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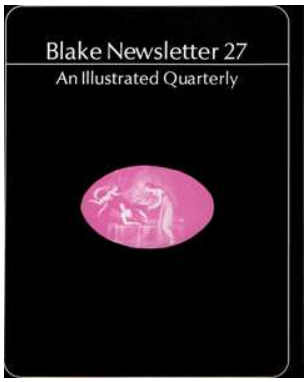

Curran and Wittreich, Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on the Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem

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REVIEWS

Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., eds. *Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1973. Pp. 384 + 28 ill. $17.50

Reviewed by Hazard Adams

Well, we've come a long way! In his interesting essay on *Jerusalem*, one of the editors of this volume, Stuart Curran, writes confidently: "Difficult it may be, but no sophisticated reader confesses himself lost in its midst, unable to comprehend the plate he is reading. In addition to the range and subtlety of the epic style, in *Jerusalem* Blake attains a clarity and a sense of driving purpose beyond his previous efforts." Curran is compelled then to say again that the poem is not easy. He knows that his optimism has been only recently shared even by the most sophisticated Blakeans. The need to make the remark at all indicates an awareness that much is to be done before *Jerusalem* is truly delivered. (The last essay in the book by Karl Kroeber is called "Delivering *Jerusalem*.") This volume, which faces the issue of interpreting the major prophecies, marks, along with Erdman and Grant's earlier *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (1970), a phase in Blake scholarship. We have an opportunity to take stock and to observe the trends.

First, communality. Of the fifteen authors represented in *Blake's Sublime Allegory*, six appeared in the earlier volume. Several essays in the earlier volume are alluded to in the later one. The issues that the authors address are interrelated, and the various authors are intimately aware of each other's work. With a few exceptions the book represents a new generation of Blake scholars. The influence of Frye remains strong, but several issues are those that in recent years have been given primary attention by Erdman and Hagstrum. The temper of the essays is one of an industry, rather than the received style of individual search. There is a sense of belonging--not to the reprobate class, as the earliest Blake scholars thought of themselves--but to a sort of guild. Does the appearance of two collections of original essays on two loosely conceived subjects mark a new style for scholars? Perhaps this communality is simply a reflection of the social fashion and group psychologizing of the age. But it has not often been present among literary commentators. On the other hand, all of this may merely be a sign of Blake scholarship settling into the same slough of deadening commentary that plagued the Spenser industry about thirty years ago. I hope not. Yet, clever and intelligent as many of these essays are, none of them grasps the imagination as some previous work on Blake still does.

Second, issues. Two are paramount, and they are interrelated. These essays try to look closely at aspects of the long poems and to interpret them. Curran quotes Bloom on *Jerusalem*: " . . . the problem may be only that the poem has not had enough accurate and close readers as yet." Also, many of these essays emphasize the relation of poetry to design. The concern carries over from *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*. This relation has provided an immensely complex problem and has been the generator of the worst sort of pedantry as well as some useful thought.

A few years ago John Grant wrote an essay in *Blake Studies* entitled "You Can't Write About Blake's Pictures Like That"; and he pretty conclusively showed that a previous essay had fallen into numerous errors of approach. What remains to be asked is not whether one *can* write in a certain way about Blake's pictures, but which of the possible ways is really worthwhile. In the preface to *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, Erdman wisely observes, "In the reading of Blake's illuminations, the advance has been slower and less steady; common ground has been gained, plate by plate, but some has been lost." There are probably many reasons for this. For the most part, the art critics have not wished to concern themselves with Blake. Supposedly reliable histories give him short shrift. Thus, the job of commentary has been left largely to literary scholars. The result has been a curiously *literary* commentary on his designs, aside from those discussions which are little more than attempts to describe clearly what objects are depicted in the pictures. Even the latter literalize the picture, turning it into a sort of text. There is nothing wrong with this, but it does not seem to help us much toward answering the fundamental question of the relation in form between poetry and design, even as we admit (as we must) that Blake's designs are *literary* in the sense that they present us with symbolic *figures*. But what about symbolic *style*? I am constantly being lectured, it seems, that the designs are integral with the text and that one can't understand the text without them, or that one more readily understands the text with them, or *vice versa*. However, I know of relatively few instances in which the design is a crucial aid of the sort claimed and no instance in which the design is indispensable. I have had to conclude that it is not in the area of the *literary* reading of the picture or the interpretation of symbolic figures that the connection is critically important. Indeed, one senses too often in commentary on the symbolism of a picture that the discussion is somehow at the wrong level or trivial, for the very reason that it is turning the paintings into verbal structures. We are wary enough of discussions that turn poems into visual scenes or tapestries, and there is a whole critical tradition devoted to the problems in this sort of approach. It must be the formal relations of poetry and design which, beyond the *literary* symbolism, produce a single artistic whole or im-

