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David Fuller, Blake's Heroic Argument

Brian Wilkie

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REVIEWS

David Fuller. *Blake's Heroic Argument*. London, New York, Sydney: Croom Helm in association with Methuen, 1988. xv + 297 pp. 16 illus. \$67.50 US/\$85 Canada.

Reviewed by Brian Wilkie

From time to time—perhaps every ten years or so—a need arises in Blake criticism for a comprehensive survey of his works, written for new but serious students of Blake. Ideally, such books reflect recently emerging emphases or issues in Blake scholarship and interpretation while preserving whatever in older criticism still commands broad assent. The authorial voice can be individual and distinctive (like that of J. Middleton Murry, for example, or Harold Bloom), but neither the core of the content nor very much of the interpretative detail ought to be strongly eccentric. The kind of book I am describing ought also, typically, to be a general study not obviously informed by too obsessive an argumentative thesis or limited by a highly specialized critical method—feminist, psychological, Marxist, deconstructionist, or the like.

This is the bill that, more than any other, David Fuller's *Blake's Heroic Argument* fits, however roughly. (The author apparently intended something different, about which more in a moment.) The book consists of four chapters. The first is on Blake's works earlier than *The Four Zoas*. The second is on the *Zoas* and *Milton*, though very little is on *Milton*; Fuller invites us (289-90), in lieu of more detailed treatment of that poem, to read a substantial essay

Blake's heroic argument

DAVID FULLER

CROOM HELM
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of his in the volume *An Infinite Complexity* (ed. J. R. Watson, Edinburgh UP, 1983). (For sixty-seven and a half U.S. dollars, the batteries, one feels, might have been included.) The third chapter is on *Jerusalem*. Within each of these chapters, the organization is chronological and linear, treating the poems in historical order and, especially with the long epics, reading them straight through, from beginning to middle to end. This organization, obviously, enhances the value of Fuller's book as an enchiridion for beginning students. The fourth chapter, which makes up about one-fifth of the book, is not concerned directly with Blake; rather, it is in part personal self-revelation by Fuller, in part a plea for reforms in the practice of criticism and in the process of education. The goal of these reforms is to foster greater personal involvement in the processes of learning and interpreting, thus freeing students and critics to invest their individual values and experiences in their readings of Blake and, indeed, of all creative literature. The same goal accounts for the autobiographical element in this final chapter, which is designed to make explicit the personal

orientations that, Fuller would have us recognize, underlie his interpretations of Blake in the foregoing chapters.

One of the more puzzling of several puzzling things about Fuller's book is his apparent belief that he has interpreted Blake in a way highly flavored by his particular values and beliefs. *Blake's Heroic Argument* has, if anything, a little less than its share either of controversial readings of Blake or of novelty in critical approach—a fact wherein, as I have implied, lies much of the book's value to a certain kind of reader. I don't mean that Fuller says nothing fresh or controversial about Blake. I feel sure that many Blakeans will share my discomfort at hearing Blake described as a relativist (88, 135)—though even that term seems, in context, to be a slip of the pen intended to mean something like "open to change and development." Among matters that Fuller treats more convincingly and, if not always originally at least freshly, are Blake's understanding of implicit and explicit symbolism in literature (21-25); the kind and degree of Blake's platonism and uniplatonism (37-41); the tortured psychology of Theotormon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (43-44); Blake's mythological method and the dynamic of growth in the myth he personally created (57-64); the importance of rhythm in Blake's verse (90-93, including a wonderfully effective visual re-shaping of a passage from Blake, bringing out its elaborate parallelisms); some good analyses, passim, of Blake's pictures, in the Four Zoas manuscript, in the illuminated poems, and elsewhere; a convincing parallel between the Los-Enithammon-Orc triangle and the Vulcan-Venus-Mars story (118, 289); Blake's high valuation of comedy (172-73); the motif of friendship in *Jerusalem* (176-77); the relationship of Los to his Spectre in *Jerusalem* (177-80); Blake's relationship to eighteenth-century ways of understanding and defining "enthusiasm" (180-81); the importance for Blake of the Judgment-of-Paris

myth (204); and a number of striking points in the final chapter—for example, the application to doctrinaire adherents of literary theory of their own familiar argument, vis-à-vis those who resist them, about the conditioning power of hidden psychological dynamics (254). A book that does all these things is, patently, worth something to veteran Blakeans as well as to novice readers.

