

Karl Kroeber. *Blake in a Post-Secular Era: Early Prophecies*. Ed. and with a foreword by Joseph Viscomi. [College Park, MD]: Romantic Circles, 2012. xxvi + 156 pp., 28 black-and-white illus. \$19.95, paperback; free as an e-book from <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/kroeber>>.

Reviewed by J. B. Mertz

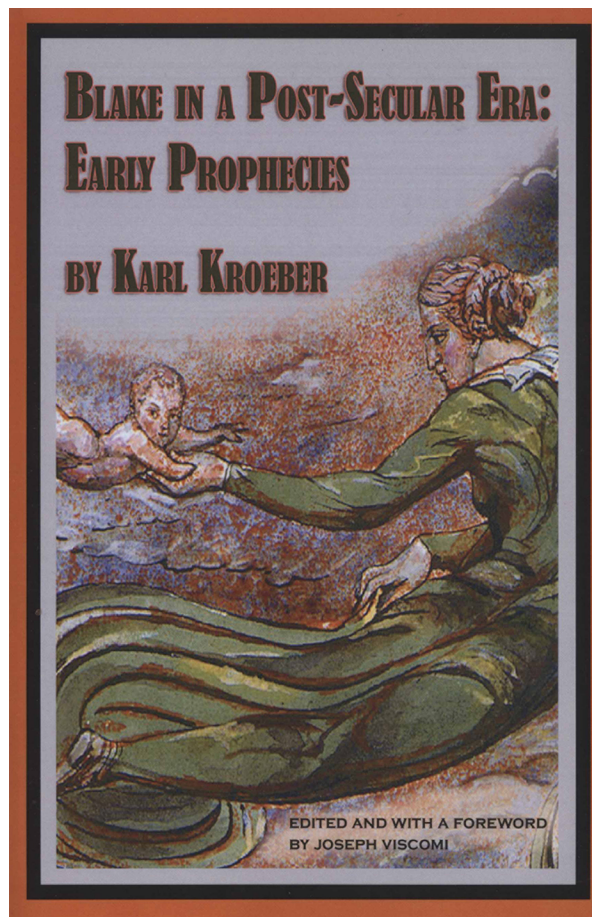
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1 **K**ARL Kroeber (1926–2009) was a scholar of British romanticism, romantic visual art, and Native American literature, and his numerous writings include criticism on William Blake¹ as well as occasional reviews for this journal.² His death from cancer interrupted the completion of what would have been a much longer book, and the present work merely comprises what Kroeber “originally intended as introductory to a study of William Blake’s longest and most complex poems” (xxi) (that is, *Vala* or *The Four Zoas*, *Milton a Poem*, and *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion*). As an “interrupted” work, *Blake in a Post-Secular Era* calls to mind Peter Fisher’s unfinished book, *The Valley of Vision*, which had the benefit of being edited for publication by no less a scholar than Northrop Frye after Fisher’s accidental death.³ In the case of *Blake in a Post-Secular Era*, not only has another eminent scholar stepped forward to edit an unfinished study of Blake, but the deceased author and his posthumous editor also worked to-

1. See his “Graphic-Poetic Structuring in Blake’s *Book of Urizen*,” *Blake Studies* 3.1 (fall 1970): 7-18; “Delivering Jerusalem,” *Blake’s Sublime Allegory: Essays on The Four Zoas, Milton, Jerusalem*, ed. Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1973) 347-67; and *British Romantic Art* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 9-33.

2. David Wagenknecht, *Blake’s Night: William Blake and the Idea of Pastoral*, *Blake* 8.4 (spring 1975): 116; Stephen C. Behrendt, *The Moment of Explosion: Blake and the Illustration of Milton* and Edward Hodnett, *Image and Text: Studies in the Illustration of English Literature*, *Blake* 19.2 (fall 1985): 75; and Morris Eaves, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, *Blake* 38.4 (spring 2005): 151-54.

3. Peter F. Fisher, *The Valley of Vision: Blake as Prophet and Revolutionary*, ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1961) v-vii. Frye had supervised Fisher’s 1949 University of Toronto doctoral dissertation, which was the basis for the book.



gether: Joseph Viscomi attended Kroeber’s “life-changing” seminar on Blake at Columbia University in 1975 (xiii), and Kroeber personally encouraged Viscomi to undertake his dissertation on Blake.⁴

2 Anyone who has enjoyed the incisiveness of Kroeber’s finished works will be continually reminded that *Blake in a Post-Secular Era*, though developed in certain respects, is far from complete and does not reflect fully his scholarly capability. In large part, this may be a consequence of the speed at which he worked (the text was apparently written between March and the end of August 2009, as described in Viscomi’s foreword). Kroeber begins by stating that we are entering a post-secular era in which “it will be valuable for academic humanists to recognize” Blake’s extensive influence on “American writers, painters, musicians, performing artists, and film and TV makers over the past half-century” (xxi). It seems to me that few people could plausibly argue that Blake is *not* among the most influential

4. Joseph Viscomi, “Remembrance,” <<http://karlsfriends.wordpress.com/2010/09/06/remembrance>> (accessed 20 October 2013).

