



PROJECT MUSE®

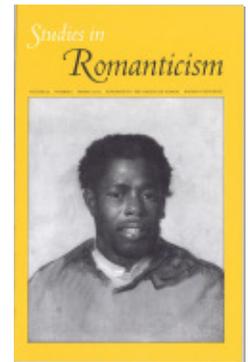
William Blake on Self and Soul by Laura Quinney (review)

Andrew Lincoln

Studies in Romanticism, Volume 51, Number 1, Spring 2012, pp. 98-103 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2012.0045>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/740678/summary>

tionship of that history to philosophy, religion, and the process of secularization.

Robert Mitchell
Duke University

Laura Quinney. *William Blake on Self and Soul*. Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp. xx+195. \$39.95.

The historical and political drive of much recent Blake scholarship, one might argue, treats Blake as a historical curiosity, the province of specialists, with little relevance to a wider readership. Laura Quinney's book has the virtue of treating Blake as a writer who addresses an issue of universal concern. It identifies his central theme as the confusion and unhappiness inherent in the very experience of selfhood.

In defining her approach to this issue, Quinney has little time for those who simply view "the discourses of soul, self, and subject as anachronisms." According to Quinney, such a view is "malformed" because it tends to dismiss not only the theoretical models of selfhood but also "the actual *experience* of subjectivity":

The self supposed to be obsolete is the unitary subject, the integral, transcendent self linked to the traditional religious idea of the immortal soul. I state categorically that the actual subject has never mistaken itself for a Subject of this kind. Modern skeptical thought congratulates itself for a work of demystification that the subject by virtue of its subjectivity performs every day. (2)

Her own approach rests upon a direct appeal to the ordinary experience of subjectivity, to an "actual 'self'" that always "fails to coincide with its own self-definition" (2). Quinney implicitly sets this self apart from historically-specific modes of conceptualizing selfhood and from the changing historical conditions in which selfhood is experienced. The "actual *experience*" of mundane subjectivity is ultimately ahistorical and universal, and Quinney's Blake, for all his obvious interest in the accumulating errors of history, seems ultimately to arrive at this view. In his earlier work, Blake may show that the major religions and philosophical movements of the West have built upon and strengthened the intuition of the self's unhappiness, and that Empiricism and the New Science (for Blake "the most recent avatars of this error") encourage the "I" "to regard itself as passive and helpless" (12). But Quinney insists that the subject would come to regard itself in this way "if Bacon and Newton and Locke had never existed" (14); and

Blake, who in his later work becomes increasingly preoccupied with “self-obstruction,” apparently concurs.

There is a sense in which Blake must find this dire view of selfhood unavoidable. Every attempt to imagine a “fall” must reveal that the potential for falling is already present within the unfallen condition. As *The Book of Urizen* demonstrates, Blake must place the symptoms of alienated selfhood within the condition of “Eternity” as well as at the end of a long and complicated history of creation-as-fall. The problem of selfhood is inevitably both inside and outside of history, both a cause and a product of the fall. Indeed, in Blake’s poems the sense of alienation that produces the fall also reverberates through every stage of fallen history. His narratives of change are haunted by sameness-in-difference. Quinney’s approach boldly emphasizes the sameness at the expense of the differences. This works to produce a Blake who seems close to our own ordinary concerns, but it also leads to much simplification, and some distortion.

The most striking virtues of Quinney’s approach are its clear focus and the consistent emphasis on issues that have perennial relevance. The limitations arise from its evasion of complexities or historical contexts that might impede the clear outlines of her argument, or challenge its basic assumptions. Quinney’s tendency to emphasize sameness where others might stress difference extends to her use of terminology. At the outset, she decides to treat the terms “ego, self, inner life, phenomenal self, empirical self, central consciousness” as “synonymous” (xiv). This means that sometimes “empirical self” refers to the historically-specific understanding of self fostered by seventeenth-century empiricists, and sometimes it refers simply to the default or universal experience of selfhood, so naturalizing the term. In a comparable way, potentially troubling religious distinctions are quickly disposed of: “I would simply like to name as ‘Gnostic’ the kernel of religious humanism in all the religions in which he participated sympathetically: his family religion, the alternative religions in which he participated as an adult (Behmen’s and Swedenborg’s), and the ancient religious he knew about” (56). This refusal to get embroiled in doctrinal detail allows her to keep a clear focus on her main issue, the basic problems of subjectivity: but it also makes it easier for her to align some of Blake’s statements with Gnostic hostility to “nature,” without engaging with alternative views, such as Kevin Hutchings’s claim (in *Imagining Nature: Blake’s Environmental Poetics* [McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002]), that Blake’s hostility is directed not to nature “in itself” (41), but to the specific power relations within which nature assumes tyrannical form.

