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Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., *Visionary Poetics:
Milton's Tradition and His Legacy*

Leonard Trawick

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REVIEWS

Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. **Visionary Poetics: Milton's Tradition and His Legacy.** San Marino: Huntington Library, 1979. \$18.50.

Reviewed by Leonard Trawick

Even though it contains only incidental references to Blake, a book about the three authors outside the Old Testament who probably influenced him most--Milton, Spenser, and St. John the Divine--is one that Blake students cannot afford to ignore, especially when it is written by a scholar like Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., who has already contributed so much to Blake studies. *Visionary Poetics* focuses on Milton's writings, *Lycidas* in particular, as central works in the prophetic tradition that looked to the Book of Revelation as a model and in turn served as models for Romantic prophecies. The first of the two chapters describes the genre which John's Apocalypse in itself constitutes--"a whole aesthetic system, together with those supports, structural and ideological, that any formally recognized genre lends to a poet" (p. 4). The second chapter--essentially an expansion of Wittreich's essay "'A Poet Amongst Poets': Milton and the Tradition of Prophecy," in *Milton and the Line of Vision*, ed. Wittreich (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1975)--points out the prophetic strain in Milton's works and especially in *Lycidas*, which, he argues, "finds its most important context in the Book of Revelation, which is both a context and the model, a generic analogue" (p. 136). Milton's poem, he says, "possesses all the earmarks of Revelation prophecy" (p. 152) and is in fact "a facsimile of the design of John's" (p. 158). Though I believe that Wittreich goes too far in regarding *Lycidas* as a prophetic poem, his argument is often illuminating and it is supported by extensive scholarship.

VISIONARY POETICS

MILTON'S TRADITION AND HIS LEGACY

By JOSEPH ANTHONY WITTREICH, JR.



The Book of Revelation is an encyclopedic work, Wittreich says, citing numerous commentators as evidence that in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries it was regarded as a "literary microcosm," an epitome of the holy scriptures, incorporating pastoral, epic, drama, lyric, epistle, tragedy, and comedy as well as prophecy. It was also regarded as a "multi-media performance," a verbal account of visions that were literally visual; hence it was an influence on literary pictorialism from Spenser to Blake.

In addition to "generic mixture," John also uses the strategies of allusiveness and obscurity. "Prophecy is a literature of contexts, depending upon the power of its allusions to return men to their source" (p. 32), and, in Isaac Newton's words, "opening scripture by scripture" (p. 33). The contexts include not only the rest of the Bible but the visions within the prophecy itself, to which the reader's eyes are progressively opened as seal after seal is broken. Along with the illumination that contexts provide, a prophecy subjects the audience to intentional difficulty, or "reader harassment" as it has been called, which screens out the unworthy but even more importantly engages the reader actively in the process of realizing the Divine Word. Blake might have named John among the ancients who he said "considerd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act" (letter to Trusler, Erdman p. 676).

The Book of Revelation has long been recognized as a politically radical document. Though prophecy and epic often overlap, Wittreich distinguishes them in this way: "Epic records, often celebrates, the history that prophecy, in the act of reviewing it, seeks to transform. . . . Epic is concerned with reformation; prophecy, with revolution" (p. 51); "Spenser," he concludes, "writes a prophetic epic and Milton authors an epic prophecy" (p. 76). (Clearly Blake leans toward the Miltonic model.) True prophecy thus shapes human affairs rather than merely predicting their course. Wittreich refers to Shelley when he observes that "prophecy may not foretell the future" (p. 51), and he might equally well have referred to Blake, who says that "a Prophet . . . utters his opinion both of private & public matters Thus If you go on So the result is So He never says such a thing Shall happen let you do what you will" (annotations to *An Apology for The Bible*, Erdman p. 607).

Having established the characteristics of prophecy, Wittreich for most of his second chapter tries to demonstrate that *Lycidas* is a prophetic poem. Like the Book of Revelation, *Lycidas* is complex, demanding, and in places obscure; it is extraordinarily allusive; it has "recapitulated the entire history of pastoral" (p. 119), yet it transcends this genre and "by assimilating more than had ever been assimilated before also aspires to more than any pastoral had achieved before. . . . Not only are all the major forms gathered together within the central form of prophecy, but the arts--poetry, painting, and song--are reunited in Milton's verbal idiom" (p. 126). *Lycidas* achieves much of its impact through the interplay of contexts, the foremost external ones being the Book of Revelation, *The Shepherdes Calender*, and the other twelve poems of *Justa Edovardo King Naufrago*. Perhaps the most valuable part of Wittreich's book is his penetrating discussion of these contexts.

Granting that *Lycidas* is complex, demanding, allusive, and encyclopedic; granting that it is saturated with the doctrines and devices of the Book of Revelation; and granting that Milton himself aspired to a "prophetic strain": none of this makes *Lycidas* primarily a visionary or prophetic poem, for the simple reason that, taken on its own terms, the poem does not prophesy. Its entire structure and strategy is that of an elegy, in which the persona comes to accept death through resources available to any Christian. The poet in *Lycidas* never claims to have received any special revelation which he is passing on through dark conceits; rather, the power of the poem arises from its dramatic representation of a sorrowing mortal's gradual progress to serenity and consolation. Although Peter's speech rises to a Jeremiad that might be called prophetic, this section is formally a digression ("Return, Alpheus, . . ." etc.) which, while it has a function in the poem's dramatic development, does not constitute its main thrust.

