

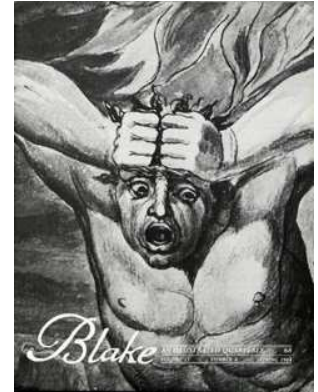
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R E V I E W

David Punter, Blake, Hegel and Dialectic

Nelson Hilton

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lins (who was represented, if only as a result of pressure from my colleagues, in the Tate display), were not included. On the other hand "Suburban Garden" of 1947 by Victor Pasmore, painted shortly before his conversion to abstraction, seemed alien to the whole spirit of the exhibition.

The exhibition clearly suffered not only from the abstention of Bacon and Freud but also from the exigencies of what works happened to be available for loan at the time. What is now needed is a far more thorough examination of how far, and in what precise respect, twentieth-century artists can be said to have returned either consciously or unconsciously to the imaginative landscape and figurative tradition established by Blake and Palmer, and, alternatively, how much of this can be seen as an independent line of descent from the tradition established by Turner, whose influence is already apparent in the later works of Palmer and Linnell. That there is some continuity is now clearly apparent, thanks to exhibitions such as this.

David Punter. *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982. 268 pp. \$23.00.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

David Punter obviously is interested in Blake and in dialectic; in addition to this book, he has published an article on "Blake, Marxism and Dialectic" (*Literature and History* 6 [1977]). The shifting middle terms of the article and the book—which was completed, he writes, in 1975—suggests something about the nature of his interest in their brackets, an interest confirmed by another article of the same general time and orientation, "Blake: Creative and Uncreative Labour" (*Studies in Romanticism* 16 [1977]). In all of these, Punter's recurrent concern is with Blake's "conception of the social role of poetry" ("Blake, Marxism and Dialectic," p. 219), Blake's "attitude toward the social determination of form, an attitude which places the figure of the poet at a crucial point in the dialectic of social experience" ("Blake: Creative and Uncreative Labour," p. 561), his vision of Blake's and Hegel's "doctrine based on social progress" and its roots in "objective social changes" (pp. 253, 255). There are the predictable references to Herbert Marcuse and N.O. Brown. Such formulations may strike us now as somewhat passé—

not that the social issue, after Thatcher and Reagan, has in any way progressed—but because of our deepening sense that the informational, technological complexities underway are reformatting all vestiges of our classical, nineteenth-century sense of the "social." To speak of the "human-shaped" world while the Spirit was moving toward a recognition of the disappearance of man would be to throw sand against the wind. Of course we will come to the question of which (whose) side is Blake on. Still, I think that *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic* would have had more effect if it had been published when first completed; as it is, it seems likely to become just a glitch in the graph of Blake studies.

So, to begin with the perennial question, "what is dialectic"? As I understand Punter's view, dialectic names, if named it can be, the progression that orders and emerges from the strife of contraries, the major experienced form being History. At any rate, through initial sections on Heraclitus, Giordano Bruno, and Boehme, Punter makes clear his stand with [his] Hegel that "formal perception of contrariety is not tantamount to a realisation of dialectic" (p. 35). The idea of Progression is essential, for Punter, if we are to have "any notion of *real* change, as opposed to that change which merely repeats itself cyclically" (pp. 43–44). Since the fundamental contrary is that of (potentially) infinite man and finite nature, the progression, by some uncertain logic, must involve the social dimension. Of course, since Blake and Hegel both reject "a simple high view of 'human nature,'" they are "therefore prevented from adopting the optimistic belief that progress is necessarily direct" (p. 222). Nonetheless, it's still there, the spectre of a theology, a teleology. So in the "Conclusion" Punter summarizes:

Blake's dialectic and Hegel's are indeed dialectics of "contraries and progression", and it is, as we have said in several contexts, the element of progression which constitutes the advance made over previous version of dialectical thought. The necessity for conceiving of a doctrine based on social progress emerges, it seems fair to say, from the experience of doubt and from the struggle against disillusion. (p. 253)

