

of *Albion* in relation to the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft and the analogies she draws between slavery and marriage. Although alert to the points of disagreement between Blake and Wollstonecraft, who occupied quite distinct positions on the matter of sexual liberation, Stevens provides a fascinating exploration of Blake's unorthodox belief that slavery caused suffering not only to those enslaved but to their masters. Via a close reading of Blake's treatment of the body and the language employed by Wollstonecraft, Stevens constructs a forceful argument for reevaluating *Visions* in light of late-eighteenth-century politics, both domestic and international.

The complexity of Blake's political and cultural positioning is further drawn out in Saree Makdisi's fascinating examination of the concepts of unity and difference and David Fuller's essay on the *Divine Comedy* images, while the intricate webbing of patronage, heritage, and homage is sensitively examined by Andrew Loukes in reference to Blake's portraits of poets. Other authors offer evidence of Blake's engagement with cultural trends, in particular Jared Richman, who considers the wide popularity of Milton's poetry and Blake's peculiarly biographical interest in him. This approach is developed by Martin Myrone, who skillfully situates Blake's interest in the supernatural and the sublime in the context of a contemporary vogue for the Gothic, while insisting upon the particularity of his practice. There is also a welcome passage on Blake's immediate predecessors by William Pressly, in which the artist is seen as the legatee of a specifically British tradition.

This theme of national heritage is also treated by Robin Simon in his discussion of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Simon interprets Blake's engagement with familiar symbols of British identity as a means by which the artist introduced the quotidian or colloquial into a visionary language, by adopting the informal idiom of Wordsworth, or through reference to the game of cricket. Although the implication that a sense of national pride can be found in Blake's work is unconvincing, Simon offers an interesting consideration of Blake's aesthetic choices and the way in which they embodied a rejection of Reynolds's theories of art.

Simon's close reading of Blake's pictures, however, is an exception which points up one of the problems of the catalogue: the concentration upon Blake's writing. While Simon and some others tackle Blake's symbolic visual imagery, a large number of the essays, among them some of the most engaging, are entirely dedicated to the poems, or gesture towards the images only as illustrations. Naturally, a great deal of explanation and interpretation is needed in introducing a non-English-speaking audience to Blake as an author. While it may be of great interest to consider the effect of translating Blake's work into French, or the prophetic nature (or otherwise) of *Europe* and *America*, it is arguable, however, whether this is the place to do so. This is not to demand a strict separation of text from image, which would be contrary to the nature of the works themselves; when faced with so vast a subject it may perhaps have been more helpful to have limited discussion to

the objects on display, of which there were more than enough to furnish a rich investigation of Blake's career.

This in turn flags another, and perhaps more serious, flaw: the inadequate and incoherent use of illustrations. Images are referred to throughout by catalogue number, which (as not all objects in the show are reproduced) leaves the reader searching through pictures that are not in numerical order, and are rarely positioned in clear relation to the text. This is compounded by inconsistency, when Martin Butlin (uniquely) decides to employ the numbering system from his catalogue *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* in order to direct readers to relevant (but unexhibited) works. With so varied a selection of themes, and very little clear structure to their arrangement, this added confusion is particularly keenly felt.

Furthermore, the texts are too short to deal with their subjects adequately, and too often the writers seem to have been trapped into oversimplification, as in the case of David Alexander, who discusses Blake's relationships with his patrons with no critical look at the artist's investment in establishing a reputation as romantic outsider, or Elizabeth C. Denlinger, whose study of Catherine Blake reads as an unsatisfactorily token gesture towards a forgotten partner. In essence, while the questions raised by the catalogue are apposite, and many essays introduce themes that have not been dealt with in the French literature on Blake, it might have been more productive to have limited the overall length of the text and included a fuller bibliography for those who wanted to explore further. This would then have provided the space for what would really have stimulated an enthusiasm for Blake's pictures: high-quality reproductions of the works themselves, clearly arranged to allow for comparison and cross-referencing. Without these, the catalogue can only help to reinforce the notion that Blake's true achievement was literary, and his images merely illustrative or incidental.

