

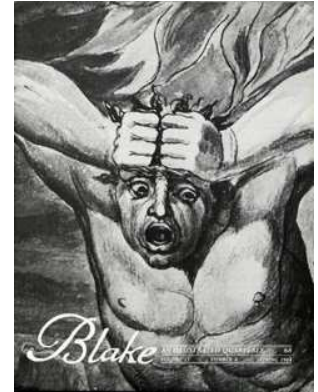
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R E V I E W

H. T. Dickinson, ed., *The Political Works of Thomas Spence*

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rhetorical, and possibly the actual, connection demonstrated by Parini in this passage is not between Roethke and Blake but between Roethke and Martin Price.¹ My point is not simply that, like Adams's Yeats, Roethke was an unsophisticated reader of Blake, nor that, like Gleckner's Joyce, he might have relied heavily on critical accounts, but that this mediation is virtually ignored by the book's contributors, and most grievously in terms of *their own* critical agency.

It is undeniable that Roethke took Blake as an ancestor, but Roethke himself claimed that a "son has many fathers" ("O, Thou Opening, O"), and when he wrote, "Walk into the wind, willie!" ("I Cry, Love! Love!"), he probably also meant Willie Wordsworth and Willie Yeats. It is undeniable that Yeats valued Blake, but simply to privilege this relation over others—Dante, Swift, Shelley, Rossetti (albeit mentioned by Adams), Lady Gregory, Synge, Pound, Rosicrucianism (simply to note the prism of occultism doesn't go far enough), Irish mythology and history, even Maud Gonne—begs too many questions of discursive context and actual compositional practice, and brute differences of time and place. It is undeniable that Marx and Blake held a handful of notions in common, but what good does it do anyone who is interested in either Marx or Blake to note them without also noting differences, or noting that these notions were much more widely held? By isolating such influences and affinities, *Blake and the Moderns* virtually unravels the intertextual fabric. By embodying influence strictly in persons and separating it from discursive practice on a larger scale—if not from an ill-defined central imaginative form then certainly from historical contexts which are both literary and non-literary, from the intercessions of critical ideologies themselves, and from the complex of ways in which all of this affects the actual production of actual works—*Blake and the Moderns* distorts both immediate influence and more general problems of literary history. The book is of very little use to the reader of Blake, who will learn nothing new about Blake from it, or to readers of Blake's heirs, for whom these links must already be common knowledge, or even to those who might still be waiting for an adequate way to swerve from Bloom.

¹ I am indebted to Professor Jenijoy La Belle for pointing out this apparently unwitting trope, and for supplying the Roethke quotations that appear in the following paragraph. The Price citation is from "The Standard of Energy," *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 273.



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Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

The Golden Age, so form'd by Men of Yore
Shall soon be counted fabulous no more
—*The Important Trial of Thomas Spence*, 2nd ed.
(1801), p. 93

Thomas Spence (1750–1814), founder of Spensonia, reformer of the English language, an obscure little Newcastle "malcontent" (as he called himself, p. 6), and political agitator chalking prescriptions for the millenium on midnight walls, is likely to be known chiefly to historians of late eighteenth-century radical English politics—at least he was scarcely known to me. But he was known to Bewick, Cobbett, Francis Place, Coleridge, Malthus, Southey, and thousands of others, and he may have been known to William Blake. Certainly during the last twenty-two years of his life, from 1792 to 1814 when he was in London, Spence had a surprising amount in common with Blake: poet, prophet, radical, publisher of his own writings, arrested (repeatedly) for sedition, of unshakable integrity, friendless (p. 93), considered as a "lunatic" by the reputable public (p. 93). What Southey wrote of him in 1817 might have been said of Blake then: he was "poor and despised but not despicable, for he was sincere, stoical, persevering, single-minded and self-approved."¹

Most of Spence's many pamphlets and broadside ballads from 1775 to 1814 were published by himself for one pence to sixpence at his shop, which was for a time The Hive of Liberty in High Holborn, and in 1801 he claimed that he had already "sold many thousands of copies" (p. 88). He wrote prolifically, but he chiefly confined himself to two subjects: the reform of the English language and the reform of the English land. The former is a new system of spelling which he clung to with a characteristic tenacity or, as he might have confessed, pig-headedness, and he popularized it in works with titles such as *The Repository of Common Sense and Innocent Enjoyment*. Some of his own works were published both in conventional orthography and in his own spelling, such as *A S'UPL'M'INT Too thi Histire ov Robinsin Kruzo, being TH'I H'IST'IRE 'OV KRUZONEA* (1782).

Fortunately, all the versions printed here are in regularized form.