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pression or effect. It is with the total presentation, seen as a "presentation" perhaps in Langer's sense, that we are concerned. Beyond Frye's 1951 essay, cited by Erdman, we have not come very far.

Nor does this book travel any greater distance than that achieved by W. J. T. Mitchell in his "Blake's Composite Art" in *Visionary Forms Dramatic*. Mitchell began his essay by asking "how" the relation of Blake's poetry and painting may best be understood. His essay strikes toward the heart of the issue by at least getting the question right. It seems also to have passed muster with Grant, the most severe of our scholars in insisting on examining Blake's pictures with great care. The essays on *Jerusalem* in the present book stay pretty much with the text, and *Milton* the same, except for Irene Tayler on the Comus designs. There the interest is in symbolic figures, as in Morton Paley's essay on the figure of the garment.

Third, new critical fashions and concerns. Some of these are worth serious notice; others are seriously worth noting for their triviality. A definite sign of incursion into Blake studies of what I cannot resist calling pop phenomenology is offered by the lead essay, portentously entitled "The Aim of Blake's Prophecies and the Uses of Blake Criticism." The author Jerome J. McGann attacks "objectification": " . . . to the degree that one regards Blake's art as an object of analysis and interpretation, to the degree any criticism fosters such a view, to that degree has Blake been misused; even, I would venture to say, misread." The poems of Blake do not offer "an explanation of, but an occasion for experiencing . . ." (I do not know of any sophisticated modern criticism that regards poems as explanatory.) The terms "I" and "Thou" are specially invoked, and the Blakean poem is regarded as requiring its meaning from the reader, the only personality who can experience in vision that for which the poem is the occasion. The language here is that derived from a criticism centered upon the "phenomenology of reading," to borrow Georges Poulet's term. Blake is quoted to justify treatment of his work as a "vehicle for vision." McGann disapproves of the objectivity of the poem, as apparently hypothesized by the Anglo-American new criticism. The term "objective," however, seems to me to do double duty in such attacks as this. Objectivity in the old Lockean or Cartesian senses, generates its opposite, the subjective. But the new critical sense of the term was not this. To talk of making the poem an aesthetic "object" is a sort of shorthand for freeing it from the objectivity of Locke into that connection with the reader paradoxically described in Kant by the terms "disinterest" or "purposiveness without purpose" and the like, or in Valéry by the image of dancing. This latter sense, sometimes called "distance" is, in fact, the opposite of the objectivity of the Lockean. This tradition of thought, which fully appreciates the ironic relation of commentary to text, is anti-scientistic and anti-positivistic. The "object" in this profoundly anti-objective sense is often described as having a "life of its own." Analogies of organicism and miraculism are frequently invoked.

