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R E V I E W

Miracles of Rare Device: The Poet's Sense of Self in Nineteenth-Century Poetry by Fred Kaplan

Robert F. Gleckner

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Fred Kaplan, *Miracles of Rare Device: The Poet's Sense of Self in Nineteenth-Century Poetry*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972. Pp. 191. \$9.95

Reviewed by Robert F. Gleckner

The aims of this interesting little book are several, all rather neatly related, ranging from enormously ambitious (leavened by an attractive modesty) to solidly modest in the light of often distinguished and persuasive previous commentaries and analyses. The latter aim is expressed succinctly in the book's first sentence: "This is a study of the structure and imagery of some major poems of the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries" (p. 11), more particularly of some poems of some of the English Romantic and Victorian poets from the early 1790's through 1864: Blake's "The Tyger," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and the "Merlin and Vivien" section of *Idylls of the King*, Browning's "Andrea del Sarto," "Pictor Ignotus," "Dis Aliter Visum," and *Saul*, and Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*. There are as well some side looks at Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and "Dejection," Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," and Shelley's "To a Skylark," generally for purposes of comparison and contrast.

Of these some are quite impressive achievements in their own right--e.g. "Dis Aliter Visum," *Empedocles on Etna*, and perhaps "Frost at Midnight"--the kind of explication one returns to, and should return to, whenever and wherever the poem is read and discussed again; others are persuasive but somehow without spark, where nothing is dull or pedestrian but where one also misses the opportunity to say with the excitement of shared discovery, "By God, he's right" (e.g. "Tintern Abbey," "Locksley Hall," "Merlin and Vivien," *Saul*, and "Andrea del Sarto"); and still others ("The Tyger," "Pictor Ignotus") are competent and adequate without inspiring confidence in the full worth of their inclusion--though it should be added in fairness that the "Pictor Ignotus" section is there mainly

Robert F. Gleckner is Professor English and Dean, College of Humanities, University of California, Riverside. He is author of *The Piper and the Bard: A Study of William Blake, Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, editor of *Romanticism: Points of View and Selected Writings of William Blake*. He is editing a volume of essays on Romanticism, re-editing the Cambridge Edition of Byron's poetry, and writing a book on "The Language of Romantic Poetry."

Wittreich, review of Kremen, continued

of which they are all, despite their different perspectives, an anatomy. Moreover, this is also the moment when, coming to full recognition of their fallenness, Adam and Eve experience their transfiguration. Though fallen into lowliest plight--kneeling on the ground in a posture of humiliation--they stand metaphorically, spiritually transfigured. Therein lies the pertinence of the design to Blake's *Songs* and to Kremen's approach to them. Yet in her book this perception is unfocused.

The Imagination of the Resurrection, though it may too often slide across the surface of Blake's poetry and of his art, gives attention to a theme of monumental importance. It reminds us of Benjamin Malkin's contention that the Book of Revelation "may well be supposed to engross much of Mr. Blake's study" (*A Father's Memoirs of His Child* [1806], p. xxx) and goes a long way toward verifying that supposition. Blake has demonstrably turned to the last book of the Bible, has located the reference points of its "sublime allegory" not in human history but in the human psyche, and has given to its presiding themes their grandest poetic statement. Blake invites a study of his work

within the context of the whole tradition of prophecy² of which the Book of Revelation is one culmination and the poetry of Milton another. Such a book has yet to be written. Kremen does not accomplish it, but she does, however falteringly, pave the way.

2 Kremen points to three studies that provide a background for such an undertaking: Farrer's *A Rebirth of Images* (1949), Kermodé's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), and Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. ed. (1970). To this list, the following studies should be added: Morton Bloomfield's *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (1961), Abraham Heschel's *The Prophets*, 2 vols. (1962), Murray Roston's *Prophet and Poet* (1965), Angus Fletcher's *The Prophetic Moment* (1971), and Tony Stoneburner's "Notes on Prophecy and Apocalypse in a Time of Anarchy and Revolution" in *Literature in Revolution*, eds. G. A. White and C. Newman (1972). Stoneburner specifically asks that "the utility" of his notes be tested "by bringing them self-consciously to a reading of such works as Blake's prophecies" (p. 265). Also pertinent to this sort of investigation is M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism*, cited in the text of this review, and Austin Farrer's *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (1964), an extension and refinement of his earlier book, *A Rebirth of Images*.

