

serves as a helpful and accessible student handbook that can stand independently as a useful resource in its own right.

Together, both *Volume One: The Medieval Period* and the *Historical Overview* provide the reader with a comprehensive survey of literature, while also encouraging them to consider the contexts which informed a text's production. By delivering this wealth of information in an accessible and thought-provoking way, Broadview have produced two volumes that will undoubtedly prove to be invaluable to any student new to the study of literature.

Natalie Jones

Jonathan Roberts. *Wordsworth. Blake. Religion.* London: Continuum, 2010. Pp. 144. £16.99.

Jonathan Roberts's unusually punctuated title announces his desire to challenge scholarly conventions and boundaries. It is an ambition which is fully realized in this study. *Blake. Wordsworth. Religion.* is difficult to categorise even within the terms of the interdisciplinary series of which it forms part. The book combines literary and religious enquiry, as is fitting for Continuum's excellent *New Directions in Religion and Literature* series, but it consciously declines to do so in any consistent or reliable way. The *Religion* of Roberts's title is a slippery matter. It is not in any substantial sense historical. The material religious contexts which influenced the poetry of Blake and Wordsworth have absorbed much critical attention of late, but this is not Roberts's focus, and the most significant work in this area (Keri Davies and Marsha Keith Schuchard's discoveries concerning Blake and the Moravians; Richard Rix's account of Blake and radical Christian culture; Stephen Gill's study of Wordsworth's adoption as a 'spiritual power' by his Victorian readers) finds reference only in an endnote. Nor is Roberts's attention to religion primarily theological, despite a brief and perceptive discussion of biblical allusion in Wordsworth and Blake. And although the book promises at intervals to use Blake and Wordsworth to probe contemporary controversies over the truth or falsity of religious conviction, it would be overly confining to describe this as a dominant theme.

If Roberts's object is neither substantially historical criticism nor theological enquiry, no more can it be said that he reads poetry for its aesthetic qualities: 'conclusive close readings', he argues, descend into a kind of 'foundationalism' (5) which we would do well to avoid. The

closeness Roberts is aiming for — his book deals with only a single poem from Blake and a single poem from Wordsworth — is clearly of a different, less definite kind. A book that works so hard to resist clear definition makes of inconclusiveness an argument, showing in its method as well as its content that none of Roberts's three objects of study are 'reducible to a set of well-ordered propositions' (3). If anything, this means that *Blake. Wordsworth. Religion.* is perhaps better thought of as an exercise in hermeneutics than as a study of either Blake, Wordsworth or religion — though Roberts might well want to resist this categorisation also.

Roberts's method is to counter totalising interpretations of his three subjects by sampling a number of different and conflicting approaches that might be taken towards them. Following a wide-ranging Introduction (referenced as Chapter One), the opening chapter (Chapter Two) relates the events that led to the writing of William Blake's 1800 poem 'To my friend Butts', and gives an account of the life of Joseph Fawcett, upon whose story Wordsworth based his figure of 'the Solitary'. Chapter Three interrogates the value of such knowledge, providing a surfeit of biographical information in order to reveal the difficulty with privileging biography above other forms of knowledge. Blake wrote 'To my friend Butts' during the period he spent living in Felpham, a coastal village in Sussex; the poem's spark had been a vision Blake experienced while standing on the beach a little way from his cottage. Roberts exhaustively probes the circumstances of the vision, going as far as to tabulate its minute material aspects: 'Blake stocky, Caucasian, balding, approximately 5 feet five inches', reads one entry under the 'Data / event' column; '2 October 1880, 4.19am, High water at Felpham (5.8m)' records a different row of the table (32). By taking biographical enquiry to such extremes, Roberts intends to show how 'the value and meaningfulness of religious narrative may not depend on its empirical verifiability, but on the relationship it enables us to establish with our world' (39).

Chapters Four and Five follow the same critical method, establishing a frame of enquiry in one chapter, before undermining it in the next. The frame of Chapter Four is autobiography, with Roberts relating the intense psychedelic experience of reading Blake while high on mescaline. In Chapter Five we learn that this account is actually comprised of a tissue of quotations from other writers: what had appeared to be an argument for the validity of individual response actually demonstrates 'that the histories of mysticism and psychedelics are so entwined in the reception of Blake's and Wordsworth's writings as to be inseparable' (59).

