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978-0-521-11047-1 - Blake, Kierkegaard, and the Spectre of Dialectic

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Excerpt

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Introduction

No, everything has its dialectic, not indeed such a dialectic as makes it sophistically relative (this is mediation), but a dialectic by which the absolute becomes manifest as the absolute by virtue of the dialectical.

Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

I will compel thee to rebuild by these my furious waves
Death choose or life thou strugglest in my waters, now choose
life.

Blake, *The Four Zoas*

Blake scholarship has been persistently rife with analogues, and the appearance of yet another is likely to meet with skepticism if not outright dismay.¹ But the idea of an analogue in Kierkegaard is a compelling one: despite Blake's Nietzschean moments, Kierkegaard's radically individual Protestantism or "Christianity" – the tension between religion and nihilism in his work – has always suggested a better analogue for Blake, whose figure of Christ in his last poem *Jerusalem* invokes at least a theological remnant of sorts. Deconstructive and poststructuralist criticism have brought this latent analogue into sharper prominence, for it has been increasingly observed of both authors that they are curiously at once "proto-deconstructive," one might say (although I must apologize for this extraordinarily ugly adjective), and anti-deconstructive.² Indeed, Kierkegaard has been thoroughly deconstructed to the point that he has himself become a master deconstructionist who brings his corrosive skepticism to bear on the question of religion or any metaphysics of presence.³ Blake thus far has proved more resistant to such dissolution, and it is interesting to speculate why this should be so. "Blake has not – apparently – been very interesting to poststructuralism and vice versa," W.J.T. Mitchell has recently remarked; yet the late Paul de Man suggested to Mitchell,

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as he recounts it, that this is because Blake is himself such a deconstructionist that “there are no secrets or repressions” to be exposed by deconstructive analysis.⁴ Mitchell further and more interestingly suggests that in fact Blake may be “the secret agenda of poststructuralist romantic criticism, the marginal figure who infiltrates the center” (91). More than this, he may be “the repressed Other who haunts and indirectly *dominates* the [poststructuralist] discourse from which he is excluded” (my emphasis); and it is this provocative insight – the insight in turn linking Blake most compellingly with Kierkegaard – that my study explores.

The observation that Blake and Kierkegaard are at once deconstructive and anti-deconstructive duplicates the observation in earlier scholarship that they are at once Hegelian and anti-Hegelian.⁵ This duplication is no accident, for both observations rest on the profound insight that their notion of “dialectic” *mirrors* – that is to say, both repeats and inverts – the logic of dialectic informing Hegelianism, romantic irony, and (I shall argue) deconstruction. What Blake and Kierkegaard fundamentally share is an eccentric idea of dialectic: Kierkegaard’s famous “either/or,” which stands in fierce opposition to the “both-and” logic not only of Hegelian mediation, but of Schlegelian romantic irony and in turn of deconstruction. (Deconstruction’s affinities with romantic irony are hotly disputed, but this dispute remains an open one, and I shall engage it in chapter v).⁶ Kierkegaard characterizes Hegelian dialectic and Schlegelian romantic irony as equally “spectral,” an abstract parody of the true dialectic of contraries constituting his ideal of “life.” And it is in a very similar spectre of “Negation” – a spectre which “mediates” and hence negates life’s contraries – that Blake–Los comes to define his greatest opponent.

Briefly, my argument is that in his new focus on the struggle of Los and the Spectre in *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, Blake turns from a Hegelian “both-and” dialectic of Orc and Urizen in his early works to something very like a Kierkegaardian “either/or.” This new dialectic of Los and the Spectre, truth and error, life and death, is in fact a complex inversion of the Orc–Urizen dialectic – an inversion which mirrors and yet radically transvalues that earlier dialectic. This transvaluation is rather in the nature of a conversion experience, embodying the same paradox of violent repudiation yet equally violent embrace. The act of repudiation in “either/or” is at the same time an act of embrace, a kind of “both-and” – and it is this

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difficult paradox which constitutes the heart of our difficulties with Blake and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's entire body of work is a sustained struggle against, yet embrace of, both Schlegel's romantic irony (which he calls "the aesthetic") and the Hegelian system ("the ethical"), a struggle with system to deliver individuals from that system. And it is a very similar struggle not merely between opposing principles or "contraries" but between two entire dialectics – a systematic dialectic of negation and an unsystematic dialectic which at once incorporates and rejects the both-and logic of idealist negation – that Blake dramatizes in the struggle between Los and the Spectre of Urthona. Their shifting mirror relationship, their shadowy resemblance, masks a profound opposition: the opposition of life and death, the "either/or" with which Blake and Kierkegaard finally confront us.

