

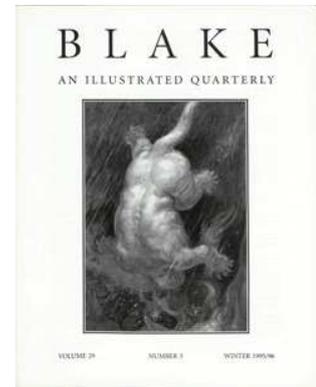
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R E V I E W

George Anthony Rosso, Jr., *Blake's Prophetic
Workshop: A Study of The Four Zoas*

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George Anthony Rosso, Jr., *Blake's Prophetic Workshop: A Study of The Four Zoas*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993. 208 pp., 9 pls. \$36.50.

Reviewed by ANDREW LINCOLN

This is the first extensive study of *The Four Zoas* to relate the prophetic form of the narrative methodically to developments in the mainstream of eighteenth-century British and European culture. Rosso argues that the contending strands of Blake's narrative embody the divisions of a culture and society "adrift in a world without economic or transcendental guarantees." His study identifies two areas of contemporary thought as having special relevance: the struggle between biblical and scientific models of creation in the religious poetry of the eighteenth century; and the Enlightenment critique of the Bible's prefigurative form and language. It treats these two areas separately, moving in each case from a general discussion of the historical context to a detailed reading of the narrative.

Rosso's exploration of the first area focuses on the long poem of eighteenth-century Christian apologetics, which he sees as a "neglected but seminal" field for the study of Blake's poem. In a survey which includes Thomson's *The Seasons*, Pope's *Essay on Man*, and Young's *Night Thoughts*, he considers the importance of the Newtonian cosmology in the poets' theology, and briefly identifies some of the developments that "put eighteenth-century apologetics on the road to the internalized creation of Blake and the Romantic poets" (in particular Lowth's study of the poetics of biblical prophecy, and Alexander Geddes's account of Genesis as a "composite" text). Blake, writing in the wake of these and other (less clearly identified) factors, inherited "a cosmological system in collapse." Accordingly, he adopts the biblical cosmology as his model but "problematizes his source, repeating the Creation in various frames, depicting it from multiple perspectives, to indicate its 'fallen,' i.e., time-bound status."

In examining the second area, Rosso outlines a history of "the crucial seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious debates that shape Blake's use of biblical typology." The survey considers the pressure exerted on the prefigurative language of the Bible by figures such as Bayle and the English Deists, and then touches on the responses of those who defended and modified typology, including antiquarians (such as William Stukeley and Jacob Bryant) and the German "higher critics." In Rosso's view, Blake resembles his German contemporaries (notably Herder) who "avoid reducing history to the empirical by raising the fact-claim of an event into the higher category of *understanding*." Since the

"fact-claim" is transformed rather than abandoned, an "emphasis on historical actuality remains crucial to Blake," whose narrative at times closely follows the linear development of biblical history (so that, for example, the temple building in Night II "ranges over Old Testament history from the rise of monarchy to Solomon's reign, roughly the period from 1200 to 900 B.C."). But although this linear development is discernable, the narrative is actually a "simulacrum of sequence," because "typological repetition neutralizes chronology and abandons causal links between events in favor of repeated type scenes." Such repetitions are part of "Blake's strategy for approximating simultaneity in his narrative." And so at one point Jerusalem may represent "not only the biblical Jerusalem of 1000 B.C. and, perhaps, 70 A.D., but also the contemporary eighteenth-century 'heavenly city' to be built among England's dark satanic mills." Past events are presented so as "to trigger their typical or figural meaning," activating the past "through the *kerygmatic* or transactive nature of prophetic rhetoric: readers must 'witness' the intrusion of spiritual agency within the text, within their own lives, and within history."

This view of the poem's method clearly determines Rosso's view of its conclusion: "Blake's hope is that, once his audience (re)learns to read history figuratively, the power of Rahab, or the whole system of natural religion, will self-destruct"—an event shown in the conclusion of Night VIII. In Night IX, accordingly, the representations of violence lose something of their actuality, since Blake continually emphasizes their symbolic nature, "translating the literal war of nations into a war of contending perspectives." It is an interpretation that seems to hand history over almost entirely to the process of writing and reading.

Rosso is theoretically informed, and handles complicated ideas deftly. Few who read his account of his chosen contexts will doubt their general relevance to Blake's poem. But some of the assumptions and methods involved seem questionable. The long poem that he cites as "seminal" does not assume as much importance in his detailed reading as we are led to expect, in spite of a determined attempt to establish the "generic relation" of Blake's narratives "to the graveyard tradition of Young's *Night Thoughts*." Perhaps this is not really surprising, given the manifestly encyclopedic nature of *The Four Zoas*. The discussion of biblical typology is developed with considerable subtlety—but the comparison with the higher critics seems to me pressed too hard. Against Rosso's claim that in approaching the Bible an "emphasis on historical actuality remains crucial to Blake," one might set some of Blake's own comments:

If Moses did not write the history of his acts, it takes away the authority altogether it ceases to be history & becomes a Poem of probable impossibilities fabricated for pleasure as moderns say but I say by Inspiration (E 616). I cannot conceive the Divinity of the . . . Bible to consist . . . in the historical evidence which may be all

false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another. (E 618)

The statements will no doubt bear more than one interpretation. To me they don't suggest a need to emphasize "historical actuality" in order to transform it; instead they suggest that the "fact-claim" of the Bible is an irrelevance. They seem to undermine, that is, one of the foundations on which Rosso has based his reading.

