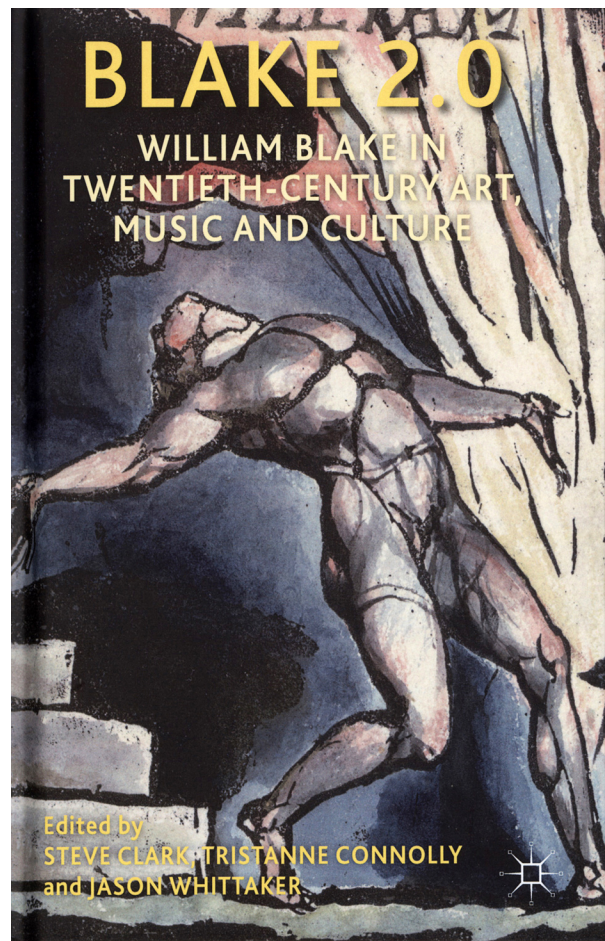


Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly, and Jason Whittaker, eds. *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xiii + 309 pp. [8 illustrations]. £58.00/\$90.00, hard-cover.

Reviewed by Grant F. Scott

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- 1 I N 2003 I remember grumbling to a friend about being unable to find a publisher for a collection of letters I had worked on for some years. The university presses aren't interested in editions of diaries or letters anymore, I complained; they want content with a broader appeal, more relevance. I looked dolefully at my muffin. My friend commiserated. But then his eyes shone as he thought of something: "Why don't you add '9/11' to the title—you know, like *Arthur Hugh Clough and 9/11* or *The Politics of 9/11 in the Early Sonnets of Felicia Hemans?* Everybody's doing it. You'll have Oxford banging down the door."
- 2 I never did find a way of slipping it in, but the cynical humor of the idea offered some comfort. Now, of course, "2.0" has replaced "9/11" as the latest numerical talisman. Take an old category with a massively general subject area, tack on "2.0," and you've got an instant bestseller. Hence, *Travel Writing 2.0*, *Literacy 2.0*, *Fashion 2.0*, and, naturally, *Me 2.0*. At the prospect of *Revolution 2.0*, Blake would have clapped his hands in joy, though *The Wired Church 2.0* would no doubt have given him pause, conjuring unpleasant images of priests in "The Garden of Love." There's no doubt that "Web 2.0" has become the magic bullet, the formula du jour for success in the book industry, and it has now crept, inevitably, into the academy. The question is, what does it mean?



- 3 Although Web 2.0 sounds like a technical upgrade of the World Wide Web, in actuality it refers to a fundamental change in the way people use the internet. As opposed to the original version, Web 2.0 takes social networking sites as its model and constructs what Tim O'Reilly has called an "architecture of participation." Rather than serving as a platform for specific content that has been written and designed by a set of editors and that is updated periodically, Web 2.0 uses the internet as a form of collective mind, focusing on the "authoring" function of the "user" and on dynamic content that is continually being created and amended. Taking its cue from Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, blogs, and wikis, Web 2.0 is genuinely interactive, positing a collaborative model of ongoing content creation and development. In Web 2.0 the terms "user" and "participant" thus become interchangeable. Users themselves generate and design the content by activities such as posting comments and reviews, creating folksonomies, video sharing, podcasting, tagging, and remixing. A useful scholarly paradigm for this brave new world is *Wikipedia*, which relies for its information, and its very existence, on the collective knowledge (and goodwill) of web participants from around the world.