June K. Singer. *The Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake*. New York: Putnam's Sons, for the C. G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1970. Pp. xvi + 270, facsimiles (part color). \$10

Reviewed by Margret Schaefer

June K. Singer's *The Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake* is a Jungian reading of Blake's prophetic books with special emphasis on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Unfortunately, it is neither psychological nor interpretive. Singer, a Jungian analyst, regards Blake's works as "a pre-form of certain of Jung's essential concepts," and in her book she has set out to explain Blake's thought by systematically recasting it into Jungian terminology. The problem with her effort is that it merely involves a translation of one poetic mythology into the terms of another. Unfortunately, this process neither explains nor clarifies, but merely obfuscates Blake's thought. For Blake's Angels, Devils, Emanations, Dragon-men, and Unnam'd Forms Singer substitutes mandalas,

animas, shadows, uroboroses, quaternaries, *conjunctio oppositiones*, and "incomprehensible mysteries"--an exercise which is often interesting and sometimes ingenious, like a rebus puzzle (e.g. find the mandala hidden on the title engraving of *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), but not in any sense "interpretive." To interpret, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means to "render clear or explicit; to elucidate; to explain," and that is precisely what Singer's book does not do: one cannot explain a difficult and often obscure symbology by imposing upon it another equally obscure, if more programmatic one.

In fact, after wading through all the

Margret Schaefer is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago. She also holds a part-time appointment at Northwestern Medical School's Department of Psychiatry, where she teaches literature and psychiatry. Her dissertation, recently completed at Berkeley, is an investigation of genre from a psychological point of view. She is especially interested in the application of psychology to literary figures and problems.

Gleckner, review of Kaplan, continued

as an entre to the fine discussion of the relatively neglected "Dis Aliter Visum." Once having offered these pontifical judgments, however, one must acknowledge immediately that scintillating explication of some poems for their own sakes is not the overriding purpose of this book.

Professor Kaplan's second aim, then, is to try to establish the fact that these poems, and by implication other Romantic and Victorian poems, are what they are about. That is, by his manipulation of imagery, syntax, rhythm, and structure the poet attempts to create in the reader an "experience" akin to that the poet himself went through in the total creation of the poem: the poem as both process and product. Thus Blake's tiger "is, among other things, *this* poem in particular" (p. 18), the "artistic form" to which we as readers respond in the same way Blake responded to the tiger in the first place. More readily seen, perhaps, "Tintern Abbey" becomes a "surrogate for nature" just as Dorothy at the end of the poem becomes "a 'moveable feast,' an embodiment 'for all lovely forms . . . for all sweet sounds and harmonies' . . . the human equivalent of a Wordsworth poem" (pp. 41-42). This is an extremely attractive thesis (although Professor Kaplan really cannot sustain it beyond Wordsworth--or perhaps Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight"), but it is not one that can unify this book. In a sense some of the poems examined could be seen not as surrogates at all, but rather as

living testaments to the inability of the poet to create such "moveable feasts," poems which as product describe, dramatize, or recount process without ever becoming process. Indeed, Professor Kaplan misses a good bet by not pursuing a splendid idea further and thereby distinguishing more sharply than he does poems of the Romantic and Victorian eras. And, of course, Shelley would have played a major role in such a book.

But again I seem to be carping at what Professor Kaplan is not finally about. His largest claim, and in great measure his achievement, is quite otherwise--and also quite grand. It is to demonstrate "that a major key to Romantic [and, presumably, Victorian] poetry is an understanding of how the artist reveals in his poetry his concern with himself as artist and with his art" (p. 11), "the self as poetic process and poem" (p. 77). Or, taking his cue from Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry," Professor Kaplan hopes "to affirm the self-conscious poem of 'the act of the mind' as an important phase in the poetic tradition" (p. 13), at least from the Romantics to the present. Or: to explore "the nineteenth century's confrontation with the relationship between creative anxiety and the vehicle through which that anxiety is communicated" (p. 13). Or: to chart the progressive demythologization of nature as a tenable "symbol or vehicle in a process of the rebirth of the poetic imagination" (p. 68). Or, finally and most grandly, "to arrange and interpret