Magnus Ankarsjö. *William Blake and Religion: A New Critical View*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009. viii + 163 pp. \$39.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Christopher Rowland

THIS concise study of Blake's religion starts from the recent work done on Blake's Moravian background and the possible overlaps between Moravianism and Swedenborgianism. In the process, it seeks to elucidate what is meant by Blake's radicalism, which, as the author points out, is a very slippery concept. The book starts with a rejection of E. P. Thompson's theory that Blake's mother was a Muggle-

tonian and a consideration of the links with Unitarianism, Swedenborgianism, and Moravianism, but these last two loom largest, as they do throughout the rest of the book. The following chapter considers Blake's religion, moving from a treatment of some of the poems in Blake's Notebook via the apocalyptic passages in *The Four Zoas* to *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. There are interesting comments on the powerfully effective juxtaposition of sex and religion, which gives some of Blake's lines such a radical feel. Ankarsjö explores Blake's use of apocalyptic religion, especially the sense of climactic unity as male and female are united in the entry into Paradise. The chapter ends with a suggestion that the emphasis on the forgiveness of sins might be explained by Blake's temptation to have an amorous affair with Nancy Flaxman, leading to his very personal interest in forgiveness.

Ankarsjö explores the intertwining of sex and religion more thoroughly in the central chapter on Blake's sexuality, which considers sexual elements throughout the Blake corpus. Here the supposed Moravian influence is especially brought out, with some interesting comments made about familiar poems, not least the "challenging and daring" "I Saw a Chapel All of Gold" (75-76), as well as the preoccupation with the blood of Christ (John 19.34), found particularly in "The Grey Monk." Echoes of Moravian and Swedenborgian material are traced in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. As already noted, eschatological union is a feature of Blake's later major works, echoing the kind of climax that we find in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. In some ways the material here retraces issues that the author has already enunciated in considering Blake's religion. The final chapter, entitled "Blake's Utopian 'Colony,'" looks at plans to set up a Swedenborgian utopian community in Sierra Leone, with a mix of sexual and utopian idealism, reflected in *The Book of Thel*, though with Blake's rejection of the patriarchal overtones. Throughout the book, the Swedenborgian elements that Ankarsjö identifies in the later works are less compelling than those found in the early ones.

Despite its somewhat discursive style, this book is an interesting read, not least in exploring neglected areas of the Blake corpus to show how Swedenborgianism and Moravianism may have influenced Blake's mental world. The definition of radicalism emerges from the content of the book and is focused on the attitude towards sexual issues. This may be a component of Blake's religion, but it does not by any means represent its entirety, and it would have been helpful to see whether the various strands of antinomian biblical interpretation support the views taken in the book. We know from the history of apocalypticism that for centuries thinkers have appropriated apocalyptic images in order to understand individual psychological development. In early Christian interpretation of Revelation we find interpreters like Methodius and Tyconius relating the images either to the religious life of the individual or the struggle of the ecclesial community. Such elements have their echoes in Blake's work. The impact of this kind of understanding in terms of wider society could have

been brought out more, rather than being confined to the final chapter on utopianism. The book's title seems to promise a broad review of Blake and religion, but in effect what we get is a rather narrowly focused discussion that omits key aspects of Blake's concerns (the Bible, for example, and his understanding of the person of Christ). Of course, the treatment of sexual matters itself points to Blake's radicalism as far as religion is concerned. The maintenance of taboos about sex and gender is one of the key features of any religion, not least the mainstream Christianity against which Blake reacted.

In affirming the importance of the discovery of Blake's Moravian antecedents and exploring the implications for his religion, Ankarsjö makes some pertinent points and offers a useful digest of the state of play of neglected elements in the study of Blake's religious background. Students will find the summary chapter on Unitarianism, Swedenborgianism, and Moravianism helpful. Ankarsjö reminds us of the often mysterious and complex religious world from which Blake emerged and to which he reacted, much of which remained in his theological bloodstream.

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