R E V I E W

Linda Freedman. *William Blake and the Myth of America: From the Abolitionists to the Counterculture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xiii + 273 pp. £61.00/$82.00, hardcover; also available as an e-book.

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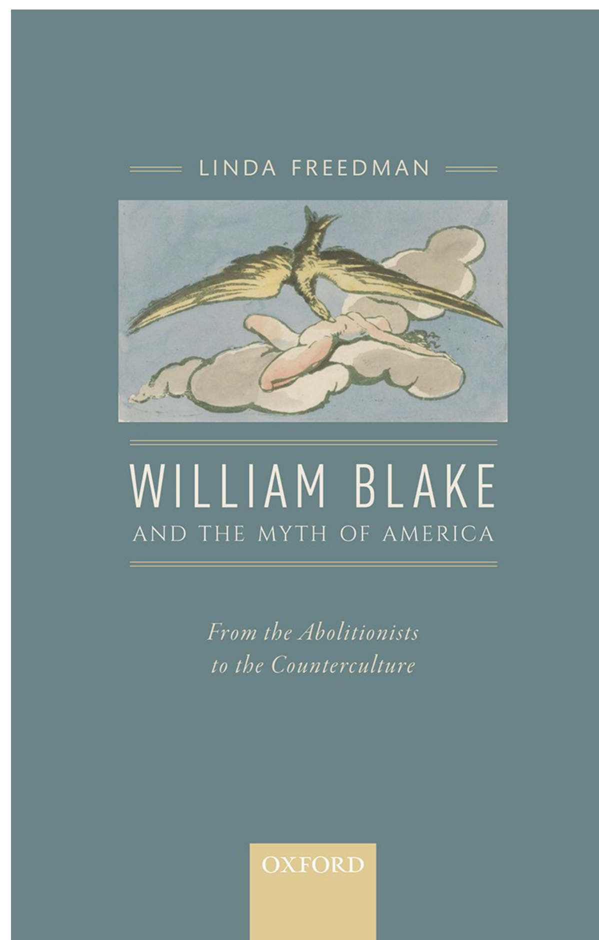

1 We seem to be living in a golden age of scholarship on Blake's reception, and Linda Freedman's *William Blake and the Myth of America* is a welcome addition to this critical canon. As Freedman notes, the recent scholarly antecedents of her study include the collections *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture* (ed. Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly, and Jason Whittaker, 2012), *Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture* (ed. Clark and Whittaker, 2007), and *The Reception of Blake in the Orient* (ed. Clark and Masashi Suzuki, 2006), as well as Colin Trodd's monograph *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World, 1830–1930* (2012) and Edward Larrissy's *Blake and Modern Literature* (2006). Freedman's book, which benefits from sixteen color illustrations embedded throughout the text, also follows hot on the heels of the even more lavishly illustrated *William Blake and the Age of Aquarius* (ed. Stephen F. Eisenman, 2017).[1] Yet, as she acknowledges, the contents of *William Blake and the Myth of America* connect it more specifically to *William Blake and the Moderns*, the 1982 collection edited by Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt, which prepared the ground for the current crop of Blakean reception studies; figures from that book who reappear in Freedman's monograph include Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, Theodore Roethke, Robert Duncan, and Allen Ginsberg.

2 A key strength of Freedman's work, as she revisits these reception contexts and introduces others, is that she weaves them into an ambitious overarching argument of her own, illuminating "a particularly American story, which spans both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and connects Blake's reception with mythopoeic visions of America" (14). Looking back from the perspective of her conclusion, she is able to summarize "four interrelated areas in which Blake's American reception really matters to Blake studies,

1. Since the publication of Freedman's book, this burgeoning critical genre has been expanded further by *The Reception of William Blake in Europe*, ed. Sibylle Erle and Morton D. Paley (2 vols., 2019). My own study, *William Blake and Allen Ginsberg: Romanticism, Counterculture and Radical Reception*, is forthcoming from Manchester University Press.

transatlantic meanings of Romanticism, and the idea of America" (251); these are "religion," "readings of the body," "the relationship between Romanticism and modernity," and lastly "the subject of America itself" (251-54). As Freedman shows, this "myth of America" has a dark side, and her introductory chapter draws lines of connection from the rape of Oothoon—"the soft soul of America" in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*—to Blake's horrific engravings after Stedman for the latter's Surinam *Expedition*, and onward via American wars in Vietnam and Iraq to the "endemic racism, persistent sexism, [and] violent nationalism" of the Trump era (3), although, as she notes, Mike Goode's story of Trump's direct appropriation of Blake's proverbs "turned out to be an irony that was indeed too good to be true" (14).

