

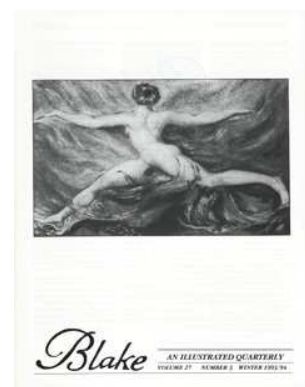
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

## Stephen Cox, *Love and Logic: The Evolution of Blake's Thought*

Angela Esterhammer

*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 27, Issue 3, Winter 1993-1994, pp. 84-86



immerses himself in its enchanting, melancholy, dank atmosphere and discovers to no one's surprise that his beloved has taken the veil. He retires to a family castle, committing himself to a life of celibacy and good works—far enough from the Jovinians to idealize them, but close enough to the sullied Rialto for an occasional visit. Though Cumberland has tried alternately to reproduce the scoured vir-

tues of a Scandinavian health spa and a sedate revival meeting in the heart of Africa, Memmo, his hero, recalls us to Venice and a less ideal harmony, reflected, distorted, and rendered irresistible by murky, odiferous waters.

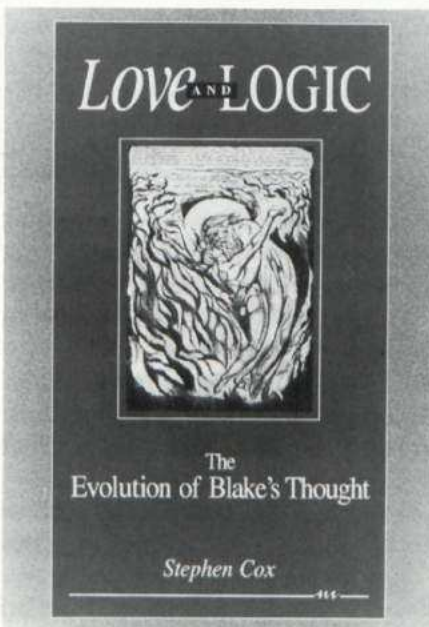
On the surface, the Christianized Part II appears to be a repudiation of the pagan utopia of Part I, and both a rejection of life in late eighteenth-century Europe and Britain. Yet the two

parts of Cumberland's odd and entertaining narrative do, in the end, make a kind of sense together. They are not so much the fantasies of a mad genius nor the visions of a political radical as the dreams of a man who frequently wishes his times were different (freer, healthier, more rational, more peaceful, more fun), but who, at the end of the day, is comfortable enough to settle at the edge of things as they are.

Stephen Cox, *Love and Logic: The Evolution of Blake's Thought*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 314 pp. \$32.50.

Reviewed by  
Angela Esterhammer

Stephen Cox's new book is well worth reading for what it says about Blake, about Blake's critics, and about the evolution of ethical, aesthetic, and logical thought over the past two centuries. *Love and Logic* will no doubt become best known for its determined opposition to postmodernist readings of Blake. Postmodernism is widely defined here to include deconstruction as well as other forms of poststructuralism, historicism, and psychoanalysis; the most consistent targets of the argument appear to be critics like McGann, Hilton, Essick, Glen, Larrissy, and Mitchell. In defiance of all critics who stress the undecidability and indeterminacy of Blake's texts, Cox's aim is to remind us that, Blake's time not being our own, Blake lived in a logical universe dominated by a concept of objective truth, and his unflinching purpose was to persuade readers to reject error and embrace that truth, even though he was all too aware of the difficulties of representing it.



Blake wants to make the clearest possible distinction between truth and falsehood. . . . Nothing could be farther from his ambitions than the projects of those postmodern theorists who have abandoned, with no visible sign of regret, any attempt to locate a reliable truth. (235)

What makes this a powerful and relevant rebuttal is that (as Cox notes) most postmodern critics have at least implicitly coopted Blake's intentions into their argument, claiming not just that his texts are responsive to postmodern readings, but that Blake himself more or less consciously anticipated postmodernism.

Cox embarks on his reading of Blake with a strongly worded defense of authorial intention and its importance for interpretation. He deflects some, if not all, of the customary arguments against intention-oriented criticism by

clearly defining intention in logical rather than psychological terms: it is not Blake's purported marital problems that are significant to his vision of love (though Cox is occasionally tempted to allude to them anyway), but the effective choices he makes as an author, choices which organize his worldview and limit the referential scope of his texts. Cox acknowledges the influence of economist and philosopher of human action Ludwig von Mises on this critical perspective, but one is also tempted to draw comparisons with E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and Cox's previous publications show that his approach derives from a sustained investigation into hermeneutics and the limits of interpretative method.

