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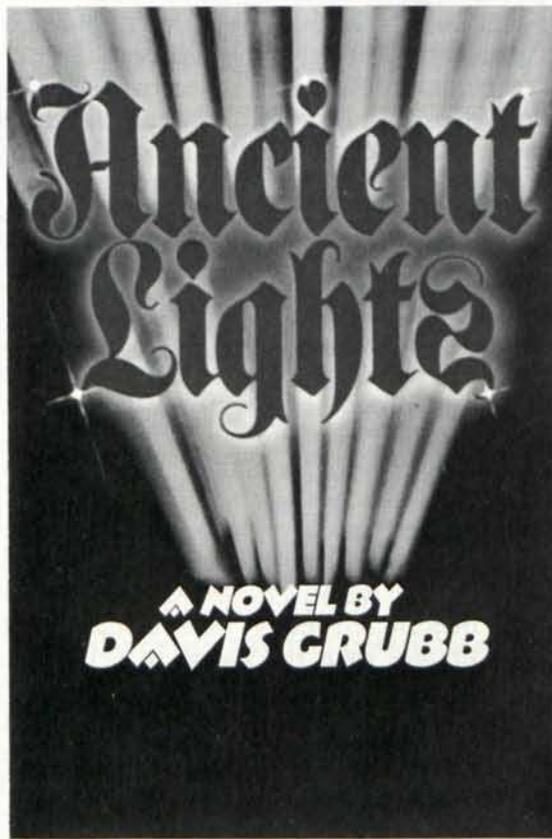
R E V I E W

Davis Grubb, *Ancient Lights*

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Davis Grubb. *Ancient Lights*. New York: The Viking Press, 1982. 540 pp. \$10.95 and \$25.00.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

Davis Grubb has written a perfectly mad novel called *Ancient Lights*—the Last Supper is said to have taken place in the Holiday Inn of Weirton, West Virginia, not that far from “a whorehouse on the high-road to Glory called Jew’s Harp House” and near where Uncle Will Blake showed himself to Sweeley Leech “last Friday night and smiled and joked awhile, and then he told him frankly that Criste had told him that there was one thing lacking.” I wonder if Cousin Davis (as he sometimes refers to himself in the book) is smiling around us as the people of “ugly, reeking, steel-mill town, Weirton” struggle to find the cash to buy the mill from the conglomerate that has doomed it and so create the largest worker-owned plant in America. He certainly knew “that Weirtons create Criste. Every time.” (“Criste,” because the “name Christ has been disgraced. The name is a cliché—not a metaphor. Criste is a metaphor. Christ is a word like fuck and cunt and cock—good words, holy words, once. Now soiled

...”) Cousin Davis, author of eleven other works (including *Night of the Hunter*), died six weeks after this book was done, and the story and imagery at times bear moving witness to the progress of cancer, of hope and fear and vision:

Fear is so funny. There are so many kinds of danger. How do we know when we are in peril? How can we guess that that headache last Wednesday night at dinner, that slight restlessness through the night, that tiny fever—that these were the battle reports on a monstrous and titanic struggle within us. Against cancer. Or typhoid. Or worse.

The narrator, Fifi Leech—at 6:30 in the morning of 4 September 1992, arching her pelvis and grinding merrily into her finger—explains that the sad reason for her being in West Virginia is “the death of the real writer in my family, the late Davis Grubb.” But, she goes on, “He was not the author.”

It is a strange, at times wonderful, production—the story of a female Gulley Jimson told by a modern George MacDonald who can graphically describe “the how and why of having sex with fairies” as well as the paranoia of “TRUCAD,” “La Machine! La ultimate world economic order. La whole fucking system that has us all prisoner” (“It had come into being out of the old Trilateral Commission . . .”). It is a book which knows its Blake but doesn’t trot out quotations in the heavyhanded manner of *The Horse’s Mouth*. At one of many points Sweeley declaims “from his favorite, next to Shakespeare, Uncle Will Blake:

And there to Eternity aspire
The selfhood in a flame of fire
Till then the lamb of God . . .”

Fifi adds, “It was one of Uncle Will’s lovely little unfinished things” (as indeed it is, appearing only as a textual note in Erdman’s edition; Sweeley, however, reads from “his scarred and dogeared Nonesuch Blake,” where the lines appear among the poems from the Notebook). the M104 Broadway bus appears “flatulating diesel smokily like Uncle Will Blake’s farting and belching God—the one he called Nobodaddy.” An advertisement in the London *Times* begins with “The outward ceremony is the Anti-Christ” (and continues with four lines from Gilbert and Sullivan, ending, “Then is the spectres’ holiday—then is the ghosts’ high noon!”).