His other great reform was of land tenure. Whether his pamphlet was called *The Real Rights of Man* (1775) or *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe* (1782), or *The Important Trial of Thomas Spence* (1803), the real theme is that God gave the earth to mankind, not to landlords, and that therefore the true and only owners of the land are the people at large. Though he called his last periodical *Giant-Killer or Anti-Landlord* (1814), he was not at all opposed to the ownership of land or to landlords (p. 3); he just believed, or rather knew, that the landlord should be the parish and that the land should be, could only be inalienable. To this theme he returned, repeatedly, as to his own darling, and his editor goes so far as to assert, repeatedly, that Spence was "undoubtedly fixated [*sic*] with his Land Plan" (pp. XII, XIV).

Spence's style is vivid, direct, earthy, humorous, and commonsensical, and his titles are aggressive and memorable: *The End of Oppression* (1795), *The Rights of Infants* (1797), which is about Land Tenure, and his most important work, his periodical called *Pig's Meat; or, Lessons for the People Alias (According to Burke) the Swinish Multitude* (1793-95).² He promulgates his Plan in dialogues, in fiction, like the continuation of *Robinson Crusoe*, in songs, in popular tracts, and in periodical commonplace books. He is trying to establish the "empire of right reason" (p. 5), and he claims that The Trial of Thomas Spence is in fact "nothing but the trial of common-sense" (p. 96). Most of his work is surprisingly temperate, considering the wanton government persecution which he suffered; he was arrested three times in December 1792 and January 1793 but not convicted; he spent seven months in jail in 1794, during the suspension of habeas corpus, without even being charged; and he was convicted by a special jury in 1801 for publishing his own book called *The Restorer of Society to its Natural State* (1801). "D—n these idle-bred people, I was going to say. But I'll try to keep my temper" (p. 84). In a triumph of temper-keeping, on his release from prison he published *The Important Trial of Thomas Spence* (1803), incorporating in it the whole of the pamphlet for which he had been jailed, on the grounds that he had read the whole of it to the jury and that therefore it was part of the court record.

Occasionally, however, he lost his temper and burst forth in an apocalyptic vein, as when he wrote of the "odious" and "bloody landed interest" and its "Gothic emblems of rapine";

Your horrid tyranny, your infanticide is at an end! Your grinding the faces of the poor, and your drinking the blood of infants, is at an end! . . . And behold the whole earth breaks forth into singing at the new creation . . . and the Meridian Sun of Liberty bursts forth upon the astonished world, dispelling the accumulated mists of dreary ages and leaves us the glorious blue expanse of serene unclouded reason (*The Rights of Infants* (1797); Dickinson, p. 50)

Land tenure was only the foundation of the profoundly radical utopia which Spence conceived. Many of its features seemed dangerously impractical or scarcely imaginable to his contemporaries; some of its features have not yet been adopted by any nation, East or West. In some respects, the nation most nearly approaching Spensonia is China, whence this is being written and where Spence's writings are remembered with honor.

In Spence's peaceable kingdom, all land belongs to the parish; all public revenues derive from the rent of the land, and the remainder of the rent (the majority) is divided equally among every man, woman, and child in the parish, legitimate or illegitimate; voting is by secret ballot (p. 29), and all residents of the parish vote, men, women, and children; there are free public hospitals (pp. 89-91): "every parish has a free-school . . . a public library . . . [*with*] all the best books in the world . . . [*a*] theatre and assembly rooms to which all have access gratis. Thus each parish is a little polished Athens" (p. 13). Divorce is easy (p. 76); children have "a right to good nursing, to cleanliness, to comfortable cloathing and lodging" (p. 48); there is no lawyer (p. 14) and "little occasion for money" (p. 22); "the real wealth of nations . . . is the produce of labour" (p. 88); and "There is also a national university, which every parish is allowed to keep one student at . . . and this one is chosen by ballot" (p. 13).

Of course the system was altered over his forty years of pamphleteering, but the essentials remained unchanged. One of the peripheral areas was spiritual; in 1782, Spence wrote, "religion . . . I had almost omitted" (p. 14), but then he permitted every parish to choose its own; but in 1796, after the French Revolution, he would not permit his citizens to be "poisoned and depraved by superstition," i.e., "religion" (p. 41).

Much of this is expressed in the language of the millenium, as in his broadside "Something to the Purpose: A Receipt to Make a Millenium" (?1806). Spence writes of "this paradisaical system" (p. 14) and of "my millennial form of government"³, under which "the country . . . has more the air of a garden or rather a paradise than a general country scene"⁴; "the whole earth shall at last be happy, and live like brethren" (p. 5).