Chapter Six continues the set–them–up–to–knock–them–down pattern of the book, offering a series of moral objections to drug–taking before moving to problematise the previous chapter’s association of psychedelic and mystical experience. The visionary quality of both Blake’s ‘To my friend Butts’ and Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*, Roberts explains, needs rather to be understood as shaped by Christian traditions of biblical interpretation. Chapter Seven departs from the book’s characteristic method in that it does not seek to undermine the means of interpretation established in the previous chapter. Rather, it probes the disjunction between religion and spirituality in contemporary society, finding that this contemporary resistance to institutional religion echoes the stance of the Wordsworth and Blake poems. These are poems, Roberts argues, which expose the flaws in syncretistic approaches to religious experience, breaking down the traditional dichotomy posited between mysticism and spirituality. The Conclusion reiterates Roberts’s objections to the notion of ‘aesthetic pleasure’, briefly explores anti–essentialist views of language, and ends by proposing ‘that “religion” is essentially concerned with the relationship between the individual and God, or, to put it another way, between the part and the whole’ (101).

This is a book which stretches and disrupts conventional discipline and period boundaries, and it is good that Continuum have found a place for it on their list, given that the danger with such innovative work is that it falls between the various readerships publishers usually seek to attract. The study is certainly effective inasmuch as it showcases the partiality of different forms of knowledge. It is not, however, without problems. The difficulty with sampling so many different methodologies in a book of little more than a hundred pages is that none receive much more than fleeting application. Some of the sampling — especially that of biography — descends into caricature.

A larger difficulty is the fact of what Roberts seems to want to exclude from his book, even as his commitment to inclusivity and openness is reiterated at every turn. The assertion that ‘a unifying category such as “aesthetic pleasure”...is required to carry so much that it can achieve very little’ (96) neglects to consider the ways in which a consideration of the ‘aesthetic’ might be very far from unifying — a neglect which is all the more odd given how often formalist criticism has elevated ambiguity and uncertainty into aesthetic qualities. As well as literary–critical exclusions, there are also a number of ways in which the *Religion* of Roberts’s title is not entirely receptive to alternative perspectives. Roberts finds in the Wordsworth and Blake poems a religious mindset which is ‘individualistic, anti–institutional, anti–ecclesiastical, with a grounding in personal spirituality’ (94). But

nonconformity in Blake cannot be taken as identical with an anti-ecclesial stance, given his involvement with a number of radical Protestant churches in London in the 1780s and 1790s. The issue with Wordsworth is equally complex, given his long and faltering journey towards Anglican orthodoxy. Roberts's conclusion asserts that literature can 'take us closer to a depiction of a multifaceted human universe than any single discipline can' (103); he adds in an endnote that 'This may be why systematic accounts of Wordsworth's and Blake's religious beliefs are never really satisfying, because they replace the dynamic life of poetry with the static of doctrine' (116). What this does not credit is the way that doctrine can be a dynamic spur to poetry, as happens in, for example, John Dryden's masterpiece of religious controversy, *The Hind and the Panther* (1687). The remark shows a rigidity which runs directly counter to the stated ambition of Roberts's book.

Martin Dubois

Sue Chaplin and Joel Faflak (eds.) *The Romanticism Handbook*. London: Continuum, 2011. Pp.235. £17.99.

A handbook of English literature for students, it seems, needs to be reliable in terms of literary facts, informative enough to support the development of further research, and broad enough to accommodate a wide range of academic interests and adapt to the various circumstances under which the subject may be taught. *The Romantic Handbook* deals with a large number of topics and contents with different research perspectives, including: historical interpretations of the Romantic age; a chronology of important events from the late 1700s to 1837; biographical information on poets and authors; and a collection of critical writing on seminal topics in contemporary English Romantic studies, bearing such titles as 'Changes in Critical Responses and Approaches', 'Canonicity', 'Sexuality and Gender', and 'Race and Ethnicity'. Indeed, in the way it has been designed for students, it seems exemplary.

However, I need to address at least two points which may be of concern if this handbook is to be ranked amongst the most useful resources: first, its use as a source of factual information about English Romanticism, and second, its effectiveness in fostering discussion and the development of questions about what makes English literature (including Romanticism) a valuable subject of study for future generations. As for the first point, once you begin reading the series of