- 4 The editors of *Blake 2.0* are keenly aware of the digital moment and the widespread reassessment of the humanities that is currently underway. They tap into the growing excitement over the digital humanities and attempt to reinvent Blake studies by offering a collection of essays on Blake's "ongoing regeneration" in a new virtual world (1). The authors are engaged by the "broader possibilities of digitalization and web dissemination" and they set out to examine Blake's virtual selves as they appear in the "processes of translation, mutation, proliferation into other media" (2). Another title for this collection might have been *Anxiety of Influence 2.0*, as many of the essays rethink Harold Bloom's patrilineal model of literary competition for the twenty-first century. In place of his Freudian "writer-on-writer" contest (3), they propose alternative theories of influence based on the new media. Most of the reception studies assembled here focus on the transformation of Blake's work as it is appropriated in film, music, sculpture, graphic novels, and digital art, and they find that "agency can occur across a network" (4). Indeed, one of the threads that recurs time and again is the role of the author, the problem of ownership and possession, the conundrum of "mineness," as the editors state. What happens to the author function in the new digital surround? Is there still a recognizable self, or has nineteenth- and twentieth-century selfhood vanished into an evanescent cloud of virtual selves? Where is Blake 1.0 and does he still matter? Or has he become like Urizen, "Unknown, unprolific! / Self-closed," an "all-repelling" book of brass? These questions cut to the quick of the collection.
- 5 The editors divide the seventeen essays that constitute the book into four sections, "Blakean Circulations," "Blake and Visual Art," "Blake in Film and Graphic Arts," and "Blake in Music." While the first section engages many of the topics mentioned above, the last three analyze Blake in relation to various artistic movements, academic disciplines, and specific artworks. Individual essays explore Blake and surrealism, contemporary sculpture, and art therapy—plus music by everyone from Benjamin Britten to the Fugs (Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, and Sir Hubert Parry feature prominently). On balance, though, most of the essays read like standard reception studies that explicate modern adaptations of Blake's works—the interventions, transmutations, "phagocytotic transformation" (22), or, more simply put, the robust mental fight between contemporary artist and canonical poet. At the same time, they refract reception theory through a variety of lenses, among them biography (Angus Whitehead), art history (Colin Trodd, Mei-Ying Sung), art therapy (Philippa Simpson), film criticism (Susan Matthews, Mark Douglas), Lacan (Mark Lussier), comics studies (Matthew J. A. Green), performance studies (Tristanne Connolly), and music criticism (David Fallon). Each essay pursues a number of creative readings and mis-
- readings of the poet's works in an effort to interrogate "the 'Second Life' of Blake's texts and art" (10).
- 6 While many of the pieces are informative and open up new vistas on the influence of Blake's ideas in the twentieth century—Peter Otto on Roszak and the counter culture, for instance, Sung on surrealism, Whitehead on the neglect of Mona Wilson—the majority remain tied to a standard version of Blake 1.0; that is, with the exception of their non-canonical material, they read as straight reception history with a soupçon of intertextuality, and might as well have been written twenty or thirty years ago. They do not "present a radical challenge to reception studies," as the editors claim (4), because their message is wed too closely to the medium they inhabit—the codex book—and to the academic disciplinary practices the authors have internalized. It's a bit like reading a transcript of a performance by the Rolling Stones. The collection needs (bravely, riskily) to embrace and implement the web practices it describes. But more on this later. The two essays that come closest to donning the digital mantle are Roger Whitson's "Digital Blake 2.0" and Shirley Dent's "Rob & Plunder ...: Blake and Copyright Today," and that's why they offer the most useful provocations in the volume.
- 7 Whitson's essay contrasts the online *Blake Archive* with the new internet realm of what he calls "Digital Blake 2.0." While he recognizes the enormous value and influence of the *Blake Archive*, he believes that its "obsessive archival focus" (42) and its emphasis on original materiality and hermeneutics limit its usefulness for the web. The archive, he argues, "has failed to inspire work that can truly take advantage of the network possibilities of online exchange" (41). Nor has it mined the internet's creative or performative capacity. Its focus on storing data and translating Blake's work to the web reproduces a twentieth-century methodology that is now effectively outdated. By contrast, Digital Blake 2.0 envisions a "transformative difference" in the relationship between literature and the media, rejecting "the theory of materiality that favours originality" and "appealing to the possibilities of networking and performativity" (42). Whitson provides three examples of projects that illuminate the opportunities, challenges, and complications of Digital Blake 2.0. Guilherme Marcondes's film short *Tyger* (2006) questions the very concepts of materiality and agency and explores a new form of "network materiality" (46). An online environment called *Virtual Crystal Cabinet* offers an interactive journey through Blake's poem and invites fundamental questions about adaptation. And the *Blake 2.0 Cloud*, a riposte to the *Blake Archive*, conceives a new way of thinking about the poet, the academy, and the public. It embraces "the performative network model" (50) in which the scholarly remit to "filter then publish" is reversed in favor of a more egalitarian charge to publish first

