

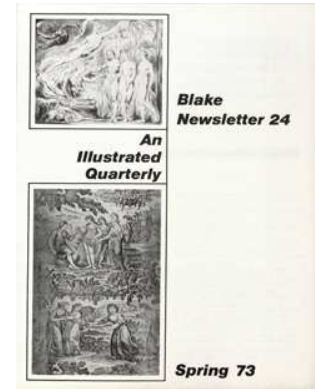
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R E V I E W

Kathryn R. Kremen, *The Imagination of the Resurrection: The Poetic Continuity of a Religious Motif in Donne, Blake, and Yeats*

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Reviews

Kathryn R. Kremen, *The Imagination of the Resurrection: The Poetic Continuity of a Religious Motif in Donne, Blake, and Yeats*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1972. Pp. 344 + 20 plates. \$15

Reviewed by Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr.

Kathryn Kremen's *The Imagination of the Resurrection* is fascinating in conception, flawed in execution, and careless in documentation. One would like to believe that a scholar who invokes names knows them, but Kremen provides little nourishment for such faith. We read "Ferrer" for Austin Farrer, who has done the finest modern commentary on the Book of Revelation, and "Ramon" for S. Foster Damon, who is the acknowledged dean of modern Blake studies (p. 330). Samson of *Samson Agonistes* is spelled "Sampson" (p. 333), and Adrian Van Sinderen becomes "Van Sinderin" (p. 336). The author pays tribute to the "sympathetic copyediting" her book received (p. 17), but any reader of it will wish that the author herself had been more rigorously disciplined as a scholar, for the book possesses an even graver technical fault. Its arguments are mounted on editions that have been superseded by their own authors or by close associates of them. Instead of being pointed to the most recent edition of David Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (the title is given inexactly on p. 330), or of the biographies by Alexander Gilchrist and Mona Wilson, we are guided to the first edition. That may be fine counsel for the book collector, but not for students of Blake. Nor is it helpful to be sent to J. Max Patrick's Doubleday edition of Milton's prose works, since Patrick paraphrases most of them. Kremen's is an overly long book that could have been happily shortened by eliminating redundancy (how often must we be told that the Last Judgment is a mental act or that Jesus and Los are the likeness and similitude of each other?); and hers is a book that could have been rendered more readable by sharper, crisper formulations. Sentences like "The moral act of the imagination whereby everlasting salvation is attained is to forgive" (p. 134), or "Accordingly, Blake thus redefines . . ." (p. 138), abound. But technical and stylistic deficiencies of this sort should not prevent us from considering what the book says, and, doing this, we must first contend with its title.

The title points at once to Kremen's subject--the resurrection motif--and to her thesis--the "continuity" of this motif, which "begins as a religious doctrine" but then "becomes a possession of the romantic poets, a recreation of the imagination" (p. 15). Already the critical idiom of the book is problematical. John Donne is not ordinarily called a "romantic" poet, and throughout most of our century he has been used to define a poetic sensibility that is in opposition

to "romanticism." Furthermore, William Blake has proved so resistant to the categories of literary criticism and was himself so recalcitrant in his attitude toward tradition that the term "continuity" becomes immediately suspect. It becomes more so when we are told, presumably to allay our misgivings, that there is "a direct line of connectedness between Donne and Blake through their Protestant affiliation, and between Blake and Yeats through the latter's poetic affiliation with Blake as a spiritual authority" (p. 15). The Blake-Yeats relationship has been well-documented, brilliantly illuminated, by Hazard Adams and, more recently, by Harold Bloom (see *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision* [1955] and Chapter V of *Yeats* [1970]). Yet Bloom's *Yeats* and his more recent study, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), cause us to wonder whether we should be talking about "continuity" at all.¹ Even Kremen wonders, albeit in a footnote, as she confides: "I am uncertain . . . if this willful misinterpretation . . . is the only or most desirable, kind of poetic influence. While sympathetic to the above situation, intuitively I prefer the example of Elijah's passing to Elisha his mantle" (p. 303, n. 6). *Intuition and preference* are irrelevant here. At issue is not the question of what kind of influence is possible, but what kind of influence operated on Blake.

I do not think that Bloom has answered the question, nor has Kremen, though one must concede, however reluctantly, that Blake provides an arsenal of examples that would seem to support Bloom's theory while subverting Kremen's. We cannot so easily dismiss the spirit of contention with which Blake approaches most of the poets he illustrates and most of the traditions that impinge upon his work. A poet who repeatedly uses tradition against itself, who openly avows that he must create his own system rather than be enslaved by another man's, does not seem a promising subject for the thesis that Kremen advances. To label Blake a Protestant and then to use the label to identify him with

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¹ Bloom presents an eloquent articulation of an attitude that has governed Blake studies for some time: "The Covering Cherub then is a demon of continuity; his baleful charm imprisons the present in the past, and reduces a world of differences into a grayness of uniformity." A few lines later he says, "Discontinuity is freedom. Prophets and advanced analysts alike proclaim discontinuity" (p. 39).

