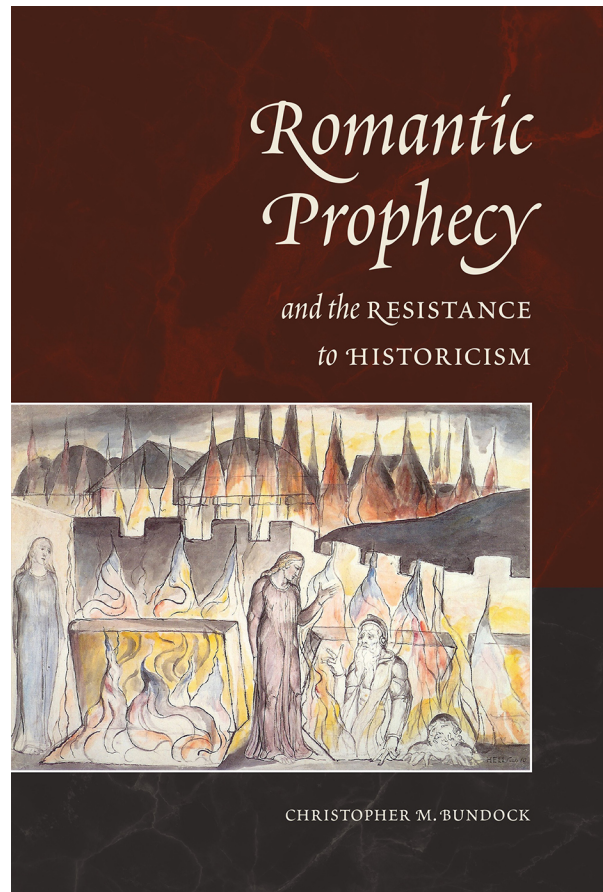


Christopher M. Bundock. *Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. xii + 273 pp. \$65.00, hardcover and e-book.

Reviewed by John Patrick James

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- 1 **W**HAT is history and what does it mean to be historical? These are not only fitting questions for an era of political upheaval and epistemic change, but ones endemic to the polyvalent inquiry and future-oriented temporality exhibited by many of Romanticism's most influential figures. What Blake, Goethe, Coleridge, and others all share—besides a penchant for observation and an inclination toward linguistic play—is an ability to combine what today seem distinct modes of inquiry into literary forms no less valid for their imaginative structure than the abstruse prose tracts of Kierkegaard or the aesthetic writings of Kant or Burke. Such multidisciplinary works propagate a novel sense of historicity, one that distinguishes itself from the accumulated chain of events that forms the present, and, beyond it, the future such poems surreptitiously portend.
- 2 Many influential studies have deftly adopted this theme, among them James Chandler's *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (1998), Kevis Goodman's *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (2004), and Saree Makdisi's *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (2003). Christopher M. Bundock's *Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism* complicates this discussion by underscoring an apocalyptic dimension to Romantic temporality central less to its ability to foresee the future, or to see itself as somehow outside time, and more to prophecy's capacity to operate "outside and parallel



to the systematic, variously scientific elaborations of historiography" (5) and to position the prophet as "an anti- or at least a para-institutional agent" (3). Such readings are especially pertinent to Blake, whose work exhibits a staunch resistance to the hermeneutic authority of juridical, religious, and educational institutions.¹ The study is also useful for understanding the prophetic dimensions of the various texts Bundock takes up, from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to Kant's lesser-known writings on Swedenborg to Mary Shelley's post-apocalyptic novel *The Last Man*. Throughout these discussions, Bundock exhibits remarkable erudition, contextualizing the book's concerns within the sometimes obscure scientific and religious discourses of the period while theorizing that argument for an inherently evolving and contentiously understood present.

- 3 Because Bundock reconfigures the manner in which scholars have traditionally thought about prophecy, as both a literary mode and a form of mystic insight, his Blake chapters offer a trenchant reconsideration of Blake's prophetic writings. He cites Alexander Gilchrist, who complains in his

1. For more on this topic, see Rix.

1863 *Life of William Blake that America a Prophecy* “has no distinctly seizable pretensions to a prophetic character, being, like the rest of Blake’s ‘Books of Prophecy,’ rather a retrospect, in its mystic way, of events already transpired” (quoted in Bundock 169). Indeed, Blake himself distinguished between prophecy and prediction, writing in his annotations to Richard Watson’s *An Apology for the Bible* (1797), “Every honest man is a Prophet he utters his opinion both of private & public matters ... He never says such a thing shall happen let you do what you will. a Prophet is a Seer not an Arbitrary Dictator” (E 617). In the most literal sense, Blake’s prophecies, from *America* to *Milton*, are not prophetic at all: as Bundock says of Blake’s prefaces, they “do not pave the way to the future but rather dig ever deeper into the impossibility of their own function” (169). He argues, drawing on Makdisi, that Blake’s books interrogate “how the narratives produced by historians fail if they limit history to the understandable,” “rewrit[ing] historiography” for an era that not only understands itself as temporally homogenous but that suffers from a hierarchical concentration of power within institutions (141-42). Such (re)inscription is performed via the engraver’s burin, metaphorized in *Milton*—as S. Foster Damon, Robert N. Essick, and others have observed—by Palamabron’s “Harrow of the Almighty” and Rintrah’s “Plow” (*Milton* 3.41-4.1, E 97). “The work [the harrow] performs,” writes Bundock, “resembles Blake’s practices of etching and engraving” (142), rendering visual, material, and textual an inscriptive modality that erases history even while writing it.