and fast, then filter. Rather than a “hybrid all-in-one edition” like the archive, it acts as a “hub” in collaboration with other sites and other users (50, 51).

- 8 While his manifesto is refreshingly pugnacious, Whitson stumbles over several key issues. Like the editors and other contributors, he takes on “the seeming monumentality of the Blake Archive” (5), though, in fairness, he does credit many of its obvious strengths. At the same time, he sees the archive as a digital dinosaur that simply mimics traditional textual scholarship online. As he says, it succumbs to “archive fever” (41), the silicon rush to translate canonical material to the web. Whitson complains that the *Blake Archive* is not interactive enough, fails to lend itself to collaboration or performance, and discourages public or popular participation. But the problem here is one of definition—as far as I know, the site was never intended for such purposes. It was conceived rather as a tool of accuracy and access, a scholarly edition to be sure, but one that for the first time honored Blake’s multimedia aesthetic by marrying it to a new medium. In this sense, the *Blake Archive* perfectly harnesses the power of the web to animate the poet’s verbal-visual plates, his experiments in copper and color. And it does so in a way that at long last does justice to Blake’s unique autographic and visual style. Given this mission, it seems unfair to speak of the archive in the same breath as creative works like Marcondes’s *Tyger* or the *Virtual Crystal Cabinet*, which primarily adapt and interpret rather than replicate Blake’s artwork.
- 9 I suppose, though, that the comparison of the *Blake Archive* with these more experimental reconfigurations of the poet’s work is symptomatic of the way that content functions on many internet sites in general, the *Blake 2.0 Cloud* being no exception. Posts, blogs, discussion boards, and so on tend to entangle objective and subjective views of their material, disdaining the distinction between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” as well as popular and academic subjects, championing inclusiveness, endorsing the radically egalitarian, and muddling the issues of excellence and expertise (I can hear the editors shouting the “e” word at me). At its best, a site like the *Blake 2.0 Cloud* is a lively online seminar that announces and discusses exciting worldwide events related to Blake; at its worst, it happily embraces the “publish then filter” mantra and becomes like a closet cluttered with old clothes. Pile after pile of old posts drift into the digital abyss, no one to read, no one daring to purge them.
- 10 Dent is more circumspect about the role of the *Blake Archive* in her essay, “‘Rob & Plunder ... Translate & Copy & Buy & Sell & Criticise, but not Make’: Blake and Copyright Today” (her ellipsis). In the “cut-and-paste” culture of the web, she asks, how can we be sure that our encounter with Blake’s work is “authentic”? Whose version of Blake

are we experiencing? Who controls or owns the Blake we see and how does the issue of copyright affect our experience of his poetry? As Dent rightly notes, “the question of authenticity becomes one of editorial authority” (57), and that’s why the *Blake Archive* again plays a crucial role in exploring these questions. Should the individual’s “freedom to innovate” trump the academic community’s “conservation of a canon” (60)? To adjudicate this debate, Dent introduces evidence from the Pre-Raphaelite revival of Blake’s works prompted by Gilchrist’s biography and Swinburne’s essay. She summons two rather unlikely witnesses, the publisher John Camden Hotten and the literary editor Richard Herne Shepherd, and they take the stand to offer opposing testimony.

