

Colin Trodd. *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World 1830–1930*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012. xvi + 520 pp. £75.00/\$120.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Sibylle Erle

SIBYLLE ERLE (sibylle.erle@bishopg.ac.uk), FRSA, is senior lecturer in English at Bishop Grosseteste University Lincoln, author of *Blake, Lavater and Physiognomy* (Legenda, 2010), co-editor of *Science, Technology and the Senses* (special issue for *RaVoN*, 2008), and volume editor of *Panoramas, 1787–1900: Texts and Contexts* (5 vols., Pickering & Chatto, 2012). With Morton D. Paley she is now co-editing *The Reception of Blake in Europe* (Bloomsbury). She has co-curated the display *Blake and Physiognomy* (2010–11) at Tate Britain and devised an online exhibition of Tennyson's copy of Blake's *Job* for the Tennyson Research Centre (2013). Apart from reception, she is working on "character" in the romantic period.

- 1 **W**HY does William Blake present such a "dazzling presence, perfect temperament and complete plenary subject" (3)? The answer, according to Colin Trodd, lies with the Victorians and their efforts to explain Blake's place in British art. *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World 1830–1930* addresses the reception of Blake's art and the refashioning of his personality and artwork through Victorian art criticism. Although occasionally a little too densely detailed, this wonderful book is a long overdue addition; it not only fills a gap in the existing works on Blake's art, but is also an important milestone in the recent interest taken in Blake's literary reception.
- 2 In *Visions of Blake* Trodd discusses Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* (1863), A. C. Swinburne's *William Blake* (1868), and the Burlington Fine Arts Club exhibition (1876) in relation to the broader historical contexts of the Arts and Crafts and Aestheticist movements and alongside the writing of Blake's nineteenth-century editors, curators, and collectors. Through accounts of seeing or handling original Blakes, reviews, critical studies, essays, and catalogues, as well as paintings, book illustrations, and poems written in response to Blake, he traces many of the intellectual trends that shaped critical opinions. To start with,

Visions of Blake

William Blake in the Art World 1830–1930



COLIN TRODD

Trodd analyzes the beginnings of Blake criticism and investigates the nineteenth-century debates about Blake's visions, then argues that the main Victorian ideas about true art crystallize around the models of Blake put forward by both the Blakeans and anti-Blakeans (chapter 1). The Blake of the former ("Gilchrist, Swinburne, [Arthur] Symons, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, William Bell Scott, Joseph Comyns Carr, James Smetham, W. B. Yeats, E. J. Ellis, G. K. Chesterton, Darrell Figgis and E. H. Short") was "a gladdening light of sensual enjoyment and living god of boundless growth" (4), while the latter ("H. G. Hewlett, Oswald Crawford, J. B. Atkinson and Coventry Patmore") claim that "Blake's vision was flawed by its inability to overcome the war of instinctive life and thus failed to codify and govern the data of the senses" (4-5). Trodd asserts that these parties reached no agreement on Blake except that he was impossible to ignore, and claims that what could be used in defense of Blake could also be used against him: "For Blake's enemies and admirers, the legibility of conventional art is replaced by the unpredictable motility of Blakeland, the unbridled fluxional power of pure energy. Moreover, the subject is no longer exact and measurable as a social self" (69). He also reflects on the cultural significance of Blakean discourse: "I have tried to give equal space to Blake's admirers and enemies because I believe that their arguments moved in the same direction: that Blake can be used as a kind of cultural petrie [*sic*]

dish to discuss how artistic vision and value relate to modern experience” (10). Trodd demonstrates throughout that even the anti-Blakeans, who eyed the artist skeptically since he seemed to reject the moral values they shared, were captivated by his art. In the first instance, Trodd is interested in the details of the arguments, not in the simple opposition between supporters and detractors, because these arguments reveal interesting information about the Victorian mind-set. The reception of Blake’s art, in short, was at the heart of Victorian anxieties concerning the educational remit of public art and the changing relationship between the artist, his audience, and his critics (172). Then and now, he writes, “Blake is fantasised through competing ideas—aesthetic immediacy, creative freedom, dynamical expression; critical recklessness, cultural solipsism, psychic violence” (10).