True enough, we might agree, for Hegel—noting Walter Kaufmann's observation that "So far from closing his eyes to the misery of humanity, Hegel needed his work, his philosophy to cope with it. He tried to show himself and others that the indubitably monstrous sufferings recorded throughout history had not been altogether for *nothing*."¹ Yet despite the edifying outcome of a "doctrine based on social progress," one wonders what would result, to adapt Punter's expression, from a struggle *for* disillusion. All of which is to say that Hegel's dialectic is part and parcel of his Absolute Idealism,² whereas for Blake, as Punter notes in "Blake, Marxism and Dialectic," there is "the question of whether Blake is setting out this [Hegel-like] theory of knowledge on a materialist or an idealist basis" (p. 233).

As indicative as the citations to Marcuse, Brown, and two studies by the venerable J.M.E. McTaggart (1896, 1901) is the book's almost complete lack of reference to or use of contemporary work on Hegel and dialectic. This is most noticeable in Punter's use of Baillie's dated translation, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, and complete neglect, even in the bibliography, of A.V. Miller's more accessible 1977 translation, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. We are certainly dealing with a manuscript that spent its hiatus in the deep-freeze. Similarly absent from the book's bibliography and critical consciousness is any reference to Gadamer's *Hegel's Dialectic* (1971, trans. 1976), to Stanley Rosen's powerful 1974 *Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom*, to Andries Sarlemijn's *Hegel's Dialectic* (1975), to Levi-Strauss' "History and Dialectic" in *The Savage Mind*, to E.F. Fackenheim's *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (1967), to Heidegger, to Althusser, and, what prompts the contrary I wish to explore—the absence of any reference to the work of Derrida.

If my notes and the memory of several readings are correct, the key term of Hegel's dialectic, *aufhebung*, never appears in Punter's work (the book's index—only proper names and no subentries—is useless). Or perhaps it appears as the ubiquitous "progression" (a word, by the way, which Blake uses only once in the singular). But *aufhebung* (and its verb, *aufheben*), the dynamic and outcome of the dialectical movement, is emphatically not "progression." A.V. Miller uses the word "sublate," so that in his translation of Hegel's own note on the term we read:

To *sublate* has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and especially it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to . . . it is certainly remarkable that a language has come to use one and the same word for two opposite meanings. It is a delight to speculative thought to find in the language words which have in themselves a speculative meaning. . . .³

We are at a curious moment—*aufhebung* is what dialectic is all about, the term for "the advance" (as Punter sees it) "over previous versions of dialectical thought," yet it is "a delight" (this from Hegel!) "in the language." What, to complete our swerve away from "social progress," is the status of a formulation "in the language"?—especially when, as Derrida observes, that term "is the concept of history and of teleology"?⁴

Language thus opens a crucial category, and Punter (as he might say of Blake [cf. p. 12]) is dialectically directed towards its crisis in the book's final discussion before the conclusion: "Language, Culture and Negativity." Hegel notoriously (understandably, we might feel today) avoids extended meditation on language, but the little he writes is revealing, and Punter quotes one of the memorable formulations: "The forms of thought are, in the first instance, displayed and stored in human language. . . . Into all that becomes something inward for man, and image or conception as such, into all that he makes his own, language has penetrated ['intruded' (Kaufmann)]" (p. 241 [*Science of Logic*, p. 31]). The