- 4 Bundock also insists on the separability of Blake’s prefaces from the body-texts themselves, reading the preface as its own constitutive and impossibly (in the Makdisian sense) predictive generic mode. “Blake’s Bard in *Milton*,” he writes, “plays this role, singing an allegorical preface ... to the larger event of Milton’s descent from eternity” (168). Readers will recall Blake’s imperative in the prose preface: “Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fash[i]onable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works” (*Milton* pl. 1, E 95). The short lyric that follows famously exhorts readers to “buil[d] Jerusalem, / In Englands green & pleasant Land” (lines 15-16, E 96). Bundock argues—correctly, I think—that “Blake’s art resists the concept of progressive development, following instead a deeply disjunctive itinerary drawn from his thinking about history” (168).² Thus works that purport predictability quickly undermine their own futural logic by offering a prediction for a text with little narrative structure and virtually no diegetic progression.

2. A similar argument is made in Morris Eaves, *William Blake’s Theory of Art and The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*.

Similar disjunctions between prefaces and their body-texts exist throughout the Romantic era: “Wordsworth’s *Prelude* is also conceived as a preface to an epic, though one that eclipses the work it would announce” (168). The preface becomes its own epic. By contrast, in two of the four copies of *Milton* (copies C and D) Blake omits the preface entirely, a decision that does not eradicate the poem’s prophetic element but that downplays its predictive logic in favor of the inscriptive historiography that Bundock describes above. The epic, Blake decided—between 1811 and 1818³—needs no preface at all.

- 5 There’s more to *Romantic Prophecy* than Blake. Perhaps most interesting to Romanticists is chapter 8, which investigates Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, a work that has garnered much recent attention as a forerunner to science fiction’s now ubiquitous narratives of apocalypse and survival. Speaking of both *The Last Man* and *Valperga*, Bundock notes how, for Shelley, “prophecy is the form that restriction, punishment, and regulation often take when women, especially, attempt to assert historical agency. Yet, Shelley does not, ultimately, understand prophecy only as a repressive discourse,” as one might view it given its predication on predictive “binding” (197). Instead, Bundock reads *The Last Man* as a “failed utopia”—or an “immanently dystopic” one—whose “drive for renovation” more closely resembles Blake’s “revisionary power” than it does the pessimism of the world’s end so readily expressed by figures like Byron: such a drive “hesitates to produce total or final visions” (197). The “survivor of a global plague,” Lionel Verney is, as Bundock points out, “the last man on earth” (214). He argues that *The Last Man* represents what Maurice Blanchot describes as a “limit-experience”: “a state of being where the Hegelian end of history encounters a kind of disappointment with its own success” (Bundock 215). “This dissatisfaction discloses a negativity,” he concludes, “that does not get drawn up into dialectical activity” and thus becomes the “twilight” in which “Shelley’s text finally leaves what is remaining of the historical subject” (216). Such negativity represents the inherent failure of prophecy as a predictive mode, a failure that ultimately enables it as “a mechanism for radically anti-institutional thought,” which “clear[s] spaces for ... genuinely different, unprethinkable futures” (7).
- 6 *Romantic Prophecy* casts an impressively wide net, one that not only encompasses a vast array of literary and philosophical texts but that, for this reason, makes itself relevant to literary historians, theologians, and historians of science alike, not to mention the Romanticists who remain its tar-

3. For the dates, see Viscomi’s chapter on the production of *Milton* (315-29), especially 327n27.

get audience. The book might also interest ecocritics, who seek to imagine the world-shaping change that prophecy itself engenders: a radical adjustment of resources and the institutions that regulate them that might, in our own era, permit sustainability for a planet whose fragile systems are increasingly imperiled. Indeed, the portents of ecological disaster are so pervasive that they engender passive acceptance. As a mode of instigating social action, prophecy has utterly failed. Yet prophecy paradoxically succeeds through its own failures: by falling short of accurate prediction, it “disencumbers the future from the weight of the past and from attempts to entail the future to the past” (7). “Writing the failure of utopia can, then, reorient the discussion of social conflicts by recalibrating fundamental ideas about the good” (196). Engendering a critique of ideologies past, *Romantic Prophecy* assembles a similar failure, a *via negativa* that enables a futurist vision by extricating that future from the burdens of the past. While we can place only so much weight on literary criticism, Bundoek allows us to view our present more clearly by viewing it through the lens of the past, and, by doing so, to instigate social, political, and perhaps even ecological change. Not only does such “new prophecy” permit readers to “distinguish productive uncertainty from crippling precariousness,” it urges us to recognize that the future is not set, that “states ... can actually change” (225), and that what now seems an unthinkable future is not only possible but imminently real.

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