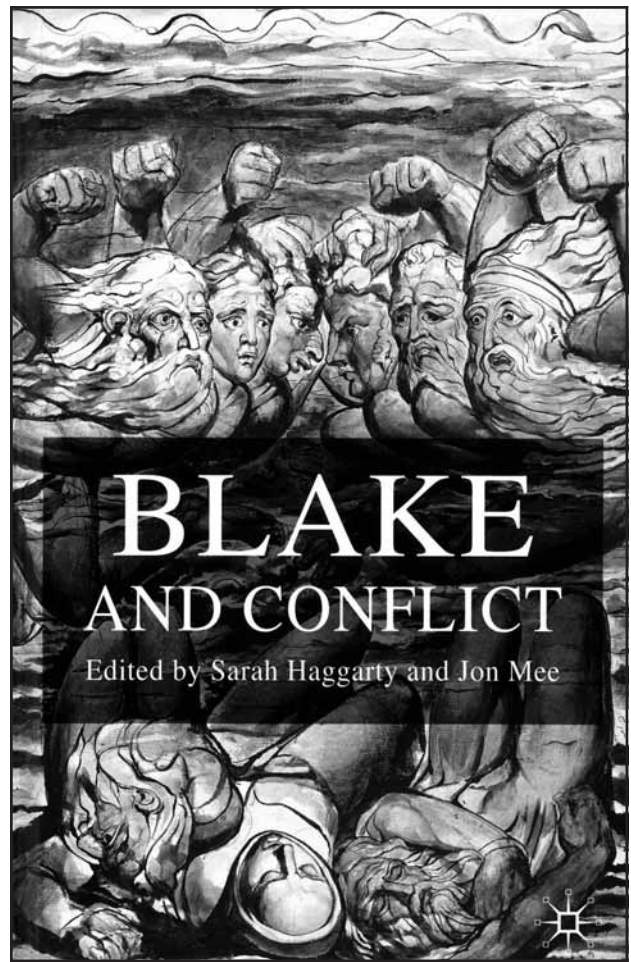


ter for British Art) shows a churchyard occupied by three distinct classes of ghosts performing their “rounds” in their own ways: six “light-heeled” dancers circling the yew, another larger circle of violent quarrelers, victims, and victimizers, and an orderly right-to-left procession of the host composed of pious “visionary shades” bearing tapers, huge tomes, and bread and wine into the church. Blake’s decision to expand the population of Blair’s churchyard in this particular way may have been inspired in part by a thirty-year-old vision of a ghostly parade in Westminster Abbey.

In addition to the snippets of conversation themselves, Bentley includes several conversation-related scholarly tools. The most useful is probably the concordance of the words used in the reported conversations, but interesting as well are the speculative remarks in the introduction on Blake’s pronunciation and the implications of rhymes (xxi-xxxv) and the supporting tables of perfect and imperfect rhymes in the appendices. Throughout the volume Bentley maintains a much lighter scholarly demeanor than one might expect from the author of those magisterial classics, *Blake Books* and *Blake Records*—this assemblage is hosted by Conversational Bentley, a manifestation of the generous and genial Flesh and Blood Bentley that the lucky may meet in person. This Bentley is much too polite and good-natured to acknowledge, say, that a plausible thirdhand anecdote might be unreliable—all tales are treasured here, and accorded pretty much the same respect as an entertaining raconteur at dinner. Similarly, the evidence to be found in Blake’s rhymes about the way he probably pronounced words is fascinating but so oblique that it would be difficult to use without extensive qualification. Though there is a danger that some will treat this whole judicious assemblage of somewhat problematic facts as having the same kind of authority as Blake’s own words, the lightheartedly learned tone that prevails should inhibit anyone from taking it all too literally.



Sarah Haggarty and Jon Mee, eds. *Blake and Conflict*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. xiii + 235 pp. £55.00/\$85.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Christopher Z. Hobson

WITH *Blake and Conflict* Palgrave Macmillan extends its role as the academic press now most consistently showcasing new Blake scholarship. The volume presents selected revised papers from a conference of the same title held in Oxford in 2006. Although it does not entirely surmount the miscellaneous quality that most conference anthologies have, synergies among several contributions provide a fairly strong thematic coherence.

