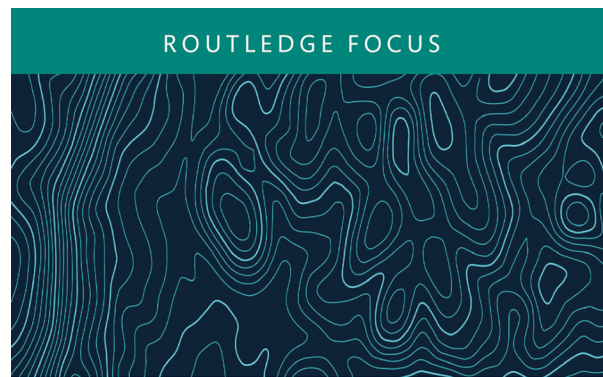


Brian Russell Graham. *Speech Acts in Blake's "Milton."* New York: Routledge, 2023. 128 pp. \$61.99/£45.99, hardcover; \$26.99/£19.99, paperback; also available as an e-book.

Reviewed by Annise Rogers

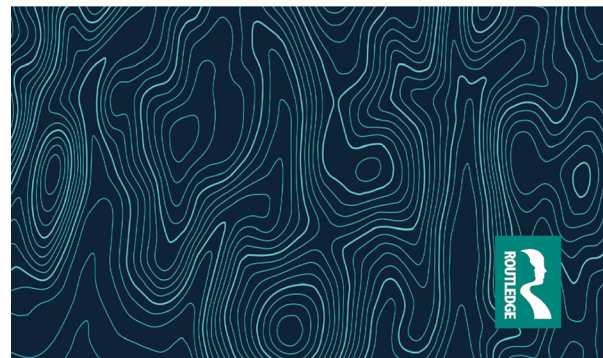
ANNISE ROGERS ([arogers@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:arogers@lincoln.ac.uk)) is an ECR whose doctoral thesis explored *Vala*, or *The Four Zoas* in connection to biblical poetic forms, as well as reexamining the role of Urizen. Her most recent research pursuit examined the links between the visual art of William Blake and J. R. R. Tolkien.

1 BRIAN Russell Graham expertly examines *Milton a Poem* through a close reading that engages with performative speech act theory, using it to demonstrate the importance of the characters' spoken lines and also to explain how the lack of any direct speech can help to bring about, or forestall, the impending apocalypse. It is this apocalypse that Graham makes the center of his argument, rather than, as one might expect, the overall value of the speech acts themselves. By structuring his theoretical approach around the observation that "everything that happens in Blake's Prophetic Books either results in progress towards apocalypse or serves to frustrate that process" (1), he is able to create a clear boundary, one that he sticks to throughout. Building on the work of Susan Fox (*Poetic Form in Blake's "Milton"*) and Angela Esterhammer (*Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake*), he devotes a separate section in his introduction to each, detailing what his argument shares with, and how it differs from, their criticism. For any reader unfamiliar with Blakean scholarship on the performative, this is informative and easily comprehensible. By contrast, it is almost shocking that there is no section on J. L. Austin, whose work is not only the cornerstone of performative speech theory, but whose terms and ideas are used throughout the book. Indeed, while it might be understandable for Austin not to appear in the bibliography, for he is never directly quoted from, his value to Graham's argument cannot be overstated. The endnote explaining Austin's vocabulary and theory is exceptional (16n3), but I did feel that it should have been included in the main body of the text.



## Speech Acts in Blake's *Milton*

BRIAN RUSSELL GRAHAM



- 2 The advice on "How to Use This Book" at the end of the introduction (15) is refreshingly honest in suggesting that "Blake scholars may happily ignore" the contextual sections of the chapters, which give an overview of what is happening at that point in the poem. I, however, urge *all* Blake scholars to read those parts, for they also elucidate Graham's formulation of the close readings that follow. In fact, the contextual sections are as much a part of his overall argument as the close readings, helping the reader to explore how the speech(es) discussed relate to the three areas or "subcategories of speech act in *Milton*" (5): agonistic speech, non-combative speech, and the soliloquy. That "everything is achieved through speech" (7) is perhaps the best way to express Graham's use of these categories to demonstrate that Blake's prophetic books are about producing, or trying to stop, the apocalypse.
- 3 In the first two chapters he examines the role of the Bard's Song, exploring multiple close readings that engage with ideas regarding "speech acts integral to the story of Los and his sons" (19). Chapter 1 looks at what happens before Milton's introduction to those characters, covering the Fall and

