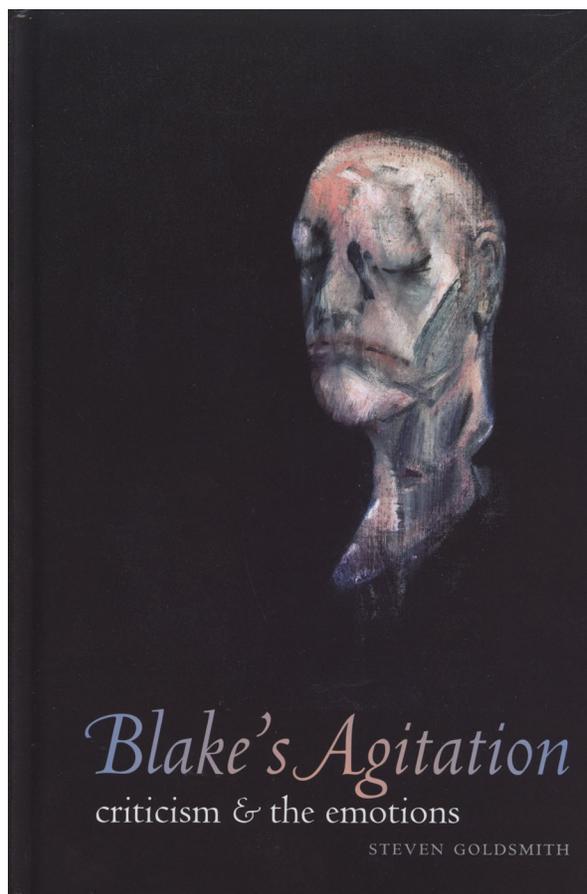


Steven Goldsmith. *Blake's Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 406 pp. \$65.00/£34.00, hardcover (also available as an e-book).

Reviewed by G. A. Rosso

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- 1 **T**HIS is an imaginative, deeply learned, and passionately argued book. The thinking and writing are sustained throughout at exceptionally high levels. Complex and difficult but readable and clear, the book makes an original and important contribution to Blake studies, though its aims and interests are much broader and more ambitious. I will focus on Goldsmith's approach to and interpretation of Blake, but since he uses Blake to explore larger concerns in literary theory, the field of emotion/affect studies, and the relation of critical thought to political theory and action, I take these into view. The thread that ties these areas together is the centrality of reading in modern culture, about which Goldsmith has innovative and insightful things to say.
- 2 The book opens with a provocation to historicist readings of Blake as antinomian radical and prophet against empire, asking "is our enthusiasm for Blake to be trusted?" (1). The question turns on another directed at Blake: why did he feel that his work had public importance when he had no audience to speak of? How did he maintain his "radical enthusiasm" in the face of obscurity? For Goldsmith, belief in Blake's political radicalism rests on shaky evidence; it is supported by his alleged presence at the Gordon Riots in 1780 and his trial for sedition in 1804—in which he was *acquitted* of uttering antimonarchist sentiments—but these events are "striking exceptions" that stand out against a lifetime of "nonparticipation" (35). Blake never broke the law, was not an activist, and had no file with the Home Office. Goldsmith titles part 1 "Devil's Party," but he asks: "Is it possible to believe oneself a revolutionary devil while remaining harmless and inconsequential?" (48). His question is not as harsh or negative as it sounds: the answer is yes if one's faculties are agitated to the point of making intellectual



arousal "feel like action." In such agitation, suggests Goldsmith, "the antinomian integrity of thinking for oneself is tantamount to a public good" (70-72). In this sense, questions concerning Blake's or Blake scholarship's enthusiasm open into a broader consideration of "critical agency" as practiced by intellectuals since the romantic period.

- 3 A special value of the book is Goldsmith's extensive and perceptive reading in the field of affect studies as it has reshaped discussion in the humanities over the last decades, especially regarding the mind-body relation and the political dimension of human subjectivity. Goldsmith shows that recent Blake criticism participates in what he calls "a sustained, interdisciplinary 'surge' in the ... study of emotion" (10), and the book is worth reading as a guide to this exciting work. An important feature of this field is its emphasis on the "anonymity" and "agency" of emotion, what Thomas Pfau refers to as the pre-discursive or "ontologically anterior" vitality of emotions said to "resist a subject's ordinary means of self-identification" (17). Affects in the new literature are "anonymous" because they are involuntary, taking place below the threshold of cognition, prior to or beyond the formation of the Cartesian subject. In posing a chal-

lenge to “the self-protective fictions of identity,” functioning “as a source of estrangement rather than as a reassuring indication of familiar humanity,” they resemble Blake’s concept of self-annihilation, the enthusiastic state that is “the primary aim of his late prophecies” (17-18).

- 4 Goldsmith joins these concepts to the issue of critical agency through what he calls his “sharpest insight into Blake’s contradictions,” which derives from an “unexpected source”—Immanuel Kant’s *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). What interests Goldsmith most about this work is Kant’s evaluation of the French Revolution and Terror, particularly his concept of the “nonparticipant revolutionary spectator,” a figure who serves to displace the Jacobins as the true agent of the revolution as “a world-transforming event” (35).

