

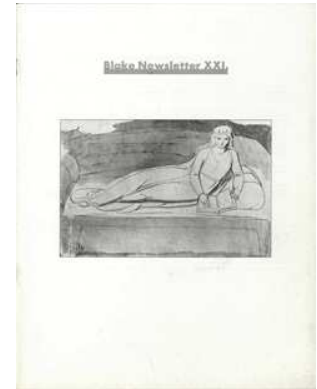
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R E V I E W

Thomas A. Vogler, *Preludes to Vision*

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In addition to providing a succinct introduction, Sir Geoffrey Keynes has written a commentary, some thirty pages in length, which is at the same time inobtrusive and rich with insight. When viewed as a whole, the designs have one aspect which bulks surprisingly large: their social satire. One expects to find this element in illustrations for "The Bard" and the "Elegy," but it is interesting to find it, for example, in "A Long Story." The pictures that accompany this frothy poem end, as Sir Geoffrey points out, "with a satirical picture of how polite society receives the serious artist" (p. 51); and the designs for "The Progress of Poesy" undermine Gray's celebration of the flight of the Muse to Albion's shore in order, as Keynes says, "to express Blake's view of the effect of political tyranny on the state of poetry in England" (p. 55). This dimension of social commentary may also be seen in Blake's renditions of the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" and the "Ode for Music." In some of these pictures Blake, who believed that education, at least in its institutional sense, was "the great wrong," seems to suggest that all is not well at Eton and Cambridge. The public school boys engage in picayune activities that do everything but prepare them for the rigors of Experience; even the poet-figure of "Ode for Music" (design 97) is shown walking away from the Gothic spire and waning Beulah-moon of the background, to pass under the barren limbs of two desolate trees, hardly the "brown o'er-arching groves" of Gray's line.

The Keynes commentary is also valuable in making use of Gray's own published notes to the poems and in pointing out instances where Blake has changed Gray's wording, used non-consecutive lines, or even illustrated a sequence of pages different from that of Gray's text. Also, some interesting remarks are made about parallels between the figures in these designs and in some of Blake's other works, as, for example, in the commentary on design 77 (*The Serpent who girds the Earth*). This catalogue, rich in both word and image, deserves a place in the library of every student of Blake.

Thomas A. Vogler. *Preludes to Vision: The Epic Venture in Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, and Hart Crane*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. Pp. 222. \$7.50.

Reviewed by Andy P. Antippas

Mr. Vogler's study examines in detail Blake's *Four Zoas* and *Milton*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Keats' *Fall of Hyperion*, and Crane's *Bridge*. Crane is by no means a stranger to the "visionary company" (the phrase is from Crane's "The Broken Tower"); however, I would have also liked included a discussion of Tennyson or Browning or Meredith to avoid reopening the abyss now sealed over by Bloom, Langbaum, Kermode, and Miller. Vogler chooses his poems on the basis of a "set of intuitive criteria" (p. 12)--the same decision, he reminds us, Aristotle made when he selected certain dramas to define tragedy. Vogler's analogy is apt. Just as Aristotle entered his subject with certain philosophic prepossessions and set forth a poetic that satisfies one play, *Oedipus Rex*, so Vogler comes to Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats with certain critical predispositions gathered over the years from his work on Crane's *Bridge*. Whether these criteria illuminate the *Zoas* and *Milton* and contribute something new to our understanding of Blake is questionable.

