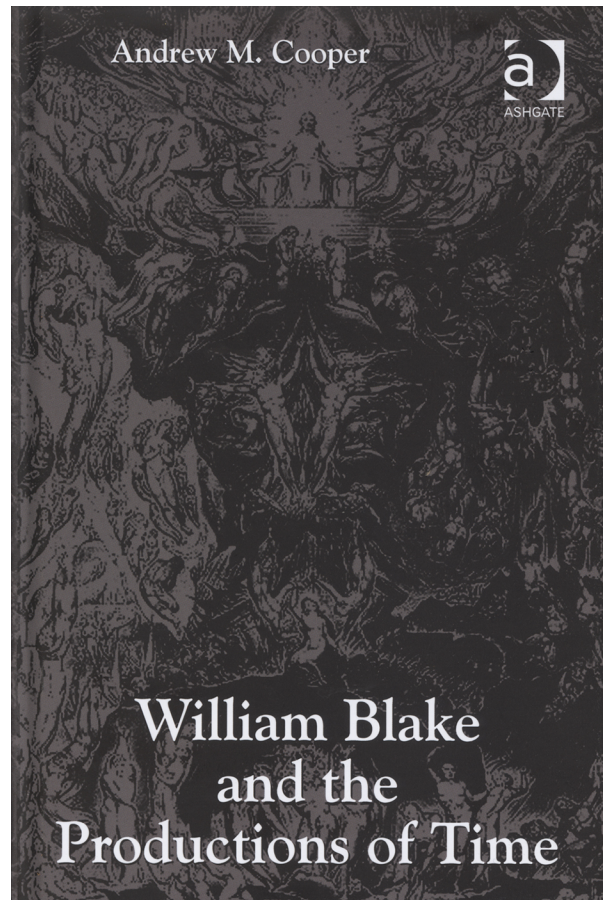


Andrew M. Cooper. *William Blake and the Productions of Time*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. xiv + 348 pp.; 37 illustrations. £95.00/\$149.95, hardcover.

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- 1 **A**NDREW Cooper's *William Blake and the Productions of Time* offers many challenges and many rewards. In a discussion that spans Blake's career, but focuses primarily on the *Songs of Innocence*, *Urizen*, *Milton*, and the painting of *The Vision of the Last Judgment*, Cooper explores the interface between the past and the future (otherwise known as the present), between the external world of objects and the internal mental world of ideas, and between the human and the divine. In doing so, he connects Blake to eighteenth-century explorations of brain physiology and the processes of perception. Cooper approaches these interfaces as a sort of Zeno's paradox, asking just how close do you have to be to the wall to register as contact? In his discussion, Blake's image of the vortex serves as the vehicle by which this constant but constantly changing moment is entered.
- 2 As dense as his argument sometimes is, Cooper does a very good job of identifying his purpose at key points along the way. In the introduction, for example, he spells out his project:



I aim neither to historicize Blake nor to re-mystify him, but rather to investigate his modernity as a formalist who exploited contemporary scientific and philosophical research on vision, sense, and mind for prophetic goals. My further intention is to show how Blake's powerful abstractions from physical reality encompass concepts in four-dimensional geometry and the relativistic idea of a space-time continuum. (2-3)

This effort focuses largely on what he calls the “performativity” of Blake's work, which he defines, “broadly speaking, [as] what occurs when Blake marries his cynical satirical impulse to explode God through the application of an Enlightened skepticism toward religion, with his post-Enlightened Romantic task of prophesizing the mystery of the divine through redemptive myth-making of his own invention” (2).

- 3 It is not surprising that Cooper's approach, with its emphasis on formalism, is explicitly antagonistic toward New Historicism: “If my own book has a polemic, it is that the attempt to view Blake's vision in historical perspective, as opposed to seeing it for oneself, comprises a deeply self-contradictory denial of his performativity” (7). More

specifically, “it appears new-historical approaches to Blake fall short [because] their strenuous revisionary dialectics too closely resemble his allegories of irony to succeed in placing him in a timely perspective” (13). Despite this antagonism, Cooper says that he seeks “to marry historicism with a reader-response type of performativity”; that is, he wants to situate “the experience of reading and viewing Blake’s works within his critique of Enlightenment rationalism and his theory of sense perception” (15). His study certainly examines areas entirely new to me at least, especially eighteenth-century theories of brain physiology. In the latter parts of the discussion, he makes much of Blake’s use of metalepsis—the shift of a figurative term from one metaphoric context to another—and indeed his own book often functions that way, revealing literal implications of language that we have commonly read as figurative, and physiological implications for images that we have commonly read as psychological.