In a single decisive move, Kant transfers historical agency to a newly emergent public whose role is to keep watch and exercise critical judgment. From this point on, according to Kant, *only* the genuine enthusiasm of the independent critical thinker, and not the agency of direct action, makes progressive historical change possible. (35)

Blake is Goldsmith’s foremost example of this new figure “whose critical engagements take on such urgency as to feel like actions themselves,” a move that renders Blake’s contradictions “more broadly representative of the modern progressive intellectual” (35). Armed with this thesis, Goldsmith explores the compensatory role of emotion in creating the sense of critical agency, though in an important methodological move he also argues that Blake puts this theory of “reading” into question by subjecting emotion to critique in turn.

- 5 If Kant is the theorist and Blake the exemplar, then Milton is the precursor for the revolutionary spectator (36), and an outstanding feature of Goldsmith’s book is its often brilliant treatment of the Blake-Milton relationship. Blake’s emotional aesthetic is “directly related” to his sense of sharing with Milton the task of sustaining hope in historical transformation in the face of “revolutionary disappointment.” “The urgent and anonymous emotions of critical engagement,” writes Goldsmith, “come to occupy the place vacated by a discredited revolutionary agency” (26). Goldsmith focuses on Blake’s visual interpretations of *Samson Agonistes*, primarily through a stimulating account of the evolution of Blake’s design “Albion Rose,” the versions of which, he says, culminate in the print’s final state (c. 1804). He compares the design with Blake’s drawing of Samson on the last page of his *Night Thoughts* illustrations (Night IX, page 119), which depicts Samson pulling down the pillars, one eye open directly across from Young’s text: “Virtue abounds in Flatterers, and Foes; / ’Tis Pride, to praise her;

Penance to perform” (9.2419-20). Claiming that these lines echo Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*—“With inward eyes illuminated / His fierie vertue rouz’d / From under ashes into sudden flame” (lines 1690-92)—Goldsmith argues that Young’s negative take on “virtue” deflects attention from Samson’s act of violence in the same way as do Blake’s additions to the print of “Albion Rose.” These include an inscription that alludes to Samson’s laboring “at the Mill with Slaves” and a date (1780) that places Samson in the context of the Gordon Riots and American Revolution, bits of text that redirect our attention from the urgency of his act to “the lateral, slower motion of reading” (133). While the print may be more multivalent than Goldsmith allows, it is especially important to him because from the time of David Erdman’s “groundbreaking reading” in *Prophet against Empire* (1954) it has served as “an indispensable key to political readings of Blake” (84). And though Erdman does not associate “Albion Rose” with Samson at the temple, Goldsmith suggests that Erdman and later historicists follow Blake’s example in borrowing Samson’s strength while “transferring” his “heroic labor to the urgent but hesitant agency” (117) involved in critical reading.

- 6 In part 2, Goldsmith locates the origins of his idea of critical reading in the age of sensibility, whose literature emphasizes emotional intelligence in an idiom Blake both mobilizes and subjects to critique. Building on recent work by James Chandler, Jon Mee, and Susan Matthews, Goldsmith analyzes “On Another’s Sorrow” to show how Blake incorporates the discourses of sympathy and sentiment in order to unmask their social-cultural construction. On one hand, emotion cannot be subsumed by reason and so functions as “autocriticism” of the instrumental subject of enlightenment thought; on the other, emotions such as sympathy and pity “underwrite the norms of social and political life,” smoothing the exchanges of global commerce, and so must be “decomposed” by critical reading. In contrast to the “intelligent” emotions subject to self-control, Blake’s Jesus in the poem demands no accountability and performs no action but a “dilatatory” and “immoderate” capacity to empathize, to sit and listen eternally, refusing to appropriate another’s sorrow for any agenda whatsoever—except perhaps for critical reading (199-209).
- 7 How does this Jesus comport with the antinomian radical who acts from impulse, not from rules, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*? They must be read together, each confounding the “ordinary distinctions between activity and passivity” (229) and so eluding narrative time altogether. Goldsmith brings his view of this impulsive yet infinitely patient Jesus to bear on the celebrated text on time near the end of the first book of *Milton*, marshaling the major threads of his argument in an imaginative and sensitive reading of the “pulsation of an artery” passage (28.44-29.3,

E 126-27). A review cannot do justice to the profound learning and energetic thinking Goldsmith bestows on the passage. Suffice it to say that the idea in the passage accords with the postmodern “disappearance of an identifiable human subject” (234) as the pulsations of life tend to render us “strangers in our own bodies” (235-36). Goldsmith thus adds considerably to discussions about Blake and the body and strengthens support for an immanent rather than transcendent Blake.