paraphernalia with which Singer, under the guise of explication, encumbers Blake, one finds that her book is but a repeat of the standard interpretations of the texts put forth by critics such as Frye, Damon and Bloom. Bloom in particular has already spelled out for us in what way *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is "about the marriage of contraries, the union of opposites, the basic duality of man as expressed in the terms 'material and spiritual' or 'body and soul' and the nature of the relationship between them." Singer has merely taken a good many of such interpretations and added a welter of references to ancient history and mythology, religion, alchemy, astrology, and hermetic philosophy and has tied everything together with a pastiche of citations from such Jungian luminaries as Erich Neumann, Alan Watts, Jolanda Jacobi and, of course, Jung himself. Further, she has imposed all this heavy structure upon poor Blake with an allegorizing and spiritualizing rhetoric intended to convince by its appeal to emotion rather than to intellect.

This rhetoric, vaguely inspirational and exhortatory, is typical of most Jungian efforts at literary analysis and is a serious barrier to

understanding in this book. It has a pervasive adjectival insistence which has evident designs upon the reader: everything is described insistently as "transcendent," "numinous," "holy," "sacred," "ineffable," "mysterious," "tremendous," "incomprehensible," "dark," or even "divine." Concrete images are allegorized by being classified as archetypes and dignified by being given scholarly-sounding Greek or Latin names. Thus, every image of a woman is an "anima," every guide a "psychopomp," every marriage a *conjunctio oppositio*, every snake an "uroboros," and every geometrical figure a mandala. Archetypes themselves are glorified as "autonomous," "ineffable," or "wise." It may be that some readers derive a sense of spiritual uplift from reading this sort of thing, but I feel that rational analysis is better criticism than surreptitious theology and romantic mysticism.

What this rhetoric can do to a poetic text is exemplified by Singer's comments on the opening lines of the "Proverbs of Hell" (plate 10), which are "The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals / Beauty, the hands and feet Proportion":

Gleckner, review of Kaplan, continued

some portion of the legacy bequeathed to us by nineteenth-century poetry and to order and structure a myth that may become part of the tradition we pass on" (p. 157). While I am not entirely certain what this last statement means, the fact that this "tradition" is forwarded by Joyce, Nabokov, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Frost, Williams, and most especially Stevens is duly acknowledged by Professor Kaplan.

The fact remains, however, that this expansive thesis produces both some interesting as well as some relatively uninteresting results. The latter are largely those referred to above in my comments on the explications or readings themselves. Often these are less revelatory of what has hitherto been unrecognized in the poems than shrewd reshapings of much that is already known--or re-readings of these poems in the light of what Professor Kaplan perceives as a valuable context in which to view the history of poetry from the Romantics to the present. The continuity that he sees in the poet's concern for himself, the creative process, and the poem--and the various permutations of that concern as it evolves over a time when the shape and structure of poetry, as well as of the cultural, social, and religious milieu, was changing substantially--is clearly a valuable insight and makes great sense in any attempt to see late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry whole rather than as bifurcated into two distinct and relatively unrelated "periods." And, further, that that continuity is demonstrable in the

structure, imagery, syntax is a significant achievement, worthy of our careful attention. What I guess I'm saying is: I think we knew much--or even all--of this, but I don't know of anyone who has to date put it all down before us.

From the point of view of Blake studies, I must add regretfully that I find the Blake section the least satisfactory in the book. If we can assent to the idea that Blake's poetry (and in particular poems like "The Tyger") "is a triumphantly unself-conscious expression of the expansion of his consciousness and a celebration of his limitless powers as a poet" (p. 15), I for one cannot agree that "the tiger . . . is the clarified and unambiguous product of the artist's imagination, taking its substance from the disordered real world and existing as an art product in that world" (p. 20). Or, that the poem for Blake is an "imposition" by the artist of "form upon matter," the grasping of "unformalized experience and nature" and the "shaping" of them into a work of art (p. 23). Or, that the "chain" of "The Tyger" is what "holds down, as in a firm vise, the artifact being made" (p. 24). Or, finally, that for Blake "There is no gap or distinction between the creator of all things and his creation on the one hand, and the poet and his poem on the other" (p. 27). From this point of view it's a shame that Professor Kaplan began with Blake. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley would have served him--and his thesis--better.