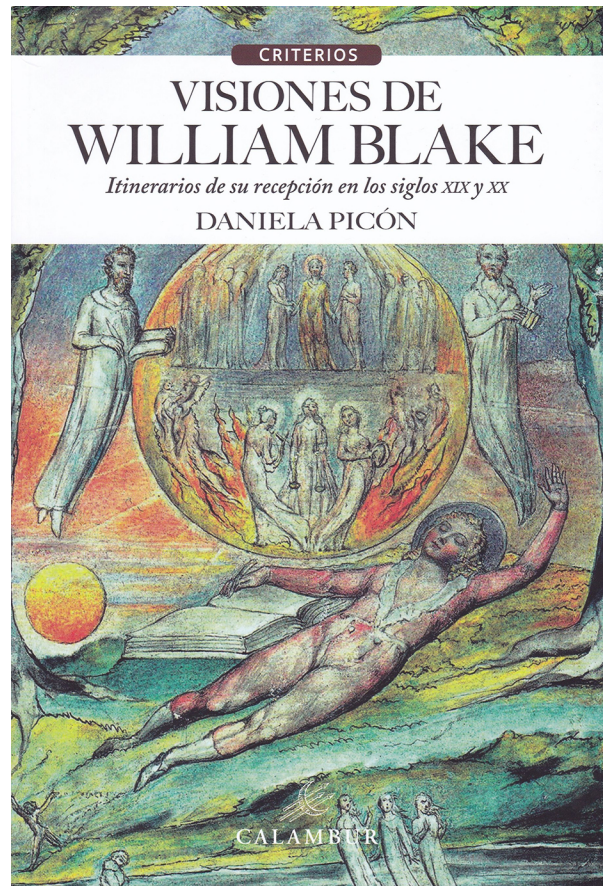


Daniela Picón. *Visiones de William Blake: Itinerarios de su recepción en los siglos XIX y XX*. Barcelona: Calambur Editorial, 2017. 272 pp. €35.00, paperback.

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- 1 **I**N the four chapters of *Visiones de William Blake*, Daniela Picón explores three fundamental artistic zones of Western modernity: Romanticism, symbolism, and the avant-garde. In this sense, the book follows a comparative methodology that valorizes and, at the same time, problematizes arguments offered by literary critic René Wellek in *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (1970). In the prologue, Picón introduces her interest in setting out “communicating vessels,” as André Breton said, between these zones in the light of Blake’s work. Under the luminous halo of the poet we can discern not only movements tied to a specific artistic or cultural field (Bourdieu 334), but also sensibilities that, beyond critical and aesthetic distinctions, suggest compelling affinities—among others, the bonding between the creator and his work, the conception of art as a vital experience where the actual and the transcendental meet, and the hermeneutical process led by readers/spectators.
- 2 In the opening chapter, titled with a translated quotation from Robert Southey, “Ese pintor de un genio grandioso pero demente, William Blake” (That Painter of Great but Insane Genius, William Blake), Picón lays out critical perspectives on the artist’s work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His illuminated and prophetic books were



regarded with mixed feelings, as revealed, for example, in Southey’s response to *Jerusalem*, which he described as “a perfectly mad poem” (“un poema desquiciadamente perfecto,” Picón 21). Artistic groups such as “The Ancients,” in turn, gained an appreciation of Blake as an interpreter who revalued premodern techniques and recognized the visionary dimension in artworks. Blake’s interpretation advances two intertwined notions that would become central in Walter Benjamin’s critique of modern art forms: authenticity and irreproducibility (24). Shorter than the rest, the first chapter is a vantage point that unfolds the itineraries of Blake’s visions through the nineteenth century.

- 3 “Simbolista” (Symbolist), the second chapter, explores the reception of the artist’s work in the nineteenth century, yet bears important references to its impact in the twentieth. Consequently, Picón’s study undertakes not only a reading of Blake, but also deploys a strategy that contextualizes him in a space of production that goes beyond his own time and place. This route enables her to visualize a poet who trespasses Romantic boundaries, treading upon symbolist territories and avant-garde experimentation. A key figure who places Blake under the lens of French symbolism is Odilon Redon (1840–1916), who, like his predecessor, rebelled

against “the academicist aesthetics of art” (53)¹ to embrace a commitment to imagination. Blake’s artistic vision, misunderstood and even neglected in his own time, found fertile ground in France through Redon’s work, which was animated by the belief that creation arises from “the docile acceptance of the unconscious” (quoted in Picón 65).² According to Picón, the plates of Blake’s illuminated prophetic books and the lithographies in Redon’s portfolios alter “the sequential ordering of their works, which rarely show a logical succession” (78).³ Both artists cultivated formats in which the visual logic served as a threshold for the invisible. This particular aspect reminds us of a main idea in the author’s argument: the compositions by Blake and Redon act as tangible proofs of the way that the artists conceived of their work, their relation to the transcendental, and, of course, the unfolding of poetic imagination. This imaginative landscape does not conform to any predictable sequence, but provides a continuous and continual expanse that enlarges the poet’s vision and, most certainly, the reader/spectator’s expectations.

