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R E V I E W

Susan Fox, Poetic Form in Blake's Milton

Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr.

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The exhibition catalogue is available from the Fine Arts Library, Adelphi University, Garden City, NY 11530, for \$1 + .50 shipping.

¹ This color was used for the catalogue cover-stock, text, and illustrations as well as for printed material related to the other Blake Festival events--clearly an effort to visually emphasize for the public the relationship among the several activities. For the catalogue illustrations, the color is sympathetic to reproduction of Blake's relief printed works, but the engravings and the drawing do suffer.

² Northrop Frye, ed., *Selected Poetry and Prose of [William] Blake* (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. xxv-xxvii.

³ Summaries and explanatory material were inconsistent in quantity and quality. For example, no overall picture was presented for *The Book of Thel*, or *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, while for *The Song of Los*, one was. In this regard, it is difficult to accept as explanation that "Visions is a feminist tragedy and something of a puzzle" (cat. 20). Interpretive entries at times lacked clarity. In some instances this results from the fragmentary presentation. For example, cat. 25 by implication refers back to cat. 24 in contrasting two "perspective(s)" on Urizen. Some entries are internally confusing, as in cat. 30, where in a description of plate 2 from *Jerusalem, Milton* is quoted without indicating the source. The entry is further unclear as to what a "labor hymn" is and whether the phrase refers to *Jerusalem*, the work being described, or *Milton*, the work being quoted. Facts, too, sometimes require clarification. In cat. 38, while the inscription on plate 1 of *Illustrations of the Book of Job* may indeed be read as "1828," one presumes this is an error for 1825.

⁴ Editorial inconsistencies which affect the quality of the information occur throughout the catalogue. To cite one example, the Rosenbach *America* frontispiece (cat. 17) is described as "Relief etching printed in blue painted with tan and blue watercolors" while the Rosenbach *Visions* title page and frontispiece (cat. 20 and 22) are described as "Relief etching painted with watercolors." One might also note such editorial problems as the fact that both of Northrop Frye's names are misspelled in the footnote to the Introduction.

⁵ "printed & sold by the Widow Spicer of Folkstone for the benefit of her orphans." should read "Printed for & Sold by the Widow Spicer of Folkstone / for the Benefit of her Orphans / October 5, 1800" and "W Blake inv & sc: A AE 1827." should read "W Blake inv & sc: / A AE 70 1827."

⁶ As a recent and convincing denial of this premise, one might note Corlette Rossiter Walker's *William Blake in the Art of His Time*, the catalogue for an exhibition held at the University Art Galleries, University of California at Santa Barbara, 24 February to 28 March 1976.

⁷ See Robert N. Essick, ed., *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Inalls, 1973). Part I: "Blake's Techniques of Relief Etching: Sources and Experiments," pp. 7-44 (includes Ruthven Todd's essay "The Techniques of William Blake's Illuminated Printing" originally published in *The Print Collector's Quarterly*, 29 (Nov. 1948), here published with Todd's revisions of the notes and new illustrations and (p. 44) the editor's list of sources for other brief descriptions of the relief etching process); John W. Wright, "Blake's Relief-Etching Method," *Blake Newsletter* 36(Spring 1976), pp. 94-114; Robert N. Essick, "William Blake as an Engraver and Etcher," pp. 16-17 in Walker, *William Blake in the Art of His Time*, op. cit.

⁸ A less negative possibility is presented by Suzanne R. Hoover in her essay "William Blake in the Wilderness: A Closer Look at his Reputation, 1827-1863," published in Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips, eds., *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 310-48. While the essay attends to the period after Blake's death, on p. 312 Hoover notes that "Of the seven obituaries that are known, one is derisive, but the others are appreciative."

⁹ This exhibition, also held at a small, not centrally located educational institution, included several very important Blake watercolors and drawings as well as superb plates from the illuminated books. It was accompanied by an illustrated catalogue.

¹⁰ Garden City, N.Y., *Newsday*, 13 May 1977, p. 11a, and *The New York Times*, Long Island Supplement, 15 May 1977, p. 24.

Poetic Form in Blake's Milton.
Susan Fox. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.
242 pp. \$13.50.

Reviewed by
Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr.