- 3 Blake was little known during his lifetime, and already divided those who knew or met him. Allan Cunningham, in *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1830), cast him as a hardworking artist who failed to translate his visions into successful pictorial representations. The image of poor, honest, laboring Blake, invariably emphasized by later commentators, inspired, for example, Frederic Shields’s *Blake’s Work-Room and Death-Room* (c. 1880–90), which “attempts to picture Blake’s world by making it a picture of his inner life” (151). On the whole, the determination to make sense of Blake’s art was fueled by biographical narrative and especially the *Life of Blake* by Gilchrist, who, like Swinburne in *William Blake*, intended to reorganize “Blake” and improve on what Cunningham or William Hazlitt had written about him.¹ The anecdotes about the visionary heads, for one, were difficult to accommodate. The diarist Henry Crabb Robinson dismissed him as too eccentric on account of the visionary heads. Edward Calvert, a follower of Blake and member of the Ancients, told Gilchrist that when he looked at Blake he saw “nothing but sanity,” and John Linnell was certain that Blake was merely acting like a medium. The question for the nineteenth-century Blakeans was, what kind of person could have produced a form of art that blocked the traditional routes of pictorial communication? Later Scott, who owned the tempera of *The Ghost of a Flea* (c. 1819, Butlin #750, Tate Britain), “would refashion Blake as the precursor of the ‘New Spiritualism’” because many of his images were specimens from “the phantasmal world at the edge of human experience” (189). In the nineteenth century Blake’s life, as well as the Blakean canon, soon came to be treated as discursive fields: not only did opinions about Blake differ,

1. Though Hazlitt seems especially relevant for arguments about the social class of the Blakeans, the afterlife of Hazlitt’s Blake—that is, romantic Blake—is never fully explored.

but Gilchrist’s biography, because of his untimely death, was completed by the Rossettis and edited by his wife, Anne Gilchrist. D. G. Rossetti wrote an additional, “Supplementary” chapter, which argues that Blake was a “forerunner of the Pre-Raphaelites” (63); W. M. Rossetti compiled an annotated catalogue that stood unrivaled, even by Scott’s catalogue for the Burlington Fine Arts Club exhibition, until the early twentieth century (159). Subsequent editions of Gilchrist’s biography were to include essays by Smetham, Shields, and W. Graham Robertson. The first monumental Victorian biography of Blake, which had set out to revise and redefine Blake’s artistic identity, was, in fact, a growing *omnium gatherum* of interconnecting ideas about his mental state and disturbingly *über*-creative art.

- 4 In chapters 1 and 2 Trodd analyzes the unresolved problems that Blake’s art posed for his Victorian commentators. What was the meaning of his art? Some perceived Blake as an outsider because he ignored the ideal of abstract beauty or central form, a goal recommended to aspiring young artists by Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses* (1798). Others admired him as an innovator because of his uncompromising pursuit of personal vision. This vision, however, was rendered more often than not at the expense of balance and pictorial expression: “Even those most sympathetic to his art, including Gilchrist, the Rossetti brothers, Swinburne and Symons, tended to trace in his work the uneasy relationship between aesthetic exuberance and compositional coherence” (21). Blake was judged simultaneously as anti-academic, going against polite art and taste, and as excessive, creating new and spontaneous visual experiences with no recognizable patterns. With Hewlett in mind, Trodd explains this position as follows: “Refusing to attend to objects in the real world, Blake makes himself the origin of the identity of the artwork, the source of its action, the master of ‘mystery.’ In place of pictorial mastery he offers unresolved pictorial discord” (37). Trodd calls this problem Blake’s “‘bad’ individualism” (38–39). Chapter 1 concludes with an interesting analysis of Blake as a Job-like figure, starting with Cunningham’s portrayal but also referring to other texts (sonnets by Bernard Barton and D. G. Rossetti) and drawing attention to Smetham’s review of Gilchrist: “Blake is drained of critical force in becoming an icon of the critical quietism and submission favoured by the Methodist Smetham” (59). Swinburne, on the other hand, attacked Gilchrist for putting too much emphasis on Blake’s personality and neglecting the “creative energy” of his art (64).
- 5 Chapter 2 digs deeper into the development of Blake criticism by explaining why Victorian critics perceived Blake’s art as “invasive” rather than “invalid,” as his earlier romantic commentators had done (89). Trodd’s metaphor “Blake-land” captures the need (articulated by Blake himself) to