Quinney deliberately confines her discussion within narrow limits. She has little interest in Blake the painter, the engraver, the annotator, the letter writer, or in Blake’s visions of history, his engagement with contemporary

politics, or even in his poetic language. And she has little interest in positioning her work clearly in relation to the current field of Blake studies. Instead, her book evokes an earlier era of scholarship around the 1960s, when George Mills Harper and Kathleen Raine explored the relationship between Blake and Neo-Platonism. She ignores a great deal of what has been written since, including earlier work on Blake as psychologist (for example by Christine Gallant, Diana Hume George, and Brenda S. Webster). For a book of such ambition, the bibliography is surprisingly thin.

In spite of her general willingness to regard the formative effect of philosophers as secondary, some of the most incisive parts of this study are those in which the influence of John Locke's empirical conception of selfhood is examined. Chapter One considers how the early works (from *Tiniel* to the "Continental Prophecies") dramatize Blake's understanding of the ways in which empiricism gives rise to despair. Here Quinney's account of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* shows convincingly how Theotormon's "estrangement from his own subjectivity," his anxiety about the "substance" of thought and the puzzle of memory, can be understood in the light of Locke's association of identity with consciousness (48). In the next chapter, Quinney introduces Wordsworth's response to the empirical self as a key point of comparison with Blake. She argues engagingly that Wordsworth's Locke-influenced empiricism "enables him to articulate not a reassuring idea of nature but rather a basic intuition about the discomfiture of interiority" (72). While other scholars have noted "the continuity from Locke through Romanticism to psychoanalysis, they have traced the contribution of Romanticism to the idea of the autonomous Imagination" whereas Quinney finds it in "Wordsworth's representation of self as porous, fragmented, haunted and half blind" (79). This is an interesting claim, and her discussion provides the basis for a useful comparison of Wordsworth's conception of the self with Blake's. However, one might easily conclude from her study that Blake's work was a programmatic response to Wordsworth's theory of the self: "He saw Wordsworth as the most eminent and most compelling spokesman of the existential sorrow he, himself knew and was bent of counteracting. . . . Blake set himself the task of proposing a counter theory that would give heart to both Wordsworth's readers and to Wordsworth himself" (69). She does not mention that the main evidences of Blake's response to Wordsworth, his marginal comments on Wordsworth's poems, were written in 1826, the year before Blake died. It is Quinney herself who turns Blake's work into a response to Wordsworth.

The rest of the book is devoted to examining Blake's own exploration of the angst-ridden self in the later, longer prophetic books. Her account of *The Four Zoas* claims that the "first version" of the poem originally began

on page 23 of the manuscript, with Albion rising upon his Couch of Death. While she offers no textual evidence to support this claim, she uses it to underwrite a shift in critical focus away from Blake's representation of systems of error towards his depiction of passive suffering and individual remorse. In her reading, the revised version of the poem introduces the despairing Tharmas and Enion "specifically to embody passivation and despair" (92). The initial description of Tharmas's alienation represents a "fundamental" experience of subjectivity that requires neither "a developmental paradigm" nor "a chronological scheme" (97). The revisions represent a change in Blake's diagnosis of the fundamental error in empiricist subjectivity, from "the egoism of the isolated Ratio" to the "assumption of helplessness" (97). In her discussion of the rest of the poem, the delineation of Urizenic error is accordingly given less importance than the poem's articulation of distress (in, for example, the lamentations of the displaced female characters, and in the plight of "the spectrous dead" who represent the life-in-death helplessness of the empirical self).

Quinney's approach usefully brings together aspects of the poem that are often considered separately, but it also makes much of the rest of the narrative seem irrelevant. Although Blake continues to use the metaphor of the fall in the poem, Quinney insists that "he does not mean it literally" (97). And although she concedes that the poem does show "the progress of history" (107), this aspect of the poem seems merely incidental, as does the elaborate redemptive framework involving the "Council of God," and the descent and crucifixion of Jesus. As the poem is dehistoricized, so it is depoliticized—its remarkable explorations of institutionalized oppression, economic exploitation, or the ideology of militarism simply fade into the background. So does the violent account of the restoration of the human body in the poem's vision of the "Last Judgment." While Quinney gives some attention to the role of art as offering a measure of comfort through spiritual inspiration, in her account the momentum of positive change begins not in any perception or activity of the poem's masculine powers, but in the broken heart gate of the female Enitharmon, which represents the "transcendental remorse" of those who recognize that they have betrayed the proper vocation of humanity (93). In *The Four Zoas* Blake begins to "think through the phenomenon of self-obstruction" (134), which will assume a central place in his next long narrative, *Milton*. In this way, Quinney begins to produce a quietist, contemplative Blake, who, in her account of *Milton* can be made to sit alongside Plotinus the Neo-Platonist.

