English Studies in Canada

Tilottama Rajan and Joel Faflak, eds. William Blake: Modernity and Disaster

Mark Canuel

Volume 47, numéro 4, décembre 2021

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112742ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a932536

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

ISSN

0317-0802 (imprimé)
1913-4835 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Canuel, M. (2021). Compte rendu de [Tilottama Rajan and Joel Faflak, eds. William Blake: Modernity and Disaster]. *English Studies in Canada*, *47*(4), 123–126. https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a932536

ing from the embodied particularity of experience, as seen in Aristotle's dialectic with Plato. How does the philosophical quest for truth relate to the form chosen to convey it? Might a poetic approach to truth challenge a philosophical approach to truth as well as instantiating it? To look back at the ancients is to revisit these old questions which endure in a twenty-first century context.

Beautifully written, persuasively argued, interpretively helpful, and splendidly contemplative, Alexia Hannis's study is a significant addition to Conrad studies and also to nineteenth and early twentieth-century British and European literature more generally, steeped as they were in the classical tradition. Hannis interprets this tradition freshly, reminding us why we should continue to study it—and also why we should keep reading Conrad.

Debra Romanick Baldwin
University of Dallas

Tilottama Rajan and Joel Faflak, eds. *William Blake: Modernity and Disaster*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 328 + xii pp. $90.00.

This volume is first and foremost a collection of brilliant essays by some of the most eminent scholars of Romanticism, contributing some of their very best work. For that reason, it's a stimulating read that has no major standouts because each contribution brings a striking perspective to bear on works that challenge the most dedicated interpreters. After reading the contributions together (a few have been published previously), I came away from the book feeling like an exciting new era in Blake studies is exemplified in its pages and that many chapters would be suitable for sharing with graduate and even upper-level undergraduate students, which is always a plus, considering the dwindling readership for literary criticism in Romanticism. Here, you'll find essays that ponder Blake's fascination with the body, medicine, antiquarianism, apocalypse, the modern nation-state, and more. Mostly concentrating on the prophetic works as well as the epics *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, the essays are also notable for attending to the intricate interplays between word and image as they expand on these topics.

Added to this general strength is the collection's stated purpose, announced in its title and in its introduction, to focus on Blake's attunement to "disaster" and to the modern age's anxious attempt to overcome disaster with its own "disastrous import" (3). By naming the multiple catas-

trophes of the twenty-first century from "climate change" to "technology's eclipse of human agency," the volume recruits Blake, long recognized as a poet of "apocalypse," as a poet for our times (3). (The volume was published before COVID-19, but often contains the prophetic and traumatic understanding required to include and process it.) But the editors Tilottama Rajan and Joel Faflak tell us that Blake is relevant not because he conveys an idea of what to do about the violence, war, and industrial development of his own moment but because but his work displays an insight into disaster as an ontological, or at least irreversible, condition. Disaster is a feature of the "ineluctable present" (11). In their account, Blake's version of disaster is transhistorical and methodological, an "undoing of certain categories" and "an ongoing resistance to formal coherence" (6, 15). And for this reason, the editors summon the contributors' "deconstructive energies" that push beyond traditional "affirmative" and "redemptive" readings of Blake, readings that that they find exemplified even in relatively recent examples of historicist critique (5, 8, 10).

Many of the included essays bolster the theoretical directions promised by the introduction's salvos. Rajan's essay on *The (First) Book of Urizen* and *The Book of Los* sees the "the vegetable growth of each poem and the corpus itself … resist integration into the systematic world-picture so often attributed to Blake" (56). She provides insight into how Blake, while working toward an elaborate mythological system, "unsettle[s]" such an attempt with proliferations of "part objects" that refuse organized coherence (63, 64). If Rajan's emphasis is on disrupted metaphysical systems, Faflak's essay on *Milton* explores Blake's interest in psychic systems that are similarly unsettled. While in a sense a plot of "personal-cum-universal revelation and redemption," the poem "marks a site and process of psychic disaster," which Faflak relates to Romantic-era discourses of psychiatry that probe the uncertain boundaries between mind and body, thinking and feeling, self and other (107).

For Faflak, the psyche itself is a "disaster," and any account of mental and affective processes is also a "disaster of inquiry and interpretation" set off by the disaster of the objects it seeks to (not) explain (108). Similarly generalized accounts of disaster appear in the two closing essays found in the book's "Coda," which demonstrate a "ruined and ruinous legibility of representation" (20). David L. Clark thus writes of Blake's exposure of a "calamity" and "disastrousness" in language itself, exposed by Blake's *Pity*, one of his 1795 colour prints, with its strange disfiguring of a passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (235). Jacques Khalip also looks to Blake's graphic

art as testimony to a disastrous "undoing" of visual and epistemological reference and certainty (263).

