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Edited by Sarah Haggarty
Excerpt
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Introduction

Sarah Haggarty

> In this Picture, believing with Milton, the ancient British History, Mr. B. has done, as all the ancients did, and as all the moderns, who are worthy of fame, given the historical fact in its poetical vigour; so as it always happens, and not in that dull way that some Historians pretend, who being weakly organized themselves, cannot see either miracle or prodigy; all is to them a full round of probabilities and possibilities; but the history of all times and places, is nothing else but improbabilities and impossibilities; what we should say, was impossible if we did not see it always before our eyes.
>
> – William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), E 543

Whether it is the cussedness of Blake, or the cussedness of some of us who write about him, he does not feel immediately like the most obvious candidate for a series about 'writers in context'. For a start, Blake was not just a writer, but also an artist practising in a range of media – writing, drawing, etching, engraving, printmaking, and painting. His earliest audience knew him as a visual artist, and if – thinking of the 'sister arts' of painting and poetry – we had to choose one sister over another, it would seem to be the visual arts that make him the more historically legible, embedded and affiliated as he was by education, friends and patrons, and professional practice. Some of the guiding terms from Blake's aesthetics (particular vs general; invention vs execution; outline) make most sense in a visual cultural context, as do his governing metaphors for artistic production (drawing; printmaking).[1] The reach of this language in Blake's usage, though, was across the sister arts, yoking visual and verbal together. Writing alongside engraving bookended his career, and his most celebrated creative achievement would seem for most people nowadays to be the 'composite art' of the illuminated books.[2] While conceiving of Blake purely as a writer can make it appear that he virtually failed to secure a contemporary audience, furthermore, looking at his work in the round suggests a degree of (admittedly still modest) success. The entire print run

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of illuminated books, if one can put it like this, numbered fewer than two hundred copies, but '[w]hile the numbers are small compared to commercial book and print publications, they are considerable when compared to the press runs of original prints of Gainsborough, Barry, [and] Stubbs'.[3] Blake also made and sold engravings and book illustrations to commercial publishers, and produced single and serial drawings, engravings, prints, paintings, and manuscripts for private patrons, notably Thomas Butts and John Linnell. Necessarily, therefore, chapters in the first part of this book engage with Blake's productions across a range of media, and reassess their reception, attending both to the networks within which they moved and to the motivations of some of their earliest collectors. Chapters throughout the book also regularly invoke visual as well as verbal examples, not least as Blake often figures his responses to fellow writers, including biblical writers, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Robert Blair, Thomas Gray, and Edward Young in visual images. If we are unable to include quite as many illustrations as we would have liked in these pages, we hope by being precise in our references to point readers on.

Blake was not just a writer, then. For various reasons, he might also seem like one peculiarly out of step with his own times (the 1750s to the 1820s). What widespread fame Blake has is posthumous, catalysed by his 'discovery' in the 1860s by the Rossettis and Gilchrists, who produced the first full-length biography and textual editions. Blake may not have willed this belatedness, insofar as aspects of his class position contrived to set him apart from polite culture – or better, to strand him between cultures: 'little' and 'great', artisan and intellectual, antinomian and rationalist.[4] Blake's autodidacticism has also counted against him, insofar as it has been interpreted to mean that he existed outside culture (specifically scholarly, or Enlightenment cultures), proceeding instead by 'unguided reading and accidental encounter' to assemble some homespun version of his own.[5] There are other features of Blake's work, beliefs, and behaviours yet more difficult to assimilate, his strong claim to vision, not least. This not only vexed Blake's contemporaries, but may also vex the possibility of contemporaneousness – of Blake's works fitting into any context other than that which they themselves have created. So compelling is Blake's emphasis on the visionary imagination, so vivid are his depictions of what he sees, 'Really & Truly', so populated and intricate are the myths he creates or elaborates (especially in his later work, from the late 1790s), that he issues a challenge to 'historical and chronological evidence' as the sole guarantee of truth (E 658, 618). There is also the matter of Blake's contrariety – rhetorical, intellectual, and temperamental – which can seem perpetually at

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risk of freewheeling.[6] Whatever the 'happy state of Agreement', it might appear that William Blake 'for One [would] not Agree' (E 783).

