

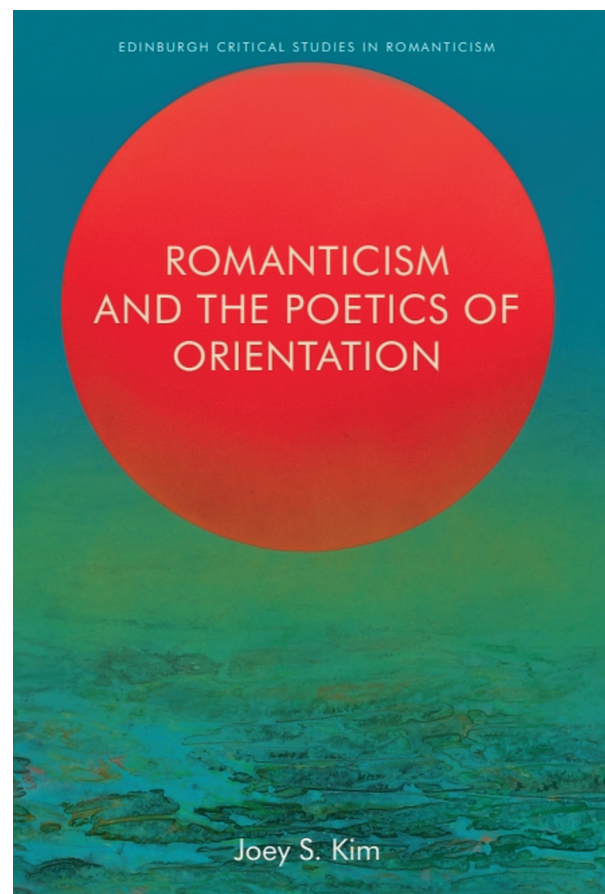
Joey S. Kim. *Romanticism and the Poetics of Orientation*. Edinburgh UP, 2023. x + 182 pp. £95.00/\$125.00, hardcover; £19.99/\$24.95, paperback or e-book.

Reviewed by Steve Clark

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1 WITH the increasing globalization of literary studies, it is unsurprising that there should emerge numerous revisionist perspectives on previous forms of appropriation and erasure. While “literature” itself might be regarded as an embattled if not discarded concept, “British” or even “in English” might be equally contested. A debunking of traditional narratives and established canon might be anticipated, though it is perhaps less obvious what might replace them. Kim’s study opens with a consideration of “orientation” as spatial coordinate and sexual preference, followed by chapters on the evolution of the lyric subject (through Jones, Coleridge, and Shelley), on cosmopolitanism in Byron’s *Eastern Tales*, on female racialization in Hemans and Wheatley, and finally—and presumably of most interest to readers of this journal—on Blake, primarily *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Jerusalem*.

2 Arguments may be made for and against holistic definitions of Romanticism (such as whether it is a movement or a period). Why not use a plural and demarcate early, middle, and late phases, or at least differentiate linguistic groups and national traditions? (Lisa Lowe [6] and Emily Haddad [9-10] are cited on the “intersection of ... English and French poetics,” but there is not much else.) How does an “anglophone poetic tradition rooted in gendered antiblackness and white supremacy” (6) compare in culpability to Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and other European colonial traditions? Kim’s initial premise—that there is a unitary “Romanticism” with a single “poetics”—is arguably more totalizing than the essentialism that is supposedly contested. A Hegelian aesthetics is privileged (23), interspersed with oddly literalist criteria directed against “Orientalist representations ... that belie reality and facticity in



favor of aesthetic experimentation” (7). “Kubla Khan,” for example, “expresses [Coleridge’s] faculties of memory and association over first-hand experience so that his Orientalism is not materially based in historical time and space or real peoples and cultures” (32), despite its clear referential provenance in *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (cited though mistitled, 34).

3 For Kim, orientation is both geographic (Eastern Hemisphere) and erotic (gender phenomenology). It is not clear that these two domains are necessarily synonymous or contiguous. Even if “[m]ap-making and geographical systems create and command the logic of directionality” (2), as she herself asks, “[W]here exactly is the east?” (1). If, during the eighteenth century, “Westward the course of empire takes its way,” Europe is itself already superseded, historically obsolete (Berkeley, “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America”). Asia, of course, has no shortage of its own empires: Mongol, Mughal, and especially the perennial claims of China. Kim might also have considered the short-lived Korean Empire proclaimed between 1897 and 1910, given her own Asian-American background as Korean.