The dialectic of Los and the Spectre of Urthona which Blake worked out during his three years at Felpham and made into the central dynamic of *Milton* and *Jerusalem* was an extraordinary breakthrough for him, a solution (as he saw it) to the problem of "the contraries" which had dogged him throughout his career. For although he never wavered from characterizing life as a dynamic interaction of contraries, he struggled throughout his career with different ways of representing that interaction. His continual reworking of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was part of this struggle, as was his sustained engagement with the battle between Orc and Urizen which Frye has so thoroughly explicated.⁷ Blake's increasing dissatisfaction with this static Orc cycle, as Frye has called it, and final abandonment of that battle with the appearance of the Spectre of Urthona is the crisis or turning point around which this study revolves.

This turn is also familiar to readers as the turn from Blake's "Two Classes of Men" (*The Marriage*) to the "Three Classes of Men" (*Milton* and *Jerusalem*), and from "the Two Contraries" to "the Two Contraries and the Reasoning Negative." He further confusingly titles these two contraries "the Reprobate" and "the Redeemed," and calls the third class of men "the Elect." The dialectic is further complicated by the fact that the two contraries are within Los, while the "reasoning negative" is the Spectre.

Unravelling the dynamics of this dialectic will be the task of this study. For the moment, the point is that the new and crucial feature in this later dialectic is the addition of a third element: the

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Reasoning Negative or Negation (the Third Class of Men or the Elect):

There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary
 The Negation must be destroyd to redeem the Contraries
 The Negation is the Spectre; the Reasoning Power in Man
 This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal
 Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated away
 To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-examination.

(M, II, 40:32–37; 142)

This negation or Spectre threatens to reconcile or mediate the contraries of life within Los, reducing them from absolutes to mere relativities within a system. But Blake despises such mutual accommodation as a blurring of distinctions which reduces the passion or energy of life, and relegates this kind of “marriage” to the secondary realm of Beulah – “To where the Contraries of Beulah War beneath Negations Banner” (M, II, 34:23; 134).

Because Los must cast off this negation, Blake’s dialectic of Los and the Spectre is one of exclusion not inclusion, emphatically not a happy marriage of contraries. And it is this new, central emphasis on casting off, on decisively differentiating between men and their spectres, between “sheep” and “goats,” and between truth and error, which makes Blake’s dialectic so resistant to the all-inclusive, both-and logic not only of Hegelian dialectic but of idealist dialectics in general. His dialectic of life is the activity of clarifying muddled perception into clear-cut differentiation or what he calls “minute discrimination” (VLJ; 560). As Blake cogently summarizes his dialectic,

All Life consists of these Two Throwing off Error & Knaves from our company continually & receiving Truth or Wise Men into our Company Continually. . . . to be an Error & to be Cast out is a part of Gods Design No Man can Embrace True Art till he has Explord & Cast out False Art . . . whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual. (VLJ; 562)

Hegelian readings of Blake’s dialectic result largely from taking as the law of Blake’s dialectic his famous aphorism from *The Marriage* that “Without contraries is no progression” (MHH 3; 34). But this is the very doctrine that Blake later repudiates – at least in its original sense, and as it is commonly understood – in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. As Leo Damrosch has observed, Blake’s final dialectic of contraries does

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not keep them “forever opposed in [the] mutual immanence” of the Hegelian system,⁸ but decisively casts one off:

It is tempting to understand Blake’s aphorism [“Without Contraries . . . ” etc.] as pointing to a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the dialectic that simultaneously annuls each stage and raises it to a higher one. But the developed Blakean myth has no place for the upward spiral that absorbs each preceding stage, emphasizing instead that the Spectral or Satanic must be expelled utterly. . . . Blake’s movement away from the optimistic “progression” of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and toward the drastic exclusion of “negation” represents a recognition that much in our experience is radically unassimilable.⁹

