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## A Swedenborgian Visionary and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Michael Scrivener

Near the end of "An Audience for *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," John Howard writes that Blake's revolutionary manifesto was "calculated to amuse the Johnson circle and to make the members of the New Church turn 'blue.'" Howard argues that the angel/devil dichotomy expressed in Blake's work corresponds to the angelic Swedenborgians and the demonic Joseph Johnson circle to whom the work was principally addressed. Howard persuasively shows the ways in which Blake satirizes and criticizes the corruption of the New Jerusalem Church, and in a more recent article, Morton D. Paley uncovers even more relevant information on Blake and the Swedenborgians.<sup>2</sup> There can be no doubt that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was influenced to an important degree by Blake's dislike of the English Swedenborgians, their political, sexual, and religious conservatism. Moreover, the Johnson circle clearly did attack Swedenborgianism and its eponymous founder, and the 1791 Birmingham riot, during which the Swedenborgians placated the same Church and King mob that attacked Priestley and other Dissenters, exemplified the differences between the new religious group and the English "Jacobins." Nevertheless, I cannot accept one part of Howard's argument, that Blake's *Marriage* was intended to amuse the Joseph Johnson circle of radical intellectuals and thus to constitute a skirmish in the battle against the Swedenborgians. The Johnson circle would have found the *Marriage* as outrageous as the New Jerusalem Church would have found it blasphemous. The *Marriage* runs counter in essential ways to the Rational Dissent of the Johnson circle and the dominant radicalism of the 1790s embodied in groups like the Revolution Society, the Society for Constitutional Information, and Friends of the People, and expressed in publications like *The Analytical Review* and the *Morning Chronicle*. Furthermore, it seems implausible that Blake would have concentrated so much of the *Marriage* on Swedenborgian error simply to express solidarity with Priestley and the Johnson circle; rather, the New Jerusalem Church, with which Blake became disillusioned, was the only ideological association with which he could (at one time at least) identify. Although Blake never joined the Church, in 1789 he and his wife did indeed subscribe to the tenets of the Swedenborgians who ultimately and rather rapidly disappointed him. Despite the many political ideas that Blake shared with the Johnson circle and the radicalism of the 1790s, Rational Dissent's hostility to all varieties of "religious enthu-

siasm" would have alienated Blake to such an extent that it is unlikely he would have written a satire in which the implied reader opposes Swedenborgian error from the assumptions of mainstream Jacobinism. Rather, the *Marriage* positions itself against both Swedenborg and Priestley, both the New Jerusalem Church and English Jacobinism.

In the 5 September 1791 issue of the *London Morning Chronicle*, there is a brief article entitled "A New Visionary" that is interesting in this context because it gives a revealing example of how the Swedenborgians were represented in one of the most important Foxite Whig publications. The *Chronicle*, of course, supported the French Revolution, defended Priestley (to whom it opened its pages on numerous occasions), and in general sustained an influential version of English Jacobinism.<sup>3</sup> If one imagines William Blake reading this 1791 article, which is brief enough to quote in full, one can begin to understand why and how the *Marriage* is a critique also of the mainstream radicalism:

Where will things end? There is a person now in this city, at the head of the Swedenborgians, who, besides possessing *their common faculty* of seeing Angels, has the privilege of conversing with the Jewish Prophets and Apostles, whom he frequently meets in the streets of this metropolis; but very seldom if he is not in company with a third person. In this case, where the other cannot see any person near them, he frequently makes a full stop; and with an air of astonishment, either falls upon one knee, or makes the handsomest bow he can! To the natural expressions of surprise at this unaccountable conduct, he always retorts by asking the other party if he did not see any thing? "That," says he, "is Isaiah — this Apostle Paul!" He had a few days ago a very favourable vision of St. Paul, in St. Paul's Church-yard! and on that account detained two friends who were with him a considerable time. The Apostle, according to his account, was then listening to a song in favour of the French Revolution! He further says, that he can any time have a sight of Moses, and the other Jewish Prophets at a boxing match, or about Rag Fair!

