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Eleanor Wilner, Gathering the Winds: Visionary Imagination and Radical Transformation of Self and Society

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Eleanor Wilner. **Gathering the Winds: Visionary Imagination and Radical Transformation of Self and Society.** Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975. 196 pp. $8.95.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Behrendt

This is an interesting and insightful book that ought to prove useful to more than the Blakeans among us. Faithful to its subtitle, the book offers a view of visionary imagination as a potentially curative or redemptive response to the crisis of self in society. The study is, as Ms. Wilner notes in her introduction, "the preliminary examination of a vast and inexhaustible subject" (p. 3). Drawing primarily upon anthropology, psychology, and literary criticism, the author presents us with a study of creative response to crisis as it emerges in the works of four principal figures: Blake, Beddoes, Yeats, and Marx.

Ms. Wilner defines her terms in the first chapter, demonstrating the common existence among diverse preliterate societies of the shaman figure, the strongly imaginative healer and diviner whose powers enable him to divine and act out the unconscious conflicts of the afflicted and to act as the intermediary in returning them to health. When the hidden conflicts with which he deals are not those only of isolated individuals but are common to his entire society, his role expands to that of prophet. In either case, his function customarily involves the creation of an apocalyptic-millenial vision which is the response to the crisis situation, a vision that reveals and then resolves seemingly irreconcilable conflicts in a new and integrated view of man and society. That this sort of visionary activity occurs not only in highly sophisticated societies but also in primitive, preliterate cultures suggests to the author that man possesses an innate integrative function which is cultivated by the shaman-prophet and which is potentially curative of deep crises of order: the apocalyptic or prophetic imagination. In a basically harmonious society the vision is generally conservative, while in a society antagonistic to harmony and personal integrity the vision is characteristically radical and subversive. If the vision articulated by the shaman is unique to himself, his actions and responses are often judged deviant or insane. But if that vision somehow verbalizes the disorientation and oppression of his society, then his responses are judged prophetic by the assenting and empathetic collective society. Ms. Wilner's observations on this point carry us, of course, toward a fuller understanding of the nature of Blake's "madness" as perceived by his nineteenth-century critics.

Importantly, though, the author notes that the prophetic or curative vision is not created *ex nihilo*, but is a new manifestation of process within tradition. The vision reintegrates traditional symbols and values in a new manner, suggesting a different set of priorities, values, and social obligations. We are already familiar with this process in Blake; it is the revolutionary process by which the artist appropriates from tradition whatever is useful to his purposes, reordering and reanimating it, and discards the rest. Hence, as Blake demonstrates, the "new" order is actually implicit in the "old," which is but a perversion of the original harmonious condition. The visionary process, which, according to Ms. Wilner, often occurs in a "wilderness" representing the estrangement and disorientation of society's members, generates several results: (1) it expresses the psychic upheaval of the visionary, representing the breakup of the old self and the annihilation of the tyrannical old order, (2) it offers a symbolic means of revenge on the oppressors, (3) it arms the visionary with a weapon of fear to use against his enemies, (4) it satisfies the desire for purification, and (5) it serves as a substitute for--or as a motive and paradigm for--active revolt in the real world. Also, if the vision is millenial, it presents an expectation of a new world which is an inversion of the old. The author contends that the constant in all cases of radical mental realignment is "the return to origins, the awakening of primal and powerful emotions freed of the inhibitors of past social prohibition, and the resultant reempowering of a renewed self" (p. 41).

The second chapter (of three) applies the preliminary observations to the specific cases of Blake, Beddoes, and Yeats, and, in delineating the nature of each poet's vision, sets the stage for the introduction of the Marxian vision, which is the visionary resolution championed here as the most practical--the most effective "curative" --response to social crisis and which provides the matter for the third chapter. Of the first three visions, Blake's is clearly the author's favorite; in fact, Blake is nearly as visible in the book as Marx. It is not just the dynamic and apocalyptic nature of Blake's vision, we learn, that makes it so attractive, but also its fundamental correctness. We are told that Blake's art (i.e., his *verbal* art; his visual art is essentially ignored) constitutes perhaps the fullest statement in the modern Western world of "the drama of apocalyptic or visionary imagination." Blake understood both his psychic crisis and his imaginative capabilities so well that he was able accurately to interpret the social and psychological ills of the society that surrounded him. The vision that resulted is, of course, grounded in the familiar doctrine of contraries, contraries which are "married" through the process of intellectual warfare that ideally reconciles all human activity in an informed and visionary human culture. If we tend occasionally to take Blake's idea of the marriage of contraries for granted, then it is instructive for us to be reminded just how appropriate the metaphor is in defining man's experience, and how the concept Blake articulates helps to shed light on the propositions of so seemingly different a figure as Marx.

