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

Lorraine Clark

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Blake's late prophecies, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, feature a conflict between the poet-prophet Los and a Spectre embodying all he most opposes: intellectual skepticism, religious despair, and a systematic philosophical logic of contraries which is for Blake an abstraction from, and a negation of, his ideal of "life." Lorraine Clark traces the analogy between Blake's Spectre and Søren Kierkegaard's concept of "dread," whose spirit of negation and irony he seeks to conquer, in both its philosophical and aesthetic manifestations. Using Kierkegaard's philosophy to illuminate Blake's prophecies, Lorraine Clark shows these concepts to offer the basis for a profound critique both of romanticism, as it has come to be identified with the spirit of dialectic, and of the postmodern irony which it has spawned. The attempt shared by both writers to rescue an ideal of life from its abstraction within idealist dialectics is itself deeply romantic, and offers a dramatization of tensions – between skepticism and affirmation, religion and nihilism, philosophy and poetry – central to our understanding of romanticism.

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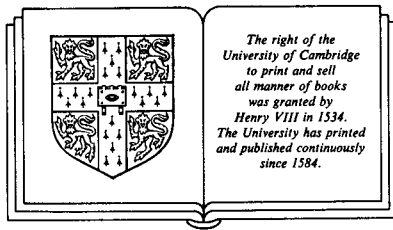
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Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario



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*For my parents,
John Hosie Clark and Rosamond Bailey Clark
and for Donald Kjølmyr*

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This mode of thought, from which a definite type of man is bred, starts from an absurd presupposition: it takes good and evil for realities that contradict one another (not as complementary value concepts, which would be the truth), it advises taking the side of the good, it desires that the good should renounce and oppose the evil down to its ultimate roots – it therewith actually denies life, which has in all its instincts both Yes and No . . . And even here, life is still in the right – life, which does not know how to separate Yes from No –:

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

For a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivisions Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else Such is Job but since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree. God keep me from the Divinity of Yes & No too the Yea Nay Creeping Jesus from supposing Up & Down to be the same Thing as all Experimentalists must suppose

Blake, Letter to Cumberland, April 12, 1827

An observation for theologians: *King Lear*, Act IV, Scene 6: “Aye and no too was no good divinity.”

Kierkegaard, *Journal*

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[More information](#)*A note on texts and abbreviations*

All Blake quotations are from David Erdman's *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, with commentary by Harold Bloom (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1982). For convenience I have included Erdman's page numbers after Blake's plate and line numbers. Blake's most frequently cited works are abbreviated as follows:

BA	The Book of Ahania
BU	The Book of Urizen
FZ	The Four Zoas
GA	The Ghost of Abel
J	Jerusalem
M	Milton
MHH	The Marriage of Heaven and Hell
VLJ	A Vision of the Last Judgment

Kierkegaard's most frequently cited works are also abbreviated, as follows, from the following translations and editions:

CD	<i>The Concept of Dread</i> , transl. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944).
CI	<i>The Concept of Irony</i> , transl. Lee M. Capel (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1965).
CUP	<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i> , transl. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).
E/O	<i>Either/Or</i> , vol. I, transl. David F. Swenson and Lillian Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944). <i>Either/Or</i> , vol. II transl. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944).
FT	<i>Fear and Trembling</i> , transl. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).

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Note on texts and abbreviations

- PV* *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, transl. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1962).
- R* *Repetition*, transl. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).
- SUD* *The Sickness Unto Death*, transl. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).