



R E V I E W

Jason Whittaker. *Divine Images: The Life and Work of William Blake*. London: Reaktion Books, 2021. 392 pp. £30.00, hardcover or e-book.

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1 ONE of the challenges of reading Blake is acquiring the contextual knowledge that illuminates his work and that is often necessary to understand him at all. Academics and enthusiasts can easily take for granted their familiarity with the culture and politics of Blake's day, the major events

of his personal life, and the details of his idiosyncratic mythology as it develops across his poems, but newcomers are faced with a daunting task. While gaining contextual knowledge is important in understanding all artists, it is both indispensable and more difficult in Blake's case because of his method: on top of his obscure style, his poetry and visual art exist in a state of dynamic conversation with the Romantic period and with his other works. Frequently, he takes discourse from the world around him and presents it in strange, defamiliarizing ways that often resonate with other aspects of his corpus, works written sometimes decades earlier or later.

2 Jason Whittaker's impressive *Divine Images: The Life and Work of William Blake* opens with an examination of a deceptively familiar image, one of Blake's most famous: "The Ancient of Days." Whittaker discusses how it uncannily remains both recognizable and alien. What seems on the surface a straightforward depiction of the Christian God in fact engages not just with the Bible (Daniel 7:13), but with ideas as diverse as Deism, the work of Isaac Newton, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Blake's own character Urizen, as developed throughout his work. "The Ancient of Days," Whittaker concludes, "is an image that demonstrates Blake's highly idiosyncratic reading of the religious and political events of his day, showing his wide-ranging knowledge of other writers and artists" (12). Those without a working knowledge of this context will miss important layers of meaning.

3 *Divine Images* is a thorough introduction to Blake's work and a guide to understanding it, written for an audience unfamiliar with the necessary context. Students will find it immensely useful, and even seasoned readers of Blake will appreciate the succinct survey of his life, poetry, and visual art. The balance between his life, the relevant history around him, and an overview of all of his major works marks *Divine Images* as distinct from biographies, such as Tobias Churton's *Jerusalem! The Real Life of William Blake* (2014), and guides to reading Blake, such as Saree Makdisi's *Reading William Blake* (2015) and Kathryn S. Freeman's *A Guide to the Cosmology of William Blake* (2017). Whittaker's book is neither an account of minute details of Blake's life nor a survey of themes that his work addresses nor a dictionary of his symbols. This exploration of Blake in context perhaps most distinguishes itself by heavily emphasizing the visual aspects of his career.

4 Whittaker's book moves chronologically across Blake's biography and the surrounding history and culture, and it succeeds in weaving these elements into the discussion of the works without overwhelming the reader or oversimplifying the subject. This is quite an achievement, given the wide array of topics that need to be covered in short order. The introduction and first chapter alone introduce Deism,

Locke's philosophy, the Established Church and Dissent, London's urbanization, the beginning of the French Revolution, Blake's possible participation in the Gordon Riots, a description of his work as an engraver, his method of producing texts, his belief that all religions have their origin in the imagination, and more. Where possible, Whittaker refers to the work of scholars who deepen the discussion of Blake, but the book is not overly "scholarly" in the pejorative sense: the prose is very readable for an audience of non-academics, and it engagingly explores how Blake's poems "contain multitudes."

- 5 One of the first things a reader will notice about the book is, appropriate to its title, the generous use of images. At least once every few pages, and often more frequently, Blake's divine images illustrate Whittaker's discussion—in full color in the e-book, which is the edition I read, and many times occupying an entire page. A discussion of Blake without a strong visual component is incomplete. Readers need to see *Eve Tempted by the Serpent* (1799–1800) in order to appreciate Whittaker's comment that the use of gold highlights, as in *Jerusalem*, "make[s] this image shine," and his observation that Eve is not "revelling in the act of taking the forbidden fruit," but that her expression is "calm and peaceful," a reflection of "mankind at the final moment before the Fall" (219–20). Similarly, it is necessary to see *Abraham and Isaac* (1799–1800) to note how the former resembles a druid—that important figure in Blake's work—while the latter is "naked and dynamic ... innocent and unafraid," possessing a "childlike perception that sees more clearly the way to reconcile God and man as opposed to the false religion followed by his father" (222). Another example is Whittaker's examination of *Satan, Sin, and Death: Satan Comes to the Gates of Hell* (1807) from *Paradise Lost*, which is followed on the next page by James Gillray's "Sin, Death, and the Devil" of 1792 (279–80). I would have loved for Whittaker to elaborate on this connection and explain how Blake responds to Gillray, but in this one instance, he oddly does not remark on the resemblance between the images. I suspect that this point was one that had to be cut for space. No doubt much material ended up on the cutting-room floor in writing this book, but what remains is a treasure trove of information and insights, beautifully and helpfully illustrated.
- 6 These divine images are more than ornamentation: Whittaker consistently shows how images are important to Blake's meaning. For instance, in discussing *America a Prophecy*, he introduces Frye's concept of the Orc cycle with reference to the similar poses of Urizen and Orc on plates 10 and 12 (139). As another example, he points out that the illustrations of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* reflect aspects of Blake's mythology that he had developed in the Lambeth prophecies (196). As Whittaker notes, "Illustra-

