



R E V I E W

Sarah Haggarty. *Blake's Gifts: Poetry and the Politics of Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. x + 238 pp. £58.00/\$99.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Grant F. Scott

GRANT F. SCOTT (scott@muhlenberg.edu) is professor and chair of English at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* (1994), editor of *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs* (2005) and, most recently, co-editor with Sue Brown of *New Letters from Charles Brown to Joseph Severn* <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/brownsevern>> (*Romantic Circles* electronic edition, rev. 2010). He is currently working on a scholarly edition of the illustrated letters of Richard Doyle to his father, 1842-43.

1 THIS book is more about the social function of Blake's art in a number of physical and personal economies than it is about the art itself. Haggarty examines the idea of the gift as well as related ideas about spiritual exchange in selected passages from a few poems—mostly *Jerusalem* and *Milton*—but the predominant focus remains the social network of Blake's friends and patrons and the larger cultural matrix that governed the etiquette of giving in the eighteenth century. As such the primary texts are Blake's letters, annotations, and *Descriptive Catalogue*. The secondary texts are myriad, though Bourdieu, Derrida, and Marcel Mauss frame the most significant discussions and Mee and Makdisi plug the interstices. In addition, a teeming hive of contemporary characters like Duff and Hayley, Reynolds and Robinson swarm these pages and at times push Blake to the margins.

2 Haggarty examines gift-giving in five “discursive domains” that ascend steadily from secular to spiritual: Economy, Patronage, Charity, Inspiration, and Salvation. Her contention is that gift-giving is not only a central preoccupation “but a quasi-formal principle” of Blake's work (2). Because of his “horror of Money” (20; Crabb Robinson's phrase), Blake continually tried to navigate the terrain between the grubby economy of business and the generosity of the gift, a generosity based upon forging friendships rather than setting prices, adhering to contracts, or exacting compensation. The paradoxes and vexations of Blake's “intermingling” of these realms form the heart of this book. Blake's conception of the gift underwrites “his radical critique of commerce, polite consensus, self-righteous morality, and Church doctrine” (2) and is bound closely with his views of reciprocity and friendship. To the bemusement and often annoyance of his patrons, Blake's notion of reciprocity rested on “an exercise of co-operative antagonism” (3) that often threatened to strain the very ties of the friendship itself. In the final chapters, Haggarty looks at various incarnations of the divine gift—the “free gift” and “pure gift,” including Christ's sacrificial offering of his life—which disrupt and complicate both the mercantile contract and the more personal idea of reciprocity.

3 The first chapter, “Economy,” analyzes the representation of the gift in Blake's letters and annotations and the transaction of his illuminated books in the world. Blake implies “the incommensurability of *price*, *debt*, and *money* with human experience,” substituting for the cash nexus his own divinely inflected discourse of “*treasures*, *rewards*, *gold*, *talents*, and *riches*” (12), borrowed of course from the New Testament. In this transfiguration “treasures” are “gifts that can be exchanged” (12). The unique production of Blake's books, his “cottage economy” (Paul Mann's term), and the way that individual sales along with the sharing of his books embody their value constitute more of a social than

commercial form of transaction. “What is particularly interesting about Blake’s home-studios,” as Haggarty insightfully remarks, “is that, in them, places of sale are also places of production and, as it were, the work of consumption. The home-studio is thus, potentially at least, a site of unalienated exchange” (21). The chapter concludes with a fine analysis of the architecture and building of Golgonooza in *Jerusalem*, a passage that intermingles earthly and heavenly details in ways that attest Blake’s practical difficulty with “treasure.”

- 4 Exploring the historical role of patronage in a transitional time and Blake’s experiences with this institution, the second chapter is the most informative and strongest of the book. Haggarty demonstrates that patronage was changing in the late eighteenth century, becoming increasingly, in Dustin Griffin’s phrase, “a site of contestation” (46) that involved overlapping economies of aristocratic and commercial culture. In some ways Blake was a throwback to the past in that from the turn of the century until his death he became almost entirely dependent for his income on three patrons—Hayley, Butts, and Linnell. On the other hand, he worked hard to guarantee that these were not exclusively business partnerships, that he did not compromise his artistic freedom in these relationships, and that he was intent on “forging, rather than breaking, the bonds between men” (51). This tightrope act could be challenging, however, particularly since Blake based so many of his friendships on the proverb “Opposition is true Friendship.” Haggarty usefully reveals how Blake negotiated such difficulties in her depiction of his wily dedication to the Countess of Egremont (1808), in which he fashions a *recusatio* that nimbly pirouettes between praise and pride (58-59).
- 5 Haggarty outlines the differences between Derrida and Mauss in their understanding of the gift’s relation to gratitude and suggests that Blake shares more of an affinity with Mauss’s notion of a gift “at once free and obligatory” (63). She then applies these ideas to a discussion of Blake’s volatile relationship with William Hayley and his circle. Blake plays the game of patronage through subtle expressions of gratitude in his letters, yet his numerous “eruption[s] of feeling” (72) and “small acts of resistance” (73) indicate that he was “subtly contesting the terms of his relationship with Hayley” (72). Blake’s defiance and indignation at the drudgery of Hayley’s projects ultimately doomed the relationship, and he broke with his patron in 1805-06. He could no longer sustain the paradox of being Hayley’s “devoted rebel” (71). As Haggarty frankly admits, though Blake improvised various forms of reciprocity and friendship with his patrons, he was never entirely successful at communicating the idea of a gift as both open and obligatory—at intertwining friendship and finance or responding promptly with appropriate expressions of grati-

tude—and often wound up qualifying his ideals of “co-operative antagonism” (83) and artistic freedom.

