

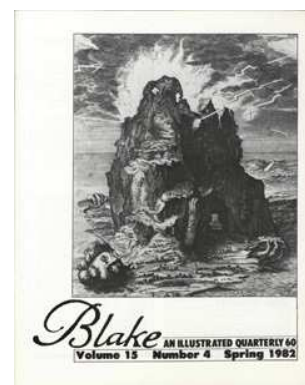
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Milton Klonsky, William Blake: The Seer and His Visions

Gerda S. Norvig

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 15, Issue 4, Spring 1982, pp. 184-187



Milton Klonsky. **William Blake: The Seer and His Visions.** New York: Harmony Books, 1977. 142 pp. \$12.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper.

Reviewed by Gerda S. Norvig



One of the striking ironies of Blake scholarship over the last ten or fifteen years is that so much of it unwittingly contradicts by the example of its own style and method just the values in Blake's vision it claims to honor and expound. Perhaps this is a paradox that cannot be solved, however, since clearly there is something in the very nature of the Blakean enterprise that stubbornly mocks all efforts to write plainly about it, something which seems equally to invite and to resist the sort of rational discourse demanded of critical commentary.

All of us have felt the dilemma. All of us have noted that the moment we try to pin down our responses to the dynamics of Blake's art, we find ourselves falling into one of the postures of limited vision the work we are looking at itself satirizes. No matter what tack we take--whether we opt for interpretation or descriptive analysis, deconstruction or literary historicism, cool objectivity or impressionistic enthusiasm--the critic in us risks becoming a parody of the flexible pilgrim-reader Blake ultimately addresses.

No doubt this is all to the good and should be considered a necessary step in the rite of reading orchestrated by Blake. For both the challenge and the impossibility of finding an unearthly, Archimedian leverage point from which to move the Blakean world is of course testimony to the remarkably vital inclusiveness of this artist's greater aesthetic.

Still, it is useful to recognize and beware the fact that like a warring Zoa, a "mistaken Demon of heaven," each of our critical approaches tends to create a fixed and one-sided universe out of the Blakean material, thereby distorting--often obliterating--the truly transformative dimensions that characterize Blake's best work.

In the text accompanying the beautiful reproductions that make up the core of *William Blake: The Seer and his Visions*, Milton Klonsky tries bravely though unsuccessfully to avoid these common pitfalls of the critical act. His strategy is to take many contradictory stances, settling for no one coherent approach as he shifts uneasily among three of the more extreme styles of Blake commentary: personal effusion, pedantic source analysis, and the mechanical cross-referencing of familiar Blakean motifs. He begins his twenty-four page introduction with a gentle poke at the insular reader who has neither particularized nor personalized the message of perceptual renovation that Blake's texts carry. This well-taken caveat, however, turns out to serve not as a way into Blake but as a prelude to a trite and tedious account of Klonsky's own visionary experience while on a one-time LSD trip in the 1960s. Throughout the description of his psychedelic conversion, itself sounding like an unconscious parody of the fall of Tharmas, Klonsky loosely appropriates mottos from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Auguries of Innocence," and *Jerusalem* to substantiate his

touching and naive claim that he has responded to Blake with an affinity of feeling Blake himself would have approved of. And it is true that Klonsky does come to the artist's work in a spirit of congeniality, eager to "Enter into" Blake's symbols and to "make a Friend & Companion" of those "Images of wonder" as Blake recommends.¹ However, like many others affected by the drug culture who have flocked to Blake because of a vague spiritual longing and a taste for hallucinogenic imagery, Klonsky too often ignores the harder part of Blake's advice to the spectator, that we should approach visionary forms not just imaginatively and emotionally but also "on the Fiery Chariot of . . . Contemplative Thought" (*VLMJ*, E 550).

The key word here is "contemplative." For although Klonsky's text is full of little bypaths into arcane fields of thought, none of these rarefied excursions is sufficiently grounded, contemplated or developed in its own right, and few are demonstrably related to the Blakean themes, purposes, instances they are supposed to illuminate. Instead the author presents a patchwork of allusive lore and occult references from sources outside Blake, while the thread of argument that would tie all these bits of learning together is most often either frayed or forgotten.

