
Reviewed by J. B. Mertz

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1 Karl Kroeber (1926–2009) was a scholar of British romanticism, romantic visual art, and Native American literature, and his numerous writings include criticism on William Blake1 as well as occasional reviews for this journal. His death from cancer interrupted the completion of what would have been a much longer book, and the present work merely comprises what Kroeber "originally intended as introductory to a study of William Blake's longest and most complex poems" (xxi) (that is, *Vala or The Four Zoas, Milton a Poem, and Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion*). As an "interrupted" work, *Blake in a Post-Secular Era* calls to mind Peter Fisher's unfinished book, *The Valley of Vision*, which had the benefit of being edited for publication by no less a scholar than Northrop Frye after Fisher's accidental death. In the case of *Blake in a Post-Secular Era*, not only has another eminent scholar stepped forward to edit an unfinished study of Blake, but the deceased author and his posthumous editor also worked together: Joseph Viscomi attended Kroeber's "life-changing" seminar on Blake at Columbia University in 1975 (xiii), and Kroeber personally encouraged Viscomi to undertake his dissertation on Blake.2

2 Anyone who has enjoyed the incisiveness of Kroeber's finished works will be continually reminded that *Blake in a Post-Secular Era*, though developed in certain respects, is far from complete and does not reflect fully his scholarly capability. In large part, this may be a consequence of the speed at which he worked (the text was apparently written between March and the end of August 2009, as described in Viscomi's foreword). Kroeber begins by stating that we are entering a post-secular era in which "it will be valuable for academic humanists to recognize" Blake's extensive influence on "American writers, painters, musicians, performing artists, and film and TV makers over the past half-century" (xxi). It seems to me that few people could plausibly argue that Blake is not among the most influential


call print culture” (9); “contemporary life is what he was solely concerned with” (27); and “Blake differs from every major modern philosopher, social and economic thinker, psychologist, political scientist, or politician” (62; my emphasis). I also find several passages where Kroeber is plainly paraphrasing Blake and wonder why he did not quote Blake to substantiate his argument: “‘innocence’ is the condition of a well-organized person of any age, ‘experience’ is the condition of individuals who have become disorganized” (21); “what we call crimes or acts of evil are not in fact actions but their hindering” (53); and “this fiction [of good and evil] encourages us passively to accept regulation of thought and behavior by others” (55). Finally, we might ask why America and Europe, both of which are explicitly identified as prophecies, do not have their own chapter or chapters in a book on Blake’s early prophecies. Of course, I hasten to emphasize my belief that many of these concerns would certainly have been addressed had Kroeber lived to realize fully his intention in writing this study.

Since the book is in an incomplete state, we might reasonably wonder whether there can be an audience for it other than, perhaps, Kroeber’s own students. Viscomi writes elsewhere of the importance of Kroeber’s interaction with his students for the generation of his publications, and it is easy to see in Blake in a Post-Secular Era the vigorous debates and “collaborative criticism” (xv) he considered indispensable to teaching and learning (and that obviously contributed to this book’s making). Notwithstanding any reservations we might have about the publication of an unfinished work, Blake in a Post-Secular Era stands as a fine memorial of Kroeber’s enthusiasm as an educator. It conveys some sense of the energy with which he approached his final seminar at Columbia and, indeed, his fifty-seven years as a teacher (xviii–xix). Even though this book appears to be a mere artefact for what Kroeber might have ultimately accomplished, his instincts had him heading in the right direction, especially with respect to what he describes as Blake’s “ubiquity in contemporary popular culture” (3). For confirmation, we need look no further than recent collections of essays such as Blake 2.0 and Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture (2007), or Alan Moore’s From Hell (1999) and the writings of Robert Duncan.7

6. See Viscomi, “Remembrance”: “He wrote with the mind of a teacher and taught with the depth and curiosity of a scholar, always developing new courses and seminars that yielded wonderful books in a few short years … He loved the Blake seminar he taught spring of 09, loved the students; it was the catalyst he hoped it would be …”

7. See Linda Freedman, “Blake, Duncan, and the Politics of Writing from Myth,” Blake 47.2 (fall 2013): n1.