The introductory section, "In Search of the Epic," presents the less-than-novel view that the epic genre died after Milton. More interestingly, Vogler observes that poets had "not given up the ['desire,' (p. 2), or the] attempt to write epic poetry" (p. 4). His comments, however, concerning the difficulty in writing an epic in the absence of a common ideology, and concerning the epic poet's obligation "to give to his race or age a completion and embodiment of the meaning of life that he finds in the accepted but not necessarily conscious metaphysic of the time" (p. 8), go back at least as far as Arnold's "Function of Criticism," A. C. Bradley's "The Long Poem in Wordsworth's Age," and echo uncomfortably Lascelles Abercrombie's classic essays on the epic: "We see him [the epic poet] accepting, and with his genius transfiguring, the general circumstances of his time; we see him symbolizing, in some appropriate form, whatever sense of the significance of life he feels acting as the accepted unconscious metaphysic of his age."<sup>1</sup>

Since Vogler has undertaken to discuss, in Wellek and Warren's terms, the "inner form" of the epic ("attitude, tone, purpose"), one might expect some difficulty in pinning down a working definition or description of the material. We must be satisfied with: a long narrative poem whose sub-

<sup>1</sup>*The Epic* (London: Martin Secker, n.d.), p. 39.

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ject is the poet's heroic exploratory attempt "to find a personal visionary perspective" (p. 14) and records "the poet in the process of ordering his experience of reality into the poetic fabric" (p. 11)--a definition, in short, roughly similar to those of Elizabeth Sewell and Karl Kroeber.<sup>2</sup> Vogler, as Abercrombie and others do, enlarges the meaning of the internal *geste* from the heuristic and potentially egoistic to the social level where-by the epic awakens "man as well as the poet" (p. 13).

Each of the poems discussed, Vogler contends, is a "prelude to vision"; it records the failed effort of the poet to achieve an ordered and adequate envisagement of the world from which still point he could have then proceeded to give fuller scope to his creativity in a long, philosophical poem in the manner outlined by Wordsworth. The critic should at least be wary of reading a body of poetry with an eye to seeing one poem as an anticipation of, or a prelude to, the poem it precedes, especially when there are problems of chronological sequence. This approach, at the outset, deprives a "prelude" poem of any aesthetic unity, since it must await fulfillment elsewhere; when this approach is carried out too literally, it becomes a taxonomical suggestion that the "prelude" poem is less significant than its successor. Further, (and this is implied by Frye's reluctance to consider one particular literary period as merely a precursor to another), this approach commits us to imposing a "false teleology on everything we study"<sup>3</sup>--in Blake's case, a "false eschatology" would be the result.

Peter F. Fisher was the first, I think, to use Blake's own term "Preludium" to explain the relationships between the *Poetical Sketches* and the *Songs*, the minor prophecies and the *Zoas*, the *Zoas* and *Milton*, and *Milton* and *Jerusalem*; he is careful to suggest, however, that a "Preludium" means "Correction, definition and presentation of subject-matter . . . the author 'finding' his theme, and at the same time, presenting it."<sup>4</sup> In other words, although one poem may well presage another, it has its own purpose and its own end. In his second chapter, "The Holy Vessel," Vogler argues that only the "elements of the change [in Los] are present . . . in a way that gives us little more than the fact stated, as if in anticipation of the central problem of *Milton*. The question we have been trying to answer unsuccessfully from Night 7a will be answered in full in [*Milton*] . . ." (p. 37). If one looks for an answer in a poem that does not pose the question, one will certainly find the poem incomplete. Vogler does further disservice to the

<sup>2</sup>Sewell, *The Orphic Voice* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 302 f.; Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: Wisconsin Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 84 f.

<sup>3</sup>"Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," in *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, 1963), p. 130.

<sup>4</sup>*Valley of Vision*, ed. N. Frye (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1963), pp. 246-47; italics added.

*Zoas* by discounting the problems raised by 7b (which Bloom calls a "rival" vision of 7a, not merely another version<sup>5</sup>), and by omitting all consideration of Nights 8 and 9. Even accepting the limitations imposed on the text, I cannot agree that 7a ends with a "shift in focus, barely discernible in the confusion . . ." (p. 32). Where formerly irresponsible chaos ruled, now Urthona's Spectre and Los are fused in artistic labor, raising the pillars and domes of Golgonooza; and when Enitharmon merges with Los, they together illuminate the heavens with "immortal lines."<sup>6</sup> Where for six unholy Nights darkness and ignorance prevailed, Los' fires now burn: "look my fires enlume a-fresh . . ." (E 356). Because art and love permeate the cosmos, even Orc and Tharmas are comforted. Most importantly, redemption is both imminent and imminent: "but look! behold! take comfort! / Turn inwardly thine Eyes & there behold the Lamb of God / Clothed in Luvahs robes of blood descending to redeem" (E 355). None of this, I submit, is either "barely discernible" or confused and should be seen as a hopeful and major turn of events--whether considered as a conclusion to the *Zoas* or as a link to Night 8, wherein these new relationships immediately stir Albion from his sleep of death.