issue to be addressed, then, is that of the relations envisaged by Blake and by Hegel "between writing and the social order." But what does Punter mean by "writing"? Given all the emphasis on "labour," "work," and struggle, it seems that writing for him is an *activity*, a means of production at the author's command which may be used to engage in dialectical/historical/social struggle. "Writing" for Punter is what one does with language; it is another form of presence and self-presentation, as in this opaque formulation: "Writing cannot set out to provide a simple, positive alternative to the given world; it must adopt a *self-consciously* negative stance, and seek its roots in the inadequacies which the imagination attempts to remedy" (p. 241). Such "writing" is "an exposé of mystery." Such "writing" is, evidently, not only a "self-conscious" subject in its own right, but subject as well to its author; Punter concludes that both Hegel and Blake "saw that a more than theoretical commitment was needed to dialectical principles, and they both realised that this commitment required the evolution of new forms of writing, forms of writing which would incorporate a degree of organisation and system impossible in conventional terms and yet true to the innermost dialectical processes of life" (p. 250). This explains the announced focus on *The Four Zoas* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The question for us is whether writing is the vehicle of a system, or whether it is, as Derrida would suggest, a kind of system in itself. As vehicle of a system one does not have to look far to discover its failure, judged by the diametrically (not dialectically) opposed interpretations such writing engenders.⁵ As Derrida notes, even with Feuerbach we recognize "the problem of Hegel the writer, of a certain *contradiction* (Feuerbach's word) between Hegel's writing and his 'system.'"⁶ With his emphasis on system, Punter can speak of Blake's "dialectical theory" (p. 59) and his "theory of literature" ("Blake: Creative and Uncreative Labour," p. 558). But for Derrida, "Hegel is . . . the thinker of irreducible difference . . . he reintroduced . . . the essential necessity of the written trace in a philosophical . . . discourse that had always believed it possible to do without it; the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing" (*Of Grammatology*, p. 26). This powerful expression awaits its needed application to Blake, changing, perhaps, "philosopher" to "poet" and "thinker" to "artist." Hegel and his dialectic, in this view, cannot be divorced from writing, from their being written (their written being). Hegel's choice of *aufhebung* as the characterization of dialectic makes the point precisely: the synthesis or product or dynamic he wishes to name—the identity of apparently opposite effects—can happen only in language/writing; moreover, it can happen only thus because language/writing is ineluctably constituted ("always already") through the play of differences or, to stretch the point, contraries.

Derrida's work can be seen as a gloss and extension of the key insight by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*: "in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*."⁷ Every term, signifier or signified, thus contains—is, in a sense, made up of—traces of that which it is not. The dental stop "d" has no "identity" in itself except as it is distinguished from the dental stop "t"; a person's handwritten "t" has no identity except as it is distinguished from the other letters which it is not. Without difference, no distinction.

To emphasize the role of writing, Derrida coins the term *différance*, whose silent *a* marks it as a phenomenon that can only exist in writing and which, as a verbal marker, creates a term suggesting "difference," "differing," and the temporal "deferring." *Différance* typifies Derrida's approach to reading texts, which involves synthesizing such a polyvalent word that, as it were, resonates with what he identifies as the different, even conflicting, conceptual drives at work in the text in question. *Aufhebung* is Hegel's version of the same gesture, and the question Derrida puts to Hegel is how it can exist outside the system of differences (writing/language) that permit its formulation.

How, that is to say, is there "progress"—unless that progress is something already inscribed in our language (hence our conceptions) and so, in Punter's terms, "real change"? If one wishes to argue that after the "real change," "social progress," revolution or what not that we will write a new language (BASIC?), then obviously one can't say any more. Within the differential system, to speak of "social progress," "struggle," "progress," and especially "labour" and "work" is only to engage in further idealization and semantization. Gadamer writes that "For Hegel, the point of dialectic is that precisely by pushing a position to the point of self-contradiction it makes possible the transition to a higher truth which unites the sides of that contradiction: the power of spirit lies in synthesis as the mediation of all contradictions."⁸ But that *aufhebung* is only in writing/language: *it cannot write itself*, it cannot "take into account its consumption of writing."⁹ Ergo, "spirit" = "writing"; "Absolute Knowledge" = "writing"; "Absolute subject" = "writing": writing is its own thing, untouched by Hegelian dialectic.¹⁰

Hegel recognizes the concept of difference (the bond of Being and Nothing, for example), but he determines it as "contradiction" in order "to resolve it, to interiorize it, to lift it up (according to the syllogistic process of speculative synthesis)" ([Derrida, *Positions*, p. 43]—out of the difference of Being and Nothing issues Becoming, to continue that example). That is to say, the "advance" that Punter sees in Hegelian (and "Blakean") dialectic, the *aufhebung* or progression, is that you get to eat your cake

and have it too; more emphatically: *you* get to remain *you*! only fuller and better, more socially engaged, more human. It is as consoling as the notion that it's not all for nothing. But Derridean *différance* is implacable, and it challenges that meaning of consciousness as self-presence, as an identity that gets to author or to experience dialectical progression. *Différance*, we might say, is the name of dialectic without psychologizing, without idealizing, another name for a system that cannot, by its nature, enable us to see beyond "self-annihilation":