Quinney's discussion of *Milton* takes self-obstruction as a central theme. Blake's story of how the prophetic poet John Milton frees himself from "Selfhood" is given a relatively simple, conventional moral dimension, since "Selfhood" is equated with "ego." Milton sees that he has yielded to

pride, vanity and power hunger, and must free his Imagination from these. Quinney compares Blake's Imagination with Plotinus's understanding of "the immaterial spiritual reality harbored within" (125). She argues that Blake endorsed the idea that "to go further inward is to discover not a personal identity but an impersonal Divine Vision" (126). This is consistent with her view that "identity" is a negative term for Blake when it means "personal uniqueness" (62). Her Blake argues for a kind of transcendence that is both "impersonal" and "intellectually individuated" (20). This argument is based upon a highly selective approach to Blake's text, and surely needs to be tested against the beliefs expressed elsewhere in Blake's work. The annotations to Lavater and Swedenborg, for example, clearly show that the idea of an "impersonal Divine Vision" was anathema to Blake (he fervently endorsed Lavater's claim that "He, who adores an impersonal God, has none") and through the rest of his work, including *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, the divine vision is given a loving human form, while the separation of thought from affection is seen as a fundamental error. In developing her argument about impersonality, Quinney claims that Blake sometimes regards identity as synonymous with Selfhood, as when (in *Milton*) "Satan, the hypocrite, makes 'to himself Laws from his own identity'" (63). But I don't think identity is equated with Selfhood here; instead, Satan's recourse to "Laws" negates identity, since law is no respecter of individuality. Blake does not separate vision from identity; instead, he consistently unifies them, since he believes that "as a man is So he Sees" (Letter to Trusler, August 23, 1799). The imagination is never simply a "hidden resource" (126), as Quinney would have it. For Blake it is the ground of being, the "true Man." The strongest part of this chapter lies not in its exposition of doctrine, but in its discussion of how the poem illuminates the sheer difficulties of overcoming the uncertainties and self-protectiveness of time-bound consciousness. Quinney asks pertinently: "How can Milton know that his assumption of authority [near the end of the poem] does not entail the residual nourishment of Selfhood?" (150). Her view that Blake "preserves the intrusions of skepticism" (154) provides a useful counterweight to the readings of less skeptical critics.

The book concludes with a "brisk" discussion of *Jerusalem*, in which Quinney detects another shift in Blake's concern, from focusing on solitude *within* the self towards an emphasis on willed alienation *from* others. She finds a significant difference opening up between "Love" and "Imagination" in Blake's thought, and Love—entailing self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and "commingling" with others—must come first. The reading is consistent in its own terms, but it seems to me that it is Quinney, rather than Blake, who opens up a gap between "'Man,' 'Brotherhood,' and 'Love' on

the one hand, and 'Vision,' 'Imagination,' and 'Prophecy' on the other" (176), a distinction that tends to make creativity secondary.

Blake's writings repeatedly deny what Quinney sees as the fundamental reality of the self, and in seeking a usable Blake, Quinney limits the terms of that denial. She avoids examining his claims that his own vision is "two-fold Always" and "fourfold" sometimes, or the references to "sensual enjoyment" as a route to the "infinite." She does not engage with the extraordinary metamorphoses and births depicted in his mythology, in which relationships between mind, body and world-view are apparently subject to fundamental change. While the complex interrelations in Blake's mythic universe can suggest that even the simplest cry from the heart may be conditioned by the conceptions of the reasoning mind, or by the visions of the prophet, Quinney prefers to keep the "actual *experience* of subjectivity" ultimately apart from the conceptualizing intellect and the visionary imagination. While she brings to her studies a refreshing emphasis on Blake's own capacity for doubt, she is inclined to discount the very sincerity of his faith. In her introduction she claims that Blake "flaunted his secular religiousness deliberately by constantly writing of God and Christ even though he was an atheist and unbeliever" (26). If Blake is seen as an unbeliever and atheist, then his religious gestures, which look like signs of enthusiastic belief, become instead a kind of affectation. To see Blake in this way is to turn him into the kind of insincere mocker he attacked with loathing. If one is going to characterize his distinctive beliefs as a form of atheism, it would be a good idea to examine those passages in his writings (e.g. the annotations to Bacon and Reynolds) in which Blake attacks atheism. But Quinney has little time for such particulars. She is a fluent and perceptive critic, who illuminates some of the key problems addressed in Blake's work. But some of the more challenging aspects of Blake's thinking are either off her agenda or simply elude her.

Andrew Lincoln
Queen Mary, University of London

Mary Favret. *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern War-time*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 262. \$60.00.

In *War at a Distance*, Mary Favret proposes that we can understand British Romanticism as a wartime culture, one that is intimately suffused and determined by the experience of those living during but not in a war. In part, her claim recognizes that Britain was almost constantly at war during the