- 4 An obvious candidate for a phenomenological emphasis would be *Milton*, where the bodily presence of Blake himself is conjoined with a startlingly explicit depiction of male fellatio in Los's descent to him (Bentley plate 21). In comparison, Kim's "queer futurity" (120), where boundaries dissolve not only with animals and plants but also with inanimate objects, is oddly sexless (even compared to Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden*). Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly's *Queer Blake* (2010) gets an honorable mention, but no reference is made to Christopher Z. Hobson's *Blake and Homosexuality* (2000; seminal in all senses). Hobson acknowledges the strain of hypermasculine assertiveness running from "Let man wear the fell of the lion. woman the fleece of the sheep" (E 35) to the subordination and ultimate discarding of emanations in Eternity, and Blake's susceptibility to perversion, from the Sadeian "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (E 38) via scatological marginalia to *The Four Zoas* through to the sadomasochistic frenzies of *Jerusalem*. One might simply respond "different strokes for different folks," but the elementary question of why queerness should be necessarily emancipatory remains. Byron's pederastic (if not paedophilic) relationships with boys such as John Edleston and Nicolas Giraud are surely at least problematic, and, by extension, the stereotype of the Orient as sodadic zone (popularized by Sir Richard Burton). If the East is associated with release from inhibition, that might not be wholly distinct from promotional itineraries for contemporary sex tourism.
- 5 Kim announces her ambition of "tracing the white supremacist logics that have for too long been dismissed as inessential or non-consequential to Romantic studies" (3). According to the *OED* definition cited, "white supremacy" was coined in a Caribbean context in 1824 (15n3), presumably as the result of specific anxiety (if not paranoia) of slaveholders confronting the prospect of the emancipation of and potential retribution by their former chattels. However, Western attitudes to Asian cultures during the Romantic period were not primarily determined by assumptions of innate racial superiority. Other forms of prejudice were certainly present, but also deference to the imposing opulence of Kubla Khan's pleasure gardens or Vathek's palace. Christians were routinely enslaved by Ottomans (Linda Colley, *Captives* [2002]), and incarceration narratives haunt the British imaginary in India (classically, Eliza Fay's *Original Letters* [1817]).
- 6 If Asians might be included in the category of "non-whiteness" (3), a further binary exists between black and non-white. The West-East opposition might be supplanted by one between African and Arab, controllers of a slave trade long predating European incursion, with a resultant tradition of *al-Istifraq* ("perceiving, imagining, and representing

black people as a subject of study in Arabic writings,"¹ as documented in Nader Kadhem, *Africanism* [2023]). A further schism opens between dominant coastal groups seizing weaker inland tribe members to sell on to first Arab, then European, traders. Prior to the kidnapping and series of transfers recounted in his *Interesting Narrative* (1789), Olaudah Equiano belonged to a family who were themselves slaveholders, and he himself dealt in slaves after manumission.

- 7 Romanticism, even if "rooted in gendered antiblackness and white supremacy" (6), emerges earlier than Kim's notional "inception" date of 1772. An obvious proponent of "Poetic Genius" (E 1) arising in the East would be Robert Lowth in his *Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, lectures delivered at Oxford from 1741 and published in Latin in 1753, with English translation by George Gregory in 1787. Their impact is apparent on a seventeen-year-old Thomas Warton, celebrating in 1745:

A Kind of Poetry which perhap[s] it would not be improper to call a Romantic Kind of Poetry, as it [is] altogether conceived in the spirit (tho' with more Judgement & less extravagant) & affects the Imagination in the same Manner with the old Romances. (Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Dep. d. 611, fol. 5)

Mid-century global lyric would include Collins's *Persian Eclogues* (1742) and Gray's "The Progress of Poesy" (1757). The latter's footnote (line 54) on "Extensive influence of poetic Genius" notably excludes the Orient from "the remotest and most uncivilised nations": "[See the Erse, Norwegian and Welch Fragments, the Lapland and American songs]." Rather than Romanticism enshrining "an individual imagination that codifies Orientalism" (Kim 5), it might be "worldliness" (3) in a more positive sense that enables and enhances individual subjectivity.