Those who dare appropriate to themselves Universal
Attributes
Are the Blasphemous Selfhoods . . .
(J 90.31–32)

Différance is an inherent condition of human life, so the attempt to transcend it—for better or worse—is inhuman. Self-presence, for example, is an instance of *différance*: one "I" must be attending what another "I" is saying, writing, thinking, etc. The language-effect of the shifter "I" allows us to conceal the *différance* and, in so doing, give expression to the mastery of a desire for there to be an "I", an illusion of presence as being-present-to-onself. This desire for self-consciousness, characterized in the *Phenomenology* as the ground of the contest between master and slave, receives curiously little attention—though at one point it seems analogized to Boehme's "desire for knowledge" (p. 41; cf. pp. 86, 91). Note, though, that the desire/struggle for self-consciousness achieves itself only with difference (master/slave; consciousness/body; I/you; North/South). The desire is in a sense engendered by *différance*, and the bottom line is whether we believe (could it ever be more than a belief?) that this desire has its own *telos*, progression, dialectical *aufhebung*, or whether we accept it as a ceaseless weaving of *différance*, of a diaphoristics (from the Greek etymon of "difference"—"diapherein"): "Going forth & returning wearied . . . reposing / And then Awakening."

What of Blake in all this? "Cogent reasons for the points of similarity" between Blake and Hegel which Punter offers are that both react against an ideology of "reason," both "draw heavily" on a tradition of dialectical thinking (Heraclitus, Bruno, and Boehme, as mentioned above), and both have "a central interest in the social and cultural implications of philosophical systems" (p. 74). Early on, Punter announces that he will focus on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *The Four Zoas*: "the first . . . Blake's major statement of the *theory* of dialectic . . . the second, his major attempt to put this theory into practice" (p. 69). Punter is interested in these particularly as examples of work that "strains . . . accepted boundaries," work, we might say, that is quintessentially *writing*, that, more overtly than others, exists in its writing. For the same reason, his focus for Hegel is the *Phenomenology*.¹¹

An important instance of Blake's "statement of the *theory* of dialectic" is the dictum that "Without Con-

traries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." This single use of progression on Blake's part, as suggested before, is certainly important for Punter's argument; it implies, he writes, "a condemnation of that kind of thought which seeks to progress without conceiving of a moment of negation and opposition," but, he adds, it also serves "to condemn the world of blind opposition which in the end has no direction" (p. 26). Again the ghost of teleology; but Blake nowhere says, "With Contraries is progression." As Steven Shavero has recently argued, "Blake's system of Contraries is generated by a movement which is endlessly contradictory, inadmissible by the standards not only of formal logic but also of Hegelian dialectical logic," so "progression . . . has a very special meaning for Blake, implying the continuation of a lived tension of opposites, rather than any sublation or furthering resolution."¹² "Without contraries" is no progression over "with contraries." Later in Punter's book we read that the significance of the passage "derives from the criteria 'progression' and 'Human existence', especially if we consider existence as a goal to be achieved, a potential to be actualized rather than as a given. Blake is not saying that contraries are the 'ground of all being' in an ontological or theological sense, for 'all being' is not the centre of his interest. This interest remains throughout firmly centred on *man* . . ." (p. 106). We will have to worry later about Blake's interest in "*all being*" with the awakening of *Albion*, but as for the goal to be achieved of "Human existence," we ought to consider the passage concerning the Prolific and the Devouring elsewhere in *The Marriage* (a passage which I don't think appears anywhere in the book): "These two classes of men are always upon earth, & they should be enemies; whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence." Dialectic, no less than "religion," is an endeavor to reconcile them.