If, for Blake, “All Life consists of these two throwing off Error & Knaves from our Company continually & recieving Truth or Wise Men into our Company Continually,” life is not a gradual progression towards some increasingly visible goal or truth, but the repeated activity of casting off error and embracing truth. And in each act of embracing truth, that truth is whole and complete, not partial or a mere approximation of some final truth. As Damrosch points out, “Blake maintains . . . , as Hegel would not, that the whole is fully present in each particular member, and is unwilling to hold as Hegel does that the particulars are necessarily finite and transitory” (151). In other words, Blake’s contraries (synonymous with “particulars”) are not merely parts adding up to some larger all-inclusive whole, but are wholes in themselves. Further, as Damrosch remarks, whatever Blake may mean by “progression” must be something very different from the usual Hegelian understanding of it as a gradual, incremental movement towards an absolute goal: “Blake’s system is often called dialectical, but it is so only in a special sense, envisioning truth as the simultaneous union of all particulars rather than as the sequential development that we ordinarily expect in dialectic” (27–28). More recently, Steven Shaviro has perhaps best described Blake’s real sense of progression as “the continuation of a lived tension of opposites:”

Dialectical progression always implies the “Abstract objecting power” (J 10:14, E151) of negation and comprehension, whereas Blake insists upon the positivity of both contraries, their active and continuing opposition. “Progression” thus has a very special meaning for Blake, implying the continuation of a lived tension of opposites, rather than any sublation or furthering resolution.¹⁰

Martin Nurmi similarly observed years ago that Blake’s dialectic was anti-Hegelian – a dialectic of “being” not “becoming” – and in

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this remark we find I think the crux of Blake's (and not incidentally, of Kierkegaard's) opposition to the idealist dialectics of both-and logic or becoming:

Blake is not a Hegelian. Though he uses the word "progression" in *The Marriage*, his contrary forces do not, like Hegel's "thesis" and "antithesis," constitute a world process of "becoming." Indeed, Blake's Human world, in which the contraries freely interact, is not one of becoming at all, for it is perfect; the only "progression" there is in it is that of continued creativeness. And, of course, Blake would have nothing to do with anything as abstractly systematic as Hegel's dialectic.¹¹

Nurmi's observation isolates a number of central anti-Hegelian features: Blake's objection to the idea of infinitely progressing towards, but never reaching, a final goal or absolute; his emphasis instead on the repeated embrace of that absolute (what Nurmi calls "continued creativeness") in the visionary experience; and his rejection of an abstract, systematic notion of contraries. Furthermore, Nurmi points out, Blake would abhor the Hegelian synthesis of contraries: "Nowhere in Blake's use of contraries does he provide for such a synthesis, except possibly in the very general one of the unity of Human life. And that is not really a Boehmian (or Hegelian) synthesis, because the contraries remain unchanged" (33). Here again Nurmi provides us with a critical phrase – "the very general . . . unity of Human life" – and with a critical distinction: that between "synthesis" and "unity." For Blake's idea of unity is that of "life" – and most of the problems with his dialectic of human life stem from the problematic nature of that almost by definition indefinable ideal. Life for Blake is a unity but not a synthesis; it has a shape (Los) but not a fixed shape (Urizen or the Spectre); and it is a dynamic struggle but not therefore mere indeterminate flux, the endless striving of infinite becoming.

In all of these ways, then, Blake seems fundamentally anti-Hegelian. Yet in fact he is both Hegelian and anti-Hegelian; and further, he is so both at the beginning and at the end of his myth. It is true that in his change from a Hegelian dialectic of contraries to an anti-Hegelian dialectic of contraries and negations he might seem to have been "converted" from a systematic dialectic of becoming to an anti-systematic dialectic of being. But his turn from one to the other, as I hope to show, merely makes explicit an anti-Hegelianism – a rejection of "negation" – that was present all along; and in his rejection of Hegelianism he does not so much reject it as re-evaluate

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and “master” it. This is why Hegelian readings of Blake are not strictly wrong and why we continue to have the sense, rightly, that Blake is in some way Hegelian.