Why all of this? There was something quite practical about it. Critics wanted to develop a way to talk about a poem that was useful. There was before them the sorry example of critical impressionism, which had solipsistically accepted the subject-object split. Flying from this extreme, critics eliminated the writer and reader as useful points of reference and began with the poem hypostatized. This was, as I say, a purely practical act in order to make contact with something present and not requiring fictive reconstruction of "author" or "reader." Critics like Poulet attempt to collapse these entities back into the terms "consciousness" or "intersubjectivity." Philosophically, as Kenneth Burke says of Sartre on *le Néant*, it's "good showmanship," but when all is said and done whatever one locates one locates in or as a text, and in this sense one objectifies it, which is to say that one frees it. The problem with the criticism of consciousness or "vision" criticism is that after the showmanship there must come silence. McGann denies "meaning" to Blake. Logically, his essay should end in silence at this point, but instead he proceeds to find meaning everywhere. He proceeds as Frye has observed every commentator must: to allegorize, and thus to establish a meaning he has already denied.

The phenomenological fashion is to proceed through a series of denials of the *objectivity* of the text, which is often confused with its *existence*, either to exhaustion of the critical impulse itself in the face of the formal and technical qualities of the work or to the "showmanship" of self-reflexive dwelling upon the critic's curious position, whether heroic, tragic, absurd, or whatever. It is no surprise that phenomenological criticism in many varieties rarely sticks with the text.

McGann knows he is employing logic to destroy logic. One is reminded of certain remarks by Yeats, but Yeats wisely chose poetry as his bow. Phenomenology must regard literature as the ultimate form of philosophy and must endlessly discard critical languages. Poulet's master is not Plato, Aristotle, or finally even Descartes. It is Mallarmé gesturing. But criticism must always finally objectify in the second sense I have mentioned above, protesting eloquently as it does so. Or it must dissolve itself into the forms of art. Perhaps a philosophy of being can rescue us from this situation, but for the interpreter the Kantian idea taken up by Schiller that we objectify the work in order to free ourselves and it into another realm is definitive. The ultimate criticism for McGann is silence, but, as we see, he wishes to speak. He takes as definitive, incidentally, Shelley's view that when composition begins inspiration is on the wane. It would be well to submit this idea to rigorous analysis before making it a rule of art or attributing it to Blake. I don't myself think Blake believed it, and I'm sure *Jerusalem* says he thinks his vision is complete in the work, even discovered by the act of its creation. In any case there are numerous critics who have questioned Shelley's point seriously.

Still McGann's heart is in the right place. He

hates to see Blake deadened by pedantic analytical procedures. He feels that Blake had a silent message for us that our act of reading him was to regenerate. No quarrel, really, with that. Or with the idea that every movement generates its pedantic objectivists, when inspiration becomes memory. In any case, the first essay is in the best modern way, as we say; and it suggests that we are to be faced with uses of Blake criticism that will right a balance now tipped toward deadening objectivity--the condemnation of Blake to the art museum, as Merleau-Ponty would put it, perhaps.

The last essay in the book also follows this line to some extent. Karl Kroeber asserts that Blake's *Jerusalem* needs to be delivered from its interpreters rather than from oblivion: an example Kroeber offers of interpretive error is to think of *Jerusalem* as related in certain ways to *Finnegans Wake*. I am prepared to acknowledge that there are many differences, but the relation of *Finnegans Wake* to Blake's later prophecies is substantial, as any close attention to *Finnegans Wake* ought to reveal. Yes, indeed, let us all insist on delivering *Jerusalem* as unscathed as possible but remember that it has been delivered at least partly to us, and probably saved from oblivion, by the efforts of preceding critics and scholars, that understanding of Blake's work has come slowly, and that the progress to date is a tribute to those who have helped us by being in some way not quite right.

It is time also to deliver terms like "ingenious exegesis," for ingenious exegesis isn't all bad. In a very ingenious scholarly essay, which incidentally gives us a possible model for understanding Joyce's relation to Blake, Joseph Anthony Wittreich shows us how Blake is related to the "epic tradition that by Spenser and Milton was tied to the tradition of prophecy." Blake's *Jerusalem* is "not only a consolidation and continuation of Blake's previous poems . . . ; it is also a consolidation of the visions contained in Milton's epics and in Revelation prophecy." *Jerusalem* "subsumes" previous prophecies and takes its structure from them, trying to reach beyond or to "complete" them. This is an essay that is not only ingenious but also exegetical--the most valuable in the book, I think.

