

Nicholas M. Williams, “‘The Sciences of Life’: Living Form in William Blake and Aldous Huxley.” *Romanticism* 15.1 (2009): 41-53

An approach which, by its own confession, “risks (and dares) anachronism” (46) is at the heart of this intriguing attempt to understand the philosophical relationship between Aldous Huxley and William Blake. Nicholas M. Williams begins his investigation from a conviction that Blake’s influence on Huxley is generally understood in terms which are not only far too limited (confining themselves strictly to a discussion of mysticism) but occasionally outright misleading (the perceived attachment of both to individualism, which, Williams points out, was gainsaid by Huxley himself on numerous occasions). “[M]ore attention needs to be paid”, says Williams, “to how Huxley sees Blake complicating the entire notion of selfhood, supplementing a rational model of subjectivity by continual sensitivity to ‘the life of the body’” (42). To this end, he begins with an examination of Huxley’s contribution to the Two Cultures debate, assuming a correspondence between the binaries of science/literature and body/mind and concluding that Blake provides Huxley with a unique method of synthesising both sides via the life sciences. Biology is the common ground, suggests Huxley, for it asks the same questions about lived experience as poetry. For Huxley, “Blake’s monism, his refusal to separate the soul from the life of the body, is the keynote of a new conception of literature” (44).

Williams’s argument takes us from Biology in general to the specific concept of emergence – the idea of naturally occurring complex systems unpredictable at the level of their individual components – and to the notion that Blake is in some sense the philosophical forefather of this idea. In the eighteenth century, science was ill-equipped to articulate the ideas which would eventually manifest themselves as, say, Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, but Blake’s legacy provides the twentieth-century poet with a place to start. As Williams claims, “[T]he parallels between Maturana and Varela’s account of the interactions of dynamic metabolism and its boundaries, and Blake’s account of Energy as the ‘only life’ and Reason as its ‘bound or outward circumference’, are startling” (46).

This is the point in the argument where the anachronism takes centre stage. Williams draws analogies between Blake’s writing and scientific ideas which would not arrive until the twentieth century, at one point even deploying a concept which would not come along until after Huxley’s work. Williams is reassuringly up-front about this, and delivers a convincing argument that Blake’s texts are in themselves examples of emergence, through an examination of their form (which he regards as Living rather than Mathematical). However, Blake’s mysticism or, put another way, the malleability in critical hands of works such as the “Proverbs of Hell” (an examination of which is central in the closing pages of Williams’s argument) makes certain parts of this relation appear a little thin.

Williams does not mention Serres - to whose works such as *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (1995), the promulgation of this kind of approach to time can perhaps be traced - but his anachronism is not without critical precedent, neither is it indefensible. Whilst it may make some scholars uneasy, Williams’s final argument for Blake as a “germinal” figure is a fascinating one – incorporating the scientific concept of emergence (which demands “temporally non-linear relations”) into critical

vocabulary, and arguing that “rather than killing their predecessors, one function of later writers is precisely to bring to life for ‘future literature’ what only existed in germ in the literature of the past” (52). Whatever view one takes in the significant discussion opened by this line of inquiry, it would surely be hard to maintain, having read it, that the relationship between Blake and Huxley is as simple as is generally imagined.

Will Tattersdill
King’s College, London