3 A major argument in chapter 1, "Spirit and Society: Blake's Early American Appeal," is that it was easier for interest in Blake to take hold in America than it was in his native Britain. This assertion should be evaluated in the context of a broader movement within recent Blake scholarship to challenge the long-held idea that Blake really was a "*Pictor* [and *Poeta*] *Ignotus*" before Gilchrist's 1863 biography. Nonetheless, Freedman convincingly argues that "Blake's peculiar brand of religious enthusiasm was better suited to mid-nineteenth-century America than it was to Victorian England," making him a "kindred spirit" to figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (17). In part, this was a result of the lively American interest in Swedenborg, although Freedman goes on to show how Emerson, who first encountered Blake's poetry through J. J. G. Wilkinson's 1839 edition of *Songs*, in fact shared Blake's own more critical approach to Swedenborg, in marked contrast to Wilkinson himself.

4 Partly drawing on the work of Clare Elliott, Freedman explores the relationship between imagination and vision in Blake and Emerson, noting the American author's particular fascination with Blake's observation that "the Eye altering alters all," which resonated with his own writing on this topic (although, oddly, Freedman never refers directly to the famous image of the "transparent eye-ball," which originated in Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature*).[2] The chapter then moves on to a subtle investigation of the complex contexts within which Lydia Maria Child (like Emerson and Blake, a disillusioned Swedenborgian) published Blake's "The Little Black Boy" in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1842. Next, Freedman uses her own research in the London archives of the Swedenborg Society to reveal the significance of the friendship between Wilkinson and Henry James, Sr., which led directly to the publication in 1848 of several Blake poems in the *Harbinger*, the journal of the utopian Brook Farm movement. In the final section of this excellent chapter, Freedman—also the author of a monograph on Emily Dickinson—shows how even though there is no evidence that Dickinson read Blake, he nonetheless had a significant impact on her reception, as evident, for example, in Christina Rossetti's praise for Dickinson's "wonderful Blakean gift" (38).

5 This discussion of how Dickinson was read through Blakean eyes prepares the ground for chapter 2, on Walt Whitman. Once again, the Rossetti siblings and their wider circle play a major role, and Freedman explores the complexities, ironies, and tensions within these transatlantic intersections, as A. C. Swinburne's influential comparison of Blake and Whitman not only Americanizes Blake, but also makes Whitman subject to the English poet; this leads to "acute anxieties of nationalism and influence" (54).

6 Figures covered in the next chapter, "Early Twentieth-Century America: New Versions of the Prophet," include Waldo Frank, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Stanley Kunitz, and Theodore Roethke; Freedman notes that for left-leaning "cultural nationalists" such as Frank and Crane, "Blake's Hebraism and mysticism once again allowed him to be seen as a prophet who promised spiritual redemption and social rejuvenation" for America (63-64). This is contrasted with the conservatism of Eliot, although, as Freedman makes clear, Eliot's relationship to Blake was more complex than he himself indicated. The highlights of this chapter are the extended close readings of works by Crane and Roethke, with Roethke's position between the modernists and the Beats nicely illuminated: this is a literary and cultural boundary that is not as clear as is often assumed. The chapter also opens up several avenues for further research. For example, a fascinating figure only briefly mentioned here is the poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), who was first introduced to Blake's work by Ezra Pound; as Freedman notes, the shared Moravian family backgrounds of Blake and H. D. provide a potentially rich area for future exploration. One interesting study that is not mentioned is Tony Trigilio, *"Strange Prophecies Anew": Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H. D., and Ginsberg* (2000). It was written before the revelation of Blake's mother's Moravianism, but Trigilio's combination of subjects does provide further support for the idea that Blake's postwar countercultural iden-