- 6 Blake’s understanding of charity, shown in his annotations to Thornton’s *Lord’s Prayer, Newly Translated* (1827) and in passages from *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, partly subscribes to, partly resists the constructions of charity in contemporary writings on religion and political economy. He opposes “the purification of the gift” (86) and hints that the free gift is always attached to the economist logic it means to refute. Haggarty examines Blake’s critique of the free gift in the context of writings on the voluntarism of almsgiving by Burke, Malthus, Copleston, and Chalmers. From the problems associated with charity and the free gift, she moves to Blake’s theory of inspiration, a genuinely pure spiritual gift with no quid pro quo but a curious relationship with temporal boundaries: “It disrupts time’s homogenous flow[,] ... resists the division and supervision of labor under industrial capitalism. But it also refuses to break with the temporal cycle altogether. Inspiration’s ‘Non Existent’ time seems ... [to be] the generous present of the ‘Moment’ in *Milton*” (113). In both later epics, inspiration defies measure, though it is never divorced from labor as many of Blake’s contemporaries believed. “Rather, inspiration and labor arrive together, in the time of the generous present” (114).
- 7 Haggarty then considers the disparity that H. C. Robinson and others pointed out between Blake’s claims to divine inspiration and his working methods, particularly his attention to copying. She argues that Blake differentiated between a “seeming” copy and a “real” one and maintains that the latter is more truly like its source (127). More compellingly, she claims that in his *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake proposed that visionary copying was unmediated and that “emulating rather than imitating these originals” was the pathway to genius (129). The balance of the chapter weighs various contradictory definitions of inspiration in Blake’s writings, setting them against those of figures such as Plato and Reynolds and arguing, among other things, that the artist may as readily be “empowered as ... dispossessed by [inspiration’s] eruption” (131). For Blake, inspiration was not passive, required the reciprocity of labor, and “was as much human as it was divine” (142). That it could just as easily destabilize or interrupt the continuity of a work is made clear in plate 3 of *Jerusalem*, where, as Haggarty notes, entire passages are “gouged out” (Paley’s words) or painted over and prominent gaps propel the poem “into ever increasing discontinuity” (152). Here is evidence of a gift that cannot be realized in human space or time.
- 8 The final chapter, “Salvation,” investigates Blake’s unorthodox representation of Christ’s “saving gift” (157), his sacrifice of himself for Albion in *Jerusalem*. Haggarty shows how the Bible and later writings link the doctrine of salva-

tion to sacrifice; how Blake critiques such figurations in his portrait of a God who manifests himself through the incarnate Christ in *The Book of Urizen*; how Blake sees Christ's sacrifice as an example that humankind has the capacity to imitate; and how the image of Christ's crucifixion and Albion's response on plate 76 of *Jerusalem* both encapsulate and extend these ideas. Her visual analysis of this plate is instructive, revealing that in Blake's image of Christ "it is almost as if the archetype is now in some sense paler than its copy [Albion]" (182).

- 9 A brief conclusion reflects further on at least two aspects of Blake's conception of the gift that frustrate any tidy thesis—his ruptures with friends and patrons and his erasure of passages from the third plate of *Jerusalem* that imply a close relationship with the reader.
- 10 In a book that offers such subtle analyses of the complex systems of social and economic transaction surrounding Blake's concept of the gift, it would have been helpful to see clear transitional bridges between chapters and a consistent evolution of the argument. It requires a good deal of patience to identify the trajectory of the thesis and follow its permutations. Too often the chapters read like discrete essays that plunge us into thickets of dense theoretical matter without a machete or the author's megaphone. So much of the material here is quoted, so many ideas overlap, that often one has a hard time discerning the source of an insight (is it Mann or Mauss?). In place of a direct payoff from the amassing of evidence stand lengthy cited passages. It's true that Haggarty eventually qualifies or modifies most views expressed by cultural or literary theorists, but the reader has to work very hard to unearth these interventions. One casualty of the book's format is Blake himself, who often bows to Bourdieu or Derrida and whose poetic texts emerge tentatively at the ends of chapters. The brief close readings of passages and plates are valuable, but they leave us hankering for more commentary, especially on the designs. In the end perhaps only the veteran Blake scholar will find wisdom along this book's perilous path. The rest of us, like Rintrah, shall roar and shake our fires in the burdened air.