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R E V I E W

## Hazard Adams, *Antithetical Essays in Literary Criticism and Liberal Education*

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## REVIEWS

Hazard Adams. *Antithetical Essays in Literary Criticism and Liberal Education*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990. xi + 292 pp. \$29.94/\$19.95.

Reviewed by Peter Otto

A part from Kathleen Raine and, perhaps, William Butler Yeats, Blake criticism retains few traces of those energetic and mobile "Spectators" of his work that, Blake assures us, are able to rise from their graves, "meet the Lord in the Air" and "be happy" (*VII*, E 560). In fact, reading Blake's poems and viewing his graphic productions seems to lead more frequently to the much less apocalyptic discipline of theory: Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, E. D. Hirsch and, of course, Hazard Adams, have all constructed elaborate theoretical systems in the shadow of their earlier work on Blake. One of the interests of *Antithetical Essays* is that it makes explicit a particular instance of this movement from reading Blake to writing theory: it collects and arranges some of Adams' more recent critical, theoretical, and polemical work in such a way that their relation (and by synecdoche the relation of Adams' entire *oeuvre*) to his reading of Blake becomes clear. It is almost as if the short essay and occasional address, when read along the grain of a prior engagement with Blake, take on a new identity as sublimated autobiography. The agent for this metamorphosis is the first essay in the collection, "The Dizziness of Freedom; or, Why I Read William Blake," in which Adams proposes not

to explicate the text of William Blake, to demonstrate a critical practice, or to treat

of literary history, but to witness to my education in his works, to show briefly how it situates me in thinking about literary criticism and theory, and finally how it affects me in the life of teaching. (3)

The first chapter, then, is a witness to the primary experience and subsequent reflection out of which the other essays proceed, a point which is perhaps suggested by the otherwise curious fact that on the contents page the title "Part One" (which contains this single essay) is followed by a zero. (Parts Two and Three do not have a trailing numeral.) The book as a whole moves from recollection to reflection and then, in everwidening circles, from the specializations of criticism through to the more general, ethical, and public responsibilities of teaching.

As witness to his education in Blake, Adams attests to the fact of it taking place but (to my mind regrettably) does not tell us much about the actual experience of reading Blake. Recollection of this primary (and of course ongoing) experience takes up less than a page, and consists of no more than a brief narrative that describes his progression from youthful mystification to mature appreciation. Instead, Adams passes quickly to a summary of what he has found valuable in Blake.

The propositions that are advanced by Adams are no doubt familiar to many readers of this journal. One can find them, in various forms, beneath all of Adams' work (which is, of course, as it should be for a criticism which manages to remain both personal and deeply felt). However, to briefly reiterate the substance of his argument: Adams introduces his readers first to Blake's notion of the contrary, which he understands as a "friendly enemy" to the rigid oppositions of institutional life. Rather than attempting to repress oppositions such as soul/body and object/subject, a contrary redeems them by providing "a context for their appropriate use" (6). For Adams, a contrary is a non-categorical, content-free potentiality which is, at least to some extent, free of or at least other to the political and institutional inertias of the everyday world. It is valuable not in

### ANTITHETICAL ESSAYS IN LITERARY CRITICISM AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

HAZARD ADAMS

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itself but for the "loosening," even iconoclastic, force it exerts when brought into productive (that is to say contrary) interaction with the fixed, for Adams inevitably hierarchical, oppositions of the modern world.

Elsewhere, and particularly in "Canons: Literary Criteria/Power Criteria," Adams uses a term drawn from Yeats, the "antithetical," to describe a very similar potentiality. The antithetical displaces (and like the contrary "redeems" [6] rather than represses or excludes) hierarchical oppositions by itself forming their productive or authentic contrary. In this movement an at first apparently self-sufficient opposition such as closed/open or institution/individual finds itself displaced and raised to one side of a contrary relation with the antithetical. Blake provides Adams not merely with the experience of contrariety and its analogues, but a set of terms for talking about it.

