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R E V I E W

Brian John, *Supreme Fictions*

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general reader meet Blakean irony without being sure about the difference between the satire of "Island in the Moon" and the irony here or later--the name seems the same, but sometimes refers to techniques like parody, now to theme, later to mode of perception, a multisensory device where the plate shows one thing and the poem another, and finally to "mythic irony" (p. 100). But this is to quibble.

Given the restrictions under which the labor was performed, its real strength appears in the masterful explanation of *Urizen*, where the action is made to appear truly dramatic and the subject made clearly the mind of Man. Sometimes the explanation of other plots comes cluttered with roll calls of commentators which seem superfluous since their names appear in the notes anyway. The real weakness, however, is the lack of a clear-cut conclusion to match the introductory chapters. The student and general reader are taken to Jerusalem and left suspended there--hanging by the thumbs as it were. Having been led from *Poetical Sketches* to this loftiest of heights, it would be nice to look back at the trackless wastes behind us and ahead. The "Suggestions for Further Reading" seem sparse enough, the "Criticism" list very heavy on collections of essays at the expense of individual studies. And the index tells us something about the current state of Blake studies when it lists Franklin P. Adams (FPA) but not Hazard S.

Brian John. *Supreme Fictions: Studies in the Work of William Blake, Thomas Carlyle, W. B. Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence*. Montreal & London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974. Pp. 318. \$13.50.
Reviewed by David Wagenknecht

Taken one observation at a time, Brian John's *Supreme Fictions* is intelligent and right-minded, but it is one of those studies of which the modesty and sanity are undone by scope. Such a range demands that one simultaneously manage general perspective as well as interpretive detail; this book, decent as it is, seemed to me neither out far nor in deep. The intention, for one thing, is rather uneasily divided between historical and critical implication: the reader must suspend himself between (on the one hand) landscapes of likemindedness so misty and general that the only distinct observations can be exceptions, and (on the other) specific interpretive patches which illustrate the author's admiration for his subjects more than these subjects' relationship to the larger view. Given the quality of the author's intelligence and the genuineness of his affections, this is a pity.

On the one hand John wants to argue for a Romantic "vitalist" tradition (stressing characteristic imagery more than his subjects' rhetorical relationship to historically conditioned audiences), but he is not very

curious about Romanticism as an historical phenomenon, and neither the provenance nor the transference of the ideas and imagery he is concerned with interests him. Consequently the reader feels himself to be dealing less with a tradition than with four quite distinct expositions of similar ideas, and his first impression that the argument will have vast scope is replaced by a feeling of arbitrariness. Not only are we not told sufficiently why author X belongs (in the tradition designated), why not author Y: we are left finally with no very developed sense of the ways in which John's chosen (and unruly) four might be related--they simply often sound alike, which is not enough point to unify the discussion. Indeed, the idea of tradition is most active in the study by negative implication, for John is often anxious because ideas which are "good" in one context (usually Blake, but often Lawrence as well) are undesirable in another (Carlyle, sometimes Yeats). The word "fascist" recurs often enough to make one uncomfortable, but it is exactly the book's undeveloped sense of history which makes the anxiety unresolvable.

The book's potential for an interpretive dimension is reflected in the title, determined by an interest in Romantic projection, but this too is swallowed up by mere exposition of ideas. There is no shortage of specific commentary in the book, but the relentlessly expository method stands far enough outside the texts that no sense of the competition between imagination and reality convincing enough to support the title emerges. The Carlyle chapter is probably the least convincing in this regard--the concluding third of it rather desperately announces a critical dimension, arguing that the sage was a literary fictionist as much as prophetic factualist (the demonstration bogs down in impressionistic appreciations of style)--but the Blake chapter may be taken as more characteristic. As a whole the chapter is a worthy general introduction to Blake's poetry (though very thin on the epics), but John decides to concentrate on *Milton* for reasons which have little to do with his general argument (it is the "shortest" as well as the "most 'finished'" epic, we are told), and the commentary manages to avoid nearly all the troubling minute particulars of the poem. Even on the level of general commentary it tells us nothing new. There is an attractive enthusiasm to the discussion, but--like the book as a whole--it implicitly begs more questions than it explicitly answers.