4 An understanding of Blake’s work would be partial without considering its reception by other poets and critics. Accordingly, Picón cites documents and pictorial compositions that interpret the poet not necessarily under the sign of his times, but in a trajectory by which historicity gives way to transcendental concerns. Hence, the study examines incursions into the Blakean world by artists associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, Pre-Raphaelites, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and, later on, the poets Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats, whose critical essays in *The Works of William Blake* (1893) accentuate mythic and symbolic elements.⁴ For these creators Blake grew as an integral artist who, clearly dissenting from modern anxieties that led toward fragmentation, imagined a unitary conception of experience, thereby anticipating a growing emphasis on visionary perspectives in the late-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. According to Picón, an issue that problematizes the discussion at this point is the way this imagination, fluent and ever expanding, embraces a readership that is not exempted from the joys of a transformative visionary experience. From this perspective, as *Visiones de William Blake* delves into the composition of illuminated

1. “la estética academicista del arte.” All translations from Spanish are mine.

2. “una dócil sumisión a la llegada del inconsciente.”

3. “la ordenación secuencial de sus obras, las que raramente manifiestan una sucesión lógica.”

4. Picón also discusses works by other artists and groups that interpreted the imaginative and symbolic relevance of Blake’s compositions. Among them are *Life of William Blake*, “*Pictor Ignotus*” (1863) by Alexander Gilchrist and *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868) by Algernon Charles Swinburne.

texts, it convincingly suggests that this composition not only requires an unprecedented kind of reader, but also constructs him/her.

5 Thus, spaces of production and reception in the works of Blake and his successors reveal a kinship in which the reading pact is sealed with the sign of indeterminacy. Blake’s suggestive art, in Picón’s words, “intends to ‘illuminate,’ ‘exalt,’ ‘stir up thought,’ intensifying, through suggestive clues, the participation that this art demands from readers/spectators” (72).⁵ What matters here is that this art, which implies compositional techniques as well as artistry, foresees theories dealing with readers’ involvement in the realization of literary texts. This phenomenon is theoretically discussed in the works of Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden, two critics who provide Picón with a vantage point from which to observe how Blake’s work incites readers’ creative energies. Consequently, the poet’s illuminations anticipate a reader/interpreter who grants the hermeneutical process not only cognitive articulation, but also imaginative force.

6 At the beginning of the twentieth century, the transcendental character of Blake’s work acquired unexpected vigor alongside avant-garde aesthetics and the probing of the unconscious as keys to perceptual innovation. These relations, or itineraries, as the book designates them, counter modern rationalist bases. Indeed, the correspondences between the visible and the invisible, bridges of an imaginative intuition that precedes empirical thought, open the way for glimpsing an ineffable and portentous universe. This is the region that Blake himself called Beulah, described by Picón as “the realm of dreams and the unconscious in his personal mythology” (65).⁶ Thus the figure of a modern visionary arises. In this light, chapter 3, “Visionario” (Visionary), focuses on a twentieth-century critical turn that emphasizes Blake’s creativity as tightly connected to mysticism. Indispensable studies that follow this course are Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) and S. Foster Damon’s *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924). From this perspective, Blake emerges as a mediator who shares the bounty of knowledge and illumination with his fellow beings. Closely bound to this visionary repertoire, a surge of spontaneously developing images begins to nurture the poet’s imagination, at times even against his will.

7 For Picón, creativity and artistic authorship are likewise essential to understanding Blake’s aesthetics. The Eranos Cir-

5. “pretende ‘iluminar,’ ‘exaltar,’ ‘incitar el pensamiento,’ intensificando, gracias a la sugestión, el compromiso participativo que este demanda a sus receptores.”

6. “el reino de los sueños y el inconsciente en su mitología personal.”

