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R E V I E W

Bryan Aubrey, Watchmen of Eternity: Blake's  
Debt to Jacob Boehme

George Mills Harper

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the work of "enemies" like Bacon, Newton, and Locke, or Milton, Shakespeare, and Chaucer, always have been emanations of Jerusalem, however unconscious or distorted. If we do focus on narrative, it seems no accident that when Albion "wakes," "war" becomes a "conversation" that can begin only with a perceiver who transforms enemies into fellow incarnations of a human form divine.

*William Blake's Epic*, then, is not the best introduction for newcomers to the poem or to an investigation of Blake's attitudes towards Berkeley and Reynolds. But the benefits it can provide will be most obvious to alert readers who can, as Blake urged, both see and forgive what they do not approve, and honor its author for the energetic exertion of her talent.

<sup>1</sup>"Jerusalem: A Synoptic Poem," *Comparative Literature* (summer, 1970): 265-78; and "Blake's Tree of Knowledge Grows Out of The Enlightenment," *Enlightenment Essays* 3 (1972): 71-84.

<sup>2</sup>For example, the brief comments on Northrop Frye (2, n. 5), or W. J. T. Mitchell (221, n. 2).

<sup>3</sup>My Blake citations are from David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), 664. Leopold Damrosch, Jr., also argues for Blake's divergence from Berkeley in this annotation. See *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 16, 141.

<sup>4</sup>Readers can locate the details of this argument by referring to "Bare and naked forms," "Particulars," and "Vision" in the index.

<sup>5</sup>A quotation from Reynolds' first discourse, that it is "necessary to the security of society, that the mind should be elevated to the idea of general beauty . . ." (38), implies the political dimension of Reynolds' aesthetics that becomes even more pronounced after the French Revolution. (For this connection, I am indebted to John Barrell's lecture on "Reynolds and the Political Theory of Painting" at the 1986 MWASECS Conferences at Northwestern University.) However, Witke's prefatory note warns that it is not her aim to consider political issues, and the reliance on Berkeley restricts England's "crisis" to its metaphysical and aesthetic aspects only.

**Bryan Aubrey. *Watchmen of Eternity: Blake's Debt to Jacob Boehme*. Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1986. xiii+193 pp. \$27.00 cloth/\$13.25 paper.**

**Reviewed by George Mills Harper**

Edition.<sup>1</sup> In his own collected writings Blake referred to Boehme by name only twice (in 1793 and 1800), but many critics have assumed that his influence was considerable if not great. How, we ask ourselves, can we argue with Blake's blunt statement in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Any man of mechanical talents may from the writings of Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen, produce ten thousand volumes of equal value with Swedenborgs, and from those of Dante or Shakespear an infinite number."<sup>2</sup> To play the devil's advocate, however, I will call attention to still "another plain fact": Blake places Boehme on the same plane as Paracelsus, far above the level of Swedenborg but far below the level of Dante and Shakespeare. Moreover, although little can be proved precisely by Blake's enthusiastic distinctions, the skeptical among us remind ourselves that he annotated three of Swedenborg's books, one with considerable care, whereas he probably annotated none of Boehme's. If in fact Blake owned the Law edition, as Bentley and Nurmi cautiously suggest, the copy has not survived. Perhaps, however, the book was too dear for the penniless Blake.<sup>3</sup>

But all this is beside the point in one sense: he was excited over Boehme as early as 1793 and still excited, according to Henry Crabb Robinson, as late as 10 December 1825: "Jacob Boehme was spoken of as a divinely inspired man. Blake praised, too, the figures in Law's translation as being very beautiful. Michael Angelo could not have done better."<sup>4</sup> That too may be beside the point: the question raised by Aubrey is how strong, pervasive, and continuing Boehme's influence on Blake was. For the opinions of others we may begin—as Aubrey does—with William Butler Yeats, who was himself influenced by Boehme and who declared that *The Book of Urizen* "is page by page a transformation, according to Blake's peculiar illumination, of the doctrines set forth in the opening chapters of the 'Mysterium Magnum' of Jacob Boehme." Even so, it should be pointed out that Yeats is trying to "convict commentators" like Garnett, Gilchrist, and Rossetti, who "show [no] evidence of having ever given so much as a day's study to any part of Blake's mystical writing."<sup>5</sup> Aubrey obviously found a powerful ally in Yeats. However, one of Aubrey's assumptions illustrates the mistakes sometimes induced by over-enthusiastic source studies. Writing about the conflict of opposites leading to the vision of joy in Boehme's system, Aubrey confidently declares that "Yeats captured this vision in his play *The Unicorn from the Stars*, in which the dreamer Martin Hearne (who is based on Boehme), discovers that the life of paradise is like 'a battle where the sword made a sound that was like laughter'" (39). Now the "plain fact" is that *The Unicorn* was inspired by Nietzsche, who was—at one degree removed in the person of Zarathustra—the typical example for Martin Hearne. Moreover, the source of the vision of the

