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James D. Boulger

The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry

Mouton

James D. Boulger. *The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980. xii + 498 pp.

Reviewed by Dennis M. Welch

This book is unconvincing and overwritten; its argument is often biased, unclear and inaccurate, based more on rhetorical assertion and repetition than on solid evidence. Boulger seeks to establish a Calvinist-Puritan tradition in poets like Spenser, Marvell, Milton, Blake, and Wordsworth. This tradition, he says, has too often been neglected, misunderstood, and even despised; but for him it presents "a world view which is at once religious, wholesome, sane, and a high form of Christian contemplation."

This enthusiasm undoubtedly prompted Boulger to introduce his book with eight background chapters dealing with such Calvinist beliefs as the primacy of conscience, the power and majesty of God in relation to human depravity, and the cycle of salvation: election, vocation,

justification, sanctification, and glorification. Very little of what the author says about these doctrines is new, most of them having already been dealt with by authorities like John T. McNeill, William Haller, and Perry Miller. Boulger also traces these doctrines in several treatises by such early Puritan divines as Richard Sibbes, William Ames, and John Dodd. But nowhere does *The Calvinist Temper* show that these divines had any direct influence on the poets of their day or thereafter.

When Boulger eventually gets around to discussing the poets themselves, his book is equally disappointing. The Calvinism that it proposes to show in English poetry ends up not being a set of beliefs artistically transformed in terms of the drama of individual souls, but a "temper," as he says, a vague notion ranging anywhere from Christian temperance to versified doctrine (though rarely the latter among major poets). The point here is that Boulger cannot, except perhaps in a figure like John Bunyan, point to a belief or set of beliefs and say that Calvinism or Puritanism is *the* source. For example, after quoting some verses from Spenser's *Hymnes* containing words with "Calvinist theological resonances," he must admit that they are also "common to the religious language of other traditions." In addition, the episodes from *The Fairie Queene* that Boulger finds Calvinistic—such as the Cave of Mammon scene and the confrontation between the Red Cross Knight and Despair—are as much influenced by medieval and Catholic traditions as by Protestant and Calvinist.

Even when Boulger notes direct references to Calvinist terms, as in *Paradise Lost*, he distorts their meaning. Forgetting Samuel Johnson's observation that Milton's theological views were "at first Calvinistical, and afterwards . . . tended toward Arminianism," Boulger cites passages from *Paradise Lost* on election (e.g., 3.183–97), arguing that the poet believed in Calvinist predestination. But Milton's chapter "On Predestination" in *Christian Doctrine* shows that he did not accept Calvin's doctrine. Sympathetic to Arminianism in the latter part of his career, Milton believed that the Elect are all Christian believers, who have the capacity to choose their salvation. Whether or not a believer decides to respond affirmatively to "prevenient" grace is up to him.

Boulger is clearly mistaken to assert Calvinism in Milton's later work; but if he had focused on the poet's early career he might have found that elements of "At a Vacation Exercise," "Elegy VI," *A Maske*, "Epitaphium Damonis," and "Lycidas" involve the transformation of Calvinist notions into ideas of poetic election and vocation, whose assuring "marks" or "signs" are faith, a firm conscience, and chastity. And just as virtue is reduced to passivity and self-regard in the Calvinist scheme, where the spirit and grace overshadow the elect, so it is with the Lady in *A Maske*. "Despatch'd" for her "defence and guard" and "safe convoy," the Attendant Spirit prompts her: "Come, Lady, while Heaven lends us grace." With

the aid of the Attendant Spirit, sacred haemony, and Sabrina's "precious cure," the Lady is assuredly of the elect ("favour'd of high Jove"), though without knowing it, protected and self-protecting, her life a pure poem and her voice articulating young Milton's highest ideals as a poet.

Perhaps these are the reasons why Blake portrays the Lady as such a static, mystified, and unapproachable figure and why he critiques Milton's concept of poetic vocation as election versus reprobation in the epic *Milton*. To revive the role of the poet-prophet in his epic, Blake has Milton return to time and space, not in self-regarding virtue but in self-annihilation, casting off his dark Puritan robe of election (14:13) and "shewing to the Earth/The Idol Virtues of the Natural Heart" (38:45-46). The pun on the word "Idol" (idle/ideal) is extremely important. But Milton's regenerative action is more than a mere disclosure and rejection of false idols. He unites with Ololon, his emanation, a virgin twelve years old like the Lady, an embodiment of his former ideal of poetry and his idol of chastity, which she too casts off (42:3-7). In their union, poetry and the poet-prophet are redeemed and raised above morality and religion. But Boulger in his Calvinism sees none of this.

And when he discusses other aspects of Blake's career, he sees even less. To try to correct all of his oversights and inaccuracies regarding Blake would require much more space and would give the impression that we

are dealing with the work of serious Blake scholarship. But concerning Boulger's more egregious errors, a few words must be said. Aside from missing Blake's critique of poetic election and vocation in *Milton*, the author asserts mistakenly that "imagination and grace are virtually identical in Blake's final vision, and that there is also a kind of predestination in the mind of the poet . . . which arbitrarily, in good Calvinist fashion, turns . . . *Milton* and *Jerusalem* from despairing facts to affirmative conclusions." Such assertions ignore the humanism in Blake's concept of imagination and the freedom and affirmation in Milton's act of throwing off his "robe of the promise" and in Los's act of searching Albion's "interiors" to find out what sickens and disables him (*J* 44:20-45:9). These acts are not arbitrary "quick fixes" in their respective poems but acts of imagination. Grace has nothing to do with them. Boulger misrepresents Blake's overall career. Simply because the poet was influenced by some Swedenborgian ideas in his early career and by some antinomian attitudes throughout it does not make him any more Calvinist or Puritan than do Boulger's attempts to force grace and predestination on him. "Reformed, rebellious, Puritan Christian Blake" is a fabrication that obscures instead of enlightens our understanding of the poet. Anyone wanting to know how Blake's or any other poet's "relationship with the Calvinist-Puritan tradition was meaningful to his poetry" will not find the answers in *The Calvinist Temper*.