One striking thing about the article is the number of parallels between the Swedenborgian's reported activities and words, and parts of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: the visionary's conversing with Isaiah, Paul, and others is similar to the *Marriage*'s narrator's conversations with Isaiah and Ezekiel in plates 12 and 13; the visionary's listening to "a song in favour of the French Revolution" is not unlike the *Marriage*'s concluding "A Song of Liberty"; the visionary's seeing Moses and "the other Jewish prophets at a boxing match" could be construed as similar in some ways to the *Marriage*'s doctrine of the contraries and Blake's idea of "Mental War." Another striking thing is the way the article constructs an implied reader who would, as a matter of course, dismiss the visionary as a religious fanatic who need not be taken seriously but who exists entirely for comic effect. It is difficult to imagine Blake conforming to the expected responses of condescension and ridicule for the visionary. The tone of the article is contemptuous, which is especially apparent in sentences like the

first one: "Where will things end?" That question assumes a shared perception of a particular kind of social disorder that is not so much dangerous and subversive as it is absurd. The italicized words in "*their common faculty of seeing Angels*" communicate a sneer at the presumption of Swedenborgians which is quite clearly homologous with social presumption (the word "common" has an unmistakable snobbish resonance). The observer-writer perceives the visionary entirely as an object, and one imagines him shaking his head, perhaps chuckling, and waiting for further evidence that the Swedenborgian is outside the category of rational human being.

It is not difficult to imagine a Blakean response to the article: "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise"; "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth"; "Listen to the fools reproach! it is a kingly title!"; "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite. / For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (E 36-37,39). In the dichotomy of the *Marriage*, the *Chronicle's* author would be angelic, and the visionary a devil. The *Chronicle's* article does not simply criticize the visionary; rather, it represents him in such a way that everything he says or does can be dismissed as preposterous. The article is rhetorically violent in that the person being represented is deprived of any qualities that might make the reader take him seriously, and for Blake the rhetorical violence would have been especially offensive because the article attacks the notion of visionary experience, of which the *Marriage* is an extensive defense. The *Marriage* surely portrays Swedenborg as insufficiently visionary, but the other emphasis is on the limitations and errors of his *vision*. In most Blakean respects, the *Chronicle* article is more error-ridden than Swedenborg's writings because at least Swedenborg does not repudiate visionary experience, the Poetic Genius.

The article is interesting in another way because in 1791 the English Swedenborgians were explicitly anti-revolutionary and dissociated themselves entirely from the French Revolution and English political radicalism, so that it is unlikely that the "head" of the sect would imply support for the French Revolution. It is also unlikely that a leader of the New Jerusalem Church would have behaved in public in the ways described in the *Chronicle* because the Swedenborgians were anxious to achieve a kind of respectability.<sup>4</sup> There are a number of possible explanations. Given the *Chronicle* author's obvious lack of sympathy for both the Swedenborgians and the individual visionary he is writing about, one cannot assume the author is especially reliable, so that possibly the visionary, far from being the "head" of the Swedenborgians, might have had only the most tenuous connection with the New Jerusalem Church. If this were the

case, the visionary might have been one of the Swedenborgians who had been expelled from the Church during the "concubinage" controversy. A candidate for the visionary's identity would have to be Augustus Nordenskjöld who not only found himself on the "wrong" side of the concubinage controversy but who was a champion of the French Revolution and was in England in 1791 to plan an interracial community to be established in Sierra Leone.<sup>5</sup> Of course the visionary could have been someone else who found himself outside the Swedenborgian fold because of his radicalism. It is worth remembering that Blake himself fits the description of the visionary—not that Blake could have been the individual described in the article (he was never close enough to the inner circle of Swedenborgians to be mistaken for the "head" of the sect), but that he would have identified more closely with the visionary than with the implied reader of the *Chronicle* article. The *Chronicle* article quite clearly wants to dissociate itself from the "excesses" of democratic enthusiasm and to establish a perspective within which one could distinguish easily between legitimate and illegitimate kinds of oppositional politics. That Blake refused to accept this definition of illegitimate, excessive radicalism is obvious.