Of the several other essays, many deal with more specialized topics. Ronald Grimes writing on time and space in Blake gathers together a lot of information scattered through Blake criticism and corrects some misapprehensions. Though not entirely original, it makes some excellent points and offers an especially interesting discussion of Blake on "reasoning historians." Edward Rose's essay on Los is more or less a journeyman's piece of work with few surprises. Jean Hagstrum's essay on Luvah and Vala provides us with a model of helpful, lucid commentary. Morton Paley's essay on the figure of the garment in Blake gathers together our sense of this image and clarifies it, but is more specialized in its use than Hagstrum's. Then we have sixty-one pages of John Grant at full throttle telling those of us who can't see what is in front of our noses--and we are legion--what's really in those designs for *Vala*.

Next we come to the essays on *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. We may notice by now that McGann's essay did not, in fact, set forth a theoretical position that others would follow. The essays thus far are works of scholarship and commentary without the sort of self-conscious theorizing that McGann's essay tends to predict. Mary Lynn Johnson and Brian Wilkie take us through *The Four Zoas* and try to give us what a few years ago we would call a "relevant" reading: *The Four Zoas* as contemporary soap opera or what the sophomoric will dig. The essay seems entirely out of keeping with the immediately surrounding essays, operating at a much more simplistic level. It does nothing with the really difficult problems of interpretation that *The Four Zoas* presents--those of structure and transition created by the curious state of the text. There is, of course, a sense in which the essay fits with the first and last essays of the collection. It is trendy. We hear of "mental law and order," "male chauvinism," the "youth culture," and the like. But trendiness runs as fast as it can to stay in the same place.

Irene Tayler, James Rieger, and W. J. T. Mitchell--the last the most interesting, I think--help us in various ways with *Milton*, a poem on which there has been a good amount of recent work. Someone is going to have to put it all together. On *Jerusalem* the collection offers considerable ingenuity. Roger Easson appears at first to have taken up the challenge laid down in McGann's essay. He analyzes the relation of the reader to the poem and to Blake in *Jerusalem*. Actually, though, he finds, instead of phenomenological intersubjectivity, an allegory of the relationship of author to reader projected objectively in the poem. The character Jerusalem, both a city and a woman, is also the poem. *Jerusalem* is seen as a metapoem. Either this is problematical, or it is a truism, with all successful poems made into metapoems by critics. The essay's most interesting aspect is the discussion of Blake's idea of the reader.

Stuart Curran follows with an elaborate piece declaring for the existence of seven structures in the poem: " . . . a primary structure of four divisions, obviously linked by calls to various classes of readers; a two-part structure delineating the marked contrast between Ulro and Eden; a three-part structure whose pivots are climactic representations of the fallen state; a threefold and a fourfold division within each chapter stressing the dialectical mode of the poem; a sixfold division emphasizing the continuity of major events; a second three-part structure, derived from the sixfold, which surrounds the central two-thirds of the work, the World of Albion, with the perspective of Los's visionary labor; and a sevenfold structure stressing the poem's genre as epic prophecy and recalling its heritage within the tradition of Christian apocalypse." Curran's collaborative effort with Wittreich in making this collection goes beyond a general interest in Blake. Their two essays are closely related in approach; one is tempted to imagine another book, a collaboration of authorship rather than editorship, in which their two essays would be chapters, the subject

being the generic structure of the prophecies. I must confess to some skepticism about all of the structures Curran finds, however, even as I applaud Curran's extremely ingenious and insightful essay. Did Blake, or Curran, stop at seven for occult reasons? Would Curran demur from a follower's attempt to discover that magnificent all-containing eighth lurking in the forests? Which is to say, with all the good will in the world and with all respect for the labors of these editors and authors, that *Jerusalem* remains yet to be fully delivered, but not, I think, from its critics.