An example is Klonsky's skewed and summary disquisition on the esoteric system of the Hebrew *Zohar*, especially its mystical teaching about the seventy "facets" and the six hundred thousand "entrances" of the words of scripture. Here he justifies a paragraph-long aside on Cabbalistic numerology by declaring (without any proven or even claimed basis in fact) that Blake was acquainted "perhaps at first hand" with that "most famous version of the Cabbala." He then hints in a round-about way that there is a causal link between the Zoharian symbolism and Blake's view of significant form--an intriguing notion were it to be either elaborated or substantiated. The entire burden of proof for such a link, however, is made to rest on the shaky ground of a single quotation from *Jerusalem* describing the many angles of the grain of sand hidden from Satan's watchfiends. Evidently these angles, each a "lovely heaven" in Blake's words, are to be seen by us as equivalent to the seventy facets of the holy words of scripture. Yet how so, and if so to what end, is unfortunately not explained. Nevertheless we might accept the analogy of Cabbalistic "facets" to Blakean "angles" if the comparison were offered as a merely curious parallel. But Klonsky, by innuendo and--as is his wont--equivocal phrasing, implies much more. He implies that Blake both intended the reference and expected it to be taken as a criticism of the Jewish source, for Klonsky writes that "in *Jerusalem* the Cabbalistic vision of the multiplicity of possible entrances into the infinite was refracted by Blake and revealed in its 'minute particularity.'"

Here many readers of his book may pause to note that "refracting the infinite" through clear exposition of "minute particularity" is certainly not one of Klonsky's own strong points. Indeed by mixing and matching ideas lifted out of context, Klonsky regularly tries to force untenable connec-

tions as he juggles the niceties of both metaphor and fact. His habit is either to cloud the issue by providing an excess of information so that his frequently dubious tenets are virtually lost in a sea of incongruous data, or, when he does hit on a fruitful analogy (for instance the comparison between Blake's fourfold system of vision and the traditional fourfold method of biblical interpretation), he makes the opposite error, generalizing without supplying the descriptive detail or conceptual framework that would lend his notion substance, validity, credence.

But it is not only the content of Klonsky's prose that is affected by this disquieting carelessness and lack of critical proportion. The style, too, often suffers from such idiosyncrasies as a self-indulgent penchant for punning and a cuteness of diction which almost always threatens clarity. For example, when Klonsky speaks of one of Blake's witty rejoinders to Crabbe Robinson, he calls it "a neat thrust, most likely inspired by some spirit on the spot--jabbing this pointed detail like a bare bodkin into his solidly planted and down-to-earth metaphysical fundament." Another time Klonsky designates what he asserts is a personification of an already hypostatized idea, "a hypertrophe of a trope as 'twere." And his trick of playing on words by fragmenting them syllabically ("with-in," "im-mediately," "into-it-tively," "ir-and/or supra-rational") only adds to the rather jarring, schizophrenic effect of the tone he adopts throughout.

What is at stake here, though, is not just a matter of voice. Fundamentally, Klonsky's commentary gets into trouble because it is the product of a sorely divided outlook, a conflicted allegiance that gratuitously pits intellect against vision and vision against intellect in an unconscious and often underhanded manner destined to misrepresent Blake's own strongly integrated aesthetic. First of all, by misappropriating Blake's anti-rationalism and regarding it as a license for him to eschew the precision of both analytical thought and truth to factual detail, Klonsky commits a shocking array of reportorial sins hard to pass over or forgive in the aggregate. For from the smallest inaccuracies of scholarship and editing (such as crediting Marianne Moore rather than Yeats with the invention of the phrase "literalist of the imagination" as applied to Blake, or giving Morton D. Paley a new middle initial) to the more egregious errors of analysis that plague Klonsky's explications of Blake's key views on cause and effect, on the relationship between artistic execution and imagination, and on the nature of spiritual sensation, this author erects a sort of "allegorical abode where existence hath never come" (*Europe* 6.7) and calls it Blake's world. One of Klonsky's favorite devices for leaping over the evidences of historical research and passing off private surmise as probable fact is his liberal use of phrases like "Blake *must have* known . . ." or "he was *undoubtedly* familiar with . . ." (italics mine). The "must have" construction is the most prevalent: I counted twelve uses of it in the introductory essay alone, five of which are the means of conveying false information, while the rest are simply minor fudgings that only slightly mislead.