Certainly *Lycidas* is a wonderful poem. But, as Blake puts it, "Goodness or Badness has nothing to do with Character. an Apple tree a Pear tree a Horse a Lion, are Characters but a Good Apple tree or a Bad, is an Apple tree still" ("On Homers

Poetry," Erdman p. 267). Of course if one wants to define "prophecy" broadly enough, and say with Blake that "Every honest man is a Prophet" (Erdman pp. 606-07), then any poem that conveys an insight--in short, any good poem--can be called a prophecy; but there is no need to write a book to prove it.

One feels that occasionally Wittreich's understandable enthusiasm for *Lycidas* betrays him into unsupportable claims or overingenious analyses on its behalf. Nothing is gained, for example, by saddling this 193-line elegy with the burden of being "a prelude poem--in the Wordsworthian sense: one that records the history of a poet's mind to the point where his faculties are sufficiently matured that he may enter upon more arduous labors" (p. 184). In a twenty-page analysis of the prosody, Wittreich praises Milton's "consummate skill" and "subtle and sophisticated art" in returning, toward the end of the poem, to "old rhymes" (pp. 177-79). In lines 132-44 Milton alternates new and old rhymes, but "significantly, he breaks the pattern in the central lines of paragraph nine, thus drawing our attention to the amaranthus. . . ." (pp. 177-78). One can't help suspecting that if the pattern had failed to work out at some other point, Wittreich would have found it equally significant for some other reason. Unquestionably Milton's use of delayed or looping rhymes on the model of the canzone or madrigal is a brilliant conscious device which contributes to the poem's subtlety and linked coherence. But every poet, even Milton, is limited by the medium, in this case the available rhymes. After a hundred or so lines, rhymes will inevitably begin to repeat, though at so great a distance that the repetition has little impact. If we compare a more or less random example, Part I of Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, which contains just 200 lines, we see that all but two of the rhymes in the last eighteen lines are old ones, and the other two are also close echoes of early rhymes--a device which Wittreich praises in the concluding stanza of *Lycidas*. Wittreich admires Milton's reiteration, in the poem's final couplet, of the D rhyme from the beginning. As it happens, the final couplet of the Pope passage similarly looks back to the beginning with a reiteration of its E rhyme. When similar qualities are found in two poems that achieve different effects, it seems reasonable to ask if those qualities may not be incidental rather than essential to the effects.

As part of his analysis of the prosody, Wittreich labels each rhyme with a letter, and when he gets to the end of the alphabet he starts over with A', B', etc., and then A'', B'', etc. He discovers that "appropriately, Milton completes one alphabet just before the end of the first movement [lines 15-84] and completes the second alphabet six lines into the third movement [lines 132-85]. The rhyme scheme, then, serves as a guide to the poem's tripartite structure; but rather than marking the three main divisions precisely, it serves instead to bind them together" (pp. 176-77). This analysis seems dubious on several counts. First, the alphabetical notation is arbitrary; there is no reason that Milton or his readers should think of twenty-six rhymes as constituting any sort of unit. Second, the first alphabet ends twenty-four lines before the end of the "first movement"--hardly "just before

the end." And, finally, the analysis finds significance in the very fact that the data are non-significant. If the first movement and the second movement had each contained exactly twenty-six rhymes, it is hard to imagine that Wittreich would have chided Milton for a lack of subtlety.

It is the duty of the reviewer to bring up such

questions, but it is also the duty of the scholar to push his thesis to its limits. If *Visionary Poetics* occasionally oversteps the bounds of the convincing, in the process it also discovers a number of significant connections and cites a wealth of valuable material. Not only Milton scholars, but specialists in Blake and the Romantic period as well should find this study stimulating and rewarding.

Richard T. Godfrey. *Printmaking in Britain, A General History from Its Beginnings to the Present Day.*

Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd. New York: Dutton, 1978. 224 pp., 168 illus. \$24.50. £9.95.

Reviewed by Andrew Wilton

It is hard to believe that Richard Godfrey's book is the first to cover the subject of British printmaking as a whole from its origins in the woodcuts published by Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde to the present day. There have been numerous accounts of special aspects of the print, particular processes or periods, and catalogues of the work of individual artists; European surveys, like A. M. Hind's *History of Engraving and Etching* of 1908, have dealt very fairly with the principal masters (though even Hind limits himself to only two techniques). But never before has it been possible to read uninterrupted and undistracted the story of the print in the British Isles as a cultural achievement worthy of independent consideration.

PRINTMAKING IN BRITAIN

A GENERAL HISTORY FROM
ITS BEGINNINGS TO THE PRESENT DAY

BY

Richard T. Godfrey



It is an achievement of great interest and importance. The British school has not perhaps been in the van of European art, for the most part, but its significance for both Europe and America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century is perfectly clear, and at that time the British were, of all nations, most assiduous in disseminating their culture through the medium of the print. They developed and exploited new processes; their artists evolved distinctive relationships with engravers in response to the economic conditions created by rapid industrial and colonial expansion. The mass production and popular appeal of the print are perfect mirrors of the predominant characteristics of the new middle-class democracy, and it might fairly be said that the print is the art form which