

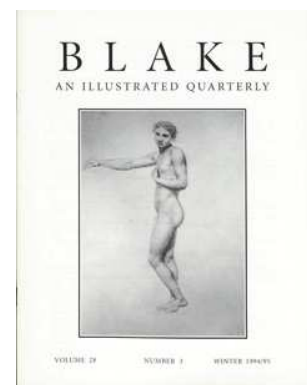
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R E V I E W

Charles D. Minahen, *Vortex/t: The Poetics of Turbulence*

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Charles D. Minahen, *Vortex: The Poetics of Turbulence*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1992. 205 pp. \$28.50.

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The power of Charles Minahen's *Vortex: The Poetics of Turbulence* resides in its willingness to speculate creatively with somewhat limited evidence. However, the work also has holes, and while perhaps appropriate given its attempted "hermeneutical disclosure of symbolic turbulence" in diverse philosophical and poetic writings, these holes qualify somewhat the insights achieved. Those wishing to derive maximum benefit from the book should invert normal reading procedure and proceed immediately to the work's closing appendix to come to grips with the confusing terms "Vortices, Helices, Spirals, and Gyres" often wrongly applied to related but different phenomena. Normally, such a definition of terms occurs at the opening of a work, but the inverse reading has the function of tapping the processes diachronically and synchronically explored in the three major divisions of the book. The appendix traces vortical phenomena "at all levels of the known universe," which are "widely dispersed through the whole range of phenomena from the micro- to the macrocosmic, and inhering in both organic and inorganic systems and states" (149). Yet the terms (vortex, helix, spiral, gyre) differ in their spatial properties, and these differences are crucial in Minahen's mapping of "symbolic turbulence" (3) in the authors considered in his study.

In exploring the differences in the specific definitions of the varied yet related terms of turbulence, readers gain insights grounded in physical phenomena, and this grounding makes legible the barrage of technical language at the beginning of Minahen's complicated assessment of the literal presence and symbolic function of vortical figuration in widely disparate works. The opening "Archaeology of Symbolic Turbulence" (3) charts the "mystical cosmic and religious significance" (3) of two types of symbols to establish a characteristic structural dialectic of embodied "polar opposition and synthesis" (3). The text then observes vortical symbols from the Hebraic and Hellenic traditions and successfully argues that vortexual processes, although different in their origins, undergird Western epistemologies from "the whirlwind [as] Yahweh's distinct emblem" (10) to "vortical symbolism [that] . . . typifies the Homeric conception of the cosmos" (14).

Having identified literary and philosophic aspects of symbolic turbulence embedded in Hellenic and Hebraic thought and practice, Minahen undertakes an exploration of "vortical cosmogonic theory" (20) in relation to the pre-Socratic philosophers Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Democritus, and the chasm between poetry and science in Western tradition: "[Aristotle's] response is indicative of the tension, in the episteme, between the more rigorous 'scientific' method espoused by Aristotle, concerned with the validity of the mechanics of the theory, and the 'poetic' tradition which Empedocles is still a part of and which Aristotle ignores altogether" (20). While the chapter is set up as a diachronic exploration of thinkers concerned with "a matrix from which the entire Western tradition of discursive thinking issues" (15), it offers one noticeable critical anachronism when Yeats's *A Vision* is used to illustrate the conceptual possibility of "the Empedoclean double process" (22). While Yeats's gyres give the "perfect example of dialectic (i.e., polarity, antithesis, and synthesis, simultaneously and/or in sequence)" (21), his presence in a chapter on pre-Socratic thinkers breaks an otherwise implied historical progression. Furthermore, given both Yeats's exploitation of the vortex at the foundation of his 'system' and his appropriation of the concept from Blake (who is discussed in chapter 7), this brief inclusion only points to the more striking exclusion of Yeats from his logical position, towards the end of the book. What binds the pre-Socratics is the element of chance or necessity at work in "sequences of mechanical interaction" (25), rendering the diverse expression of vorticality in their thought "as much a metaphor as a scientific cosmogonic principle" (25).¹

Minahen's discussion of Plato's "Great Whorl," in chapter 3, rightly focuses on the myth of Ur that concludes the *Republic*, and the mythic narrative of a soldier's death and return to life that brings him to view "a vision of the structure of the cosmos" (28). The cosmos, gyrating hemispheres that correspond to astrological and planetary movements, is a "revolving vault" (28), with eight "whorls in all, lying within one another" (29), and its operations are linked to that of a "free circular vortex," where "velocities vary in a manner inversely

¹ However, as Roger Jones discusses in his *Physics as Metaphor* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982), there is some validity to the representational interweaving of physics and metaphor: "we were all poets and the world was our metaphor," since "the observer and observed form an integrated unit that cannot be broken down into independent components" (3, 6).

proportional to the distance from the central axis" (33). One's reservations about this chapter stem not from the technically dense language, a type of hermetic scientism, but rather from the rhetorically manufactured debate with an isolated critic (in this case, Francis M. Cornford), which detracts from the significant insight that "the Great Whorl represents a culmination, an apex, in the development of an epistemic vortex symbol" (36).