But while Klonsky is impatient of both scholarly tact and intellectual rigor in this way, his mistrust of the restraints of academic argument does not represent a considered position. Indeed, he seems just as uncomfortable with the compensatory virtues of his "amateur enthusiasm,"² and we therefore often find him curiously withholding the sympathy we might well expect him to show for modes of imagining that dispense with logical structures. He regularly adopts an excessively cynical tone, for example, when speaking of Blake's view of the spirit world, as if embarrassed by the products of Blake's eidetic imagination even though in theory he hotly defends the psychological and perceptual processes such envisionings entail. So of Blake's encounter with psychic images Klonsky says, "he also--or so he claimed--saw visions and spoke face to face with spooks . . . and what can we make of that?" Further on he remarks, archly, that "whatever else [Blake's] spirits had going for them, they weren't very good at business." And later still, when Klonsky is ostensibly clearing Blake (yet again) of the old charge of insanity, he writes: "No doubt, among the heterogeneous swarms of spirits attending him he must have had (and who hasn't?) one or two or several spirits, with a bit too much white around the eyeball" In a similar fashion Klonsky several times attributes to the subtly controlled, allusive method of Blake's expressive technique a wild and woolly mentality more accurately descriptive of Klonsky's own thought process. Thus while analyzing what he evidently believes is the chaotic formal principle of *A Descriptive Catalogue*, Klonsky declares that:

One idea in *A Descriptive Catalogue* suggests another, sometimes only distantly or even metaphorically related, which immediately raises its voice above it, and then, in turn, may be drowned out by a following idea, before the first can be heard again. Written in the ejaculatory style of his marginalia, but now across the whole page of everything he believes and knows, it is as though the conclamant and sometimes discordant voices of all his attendant spirits were alternately haranguing, explaining, protesting, denouncing, scolding, cajoling, lecturing, pleading and prophesying.

Unhappily many of the problems of the introduction are carried through in the explanations of the splendid visuals which are the main allure of this book. One wants to cry out, after the essay so titled by John E. Grant, "you can't write about Blake's pictures like that!"³ You cannot, that is, say that the six birds painted in the sky of the title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* are five in number simply because you want to identify them with the five senses, nor can you name one of those six birds an "eagle," when it is really a bird of paradise, just to be able to compare it to that other eagle Blake calls "a portion of genius" in one of the proverbs of Hell. Or again, in Blake's tempera "Satan Smiting Job with Sore Boils" you cannot claim that the three darts in the hand of Satan are actually four darts, and you cannot call the substance Satan is emptying out of the vial in that same picture "venereal disease" because you want to interpret Job's affliction as sexual.

But these and other difficulties that crop up in the descriptive commentary do not seriously detract from the special value of the book's 107 pages of illustrations. Considered as an anthology of Blake's pictorial art, the 135 separate pictures exhibited here show a satisfying range of methods, kinds and iconographic concerns, and they are displayed in clear, large-format reproductions, 43 of which are printed in (mostly very good) color. Some of these offerings are familiar favorites, others make available for the first time in an inexpensive edition glossy colored versions of such striking watercolors as "The Arlington Court Picture," "The Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul," two of the full-page illustrations for the illuminated *Song of Los*, a pair of lesser known designs from the "L'Allegro" sequence and three well chosen drawings from the second set of Blake's "Comus" illustrations.

Perhaps the best feature of the collection, however, is not the range of pictures but the aesthetically pleasing, gently instructive way designs are juxtaposed on the page to make valuable graphic points about the relationship of significant themes and pictorial ideas in Blake's work. One case in point is the two page spread, pages 72-73, which pairs "The Woman Taken in Adultery" with "The Blasphemer" (commonly called "The Stoning of Achan"). Both paintings illustrate scriptural passages that treat the motif of punishment for sin by stoning, the "Woman Taken in Adultery" representing Christ's New Testament critique, in John 8, of the Old Testament law which is being shown at work on the opposite page in the painting of "The Blasphemer" from Leviticus 24. Another case: on the page-spread just preceding, two more of Blake's biblical illustrations, "Bathsheba" and "Lot and His Daughters," are matched, but this time the connection between them remains primarily compositional. The representation of Bathsheba shows her upright in the center of the canvas, her arms around two young children who stand on either side of her as she is being observed by David, while the design of "Lot and His Daughters" depicts a drunken, half-reclining Lot flanked by his two children as they prepare to seduce him. The general plot of illicit eroticism ties the two subjects together, but it is the similarity of the compositions that draws our attention to the vaguely cognate themes.