enter into Blake's art in order to understand Blake, and links back to Smetham's "Blakean chamber," which is a space all viewers are invited to share with the artist (58). Again, Trodd approaches his topic through opinions voiced in reviews of Gilchrist's *Life of Blake*. The mid-Victorian anti-Blakeans, he stresses, focused on the physicality of Blake's designs because, when looking at them, they realized that they felt threatened (89). "A persistent theme in Victorian discourses on Blake is the way in which his images project themselves at spectators, how they suggest or enact certain conditions of experience" (92). He urges that "we need to look at Blake's art as a stimulus" and admits that he wants to "find out what kind of criticism Blakean vision makes possible" (98, 99). Beginning with an examination of the commentary of J. J. G. Wilkinson, an anti-Blakean despite his (image-free) edition of the *Songs*, Trodd explores the negative feelings caused by Blake's art, directing us to the writings of F. T. Palgrave, Atkinson, and John Ruskin, as well as Cunningham and Robert Hunt. He eventually turns to analyzing the composition, surface, and form of Blake's *Newton* (124). Moving between nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism, as well as in the footsteps of Victorian Aestheticists, Trodd undertakes a commanding case study of the body of Newton but side-steps the visual effects produced by color printing. Given the focus on physicality, it would be good to find out if W. M. Rossetti or Ruskin (190) or even Edward Burne-Jones (237) knew about the different pulls or versions of the large color prints.

- 6 Nineteenth-century scholarship is responsible for establishing the Blakean canon. Ellis and Yeats, in *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical* (1893), for example, present *The Four Zoas* as "Blake's master text" (198). The broader question of which artworks Victorian Blakeans would have had access to remains, unfortunately, unanswered in the early chapters. In chapter 3 Trodd outlines how, thanks to the exhibitions organized by the Burlington Fine Arts Club, the Carfax Gallery (1904 and 1906), the Tate Gallery (1913), and the Whitworth Institute in Manchester (1914), Blake's art emerged "into the wider public world" (156). Blake began to figure significantly in the art market around 1850, and by the end of the nineteenth century, Trodd stresses, his art was part of the public discourse on national art and British book design. In view of the book's subtitle it is surprising that early auction sales, such as *Visions, America, Urizen*, and two other works at Christie's in 1834,² go unmentioned. Trodd moves through the proposal by Bernard Quaritch and Ellis for a Blake Society, or "social bureau for the exchange of information and

2. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 285-86.

knowledge" (145); the acquisition of Blake's works by national institutions; private collectors and critics, such as Richard Garnett, Isaac D'Israeli, Thomas F. Dibdin, Palgrave, and Carr; and the role of Victorian art journals, such as the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, *Athenaeum*, and *Art Journal*, in promoting Blake's designs, which were available as facsimiles by William Muir. He makes a number of thought-provoking observations, noting, for example, that few of the "collections assembled by Victorian industrialists included works by Blake" and that the patrons of the Pre-Raphaelites showed little interest in Blake (159). Trodd's analysis of an exchange between D'Israeli and Dibdin presents these two collectors as agreeing with Gilchrist; for all of them, "Blake is involved in a peculiar project to reawake our sense of human beingness by unearthing the origin of art in the obscure, enclosed and confused movement of the body" (188). With regard to the changes in the perception of Blake's art, Trodd explores the view held by Blakean Aestheticists, which celebrated his art as "the embodiment of pure freedom" but was "rejected by anti-Blakeans ... [as] a form of collecting premised on the notion that the cherished artist carries and embodies a mysterious and desirable value" (192). He uses "collecting" here as a metaphor to describe the content of Blake's compositions. Looking toward *A Descriptive Catalogue*, which he believes to be the central document of Blake's aesthetic theory, Trodd argues that "Blake, who believed he was equipped with an ur-connoisseurial vision that enabled him to strip classical objects of their conventional signs or names and return them to an original state of being, identified real artists with the power to see beyond traditional codifications of the meaning of art" (193). So, when it comes to art-making, Blake is a collector of mental images, and he is also, to push Trodd's argument slightly, a creator of montages: "Blake expresses the view that art is an expression of the desire to increase the quality, harmony and integrated force of the public imagination: images act to reconnect the individual artist with a visionary fellowship, critical audience or public of creator-collectors" (195). This chapter ends with an account of Blake's impact on the designs of Ellis's *Seen in Three Days*, Walter Crane's *The Sirens Three*, and J. T. Nettleship's "Blake drawings."