“canonical” poets in terms of his impact on modern popular culture,⁵ yet Kroeber believes, notwithstanding “the impressive, even revolutionary, expansion of specialized scholarly studies of Blake during the past thirty years,” that he “has totally disappeared from the view of theorizing critics who claim leadership of academic literary humanism.” Such critics ignore Blake “primarily because one of their fundamental principles is that all religious concerns should be excluded from literary criticism.” Kroeber envisions “post-secularism” as a response to the “manifest dubiousness of that principle.”

- 3 “The essential point of this study,” according to Kroeber, “is simply that Blake offers a view of art, science, and religion as ... products of imagining” (14). The book consists of an introduction, five chapters discussing certain of Blake’s works from 1788 through 1794 (*All Religions are One, There is No Natural Religion, Songs of Innocence and of Experience, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The Book of Thel, Visions of the Daughters of Albion, and The [First] Book of Urizen*), a conclusion, two appendices, endnotes, and a list of works cited. Kroeber wrote parts of the endnotes and appendices (“Blake and Science” and “Blake and Contemporary Popular Culture”), and Viscomi was able to develop these sections from materials Kroeber was using for the project. Although the focus varies somewhat from chapter to chapter, Kroeber pursues the theme of Blake’s insistence upon “the essential uniqueness of each and every human” (20), the awareness of which is sustained by the imagination.
- 4 It would be uncharitable to criticize this book for lapses or lacunae because it has not undergone the extensive editing, revision, and peer review usually applied to scholarly publications. Nevertheless, I could wish for clear critical discussions (rather than endnote references, sometimes without commentary) of precisely what Kroeber meant by “post-secular age” (3) and “modernism” (6). Also, it would be helpful to have some names when he finds fault with “theorizing critics” (3) and “academic intellectuals” (8) in his introductory chapter, or celebrates “biologists” who “accommodate their discoveries to acceptance of the absolute uniqueness of every individual organism” (115) in his conclusion. He makes some disconcertingly broad and unqualified statements that probably would not have survived the editorial process: “Blake was continuously and actively engaged, not with the past, never in nostalgia, but always with the emerging developments of what we now

5. See, as a recent example, “Part III: Blake in Film and Graphic Arts,” *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture*, ed. Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly, and Jason Whittaker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

call print culture” (9); “contemporary life is what he was solely concerned with” (27); and “Blake differs from every major modern philosopher, social and economic thinker, psychologist, political scientist, or politician” (62; my emphasis). I also find several passages where Kroeber is plainly paraphrasing Blake and wonder why he did not quote Blake to substantiate his argument: “‘innocence’ is the condition of a well organized person of any age, ‘experience’ is the condition of individuals who have become disorganized” (21); “what we call crimes or acts of evil are not in fact actions but their hindering” (53); and “this fiction [of good and evil] encourages us passively to accept regulation of thought and behavior by others” (55). Finally, we might ask why *America* and *Europe*, both of which are explicitly identified as prophecies, do not have their own chapter or chapters in a book on Blake’s early prophecies. Of course, I hasten to emphasize my belief that many of these concerns would certainly have been addressed had Kroeber lived to realize fully his intention in writing this study.

- 5 Since the book is in an incomplete state, we might reasonably wonder whether there can be an audience for it other than, perhaps, Kroeber’s own students. Viscomi writes elsewhere of the importance of Kroeber’s interaction with his students for the generation of his publications,⁶ and it is easy to see in *Blake in a Post-Secular Era* the vigorous debates and “collaborative criticism” (xv) he considered indispensable to teaching and learning (and that obviously contributed to this book’s making). Notwithstanding any reservations we might have about the publication of an unfinished work, *Blake in a Post-Secular Era* stands as a fine memorial of Kroeber’s enthusiasm as an educator. It conveys some sense of the energy with which he approached his final seminar at Columbia and, indeed, his fifty-seven years as a teacher (xviii-xix). Even though this book appears to be a mere armature for what Kroeber might have ultimately accomplished, his instincts had him heading in the right direction, especially with respect to what he describes as Blake’s “ubiquity in contemporary popular culture” (3). For confirmation, we need look no further than recent collections of essays such as *Blake 2.0* and *Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture* (2007), or Alan Moore’s *From Hell* (1999) and the writings of Robert Duncan.⁷

6. See Viscomi, “Remembrance”: “He wrote with the mind of a teacher and taught with the depth and curiosity of a scholar, always developing new courses and seminars that yielded wonderful books in a few short years He loved the Blake seminar he taught spring of 09, loved the students; it was the catalyst he hoped it would be”

7. See Linda Freedman, “Blake, Duncan, and the Politics of Writing from Myth,” *Blake* 47.2 (fall 2013): n1.