Adams also draws from Blake an ethic and a view of language. He argues that for Blake the basis of the former is love and mutuality which "is . . . a going-out from the self to identify with the other" (9). Figures such as Albion, who fear that in love they will lose "selfhood," "subjectivity," and "capacity for mastery" (9), have no notion of the contrary of the opposition between subject and object which is the "idea of identity": "When two things



are identical, they are not the same, they each maintain their own identities but are in a relation of identity" (10). This sounds a bit like having your cake and eating it too, but nevertheless this relation is for Adams at the "base of Blake's ethic" and, more dramatically, at the heart of tropes (which always "insist on identity") and therefore at the heart of language. Complementing these positions, Adams draws from Blake a view of language as fundamentally expressive, so much so that Adams is able to write that

If the world is the projection of our expression of it, and we are our own acts, as Blake thought (that is, we are what we do), then in some sense the world emanates from us and is, in that sense, identical with us. (10)

Adams immediately qualifies this proposition by admitting that it is in fact "the contrary of equally true propositions that make the world into an object"; but he then qualifies this very different view of language by noting that it is ultimately itself a fiction (see also the discussion of myth and antimyth on 273-76). As a result, it seems that both sides of the opposition turn out to emanate from the same expressive function of language.

On the evidence of this chapter alone, the "dizziness of freedom" would seem to refer to the vertigo experienced by the self within a space where (precisely because it is literary) economic and political constraints have been relegated to the margins and, in their place, the self feels itself free to posit a world and an identity as an intent of consciousness. Within this space reality and morality, for example, are not externally imposed givens, but are experienced as forms potentially expressive of the self.

The second essay in this collection—"Synecdoche and Method"—extends these views during the course of a reflection on the implications of synecdoche. Steering clear of both marxist and deconstructionist critiques of this trope, Adams distinguishes what he calls Blake's radical and progressive synecdoche from figurative synecdoche ("where the part stands for the

whole"); miraculous synecdoche ("the part is invaded by a whole that has emanated or shrunk into it"); closed synecdoche ("both part and whole are spatially considered as fixed in size"); and open synecdoche (which "implies a progressive movement or temporality entirely avoiding any suggestion of completed form"). The Blakean synecdoche "opposes the negations open/closed and miraculous/figurative" (27), loosens the hold of these negations and in this way uncovers their contrary. The radical and progressive synecdoche is "both infinite and bounded, open and closed":

There is a progression, a supplementation, but rather than rolling out into endless night, it returns infinitely to itself, but always in a new and immeasurably greater—or smaller—form. (28)

In place of a simple opposition between 'openness and closure, or the figurative and the miraculous, this kind of synecdoche inhabits the void between these extremes.

If this activity were a function of language, the ferrying to and fro of the radical and progressive synecdoche would be hardly more reassuring than what Adams calls Derrida's open synecdoche, where "the activity is always that of differentiation and 'dissemination'" (27). However, radical and progressive synecdoche turns out to have both boundaries and a center. Rather than displacing the oppositions open/closed and figurative/miraculous, it is a dynamic that unfolds only within the space mapped between them. Moreover, just as contrariety and antitheticality seem to function in large part as levers for opening a vertiginous space in which the self is able to experience its own freedom, so, too, radical and progressive synecdoche finds its center and rationale in the self. If language is fundamentally expressive, then synecdoche is indeed the part which is the whole: radical and progressive synecdoche is that trope which best embodies both the expansive movement from self through creation/emanation to world, and the subsequent contraction from world to

the self re-formed by its own creation.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Adams' notions of contrariety, language, the self, and synecdoche is that taken together they describe the form of an apocalyptic and linguistic body. The model for this body is once again drawn from Blake, from the resurrected and expansive bodies described at the end of *Jerusalem*. Adams is in effect writing (in critical and theoretical discourse) a creation myth which, like Blake's creation myths, strives not to be nostalgic. This apocalyptic body finds its origin not in "a receding *then*, separate from the present, but a *then-slumbering now*" (43). The movement of radical and progressive synecdoche, with its outer limits defined by the opposition between the whole and the part, and with its center firmly tied to the self, defines this creature's "living" form. One of the many remarkable things about this apocalyptic body is that it is its own creator, its own Adam and, in its alienated or emanated form, it is its own Eve. Despite the linguistic bias of Adams' apocalyptic body, the paradigmatic critique of this kind of "fantasy" is, of course, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

One of the strong presences that walk the pages of *Antithetical Essays* is Kant; indeed, one could, with only a moderate degree of unfairness, note that the paradigm which informs Adams's critical, theoretical, and pedagogical work, and which guides the construction of this apocalyptic body, is strikingly similar to Kant's mathematical sublime. Neil Hertz writes in *The End of the Line* that the mathematical sublime arises

out of sheer cognitive exhaustion, the mind blocked not by the threat of an overwhelming force, but by the fear of losing count or of being reduced to nothing but counting—this and this and this—with no hope of bringing a long series or a vast scattering under some sort of conceptual unity. Kant describes a painful pause—"a momentary checking of the vital powers"—followed by a compensatory positive movement, the mind's exultation in its own rational faculties, in its ability to think a totality that cannot be taken in through the senses.<sup>1</sup>