The loose plot follows Fifi, who likes to fuck and has no sympathy for the “machocists” and “homosocials,” as she moves through a late ’70s 1992 toward the reconstitution of the Book of Criste Lite. Her father Sweeley had it once, on forty-four pages of yellow ruled paper: “No words. In heaven . . . there is only form and color. And movement.” And more, says Sweeley, describing a would-be *Ancient Lights*, “it was the damnedest, most godawful funny book I ever read. Funny. And horny. A real stroke book!” But that version is lost, and recreating the second entails a collective effort in which Sweeley (“the dear cor-

ruption of the word *Seeley*—of the Fairy Court. Leech . . . a Healer”) fights to keep from being *organized* (“The worst thing that happened to Criste”) by the Church of the Remnant, who, in turn, must battle against the vicious Goody Two-Shoes, with their white plastic Bibles, and the ever-present TRUCAD. Fu Manchu, another “religioeconomic” heretic, makes an appearance. The achieving of the second book of *Criste Lite* shows the author’s love for the story of Blake pointing to children and saying “That is Heaven” and also involves Fifi’s winding a golden string into a ball. (The parable about becoming a child appears again in Fifi’s memory of Sweeley’s reaction at finding her, age three, “with crayons aforethought,” coloring in first-state woodcuts of “the Adoration of the Magi and the Whore of Babylon” by Dürer: he “encouraged me to color a few more of the spidery, wild little pictures, but I soon wandered away into the tall iris to trade jokes with a mushroom-sheltered friend or foe.”) On the way we pass through a house with framed Blake mottos; hear Uncle Will chanting audibly in Fifi’s ear; encounter statements urged “on authority from none other than Uncle Will himself”; see someone reading “not the King James Bible—it was a Nonesuch William Blake”; and ponder how to get back “to the place where the golden string will at last be wrapped into a glittering ball. To the goal—that gate carved in Jerusalem’s wall.” There is also one minor difference raised, as Fifi thinks, “Uncle Will Blake says it is wrong for us to love our enemies, that only betrays our friends. I don’t know about that. I do know it’s better than pitying our enemies—because that gets us into bed with them” Little wonder in this fantastic effort for astonishment and against death that the recurring refrain is “*Try to believe—only try*, as Uncle Will Blake has our dear Lord bid us.”

Ancient Lights takes several clear positions. It is pro-individual—“the lonely, Criste-crazed individual”—and anti-institutional: “when Truth is Organized, it becomes a Lie. There is no bigger Lie than organized Truth. There is no greater Hate than Organized Love The only place where Truth can survive is in the spirit of the In-

dividual.” It is pro-dope—low-grade marijuana has been legalized, and everyone tokes either that or contraband—and it is very, so to speak, pro-sex: “Because the Sexual—the freely given, unbought, unsold, unforced Sexual—is, if you must be told . . . the essence of what someone somewhere has called the *Criste Lite*” (St. Paul appears as a giant turtle, his shell inscribed with intimate details of copulations, to offer his recantation). Few, I suppose, will find much to object to in such positions, yet, confronted with “La ultimate world economic order,” one may find oneself trying, trying, trying, and not quite believing that agreeable opinions can substitute for analysis. “The perception of power is power,” reads one chapter’s epigraph, but it is precisely here that one feels most unsure. What about those workers in Weirton who need \$250 million to build Jerusalem in their Dark Satanic Mill?

Ancient Lights lives in its luxuriant images (“the soft, wet braille of scalloped labia”), its at times excessive similes (“Police sirens were yodeling like castrated Dobermans”), and its outright puns (“poets, a batch of pale, lifehating godhating naysaying bookclub avatars, scuttling and hopping back and forth in the liberal, cautious, cynical safety of their rabbit-pen warrens”). Some of these live on in the reader’s imagination: “The black Ohio River shone and shimmered and wound like a dark, sullen torrent of Coca-Cola sewerage into the rotting teeth of little children.” And some glimmer with something like the true light of Old Uncle Will, as in this description of the colors giving meaning to the *Book of Criste Lite*:

Colors you see deep in the flames of glowing coals in a grate on a deep winter’s night. Colors you sometimes see deep inside the pagan quiet of a Christmas Tree. And something—something dangerous, too—like the tints you see flaming in sorrow within the wings of a murdered jungle butterfly imprisoned in a Lucite paperweight.

While one would probably hesitate before going out to contribute \$10.95 to La Machine for the *paperback* version of the novel, many readers of *Blake* will surely want to look into *Ancient Lights* as time goes by.