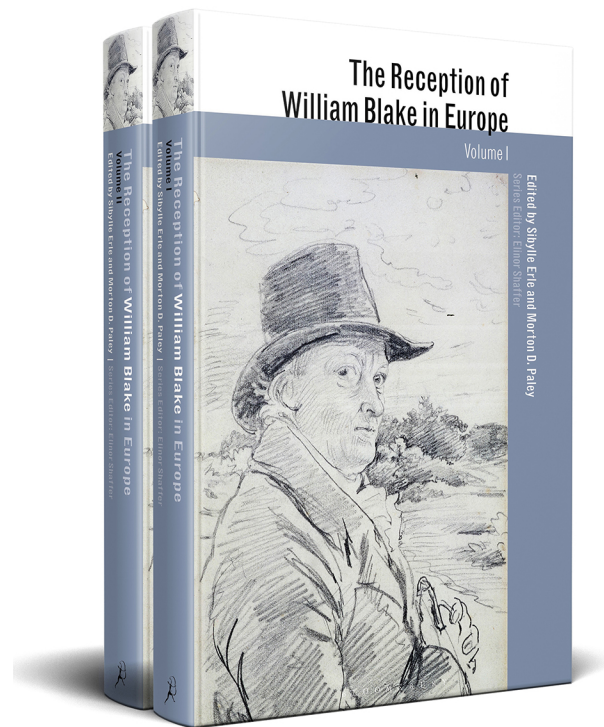


Sibylle Erle and Morton D. Paley, eds. *The Reception of William Blake in Europe*. 1 vol. in 2. The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe, no. 25. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. lxvi + 384 pp., viii + 434 pp. 29 illustrations. £250.00/\$338.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Silvia Riccardi

SILVIA RICCARDI (silvia.riccardi@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de) is a postdoctoral assistant in the Department of English at the University of Freiburg. She has written on the reception of Dante in England and is currently working on graphic and textual forms of biomorphism in Blake's illuminated manuscripts and on a monograph examining the aesthetics of Dark Romanticism.



There is an Outside spread Without, & an Outside spread Within  
Beyond the Outline of Identity both ways, which meet in One:  
An orb'd Void of doubt, despair, hunger, & thirst & sorrow. (*Jerusalem* 18.2-4, E 162)

- 1 **T**HE *Reception of William Blake in Europe* is the twenty-fifth title in the series *The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe*, published under the editorship of Elinor Shaffer. As Shaffer contends, the project sets a broader definition of the term “afterlife” in relation to the authors’ reception beyond Britain. This transnational and comparative approach broadens our knowledge of “writers in any field whose works have been recognized as making a contribution to the intellectual and cultural history of our society” (xii).
- 2 The identity and role of William Blake as a “writer” have not always been taken for granted. Within the timespan of two centuries, Blake has been considered as both an artisan and one of the big six of British Romanticism. For much of his life he worked as an engraver, socially considered among the reproducers of pictures rather than the creators. Since his death, a recognition of a more complex figure around his name has emerged. Today, across Europe, Blake is regarded as a printmaker and engraver, poet and painter, prophet and philosopher, mystic and musician. The assess-

ment of a slow and unbalanced reception of such a multifaceted figure, whose role has morphed across the arts throughout different periods and regions, is one of the factors that makes this project especially valuable, creating “a unique and startling story, to which no label or temporal category is adequate” (Shaffer, *Reception* xiii).