Sarah Haggarty and Jon Mee’s introduction outlines two kinds of conflict as salient for the volume, both involving the conversation of “Visionary forms dramatic” that Blake envisions in humanity’s future (*Jerusalem* 98, E 257). The first centers on ideological or intellectual conflict as an aspect of pluralistic harmony: Blake, the editors say, imagines “the kind

of community that arises from the communication between differences” (4). A second, more mundane, type of conflict involves Blake’s contentious “relationships with his precursors and precursor texts,” and these too, for the editors, are relationships among “Contraries,” so that conflict emerges as a “risk inherent in fully engaging with the other” (4, 5). This breakdown, however, only partly accounts for the volume’s contents; more than half the essays involve “conflict” with recent views of Blake or Blake-like ideas as complicit with imperialism and its ideological categories, with elite political domination, or with masculinist gender conceptions. These essays suggest a turn away from a “complicit” Blake by at least some now working in the field.

Blake’s involvement with burgeoning nationalist or imperialist ideas has been argued by several recent interpreters, including Julia M. Wright (*Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*, 2004), Edward Larrissy (“Blake’s Orient,” *Romanticism*, 2005), and Steve Clark (“Jerusalem as Imperial Prophecy,” *Blake, Nation and Empire*, ed. Clark and Worrall, 2006). The first two essays in the present volume, by Saree Makdisi and Angus Whitehead, address Larrissy’s arguments, which themselves critiqued Makdisi’s earlier work. Larrissy argued, among other points, that Blake’s reference to the Qur’an as a “loose Bible” in *The Song of Los* (3.29, E 67) incorporates orientalist notions of Islamic licentiousness and that the *Descriptive Catalogue*’s discussion of art in “the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia” (E 531) typifies Blake’s limited and eurocentric knowledge of the East. Makdisi counters that Blake refused orientalism’s elevation of assumed Western self-control over Eastern license and that his references to Asian art, if inexact, evince a plural conception of Europe’s cultural heritage (14-16, 23-24). More broadly, he uses G. A. Rosso’s “The Religion of Empire: Blake’s Rahab in Its Biblical Contexts” (*Prophetic Character*, ed. Gourlay, 2002) as a springboard to argue that Blake’s late work remains oppositional toward empire (20-21, 25). Though perhaps overly defensive in trying to clear Blake of any involvement in orientalism, Makdisi is right in my view to insist that Blake’s thrust is against both the structures of empire and the psychic-moral formations that bolster them.

Whitehead’s “A wise tale of the Mahometans’: Blake and Islam, 1819–26” uses three specifics—Blake’s reference to a “wise tale of the Mahometans” in conversation with Crabb Robinson, his “Visionary Head” of “Mahomet,” and his illustration to the Muhammad–Ali meeting in *Inferno* canto 28—as evidence that Blake shows “a positive engagement with Islam” in a period when “this religious faith was still regarded by many in Britain as ‘the Devil’s Methodism’” (32, quoting an 1828 magazine reference). Whitehead, like Makdisi, positions his essay as a response to Larrissy’s (29-30). Despite some questionable interpretations, the overall point that these late portrayals avoid any sort of denigration of Islam both extends Makdisi’s argument and provides independently valuable insight into Blake’s religious latitudinarianism.