- 4 The book is divided into an introduction and then eight chapters, followed by a conclusion examining the importance to Blake of the year 1804, which appears on the title page of both *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. The first five chapters introduce the conceptual elements necessary for the discussion in the final three chapters and conclusion. Chapter 1 explores the interface between past and future, focusing on “anamnesis” as “visionary recollection” (27). Chapter 2 examines Blake’s performativity in the *Songs of Innocence* and the tension between “paralyzed self-reflexivity and disruptive satire” (58-59). Chapter 3 builds on the work of Stewart Elliott Guthrie to distinguish between “anthropocentrism” and “anthropomorphism,” and Cooper argues that “Guthrie’s anthropomorphism is the ‘universal Poetic Genius’ of Blake’s *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*” (79). Chapter 4 uses *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* to argue that Blake anthropomorphizes the mechanisms of perception, and to suggest an individualized “common sense” that projects the human onto the “external-seeming visible images” (121).
- 5 The introductory section climaxes in chapter 5, where Cooper provides his fullest explanation of the Blakean image of the vortex, which is brilliant and far reaching, but also dense and complex. He argues, “In sum, as Blake began to move beyond lyric and pastoral toward epic narrative, he needed a more diachronic form for organizing the shifting imagery seen and heard in *Songs*. This he would eventually discover in the conceptual metaphor of the Vortex” (163-64). For Cooper, the vortex is both a structure and a mode of transport. As a structure, it links “together traditional allegory’s twin poles—the temporal and the eternal, narrative and symbol” and “creates Last Judgments wherein readers may bear witness to time’s perpetual perishing” (167). As a mode of transport, it provides access to the in-

terface between states, however those states are manifested. Perhaps the most clear statement of Cooper’s understanding of the vortex concerns the transition from external to internal reality: “Physiologically, the Vortex represents the trace-path of a percept as it spirals inward from the ‘bound or outward circumference’ (*MHH* 3; E 34) of the physical eye or ear into the common sense, the seat of touch, where true contact occurs and sensations of light or sound become objects of thought” (168). The vortex provides access to the interface between the past and the future, between the percept and the idea, between (in Aristotle’s terms) “the now of the common sense and the soul’s ‘saying’ that now to itself” (168).

- 6 With these components in place—the emphasis on interfaces, the humanizing of the processes of those interfaces, and the vortex as the symbolic mechanism of the poet’s access—Cooper turns to demonstrating what his approach reveals about three important works. In chapter 6, “Freedom from *The Book of Urizen*,” he applies the image of the vortex to Blake’s greatest short prophecy while also blasting certain critical positions for complicity in Urizen’s systems. He notes that in *Urizen*, Blake “exploits the performativity of storytelling to re-enact the fall of his own invented ur-myth into the received Christian one, the main object of his satire” (191) and that “*Urizen*’s evolving Fall-Creation takes the form of a Vortex” (194). The poem, according to Cooper, creates for readers “an ethical crisis, the only real crisis any literary work can effect: a fresh engagement with ordinary practical life, whose mindless duties and heavy routines are found, upon inspection, to dissolve, being in truth abstracted from countless contingent, often improvised individual choices and decisions” (191). Not surprisingly, given the polemic he announced at the outset, Cooper finds many readers wanting:

All too compatibly with Urizen’s idea of himself, [recent critics] portray him as a truly hegemonic power. ... If the cause of Urizen’s fall is his insistence on certainty, then criticism has repeated this error by conceiving of the Contrary relation existing between Urizen and Los, and between the Book and the reader, according to formal models of blindness and insight or subversion and containment. ... If critics have overlooked just how radically Urizen’s authority depends upon their own interpretive choices and decisions, it is perhaps not because they are unaware of their complicity with him but rather the opposite, because they are too stricken with liberal guilt to embrace the freedom that Blake (by contrast with his anti-hero) holds out to them. (196)

And just for good measure: “If Urizen is a structural presence in everyday life, it is not, as he insists, because mankind are inherently evil but because individuals are so pathetically willing to suffer long and hard to prop up

Urizenic systems that might otherwise collapse under their own weight (or so Blake hopes)” (197). And that extends to the academy: “In terms of recent literary criticism, Blake’s amalgam of resistance and compliance points up the naïvete of the Academy’s still secretly cherished belief that genuine, revolutionary change can come only from some organized political opposition located outside the system” (197); or, as James Scott puts it, these critics suffer from an “ironic combination of both Leninist and bourgeois assumptions of what constitutes political action” (quoted in Cooper 198). All this leads to an impressive critique of the way in which “even Blake became a target for disciplinary self-dissatisfaction” in the 1980s and 1990s (198).