As for *The Four Zoas*, "history" or the "continual dialectic of division and regeneration which is the true agent of the poem" takes three forms. These are "the metaphysical abstraction of an ideal world from concrete reality, the division of human consciousness within itself, showing itself as a disjunction of faculties; the severance of mind from the body," and, Punter adds, "it is these three distinct but fundamentally connected processes which also form the recurring pattern of the *Phenomenology*" (p. 174). "Disharmony and disjunction run through every plate [sic]," reflecting the poem's thematic center in the sleep of *Albion*, "Blake's version of 'Geist'" whose sleep is "the historical inadequacy of spirit, and his awakening the dawn of that absolute knowledge in which man realises the human shape and meaning of the world, and alienation is banished" (p. 163).

Albion, Punter quotes the *Phenomenology*, is "the remembrance of the activity of self-consciousness" which

eventually has "its necessary impact on the fragmented mind." Reunification, then, "is not an inexplicable phenomenon but the *realisation*, in the full sense, of a desire which is irrepressible, and the consequent creation of a society designed to facilitate the liberation of the whole man" (p. 197). This whole man is evidently *Albion* himself, though he "will only become the universal individual when he awakens; that is, when he becomes conscious of his own unity" (p. 133). Or is it, rather, when he becomes conscious of his own contradiction, seeing as how he has now the remembrance of unity? Once again we seem to be in the middle of a language game, with *Albion* denoting shifting signifieds. As in the case of the shifter "I," the formulation of a single (universal) individual is a means of postulating the abolition of difference. Again quoting Hegel, Punter proposes that "The characters in *The Four Zoas* can be seen as 'the shapes which the concept assumes', as their configurations and relations change from book to book in the search for the final reintegration of spirit and matter" (p. 182). Here, evidently, it is not the "characters" which are the "shapes," but their "configurations and relations"—and while those may indeed "change," that seems a different thing than the unfolding progression of the *Phenomenology* ("the spirit's growth to self-consciousness," as Punter puts it [p. 161]).

"The distinctive feature of Blake's thinking" which Punter perceives leads to his volume's own distinctive orientation; that is, because of "Blake's evolution of a theory of States, which signify the interposition in the dialectic of universe and individual of a crucial mediating category of the 'social' or 'collective' . . . the formation of *Albion* can be discussed in precise historical detail, as a past, present and future labour" (p. 139). What we have here is an idealization and semanticization of "labour": just another literary/critical category, more material of/for writing: a pseudo-transcendental signified which is imagined to stand behind, beyond writing. But "For Hegel," explains Punter, "there were two principal mediations"—these are the mediations qua Blake's "States" that enable man's transformation of nature and of himself—"if one wants to speak of a "dialectical method" used by History, one must make clear that one is talking about war and about work." The quotation, significantly, is not from Hegel, but from Kojève.

Consider the following intriguing progression, which comes after Punter quotes one of Hegel's crucial pronouncements on the nature of work: "Labour, therefore, is the *form* of energy, and civilization requires the establishment of a just dialectic between labour and energy" (p. 227). One could translate: "Labour, therefore, is the form of energy, and civilization requires the formation of a just dialectic between the form of energy and energy." "Labour" now falls victim to a new transcendental signified, "civilization." One could go on indefinitely like this, the point being that Punter doesn't know

he is only writing. (In "Blake, Marxism and Dialectic" we hear of "kinds of energy" as irrepressible identity-features within the system [p. 229]). The mysteries of this paragraph deepen as Punter finds that the quoted definition from Hegel, that "'Labour . . . is desire restrained and checked' . . . reminds us of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which Blake, alongside his exaltation of exuberance, takes care to describe the *form* of this exuberance: 'I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation'" (p. 227). One wonders here as well whether Punter has been dialectically summoned to this formulation, for that passage goes on to culminate in the vision of " . . . Unnam'd forms, which cast the metals into the expanse. There they were reciev'd by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books and were arranged in libraries." The final *forms* of the transmission and organization of knowledge are unnamed, though one reading suggests that it is Men themselves who receive the metals (me-tells) *and themselves take the forms of books*. We call them "books" or "writing," but we still do not know their form ("Nor is it possible to Thought / A greater than itself to know" ["A Little BOY Lost"]).