The same critical practice that structures chapter 3 continues in chapter 4, "Epicurean Whirlings and Lucretius's Turbulent Flux," where Minahen confronts Donald A. Mackenzie's denial of the vorticity in the thought of Epicurus. The crux of the matter hinges upon Epicurus's discomfort with the role that "necessity" or "chance" plays in pre-Socratic and Platonic thought, due to "the teleological implications" (38) of the *clinamen* or random swerve at the foundation of atomist theory. Although Epicurus cites certain meteorological phenomena as demonstrative of the presence of the vortex, his thought does "lack the symbolic multivocality of other examples we have seen" (38). In contrast to the use of previous interpretations as critical cannon-fodder, Minahen's confrontation with conflicting interpretations of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (Mackenzie versus Michel Serres) successfully provides a frame for Lucretius's cosmology of "many vortices coming into and out of existence in ever-changing complexes of colliding atoms and swarming fluid flows" (40). As a result, his use of Lucretius as the terminus to the opening section elevates the concluding discussion of "the vortex" (48), clarifying "its evolution into so rich and complex a symbol by the end of the classical age" (48) and its "reemerge[nce] as a quintessential symbol of the late Medieval Christian vision in the work of Dante" (48).

Once into the second section, "Visionary Breakthrough," Minahen's text supplies just that, breaking through its negative dialogical engagement with isolated critics to confront the complexities of Dante's use of "circular, spiral, and vortical properties [as] a reservoir of symbolic possibilities with which to fashion his mystical vision of the after-life" (51). In "Dante's Vortical Triptych" (chapter 5), Minahen does justice to the prevalent layering of spiral, vortical, and helical symbols in the large structures of hell, purgatory, and heaven and in the smallest descriptive details, with the minute particulars of local symbolism reinforcing the grand gyrations of bodies and spheres. The most obvious example is hell; the pit spirals downward to a singularity, powered by the "association of vortical turbulence with sin" (54) appropriated from St. Au-

gustine, and displays characteristics defined by "the concentric streamlines of a 'free circular vortex' . . . in which the velocities are backward [fast on the periphery and stagnant at the center]" (52).

Dante's sensitivity to structural possibilities in vortical phenomena can be seen when "purgatory reveals itself to be an enantiomorph of hell, turned inside-out" (59). The prototypical spiro-helical qualities of pyramids and mountains are pressed into Dante's service, and, true to its inverse relationship with hell, activity intensifies with the ascent just as, in hell, activity decreases with descent. "Whereas hell and purgatory are visible entities in Dante's scheme . . . the system of concentric crystalline spheres of the Ptolemaic universe . . . is transparent and invisible" (62). This obvious difference and its moral implications lead Minahen into a discussion of the "four great symbols" (63) that structure paradise: "the 'wheel' of planetary orbits"; "the 'nest of hemispheres' . . . that turn on the axis of the North Star"; "the primum mobile," and "the celestial rose" (63). The interweaving of these symbols brings "concentrically circular, spiro-helical, or vortical structures" (63) into conjunction in such a way that deity can be both center and circumference, and the terms and instances of vorticality increase as the poet moves through the heavens. The penultimate and ultimate images of vortical phenomena in heaven are the juxtaposed primum mobile and celestial white rose, and Minahen's analysis of the "paradox of this inverse double image" (69) justifies his conclusion that Dante's "elaboration of spiro-vortical symbolism" has been of "seminal importance in the history of ideas" (69).

The brief analysis of Descartes, in "The Turbulent Dream-Vision of Descartes's 'Olympian' Experience" (chapter 6), provides a transition into the modern period of "scientific cosmology" (71) yet resists the exploration of the vortices upon which Descartes built his mechanics of planetary movement, preferring, instead, to examine a tripartite dream vision experienced by Descartes which proved pivotal to the development of his thought. This is a clever and wise procedure, and Minahen's "reading" of Descartes's dream provides a tangible example of the philosopher's symbolic intertwining of "physics and metaphysics" at the foundation of his material analysis. Minahen concludes that "Descartes's turbulent cosmology was thus figuratively correct, even if literally misapplied, since the vortical configuration is ubiquitous in the universe" (72). Minahen's selection also skillfully bridges the gap between the Ptolemaic Christian vision of Dante and the post-Newtonian visionary physics

pursued by Blake. Descartes's dream reveals him as a man grappling with "a profound conflict between science and religion, knowledge and faith, vanity and deference to divinity" (83), and these dualities, characteristic of vortical phenomena in nature, symbolically "anticipate such important antitheses as body and soul, doubt and certainty, dream and reality" that shaped philosophical discourse in the eighteenth century. Additionally, the focus on "dream" helps shorten the distance between the material dualism of Descartes and Blake's radical eradication of dualities, since Blake too turns to dream discourse for solutions.