2. Elliott's substantial body of work on Blake's nineteenth-century American reception is yet to be published in monograph form, so in places Freedman draws (with due acknowledgment) on Elliott's doctoral dissertation. Elliott's published work includes "William Blake's American Afterlives," *Transatlantic Literature and Transitivity, 1780–1850: Subjects, Texts, and Print Culture*, ed. Annika Bautz and Kathryn N. Gray (New York: Routledge, 2017) 195-211; "'A Backward Glance O'er' the (Dis)United States: William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the 'Authentic American Religion,'" *European Journal of American Culture* 28.1 (2009): 75-93; and "William Blake and America: Freedom and Violence in the Atlantic World," *Comparative American Studies* 7.3 (2009): 209-24.

tity needs to be considered in relation to the earlier American modernist interest in Blake.

7 Chapters 4 to 8 consider various aspects of Blake's countercultural influence. Given the centrality of Blake to Allen Ginsberg's life and poetics, and of Ginsberg himself to American counterculture, it is appropriate that the first of these chapters should be given over to him. Yet the sheer extent of Ginsberg's lifelong engagement with Blake—together with the ambitious scope of the book overall, with its large cast of characters and periods to be researched—leads Freedman to make several errors and missteps. For example, it is surprising to see her describe Ginsberg's famous 1948 "Blake vision" as "drug-induced" (109), when Ginsberg explicitly denied this on numerous occasions (including in sources cited by Freedman); in fact, he wrote and spoke in detail about the complex relationship between this early "natural" vision and his later use of psychedelics, which he had not yet encountered in 1948. More broadly, the discussion of this key event is overly reductive; by relying entirely on the account given by Ginsberg in his 1965 interview for the *Paris Review* (here misdated as 1967), Freedman misses the way in which Ginsberg's perspective on this vision, and on Blake's work, developed over time, under the twin influences of Buddhism and of his increasingly studious post-1960s engagement with Blake scholarship.

8 Other questionable assumptions include the bland statement that, in contrast to Ginsberg, "Blake never took drugs" (91). A better phrasing would be that, with the exception of alcohol, there is no evidence that Blake used any drugs recreationally, though it would not be surprising if he took tinctures of opium in a medicinal context. Freedman probably also misjudges her readers when she somewhat laboriously explains the typical atmosphere of a 1950s San Francisco poetry reading and spells out the meaning of Timothy Leary's famous "turn on, tune in, drop out" dictum. Despite occasional misjudgments, there is much that is valuable in this chapter, such as the astute close readings of several Ginsberg poems; these are aided by the fact that, throughout the book, Freedman is not afraid to quote at length from her subjects. The chapter also perceptively draws attention to the significance of the body for Ginsberg's reading of Blake; this topic forms an important thematic link with the next two chapters, which cover Ginsberg's friends Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure.

9 Duncan was associated with the San Francisco Renaissance as well as the Black Mountain poets; both groups also intersected with the Beat movement. This web of connections leads to a couple of minor errors, as Freedman assumes that Black Mountain College (rather than San Francisco) was the location of Duncan's momentous first encounter with Blake's poetry in 1953 and erroneously states that Ginsberg also taught at the college (he never even visited), but overall "Blake, Duncan, and the Politics of Writing from Myth" is an illuminating introduction to a fascinating figure.[3] Drawing on sources including Duncan's long 1968 essay *The Truth and Life of Myth* and on her close readings of his poetry, she skillfully shows Duncan's familiarity with Blake's myth of America, as well as his self-consciously Blakean struggle to reconcile "the relationship between revelation and revolution" in the context of the Vietnam War (122).