If any one phrase summarizes the burden of this book, it is the five times repeated formulation of "the infinite at the heart of the finite" (pp. 33, 41, 143, 158, 214; see also 235): "Correct perception, or in Blake's term, imaginative vision, illuminates the infinite at the heart of the finite; therefore, since man and infinite are here identified, this perception is simultaneously an awareness of the human form in the world" (p. 214). "Perception," we were told earlier, is "the manifestation of a particular historical state in the constitution of consciousness" (p. 113), so "correct perception" must stand for the ultimate achievement of ultimate consciousness, whose work, like that of Los, "recognizes the perceptual flux which characterizes real . . . perception" (p. 127). The ground is getting miry—dialectic or difference? Surely the revelation at hand will take us into the nature of identity (such that correct, real perception can be of perceptual flux and yet remain correct and real):

It is this continual dialectical flux, by which the human form becomes also the form of the world, and by which man can assert his ability to transcend the given forms of nature, which is portrayed at the end of *Jerusalem*:

All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone. all Human Forms identified, living going forth & returning wearied Into the Planetary lives of years Months Days & Hours reposing And then Awakening into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality

What is the identity of this "identified"?—do the forms achieve each its own identity, or do they become all identical? do they repose (even repose the question) and then awaken once for ever? Or is there, to return to the phrase of Swedenborg's that Blake annotated "A going forth & returning": "a Progression from first Principles to Ulti-

mates, and from Ultimates to first Principles"?¹³ Is such two-way progression "progression"? Or is it not, as the language that permits it to be written, the play of difference?—a play whose *différance* is written in the final line, which Punter does not quote, "And I heard the Name of their Emanations they are named Jerusalem." Is "I" one of the identified Human Forms? or is s/he something else, with the concomitant self-division which permits her or him to hear the name (but not the name of the forms themselves)? But, as hearing the name emphasizes, all *this* takes place in the differential play of the system (the infinite at the heart of the finite). To adapt the quotation from Schiller with which the *Phenomenology* closes: "from the chalice of this realm of writing/foams forth for Him his own infinitude." "Writing" replaces "spirits"; and the *work* of "writing" is more writing, even unto "the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression" (M 42.14).

Blake, Hegel and Dialectic displays a breadth of reading equal to that of any serious dissertation, and has also its share of lapses, as when Punter writes that "four years after the completion [sic] of *Milton*, he wrote in his *Vision of the Last Judgement* [sic]. . . ." Yet the *Vision* referred to is "For the Year 1810"—which would put the completion of *Milton* at 1806, neither the 1804 colophon date nor the 1808 watermark of the earliest copies. Now that it is published, this volume can take its place on the shelf next to other comparative studies, like *Blake and Novalis*. Which is a pity, because the topic is worth much more. Indeed, the topic of Blake/Hegel—last poet/philosopher of the book and the first artist/thinker of writing—could sustain the labor (writing) of a generation. But neglecting the topos (which is even its own) of "writing," *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic* neglects each of its terms, dominating them, instead, with academic idealization.

¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation*, Anchor Books (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 252.

² Andries Sarlemijn argues that "Because of its theory of *sublation* of everything finite, Hegel's philosophy is an *absolute* idealism. Every moment of the whole is denied separateness, independence, reality and finitude. These properties have completely 'vanished' at the end of the *Logic*. Nothing remains but the unitary circle of the all-encompassing, absolute subject" (*Hegel's Dialectic*, trans. Peter Kirschenmann [Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1975], p. 49). For Michael Rosen, "the rationality of Hegel's dialectic is . . . inextricably linked to Hegel's Absolute Idealism" (*Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], p. ix).

³ *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London and New York: George Allen & Unwin and Humanities Press, 1969), p. 107.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 25.

⁵ For Alexandre Kojève, "Dialectic for [Hegel] is quite different from a method of thought or exposition" (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, assembled by Ramond Queneau, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., ed. Allan Bloom [1968; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980], p. 179). But for Kaufmann, "Hegel's dialectic is at most a method of exposition; it is not a method of discovery" (p. 162).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans., ann. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 77-78.

⁷ *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (1959; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 120.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans., int. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 105.

⁹ Alan Bass, Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., ann. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 20n.

