

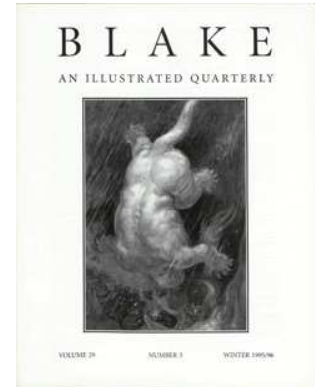
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R E V I E W

Steven Vine, *Blake's Poetry: Spectral Visions*

Janet Warner

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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

W e'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.