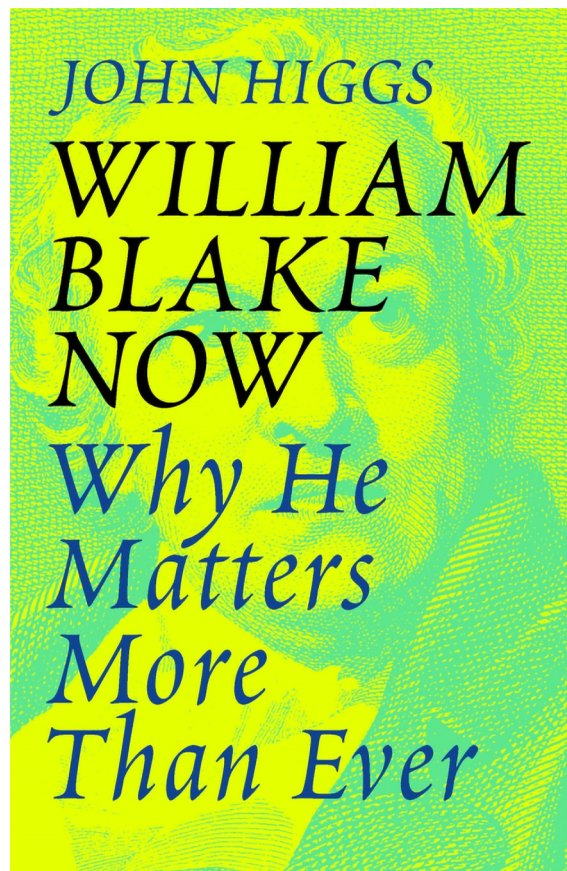


John Higgs. *William Blake Now: Why He Matters More Than Ever*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019. 80 pp. £6.99, paperback and e-book; £5.99, audiobook.

John Higgs. *William Blake vs. the World*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021. x + 390 pp. £20.00, hardcover; £10.99, paperback and e-book; £19.99, audiobook.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

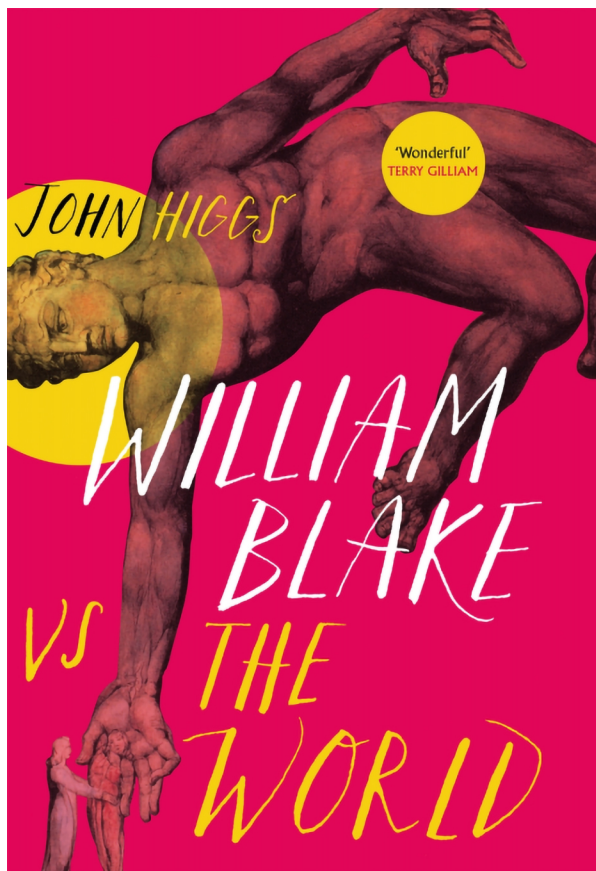
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- 1 JOHN Higgs is a versatile British essayist, television producer, journalist, and novelist (and more) who has written an odd but excellent general introduction to Blake. A few years ago he began working on a big but amorphous (from the sound of it) Blake project; shaken by the Brexit vote and stirred by the size and diversity of the audience at the ceremony dedicating the Blake memorial in Bunhill Fields, Higgs published a short collection of essays considering causes and implications of the huge change in Blake's reputation in his home country since his death. In 2021 Higgs presented a 400-page biographical Blake-buster, part study guide, part self-help book, part manifesto—here and there encompassing pop culture, counterculture, high culture, literary criticism, seventeenth-century theology and poetry, psychology, current and Georgian politics, neuroscience, quantum mechanics, comparative theology, mysticism, and much else.
- 2 Higgs is a skilled writer, and his earnest enthusiasm for his subject is both evident and contagious. In many respects he might be the ideal reader of Blake—self-assured but not dogmatic, well and widely (but not always deeply) read in many disciplines far outside the usual areas of expertise with which academic critics are prepared, and shifting easily between the sensibilities that accompany current, earlier, and much earlier systems of thought. He is also therefore an appropriate guide for a very wide audience, Blake's envisioned future "Public." He starts from scratch as a reader and thinks for himself while encouraging his readers to do

the same, responding to complete actual texts rather than manipulating the same old decontextualized Blake snippets. And when he does use the familiar quotes, he often finds fresh insights in them. He gets important things right that are persistently missed, and though there are many things here with which I disagree, I would say that for every weak or doubtful observation I found two that clarified or changed my mind about something: his take on "Beulah," for instance, is much better than the one in my glossary in the *William Blake Archive*. He is more expert at reading texts than images, but he has taken the trouble to understand the most important technical aspects of Blake's art(s).