Not so long ago, F. R. Leavis spurned Blake's late prophecies as not worth reading and, because laden with obscurities, as neither intelligible nor interpretable. Subsequently, the *Times Literary Supplement* celebrated Leavis for setting forth an essential truth from which Blake studies might now proceed. Never before the subject of a book, Blake's *Milton*, it seemed, might not now elicit a book--at least not until there had been a major reversal in critical thinking. That reversal, however, was already underway, with the epoch-making studies of Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom prompting David Erdman's annotations for the *Milton* designs, together with the wonderfully incisive essays by E. J. Rose, W. J. T. Mitchell, and Florence Sandler. *Milton*, despite Leavis, was drawing forth an important body of commentary that shortly would culminate in the publication of two books, within months of one another: one of them is by John Howard, and the other (here under review) by Susan Fox. Fox's *Poetic Form in Blake's Milton*, even if narrowly conceived, is an important addition to Blake studies: this is a splendidly perceptive book, which, nevertheless, is somewhat long on the minutiae of Blake's poem and correspondingly short on a historical sense that might explain them; still, the book is prodigiously argued, keenly sensitive to Blake's text, deft in dealing with its complexities, and (what today is rare) both lucidly and elegantly written. Whatever its defects, *Poetic Form in Blake's Milton* has the virtue of illuminating the structure of one poem and, through that analysis, of shedding light on those formal features that come increasingly to govern Blake's art.

Fox's commentary terminates in a question: "Why should Blake deliberately call two books twelve?" Then comes a declaration, "Whether that means he was . . . thinking about the structure of his poem, . . . or . . . not thinking about it all, seems to me moot." Declaration, in turn, yields to conjecture--"Perhaps Blake was merely enjoying some prophetic private joke"--followed by yet another question: "Do those ten unwritten books represent Blake's ten lost tribes?" (p. 238). In this coda, we see at once the strengths and deficiencies of Fox's study: it is everywhere imaginatively responsive to Blake's art, always provocative--a question-asking, consciousness-raising book; yet the boundaries of its consciousness are set by Blake's canon and so never extend outward



Poetic Form in Blake's *Milton*

by Susan Fox

to embrace those traditions that might help explain the puzzles created by a poem like *Milton*. This study gives little attention to literary analogues, and none to literary models, except for John's Book of Revelation, which it never really admits to be a model.

Whether *Milton* should be called an epic is disputable; however, indisputably, the poem is lodged in the epic tradition, and that tradition historically has focused on the question of a book's integrity. Homer did not, of course, divide his epics into books--the book divisions are instead the invention of his editors. And as Blake must have known, the problem of the "book" was very much on the mind of Spenser, Milton, and the critics of both poets. In his letter to Raleigh, Spenser promises an epic in twelve books but then delivers only six. Milton published *Paradise Lost* first in ten books but later revised the poem into a twelve-book structure. What to say of Blake's proclaiming *Milton* to be a poem in twelve books is problematical in the extreme; but whatever is said, I suspect, must allow the convention of broken expectations and explore Blake's strategy in terms of it, taking some hints from the tradition itself. *The Faerie Queene*, for example, may not issue forth in twelve books, but each book is composed of twelve cantos. By implication, we are thus dealing with six epic patterns, epic within

epic, patterns that the poem's outer structure conceals. By way of explaining Milton's decision to change from a ten- to a twelve-book structure when *Paradise Lost* went into a second edition, it has been suggested that Milton was motivated by a fear that, unless presented in twelve books, *Paradise Lost* would never be recognized for what it is. But such an explanation misses the central point: there are two traditions of epic, the one classical and the other Christian; and both these traditions progress by systematically reducing the number of books that constitute an epic. Thus we move, in one tradition, from Homer (24), to Virgil (12), to Spenser (6)--and in the other tradition from Dante (100), to Tasso (20), to Milton (10). What is curious about Milton's modification of *Paradise Lost*'s book-structure is that he dislodges his poem from the very tradition to which it belongs, lodging it instead in the tradition that *Paradise Lost* would subvert. There is special propriety in Milton's strategy here, for in a poem that pits epic against prophecy, treating them as countergenres, it is appropriate for outer structure (mechanical form) to contend with inner form (the sevenfold pattern of prophecy).

What are we to infer from all this: that calculated confusion over the number of books is a device for indicating the essential incompleteness of *all* epic poems? that playing with numbers evinces not only a profound consciousness of structure but a desire through numbers to discriminate outer structure from inner form? that numbers themselves symbolize other poems which the new poet would displace (Milton, the *Aeneid*; Blake, *Paradise Lost*)? Are we to remember the principle of progression by systematic reduction, and thus the fact that the epic line moves from *Paradise Regained* (a poem in four books) to *Milton* (a poem in two)? Is it important that the outer structure of these two poems conceals, in each instance, a tripartite design? These are the kinds of questions that Fox's book might have raised--but doesn't. On the other hand, there are many questions that her book does raise and, what is more, pursues to intelligent resolution.