Chapter Three, "Blake: Mental Fight," follows much too closely Bloom's "Prelude to Apocalypse: Milton."<sup>7</sup> There is nothing to comment upon in Vogler's summary of the narrative or his contention, already convincingly argued by Bloom,<sup>8</sup> that "Although the poem is in part a purification and re-creation of the poet Milton, it is more basically an expression of the self-creation of the poet, embodied in Blake . . ." (p. 39). The instructive difference between Bloom's and Vogler's treatments of the "prelude" theme in *Milton* brings us back to the difficulties discussed above in connection with the handling of the *Zoas*. Bloom concludes by celebrating the achievement in *Milton* for "the moving passion with which Blake believed in the truth of the awakened imagination. . . ."<sup>9</sup> And that, after all, is what the poem set out to do: awaken Milton-Blake's imagination with the assistance of Los and prepare the slumberous mass of Albion for Christ's entry into his bosom. Because Vogler is intent on reading *Milton* as merely a presentiment of *Jerusalem*, he can only observe that the poem ends without the "vision of the apocalypse itself"; and, he continues, since *Jerusalem*, finally, does not fulfill the apocalypse prophesied at the end of *Milton*, the latter poem is consigned to "a somewhat strange position in the canon of Blake's writing" (pp. 58-59).

<sup>5</sup>*Blake's Apocalypse* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 244.

<sup>6</sup>Erdman's edition, p. 356; hereafter E.

<sup>7</sup>*Apocalypse*, pp. 304-64.

<sup>8</sup>*Apocalypse*, p. 303.

<sup>9</sup>*Apocalypse*, p. 364.

Vogler seems to have forgotten what Bloom clearly remembers, and what Frye cites at the beginning and the end of his study<sup>10</sup>--namely, Blake's own injunction: "Every poem must necessarily be a perfect Unity. . . . when a work has unity, it is as much in a part as in the whole . . ." (E 267). The Prophetic Books certainly develop and expand into each other: Blake's comment on *Jerusalem*, that it is a "more consolidated & extended Work . . ." (E 143), could be prefixed to each of the long poems in turn. They requite and reprise each other, and together reach out toward a supreme fiction, in Erich Kahler's phrase, for that "all embracement of discontinuity"<sup>11</sup> which is the essence of the modern long poem--Aiken's *Preludes*, for example. Each of the Prophetic Books is in itself a unified, concordant gesture against Error and an epic probe into Albion's sleeping brain. That they may be said to end *in mediis rebus*, inside history and before the Fullness of Time, is not to deny them an authentic eschatology. Blake fills and ends his Prophetic Books with spiritual and mental crises because he knew Albion and his creative

reader both, striking down selfishness, ignorance, and apathy, could at any moment awaken to glory. Blake would have agreed with Bultman: "In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it."<sup>12</sup>

Because Blake would not approve the Newtonian subdivision here in isolating a few chapters for review ("Sacrifice the Parts, What becomes of the Whole" [E 639]), I will say simply that Vogler's consideration of Wordsworth, Keats, and Crane is judicious and insightful.

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<sup>10</sup>*Fearful Symmetry* (1947; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 10, 426.

<sup>11</sup>*The Tower and the Abyss* (New York: Viking, 1967), pp. 110, 132.

<sup>12</sup>*History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Univ. Press, 1957), p. 155.