Context, whether historical, genealogical, textual, or otherwise, is a lot about making things fit. Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (1819), for instance, defined *contexture* as the 'disposition and union of the constituent parts' of 'works of nature and art' – a 'union' liable to be dismantled and denaturalised immediately by one such as Blake who denied the premises of Newtonian physics.[7] We need not endeavour only to read writers in the way we think they would like to be read, of course. But it seems important to acknowledge at the outset of a book such as this that Blake is a figure who at the very least prompts us to think carefully about what we mean by 'context'.

By and large this is not a debate we engage in explicitly over the course of the chapters that follow. The tendency of authors has rather been to strip away anything that obstructs a direct and accessible discussion of their topic. Each of the book's four sections implies a different slant on context, to be sure: Part I emphasises biography and the histories of media and reception; Part II is attentive to form, genre, and mode (and is relatively unusual in treating Blake's lyric, and mythic or epic, works together); Part III is interested in allusion and influence, and in creative conversations that cut across, or gather, time as well as ramify within particular periods; and Part IV examines issues of history, society, and culture, giving the last word to a chapter whose placement is at once accidental (by virtue of alphabetical ordering) and entirely appropriate to the spirit of this volume. Authors have, however, carved out their topics, and made decisions about what counts as context, independently, which has led to a diversity of approach across the volume, and even within each of its parts. Equally, we have ensured that each chapter stands alone, to enable readers to follow their own interests. The brief 'Further Reading' lists at the very end of the volume are designed both to help prioritise and to supplement suggestions for extra reading provided by the chapters' notes. The 'List of Abbreviations' shows our main sources of reference, and further reading specified for the 'Introduction' operates as a general bibliography of sorts.

It is Blake's character Los who resolves to 'Create a System' lest he 'be enslav'd by another Mans' (*Jerusalem* 10: 20, E 153). *William Blake in Context* would have it not both ways, but neither. Not in thrall to Blake's idiom, but with an ear always to its resonance, coming at man, myth, and works from without as well as within them, we accept the inevitable otherness of our contextualising approach. We also hope by its means to sound Blake anew.

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Notes

1. On 'drawing', see Viscomi, Ch. 4, 32–44; on 'printmaking', see J. Viscomi, 'In the Caves of Heaven and Hell: Swedenborg and Printmaking in Blake's *Marriage*', in S. Clark and D. Worrall (eds.), *Blake in the Nineties* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 27–60.
2. Introduced in the mid-twentieth century by Jean Hagstrum, the term 'composite art' was glossed by Northrop Frye as a 'radical form of mixed art' which must be read as a unity. See W. T. J. Mitchell, *Composite Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 3 and n.
3. Viscomi, 338.
4. See J. Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), esp. 'Conclusion: A Radical without an Audience?', pp. 214–26, and E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. 'Introduction', pp. xv–xxv, and 'Anti-hegemony', pp. 106–14. Thompson borrows the idea of '"great" (or polite)' and '"little" (or popular) tradition[s] of culture' from the anthropologist Robert Redfield (p. xxii), and in part develops it as a model of diversity opposed to the exclusive emphasis on Blake's affiliation to '"The Tradition" of neo-Platonic and hermetic thought' (p. 33) that he finds in K. Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). See further N. Heringman's discussion in Chapter 27 of this volume, suggesting Blake's knowledge of both practical and scholarly traditions of antiquarianism.
5. P. Bourdieu, 'Education and the Autodidact', in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 328–31 (p. 329). T. S. Eliot recognised the artisanal character of Blake's autodidacticism (his 'ingenious' and 'home-made [philosophy] [. . .] put together out of the odds and ends about the house'), but did not credit it; for him, Blake 'lacked' tradition, 'indulging in a philosophy of his own' (Eliot, 'Blake', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), pp. 128–34 (pp. 132–3, 134)). E. P. Thompson reminds us that '[a]lternative intellectual traditions' were available: not only Rational Dissent, but also yet more marginal, specifically anti-rationalist groupings (*Witness*, pp. xviii–xix).
6. See J. Mee and S. Haggarty, 'Introduction', in *Blake and Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–11 (pp. 1–5).
7. A. Rees, *The Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, 39 vols. (London: 1819), Vol. IX.

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