The next chapter, ". . . That Every Thing Has Its/ Own Vortex . . .": Dialectics of Vortical Symbolism in Blake," ends the center section of the text with Blake's "pithy, if somewhat cryptic, synthesis of many of the vortical images examined heretofore" (85). Minahen discusses the symbol's verbal and visual manifestations to explore Blake's negative and positive uses of spiral and vortical imagery: the former associated with Urizen's vortical passage in *The Four Zoas* (Night 6) and with plate 11 of the Job illustrations; the latter associated with the famous "vortex" passage from *Milton* and plate 13 of the Job illustrations. The ambiguities of Blake's use of the vortex are considered at the conclusion of the chapter through one of Blake's better-known watercolors to Dante, "Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car"; Beatrice represents the "Female Will," and the painting "epitomizes the equivocal, dialectical function of the vortex in Blake's art" (95). As these last formulations indicate, this chapter adds little to our understanding of Blake, his use of the vortex, or his place in a line of thinkers operating in a counter-linear fashion in relation to culture. There are some troubling generalizations scattered throughout this and other chapters: for example, Minahen's claim that Blake reinforces "lefthandedness" (90) as the direction of error ignores Blake's propensity for inverting exactly these stereotypical categories, as in the title page to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

The last section of the book, "Threshold of the Unknown," opens with "Descents into Poe's Maelstrom" (chapter 8), in which Minahen "consider[s]" Edgar Allan Poe a symbolist along with Rimbaud and Mallarmé (101). Certainly, all three writers liberate the vortical symbolism from its nebulous dependence upon "necessity" in the first section and the markedly Christian orientation found in the second section, and the growth of the symbol from Poe to Mallarmé might very well "identify a specific nineteenth-century symbolist episteme" (102). It is not new to find "the recurrence of the *spiral* or

vortex' as one of [Poe's] most pervasive symbols" (quoting Richard Wilbur 102), and Minahen examines such symbols in Poe's early "MS. Found in a Bottle" and the later "A Descent into the Maelstrom." Both stories, which conclude with a narratorial descent into a watery vortex, present "the vortex [a]s literally a natural destructive force" (103). In the first, the natural experience collapses into a teleological event with "Dantesque" overtones of "evil, hopelessness, and death" (106). In the second, the narrator's visual observation of a vortex, punctuated by an old sailor's verbal narration of surviving his passage through one, takes on the aesthetic and dramatic dimensions of the sublime and the cathartic. Both stories achieve, in lesser and greater degree (respectively), a double *mise en abyme*, an interpenetration of content and style as well as the intertwining of narrative layers. According to Minahen, "the paradox of Poe's vortex" resides in its ambiguous functions as "threshold" and "state of suspension" (112), but this could be said about several of the previous writers; Minahen's singular focus on the natural and symbolic correspondences between text and world creates blindspots that could be pursued to widen the effects of vortical symbolism as a viable epistemology.

My point here is simply illustrated. When we apply, as I believe we must, terms and concepts drawn from quantum mechanics and relativistic physics to our discussions of the structure and effects of literary phenomena, as Minahen does in evoking terms drawn from black hole theory in this chapter (104), then we are equally obligated to perform an analysis of psyche's role in the construction of that reality, since the two are inseparably entwined, as both the poet Blake and the physicist Heisenberg know too well. Given the attention paid to Poe by postmodern critics (Lacan, Derrida, Holland, et al.), it seems inconceivably neglectful to cite Marie Bonaparte's rather infantile and shallow reading of Poe, when the full psychoanalytic dimensions of Poe's use of the symbol in fact support a reading that his and all texts incorporating *mise en abyme* techniques often function as 'vortexes'.²

Minahen's analysis of vortex as modern episteme achieves significant insights when confronting the poetic phenomena unleashed in chapter 9, "Tourbillons de Lumière": Rimbaud's Illuminating Vorti-