- 3 Several times we return to the familiar question: Was Blake crazy? Higgs offers glimpses of a Blake who more closely resembles the extravagant visionary of early Victorian fantasy than the canny poetic painter who tapped his head when asked where he saw one of his visions. But Higgs is a canny writer himself, starting with the one thing that many in his audience think they know about his subject and then working his way toward a version of the question that interests him more. He makes a case for associating certain of Blake's claims and eccentricities with recognized psychological phenomena, especially "hyperphantasia," the ability to imagine things in exquisite detail, and points out episodes



recognizable as mania, paranoia, and depression. But he also acknowledges that answering this question is not much help in understanding Blake's works, even if one accepts that Blake's extraordinary brain accounts for some features of them. Blake apparently had an unusual ability to control and even to exploit his psychological peculiarities, and diagnosis of his condition does not make it any less interesting to try to figure out what he thought he meant, even if we should also attend to subconscious and unconscious mental phenomena in his head and those of his readers. Higgs is ultimately as interested in what is going on in our brains when we pay attention to Blake's works as he is in what went on in Blake's, while at the same time leading us to think about how Blake's response to his world can help us to respond to ours.

- 4 Higgs's procedure is to introduce a figure or phenomenon—say Swedenborg or Romanticism or Deism—and then wander informatively around the topic, offering insights into it from various perspectives until an opportunity arises to connect it to some aspect of Blake. Whereas most conventional literary criticism marshals the conclusions of subsidiary arguments to make a broader point, piling intellectually inert brick on brick, Higgs usually ties the discussion to a narrative, especially one in which someone

discovers something, such as Swedenborg's conversion, or Allen Ginsberg's masturbatory apocalypse.

- 5 It matters that Blake did not regularly hear supernatural voices "in a finite organical perception," write verse by recording what they said verbatim, or capture images of delusive hallucinations in his art. It is true that he (or his persona) claimed to operate in something like that way, as for example in the page of *Jerusalem* addressed "To the Public." But just because Blake was in charge of what he wrote most of the time does not mean that he always meant what he said, much less what his characters or narrators say. Higgs tries to listen to all Blake's voices, taking all Blake's words seriously, not ignoring one voice to attend to its contrary. But I think irony is a central feature of Blake's form of prophecy, and only rarely do we hear from Blake himself straightforwardly in his works. Higgs presents *Songs of Innocence* as a confection, essentially dismissing "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Innocence* as an error needing correction by the contrary song of *Experience*. Superficially, this characterization makes some sense: except for the dreadful rushing carnivores in "Night" there are few explicit signs in *Innocence* of the dark mechanisms that pervade *Experience*. But even in *Innocence* mothers die and winter mornings are cold, and both Blake's sweeps are aware of these realities. Blake may have adjusted his strategy between writing the two books, but he didn't write *Experience* to correct blind spots in *Innocence*.
- 6 Higgs's imaginative, steady attentiveness pays off impressively in handling the even thornier works that follow. Attending closely to what Blake's voices actually say while suspending the impulse to take sides, he introduces a hodgepodge of other authors' metaphors and metaphorical systems that are variously complementary, contrary, or comparable to Blake's. Readers who expect paratextual tact, as I do, may regard this with suspicion, as I did, but I now profess my conversion. After I submitted an earlier draft of this review I suddenly found myself an invalid with only Higgs's big book and the \$1.00 e-book of Blake's illuminated works on my phone, so I decided to take a stab at reading *Jerusalem* in the original format, without notes or editorial assistance other than the very assorted texts and ideas that Higgs adduces as relevant. The result was not quite apocalyptic, but it was impressive. I won't claim that Higgs provides the key to all Blake's mythologies, but his approach brought me greater clarity than more conventional academic criticism.
- 7 The guest list for this panel discussion is diverse, to say the least. Timothy Leary chats with Lao Tzu and Carl Jung in the green room, and Pythagoras plays fantasy games with Jim Morrison. (I exaggerate.) Higgs manages this unruly crowd deftly, but some figures, especially acquaintances

who knew little about Blake's inner life or works, are allowed to speak for Blake even when they haven't much in the way of credentials. Though he seems to have ignored most academic criticism, and is sometimes gently satirical about it, Higgs might have been better off if he had read even less, sparing himself the influence of the persistent lazy misconceptions that teachers and students love to repeat. He is a good reader because he skips the scholarly introductions, trusting Blake to sell himself to readers who are sympathetic, imaginative, and well read, but not necessarily steeped in esoteric traditions. His contextualized summaries of relevant ideas and controversies, both esoteric and exoteric, together with his lucid restatements of Blakean principles, are good enough that one can imagine an autodidactically inclined reader concocting a serviceable Blakean theory of everything using Higgs's intellectual sketches as a foundation.

- 8 Some aspects of these books are peculiarly local and ephemeral: in both, for instance, the Brexit vote and the concomitant tension between jingoistic conservatism and leftist globalism appear to be haunting the discussion even when they are not explicitly the topic. In treating the relevance of Blake to contemporary politics and social issues, Higgs is careful to distinguish Blake's ideas from the tribal ideologies that have become attached to him, such as the British Christian nationalism that some find in such works as Parry's setting of "Jerusalem" or the ambiguous heroic portraits of the spiritual forms of Pitt and Nelson. For Higgs, the large and heterogeneous crowds at Blake's memorial or the Tate Britain exhibition of 2019–20 are evidence that his appeal is not only powerful and diverse, but that his work provides a perspective that can transcend orthodoxies within and without his green and pleasant homeland. Wherever it goes, *William Blake vs. the World* will make friends for Blake.