A final example, more subtle yet possibly even more effective, is the antiphonal facing of a *Night Thoughts* engraving on page 96 with Blake's design for the titlepage of Blair's *The Grave* on page 97. Here the two prints maintain a symmetrical, formal balance largely on the grounds of their topological identity. For both designs feature two figures about to join each other on the vertical axis in an ascending-descending relationship, and both sets of figures are placed on the outer edges of their plates (one on the left, the other on the right) with a middle space reserved for text. We note the visual mirroring, and only secondarily does it occur to us that the subjects, also, are related reflexively. For the *Night Thoughts* illustration depicts a young nude woman personifying "sense" (in accord with the appropriate lines of Young's poem) who runs "savagely" to celebrate the powers remaining

to her in the fading daylight while the ghastly figure of descending night is about to smother her with his bell-shaped pall; and the contrary situation is portrayed in the *Grave* design where a beautiful nude man, an angelic messenger, dives downward, blowing his bell-shaped trumpet, to waken the shrouded, ghoulis skeleton below and rouse him from the sleep of corporeal death in the grave. The pictures thus comment upon each other like type and antitype. Thanks to the inventiveness of Gene Conner and Murray Schwartz, layout and production editors, this kind of interplay is a general feature of *William Blake: The Seer and his Visions*, a feature the thoughtful reader cannot help but learn from and enjoy.

Because of such felicities, this handsomely produced book is a valuable volume indeed. It will be accessible to many because of its reasonable price, and so long as its owner or borrower reads the pictures and skims the text, rather than vice versa, it will make an excellent introduction to Blake's art.

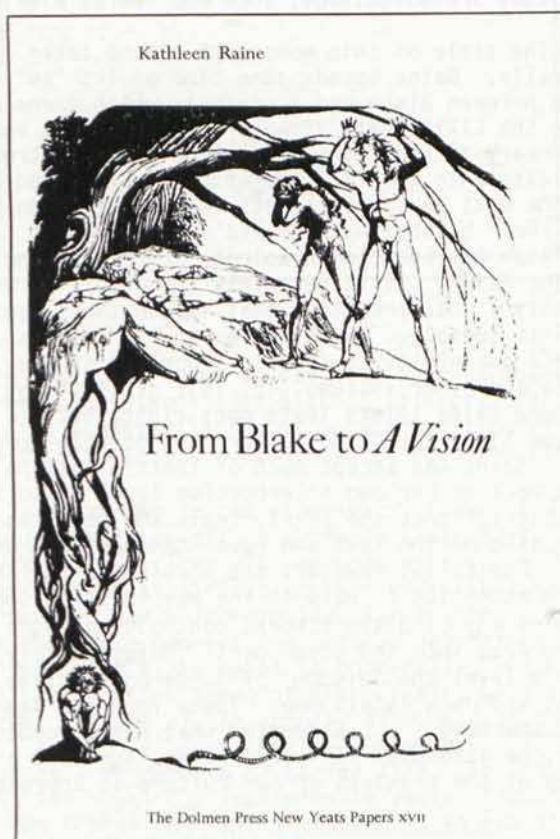
¹ "A Vision of the Last Judgment," *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York, 1970), p. 550.

² Cf. John Hollander, "Talkies," *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 8, 1977, 50-54, p. 51. This is a review of Klonsky's *Speaking Pictures* and D. J. Gordon's *The Renaissance Imagination*.

³ *Blake Studies*, 1 (Spring 1969), 193-205.

Kathleen Raine. **From Blake to A Vision.** Dublin: The Dolmen Press. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979 (New Yeats Papers XVII). 64 pp. £4.50, \$11.75 paper.

Reviewed by Hazard Adams



Kathleen Raine's line on Blake is familiar to us: He was an adept of the "Perennial Philosophy," which holds that consciousness is the ground of reality. In this monograph she asserts that Yeats is Blake's "greatest disciple" and "the claims he made, the beliefs he held on the reversal of premises which would characterize the New Age, are the same as Blake's." When I hear this sort of remark I must confess that I am inclined to stop reading; I want immediately to make a list

of all the important differences that I am convinced are going to be glossed over in the discourse that follows. But the writer is Kathleen Raine, and like many earlier quirky scholars of Blake, she is usually informative even when she mounts into her particular pulpit and tells us (in the tone I imagine a True Pythoness would use) that we must all now hear occult Truth. This is a Truth that links the speaker in a chain of adepts back to Plato, who of course was himself a neoplatonist.