- 3 Sibylle Erle and Morton D. Paley took up the ambitious task of editing the first comprehensive and systematic reference guide to Blake’s European afterlife, in collaboration with international scholars. The study resulted in a monumental collection of twenty-six chapters arranged in two volumes. Covering an extraordinary diversity of disciplines, *Reception* comprises essays on Blake editions, music, exhibitions, and the reception histories in Ireland, France, Belgium, Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, Romania, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries, the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia and the USSR, Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. The work also contains an introduction, a thoroughly compiled timeline of Blake’s reception in continental Europe, and a detailed bibliography in each volume, divided by chapter, including the major translations in the countries covered.
- 4 Paley opens the discussion with the editorial history of Blake’s work, setting the stage for the remaining chapters. During Blake’s lifetime, his reputation was clouded by his supposed insanity. The inaccessibility of his art and his

social-class limitations were further impediments to his reception, even in his own country. Unlike his Romantic contemporaries, he remained a “*Pictor*” and “*Poeta Ignotus*” for decades (25). The first widely promulgated acknowledgments of his literary and artistic achievements appeared about fifty years after his death, with Alexander Gilchrist’s and Algernon Charles Swinburne’s biographical works, published in 1863 and 1868, and the 1876 Burlington Fine Arts Club exhibition.

- 5 William Butler Yeats and Edwin John Ellis’s three-volume edition of *The Works of William Blake* (1893) was a watershed for Blake’s afterlife abroad, proposing an esotericist view of the artist and anticipating Jean H. Hagstrum’s approach to Blake’s work as “composite art.” As Edward Larrissy highlights, the enthusiastic editors attempted to proffer Blake as an Irish national. Two years later, in his *Book of Irish Verse*, Yeats further affirmed that “William Blake has been recently claimed as of Irish descent, upon the evidence of Dr. Carter Blake; and if, in the course of years, that claim becomes generally accepted, he should be included also in Irish anthologies” (quoted in *Reception* 39). Helene Richter, as Erle and Susanne Schmid point out in their essays, was the first European scholar to reject this claim, in 1906.
- 6 Blake’s fortunes on the Continent developed into disparate but often entwining threads across media. While in Belgium interest was predominantly focused on his art in relation to the Symbolist movement, in France attention was mostly given to his poetic pieces until recent times. In 1972, Jean-Jacques Mayoux discussed the role of Blake as an artist in his study on English painters, *La peinture anglaise*, drawing parallels with John Flaxman and Henry Fuseli. From a political perspective, Blake was best known for his radical views inspired by the French Revolution. Gilles Soubigou and Yann Tholoniati note that he was compared by philosopher Jean Wahl to “Rimbaud and Nietzsche or a ‘Dante révolté’ (‘rebellious Dante’), a priest on the path towards wisdom” (quoted in *Reception* 69). According to Wahl, the English author conflated the spirit of three iconic figures in the cultural histories of France, Germany, and Italy.
- 7 Blake arrived in Italy through visual means. His final, incomplete work on the illustrations to the *Commedia* portrayed transcendence and corporeal translucence beyond Dante’s words. The watercolor series was displayed in a comprehensive exhibition in 1983, though it has never been presented as a whole. Translations, scholarship, and criticism on Blake flourished even during the Fascist period; by contrast, extended authoritarianism in the remaining Romance-language countries affected the cultural acknowledgment of his work. Cristina Flores traces an early appreciation of his art in Spanish in 1826 with José Joaquín de Mora’s *Meditaciones Poéticas*. Unlike in Italy, however, there was no substantial continuation of the artist’s reception until 1928, when Blake’s poetry was translated from a 1927 French version. The first Portuguese translations appeared in 1979, followed, among others, by Edições Antígona’s publication between 1994 and 2009 of the complete illuminated writings. Cătălin Ghiță expands on the relevance of translation in Romania, drawing attention to Mihai A. Stroe’s bilingual project on Blake’s works, “for it fills a significant reception gap in Romanian culture” (223). Of the ten-volume initiative, *The Four Zoas* and *Milton* have been released so far, in 2006.
- 8 The German section on Blake’s afterlife is articulated in four chapters and explores the responses to the author’s writings and art in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, including an essay by David Bindman on the great 1975 Hamburg Kunsthalle exhibition. The first mention of Blake in Germany dates back to 1789, but only in 1811 did he gain scholarly attention via Henry Crabb Robinson. He was, however, mainly considered as a “madman” throughout the nineteenth century in German-speaking areas (239), until the publication of Richter’s *William Blake* in 1906. Both Schmid and Erle acknowledge the importance of the Austrian scholar’s contribution, which was also devoted to the illuminated books and their material qualities. Notably, Richter’s work influenced Blake’s reception in the Czech Republic, the former Yugoslavia, and Switzerland. On the latter, Angela Esterhammer discusses Blake’s relationship with the expatriated Fuseli and the interest in Blake’s mysticism among Swiss audiences. After Blake’s style, the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung incorporated illuminated handwritten text and images in his *Liber Novus*, the volume of visionary material he produced between 1913 and 1930 (302).
- 9 The visionary and mystical aspects of Blake also prevailed in the Dutch reception until the works of Jan Veth (1893) and Edward B. Koster (1907) brought attention to his poetry. Owing to the impact of the Cold War, there was a late response in Eastern Europe. Despite being presented as a revolutionary by the Soviet poet Marshak, Blake is mostly appreciated for the visionary qualities of his art in Russia today, and seen as a disciple of Swedenborg in Bulgaria. His reputation as a Christian visionary poet was the cause of the slow reception in Turkey, where some of his prophetic books appeared in translation only in 2015. The Nordic response shows Blake emerging in the twentieth century as a literary man in Sweden, an artistic figure in Finland, and a musical and theatrical inspiration in Denmark.
- 10 Jason Whittaker and Martin Myrone examine the crucial roles of popular and classical music and of traveling exhibi-