This Hegelian anti-Hegelianism is the very structure of Kierkegaard’s “either/or,” which, like Blake’s dialectic of Los and the Spectre, incorporates yet radically transvalues the Hegelian logic of negation. It is a structure which may take us some considerable way towards explicating many of the apparent contradictions within Blake’s thought. For, like the relationship of Los to the Spectre, the structure of either/or is such that it rejects yet contains both-and logic. Like Blake, Kierkegaard rejects the both-and logic of “Becoming” for a dialectic of “Being” in which the final vision of life is (to quote Shaviro once more) as an “active and continuing opposition” of contraries, “a lived tension of opposites, rather than any sublation or furthering resolution.” For Kierkegaard, the Hegelian *Aufhebung* of contraries was a bloodless abstraction, the final evaporation of the romantic ideal of life through the agency not just of Hegel but of all the post-Kantian idealist systems. “The calamity of romanticism,” he pronounced, “is that what it grasps is not actuality” (*CI*, 319). Just as Blake came to see in the course of his career that his originally systematic dialectic of contraries (Orc and Urizen) abstracted from and hence destroyed his ideal of life, so Kierkegaard came to see in the course of the romantic age that all the systematic idealist dialectics abstracted from and thereby destroyed life. Their easy mediation of contraries within what Kierkegaard called the “higher unity” of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* and the “higher madness” of Schlegel’s romantic irony (*E/O*, II, 174) was a mediation which could occur only in the abstract realm of thought, not in the concrete realm of life. For Kierkegaard, “both-and” logic is life-denying because it blurs the absolute distinctions or minute discriminations in which life consists; it does not encourage choosing among alternatives, but rather suggests that all alternatives are equal. Life for Kierkegaard as for Blake is the activity of sharpening distinctions or “contraries” to the point at which they become absolute and one embraces truth in a moment of unmediated fusion with it.

Kierkegaard’s dialectic, like Blake’s, emphasizes subjectivity over objectivity, the individual over the system, exclusion over inclusion, passion over reason, truth and error over good and evil. It proceeds not through a series of gradual, mediated steps towards some absolute

goal, but through a series of unmediated leaps, each of which is absolute in itself, a crisis of vision or “choice” which is also a “Last Judgment” differentiating truth from error, life from death. Its focus is what Kierkegaard calls “the instant,” the moment of breakthrough when truth or the eternal enters time, the moment Blake refers to as the “Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find / Nor can his Watch Fiends find it” (M, II, 35:42–43; 136).

In apparently rejecting the mediations of both-and for the unmediated leaps or decisive “crises” of either/or, however, Blake and Kierkegaard nonetheless retain both-and logic as essential to their vision of life, and it is this which makes them so difficult to explicate. The Spectre of both-and logic is the spirit of indeterminacy, perspectivism, Becoming, and “error” who dissolves or relativizes life’s contraries into undecidable oppositions; “either/or” attempts to reintroduce “decidability” into this prior dissolution. Blake and Kierkegaard thus try to “master” or “dominate” (Mitchell) the logic of indeterminacy or error as Blake–Los tries to master the Spectre. Yet it is critical to see that this spectre is also essential to their ideal of life, which is why, again, one can call them both Hegelian and anti-Hegelian, deconstructionist and anti-deconstructionist. Both see this spectre of indeterminacy as central to their vision of life as flux; but because they do not want life to be *only* flux (the flux of pure Becoming that is Hegelian, Schlegelian, and deconstructive), they try to master this indeterminacy in the service of their truth of life. They attempt to reconstitute an idea of Being out of its prior dissolution within the Becoming of idealist dialectics (or less anachronistically in Blake’s case, out of its dissolution in his Orc cycle of pure Becoming); and in this sense they might be said to respond to what Tilottama Rajan terms a “proto-deconstructive crisis” in nineteenth-century thought.¹²

The difficult logic informing their attempted reconstitution of “Being,” the conversion of a spectral “both-and” into a living “either/or,” is what this study attempts to explicate. This logic is a peculiarly negative one, which is why Blake and Kierkegaard are so notoriously difficult. The starting point of their dialectic, for example, is not a state of alienation requiring a mediation of contraries, but a state of mediation or dissolution requiring their differentiation. Their dialectic does not attempt to grasp “inclusively” the whole of life (as does the both-and system), but to consolidate “exclusively” the state of “error,” in a “Last Judgment” or act of

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choice that sharply differentiates “error” from a truth of life that ideally (but not inevitably, and this is its precariousness) stands revealed in stark opposition by this consolidation. The Spectre “who will not defend Truth” must “be compelled to / Defend a Lie,” as Blake puts it, “that he may be snared and caught and snared and taken / That Enthusiasm and Life may not cease” (J, 1, 9:29–31; 152).