Two lengthy, substantial chapters (ii and iii) elaborate the structural principles operative in *Milton*, elucidating the complex patterns those principles generate. Symmetry, elaborate parallelism, interruptions and revisions, manifold repetitions and layered organization, alternating perspectives, disrupted time-sequences--these are the devices, *all of them* hallmarks of prophetic literature it should have been noted, which are called upon to explain the peculiar features of Blake's poetry, especially *Milton*, a poem that is both "intricately and suggestively formed" (p. xiii). This poem's structure, according to Fox, finds its prototype in *Europe, a Prophecy* (another poem marked by the principles of simultaneity and perspectivism) and its contrasting type in *Jerusalem*, a poem, as Fox would have it, that, linear in design, is "plotted progressively" (p. 14). (On prototypical structures in Blake's early poetry, William Halloran's "Revelation's 'New' Form" should have been mentioned; and on the structure of *Jerusalem*, Stuart Curran's "The Structures of *Jerusalem*" might have been cited.) Perspectivism and simultaneity, however, are not represented as the ultimate controls of *Milton*'s structure. Rather, the principle that organizes that poem

is said to be parallelism: "Accruing definitions, simultaneity, multiple perspectives all are organized in *Milton* by the elaborate system of parallels that is the poem's basic framework" (p. 24). In these terms, Books I and II are shown to be correspondent and their various parts (each book is shown to be threefold in design) to be correspondent. Book I expounds the myth of which Book II is a personal realization; the poem begins by prophesying, through the voice of the Bard, the action that climaxes Book II. The structure of this second book, Fox argues, exactly parallels that of Book I: "Each has three major parts, a prologue of events leading to an act of union, a refracted account of that union, and an epilogue expanding upon a vision associated with that union" (p. 128). The argument is both tidy and convincing; and it is supported by a profusion of detail--is augmented by rich, impressive interpretations.

Yet there are problems here: inconsistencies and even contradictions that go back to Fox's early declaration that "the 'epic' structure of *Milton* is largely illusory, that Blake uses it only as a superficial organizing device and so undermines it" (p. 14 n.). What, in this context, are we to make of the fact that salient symmetries and balances, persistent parallels and repetitions (what Fox calls the primary organizational principles in *Milton*) are historically the devices of the epic poet--and of the fact that the subsidiary devices of perspectivism and simultaneity are, again historically, the chief attributes of prophetic literature? By Fox's own analysis, it is mechanical structure that here subdues living form, rather than the other way around; and by her own admission, this analysis has focused attention on the "illusory," "superficial" devices of epic--not, it would appear, on the real, central strategies of prophetic structuring.

There are other problems besides, first of all with the book's critical idiom. Its tendency is to eradicate rather than observe time-honored distinctions such as between form and structure, even as it fashions distinctions (between bardic and visionary techniques [p. 191], for instance), which confuse more than they clarify. The former tendency is particularly regrettable, for the blurred distinction might have focused attention where it finally belongs--on the two contending structures in *Milton* which derive from the poem's countergenres, epic and prophecy. Correspondingly, where distinctions are drawn, as between visionary and narrative coherence (p. xi), Fox oddly reverses the meanings such terms have accrued. Thus, visionary coherence here refers to thematic structure and is to be distinguished from narrative, poetic, rhetorical structure (those terms are used interchangeably). Confusion reigns when structures are conflated and treated as if they were one. After all, Blake's is a poetry not of one but of many structures.

Most distressing, though, is the amount of waffling in this book--and waffling on crucial issues. The Preface, for example, quite rightly associates the structural devices of *Milton* "with the visionary forms of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and especially Revelation" (p. xii) and, I think mistakenly, enters a demurrer when it comes to arguing "that Blake consciously devised the structure of *Milton* according to

the principles delineated in this study" (p. xiii). But in the course of this study, *both* these suppositions are reversed as we are told: "That St. John deliberately built his vision on these complex structural principles I do not propose. That Blake did . . . I am certain" (p. 187). And: "I do not mean . . . to imply that St. John was writing a Blakean poem . . . The design of the book of Revelation arises from far different conventions and necessities from those of early nineteenth-century England" (p. 186). That proposition requires an explanation that is never forthcoming. Is it important to know that through the ages John's New Testament prophecy was always distinguished from Old Testament prophecies--on these grounds: in the Old, we are given the visions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, of Jeremiah and of Daniel; but in the New, we are given not the vision of John but the vision of Jesus Christ? Old Testament prophecy is thus the embodiment of impaired human vision, whereas the Apocalypse is an example of divine vision. Accordingly, the book of Revelation was exalted as a perfect pattern of prophecy, as *the* model for all aspiring prophets to observe. Authenticated by Christ himself, its structural conventions, its whole aesthetic, had very special authority for the Christian poet.