There will always be differences of opinion about such statements, and about the most rewarding way of reading Blake's narratives (let's hope so). One of the agreeable features of Rosso's book is its flexibility and tolerance of other views. The flexibility of his method appears in his adaptation of, among other things, Northrop Frye's theory of the "Orc cycle," Jackie DiSalvo's application of the social history of Old Testament culture, and David Erdman's method of relating the poem to contemporary events. Apart from this incidental introduction to the larger field of *Four Zoas* criticism, Rosso's book has other features that will make it useful to new readers. It begins with a lucid explanation of the special problems associated with the manuscript; it provides a succinct account of the critical reception of the poem; it ends with a brief commentary on the drawings. It is a study which makes Blake's narrative seem less eccentric, more clearly of its time, and in doing so it should help readers to make up their own minds about Blake's visions of creation and history.

Steven Vine, *Blake's Poetry: Spectral Visions*.
New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. xv + 194
pp., 16 pls. \$45.

Reviewed by JANET WARNER

We've had the Visionary Blake, the Dangerous Blake, and now the Ambiguous Blake. Steven Vine states at the outset that his book examines Blake as a poet of contradiction and contrariety, and focuses on the elusive spectre, its shadowy ironies, and "the divided energies of Blake's poetics." Vine criticizes the idealist approaches to Blake of Frye and Erdman, who insist on the integrity of Blake's prophetic voice. He sees instead a Blake who relentlessly confronts the failure of visionary power, whose poetics are "ever building, ever falling."

In Vine's words, "... a spectral rhythm of continual building and falling is installed at the heart of Blake's account of visionary poetry, and it is the argument of this book that the poetic dramatisation of such inquiet energies is the measure of Blake's poetic daring and his rigour." This is nicely put; however, what emerges is a book emphasizing Blake's failure and the paradoxes of his doctrine. Vine gives illuminating close readings of selected passages of Blake's major

poems, quite often for the purpose of pointing out the ambiguities and contradictions and presumable failures. Yet paradox works both ways, and often the critic is undermined by the energy and mystery of his poet.

Vine's book charts a chronological path through Blake's work, and the second chapter considers Blake's critique of Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime by exploring Blake's revolutionary poems of the 1790s. Vine argues that Blake's "aesthetic of vision" fails to escape the paradoxes that bedevil it, essentially because in spite of his criticism of Burkean obscurity, Blake's is itself the language of mystification. Most importantly, there are "spectres" in these poems who are both kingly and revolutionary, and a general mistiness prevails which clouds the imagination in spite of Blake's avowed aim to the contrary.

Vine thinks Burke is successfully criticized in certain designs in *Job*, particularly the design "Behemoth and Leviathan" (1805-06; the design appears in plate XV of Blake's engraved collection). Because Burke used Eliphaz's vision as an example of sublime obscurity, Vine contends that the clarity of Blake's line renders these beasts less terrible than laughable and that Burke's vision of the sublime is being overturned by mockery. He then asks the key questions which the rest of the book examines: "... if these designs expose the collapse of a certain kind of sublimity, what of Blake's sublime of 'vision?' Is the Blakean sublime free of the blindness which darkens the visions of Burke, Eliphaz, and the God of Job?" Ambivalence is the answer here, as it is for Vine's reading of the Lambeth Prophecies, with their conjunction of the sublime and satiric modes.

When Vine carries his study of ambiguity into a consideration of the idea of form in *The Four Zoas* he becomes really interesting, though I think it is here that he goes astray, for he suggests that the veil of Enion ("Hide me some shadowy semblance" [FZ 1, 4: 24]) becomes in Beulah a "metaphor of redemptive form." This idea can only be valid if one rather willfully misreads the veils of Beulah as positive. By insisting upon ambiguity in Blake's idea of form, Vine misses the distinction in Blake between Eternal Form and Fallen Form. (Critical discussions of veils and form are not mentioned in Vine's references.)

Of course, Vine's point of view would not allow an idealist concept like Eternal Form, so I was interested to see what he would do to the idea of the Spectre in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Somehow the approach that seemed confusing in *The Four Zoas* works brilliantly in Vine's concise discussions of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. There is creative ambiguity in these poems and Vine's close readings of key sections are illuminating. His chapter on *Jerusalem* focuses on language, and also takes up the theme of the garment to argue that the ambiguous nature of apocalyptic language dissolves into a kind of chaos. As he writes at one point, "The language here makes and unmakes its revelations..." Although the Spectre is annihilated, he is still in the play, so to speak. The energy of *Jerusalem* belongs to the Spectre, and Blake is of the Spectre's party without knowing it.