10 Equally illuminating is chapter 6, in which Freedman considers Beat poets Michael McClure and Gary Snyder alongside the objectivist George Oppen. It benefits from an interweaving of two strong thematic strands: first, a continuation of the theme of Blakean embodiment, and second, a consideration of the practice of ecopoetics. As Freedman notes, Snyder's and McClure's poetic styles differed significantly from one another, but their shared environmentalist approach to poetry was "ahead of the critical trend" (140). She mentions recent ecocritical scholarship on Blake and Romanticism, but the chapter is particularly notable for its close and productive engagement with Tristanne Connolly's *William Blake and the Body* (2002). These critical sources assist in the exploration of the tensions between McClure's forceful co-option of the figure he described as "the great MAMMAL William Blake" into his poetic project and Blake's own ambivalent attitude to the natural world (147).

11 The idea behind "'Break on Through': Musical Openings of the Doors of Perception" is promising: linking a range of 1960s and 1970s musicians who were influenced by Blake, including Bob Dylan, Ed Sanders, Jim Morrison, and Patti Smith. Unfortunately, this turns out to be the weakest chapter in the book, as Freedman fails to provide the strong thematizing arguments that the previous chapter had used so well, and even the tone and language seem at variance with the tight expression of most of the rest of the book. Given the close personal and professional ties between all these musicians and the Beat poets (in particular Ginsberg and McClure), there is also a missed opportunity to investigate more fully these interwoven lines of Blakean transmission.

12 In contrast to Freedman's apparent difficulty in mustering scholarly enthusiasm for the musical side of Blake's countercultural appropriation, her chapter on Blake's influence

3. On the relationship between Ginsberg and the Black Mountain poets, including shared interests in Blake and other strands of Western esotericism, see my "'One physical-mental inspiration of thought': Allen Ginsberg and Black Mountain Poetics," *The Beats, Black Mountain, and New Modes in American Poetry*, ed. Matt Theado (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2021) 35-46.

on the radical 1960s theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer and Norman O. Brown is a triumph, and she seems aware that she is breaking new ground here. It begins with a succinct but insightful discussion of the complex question of Blake's theology and a summary of scholarship in this field, followed by some context on Altizer's and Brown's place in the history of American theology and culture. Linking back to her opening chapters, Freedman argues that the distinctive American response to Blake had "always been theological as well as social, political, and literary" (193). We get a strong sense of the individual characters and literary oeuvres of Altizer and Brown, and of their relationship to the historical moment. The connection between revelation and revolution is once again at the heart of this chapter. Freedman shows how the theology of both men involves an understanding of "America itself as satanic—in its imperialism, its capitalism, its racism, and its war in Vietnam" and also a celebration of the revolutionary energies of Los and Orc that are embodied in its arts and counterculture (202).

13 If "Romanticism after Auschwitz: Blake and Bellow" lacks something of the verve of "The Poetics of Belief: Blake and Countercultural Theology," it nonetheless contains some interesting and original material. Here, Saul Bellow's brand of Blakeanism is presented as a foil to what he saw (in Freedman's paraphrasing) as "the sham Romanticism of the counterculture" (215). This makes a nice coda to the suite of chapters on countercultural Blake, and Freedman does uncover a number of Blake references in Bellow's work, but she admits that his influence on Bellow is "subtle" (215). The chapter could perhaps have been energized by an expansion of the short section where she makes comparisons with the work of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut.

14 The book's conclusion is an effective restatement of Freedman's central argument, but prior to this she gives us "Continuing Visions," which brings together Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, Jim Jarmusch's 1995 "acid western" *Dead Man*, and a 2004 artwork by the activist Paul Chan, who belongs to a New York network called the Friends of William Blake. While Freedman introduces the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century period as being "long after the counterculture had diffused" (232), the influence of the 1960s on all three of these artworks is implicit throughout the chapter, and on occasion brought to the fore more explicitly, as at the end of the discussion of *Dead Man*. Indeed, it is this text in particular that gives Freedman the opportunity to return to the book's powerful central thread, as she notes that "Jarmusch implies that the frontier mentality is Urizenic in its brutal colonization of land and genocide of native people. As the naive Bill [Blake's namesake in the film] is told in no uncertain terms: 'this is America'" (240).