Although such parts of the volume retrofit deconstruction for new aims, other essays address disaster with more political or historical specificity, as in Elisabeth Effinger's essay on the disasters of scientific inquiry in *Jerusalem* or Peter Otto's essay on *Vala, or The Four Zoas*. Otto's essay deftly connects Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Catherine Blake's rendering of Agnes and her dead infant, and Blake's poem; Catherine Blake's pictorial emphasis on birth and beginning as a ruin echoes in William Blake's emphasis on death, violence, and catastrophe at the heart of revolutionary transformation. For Otto, Blake's tracking of the nightmare of history isn't an embrace of disaster as a general condition but an implicit plea for nonviolence. In her readings of *Jerusalem* and "London," Lily Gurton-Wachter refines the historical perspective to focus on the disaster of war; following Karen Swann's lead, she sees Blake's *Jerusalem* as intently focused on Albion's "shame" in its continued military conflicts on the continent and in the colonies; her reading of the third stanza of "London" focuses on the circulation of "blood," thus exposing shame as a "mist of complicity" in war among all civilians and presumably among Blake's readers as well (139).

Gurton-Wachter's emphasis on circulation connects with a continued theme of the body in the volume, which certainly makes sense, given Blake's own fascination with human and national bodies and with the intense physicality of the artistic process itself. Just as Rajan focuses on the permeable and unstable boundaries of the body in her essay, Christopher Bundock's exploration of Blake's response to controversies around Jewish naturalization shows how Albion's antisemitism is a bodily disorder because it attempts to secure a false and destructive "autoimmun[ity]" (165). Politicizing the medical discourses of the moment, *Jerusalem* dramatizes the "disastrous solipsism" resulting in the "disaster of global political hostility" (166).

Among the essays in the volume, six out of the eleven are devoted at least in part to *Jerusalem*, a concentration of attention certainly merited because of the epic's complexity, even if readers may wish that more essays in the collection had ventured into *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* or other early works. The collective attention on this great, maddening epic also allows theoretical distinctions to emerge in ways that exemplify the range in the volume as a whole. For Effinger, *Jerusalem* discloses "disaster" in modern science and its humanist antidote. Both Gurton-Wachter and Bundock see the poem as a form of negative critique; the disaster of modernity is specifically located in war and intolerance. David Collings's

contribution takes Blake as far more seriously devoted to normative ethics; he sees "forgiveness" and "self-sacrifice" as the epic's keys to an immanent and "eventless" transcendence (200, 202). While more focused on epistemology than ethics, Noah Herringman also reveals a Blake at work against a disastrous modernity—in his account, by constructing a "strong antiquarian component" in both *Milton* and *Jerusalem*; "primitive" British culture is a culture always already endowed with knowledge, as in Los and Enitharmon's preservation of the ancient arts of hammer and loom (41, 42). And in a related but more skeptical vein, Steven Goldsmith's essay observes *Jerusalem*'s tenuous aesthetic commitment to preserving the past from catastrophic loss, a perspective that he compares and contrasts with "new materialist" arguments (213).

The notion that a poem could be responsive to disaster by isolating it, criticizing it, compensating for it, or even curing it obviously contends with the notion that disaster is generalized, in language, in subjectivity, or coextensive with "modernity." While the latter notion is supposedly what organizes the volume, it is also perhaps the least convincing: if disaster is everywhere—in us and everything we do—it's impossible to say it's anywhere except as a theoretical term that insulates academic inquiry from the real harms that are named on the first page of the book. Thankfully, the volume is anything but a demonstration of a single theoretical perspective: it vividly displays contrasting readings of Blake's take on the disasters of his era; the depth, detail, and erudition in each of the essays, moreover, will surely make it a touchstone for the next generations of Blake scholars.

Mark Canuel
University of Illinois at Chicago

Michael L. Ross. *Words in Collision: Multilingualism in English-Language Fiction*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2023. 216 pp.

Adding to a growing literature on non-monolingual writing, *Words in Collision* explores the textual and narrative effects created by the incorporation of words and phrases from languages other than English in major Anglophone literary works of fiction, spanning several centuries and continents. The book is divided into two parts: part I focuses on works from the Western metropolitan canon (the UK and the U.S.), while part II focuses on texts by authors from the postcolonial world, namely Nigeria and India. While Ross's study is "primarily concerned with prose fiction dating from the 1800 onward" (27), part I opens with a chapter detailing the