the creation of Time and Space—all of which, as Graham reveals, come about through performative speech acts. Chapter 2 expands on this and has Milton's response. Graham's examination in the first chapter of the three-way relationship between Los, Satan, and Palamabron is perhaps the most extensive, as it deals with all three of the subcategories, explaining how a speech act can be just as important even when "it does not have the perlocutionary effect ... wanted" (25). Furthermore, chapter 1 discusses many speeches for which Blake gives the aftermath alone, with the words often "only alluded to" (27); the reported speeches are treated as being as important as those that are spoken, with the causes and effects of the non-spoken words seen as crucial to this interpretation of the poem. Graham does not give a poststructuralist reading and instead focuses on the "perlocutionary" outcome of the missing words, rather than the words themselves. In this way it is obvious that he is exceptionally knowledgeable in speech act theory, because he does not feel the need to defend his position, and also that he is confident that his argument stands together without a detour into explanation.

- 4 The third and fourth chapters follow the chronology of *Milton*. Each character that Milton engages with—whether helping or hindering him—is examined in terms of the outcome of that encounter and what it means in the context of Graham's overarching argument about the apocalypse. His discussion of Rahab and Tirzah, following one about Orc and the Shadowy Female, identifies that Milton is being given an "invitation" (64) to join them; Graham follows Northrop Frye's idea that "natural religion is symbolically female" (61), and thus "the two think they have a fighting chance of tempting Milton ... because his Puritanism was marked by a strong admixture of natural religion" (62). This is a good assessment of such a speech act, and yet, like many others in the book, it relies almost entirely on Frye's analysis of the poem's plot and meaning, with much less space given to any other critic.
- 5 In chapter 5 Graham breaks away from the chronology of the poem and instead focuses on Ololon. In this way he is able to examine the character as a whole and help the reader to recognize that her descent into Ulro is caused by her own soliloquy, in what he calls "the perlocutionary effect of the speech" (92). However, what makes the chapter so interesting is that although Ololon remains the central figure, Graham explores how more than this one event is "rendered an effect of Ololon's words" (94). When combined with his analysis of Ololon's interaction with the Polypus and her later "non-combative statement" to Blake (the character in the poem), this illustrates the strength of his ideas about performative speech acts and demonstrates why this book was so needed. Further depth is added in chapter 6, when the character of "Milton secures the instant

before apocalypse" (106), which was Graham's argument from the very first page. That ultimately the poem's "finale is non-verbal" (116) allows him to move away from speeches and instead look at the words of *Milton* as a whole, and in "Coda: *Milton* as Speech Act," we are given a sweeping overview of the power of words, and also where and why the reader fits into Blake's use of performative language.

- 6 Some readers might be surprised that most of the critics discussed are not those who would be considered contemporary, and it would be easy to disregard this book as the work of someone who is not up to date, as it were. To do so would be a great disservice to both the writer and his argument. Graham himself acknowledges the point, explaining that "three of the four monographs about Blake's *Milton* ... were written in the seventies, and they are fine works of literary criticism" (8). Added to this is what he calls "substantial use of" Frye, making the book to some degree a strange read. It has the structure of those earlier works, with its dense close reading and engagement with the scholars, and yet it is also refreshingly modern, with a clear and easy to understand literary style. Graham's vocabulary is perfectly chosen; each word is the precise and correct choice, and he does not overwhelm with overly complicated words for no reason, although the reader may wish to consult a dictionary for the linguistic terms. Do not think because this is a short book that it is an easy read. Graham presents a dense and invigorative argument that needs to be followed both carefully and slowly. Readers who are interested in either *Milton* or performative speech acts will find it a perfect example of how to do a very thorough analysis of Blake's poem, whether or not they fully agree with everything that Graham argues.