- 7 In the second half of *Visions of Blake*, Trodd delves deeply into Blake-inspired criticism of Victorian art, as he wants to move beyond studies of influence (233). Concentrating on the model created by the Rossettis and Swinburne, he proposes that we use Blake to explain and evaluate the technical radicalism of Aubrey Beardsley, Burne-Jones, and, most importantly, Ford Madox Brown, because one's position on Blake came to define any stance of critical opposition: "Blake becomes an available reference point for those artists and commentators who set out to challenge the academic assertion that pure individualism tends to erode the

authority and integrity of art by weakening its technical and formal means of expression" (233). Consequently, what drives Trodd's impressive readings in chapter 4 is the "shared attitude to the nature of the body as a vital component in the production of visual meaning" (232). For example, reminding us of Blake's *Newton* and pointing toward his "Chariot of Inspiration" while analyzing Beardsley's *The Cave of Spleen*, Trodd concludes that "Beardsley assaults the insulating orderliness of composition to stress the directness of vision, but ... the unified body mutates into the grotesque excrescences of biological life, and so he generates something similar to the kind of spectral field described by Wilkinson, Dibdin and D'Israeli as they looked at and beyond the traumatised figures populating Blake's mysterious artworld" (240). Next, Trodd builds toward a new reading of Brown's style and works, in particular *Work*, by explaining Brown's indebtedness to Thomas Carlyle's writings and to the quality of Blake's images: "Style becomes part of his method of seeing the world, which is to say, it becomes embedded in his way of representing people, objects and spaces" (247). Brown, he argues, approaches representation as melding or rather "knitt[ing] together" (258, 273): "content' and 'style' intermingle in images designed to complicate the processes of pictorial composition and critical exposition" (279). All this makes very interesting reading. Trodd connects *Work* with the text of Blake's "London," but does not address the visual effects made possible through illuminated printing. (I should mention that it is not always immediately clear how we are meant to look at the wonderful color plates in the middle of the book. Are we to observe as Blakeans or as anti-Blakeans?)

8 In chapter 5, Trodd discusses the paintings of G. F. Watts. Watts came to know Blake's work through the circle at Little Holland House; he viewed Blake's art through Wilkinson's lens rather than Rossetti's or Swinburne's (325). Trodd moves from technical similarities to shared attitudes and responses to cultural change while revisiting and reevaluating the opinions of contemporary writers on art, such as Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Chesterton, Symons, R. E. D. Sketchley, Mary Watts, and Mrs. Barrington (333-70). He concentrates on the body, the relationship between "subject and space" (316), and "archetypal beings in cosmic settings" in Watts's late paintings (322). The first case study is on Watts's *Hope* and the body in Blake's "The Ancient of Days" and *Newton* (321f., 344, 351f.); the second, related study is on *Evolution*. Keen to establish Watts's "Blakean vision" (355), Trodd draws a connection to Swinburne's model of Blake (353) and examines the double identities articulated in *Evolution*, which depicts a nude woman surrounded by active infants: "The mother-idol and the *putti* are designed to block the expectation that the subject of evolution should represent separate stages in the march from savagery to civilisation. Life itself appears

anomalous, resisting the homogeneity of the continuous interactive composition, hence the kinetic energy of the *putti* creates a strange lattice-like growth obscuring, as opposed to clarifying, the self-contained rectangularity of pictorial space" (352). This chapter on the post-Gilchrist and post-Pre-Raphaelite reception of Blake's art (311) focuses on how the body comes to represent the tensions inherent in modern consciousness: "The body becomes at once unstoppable, incomplete and unresolved" (357). It is through Blake that Victorian critics frame and understand this phenomenon.