7 Chapter 7, “The Picture of the Mind in ‘The Vision of the Last Judgment,’” shifts from the critique of recent criticism to images of the brain in eighteenth-century studies of brain physiology. Referencing Blake’s pen-and-watercolor rendering of the Last Judgment from the Egremont collection, his “Day of Judgment” design for Robert Blair’s *The Grave*, and the lost painting described in “A Vision of the Last Judgment,” Cooper draws in the discussion from chapter 4 of Blake’s humanized images of the mechanisms of perception and applies it to *The Vision*’s crowds of human figures. He asserts that “the goal of Blake’s later mythological works is to catch hold—in the full, tactual sense of the phrase—of how that which is objective is given to us in cognition in the first place” and that “the purpose of the Blakean Vortex is to facilitate this gradual grasping of ideal entities” (222). On this foundation, he argues that *The Vision* “is a picture of the mind consisting of a series of schematic cross-sections based on brain anatomy” (227); that is, all those teeming human figures rising to and falling from the Saviour, swirling around the design, depict the anthropomorphized mechanisms by which the sensations of the outside world are internalized as ideas. The cross-section of brain shows the interface between, as Blake calls it in *Jerusalem*, “an Outside spread Without, & an Outside spread Within / Beyond the Outline of Identity” (18.2-3) (Cooper cites the phrase “outline of identity,” but not from this passage). There is much discussion of duration (the persistence of an object at a particular point in three-dimensional space) as a fourth dimension, of the individualized human common sense, and of the search for the bodily site of the soul. The payoff is good: “In this way, ‘The Last Judgment’ establishes an anatomical basis for Blake’s lifelong identification of Jesus with the Imagination. Its central emphasis on touch as the means by which the human common sense recognizes its own divinity constitutes a neuroRomantic reprise of Michelangelo’s God giving life to Adam” (239).

8 In chapter 8, “The Physiology of Vision in *Milton*,” Cooper examines the physiology of the eye and optic nerve, and

“the capability of each sense to perceive its own power of perception” (277). In this context, he suggests, “the Vortex is a mediatory form of inner touch, a way to look within without the strain of going extremely cross-eyed” (251). The target in this inquiry is “‘outness’—the mind’s chronic mistaken tendency to regard objects as external” (250), and Cooper manages to bring into question the status of the body itself: “If the body is the universal site of perception, as all agree, then what if the body as we know it is a contingent effect of *how* it has been perceived, namely ‘by the five Senses the chief inlets of Soul in *this* age’” (252). This chapter continues the theme of the previous chapters—Cooper argues that “through *Milton*’s universal Moment, Blake mythologizes contemporary physiology” (261)—and each new area of inquiry turns up new implications:

In other words, sense is a necessary but not sufficient condition for perception. This seems a fair description of the Blake poet’s invocation and gradual awakening in *Milton*; the passage [from Berkeley on Platonic anamnesis] helps clarify the basis for that poem’s unlikely combination of contemporary nerve physiology with a neoplatonic theory of emanations. (280)

9 Finally, in the conclusion, “1804,” Cooper says, “I want to bring this book full circle by suggesting that *Milton* and *Jerusalem*—the poems of ‘1804’—implicitly associate the gleeful paradoxes and flippant ironies of [*An Island in the Moon* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*] with a certain glib artistic dishonesty or at least evasiveness: namely, the obstructive Spectre of nihilism, attachment, and personality” (287). His fine-tuning of our understanding of the Spectre is especially useful: “*Milton* recasts *Europe*’s Burke-faced felon as the Spectre, a new figure in his mythology embodying not state paranoia and repression but their insidious psychic effects” (289). Blake himself felt these psychic effects:

The recursive nature of Blake’s mythmaking drove him to recognize that the monolithic Satan-Urizen of History portrayed in *The Book of Urizen* included a more shadowy and elusive figure: the lengthening Spectre of the aging poet’s personal life history. His efforts to free the present from the burden of the past were accumulating a past of their own. (291-92)

Between 1784 and 1804, Blake had become plagued by his own ambitions and resentment at their frustrations, and the result, according to Cooper, is

that Blake *did*, after all, withdraw into vision—not after 1804 but during the decade before when, as Paley shows, he began to model his painting after Flemish and Italian

Old Masters and to imitate what he later called “that infernal machine, called Chiaro Oscuro ... like walking in another man’s style ... inappropriate and repugnant to your own individual character” (DC; E 547). (301)

After 1804, Blake’s poetry became even more personal, and Cooper argues that “the reason *Milton* and *Jerusalem* are so obscure and cantankerous is that their mythologies are more, not less, revealingly linked to the author’s life experience than ever before” (291). Thus “the climax of [*Milton*’s main tale of Milton-Blake’s journey to Felpham] is not, as in *The Four Zoas*, a wistful, patently imaginary apocalypse of time and history. Rather, it is the poet’s direct personal vision of that event, recast as an apotheosis of the indwelling Imagination” (306). Ultimately, Cooper parallels Blake’s friendship with the liberal Joseph Johnson circle with his ill-fitting relationship to modern historicist critics. Of the Johnson circle he says, “they could only have been corporeal friends. Their liberalism was rooted in Locke and Reason, their religious beliefs were Deistic and coolly Enlightened, their projected utopias founded in political science not prophecy” (301), while of recent historicist critics he says:

The irony of Blake today ... is that historicizing criticism, ever on guard against ‘uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations,’ paradoxically tends to reinforce the *cordon sanitaire* erected after his death by the original Blake enthusiasts, the Ancients. These young admirers rebutted the reputation of madness that had dogged him since Hunt’s review, sanitized his antinomian excesses, and ensured a posterity for his work by representing it as fundamentally Christian. (315)

Cooper does not argue that Blake was mad or that he was not Christian. Rather, he argues that for most of his career Blake was caught between the drive to speak and a fear of speaking, and those two states imply the same sort of interface Cooper has been examining all along. In the deletions in the first preface to *Jerusalem*, Blake “confronts and rejects spectrous orthodoxy, while at the same time acknowledging his inability to find a moral language not liable to religious appropriation” (317); thus by gouging out words from that preface, Blake “did *not* cancel and revoke his preface’s message of love and forgiveness. Instead, he updated the message by incorporating into it his perceived failure to be heard, and published a garbled transmission” (318).

- 10 I like this book a lot. The pieces build on each other well as Cooper draws the early chapters into the discussions in the second half of the book. I find the discussions of *Urizen* and *The Vision of the Last Judgment* to be especially enlightening. There are some minor problems. As clear as Cooper is about his argument in many places, he is equally obscure in other places, and the reader is sometimes left with the sense

of having read a great sentence without really knowing what it meant. The book needs a close proofreading. “The Ecchoing Green” gets confused with “Laughing Song” and becomes “The Ecchoing Song” (75). “Thistle” and “thorn” get confused in a reference to Blake’s letter to Thomas Butts of 22 November 1802 (300), and “Gordian Knot” appears as “Gordian Not” (302)—a good pun, but I don’t think it’s deliberate. Some of the illustrations are misnumbered. But the biggest weakness here is actually a strength: the book leaves me wanting to know more. Cooper talks much about what Blake finally calls the “outline of identity,” yet he does not discuss how it functions in *Jerusalem* as the meeting site of the Sons of Albion when they judge Jerusalem as their harlot sister (18.3). Similarly, he says much that is useful about “vehicular form,” but does not mention Los’s appearance as “the Vehicular Form of strong Urthona” at the outset of chapter 3 of *Jerusalem* (53.1). I cannot but wonder how Cooper might apply his understanding of the Blakean vortex to Blake’s explanation of “the nature of infinity” in *Milton* (15.21), or *Jerusalem*’s exploration of the relationship between substance and shadow, above and below, without and within (71.1-9). At 348 pages, *William Blake and the Productions of Time* is hefty enough, but contrary to Samuel Johnson’s assessment of *Paradise Lost*, one might still wish it longer.