tions in Blake's growing popularity. These have been accessible means for large numbers of people to appreciate his work without having to confront the written idiosyncrasies of his mythopoeia. Blake originals first started traveling to the Continent in 1937 (Paris), and loan exhibitions became more common after World War II, offering European audiences a direct experience with the materiality of the pieces, which remains central to his reception.

- 11 One of the most attractive features of Erle and Paley's collection is the extensive exploration of Blake's protean nature and the way in which the development of its varied discovery abroad has unfolded. As Shaffer notes, "In the current volume we find ourselves in a unique world that eluded definition, and sometimes recognition, through its own originality" (xiii). Each chapter is meticulously tailored to provide a sense of temporal and geographical—and quintessentially European—continuity. For instance, both Schmid and Erle highlight Richter's notable example of transnational response interlacing Blake's fortunes in multiple countries and, emblematically, Luisa Calè observes that "the first significant traces of Blake in Italy come through Dante via Germany" (125), bringing forth interwoven contingencies of different periods, cultures, and media that occurred beyond national borders.
- 12 Given the role of Blake as a writer of pictorial language and the importance of his visual art for European audiences, the reader may expect the collection to offer more than twenty-nine black-and-white illustrations and to include, for example, reproductions of the stipple engravings recently identified in Russia by Tatiana Tiutvinova. These pieces—"Robin Hood and Clorinda" (1783) after John Meheux, "Calisto" and "Zephyrus and Flora" (1784) after Thomas Stothard, and "Venus Dissuades Adonis from Hunting" (1787) after Richard Cosway—"were coloured by Blake himself" and testify that the first originals in Europe arrived in Russia in the 1820s and not in Germany or Austria (see 540-42 and Erle and Paley, "Introduction" 21). The studies and material put forth in this work are, however, exceptionally substantial. Blake is the only Romantic author—and one of the very few, with James Joyce, Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens, and Isaac Newton—to whom multiple volumes have been devoted in Shaffer's series. As Erle and Paley point out, this work is, after the one on Alfred Tennyson, "only the second . . . in Elinor Shaffer's series *The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe* to have illustrations" (10). It may not be literally visual, but *The Reception of William Blake in Europe* powerfully portrays the multiform image of William Blake, presenting the fascinating and quasi-mythical construct of his figure as a central enigma from the Romantic era to our own.