In “Blake, the Female Prophet and the American Agent: The Evidence of the 1789 Swedenborg Conference Attendance List,” David Worrall takes up the issue of complicity with emerging imperialism in one of Blake’s milieus. His stated purpose is archival, to identify as many as possible of the conference participants (48), and his modest conclusion is that contacts with some of them may have influenced Blake’s later choices of topics and approaches (61). For example, meeting Dorothy Gott, the prophet of Worrall’s title, could have spurred Blake’s adoption of prophetic speech modes. Implicitly, Worrall is also working to rescue the relative social radicalism of central Swedenborgian figures from views that associate them with commercial penetration in Africa and land speculation in the United States, as argued by Deirdre Coleman (see Worrall’s note 18). He does this by distinguishing some participants who played such a role, such as the partners in US land dealings Colborn Barrell and Henry Servanté, from the leading Swedenborgians Carl Wadström and Augustus Nordenskjöld, who Worrall feels had more disinterested religious motives (52-57). Particularly valuable is Worrall’s recognition of the autonomy of religious motivation, its nonreducibility to material interests, and the consequent pluralism within dissenting traditions, a point relevant to Blake, who, Worrall speculates, could have known of the Moravians’ work on the US frontier “with the native North Americans imminently threatened by Barrell and Servanté” (60).

This pluralism is Mee’s topic in “A Little Less Conversation, A Little More Action’: Mutuality, Converse and Mental Fight,” which responds to criticisms by David Simpson of “conversation” as a model for social change (126). Simpson doesn’t discuss Blake, but Mee takes on his ideas by using Blake to exemplify a different idea of “conversation” from Simpson’s. Mee distinguishes between relatively distinct “conversations” in the 1780s and 90s, a polite kind that the salons of the Mathew circle may have typified, and one stressing “candour” over politeness, favored by Mary Hays, Godwin, and others sharing a “tradition of Dissent apt to think ‘collision’ and conflict as part of any genuine conversational encounter” (127). Mee thinks that this idea lies behind Blake’s “Visionary forms dramatic” passage and that Blake “radicalizes the polite vision of conversation” to produce a “more conflictual model” in tune with radical ideas of change (127, 139).

Mee’s emphasis is not new for him—he has been excavating radical, plebeian forms of conversation since his first book, *Dangerous Enthusiasm* (1992). His polemical purpose here becomes clearer when one looks at the Simpson essays in *Raritan* and *New Left Review* that he criticizes. Simpson’s idea is that polite models of conversation play into the hands of elites who decide what is acceptable subject matter. But additionally, I suspect Mee is reacting to implications in some Marxist and post-Marxist political writing that downplay the need for open political debate as part of radical culture. Simpson, for example, deprecates a current idea of conversation as “open, undecided, welcoming, antifoundational, and

minimally teleological” (“The Cult of ‘Conversation,’” *Raritan*, 1997). This implies preference for discourse that is decided, foundational, teleological, and so on, terms that tend to exclude free-ranging debate. Marxism classically, and to some extent still, assumes that oppositional consciousness derives univocally from its own assumedly scientific method and that all views except its own ultimately represent the ideas of opposing classes. (For a classic statement, see the essays in Georg Lukács’s 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*.) This is an issue of course with resonance in the history of twentieth-century totalitarianism. It is one, too, with relevance for Blake, since some interpreters, such as Makdisi in his “Blake and the Communist Tradition” (*Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*, ed. Williams, 2006), have argued for Blake’s continuity with Marxism. Reviewing that volume in these pages, Jason Whittaker argued that “alternative traditions of later communist thinking ... espoused a view of anti-authoritarian communism that often appears closer to Blake than Marxism does” (*Blake* 44.2 [fall 2010]: 74), and I urged a similar view in my own *The Chained Boy: Orc and Blake’s Idea of Revolution* (1999). Mee’s historicizing of “conversation” as including vigorous debate and ideological confrontation seems, implicitly, also to argue for the multivoiced character of radical opposition and for placing Blake, as Whittaker does, in a more open tradition than that of Marxism.

