

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

BLAKE

R E V I E W

Steven E. Alford, *Irony and the Logic of the Romantic Imagination*

David Simpson

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 19, Issue 3, Winter 1985/1986, p. 106



¹*Blake Records* (1969), pp. 166-67.

²*William Blake's Writings* (1978), p. 1628—this edition is the source of all the other quotations from Blake which follow.

³See "Blake and Cromek: The Wheat and the Tares," *Modern Philology*, 71 (1974), 366-79.

⁴*Blake Records*, p. 187.

⁵As I am told by Cromek's biographer Professor Dennis Read, Professor Read tells me that he has searched assiduously for Cromek's will without success and believes that his will was nuncupative.

⁶*Blake Records*, p. 214; the date of the blurred postmark was there misread as 22 January 1809; it should be 1819, as Robert Essick, and the late Sir Geoffrey Keynes have pointed out. No one has identified the "Home Philosophical Journal" (or transcribed its title differently) or located the quotation.

REVIEWS

Steven E. Alford. *Irony and the Logic of the Romantic Imagination*. American University Studies, Series III: Comparative Literature, vol. 13. New York, Berne, Frankfurt on the Main, Nancy: Peter Lang, 1984. 177 pp., paper, \$19.45.

Reviewed by David Simpson

Steven Alford's book is a comparative study of Blake and Friedrich Schlegel in which the German critic is read as providing the model of romantic irony necessary for the proper reading of Blake's *Marriage*. The aims of the book, which is an unmodified doctoral dissertation, are modest. Schlegel's early writings are expounded, and the essay *On Incomprehensibility* examined in some detail; Blake is represented in detail only by *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

After unpromising beginnings, in which the author appears to want to take seriously the accusation that Romantic poetry is "flowery" in order to reassert the counterclaim that its aims were "noble and beautiful" (pp. 1, 3, 4)—the probable irony of Keats's "flowery tale" might have been usefully recalled here—the major argument comes clear: that the Romantics moved toward an emphasis on the "rhetorical" over the "logical" as the essence of meaning (p. 6). The substantial vehicle of

this shift is a move away from "understanding" to "imagination" by means of irony (p. 7).

Unfortunately for Blake specialists, the discussion of Schlegel is considerably more adventurous than that of Blake. Schlegel is argued to be recommending and embodying a move from logic to poetry as the proper model of the philosophical enterprise, which then becomes "performative" rather than deductive (p. 42). Suggesting convincingly that Schlegel was unwilling to accept the potentially tragic Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal (p. 107)—an unwillingness shared by almost all of Kant's self-styled followers—Alford demonstrates the case in Schlegel's writings for a unification of the empirical and the absolute through the medium of romantic poetry (p. 55). In particular, romantic irony is the unity of the "cognitive and rhetorical" in which otherwise abstract philosophical problems are adjudicated in performance, in the actions and spiritual gestures of individual persons (pp. 64, 58).

As this model is carried over into a reading of the *Marriage*, it becomes somewhat platitudinous. Alford sees a parallel to Schlegelian irony in Blake's "visionary form of language" (p. 123), whereby the irritable reaching after fact and reason (fixed allegories, stable speakers, simple ironies of inversion, etc.) is to be replaced by "the eternally active creative imagination" (p. 167). Alford is surely right to lead us away from simple readings of Blake—but even a moderately experienced reader is unlikely to perpetrate such readings in the terms he describes. He is right also to encourage the search for "functional analogy," not simple definition, as the proper approach to Blake's myth (p. 148). But I cannot see that anything that is not already habitual happens to our reading of the *Marriage* if we agree that "irony functions to suspend the understanding and to make way for an act of vision" (p. 13). If anything, such a conclusion is likely to contribute to the morass of relativism that surrounds the presence of Blake in print and in the classroom. Even if we accept that such readings are part of Blake's purpose, at least two kinds of inquiry are called for: one into the composite identity of Blake's art, ignored here, and a very specific incidence of "vision"; and another (not unrelated) into the *narrative* identity of the *Marriage*, if any. Forms of coherence obtained by the privileging of luminous aphorisms are no longer enough, even as there is a great deal in Blake's writing to encourage such an approach.

The book's somewhat military style—the naming of parts that is all too standard as a dissertation format—and the fact that long and important passages in German are not translated, is not likely to assist the author in finding a wide audience for his book. But he does demonstrate, once again, that Friedrich Schlegel is an important figure for the understanding of Romantic theories of meaning and communication.