This battle with the spectre of negation or error has an extraordinary vitality that I would like this study to convey. But to do so requires walking a fine line between two orthodoxies that are equally determined to collapse Blake (perhaps) and Kierkegaard (certainly) into either orthodox evangelical Christian theologians or into master deconstructionists. Deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard dismiss resistance to their orthodoxy as a reactionary retreat into the staid Kierkegaard of early Kierkegaard scholarship, the Kierkegaard of evangelical Christianity. Conversely, Christian readings of Kierkegaard, while generally acknowledging the radicalism of that Christianity, nonetheless fail to grant the extraordinary precariousness of Kierkegaard’s reconstituted Being – a precariousness that cannot, I would insist, *after* Kierkegaard be sustained. But I want to argue that it is sustained in Kierkegaard himself, as it is in Blake – and that this extraordinary tension between religion and nihilism is Blake’s “wiry bounding line of life” attenuated to its very breaking point. Through their negative dialectic Blake and Kierkegaard do I think reconstitute a precarious Being out of its dissolution within Becoming, and my study traces this vigorous attempt. But because they reconstitute Being *for the sake of* Becoming or life, that Being is reduced to a mere limit, “the bound or outward circumference of energy.” In this radically attenuated form it becomes dispensable to those who follow Kierkegaard; yet in his own thought it is critical to distinguish between a precarious Being and no Being at all, and thus to insist on a critical, however tenuous, distinction from a Nietzschean/deconstructive Becoming. Blake and Kierkegaard retain a certain *moderation* that critically distinguishes them from Nietzsche – the moderation behind their struggles with dialectic, as I shall argue. To collapse them at the very outset into either orthodoxy of religion or of deconstruction destroys not only this moderation but the vitality at the heart of their romantic ideal of life, the vitality at the heart of romanticism itself. I shall argue indeed that their ideal *is* finally

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“life” and not a Platonic truth or orthodox God; and those who would too easily dismiss this reading as theological are well advised to keep this in mind. Blake and Kierkegaard want to rescue “actuality” or “life” (what Kierkegaard also calls “existence”) from its formalistic abstraction within idealist dialectics, and it is the extraordinary vitality of the attempt itself that may best testify to its success.

In some ways this alliance of Blake and Kierkegaard may seem an unlikely one, not only because of the historical gap between them, but because of political and perhaps temperamental differences. Blake’s England was, from the 1770s through the early 1800s, in the throes of division over first of all the American revolution and later England’s response to the French revolution and involvement in the Napoleonic wars. And Blake responded as a political liberal to these events, always championing the cause of liberty against tyranny in all its guises. Kierkegaard, writing in Denmark in the 1840s, was by contrast a political conservative who championed the monarchy and deplored the increasing democratization of Denmark, a movement which he saw as consolidating the slide into mediocrity brought upon “Christendom” by the Hegelian systematic philosophy. The only revolution he witnessed was the bloodless revolution of 1848 – and his sympathies were decidedly not with the revolutionists.¹³

Yet Blake and Kierkegaard seem to have had uneasy and controversial relations with the realm of politics, and may well themselves transcend or expose the conservative–liberal opposition as an illusory one, in the pattern we will come to see as characteristic of their thought. It is generally accepted that although Blake did not become a political conservative he significantly moderated his early revolutionary ideas.¹⁴ And while Kierkegaard is called a conservative, he spent most of his life attacking the political and social *status quo* in Denmark, the complacently institutionalized bourgeois society of Hegelian Christendom. More significantly, both at times seem to repudiate politics in the name of a radical individualism. Kierkegaard remarks that it is an “illusion” “to believe that corruption comes from a king, an emperor, a Pope, a tyrant, or a national leader; if only he can be toppled, the earth will be saved. . . . Any reformation which is not aware that fundamentally every single individual needs to be reformed is *eo ipso* an illusion.”¹⁵ This finds an almost uncanny echo in Blake’s rather bitter remark