All serious students of Blake know that he read Boehme and approved in general what he found in the famous collection of Boehme's *Works* known as the William Law



clashing swords, one of Yeats's favorite images, was not Boehme but Mrs. Harietta Dorothea Hunter, a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Writing to Mrs. Hunter, in an unpublished letter dated 13 June [1938], Yeats recalled the vivid impression her vision had made: "Yes, of course, I remember. . . . In a vision you described to me the music of heaven you heard as the Clashing of Swords."<sup>6</sup>

At one time or another, to be sure, most of us are guilty of mistaking the tail for the donkey. Although *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is "full of ideas and symbols" from Boehme, as Martin K. Nurmi pointed out thirty years ago, "Blake borrows ideas from Boehme that he had not really assimilated and that he was never to assimilate."<sup>7</sup> Extending the suggestion in an article about negative sources, Nurmi warned that "Blake is sometimes illuminated but rarely explained by his sources. . . . It is therefore hazardous to accept prior analogues to his ideas as sources, especially on the basis of mere conceptual analogy. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

Almost certainly, I suppose, Aubrey would agree in general with that cautious warning. But he disagrees with Nurmi and numerous other critics who deny that Blake belongs in the company of mystics: "The argument of this book, however, is that for all Blake's idiosyncracies, the creative way in which he transformed his sources, and his fierce independence of mind, he was nonetheless working within the broad framework of this mystical and metaphysical tradition" (2).

It is not my purpose to debate this issue,<sup>9</sup> but rather to consider briefly Aubrey's method and relative success in defending his thesis. It is true, as he writes, that "the amount of literature which deals specifically with Boehme remains comparatively small" (ix), and he cites the most significant of these to address the question.<sup>10</sup> His "aim" therefore "is to fill the gap, to show how Boehme's work was a major factor in Blake's intellectual and spiritual life, and how a knowledge of Boehme greatly enriches our understanding of Blake's work" (ix). Unfortunately, "the format of the book" (ix) makes Aubrey's task difficult if not impossible. Beginning with a brief but useful chapter on Boehme's system, he devotes the remaining chapters to five of Blake's poetic works: (2) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; (3) *The Book of Urizen*; (4) *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*.<sup>11</sup> Since the study of Blake's three major poems is confined to one chapter and since a great body of his work is considered sparingly, if at all, the reader who expects Aubrey's book "to fill the gap" will surely be disappointed. In fact, most of the "aspects of Boehme's thought" (ix) treated by *Watchmen of Eternity* have already been explored by other critics, especially Kathleen Raine, to whom Aubrey "acknowledges[s] a lasting debt"

(x). And well he might: her impressive study of Blake's sources cites the same works and traces many of the same ideas as she presents the case of Boehme's influence. More cautiously and from a somewhat different perspective, Paley develops many of the same arguments in his provocative study of Blake's thought.<sup>12</sup> Since the Blake-Boehme relationship represents only a part, however significant, of Raine's and Paley's books, neither of them attempted to justify disregarding the influence of "some elements" of Boehme's thought completely, as Aubrey has (ix).

Although the "element" (or subject) of numerology is not entirely disregarded by Aubrey, it should have been expanded or rejected. Boehme had faith in the symbolic properties of numbers, explaining the meaning of 1 to 65 in *The Answers to Forty Questions Concerning the Soul*,<sup>13</sup> and Blake was probably impressed. However, 3 and 7, the seminal numbers in Boehme's system, were anathema to Blake. If in fact, as Aubrey suggests, Blake learned from Boehme the value of these symbolic constructs, his borrowing may be a prime illustration of Nurmi's "negative sources." We would, of course, be more certain if we had the evidence of annotations or if we knew how long Blake continued to read Boehme after his first great burst of enthusiasm from about 1790 to 1793. Since numbers are not consistently important in Blake's work until *Milton* and do not bear a heavy symbolic burden until *Jerusalem*, it is likely that some new or renewed interest or source of information excited him to extend the function of the divine numbers.<sup>14</sup> If so, this source (Thomas Taylor, the Cabala, or whatever) emphasized the significance of the number 4 and its extensions (especially 16, 32, and 64). By this time certainly—if not long before—Blake had concluded that 3 and its extensions (especially 6, 7, 9, 12, and 27) were pernicious if not downright evil. It is significant that Blake was not greatly impressed by Boehme's Seven Properties, Three Principles, Threefold Life, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

In short, *Watchmen of Eternity* has not filled the gap or settled the great argument. Although Aubrey's brief survey of scholarship and fairly extensive quotations from the rare Law edition are useful, the reader of his persuasion will prefer to consult Damon, Paley, Raine, and others who study Blake's debt to Boehme in the context of his debt to other writers of "the heterodox tradition."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup>*The Works of Jacob Behmen*, ed., George Ward and Thomas Langcake (London, 1764–81), 4 vols. See Aubrey's outline and brief comment, pp. xi–xii.