More than any other scriptural book, the Apocalypse was thought to embody the great code of Christian art. One commentator may be cited by way of suggesting the pertinence of this whole tradition to a structural analysis of Blake's *Milton*. Johann Bengel, in *Bengelius's Introduction to His Exposition of the Apocalypse* (1757), speaks of "the exact coherent order" of the Apocalypse, which he proceeds to describe as being "like a piece of musick" all of whose parts "are beautifully interwoven; and like the pipes and stops of an Organ, at times some of them are silent, at others again all of them sound aloud together." And, says Bengel, "this very regularly disposed system brings its key along with it," its key being its structure and its structure being marked by these features:

- (1) . . . elegant *Simultaneum* . . . by which . . . two things, that belong precisely to the same time, is often divided into two parts, and, as it were, split; and the other comes in unexpectedly between these two parts, as a parenthesis.
- (2) Wonderful, and very conspicuous in all this, is the Gradation in which the *Evil* and the *Good* always advance and increase, till they come to the utmost conflict with one another . . .

Aware that the number seven figures prominently in prophetic writing, Bengel nevertheless suggests that sevens are divided into fours and threes so that fours "are directed to the four Quarters of the world" and threes "relate in some measure to invisible things" (see pp. 65, 111-14, 115-16, 125-26). There is nothing new here--nothing that cannot be found treated more expansively in the work of David Pareus, Joseph Mede, Henry More, and Isaac Newton who together must be credited with unlocking the secrets of Revelation's structure. Bengel introduces into his commentary, though, this observation: "the Revelation . . . is

. . . so contrived that the other Prophets are not necessary for the understanding of it; but it is rather necessary for the understanding of them" (p. 65). That observation leaves us with this haunting question: if so, to what extent is a prophet like Blake dependent upon the book of Revelation; how important is an understanding of that prophecy to an understanding of his prophecies?

Fox has answered that question in one way--"not very important at all"; but I think that students of Blake will eventually answer differently: "it is very important, indeed." The context of prophetic literature, missing from Fox's book, would have saved her from exaggerated claims for Blake's uniqueness. "The structure of *Milton* is unique" (p. 3), we are told; and its "uniqueness . . . is that in its controlling as well as in its underlying structures it seeks to tell the same story 'in several ways at the same time and at several times in the same way.'" (p. 24). When we have come to know more about the tradition of Revelation commentary, we will come to realize that this is precisely the claim made for that book's uniqueness of structure, which by Mede first, then by More, and finally by Newton is discussed under the rubric of *synchronism*.

These commentators, indeed, turn one of Fox's offhand remarks into a question that future students of both Blake and romanticism will have to confront: Which supposition is nearer the truth--that biblical prophecy and romantic poetry arise from very different cultures, predilections, needs, and aspirations; or, that biblical prophecy generates the poetic on which romantic poetry is founded and represents, finally, the ur-form of all romantic literature? That question cannot be answered satisfactorily until, like the poets they are studying, students go back to the Bible, to its commentators, to the very tradition of prophecy of which Blake's *Milton* is a mighty emanation.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.
William Blake. Drawings by Clark
Stewart: Knoxville, TN: Darkpool Press,
1972. 35 pp., 13 pls. \$55. Order from
F. Clark Stewart, Art Department,
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
37916. Edition of 100 copies, numbered
and signed by the author.

Reviewed by Judith Ott

Clark Stewart's drawings for *The Marriage* will cause mixed reactions in many a Blake enthusiast. Intended as a personal response to Blake's visionary cosmology, Stewart's designs incorporate familiar Blakean motifs (mundane shell, batwinged spectre, and flocks of



sheep) with some wildly disparate ones (World War I and II planes and tanks, top hats and a jack-o-lantern). As a result, the combined images in these drawings create a simultaneous sensation of déjà vu and culture shock in the viewer. This kind of liberal play within the hallowed territory of Blake's own illustrations may well be frowned upon by the Blake purist. However, seen as an extension of--rather than an intrusion upon--Blake's designs, these drawings present a fresh interpretation of the artist-poet's well-thumbed iconographical system.

In style, Stewart's drawings are of a gorgeously detailed, linear character not unlike the graphic works of Dürer. They display the variety of texture, depth of space, crinkled drapery patterns and tightly packed compositions that characterize works of the Northern Renaissance. Although Blake often borrowed from such engravings, he inevitably simplified the figures and flattened the spatial representations in his own work. Thus, with their Northern Renaissance flavor, Stewart's illustrations resemble Blakean sources more closely than Blake designs. Both Blake and Dürer were skilled at combining many different symbolic elements into a cohesive whole. Unfortunately, Stewart's compositions lack this quality and too often appear overworked, disjointed or contrived (e.g., pls. 7, 11, 13). The unifying device of a frame is only successful in some of the designs