Besides these discussions of overall social ideology, essays by Susan Matthews and David Fallon target Anne Mellor and others who assert Blake’s entrapment in and replication of dominant gender paradigms. Matthews’s “Impurity of Diction: The ‘Harlots Curse’ and Dirty Words,” while accepting that Blake cannot totally escape these paradigms, argues for the “transformative power” of his writing in “London,” based “not on the ability of poetry to cleanse but to bring to the surface and to refigure meanings” (66). Detailing eighteenth-century debates about prostitution, Matthews urges that the poem critiques “the evangelical account of prostitution” and prefigures later Blake works that present women’s sexuality as socially transformative (74, 79-80). Fallon’s “‘She Cuts his Heart Out at his Side’: Blake, Christianity and Political Virtue” examines Blake’s relation to the “civic humanism” tradition, arguing that he gradually reworks its “republican masculinism.” Fallon’s key texts, “The Mental Traveller,” the annotations to Bacon, and “I Saw a Monk of Charlemaigne,” persuade him that for later Blake, “male-oriented classical civic virtue is seriously flawed,” especially by militarism, and “women [are] essential to a liberatory renewal of the social body” (101).

Rather than critical conflicts *about* Blake, Sarah Haggarty, Sibylle Erle, Mark Crosby, Luisa Calè, and Morton D. Paley all pursue Blake’s own conflicts and alignments with contemporaries. Haggarty’s “From Donation to Demand? Almsgiving and the ‘Annotations to Thornton’” and Erle’s “Shadows in the Cave: Refocusing Vision in Blake’s Creation Myth” focus respectively on Blake’s indignant response to Robert Thornton’s 1827 version of the Lord’s Prayer and on *The Book of*

Urizen’s use of eighteenth-century optics and ophthalmology. Haggarty valuably contextualizes Thornton’s work among contemporary writings on charity and suggests that by insisting that bread is ours by right, Blake in old age sustains the radicalism of his youth (107). Erle reads the creation of the senses in *Urizen* as influenced by then-current optic theory, including findings on the lens’s active role in vision. Her further argument that *Urizen* counters Swedenborg’s account of distinct spiritual and material realms by “adapt[ing] optic theory to explain the *visible* existence of the spiritual world” (152) is weakened by failure to discuss the Eternals’ “tent” erected to block vision between these realms (*Urizen* 19.2-20.2, E 78-80). Nonetheless, this essay resituates Blake in a way that counters still-resonant ideas of his opposition to science.

Crosby, Calè, and Paley focus closely on Blake and art. In “A Minute Skirmish: Blake, Hayley and the Art of Miniature Painting,” Crosby examines Blake’s use of stippling in miniatures done for Hayley, arguing that these works violate models that Hayley recommended and so are a first step in Blake’s rejection of his patron. Calè’s “Blake and the Literary Galleries” seeks parallels between *Urizen* and *Night Thoughts* and Fuseli’s Milton illustrations, notably *Satan Bursts from Chaos*. Calè does demonstrate parallels (most convincingly with *Urizen*), but her larger argument that both Blake works show the sequential indeterminacy associated with gallery browsing is overstated. Paley’s “Blake’s Poems on Art and Artists,” which ends the volume, opens new ground, given the lack of much previous analysis of these angry Notebook poems (“To Venetian Artists,” “Florentine Ingratitude,” and others). Paley proposes that the Orléans sale of French, Italian, and Spanish art in 1798 was “a major impetus” for the poems (210); he doesn’t provide evidence but expertly decodes the works and shows their relevance to Blake’s annotations of Reynolds, long accepted as major statements of his ideas on art.

One relevant sense of conflict not addressed in the volume, curiously, is Blake’s representations of social conflicts, whether the European war—highlighted in the editors’ first sentence but not discussed by any contributor—or the war at home. Issues still needing discussion, in my view, include Blake’s possible sanctioning of social violence in both early and later work (*Europe* 15, *Milton* 42), his attention to poverty and growing rebellion during the Regency (*Milton* 18, *Jerusalem* 60), and his sense that social war trumps international war—“The Wine-press on the Rhine groans loud, but all its central beams / Act more terrific in the central Cities of the Nations / Where Human Thought is crushd beneath the iron hand of Power” (*Milton* 25.3-5, E 121). But one essay collection can’t do everything, and this one does a great deal both to extend knowledge of Blake’s intellectual and historical contexts and, in the polemical essays, to sustain an ongoing debate over his complicity with or defiance of ideologies of oppression.