<sup>2</sup>G.E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake's Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 1:95. Bentley's conjectured dates of *The Marriage* are "(?1790-3)."

<sup>3</sup>G. E. Bentley, Jr., and Martin K. Nurmi, *A Blake Bibliography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 199. According to Bentley and Nurmi, the Law edition was offered by Rivington in 1824 for £1.16.0. That, I suppose, was expensive for Blake.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Sadler, ed., *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 2:305.

<sup>5</sup>John P. Frayne, ed., *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 1:402. From a review in the *Bookman* (April 1896) of Richard Garnett's *William Blake*. Yeats's library included six volumes of Boehme's works by various translators. Five were published by John M. Watkins, Madame Blavatsky's publisher and bookseller, and one by Joseph Richardson which contains four items from the Law edition (see Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W. B. Yeats's Library* [New York and London: Garland, 1985], pp. 37-39).

<sup>6</sup>I quote from a xerox copy of a typescript in the library of Michael B. Yeats.

<sup>7</sup>*Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Critical Study* (Kent: Kent State University, 1957), p. 28. Nurmi refers to Bentley's unpublished dissertation (Oxford, 1954) as "the only study of Blake's connections with Boehme that approaches thoroughness." I agree, having read it many years ago; but much has been done since, as Aubrey points out.

<sup>8</sup>"Negative Sources in Blake," *Essays for S. Foster Damon*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence: Brown University Press, 1969), p. 303.

<sup>9</sup>The opposing viewpoints are most strongly supported by Kathleen Raine in *Blake and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) and Helen C. White in *The Mysticism of William Blake* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature 23, 1927).

<sup>10</sup>Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols*; Percival, *William Blake's Circle of Destiny*; Bentley, "William Blake and the Alchemical Philosophers"; Raine, *Blake and Tradition*; and Paley, *Energy and the Imagination*. Aubrey's review of the scholarship is generally sound but not comprehensive.

<sup>11</sup>Occasional reference is made to other poems, especially *The Book of Ahania* and *The Song of Los* in chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup>Like Raine, Paley explores many possible sources. See especially his chapter on "The Lambeth Books" in *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 61-88.

<sup>13</sup>Law, 2: 24-31.

<sup>14</sup>See especially George Mills Harper, "The Divine Tetrad in Blake's *Jerusalem*," *Essays for S. Foster Damon*, pp. 235-55; see also Harper and Jane McClellan, "Blake's Demonic Triad," *The Wordsworth Circle* 8 (spring 1977), 172-82.

<sup>15</sup>Vol. 1 of the Law edition contains *The Three Principles of the Divine Essence*; Vol. 2 *The Threefold Life of Man and The Answers to Forty Questions Concerning the Soul*. For Aubrey's discussion of numbers, especially 7, see pp. 20-23, and 125. Although he comments briefly on the "fourfold nature" of Freher's designs, Aubrey concludes that "the similar fourfold nature of Blake's universe needs little elaboration" (102). Students of the later Blake should keep in mind that "The Sexual is Threefold: the Human is Fourfold" (*Milton*, Bentley, p. 322).

<sup>16</sup>*Blake and Tradition*, I, 1. Besides Boehme, Raine has read widely in and quotes from such esoteric sources as the Cabala, Agrippa, Hermes Trismegistus, Fludd, Paracelsus, Swedenborg, Jacob Bryant, and Thomas Taylor the Platonist. More modest in their claims, Damon and Paley have considered most of these.

# BLAKE'S INNOCENCE & EXPERIENCE RETRACED

STANLEY GARDNER

Stanley Gardner. *Blake's Innocence and Experience Retraced*. London and New York: Athlone Press and St. Martin's Press, 1986. xviii + 211 pp. illus. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

Attempting to trace the *Songs* back to some origin or source, this book offers a Blake who first acclaims "the work of enlightened charity" undertaken by his parish in the 1780s but who subsequently, owing to the failure of that experiment in welfare, turns with "cold fury" to epitomize "the desolation" in *Songs of Experience*. Along the way we have a provocative revisionist account of "Holy Thursday" (*SI*) and become well acquainted with how things sound "to [Gardner's] ear" and look "to [Gardner's] eye." Working our way back to "the groundwork of a vision" (14), "the visionary groundbase" (47),