

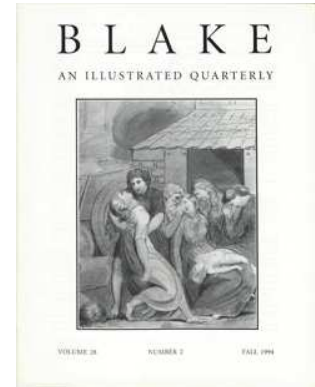
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R E V I E W

E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against The Beast:  
William Blake and the Moral Law*

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E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against The Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. New York: The New Press. 1993. xxi + 234 pp. with 20 illus. \$30.00.

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Many of us can remember when the antinomian tradition was treated with undisguised scorn by literary historians. Even students of Blake were slow to come to terms with the extent to which he shared his vision of the abolition of moral law with predecessors and contemporaries. A. L. Morton's *The Everlasting Gospel* tried to remedy this by placing passages from Blake into relationship with Ranter texts, but these juxtapositions were largely unconvincing—"the everlasting gospel" is itself, after all, a term from the Book of Revelation. More indicative of what might be done on the subjects were historical studies whose focus was not Blake: particularly those of Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson himself. *The World Turned Upside Down* and *The Making of the English Working Class* treated antinomianism and the frequently allied phenomenon of millenarianism seriously as part of a social fabric. This pointed the way for some later essays, but it was left for Thompson himself to produce a full scale study on the subject as related to William Blake.

Thompson divides his subject matter into antinomian, Swedenborgian, and "Jacobinical," and his discussion of each is richly configured. The opening chapters are of great interest not only for their clear expositions of the varieties of antinomian doctrine but also in their delineations of how these could have been transmitted to Blake through printed texts. Some of Thompson's research reveals new connections among figures other than Blake. It is worth knowing, for example, that the Swedenborgian doctor Benedict Chastanier and the artist Phillippe Jacques de Louthembourg were well versed in the writings of the Philadelphian mystic Jane Lead (documentation is provided for this but not for the interesting statement [43] that Louthembourg was a disciple of Richard Brothers in the 1790s). There is also some valuable information about private libraries, though not about Richard Cosway's, to which Blake is thought to have had access. The whole of this material is greater than the sum of its parts—we get a picture of the confluence of many streams in the later eighteenth century.

The same may be said of Thompson's exploration of radical dissent. To the older movements of sects are added Moravians, Sandemanians, Hutchinsonians, and "irregular" Methodists. One would especially like to know more about the Sandemanians: William Godwin was educated in a Sandemanian academy and for a short time was a Sandemanian minister, as was William Hazlitt's father. Later comers, the Unitarians, also offer interesting analogies to Blake. However, the single group that most interests Thompson is the group known as Muggletonians. Founded

by John Reeve (d. 1658) and Ludowick Muggleton (d. 1698), the Muggletonian sect had an astonishing longevity, especially considering the very low profile it kept: there were still 100 male believers in 1803; in 1975 there was one left. Thompson's extraordinary account of his meeting with the last Muggletonian and the consequent transfer of the 89 volumes of the Muggletonian archive to the British Library is a fascinating one, but the main thrust of his argument here is Blake's possible knowledge of and sympathy with Muggletonian beliefs. The three Muggletonian doctrines that Thompson finds especially pertinent are "the specifically antinomian tradition, with its repudiation of the Moral Law" (91), "the explicit and repetitive identification of 'Reason' as the Satanic principle" (94), and "the unusual symbolism of the Fall, and of the Serpent-Angel's actual copulation with Eve and transmutation into flesh and blood in her womb" (96). While stating his own conviction that there is a connection with Blake, Thompson avoids special pleading and even notes that Blake would have abhorred some of the Muggletonian teachings, such as the predestinarian doctrine of the two Seeds. In the absence of any documentary evidence linking Blake with the Muggletonians, each reader must judge whether an examination of these doctrinal matters and a comparison of passages establishes any link between Blake and the Muggletonians. I am myself unpersuaded that there is a particular link, for the very reason that makes *Witness Against the Beast* a work of such interest: and that is the impact on Blake of the antinomian/millenarian/radical subculture in its many forms, with some of which Blake did have demonstrable contact.

Although I have said that documentary evidence does not link Blake and the Muggletonian teachings, there is one documentary matter here of considerable interest to Blake scholarship. Blake's mother has been known as Catherine Hermitage, but Thompson reads the entry in the register of St. George's Chapel, Hanover Square, as "Hermitage." He argues that she was the widow of Thomas Hermitage, hosier, of 28 Broad Street and that she afterwards married James Blake, hosier, of Glasshouse Street, and brought the two businesses together at the Broad Street address. This in itself, with some ancillary facts (120-21), constitutes an important discovery. Thompson draws on it to suggest that a George Hermitage who wrote Muggletonian songs in the mid-century could have been related to Blake's mother through her first marriage. This of course does not prove that Blake even saw these songs—Thompson handles this material with his customary tact and engages in no special pleading.

