

**Faflak, Joel and Tilottama Rajan. *William Blake: Modernity and Disaster*. U of Toronto P, 2020.**

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William Blake was perhaps best known for his highly allusive and synesthetic work that syncretically mixed personal revelation with traditional religion as much as he generically mixed literature and art. Joel Faflak and Tilottama Rajan have collected essays that likewise explore the ruptures between categories and bodies of knowledge. As one might expect from its subtitle “Modernity and Disaster,” these essays map a constellation of recurring terms, especially “disaster,” “apocalypse,” and “science.” Like Roland Barthes emphasizes in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), these terms are treated “encyclopedically,” stretching their multivarious affordances to the limit. For example, in the introduction the editors establish the term “disaster” as a unifying theme among the essays; its etymology (bad + star) necessarily invokes astrology and prediction as well as “apocalypse,” which in turn is both an “uncovering” and an ending. They also provide a secondary definition of “disaster” as “aftermath,” thus recursively rewriting the book’s subtitle as “Modernity and Its (Post-Modern) Aftermath.” Such cyclical and iterative (re)interpretation describes not only William Blake’s theology, but also the approach of many of his scholars.

One senses from the very first essay that the scholars involved felt the pressure to make something new. The result is an often dazzling web of references and literary-critical language, but the web sometimes becomes a net insofar as the scholars stick to Blake’s most obscure mythological works, which are disorienting enough on their own. It is only by the end of the nine main essays that the contributors explicate helpful background for the reader. Other than its fruitful discussion of the affordances of dis-aster, the introduction proves conspicuously inaccessible to the casual admirer of William Blake. The first few essays likewise give the reader precious few

handholds, among which a central metaphor of corporeality emerges. Science, in its etymological root *scientia* (knowledge), is transplanted into the corpus of Blake's complex yet consistently personified mythology. The resulting "body of knowledge" becomes simultaneously graspable yet mortal, vulnerable to the disease and disorder inevitable in bodies.

This "body of knowledge" metaphor might have been better immunized against criticism if the gnostic complications lurking in the margins of every page were made more explicit. The main "bodies" discussed in the collection are the materialistic and the Jewish, but Christian notions of the body (both orthodox and heterodox) feel largely missing from the conversation. Gnosticism, especially its mistrust of the physical and its focus on "hidden" (apocalyptic) interpretations, could have been a pregnant connection between the secular shape of contemporary academia and the heterodox Christianity of Blake.

The fourth essay in the collection manages to pivot from the embodied to the psychoanalytic, updating the conversation from the Romantic tension between science and art to contemporary issues such as anti-psychiatry and post-modern modes of knowledge production. On the latter point, Faflak's essay highlights a subjectivity which the fifth essay threatens to transmute into solipsism. Lily Gurton-Wachter's essay marks and re-marks the short poem "London" until it is "blackened," that is illegible, and thus readily interpretable in any fashion desired (in this case, a shame concerning nationalism, something alien to Blake's "Albion"). The sixth essay explores the ramifications of rooting the imagination in the material, that is, in the body; this is not done to dismiss the imagination as a symptom, but instead to legitimize it and treat it holistically rather than clinically. Christopher Bundock here echoes Ludwig Feuerbach's (and Friedrich Nietzsche's) frequent remarks on the complex interrelation of digestion and belief, resuscitating via a post-modern modality what might seem to some a quaint early-modern idea. Bundock's essay also

contextualizes the Blakean term “polypus” for the first time in the collection (158); this is the first of many definitions which may have fruitfully been located earlier rather than later in the book. The seventh essay continues with the background, this time describing various characters that had been previously discussed. In this essay, Elizabeth Effinger follows a Foucauldian route to find faultlines and other anxieties within the categories forming against the backdrop of the burgeoning empirical sciences. Blake finds himself in a precarious position, one where he desires reconciliation (between himself and the scientists of his day, and between the arts and the sciences), but his later editions of *Jerusalem* (1804-1820) literally effaced such attempts at “love” and “forgiveness,” with these words struck from the printing plates. This felt like an especially provocative point to end on; as such, this essay might serve as a microcosm of the book itself, ending where it should have begun.

The eighth essay begins by commiserating with readers new to Blake’s poem *Jerusalem*; furthermore, the last two essays (plus the final two of the *Coda*) focus the least on embodiment. David Collings’s essay perhaps lends itself most easily to gnostic intrusion, which, if the order of these essays were roughly reversed, would have provided a thematic bridge to and contrast with the heavily incarnational earlier essays. Without the exploration of possible gnostic influences or undertones, an unresolved (and largely unexplored) tension emerges between the earlier embodied essays and the increasingly disembodied later essays. Steven Goldsmith’s chapter especially makes the case that Blake “scorn[ed the]...mortal body” (223), which complicates the tortured and tattooed body of Albion on Plate 25 of *Jerusalem*, which several earlier essays analyze (however, any negative valences toward mortality *per se* are avoided in those earlier essays).

This full color plate is included in an insert along with several other images that the authors discuss. Especially striking are the final two images, *Pity* (1795) and *The Ghost of a Flea* (1819-

20), which accompany the two essays comprising the *Coda*. These two essays are both physically and topically disparate from the others in the collection, being separated by the color image inserts. This feels appropriate, as both essays focus primarily on the artwork of Blake rather than his mythological writings. This does not mean that either of the images are any less enigmatic, however; the former, *Pity*, is a literal representation of an obscure simile in *Macbeth* (1606), and the latter is the memorable personification of a flea as a muscular humanoid. Whether explicitly or implicitly, Derridean interrogation pervades both essays; the former asks why a “literal” or straightforward representation of a line from Shakespeare should be so hopelessly opaque (despite being “faithful” to the letter of the text), and the latter asks what we see when we gaze at animals, and especially when they gaze back at us.

Within these pages, bodies of knowledge possess and become possessed themselves (cf. Blake’s *Milton* (1804-1810)). Blake turns out to be both a product of his age and far ahead of his time, anticipating alternatives to empirical modes of understanding while moving cyclically, regressing and progressing in turn. His personal revelation (apocalypse) destroys as it creates; as Peter Otto writes, “Teleology consequently becomes archaeology” (83). Astrology and other ancient sciences re-emerge with a disastrous vengeance, and bodies are caught in the middle: “The cost of knowledge is crisis and catastrophe” (118). Such trauma proves generative, however, and perhaps the central message from Blake (and from his scholars) is to learn to build on such ruins, to combine and recombine until coherence arises, because “the terror of thought . . . reveals nothing less than who we are” (120).

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