These interesting and useful pauses for synoptic comment are effectively placed in Fuller's otherwise step-by-step progress through Blake's works. But most of them are brief, and together they bulk much smaller than the rather orthodox, and often familiar, matter of which Fuller's commentary largely consists. Certainly there is nothing novel in his fundamental premises that Blake is a poet of ideas, that his meaning resides both in minute particulars and in the total form or impact of his visions, and that content and form are inseparable (xii-xiii, 1). What, then, makes Fuller believe that his views of Blake are so novel or special that he must spend several dozen pages elaborating the personal experience that has made him, for example, a "libertarian socialist" (256)? It is true that throughout Fuller's book he occasionally expresses such political values, in passing, along with mildly rebellious religious ones, but otherwise I find little or no sign of a distinctive, informing personal vision, and even his rather moderate political leftism can hardly be considered unusual in the context of Blake criticism over the last few decades. The tone of Fuller's approach to Blake may owe something to the atmosphere and values of the late 1960s (the period when, he says, he first read Blake, xi), but much the same anti-establishment tone had informed many books on Blake for at least a decade before that epoch and has, in different veins, continued to do so thereafter. The discomfort Fuller occasionally confesses with apparently sexist elements in Blake's work, and

his insistence that Blake's myth and values are developmental rather than serenely monolithic, are reminders that he writes in the 1980s, but they are very pale reflections indeed of the more outspoken critical attempts, since the late 1970s, to de-idealize Blake in these respects.

The most glaring defect of Fuller's book is this insensitivity to both the tradition and the recent currents of Blake scholarship and criticism, an insensitivity so glaring as to seem, sometimes, almost willful. Scholarly spleen—like charity in at least one respect—begins at home, and so I'll begin with Fuller's treatment of *Blake's Four Zoas: The Design of a Dream*, by Mary Lynn Johnson and me. This treatment consists of half of a single fleeting reference (95 and note) to the tendency of critics—Alicia Ostriker too—to allegorize Blake. Now, it has been proved by several interpreters of the *Zoas*, since our book appeared in 1978, that the poem can be discussed intelligently and incisively without much if any recourse to Wilkie and Johnson. But that does not describe what happens in the Fuller book; his 75-page commentary on the poem is not substantially different from ours, and a number of his detailed remarks on it are very similar indeed. Moreover, the allegorical approach, in which the *Zoas* are human faculties, is only one of four used in Wilkie-Johnson, and the other three approaches, which treat the poem as an intricate structure, as an almost realistic novel or drama of character, and as a potent myth inviting deeply personal response, are very close to the approach Fuller himself claims to be taking and to be encouraging in other critics and readers. Even Fuller's impatience with ideological translation of Blake's myth seems disingenuous, since in a number of places he seems to be doing that very thing himself. Apparently it's all right to do so as long as one confesses to self-contradiction: "[Our] primary awareness of the characters is not concerned with what they

represent but with who they are—but Blake is also here [in Night 1 of *The Four Zoas*] writing a psychological allegory. Mental life is seen as attempting to dominate the workings of the passionate faculty, and vice versa, and their conflict corrupts the imagination. Or . . . one aspect of the emotional life, Vala, demands too exclusive an attention . . ." (99). Other ideological translations appear on pages 32, 103, 118, 120, 127, 133, 139-40, and 161. Why, then, so short and contemptuous shrift for the likes of Ostriker and Wilkie-Johnson?

The same kind of need to misrepresent appears in Fuller's remarks on Nelson Hilton's book *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (1983), where Fuller quite wrongly implies that Hilton's attribution of elaborate wordplay to Blake is an invitation to admire the indefinite and blurred. It requires considerable perverse ingenuity, I think, to misread Hilton in this way, since Hilton argues—and shows—that Blake's writing is *literal*—a multivocal interplay of very definite meanings, not "an indefinite possibility of suggestion and association" (287). I don't see how the literal can be indefinite. Would Fuller call the polyphonic—i.e., multivocal—lines of the *St. Matthew Passion* an exercise in blurred ambiguity? In the same league with the treatment of Hilton is Fuller's anger with John E. Grant for inferring, from the *Four Zoas* illustrations, that "the pursuit of natural happiness tends to lead insensibly toward a quest for the unnatural." This, says Fuller, is "Urisen's view of sexuality, not Blake's" (288-89; cf. Grant, "Visions in *Vala*," in Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., eds., *Blake's Sublime Allegory*, U of Wisconsin P, 1973 [194]). Surely Fuller has misconstrued Grant here, out of temporary blindness to Blake's special sense of the word *natural*, which almost certainly is the sense in which Grant is using the word. I fail to see how anyone who has read

much of Grant's work on Blake can make Fuller's accusation.