Blake might very well have read the *Chronicle* article, or if he did not, he would probably have known the visionary directly or indirectly (through his Swedenborgian friends). One can take for granted that Blake realized what the reception of the visionary's words would be in the Johnson circle and mainstream English Jacobinism. He hardly would have been surprised or shocked by the tone and rhetoric of the *Chronicle* article. Plates 12 and 13 of the *Marriage*, which represent the narrator's conversations with Isaiah and Ezekiel, are not necessarily influenced by the article or the visionary, but they are nevertheless an assault upon the assumptions of the *Chronicle* article which would dismiss visionary experience as absurd. The assumptions of mainstream radicalism, which Blake would call natural religion or deism, marginalized the religious radicalism Blake defended. One cannot find in Priestley, Paine, Thelwall, Godwin or Wollstonecraft anything even closely reminiscent of Blake's bold assertions of visionary experience. The Johnson circle, then, would have enjoyed the *Marriage's* attacks on Swedenborg, but it could not have accepted the overall logic of the work.

Blake seems to have shared a particular structure of feeling with the Swedenborgians that he did not share with the Johnson circle, even after he repudiated Swedenborg and the conservative New Jerusalem Church, even when he maintained a political radicalism similar to that of the Johnson circle. Blake could have conversed with the *Chronicle's* visionary on terms of real respect, even if he disagreed with him; the Johnson circle would have perceived him as the *Chronicle's* author did. Swe-

denborg's errors are so central to the *Marriage* not because the Johnson circle also attacked Swedenborg but because Blake wanted to rescue a particular kind of religiously based radicalism from Swedenborg's limitations and Jacobinism's rationalism. Moreover, the New Jerusalem Church seems to have been for Blake the one institution which at one time seemed to represent his most passionate commitments. As a way of working through his disillusionment with Swedenborgianism, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* would have to have

Swedenborgian error as a principal point of departure.

<sup>1</sup>*Blake Studies*, 3 (fall, 1970): 51.

<sup>2</sup>"'A New Heaven Is Begun': William Blake and Swedenborgianism," *Blake*, 13 (fall, 1979): 64-90.

<sup>3</sup>Lucyle Werkmeister, *A Newspaper History of England 1792-1793* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), 34.

<sup>4</sup>Howard, 24-32; Paley, 70-74.

<sup>5</sup>Paley, 83. In 1791, Joseph Proud or Robert Hindmarsh would have been viewed as leaders of the Swedenborgians.

## New Blake Documents:

### *Job, Oedipus, and the Songs of Innocence and of Experience*<sup>1</sup>

Mark Abley and G. E. Bentley, Jr.

Contemporary documents of William Blake's life are widely scattered, in record offices, museums, churches, and libraries from London to San Marino and Melbourne. However, one of the richest collections of such materials is in a cottage called Apple Thatch in Hampshire among the voluminous papers of Blake's last great patron, the artist John Linnell. This extraordinarily rich cache of manuscripts has wonderful materials not only for John Linnell and William Blake but for many others as well, such as Samuel Palmer and William Butler Yeats. Scholars with many goals have been welcomed, and often fed, housed, and entertained, by the splendidly generous custodian of these papers, John Linnell's great granddaughter Joan Linnell Ivimy. The pages of *Blake Records* (1969), which attempted to gather all contemporary references to Blake, are thickly strewn with references to the Ivimy Manuscripts, particularly in the parts recording the last ten years of Blake's life.

When I first went through the Ivimy mss. in 1959, it quickly became apparent that I could not possibly read the majority of them without devoting more years to the undertaking than I had weeks to spare. Consequently, I read with care everything I could find which related directly to Blake and to his known acquaintances during his lifetime (1757-1827); I read almost equally scrupulously everything for the period from his death in 1827 to that of his wife in 1831. For the period after 1863, I read much more casually and rarely did more than glance at letters unless they were to or from someone important to Blake, such as Anne Gilchrist or Samuel Palmer. I concluded my search, confident that I had found most of the Blake references there and that more were awaiting searchers with sharper eyes and more patience and time than I could muster.



1. John Linnell's oil portrait (dated "1821") of Edward Denny (then age 25) in the collection of Robyn Denny, and reproduced with permission of Robyn Denny.

But the collection kept growing, with the discovery of here a trunk of Linnell manuscripts which had lain unrecognized for decades in the vaults of a family lawyer and there the return of letters from other members of the family. In the past twenty-seven years, I have returned repeatedly to Apple Thatch and to the loving hospitality of Joan Linnell Ivimy, and I have often found more references to Blake.