Introduction: Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture

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When William Blake died on 12 August 1827, he left behind him, in the words of his most recent biographer, G. E. Bentley, a ‘fading shadow’. While Bentley notes that the number of obituary notices that appeared were ‘more ... than might have been expected’ (BR 465), those expectations were very low. Although Blake was a minor footnote in the established histories of British literature and art, it is not true, as Richard Holmes (2004) has remarked, that by the time of his death ‘he was already a forgotten man’; indeed, plenty of nascent biographers were keen to use the deathbed scene of this obscure engraver, painter and sometime poet to establish their visions of a reinvigorated sentimental aesthetic and to serve as the foundation for their own future reputations. Allan Cunningham ventriloquised Blake thus in his 1830 Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects: ‘Why should I fear death? Nor do I fear it, I have endeavoured to live as Christ commands, and have sought to worship God truly – in my own house, when I was not seen of men’ (cited in BR 654–5). The author of Jerusalem might have approved, although it is hard to imagine the diabolic engraver of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell being quite as complacent.

Despite the regular appearance of numerous articles on Blake’s influence, particularly in Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly, full-length studies are few and far between. Deborah Dorfmann’s informative and valuable Blake in the Nineteenth Century (1967) is confined, of course, to the simpler task of outlining Blake’s reputation before the explosion of self-professed followers in the twentieth century. Robert Bertholf and Annette Levitt’s William Blake and the Moderns (1982) extends the temporal reach of Blake’s influence, but concentrates on a very traditional high cultural genealogy. The book that offers a wider consideration of
Blake’s cultural impact is Shirley Dent and Jason Whittaker’s *Radical Blake: Influence and Afterlife* (2002), which drew on and extended the emerging body of work concerned with Blake’s influence on areas such as film, political philosophy and popular music as well as more conventional literary studies. A more recent and detailed study of Blake’s impact on literature is Edward Larrissy’s *Blake and Modern Literature* (2006).

What is perhaps so unusual about Blake is that the influence of his work is often much more visible than that of other writers and artists. All scholars devoted to a particular author wish to plead a special case for their subject, but there remains something slightly odd about Blake’s incorporation into the canon, a process that began with Alexander Gilchrist’s biography of the *pictor ignotus*, published in 1863 with help from the Rossettis and Swinburne, and which achieved a great leap forward with Blake’s adoption by modernist poets – most notably W. B. Yeats – and important work by critics and scholars in the twentieth century such as S. Foster Damon, Northrop Frye, David Erdman and G. E. Bentley. Their labour, and that of many other critics and writers, has secured Blake’s position as an artist and writer, and so elevated it that the London printmaker has, predictably enough, been subjected to a critical backlash for his religious, political and sexual views. Yet while Blake is often studied as one of the big six of Romanticism, anyone who reads his work, particularly if they move beyond the pastoral lyrics of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, cannot help but note its strangeness. Blake was by no means the first oddball to occupy a quiet recess in the pantheon: John Bunyan, Christopher Smart, even that linchpin of theories around the anxiety of influence, John Milton, read bizarrely. It is Blake, however, who is most often interpreted as the emblem of the unorthodox imagination and, as Schuchard (2006) has indicated, he was more firmly situated in the esoteric, erotic and apocalyptic counterculture of the Enlightenment than most.

Much of our appreciation of Blake’s strangeness comes from his artistic talents: an engraver by training, a painter by inclination, not only have his illuminated manuscripts provided a more material environment for his literary vision than can be attained by most writers, but his other paintings and prints, such as the magnificent large colour print of *Newton*, have inspired generations of writers and artists. Again, this is not to imply that Blake’s inspiration on artists is unique: countless illustrations of the works of Shakespeare and Milton indicate otherwise, and Blake’s own illuminations of figures such as Orc and Urizen tend to block out later interpretations – the original is all too