Thus Cox's book resolutely reads the direction of Blake's logic from signs that others have found indeterminate or infinitely referential. If it is true that "some readers may be surprised . . . by [an] emphasis on logic, and hence on reason" (1), as Cox initially suggests, the excellent introductory chapter should convince many of those readers that logic may be regarded as the organizing principle of Blake's vision. "Logic," here, is primarily the establishment of relationships between ideas, and Cox maintains that Blake's favorite methods for handling ideas are substantialization (giving ideas a physical and spatial form), universalization (expanding the scope of individual ideas), and identification (equating ideas with one another). Blake's poetic works then become experiments with different ways of grasping and arranging concepts, par-



ticularly concepts of love—though love is defined broadly enough here to include freedom and individuality as well as familial, sexual, and religious relationships.

The logic of Cox's own book, as reflected in his subtitle, is severely chronological. This is explicitly a study in the *evolution* of Blake's thought, which means not only that the poetry is studied in chronological sequence (problems of dating, while not dwelt on, are competently handled), but also that the *Songs of Innocence*, for instance, are counterpointed with marginalia from the 1780s and the *Songs of Experience* are paired with contemporaneous notebook poems, even studied in their notebook versions. One consequence of this perspective is that Cox's narrative of Blake's career is unrelentingly teleological. The motivations of characters within each poem are likely to be explained by appeal to the development of the poem's logical pattern. More significantly, each work leads logically on to the next as if they were a series of computer programs to be tested and debugged in turn, or, to use Cox's more historical metaphor, as if they were the projects of a tinkerer or workshop inventor. The result is a curious view of Blake's oeuvre as "a series of experiments in using logic to construct a universe congenial to love" (35). The teleological bias may be an accurate reflection of Blake's pursuit of a goal, and thus justifiable within the limits of Cox's intentionalist perspective, but its corollary is a more dubious determinism: it sometimes seems as if Blake's works could not possibly have been other than they were, or been produced in a different order, given the logical problems they consecutively posed for him.

Nevertheless, this approach leads to some excellent, thought-provoking, original readings. It accounts—logically—for characteristics of some works that other critics have seen as indefensible, and therefore either as weaknesses or as indications that Blake must have been aiming at indeterminacy or deconstruction of his own

texts. *Songs of Innocence*, in particular, emerges here as a deliberate limitation of the world to certain kinds of logical love-relationships, so that emotional responses follow "as seemingly inevitable inferences from a logical relationship, the identification of God and humanity" (42). Cox's interpretation accounts for the limitation of innocence without identifying it as a limitation of Blake's awareness or his abilities. This makes possible a refreshing study of lyrics which have been pressed into deconstructive service so often that it hardly seemed possible any more to identify their embodiment of an ideal as a component of their meaning. Cox, however, realizes that love in *Innocence* "is purely and simply good—not because Blake cannot imagine any arguments against this ideal, but because he chooses to construct a world that corresponds to it" (39). In this context, the things about which the *Songs of Innocence* are silent can be interpreted positively (what would a world look like which had these boundaries?) instead of negatively (since Blake must be saying something about the "real" world, what have these boundaries excluded or repressed?).

The insightful reading of *Innocence* may point up a few weaknesses in readings of other poems. Granted that *Tiriel* is, as Cox suggests, an inverse and parody of the vision of innocence, why can the interpretation of *Tiriel* be substantiated by historical circumstances when these would distort the interpretation of *Innocence*? The superficial answer is that *Tiriel* adopts a different logical framework from the *Songs of Innocence*, which deliberately excluded historical cause and effect; a more considered answer might be that a book which examines Blake's authorial choices is justified in considering the context in which those choices were made. Yet introducing the context of eighteenth-century attitudes to love and familial relationships, as Cox occasionally does, seems somehow to detract from one of his most significant arguments, which is

that Blake's characters and states are more readily comprehensible as *logical* constructs than as the "realistic," historical, or psychological constructs we might expect to find in novels. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* benefits particularly from this approach; Cox traces the consequences of its substantiating and dialectical logic and argues convincingly that it is neither naturalistic nor antinomian. A chapter on *The Book of Urizen* provides a marvelous pendant to the analysis of dialectical logic in *The Marriage*, since Cox reads *Urizen* as a parody of Blake's own "essentializing, dualizing, universalizing, and substantializing vision" (146).

Despite Cox's repeated dissociation of his viewpoint from that of "traditional" critics as well as from postmodernists, it seems to me that one of the critics he is closest to in terms of his patterns and priorities is Northrop Frye. If Frye regarded Blake's corpus as a quasi-architectural system, Cox sets that system in motion so that it becomes a series of components re-arranging themselves into different positions and progressively generating new members. His perspective is similar to Frye's in that it emphasizes the overall shape of Blake's thought rather than the often contradictory details—focusing, one might say, on *langue* rather than *parole*. His consistently deductive approach even suggests the extent to which the choice of focus determines the resulting vision. An emphasis on significant detail is likely to result in a postmodernist reading full of paradox and conflicting or indeterminate reference, while a focus on deep structure is more likely to result, like Cox's study and Frye's, in the discovery of logical patterns.