As for the giants of Blake interpretation, Fuller is sometimes a little cavalier with Kathleen Raine (220 and note) and David V. Erdman (291), and perhaps a little careless with Erdman, failing to credit him with identifying the "boring screws" and "hollow globes" of *The Four Zoas* Night 8 as, respectively, tools of naval warfare and shrapnel (141; cf. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, rev. ed., 1969 [398]). For the most part, however, Fuller's quarrels with Raine and Erdman are conducted according to legitimate canons of intellectual dissent.

The situation with Northrop Frye is more complicated and puzzling. Despite occasional bows to him, Frye is virtually a *bête noire* for Fuller. Plenty of Blakeans today resist Frye's ideas and influence, and the lines of such opposition can be meaningfully drawn. But Fuller's antipathy is harder to define or explain. The main bone of contention seems to be Frye's desire, expressed in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, to detach literature from value judgments about life. But, even granted that this is what Frye called for in that book, surely it does not describe his critical practice in general, or in his main work on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*. There, on the contrary, Frye could more cogently be faulted for the opposite: for blending his voice polemically with Blake's. The "Case against Locke," for example, that constitutes the first chapter of *Fearful Symmetry* is one of the most impassioned pieces of criticism produced by an academic writer in recent decades. I should have thought that the unusually pungent Frye would be considered a prime model of the kind of investment of personality in criticism that Fuller advocates. Perhaps Fuller has allowed his opposition (263 ff.) to principles announced in the *Anatomy of Criticism* to color unduly his view of Frye's Blake criticism, so that Frye becomes a kind of morally disengaged aesthete (282). Fuller's oppo-

sition to Frye's comparative mythologizing—his alleged tendency, for example, to lose sight of Blake's Orc in a more universalized "Orc cycle"—is understandable but would be more so if Fuller did not at times attribute the same kind of synoptic mythic imagination to Blake, who, Fuller tells us, "praised Jacob Bryant's *A New System, or Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774-76) because . . . it has at its heart a comparative approach to the understanding of mythology which he accepted" in the *Descriptive Catalogue* (61). The hostility to Frye in Fuller's book seems in excess of what, given Fuller's own critical principles, the situation warrants. He seems more interested, for example, in arguing that what Frye calls the "Orc cycle" is a misnomer for the revolution-reaction pattern in Blake's myth than in denying that the pattern is there (67-68, 286).

In *Blake's Heroic Argument* Fuller once refers to university professors of literature as "paid interpreters" (22), and again, later, as persons "paid to speak and promote speech" (252). After awakening from a brief, not entirely unpleasant fantasy of my colleagues and myself as fatcats, I began to wonder who was getting the sixty-seven and a half to eighty-five North American dollars being charged for each copy of this book, and what we have a right to expect for that price. At the very least, I suggest, a well-produced book. Instead, though, we get what is probably the most sloppily produced book I have ever reviewed. In the broadest terms, this statement applies to the book's whole plan; the senior editor who handled the project and the expert Blake referees who, I presume, were consulted, ought to have told Fuller that the long concluding chapter, with its call for personal involvement and unconventionality of approach, does not jibe with the rather orthodox content and method in the discussion of Blake in the body of the book. If not such persons, a good copy editor ought to have coached Fuller in punctuation,

sparing the reader the irritation of re-reading and re-construing so many sentences, of which this is one specimen: "Because of the mutually creating and reinforcing relationship between the inner and outer worlds in Blake's view his poetry, like a Dantean allegory, often engages with both at once" (58) and this is another: "Blake's myth has analogies with all these mythologies as well as with the Christian in most cases though only analogies with Christian myth are explicitly drawn" (61). But, indeed, the proofreading of the book has been so unreliable that resorts to a conjectural text are sometimes necessary: "Milton had begun the process of transformation between *The Faerie Queene* and *The Prelude*, not only in the directly personal passages of *Paradise Lost* but also in that the poem's central characters and its basic issues of the nature of true freedom and the proper limits of knowledge and of obedience which can be seen as dramatisations of Milton's own subjectivity" (60). That non-sentence can be turned into either of two different sentences—parsable, however shaky—but only surgically, by deleting either the *that* or the *which*. Take your choice. This puzzling-out of sentences can get fatiguing.