Or as Adams puts it in "Synecdoche and Method," "When Immanuel Kant considered the sublime he responded to Edmund Burke's notion that the sublime was overwhelming by arguing that what we discover ultimately in the sublime is the infinitude of the human mind, by which synecdoche he meant the mind's satisfaction in discovering its power" (28). Similarly, for Adams the sublime spaces and potentialities of the radical and progressive synecdoche, the contrary and the antithetical (along with the dizziness of reading Blake) are exhilarating because they are the flux in which the self discovers "its power." It is, again, perhaps not unfair to note that there is an uncomfortable degree of congruity between these views and those of "free-market economics."

The set of terms discussed above are deployed in *Antithetical Essays* as part of a powerful, sustained, and fascinating intervention in a wide ranging and now long-running debate over the status of the aesthetic. For marxist and new historicist critics the aesthetic is a space of illusion, of false consciousness: it is one of the many effects of the appearance of a bourgeois subject towards the end of the eighteenth century. In Foucauldian terms the aesthetic (certainly the antithetical) might be framed as a technology of the self. For deconstruction the aesthetic is a realm in which the poetic image is "able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness."<sup>2</sup> For Lacan (along with Bataille and Blanchot) a very similar space is a defence against (and paradoxically an opening to) the absolute master, death.<sup>3</sup>

When juxtaposed with the tragic tone of these reworkings of the Kantian aesthetic, the comic (in the Shakespearean sense of the word) tone of *Antithetical Essays* is remarkable. Adams always works towards a rational balance and harmony. In "Some Yeatsian Versions of Comedy," for example, Adams sets himself against the prevailing assumptions in Yeats studies by identifying the comic as "a

necessary aspect of Yeats's art," the apprehension of which "is necessary to any tragic perception we discover" in his *oeuvre* (75). Similarly, in "Thinking Cassirer" he notes that one of his aims is to see Cassirer and Heidegger—"concord and discord"—as "a pair never emptied out of time" (220).

The most appropriate model for this balance and harmony often seems to be conversation (a key word in *Antithetical Essays*), which is imagined as a form in which identity and difference are held in relation (the social form of identity). Moreover, conversation is the vehicle through which reading enters the social and ethical. In opposition to those critics who would see Joyce as the producer of a postmodern, linguistic surface, in the essays on Joyce included in this book Adams tries to move beyond the endless play of difference towards readings that allow the "possibility of conversations about a text" and so towards the experience of "literature as an ethical force in society" (150). In each of these essays the comic is possible precisely because the self (not the bourgeois self but what Adams calls the cultured and social individual) is affirmed as center.

In the essays on education included in the third part of this book ("The Fate of Knowledge," "Biographia Educationis Humanae," "Humanitas and Academic Politics," "Neo-Blakean Prolegomena to an Unlikely Academic Structure"), the implicit and explicit ideal is that of "the liberally trained individual," described at one point as "both an aesthetic and ethical ideal" (254), who is to be formed through exposure to the antithetical found in literature. The antithetical becomes a force essential for any pedagogy which "is based on an ethic that refuses to accept tyranny, particularly intellectual tyranny" (238) because it is antitheticality that opposes the hegemony of institutional life and so opens the space in which individuals can construct their own lives. Adams defines this notion of education against "the tremendous pressure to generalize individual imaginative power into the abstract notion of 'mass man,' who, once so defined,

is beheld as a pawn of historical forces and soon becomes what he beholds in himself" (262). For Adams' power lies "fundamentally with the individual imaginative acts from which the institution appropriates what it, in its fumbling way, can manage to vulgarize" (17).

Does the presence of the comic in Adams' work mean that, like Blake's Spectator, he has managed to leave his grave and be happy, albeit through the back door and hard discipline of theory rather than levitation? I would not for a moment pretend to be qualified to judge; so in place of a categorical decision on this matter, let me just say that as intriguing and important as Adams' attempt, via Blake, to formulate a positive and comic ethics of reading undoubtedly is, I found *Antithetical Essays* disappointing. First, despite the use of Blake's notion of contraries as guiding principle, there is in this volume very little actual engagement with the antagonists that, in the course of reading *Antithetical Essays*, seem to loom behind every page. Characteristic of Adams' attitude to his opponents is the rather cavalier reference to Kierkegaard in the first essay:

I intend to express my experience of reading Blake as the *dizziness of freedom*. The phrase is from Kierkegaard. He identified it with existential anxiety. I don't, and I'll come back to that point. (4)

By the end of the essay one understands why Adams doesn't identify the "dizziness of freedom" as existential anxiety, but Adams does not at any point return to the question of Kierkegaard. Unfortunately, Kierkegaard, present in the title as well as this isolated reference, offers his own interpretation of the apparently autonomous self described by Adams, and it is one that threatens to reframe the self of this essay as belonging to one stage, and an early one at that, in the progression to religious understanding. There is a similar "I don't" implicit in many of Adams' remarks about deconstruction, where it is at times as if Derrida were being criticized for a failure of nerve (perhaps even a weakness of the self) in the face of the Kantian sublime. For Adams the contrary is a principle of



balance: it redeems and embraces much more than struggles with the oppositions with which it is in a contrary relation. It seems to me that the difficulty here is that Derrida and Kierkegaard represent a much more vigorous and unruly contrary than Adams is prepared to contemplate, one moreover that is not at all content with being brought in as the other or the opposite (9).

Second, it seems to me that the twin emphasis on the self and the expressive power of language is itself part of an American reworking of romanticism that dates back to Emerson and Thoreau. From the southern hemisphere, and no doubt from the third world, it is difficult not to see the contemporary versions of this ideology as bearing the signature of the powerful. In the late twentieth century America is surely one of the few nations to have the eco-

nomic and military power necessary to make this kind of view of the self and language at all plausible. Adams' view of the antithetical is of course one that would lodge the antithetical and the self at the very center of resistance to the institutionalized oppositions which make up the nation-state. My concern is that it is here, at the very point where, presumably, Adams would want to locate a break from the expanding and contracting energies of the radical and progressive synecdoche, and so separate the individual from the mass, that the part/whole relation of synecdoche is most strikingly evident. It is perhaps not merely repeating the obvious to say that there is a self which does not (except perhaps in the mode of false consciousness or of dream) experience its relation to the world as one of radical and progressive synecdoche. For this self, synecdoche can be rein-

scribed as a vehicle of alienation, a process in which the part has no option but to inhabit the whole and where the whole haunts the spaces of the part. Moreover, I suspect there are others who would experience Adams' mutuality, his relation of identity, and his "sympathetic expansive identity to include the other" (49) as being not readily distinguishable from assimilation and appropriation.

<sup>1</sup> Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 40.

<sup>2</sup> Paul de Man, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970) 65-77, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991).

Margaret Storch. *Sons and Adversaries: Women in William Blake and D. H. Lawrence*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990. xviii + 226 pp. \$28.95.

Reviewed by  
Nelson Hilton

As the title allusion suggests, this book contends that Blake and Lawrence were not so much the lovers as the adversaries of their mothers, and that their works fundamentally reflect—as they were fundamentally affected by—this fundamental relationship. The argument assumes the pre-oedipal dynamics of early object-relations—i.e., infant and mothering "object"—as posited initially by Melanie Klein. Almost with birth, according to Klein's model, the incipiently organized infant ego is in effect "split"

by distinct relations with "good" and "bad" states which concern primarily the breast as metonym for the all-important experience of nourishment. To conceptualize the "bad," one must imagine that, from an ostensibly infantile perspective, just as the gratification of a successful feeding represents incorporation of a good object, so the frustration of hunger is by analogy not privation, but the active incorporation of a bad object (a prime example of Freud's idea that the unconscious doesn't recognize "no"). Klein labels this earliest state of a split ego threatened in its fantasy with anxiety over annihilation by the bad object the "paranoid-schizoid position" ("position" rather than "stage" to emphasize that these psychological states are never completely passed, but persist in the unconscious throughout life). Attempting in fantasy to eliminate the bad and save the good within a renewed ego-integration, the infant self resorts to a dynamic of "projective identification" by which it aggressively spits out or projects the internal bad feeling and identifies it with an object, like the ubiquitous breast.

## Sons and Adversaries

*Women in William Blake  
and D. H. Lawrence*

Margaret Storch

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But if reality is at least barely adequate, at the age of three or four months this schizoid adaptation runs into the new perception that good and bad breast belong both to the same "whole object" mommy. In the ensuing "depressive position," the infant begins the life-long attempt to work through ambivalence as it encounters helplessness, jealousy, anxiety that its aggression now could potentially annihilate the object on which it hates to depend,