

10-1983

## Blake, Hegel and Dialectic [Review]

Michael Fischer

Trinity University, mfischer@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng\\_faculty](http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng_faculty)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Fischer, M. (1983). [Review of the book *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic*, by D. Punter]. *Philosophy and Literature*, 7, 265-266. doi: 10.1353/phl.1983.0007

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

this fable. In such a model the parasite does not relate to the individual objects but to the relationship between the objects: "someone has a relationship to someone or something else. A third arrives who has no relationship to the people or the things but only relates to their relation" (p. 109). Thus static or noise, *bruit parasite* in French, interrupts the relationship in sound or electronic messages yet the static has no significance for the individual parties to a communication, only to the communicative relationship.

To characterize any philosophical reflection in a few sentences is unsatisfactory; in the case of Serres it is laughable because Serres builds his whole work out of complex verbal play, much of which would be lost in any translation, and with a deliberately non-linear movement, circling around various problems again and again but with different examples. Since most of these textual illustrations are literary (seventeen texts from La Fontaine, two from Rousseau, a passage from the *Odyssey*, etc.) he casts a new light on the structure of these stories — and he *does* treat them as stories by concentrating on the relations of characters, for the most part — in a way that should give a welcome shock particularly to readers of French neo-classical literature.

Serres is not easy reading, yet he is anything but dull. It is hard not to rethink familiar texts after a brief plunge into Serres. The translation by Lawrence Schehr is generally competent and gets across the main ideas. Strangely, the translator has solved some really difficult problems, translations of puns and of the word families by which Serres proceeds, but has fallen into simple traps of idiomatic French. The English reader should be warned, for example, that the country rat is not "Broken himself by the interruptions . . ." (p. 14). It is instead "Because he is not accustomed to these interruptions." In another case, "I never thought that my peers and I were angels, but we were not stupid enough ever to stop making war, ever to obtain a few moments of peace" (p. 139), should be the opposite, "we are not stupid enough never to stop war, never to arrange moments of peace." Yet despite errors of translation and typesetting, the reader will get a reasonably good idea of Serres's thought. This is an important contribution to the philosophical use of literary texts.

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

JOHN D. LYONS

*Blake, Hegel and Dialectic*, by David Punter; 268 pp. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982, \$23.00.

According to David Punter, "Blake's dialectic and Hegel's share a number of crucial features" (p. 11), making Hegel's *Phenomenology* the "closest parallel to [Blake's] work" (p. 17). By emphasizing progression through contraries, both Blake and Hegel transform the dialectical tradition that they presumably inherit from Heraclitus, Giordano Bruno, and Jakob Böhme, all of whom Punter analyzes in his opening chapter. Subsequent chapters trace the similarities that Punter finds among such works as the *Phenomenology*, *The Mar-*

*riage of Heaven and Hell*, and *The Four Zoas*. Although Punter calls his comparison of Blake and Hegel "important and fruitful" (p. 255), I do not see that it tells us much that we did not already know.

Punter wants not only to join Blake and Hegel but to separate them both from the Romantic movement with which M. H. Abrams, Northrop Frye, and many others have associated them. In Punter's view, "dialectic" serves a "double function" in Blake and Hegel, allowing them to transcend the "logical and scientific formalism" that characterized the Enlightenment and to counter the "subjectivistic," "mystical," "indulgent," "one-sided," and "simple organicist assumptions" that "romantics from Fichte to Keats" endorse. Although Blake, Hegel, and the Romantics all respond to "the political experience of the French Revolution and its aftermath" and to "the effects of industrialization" (p. 253), only Blake and Hegel, in this view, try to salvage reason and work instead of crudely rejecting them.

Punter concedes that his portrait of the Romantics may be "partial" (p. 7), but in my opinion it is worse than that. The generosity toward reason and work that characterizes Blake and Hegel also appears in Coleridge, Keats, Wordsworth, Schelling, and the other writers that Blake and Hegel ostensibly supersede. Punter's conclusions about Blake and Hegel accordingly seem to me not wrong but trite. Although these two share the hostility toward positivism and subjectivism that Punter imputes to them, this antagonism puts them in a far from exclusive group that includes most modernist writers as well as the major English and German Romantics, all of whom argue that "reason should be neither vaunted as final arbiter nor abandoned as repressive agent, but reassigned to its correct place in the whole man" (p. 101).

Isolating Blake and Hegel (if possible) would require a closer look at them than Punter takes here. From Punter's distant vantage point, complex terms such as Blake's "Ratio" and Hegel's *Verstand* (p. 121), or Albion and *Geist* (p. 163), are simple equivalents, and relating Blake to Hegel, or both writers to their surroundings, only involves translating characters and imagery (e.g., Blake's Orc and Urizen) into concepts (Hegel's "desire" and "objectification") that stand for "entire social configurations" (here, "the resumption of alienated energy" and "creeping industrialization"). Similarly, from where Punter stands, the *Phenomenology*, as "a work of philosophy which is yet not philosophy," illuminates Blake's "evolution of new forms of writing," designed to "realize the unity of psychology, history and teleology" (p. 17).

Although Punter occasionally acknowledges the "complexity" of the writers he discusses, he is most often content to reduce them to the static abstractions ("alienated energy," and so forth) and bland propositions that I have been citing. M. H. Abrams has said that "wherever you engage with Hegel's thought, you find yourself in immediate motion." Much the same can be said of Blake, whose characters, designs, and texts shift and intermingle in a dizzying way that prevents us from calling Blake's work "writing," much less "poetry" or "philosophy." Although generalizations about Urizen, "objectification," and "industrialization" may nevertheless complement detailed analysis, in *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic* they substitute for it, turning a potentially important book into a tedious one.