Moving from the sects already mentioned to one with which Blake is known to have had contacts brings another dimension to the discussion. Thompson has deeply investigated the rise and progress of the New Jerusalem Church and rightly warns us that Richard Hindmarsh's book of that name merits "as much and as little respect as Stalin's *Short History of the CPSU(B)*" (135). As a participant in the events he documents, Hindmarsh is both a valuable and a suspect

source. Thompson's three chapters on Blake and Swedenborgianism are at the same time comprehensive and incisive, as this fine summary passage indicates:

The first year or two of the [New Jerusalem] Church were clouded with dissension. For the Blakes the entire Swedenborgian movement was fraught with conflict, but was nevertheless of profound significance. We cannot clearly identify Blake with any of the conflicting groups, but again and again we seem to see his face, obliquely situated to a particular argument. There is his recognition of a body of visionary writing undoubtedly carrying some of the old Behmenist imagery. There is identification not only with certain beliefs (Christ is man) but also with the very notion of a New Church of regenerated humankind. There is also some shared jargon of correspondences (chariot for doctrine, Edom for what is natural, dragon for the 'falses' of religion). The influence was deep, and with *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, productive of polemic. It would also seem that Blake's antinomian tenets were resisted from the start by the orthodox within the Church. (168-69)

Thompson discusses "The Divine Image," "To Tirzah," and "I saw a chapel all of gold" in the light of Blake's changing relations with Swedenborgian thought. He interestingly associates the chapel in "I saw a chapel all of gold" with the Swedenborgians' Great Eastcheap meeting house and ingeniously suggests that the "sty" of the last line "was that of advanced radicalism," the "swine" being associated with the satirical variations on Burke's "swinish multitude" made by radicals such as Daniel Isaac Eaton and Thomas Spence. One of the important elements of this part of *Witness Against the Beast* is Thompson's sense that the books Blake read were not merely "sources" or even negative sources but the productions of a culture comprising various overlapping constituencies.

With Thompson's brilliant exposition of "London" we leave the discourse of Swedenborgianism and approach that of Paineite radicalism. The well-known revision of "dirty" to "charter'd" acquires a new context in Paine's rejection of the freeborn Briton's pride in his chartered rights. "Every chartered town," Paine wrote, "is an aristocratical monopoly in itself, and the qualifications of electors proceeds out of those chartered monopolies."<sup>1</sup> In citing such examples Thompson is not engaging in mere source-hunting but is, as he later puts it in comparing Blake's use of the verb "appall" with that of William Frend, "finding a vocabulary and stock of images common to a particular group or a par-

<sup>1</sup> No footnote is given for this quotation, which is from Part I of *Rights of Man* (page 75 in the Penguin edition), and it should be noted that while Thompson's posthumous manuscript has generally been well edited there are occasional omissions such as this one and the absence of the name Hermitage from the index. One would also like to know the identity of the Siegvolk (first name not given) who wrote a work called *The Everlasting Gospel* (226-27). There are also a few typographi-

tical intellectual tradition, in this case that of radical Dissent" (185n21). Yet, as Thompson argues, the poem is not only a political vehicle, for Blake's vision is wider, combining in the last stanza of "London" the image of the exploited girl sold for a bit of bread with the archetypal whore of Babylon. The relationship of discourses is, as the author puts it "fraternal but transformed."

In "Human Images," the penultimate chapter of *Witness Against the Beast*, the authors juxtaposed with Blake are Gibbon (especially chapters 20 and 49 of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) and Constantin de Volney. Although Blake, unlike Byron, did not sympathize with Gibbon's sapping a solemn creed with solemn sneer, he did read the *Decline and Fall*, or at least parts of it. David Erdman has demonstrated the relevance of chapter 1 to *Jerusalem*, and Thompson shows convincingly how Constantine and Charlemagne are linked through the intermediacy of Gibbon. Volney's *Ruins* is never mentioned by Blake but it is hard to believe that this radical's Bible was unknown to him, and Volney's vision of human history culminating in a revolutionary society may have seemed to Blake for a time compatible with his own. As Thompson remarks, "He was happy, at least until 1795, to co-exist with atheists and deists," though I am not sure why Godwin is specifically excluded from the list (215). Godwin, on the contrary, may be responsible for much of Blake's anti-institutionalism as well as for what appears to be a consistent indifference to the extension of the vote. The crucial difference between the Blake of the 1790s and the radicals with whom he fellow-travelled was that, as Thompson puts it, "Blake, while appropriating some of their arguments, placed a full emphasis upon affective and imaginative 'culture'" (215). *Witness Against the Beast* is consistently true to Blake's commitment to such culture (to dispense with inverted commas), broadening our understanding of Blake's political and religious interests by viewing them as components of his creative work.

Some time in the 1980s I visited a William Morris exhibition at the ICA Gallery in London. The installation concentrated less upon the display of objects, though there were plenty of those, than upon the re-creation of both Morris's historical ambiance and his imaginative world. The last item in the show was not by Morris, though it featured someone who had written a book about him. It was a black-and-white photograph of a large crowd standing in the rain. Rising above a sea of umbrellas was the white-maned head of Edward Thompson, addressing a nuclear disarmament rally. It was a fitting emblem of the subject of the exhibition and, one might now add, of the subject of *Witness Against the Beast*.

cal errors, the most important of which is the misprinting (twice) of the title of an important source for the history of Swedenborgianism: P. F. Gosse's *Portfeuille d'un ancien Typographe*.