- 8 Kim, however, singles out William Jones's *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages* (1772), effusive compositions markedly inferior to his Vedic hymns and the acclaimed *Sacontala*, and even to his earlier fables, drinking songs, and mock-heroic exercises. The two essays appended to the collection, "On the Poetry of the Eastern Nations" and "On the Arts, Commonly Called Imitative," have not been "largely forgotten" (11); in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), as Kim herself concedes, "M. H. Abrams famously describes this [second] essay as 'the first explicit codification of an expressive theory of poetry' in British literature (88)" (21). Jones, whose repertoire of languages expands over seven pages from thirteen to twenty-eight (Kim

1. See www.mqup.ca/Books/A/Africanism2.

- 10, 17), asserts the autonomy of Eastern traditions, insisting upon enlargement over “perpetual repetition” of the classical canon and helping to restore an intellectual heritage occluded by Mughal rule. His early support for American independence resulted in a sedition trial for *The Principles of Government; in a Dialogue between a Scholar and a Peasant* (1783), rather than inaugurating “a changing world order of hardening Eurocentrism” (19).
- 9 Yet even if Jones, as Kim contends, “forged the grounds for a British lyric subject of global aims” (17), Romanticism is not, on the basis of her selection of texts, primarily “lyric.” “Kubla Khan” offers an opiated version of medieval dream-vision; Byron’s elliptical *Eastern Tales* are notably prolix (considered by him “largely inferior works” [Kim 84n46]); and on a strict definition, neither Hemans nor Wheatley would qualify. Perhaps Kim’s most impressively sustained reading is of Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam* (37–50), though this twelve-book phantasmagoria of nested narratives and hallucinatory violence could hardly be regarded as “self-expression” (19). Kim claims that “continued dismissal or disregard” has resulted in “Orientalist works” of these writers being “[l]eft understudied and in the margins of the literary canon” (29), yet they have all received considerable critical attention: Byron’s *Eastern Tales* have scarcely been “minimally read” (6), as she herself documents (for example, 81n18).
 - 10 Wheatley’s inclusion, which Kim acknowledges as a “detour” (160), remains somewhat perplexing. A valid point is made about London publication entitling her to be considered as an English poet (88), but the Atlantic triangle hardly extends to the Orient. Furthermore, her “alignment with neoclassical imitation” (105) is more pronounced than even early Jones. Her work certainly shows awareness of blackness (for example, celebrating the North African Terence as precursor in “To Maecenas”). However, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” forthrightly celebrates the providential abduction of the “sable race” allowing salvation to those otherwise “black as Cain” through conversion to Christianity. In contrast, Felicia Hemans’s attempts at cross-cultural empathy are dismissed as merely “diversify[ing] the nationalist typology of her heroic women protagonists, but for what purpose?” (93). Despite her geographical range and translations from multiple languages (115n7), she represents “white femininity that appropriates and effaces forms of racialized suffering” (87). Kim’s earlier essay “One deep heart wrung”: Felicia Hemans’s Affective Poetics in “The Indian City” and “Woman on the Field of Battle” (*Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2022, www.ncgsjournal.com/issue181/kim.html), in which there is no mention of Wheatley’s “autonomous Blackness” (*Poetics of Orientation* 114), at least acknowledges Hemans’s problematizing of Wordsworthian feeling.
 - 11 The final chapter, on Blake, begins by describing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Jerusalem* as the “start and end” (121) of the prophecies. Going simply by Erdman’s ordering, these are preceded by *All Religions Are One*, *There Is No Natural Religion*, and *The Book of Thel*, and followed by *The Ghost of Abel*, *On Homers Poetry* [and] *On Virgil*, and *Laocoön* (“three more illuminated books” are acknowledged [156n10]). Kim’s central premise is “Blake’s turning away from a fixed East and his ultimate disorientation of a fixed lyric subject” (143), yet she glosses “The East is Inwards” (*Jerusalem* 14.30, E 158) as a “haven of interiority and subjectivity” (147). One might cite in contrast “East, the Center, unapproachable for ever” (12.56, E 156), remote and inaccessible, the realm of bad interiority. This also poses the question of whether Blake counts as a lyric poet. First-person lyrics are usually monologues by a dramatic persona, and there are no I-thou prayers or love poems. The preponderance of his work consists of prophetic-didactic utterances, with little that might be deemed autobiographical reference.
 - 12 Kim focuses on *Marriage*’s alternation between italics and roman script, concluding that in the Argument and Proverbs of Hell “the Orientalist yearning eastward ... [is] graphically captured by Blake’s right-leaning italic writing” (150; supported pithily by Dickinson’s “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” [157n19]). However, script facing eastward but written as mirror writing is equally westward. “[O]penness of directionality” is deemed common to “handwriting, illustrations, and representations of the human body that deny fixity” (119), yet these distinct realms are difficult to reconcile with the ideal of “the bounding line” as “more distinct, sharp, and wirey” (E 550). For Kim, this allows a celebration of gender indeterminacy, though “queer forms” (118) such as the Vala-Jerusalem intimacy are often voyeuristic, even salacious; there is at least as much residual misogyny as emergent pansexuality in Blake.
 - 13 Kim emphasizes “[*Jerusalem*’s] fourfold structures as one organizing force” (142). The reshuffling of plate order suggests at least provisionality in the larger groupings of the individual books, rather than “the fourfold structure [being] the only organizing principle that maintains itself throughout the work” (146). The various schema attached to these “cardinal directions” (121) contradict the “fluidity, dynamism, and recursive engagement” emphasized elsewhere (141). Certain passages undoubtedly lurch into bathos and absurdity: “And every pot & vessel & garment & utensil of the houses, / And every house, fourfold” (13.21–22, E 157).
 - 14 “The Bible and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* serve as the clearest forerunners of Blake’s *Marriage*” (130), yet it is unclear why Kim stakes so much on conventions of specific editions when it is uncertain whether these were “unique