- 11 In his book *Literary Copyright* (1871), Hotten makes the claim that the public rather than the author or the law should be the final arbiter of copyright, and argues for “a utilitarian, market-oriented approach to literary production” (*Blake 2.0* 61). An extreme example of his argument materializes in the figure of Swinburne, who in copying the final illegible lines of a scatological poem in Blake’s Notebook supplied his own verse in place of the poet’s. As Dent puts it, Swinburne “proactively changed Blake’s text” (63). Sir Geoffrey Keynes later discovered the joke and was horror struck. Like his fellow Pre-Raphaelites, Swinburne believed that textual transmission was “not about objective scholarship reaching after and bringing to light recondite manuscripts,” but rather “a question of genius calling to genius” and “recreating the text” (63). Representing the old guard, Shepherd demurred, excoriating the Pre-Raphaelites for “tampering” with Blake’s texts and destroying “the historical value of the poems” (quoted on 64-65). In the preface to his edition of *The Poems of William Blake* (1874), Shepherd wonders, “what protection has the reader against the caprice or vanity of an editor who does not adhere religiously to the author’s text?” (quoted on 65).
- 12 Dent notes the parallels with our own time in this debate and is admirably cautious about reaching any definitive conclusions. On the one hand, she agrees with the editors of the *Blake Archive*, who, like Shepherd, see copyright as “an important defence in preserving the integrity of Blake’s work in a digital and online environment” (64). On the other, she sympathizes with “the fast and loose attitude to copyright” that Hotten defended and that defines our own digital moment (67) and concedes that there is “just too much of a momentum to stop Blake being prey to cut-and-paste culture” (67), though the word “prey” may reveal her conservative bias here. She’s certain that “the real text still matters,” but also admits that “a serendipitous encounter” with digital or commercial Blake “might well be more authentic, have more textual integrity for a popular audience,

than anything the Pre-Raphaelites could have imagined” (67).

- 13 And so she leaves us in a quandary. What’s an aspiring digital humanist to do—tweet, text, and tumbly in the electronic ether? Embrace mash-ups and “performativity”? How will tenure committees judge this new brand of scholarship? Will the dean smile this work to see? What becomes clear from Dent’s essay, along with several of the others, is that the new digital environment necessarily changes the activity and aims of conventional scholarly editing. The medium is not completely the message, but it radically alters it. Web editing cannot afford to mirror book editing for much longer. Soon it will not be enough for the digital humanities simply to archive a writer’s work—tag, footnote, and make it searchable. They will have to find a way of uniting the rigor and standards of the academy with the aleatory wonder of the web. In this sense, the *Blake Archive* probably represents the first generation of online editions. Subsequent ones may look more like the *Blake 2.0 Cloud*, but they will have to devise ways of navigating clutter and creating a manageable hierarchy of material if they are to maintain some degree of scholarly integrity.
- 14 The strange material fact of this book itself, optimistically titled *Blake 2.0*, gives rise to yet more questions and only deepens the quandary. The volume appears before us, weighty and expensive, decidedly not meant for a lay audience (only eight illustrations!), and surrounded by a host of anachronisms. There is something fundamentally counter-intuitive about its very existence. Not copyright, as it turns out, but the academic tome in an age of digital reproduction ought to be the real subject of scrutiny here. What are we to make of a twenty-first century debate housed in the hoary tabernacle of the past? Doesn’t the old Gutenberg technology invalidate, or at least subvert, many of the arguments being made in the collection? Why weren’t these essays published online with links to Blake blogs, other online essay collections, and social networking sites? Was it the whisper of permanence that still beckons from the codex form, the imprimatur of a worthy press, the satisfying comfort of a book on the shelf?
- 15 These questions perforce lead to the most disturbing of all. When he proclaimed “The Death of the Author” many years ago now, Roland Barthes never imagined that it would happen quite so literally as it has. On the web, “network materiality” presupposes or portends, in ways that are still evolving, a concomitant “network immateriality” of the author, whose identity is not only masked behind PINs and passwords but subsumed in a complex of “relations.” Because of continual updating, new and multiple alliances, and the vexed status of copyright, the primary focus of the web has become the *site* rather than the author or authors

behind it. Thus the *Blake 2.0 Cloud*, like some relative of HAL, will soon replace Whittaker and Whitson as the living digital progenitor. And that’s why these essays, with their identifiable authors, standard page lengths, and rumble of footnotes seem oddly reactionary, an atavistic cry of “mine.” They pledge allegiance to what L. O. Sauerberg has suggestively called the “Gutenberg Parenthesis,” the five-hundred-year pause that interrupts a discernible continuum between the Elizabethan world of performance and re-creation and our own digital culture, which is increasingly defined by oral and communal traditions as well as transmedial forms of communication. Web 2.0 implies a sense of transience and flux that produces terrible anxiety in many academics. There is no inscription, no name on the title page, no sweet-savored legacy. Everybody’s on the masthead and Nobodaddy. And so the forces of the internet appear to foretell a much more disquieting “Death of the Author,” especially for those of us still chiseling away at the little monument of our name.