- 8 In the final chapter, “Criticism and the Work of Emotion,” Goldsmith puts into question his argument about the “intimacy between criticism and feeling” asking as he did of Blake’s enthusiasm how we know to trust “agitations irreducible to concepts” (272-73). He draws on Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory* (1939)—which both affirms and distrusts the transformative potential of emotion—and on Jacques Derrida’s late work, especially *Specters of Marx* (1993) and *The Politics of Friendship* (1994), the latter recording Derrida’s lone reference to Blake. Of particular importance is Derrida’s “performative interpretation” of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, the injunction not just to interpret the world but to change it. A performative interpretation transforms or changes the text/event that it engages, as when Derrida reads the communist specter haunting Europe as a “promise” that remains fundamentally indeterminate, that must “exceed and surprise every determinant anticipation” (*Specters* 251). This “structure of experience” applies also to the promise of revolution or the coming of the messiah, both of which require “a waiting without expectation” (“Marx & Sons” 248-49). For Goldsmith, the crucial point is that Derrida “collapses any distinction between the formal action of Marx’s writings and the reader’s affective, even somatic response, making it impossible to locate revolt in one or the other exclusively” (288). True to his self-reflective method, however, Goldsmith warns that the transformative potential of affective reading may be an indulgent fantasy, “a product of specialized, professional labor” constrained by socio-economic conditions (302). He thus counterposes Derrida’s messianic structure with Sartre’s theory of emotion.
- 9 As Goldsmith explains, Sartre identifies two main types of emotion, each performing a kind of “magic” that transforms the self: those “that emanate *from us* and others that happen *to us*, with the latter pointing to sources outside our own subjectivity” (306). The first type supplies immediate, embodied evidence that critical thinking can change the world, specifically when the critic or when history has reached an impasse: a failed revolution or discredited apocalypse. One’s enthusiasm in such a moment amounts to a kind of magic that Sartre says is based totally on subjective life, not on the outside world that denies the desire for transformation. The second type of emotion comes from

outside the self and “reveals itself to consciousness as magical instead of determined” (308), confronting the subject as something other than its own will or agency. This second emotion enables Goldsmith to interrogate the “implicit claims of affective agency in order to decouple emotion from the promise of empowerment” (Goldsmith, “William Blake and the Future of Enthusiasm” 453). He offsets Derrida’s messianic structure of experience with what Sartre describes as “an existential structure of the world” (308). Yet if he counters Derrida with Sartre, he also remains committed to the principle of indeterminacy: not the indeterminacy that critics impose on an intransigent and overdetermined world in order to interpret and change it, but a “second indeterminacy—if it exi[s]ts at all”—that transcends human mentality and reveals itself through the object (308-09). The Derridean phrase “if it exists” suggests that Goldsmith reads Sartre *through* Derrida and that what may be at stake is not Blake’s politics but the burden of the postmodern subject looking to escape the hegemony of the sign. The decentered subject gains an implicit authenticity through those affective agitations and intensities that open up an interiority “outside” the processes of subjection (or subjectification in postmodern parlance).

- 10 As with any book, even one as self-aware and knowledgeable as this one, several limitations can be noted. For one, despite its historical range and theoretical sophistication, the book does not add much to readings of any of Blake’s major poems. In this sense it recalls Leo Damrosch’s similarly provocative and challenging *Symbol and Truth in Blake’s Myth* (1980), a work also focused on the productive value of Blake’s contradictions. For another, the book seems to generalize a point Kant makes about the failure of the Jacobin-led revolution to all revolution and perhaps to political action as well. One can practice the enthusiastic reading that Goldsmith observes in Erdman, Mee, Saree Makdisi, and others without confining political participation to the groves of academe. In related terms, Goldsmith says that Blake’s Jesus is modeled on the self-sacrificing Passion of Christ, but we get a Jesus who does not risk provoking the violence of the state, as he does in *The Four Zoas*, *Jerusalem*, and *The Everlasting Gospel*. Finally, Goldsmith’s questions about political agency in Blake and tensions within his conceptions of revolutionary violence have been anticipated and addressed in Christopher Hobson’s *The Chained Boy: Orc and Blake’s Idea of Revolution* (1999), a book also indebted to the school of Joseph Wittreich, a pioneer of Milton-Blake studies whose engagement with Milton’s revolutionary legacy deeply informs Goldsmith’s argument. Hobson offers a critical, historically nuanced account of Blake’s revolutionary thinking that does not reject populist violence as an option in his work, a reading that Goldsmith does not consider.

- 11 *Blake's Agitation* thus can be placed within a subfield inaugurated by Wittreich nearly forty years ago with *Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton* (1975), including works by Leslie Tannenbaum, Jackie DiSalvo, Stephen Behrendt, Hobson, and this reviewer among others that engage Blake's relationship to Milton and to the revolutionary currents of his own age. Yet Goldsmith's book stands out for its larger aims and concerns, even as it advances discussion of Blake's enthusiasm, fulfills an important need for studies of Blake's relation to sensibility, and goes further than any previous study in exploring contradictions in Blake's work. Indeed, the book has the enviable potential to make Blake available to a larger audience than most Blake specialists can reach. In this sense, its focus on a limited number of passages in Blake's work may prove to its advantage. We might end by citing Goldsmith's own praise of a fellow romanticist's book: "its monumental scope and complexity lie well beyond anything that can be treated justly in this brief engagement" (14).

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