Donne can be no more helpful than it has been to label Milton a Puritan and then to identify him with Calvin. Both identifications falsify the poets involved in the affiliation and distort, if they do not altogether destroy, the minute particulars of their respective visions. M. H. Abrams has recently shown that Blake's ideas may be profitably explored in relation to Protestant tradition, not that of John Donne but that of the religious dissenters with whom Christopher Hill has shown Milton to have had his deepest affinities (see *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* [1971] and *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* [1972]).

If our objective is to perceive "continuity" between Blake and tradition, then it is unfortunate that Donne, not Milton, assumed a place in this study. It may be, as Kremen says, that the inclusion of "Milton" would not "fundamentally change" her conclusions "either about the relation between a religious doctrine and its poetic incorporation or about the process of secularization" (p. 15). But that is beside the point. The inclusion of Milton would have mitigated the spectacle of presenting a context so remote from Blake that if he were to know it he would have had to spend his time reading the *Patrologia*. The context developed by Christopher Hill in *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (1971) is far more pertinent. The inclusion of Milton would have established connections that, once perceived, could have enabled the author to draw lines of continuity between Blake and the tradition of dissent in Protestantism, between this tradition and the Book of Revelation, which was its fundamental document, and between the Book of Revelation and recent, not Medieval, commentary on it. In this Book, the theme of resurrection receives its fullest delineation; and from this Book and commentaries on it, especially those by David Pareus, Isaac Newton, Joseph Priestley, and Emanuel Swedenborg, Blake probably derived his knowledge of the motif and shaped his own understanding of it. If our concern is finally with the theme of resurrection and its articulation in Blake's poetry, then it is probably more important to be told that there were about twenty separate commentaries and sermons on the Book of Revelation published between 1780 and 1800 than to be told what Thomas Aquinas said about the Book. And I assume that the concern of this book is finally with Blake: he is its center. While 50 pages are devoted to the origins and development of the resurrection doctrine (pp. 29-79), and another 48 pages to Donne (pp. 80-128), while the last 64 pages of the book contain an essay on Yeats (pp. 260-307) and a "Post-Mortem" (pp. 308-24), the whole middle of the book, a very expansive middle, rivets attention to Blake (pp. 129-259).

In these pages, there is liberal quotation from Blake accompanied by extensive paraphrase into which is folded some keen perception and intelligent criticism. There is, however, more paraphrase than criticism; and this is particularly regrettable, since the concepts dealt with are difficult ones--centrally important to Blake, yet

not easily penetrated or explained by a single passage from his canon. It is just not enough to say that "'divine vision' means . . ." and then quote from *There Is No Natural Religion* (pp. 132-33). More troublesome still is the tendency to blur distinctions that ought to be observed. For instance, the "states" of the *Songs* become one with the mythology of the later prophecies; the *Songs*, we are advised, "belong to Blake's fourfold system" (p. 141). The philosophy of contraries, as it is expounded in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is undistinguished from the philosophy as it is expounded in *Milton*, despite the fact that in this poem the idea of contraries is tied to the principle of negation for which there is no correlative in the earlier work. Orc in *America*, despite David Erdman's warnings, is identified with the Orc of the succeeding prophecies; and, predictably, the Orc cycle of the later poems is projected back onto this one. Finally, the resurrection motif is pursued relentlessly, through one poem into another, without any real acknowledgment that in some poems it is more prominent, more pervasive, than in others. Surely the theme as it is advanced in *The French Revolution* and *America* is different from its unfolding in the Lambeth poems; and its articulation within these visions of despair is qualitatively different from its presentment within the apocalyptic visions of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. The problem is not that Kremen's accents are wrong; it is that there are none.

Appropriately, the resurrection motif is pursued verbally and pictorially (the book is adorned with twenty carefully chosen, cloudy reproductions); yet what is said about the designs seldom advances our understanding of them. Where there is calculated ambiguity, it is erased, as in the discussion of plate 42 of *Milton* (p. 192). When we seem to be at the threshold of fresh insight, we are given instead a critical cliché. Thus we are told, by way of elucidating the title-page design for the *Songs*, that it "shows fallen man represented as Adam and Eve, who are girded ['girdled' in Keynes] with leaves, showing ['shewing' in Keynes] that they are in the state of Experience; tongues of flame play over them to indicate their expulsion from Eden" (p. 142). This much, in practically the same words, we have learned from Geoffrey Keynes. We are not told that this design resembles conceptually, and in many of its details, the scene often chosen to illustrate Book X of *Paradise Lost*, the book which contains the poem's dramatic center and climax.

Milton's version of the fall is not Blake's. That I take to be self-evident and really not so important as the fact that both Milton and Blake as poets, though they might differently locate the fall as a theological event, still perceive it, as a poetical event, occurring in the precise moment when Adam and Eve achieve consciousness of their fallenness. In that moment the real crisis of *Paradise Lost* occurs; in that moment, for both poets, man passes from innocence to experience. Milton's epic drives unremittingly toward the moment from which Blake's *Songs* unfold, the moment

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

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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*.