Someone should have had a part in the production process who knew how to spell *Warren* (the American Revolutionary hero; page 283 reads "Watten"), *dissension* (110), Joseph Priestley's last name (199), Stuart Curran's last name (288), *cumbrous* (122), and *Gethsemane* (214). Someone on the team ought to have known that the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary's birth from her mother, not the birth of Jesus from Mary (203). Someone ought to have ruled out round parentheses inside round parentheses, or, better still, have rectified sentence constructions so that that confusing oddity did not come into play in the first place. Someone should have taken care that there be an adequate index, or, having failed to do so, should have avoided flaunting

the deficiency: "Only the more extended discussions of characters and locations of Blake's mythology are referenced" (294). Someone ought to have known that a table of contents is not an index and that therefore, by the conventions of book publishing, heads listed in the contents should actually occur on the identified pages of the book. Someone ought to have asked Fuller to supply Night numbers of *The*

Four Zoas rather than merely MS page numbers. Someone ought to have remembered to tell us how we are to distinguish references to plates of Blake's illuminated works from references to the sixteen plates of Fuller's book. (Roman vs. italic, I think, but that's an inference.)

These annoyances of format distract us from what we might otherwise recognize more clearly: that Fuller's book,

up to a point, serves a legitimate purpose and that, at his best, he writes a supple and expressive prose, certainly better than in many current academic books. The main trouble with this book is not in its sloppy texture but in the author's basic misjudgment of the relation between what the book is and what he seems to have intended it to be.

Martin Bidney. *Blake and Goethe: Psychology, Ontology, Imagination*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988. xvi + 184 pp. \$24.

Reviewed by Stuart Atkins



Concisely formulated and meticulously documented, this comparative study should be of equal interest to students of romanticism and of German literature in the Age of Goethe. It is, moreover, an impressive work of scholarship that does credit both to its author and to its publisher at a time when books by university scholars treating foreign language materials and appearing under the auspices of university presses are often painful to read because of inaccurate citations, inexact quotations, frequent mistranslations, and obviously insouciant editing.

As critical analysis in the Jungian tradition of Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, Bidney's monograph persuasively demonstrates—to some extent by definition, since it treats the archetypal—strikingly similar elements of thought and form in selected texts of Blake and Goethe. Because a "spiritual kinship" (xii) can be discerned in the shared interest of both writers in neo-Platonic and later hermetic materials, Bidney is persuaded that they are very similar "Romantic poet-thinkers" (xi). In Goethe's and Blake's writings it is indeed possible to find "Shared Ideas and Myths" (title of Bidney's first chapter), some of which—like the pairs "Selving" and "Unselving" or "negation" and "contrariety"—are constants, while others are to be found in Goethe only in early works or in ones using motifs typical of his early writing but without their original positive value or importance. The most obvious example of "re-use" would be the anacreontic motifs in

West-östlicher Divan, his last large poem-cycle, and of "changed value," the folkloristic-supernatural elements in *Faust*. Beginning with Goethe's conversion to classicism, as the writing of the drama progressed these supernatural elements were used with ever greater irony and ever more directly satiric, often anti-romantic, intention (e.g., in "Witch's Kitchen," usually dated 1788—with its mocking of superstition—and in many later scenes through act 4 of *Part II*, written in 1831, with its jibes at the cult of medievalism). Although Bidney's premise of a basically romantic Goethe is in no way idiosyncratic, having been promulgated for some decades even by self-proclaimed Goethe specialists, it means limiting Goethe's classical period—Bidney does not, like some who take his position, suppress the fact that there was such a period for Goethe—to "the decade of his friendship with Schiller" (xii) and ignoring the fact that Goethe expressed stronger disapproval of romanticism in the decades after Schiller's death than in the one before it and was still criticizing romanticism in his last years (e.g., in the concluding volume of his account of his Italian sojourn, published 1829, and in *Faust II*, chiefly written 1825-31).

The extent to which Goethe in some periods and works is a romantic poet-thinker comparable with Blake is economically but adequately demonstrated by Bidney with reference to a limited corpus of materials, namely, representative lyrics and a few prose passages by each writer, and major