tion was a means for Blake to explore fertile dialogues with those works that inspired him" (274), and this is especially true of the Bible and John Milton. In discussing the 1799 paintings of biblical subjects for Thomas Butts, Whittaker draws on the work of Naomi Billingsley to contrast Blake's depictions with those of contemporaries, indicating how Blake's "renounce any form of naturalism: they are intended to inspire the viewer to consider the nature of Christ rather than to seek out the historical Jesus" (218). Indeed, Whittaker is sure to note that in the illustrations to *Paradise Lost* and especially *Paradise Regained*, it is Christ's humanity that is central for Blake (282–83). In fact, the devil appears as an old, bearded man in the illustrations to *Paradise Regained*, connecting Blake's conception of the ultimate enemy with orthodox notions of God, as depicted in "The Ancient of Days" and Blake's character Urizen (284).

- 7 Whittaker observes throughout the book how Blake's work emerges from his relationships with others, his economic circumstances, and the political realities of his age. Given the cooperative spirit of his ethos ("I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine," *Jerusalem* 4.7, E 146), a study of his works needs to appreciate, for instance, the importance of the Johnson circle and friends/patrons like Butts and John Linnell. Further, *The Four Zoas* needs to be understood in the context of the failure of the *Night Thoughts* project, and the book helpfully situates the poem alongside this failure. Whittaker treats at length the conflicted relationship with William Hayley and the circumstances surrounding Blake's trial for sedition, which directly influenced *Milton* and *Jerusalem* and almost certainly contributed to Blake's increasingly obscure style. Blake's relationships with others continue beyond his death; in the final chapter, Whittaker covers a detailed reception history spanning nearly two centuries.
- 8 The book will also help students to grasp the development of Blake's characters and ideas, and his presentation of those ideas over the course of his career. *The Book of Thel*, for instance, appears as a step toward Blake's later prophecies, both by employing the fourteener and by giving the "first indication that Blake was considering a new style of mythological thinking in his work" (83). Whittaker traces Los from the "agonized individual" of *The Book of Urizen*—"full of terror and apparently resentful of his task"—to the "quietly heroic figure who guides Albion from death in *Jerusalem*" (168). And he nicely shows how, even as the use of symbols can change from work to work, Blake consistently tends to attribute "demonic aspects to the traditional conception of God" (249). Blake could align himself with the "Devils party" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but the "devil" of that work is distinct from the satanic, Urizenic figure worshipped by many people under the name of God.

- 9 Whittaker presents Blake (correctly, in my estimation) as never having abandoned his early radicalism. As he notes, Blake was already well aware of social injustice before the French Revolution, and was not “suddenly radicalized” by it (122); later in life, he never renounced his support for the Revolution, even as his opinion of it changed after the Reign of Terror. Where others saw it as the product of irreligion, Blake “gradually came to view its failures as the inability to rise above the corrupting influence of power, best exemplified as priestcraft” (161). Ironically, Blake saw the French Revolution as *too* religious: the “cult of reason” and rationalism were not the negation of religion but another form of it. To the end of his career, his work remains deeply radical, as Whittaker shows with a discussion of the heretical ideas of *The Everlasting Gospel* and their relation to earlier works, especially *Marriage*. As Whittaker indicates, the later Blake continues to believe that God is “entirely internal,” and he opposes the “common misconception of a god *out there*.” His unorthodox stances are reflected in his illustrations to the book of Job and to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (321).
- 10 There is little a reader could criticize. While I naturally found myself wanting the analysis of Blake’s works to be extended, and for even more illustrations to appear (in support of every single detail referenced), this would have been impractical. Further, it would have undermined the purpose of the book as a launching pad for readers to explore Blake on their own. The only aspect of Blake’s work that would have benefited from greater examination is the concept of emanations. This key idea is explained only on one page, where emanations are described as female aspects of fallen Zoas who are “somehow intrinsically inferior to the male Zoas,” a presentation that “introduces an increasingly misogynistic tone to parts of Blake’s later prophecies” (213). While this is not exactly inaccurate, there is much more to say, as several passages in Blake complicate the concept. Though all of these details are not necessary for beginners to understand Blake, it would have been good to gesture toward this greater complexity here, as Whittaker does elsewhere so well.
- 11 Critiques like these are quibbles at best. *Divine Images* is overall an enjoyable, thorough, and useful guide to Blake, especially for students, that pays particular and much-needed attention to the visual aspects of his work. Frequently while reading the book, I thought how excellent it would be as a text for an undergraduate or graduate seminar. When I teach Blake to undergraduates, I often find myself overwhelmed with the amount of groundwork I need to lay so that they can make sense of even the most apparently simple texts. A book like *Divine Images* would greatly enrich the classroom, as well as any reader’s understanding of Blake’s art.