¹⁰ On the obvious idealism of *this* formulation, see Richard Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" in his *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹¹ "Of course," we read in a bizarre comparison, "there is work of Blake's which does not diverge far from eighteenth-century poetic norms—the lyrical work in particular—just as there is work of Hegel's, especially perhaps the *Science of Logic*, which employs all the traditional philosophical apparatus" (p. 69). But for Michael Rosen, "the characteristic feature of Hegel's dialectic—*determinate negation*—is . . . only displayed and developed freely in the *Science of Logic*" (pp. 21-22).

¹² "Striving With Systems": Blake and the Politics of Difference," *Boundary 2*, 10.3 (Spring 1982), pp. 234, 231.

¹³ *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, Newly Revised Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 607.

Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt, eds.
William Blake and the Moderns. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1982. 352 pp.
Cloth, \$39.59; paper, \$14.95.

Reviewed by Paul Mann

Is Harold Bloom the Covering Cherub of *William Blake and the Moderns*? His work is mentioned in only a few of these thirteen essays, and discussed in any depth in only one, but as the most visible current theorist of influence, he must be taken into account in any discussion which attempts to graph potential arcs of influence—even if that accounting turns out to be merely a prelude to dismissal. And dismissal appears to be one of Bertholf's and Levitt's purposes:

The literature which contains reference to preceding literatures becomes an indication that the central imagination is alive and provocative, and not an indication of a metaphysical scheme of influence dominated by the anxiety of that influence and the obligation to remove that antecedent force. Harold Bloom's system in the end only explains the psychology of itself, and not the literature it raids for illustrations. Instead of declaring a necessary independence from antecedent masters, writers in this tradition seek out (often consciously) examples of this central imagination in order to penetrate further into the life of the sustaining vision. (xi)

It's fairly clear from this passage that Bertholf and Levitt have misread Bloom. Where in his writing does he claim that poets are under an obligation to remove their precursors? Ashbery wants to *remove* Stevens? To what misty realm? Bloom's theory seems rather to insist that, even in their most strident oppositions, poets manifest an indissoluble bond with their precursors. If "strong" poets do labor to revise antecedent masters, if they "swerve" from those masters in what Bloom terms a *clinamen*, they remain nonetheless anchored in them. Bloom's theory is a great deal more dialectical than Bertholf and Levitt credit it with being: it is a theory of sublation, not of excision. But it's the word "anxiety" which appears to cause them the greatest anxiety; what they desire for this central imagination is a healthier rhetoric, something purer and less troubled than the neurotic imagery of Bloomian influence.

And what they arrive at is something rather like a platonic Form:

The poet seeks out, both consciously and unconsciously, influences, attunements, and disruptions that provoke his awareness of his engagement in a literary history of recurring forms. His occupations are not driven by a creative anxiety into intricate procedures of misreading in an effort to do away with his predecessors. The forms of expressions dominate. The generation of particular forms to present a vision specifies a line of writing that grew out of the period of the Romantic in literature. The forms develop within the vision, present and enact it; they are not imposed as external agents of structure. But while the freedom of the imagination acts as a bulwark against the passivity of conventional structures, the active principle of insistent reference to preceding literature picks out what is most vital in the line. If Blake had not taken up Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example, as a projection of what he called "The One Central Form," that omission would have been an indication that Milton's poem had so mismanaged itself that it was not part of the common form of the imagination's life. The tradition of enacted forms by necessity refers to itself because it seeks out examples that most vigorously present the vision of the imagination engaged in an area of meaning greater than itself. If there is one central form of the imagination, then the possibilities of imaginative literature are manifestations, as approximations, of that central form. (x-xi)

If I understand this passage, literary history is construed here less as a set of intimate relations than as a wide field in which all writers can participate in "One Central Form," the Imagination itself. Writers may constellate in or around that form, but no single writer can ever embody it. A writer might be taken to exemplify it, or to mediate other writers' encounters with it, but that writer can never be entirely central to it. In other words, the true title of this work is not *Blake and the Moderns* but *Imaginative Form and the Moderns*; the book is centered in Blake primarily in the sense that it is his definition of that form which mediates its relations—in which case, it is certainly curious that so many of the essays in the collection are rather superficial and old-fashioned influence studies.

It is difficult, of course, to lump together thirteen essays by thirteen different critics, and foolish to hold the contributors responsible for the claims and errors of their editors. This is, however, a remarkably coherent book.