9 Chapter 6, the final chapter, is an almost panoramic survey of the "critical modelling" (372) happening during the Edwardian period. Trodd starts with the way that Blake is remade through the thinking of James Joyce and Yeats, as well as in the writings of Henry James and J. K. Huysmans; he continues to identify critical alignments while considering the ever-growing and diversifying number of critical viewpoints. He returns, for example, to A. H. Mackmurdo and the Arts and Crafts movement's "celebration of the handmade artefact" (388), Chesterton (423ff.)—who "wants to see Blake battling to outflank Decadence and Theosophy, both of which he associates with a condition of formlessness" (424)—the Blake Society, and Watts (451ff.). He spends additional time on Symons, with Ellis and Yeats's *Works of William Blake* in the background, and arrives at Wicksteed, who subscribes to the idea that systems or codes are at work in Blake's art, but "stresses the evangelical-moral Blake over the inspirational-ecstatic Blake" (405). Trodd ends this strand with a summary of Wicksteed's legacy: "Wicksteed wanted to free Blake from the fluxional world of Aestheticism by finding works which demonstrated that he was a disciplined, well-organised and effective citizen in the republic art [*sic*]" (406). Fifteen years later Figgis, a good synthesizer of existing models of Blake, would follow suit (456ff.). Next, Trodd sweeps across the "self-help" Blake (407) and the "life-altering" Blake (408) and, after briefly mentioning Stanley Spencer and Paul Nash (408), settles on discussing Blake's influence on Wyndham Lewis and Edwardian book illustrators. He then turns to Basil de Selincourt and Osbert Burdett, who approached Blake in the manner of anti-Blakeans because for them Blake was dangerous: they "declare that Blake is more an entrepreneur of crisis than a connoisseur of artmaking processes" (416). Short and Alan Clutton-Brock, on the other hand, are more sympathetic; Short's approach, Trodd points out, "anticipates the social and political reading" of Jacob Bronowski and A. L. Morton (430). Clutton-Brock, however, falls into the category of psychoanalytical critics who, in the tradition of the anti-Blakeans, attest to Blake's mental problems.

- 10 In the remainder of the chapter Trodd maps out the debate about Blake's position in British art in the wake of the foundation of the main national Blake collections. He surveys how "well-placed professional figures" (433) responded to the existing critical writing while aiming to promote Blake to allow his art to succeed in sales and exhibitions. For example, about the astute Robert Ross, "co-owner ... of the Carfax Gallery ... [and] taste-maker" (437), he writes, "He sets out to explain that although Blake may have little to offer the great tradition of art, his designs play an important role in the creative evolution of self-expression" (438). "To invoke Blake's creative identity is to engage with a critical system that entrenches him in a wider story about artistic inventiveness" (439). Trodd says nothing about A. G. B. Russell's essay "The Visionary Art of William Blake" (1906), but comments that Russell wrote the best catalogue since W. M. Rossetti (444) and made Blake "sound like a proto-modern primitive, the magical figure who looms large in modernist eschatology, where Giotto and Cézanne are confederates committed to the same pictorial and critical outcomes" (445). For Laurence Binyon, on the other hand, Blake was singular and "unrepeatable" (449).
- 11 William Blake's pervasive cultural presence and status as controversial and innovative painter in Victorian and Edwardian art criticism cannot be doubted. Trodd's beautiful and carefully researched book offers an amazing range of interconnected opinions about Blake's achievements and failures as a painter. Blake was an outsider, and it is truly fascinating that his art has spawned so many responses by so many different commentators. This book highlights the varying perceptions of Blake's personality and artistic outputs—his going in and out of fashion—and encourages us to speculate about the reasons behind publishing his poetry with or without images, beyond what was technologically feasible. Trodd's exuberant and elegant prose guides us through a mass of material (books, catalogues, essays, journal articles, reviews, letters, artworks, initiatives), supplying long lists of names as well as compact footnotes; his work abounds with interesting detail and information about Blake's critical afterlife.