practices or English printing practices of the time in general" (157n24, in this case referring to indebtedness to Swedenborg). Benjamin Blayney's 1769 edition of the Bible (132), of undeniable importance as the source text adopted by Oxford University Press (in contrast to the 1762 Parris preferred by Cambridge), is singled out for its "special regard to the words not expressed in the Original Language, but which our Translators have thought to insert in Italics, in order to make out the sense after the English idiom," but Blake scarcely adopts this as a consistent rationale. Critics such as Leslie Tannenbaum and Christopher Rowland have demonstrated his wide-ranging theological expertise. The Authorized Version would appear his most obvious choice of Bible; the prominence of Calvinist terminology of reprobate and elect in *Milton* suggests at least occasional recourse to the Geneva; and his biblical illustrations show extensive familiarity with apocrypha such as the Book of Enoch. Similarly, why assume Blake followed the 1667 *Paradise Lost*? Even if the dispute about whether he owned a copy of Bentley's 1732 edition is ongoing, during his period at Felpham he would have had access to multiple editions assembled by William Hayley for his biography of Milton.

15 Kim contends that "William Blake's mental and psychological realms of place and world-making are fundamentally different from the other authors in this book" (119). This position as outlier and exception is attributed to his status as "plebeian" (quoting James Watt) in giving vent to the collective voice of "common people." Yet is it possible or desirable to conceive of Blake as "concerned with freedom and creation unbarred from cultural norms" (119), or does aspiration to an ideal realm inevitably reverse upon itself: "The iron hand crushd the tyrant's head / And became a Tyrant in his stead" (E 490)? Might Eternity be seen as the problem rather than solution? What could Albion do in Eternity once he bestirs himself and enters there? *Jerusalem* plate 99 may depict a threshold never finally crossed, as is suggested by Kim's own attentive exegesis to the Druidic ambiguities of the full-page design following on plate 100 (151-53).

16 English Blake is perhaps all too familiar, and Irish Blake has already been coined by Yeats; perhaps scrutiny of White Blake is long overdue. Abolitionism has its own implicit hierarchies and subordination, as indeed does critical race theory. Blake was connected to the abolitionist movement through the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church and Johnson's *Analytical Review*, but these themselves may be critiqued for reinstating stereotypes. Biographically, he was surprisingly close to Stedman, acting as his London agent, and might be seen as indirectly profiting from Stedman's mercenary activities hunting down the rebellious Maroons. As artist and one-time prosperous print-shop proprietor, Blake at the very least periodically endorses the view

that "Arts ... Encourage Empires" (E 577), for "Empire follows Art & Not Vice Versa as Englishmen suppose" (E 636). Furthermore, there was no automatic fellow-feeling between white working-class radicals and overseas slaves. John Cartwright, William Cobbett, and Richard Carlile all campaigned against diversion of resources to already pampered blacks; Monk Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (1834) continues to stress the holiday atmosphere of the plantation; and Thomas Carlyle's "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question" (1849) proposes the reintroduction of slavery to curb the idleness of blacks after emancipation.

17 "Blake's Orient is an always future realm rooted in both biblical and sensual prophecy" (119): nothing in *Jerusalem* is restricted to the here and now, but the superimposition of Britain onto the Holy Land might be seen as a manifesto of expansionist ambition as much as a critique of British imperialism, with Golgonooza serving as colonial fort and missionary house. As Kim concedes, "That Albion must awaken the 'East' shows the contradictory logics of empire and alliance" (148). One can only admire her willingness to confront and discard the world as it is, epitomized by her generous celebration of *Jerusalem* as "a work of confusion yet possibility" (142). Yet perhaps what her book demonstrates is not that Romanticism as a whole is irredeemably contaminated (though certainly it may be contested on a case-by-case basis), but that debate on Blake's own racial and sexual "orientation" remains an open and contentious process.