² I discuss such "vortexuality" in "'Vortex' as Philosopher's Stone: Blake's Textual Mirrors and the Transmutation of Audience" *New Orleans Review* 13 (1986): 40-50. In regard to the postmodern 'uses' made of Poe that could further this ar-

ces." Minahen approaches Rimbaud's "bizarre symbolic universe" (115) at both the level of image and the literal level of appearance of words floating on blank pages with interesting results, although a similar approach in the Blake and Poe chapters would bolster and complicate the symbol's efficacy there in forcing the "breakdown in the linguistic sign itself" (116) observed in several of Rimbaud's poems. Clearly, Rimbaud's most intense engagement with symbolic turbulence occurs in three "illuminations" ("Marine," "Mouvement," and "Mystique"), and the analyses of these poems are illuminating. In "Marine," the "free association of subject-predicate" evokes a stylistic vortical dynamic, tapping the "opposition, tension, and possible fusion" (118) that the symbol has gathered to itself in its passage through time. The turbulence discussed in "Mouvement" grows out of "vortical synecdoches that abound throughout the text" (120) and unveils "the vertiginous 'discovery' of poetic insight" (123). The last poem, "Mystique," differs from the previously discussed illuminations in its movement away from aquatic contexts and toward the poem as "a window into a kind of noumenal world beyond that of phenomenal appearances" (124). These readings support Minahen's contention that "the Rimbaldean vortex is a metamorphosing entity . . . that develops across the young poet's career, becoming increasingly hermetic and complex" (127).

"Whirling Toward the Void in Dead Center: Symbolic Turbulence in Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*" (chapter 10) clarifies the metaphorical differences in "the symbolist concept of reality" (129) that become apparent in the nexus of their turbulent representations. Mallarmé's use of the shipwreck reaccesses the associations of aquatic phenomena with vortical symbolism found in all three sections of Minahen's text, and the graphic dispersal of terms on the page embodies the oppositions explored in the poem's content in a manner analogous to Rimbaud's. Confronting Mallarmé's poetic "epistemological statement that depicts the complex, fragmented nature of thought" (130), Minahen enters the poem's "absences and omissions" (130) to elucidate "the vortex paradigm . . . established throughout" (131). The effect of this effort, while

gument, I only point to Lacan's use of the Yin/Yang symbol, the very symbol that opens Minahen's attempted archaeological recovery of the vortical episteme, in his discussion of inversions, double structures, and reversals in Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (*The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, John P. Muller and William J. Richardson [Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1988] 28-54).

admirable, accounts for the sense of the chapter's "constructed" feel; in this way, the poem seems to function more like a mirror that comes to reflect the author's desire for closure, even though vortical symbolic clusters are present. Mallarmé's use of the vortex, where transcendent ideas are subsumed in a vortex that leads to death, intersects practices traced in all previous chapters but in inverse fashion, since Mallarmé's metaphors of turbulence function as "a negating absence at the center of all experience" (141).

In summary, although the work articulates, at the outset, a desire to pursue these matters through "a synchrony of the symbol" (ix), the actual pursuit is clearly established as a diachronic sequence from earlier to later writers, creating inexplicable holes where evidence seems to support the progression. Drawing an example from the material most familiar to me, the chapter on Blake places the poet in an epistemological line issuing forth from Descartes (in spite of Blake's repeated attacks on Cartesian dualism) and situates Blake's vortical practices within the framework of critical consensus by powerful readers of Blake's poetic and visual designs (Mitchell, Raine, and Ault, among others). However, Minahen neglects to connect Blake's use of the vortex in *Milton* to the intense inquiries into cones of vision as vortical phenomena in the diverse writings of Newton, Berkeley, Priestley (to name only a few) and, of course, Blake himself. Worse still, the chapter neglects specific attempts to address Blake's use of the vortex; the most glaring omission, to this reader, is failure to reference the information provided in Nelson Hilton's chapter of *Literal Imagination* entitled "Word and Text: Vortex and Wheel," although other examples could be cited.³

There is much to recommend a reading of *Vortex/t: The Poetic of Turbulence*, for the continuity and development of vortical symbolism as a counter epistemology capable of embodying the inner and outer turbulence of thought and experience is thoroughly established. However, there is considerable room for disagreement with individual readings in the text, and readers should be prepared to engage the text dialogically, probing the limits of Minahen's application of vortical processes and entering, in the process, the vortex of mental strife that Blake terms "mental war."

³ E.g., Kay Parkhurst Easson and Roger Easson's "Commentary" to their edition of *Milton* (Boulder: Shambhala Press; New York: Random House, 1978) which speaks directly to the function of the eye as vortical in nature (145-50) and the vortex itself as "Blake's image of spiritual travel" (151 ff.).