Ms. Wilner identifies as the most revolutionary aspect of Blake's system the explicit identification of God with the human imagination, noting that Blake's Jesus is "energized order in human

form" (p. 51). There is a certain oversimplification involved here, as is perhaps unavoidable in a study of this scope. On this particular point, the author seems to overlook the ambiguous nature of her term "God," failing properly to distinguish between Father and Son, a distinction Blake so obviously draws. A related sort of oversimplification also crops up early in the discussion of Blake when the author itemizes social, psychological, and artistic trends and ideas which Blake "anticipated": from Freud and Jung to existentialists and feminists. Even the works of Hieronymus Bosch and M. C. Escher are called up as *visual* counterparts to Blake's *verbal* art, while *Blake's* visual art is left unexplored. Even though these various systems and ideologies are imposed externally upon Blake's only in passing, by way of demonstrating Blake's continuing relevance, to engage in this sort of operation is to risk finding what is absent and missing what is present.

Still, what Ms. Wilner has to say regarding Blake's vision is essentially right. The real heart of the matter is her definition of the Blakean apocalypse: "the breaking through of the powers of imagination, and the heightening of the forces of error until their negative nature is fully revealed" (p. 52). In this sense, we are told, man may make or unmake his world by destroying what is "oppressive" and creating a new entity in conformity with the dictates of human need. Thus the apocalypse proceeds by "the upsurge of the destructive and formative energies of the imagination," clarifying the outlines of humanity's enemies so that they may be destroyed and man may live in consonance with his imagination, "his full sight restored" (p. 53). The author seems to move toward the idea of the destruction of the Selfhood as described, for instance, in *Milton*, as the ultimate goal of the Blakean apocalypse. Perhaps it is the concept of the apocalypse's basis in human need that leads Ms. Wilner to identify Tharmas, whom we customarily associate with the senses and the physical body, as the unifying urge in man which, when frustrated, produces despair and then reawakens out of it. Tharmas is identified for us here, then, as "instinctual energy that has as its drive both personal integrity and social integration, which empowers both sexual (Luvah) and intellectual (Urizen) powers toward the joining" in a unified being (p. 55). Tharmas, then, through his agent and son Los, is regarded as the reigning power behind apocalypse, the possessor of a "radical innocence."

The figure of Tharmas, though, is eclipsed in the discussion by that of Los. Ms. Wilner judges *The Book of Los* a central document in the development of Blake's visionary imagination, the record of the poet's discovery that he had mistakenly championed a revolution of society which had frozen into a new tyranny, and his consequent turn to a "rebirth" of imagination. While *Los* is not the most satisfactory poem upon which to base a definition of Blake's vision, it does present both the paradigm of the binding of Urizen and a good indication of the imaginative process involved in reaction to crisis. Thus, while the example is perhaps unsatisfactory in terms of the entirety of Blake's vision, it is, in the long run, appropriate in terms of the author's discussion. *The Book of Los* mythologizes the process by which the imagination generates life out of its own higher consciousness, falls into the vegetative world of error and Experience, and moves through and beyond that state to a resurrection of its dismembered parts in the primal unity of its original state. But for some reason Ms. Wilner minimizes the creation of Adam with which Blake's poem concludes. Yet that creation is implicit in the pattern of Genesis 1 upon which Blake bases the poem. In stopping short of treating the "Human Illusion" (*BL* 5.56) as archetypal man or Adam, the author misses the opportunity to apply Los's struggle to the mind of man and identifies the form simply as the abortion in Europe of Blake's optimistic view of the revolutionary process. Thus we are left short of a full understanding of the manner in which man internalizes the Orc-Urizen struggle with which Los has grappled.

Ms. Wilner's final point, and perhaps the most important, involves Blake's vision as a response to the developing social crisis of his times. She points out forcefully the degree to which Blake's vision is a strenuous defense of the *inner* life, of imagination, of a restorative and transformational vision that unites the poetic and the prophetic, offering a vision of healthy exuberance attainable by all imaginative men. For the internal world is man's true home, and in coming to terms with that world--in opening his eyes inward--man can transform the antagonistic external world into a harmonious structure that springs from within the individual. This is, of course, the proper conclusion, and identifies the appropriate resolution of the internal conflict of which the external disorder is merely a manifestation.

The author views Beddoes and Yeats as visionaries as well, but visionaries of a much less satisfactory nature than Blake. Beddoes is likened to the malign sorcerer, the shaman "cousin" who kills where he cannot cure. Beddoes' nihilistic attitude results, we are told, from his conviction that the forces of creation have been perverted and replaced by those of destruction. Hence the central aspect of his vision is the conviction that "human shape" has been lost, that the "natural" has been sacrificed to the "rational" which is itself irrational and monstrous. Blake, we assume, would see this oppression as reversible by an act of the imagination--a "Last Judgment" consisting of the repudiation of the error--while Beddoes seems to feel that the apocalyptic insight will only reassert the ultimate monstrosity. In short, Beddoes posits the death of the human spirit, in which case the dead are resurrected as *dead* men. In terms of imaginative visions of reintegration, Beddoes may be considered a poet who sets out consciously to destroy the idealism (the mistaken dream that integration is possible) which he feels cannot be revivified. Yeats, on the other hand, does attempt to reanimate the old order, we are told. His poetic vision involves an apocalypse which does not *culminate* history but *repeats* it. Through his cyclic system, Yeats posits the return of a past aristocratic order which will combat the natural tendency

toward disintegration. Yeats's entire system reflects his continual conscious attempt to rebuild and reintegrate an order which is continually crumbling. Hence Yeats's vision is itself ironic it involves not the release of energies to forge a new system but the retreat into an older order. It is a search for a "promised land," "a flight into the imagined past posing as a prophecy of an assured future" (p. 119).