- cle, founded in 1933 in Ascona, Switzerland, was intellectually shaped by critics such as Henry Corbin, Joseph Campbell, and Kathleen Raine. Led at one point by Carl Jung, it centered its debates on the significance of religious, primeval, and archetypal images in Blake's work. In her discussion of the contributions of the circle, Picón proposes an approach that enables a comparative reading of the prophetic illuminated texts by Blake and Jung's *The Red Book* (138). She argues that the work that best represents the complexity of Blake's visionary project is *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (composed 1790–93). The creative urge finds primordial vitality in hell, whose subterranean depths have been symbolically related to the psyche. Moreover, in this work Blake advances the convergence of dynamic oppositions (159) that reflect the desire to rehabilitate the unitary, prelapsarian condition of humankind, prior to the Fall. In sum, both Blake and Jung saw creativity as inseparable from mystic experience, so much so that their manuscripts and codices served as material support for their illuminated visions.
- 8 In this context, Raine plays a major role in the interpretation of Blake's artistic goals. Finding support in the development of modern psychology, she holds that the twentieth century is, in some respects, better equipped to appreciate the nuances of Blake's vision. For her, the poet grows as "a prophet of twentieth-century England" (Raine, quoted in Picón 124).⁷ Corbin's insights enable Raine to discuss Persian mythic traditions as lying at the core of a *mundus imaginalis*. Platonic symmetries appear evident between this "world" and the Blakean sphere. The vision gains momentum insofar as the imagination becomes not merely representative of an existing reality, but arises itself as the most genuine form of reality.
- 9 The edition, illumination, and printing of his own prophetic creations evince how Blake, working at the very core of domestic habitation, embraces a traditional culture of the book that had been interrupted by the industrial division of labor. Picón sees in Blake's engraving and printing techniques an alchemical metaphor that suggests the dissipation of sensitive distractions in order to commune with the invisible. When the copperplates are subjected to acid, a series of perennial images appear, animating and inspiring the work of art. The effect of acid on plates reminds Blake of the purifying bath of fire in the Last Judgment. Indeed, these flames not only purify, but also reveal what has been concealed from human understanding. In this way, Picón stresses the import of illuminated texts in Blake's imagination: their aesthetic form is but a preliminary spark that ignites a richly textured and complex spiritual dimension.
- 10 In the last chapter of the book, "Surrealista" (Surrealist), the author extends Blake's itinerary into surrealist expressions in Spain, France, and the United States, specifically New York. Already discernible in Blake's creative imagination, contradiction and automatism became significant conditions that prompted an array of surrealist manifestos. As to the dialectical force of contradictory spheres, the essays *La imagen surrealista* (1953) and *Diccionario de símbolos tradicionales* (1958) by Juan Eduardo Cirlot (1916–73) provide interpretive avenues to ambivalence in Blake's poetics, specially marked in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Picón's study takes us back again to this fundamental work, cornerstone of a "ruptured ontology" (Cirlot, quoted in Picón 201)⁸ that confers upon surrealism a distinctive contradictory ethics. By examining the solidarity between Blakean and surrealist visions, Picón points out the confluence of elements that the course of modern history has blurred or made irreconcilable. The Enlightenment, for instance, sought to conquer reality by means of expedient forms of positivism and synthesis. These epistemic strategies, and others, were intended to shun paradoxical twists and unpremeditated eccentricities. Conversely, under the path initiated by Blake and followed by later surrealists, antagonistic energies move productively in a space of communion where the Tyger and the Lamb enjoy, in a prophetic and symbolic epiphany, their most lasting brotherhood.
- 11 In France, artists such as Joan Miró and André Masson created works that interpreted Blake's formidable Visionary Heads. In order to establish a more emphatic connection with the English artist, Picón usually avoids analyses of particular works; rather, she focuses on the modes in which they were conceived and crafted. In this sense, their genealogy can be traced back to what Breton identifies as "pure psychic automatism" (quoted in Picón 208)⁹ in his *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924). Instead of resulting from a preconceived plan, surrealist creations evolve spontaneously from seemingly inconsequential imaginative crises. These inflections, in turn, challenge compositional codes that govern literary and pictorial expressions. Picón's examination, therefore, draws readers' attention not only to Blake's techniques, but also to their translation into automatism by the surrealist idiom.
- 12 In the context of an avant-garde and transatlantic migration, surrealism found a stimulating atmosphere in New York in the 1940s. Artists and critics such as S. W. Hayter, Jackson Pollock, Marc Chagall, Le Corbusier, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst led transgressive experimentation at

7. "un profeta de la Inglaterra del siglo XX"

8. "una ontología desgarrada."

9. "automatismo psíquico puro."

Atelier 17. The concluding part of Picón's study discusses ties between Blake and Ernst (1891–1976) that confirm the free unfolding of imagination through automatist activity. In a variety of tones, both artists concurred in their mistrust of the pressures of a purely materialist and retinal emergence of reality. Ernst's collages and *frottages*, which sought to diffuse apparent surfaces, are analogous with Blake's relief-etching techniques in their attempt to "conceal the visible and expose the invisible" (Werner Spies, quoted in Picón 245).¹⁰ In this respect, the visual design of *Visiones de William Blake* not only invites reading, but also evokes the artist's own visionary world. All chapters are complemented with illustrations of engravings, prophetic passages, and illuminated texts, some of them culled from the *William Blake Archive*. Carefully placed at key intervals, these reproductions never obtrude into the reader's exploration of the itineraries that the book offers.

- 13 Finally, *Visiones de William Blake* offers an approach to the artist in perspective, augmenting the field of his creations in two ways. Firstly, the study determines how the Blakean work, starting from an English threshold, connects with major artistic developments in continental Europe and America. Secondly, the Romanticism that invigorates the artist's work acquires new aesthetic connotations in its resonances with other artistic movements, such as symbolism and the avant-garde. Picón's book clearly traces the itineraries of a legacy that, from its romantic inception to its further surrealist interpretations, celebrates a visionary art "seeing from the other side, trespassing the visible" (Arthur Symons, quoted in Picón 54).¹¹

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10. "ocultar lo visible para mostrar lo oculto."

11. "ver del otro lado, atravesando lo visible."