The originality and power of the book seem to me to lie in its focus on logic, but the primary subject of Cox's analysis is, after all, love. Love and logic are not related dialectically here, but rather as material and method: it is the vagaries of love that Blake, and Cox, try to work through in logical terms. The second half of *Love and Logic* addresses Blake's major pro-



phesies, all of which are read as "the torments of Love & Jealousy in The Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man," or as a "history of the human heart" (167-68). In Cox's terms, the complexity of these poems results from Blake's attempt to set competing forms of logical thought side by side within the same text, rather than working through one possible logical organization of love as each of the shorter poems does. By working inward from Blake's logical method to the vision that method produces, Cox arrives at significant insights into the origins of sexual love and jealousy (consequences of dualistic thought itself), and the meaning of substantializations such as Beulah ("an effort to work out the logical conditions of an environment in which spiritual love can inhabit temporality," 231) or the Spectre of Los (a necessary parody of logic). Blake's solution to the torments of love and jealousy is a substantial and uncompromising vision of Christian love, a logical principle of redemption which can harmonize previously competing conceptual drives such as universality and individual identification.

Ironically, when viewed from this perspective Blake's method can come across as rather postmodern: instead of grand narratives, his major prophecies offer heterogeneity and continuous experimentation with logic. Cox indeed argues that Blake and postmodernism share some forms of logical thought ("The great problem of Blake and the postmodernists is the habit of imputing to propositions and logical operations the characteristics of substantial things" [235]), but they differ on the crucial issue of representation. In Blake's major prophecies the logical principles that he initially shares with postmodernism are taken a step further, toward a paradoxical "parody of a parody, a reproduction of reproductions" for which Cox coins the noun "paralectic" (239-40). Paralectic is the method of salvation in Blake's later works, a logical method by which Blakean realities are represented as parodic likenesses of a

material world that Blake knows and demonstrates to be itself a parody of the eternal world. This is the culmination of Blake's substantializing logic, and of Cox's predominantly spatializing explication of that logic (demonstrated, for instance, by his persistent interest in terms which etymologically convey some sort of positioning, such as "parody" and "dialectic"). Spatializing logic of this kind (which is again reminiscent of Frye) allows for a distinction between the postmodernists' "paradox," which is undecidability, and paradox in Blake, which literally means two beliefs existing side by side. Ultimately, the difference between Blake and the postmodernists resides in Blake's conviction and demonstration that paradox and indeterminacy, far from undermining the concept of objective truth, instead verify the existence of a truth beyond the power of human representation. Discussing Los's laborious efforts in building Golgonooza, Cox concludes that

The final effect is not, however, a denial of the power of vision; and it is not an affirmation of the value of mystery or indeterminacy. . . . It is, rather, a sign that Blakean visions are not emptily self-reflexive but are imperfect and unapologetically inelegant aids to the contemplation of a truth beyond themselves. (270-71)

Not least among the strengths of Cox's argument is its ability to contain its own opposition, by a process analogous to the way Blake himself (according to Cox) contains negations by substantializing them and assigning them a place in his logical system. Cox agrees that there is profound indeterminacy in Blake's vision, only he redefines indeterminacy so that it is not limitlessness of meaning, but rather a kind of pluralism which results from Blake's "constantly varying involvement with logic," his "multiplication of logical strategies that organize meanings in a variety of momentarily determinate ways" (10). If, as Cox seems to suggest in his opening chapter, the mid-twentieth-century critics who set

out to elucidate Blake's system represented a certain innocence that has given way to the experienced state of postmodernist criticism, then Cox's own book represents a kind of organized innocence that is able to contain the postmodernist vision as a systematic part of a larger whole.

Still, it is worthwhile to have someone remind us, from a strongly intentionalist, mildly historicist perspective, that Blake did care more for mastery, persuasion, clarity, and a stable truth than many contemporary critics would comfortably admit. Blake's language and imagery, his psychology and his ideology continue to be fair game for critics fascinated by the capacity for play in his kaleidoscopic work. But these readings will also continue to contend with a tradition of interpretation which emphasizes the coherence and teleology of Blake's thought, a tradition now infused with new energy by *Love and Logic*.

Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. \$59.00.

Reviewed by  
Morton D. Paley

In the Introduction to the last annotated checklist, Detlef W. Dörrbecker remarked that "Blake's *revolutionary inclinations*, especially during the 1790s, are presently being studied with fresh momentum, and a new understanding of Blake's radical position is unfolding" (*Blake* 26 [1992/93]: 77). *Dangerous Enthusiasm* is an important contribution to that new understanding, while at the same time pointing the way to new areas of