The author's conclusions regarding the nature of these three visions leads directly to the Marxian perspective. Blake's vision of a totally new social order (a curative vision which is apocalyptic-millenial, based upon a humanistic faith) is superior to Yeats's vision of the reconstructed old, idealistic but essentially aristocratic order (a defensive vision which is ironic-tragic, based upon a heroic fatalism and skepticism), and is clearly preferable to Beddoes' vision of total destruction of all order (a suicidal vision which is grotesque, based upon nihilism). Since in their own times these visionary responses to crisis were regarded as irrelevant, unrealistic, and demented, respectively, they were ineffectual in healing the growing sense of societal disintegration. This being the case, the author tells us, we can see how Marx's vision provides the practical and redemptive prophecy, articulating as it does the discontent of an age and empowering a new vision of man and society. Ms. Wilner takes great care in detailing the manner in which Marx's vision may be regarded as a reworking of the concept of contraries in terms of actual material reality, a vision that verbalizes the physical needs of his time while promising the present oppressive situation must *necessarily* be overcome and the desired ends produced. Capitalism represents a dehumanizing and elitist form of estrangement which pits man against man and imposes upon most of society a natural and moral inferiority complex. Where the Marxian theory comes nearest the Blakean is in its conviction that the transformation of the inner man *precedes* that of the total society, arising from within man as he begins correctly to perceive his real situation. Hence the transformation foreseen in the Marxist's apocalypse is not escapist; rather, it reveals an awareness of the contradictions of life experience and constitutes an attempt to work out the contradictions in the physical, material world.

Perhaps the most significant point made in *Gathering the Winds* involves the author's assertion that "crisis imagination" customarily identifies the ills of the visionary's social order and seeks to work its cure by creating new images of fertility, beauty, and health "on the far side of a necessary destruction" (p. 181). To see this tendency, so visible in Blake's work, as part of an archetypal pattern of visionary experience is better to define the nature of that particular variety of experience. For, as the author reminds us, the recurrence of such apocalyptic visions reasserts continually the validity of such visions, underscoring their power to inspire confidence, renew dignity, and reorder reality. When Ms. Wilner tells us that the study of apocalyptic vision also "asserts the possibility of the recurrence of this kind of revelation, or transformation, in souls and societies whose need produces them" (p. 181), we can only be the more reminded of Blake's quotation of Moses in the preface to *Milton*: "Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets." In spite of its occasional shortcomings, then, not the least of which is the tendency to employ a complex prose style that sometimes obscures what it would illuminate, this is a provocative book, one that provides some valuable insights not just on its four principal figures, but also on the imaginative process itself.

Thomas Weiskel. **The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence.** Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. xi + 220 pp. $12.00.

Reviewed by Michael Fischer

According to Thomas Weiskel, the sublime describes an experience in which man claims to "transcend the human." Whether man encounters the sublime in a literary work or in a natural scene, the distinguishing feature of sublimity is its capacity to transport man beyond the limits of his humanity and the empirical world in which he lives. Such an experience, Weiskel notes, was peculiarly important to the Romantic writers, who sought to preserve the intellectual validity and moral value of sublimity in an age which increasingly confined man to spiritless notions of reality. In *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* Weiskel studies the sublime as it appears in the poetry of the major English Romantic writers and in the theoretical accounts of Longinus, Burke, and Kant. The result is a deeply intelligent, yet sharply limited, analysis.

As indicated by the subtitle of his book, Weiskel's method of analysis borrows extensively, but not uncritically, from the vocabulary and presuppositions of both structuralist and psychological thought. The structuralist orientation of his analysis appears in his initial attempt to describe the sublime and to differentiate what he terms its two major forms, the negative or metaphorical sublime and the positive or metonymical sublime. In Weiskel's view any sublime experience breaks down into three phases. In the first phase, the mind's relation to its object, be it a text or a natural scene, is determinate and familiar: the object (or signifier) offers no unusual obstacles to our comprehension of what it signifies. In the second phase, however, this determinate relation between signifier and signified collapses and the mind faces a radical disconnection between the object and its possible meanings. This second moment in the experience of the sublime is thus one of negation, absence, and alienation, and its emotional accompaniment is astonishment, surprise, and even terror. The painful confrontation with the absence or negation of meaning was, of course, central to the experience of the Romantic writers, and it is the predication of the sublime on the loss of meaning which makes it so important to our understanding of Romantic thought.