In one of the many dialogues in which the Land Plan is set forth, a Courtier remarks, "You may form, Sir, what aerial plans you please" (p. 41), and normally Spence dismissed the likelihood of violent opposition to his Plan as negligible because manifestly suicidal. However, at least after 1789, he was willing to be quite ruthless with opponents: "if the aristocracy rose to contend the matter, let the people be firm and desperate, destroying them root and branch and strengthening their hands by the rich confiscations" (p. 37).

The violence of such an opinion, coupled with Spence's open sympathy with the French Republic, not

unnaturally alarmed a government of landed aristocrats. He addresses a series of letters to "Citizens" (pp. 73-92), he adapts the constitution of the new France in his *Constitution of a Perfect Commonwealth; Being the French Constitution of 1793, Amended* (1798) and *The Constitution of Spensonia, A Country in Fairyland Situated between Utopia and Oceana* (1803), and during the hysteria about the imminent French invasion of England in 1801 he proclaimed that he "would not" fight the French (p. 79; see p. 121) in defense of English landlords.

The immediate sequels to Spence's persistent propaganda were pathetic rather than heroic. After his death, on 1 October 1814 his disciples established a Society of Spencean Philanthropists which was "closely watched by a suspicious government and infiltrated by a government spy" (p. XVII). In an Act for Suppressing Societies of 31 March 1817, the Spencean Society is singled out; "certain societies or clubs calling themselves Spenseans or Spencean Philanthropists" were to be "utterly suppressed" (Rudkin, p. 156). Its leaders increasingly fostered political violence; they were involved in the Spa Fields Riot of 2 December 1816 and the grossly bungled Cato Street Conspiracy of 23 February 1820. By then, the "Land" in Spence's Land Revolution had been largely forgotten.

Thomas Spence was, then, a fascinating political reformer, and his editor H. T. Dickinson has proved a benefactor to us all by reprinting here "the great Bulk of Spence's political writings" (p. V). From a political point of view, this is a wonderful series of documents.

From the point of view of the historian and editor, however, it leaves a good deal to be desired. Spence reprinted his works repeatedly, often first appearing in *Pig's Meat* and later separately, sometimes altering the text and changing the title in the process, for example from *The Real Rights of Man* (1775), the title used for the text printed here (pp. 1-5), to *The Rights of Man* (1793), the titlepage reproduced here (p. 137), to *The Meridian Sun of Liberty* (1796), but there is no indication here as to which edition is printed or why it was chosen or how it differs from the others. There is no bibliography of works by Spence (for this one must turn to Rudkin, pp. 206-33), so we cannot ascertain what political writings are

omitted, much less why. The editor does not indicate the sources of his information in the useful Introduction (pp. VII-XVIII), or the collections from which his reproduced titlepages come, or even, once or twice, what publication the reproduction comes from, as with the frontispiece bust of Spence. To judge from the reproductions here, the text has been thoroughly and silently normalized, with extensive alteration of capitalization, italicization, punctuation, and spelling, and the reader is likely to wonder whether Spence or Dickinson is responsible for "villians" (pp. 48, 49) and "Cupid . . . is not so stern an jailor like a deity" (pp. 76-77)—presumably it should be something like "Cupid . . . is not so stern and gaoler-like a Deity."

The publisher, Avero (Eighteenth-Century) Publications Ltd. of Newcastle, is a new one likely to be of importance to students of late eighteenth-century English history and society. This is their first publication, and it exhibits some signs of immaturity, with a few footnotes on the wrong page (pp. 25, 39, 48) or a footnote continued from the bottom of one page to the top of the next (pp. 16-17). We have not yet reached the Golden Age of editing or printing, though we still have Spence's promise of it.

If Thomas Spence and William Blake were introduced to one another, neither man seems to have left a record of it. They clearly had much in common, though Spence's paradise is in the future and on the land, whereas Blake's is now and in the mind. Both were ignored and scorned by their contemporaries, but both have taught succeeding generations to "break forth into singing at the new creation."

¹ "On the State of Public Opinion and the Political Reformers," *Quarterly Review* (1817), quoted in Olive D. Rudkin, *Thomas Spence and His Connections* (1927), p. 141.

² The pig in the frontispiece "bears a striking resemblance to the picture of a wonderful performing pig in the *Newcastle Chronicle*, July 27, 1787," according to Rudkin, p. 16.

³ p. 97. ". . . who can tell but the Millenium / May take its rise from my poor Cranium?" (pp. 117-18).

⁴ pp. 10, 31; the same passage appears in *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe* (1782) and *Description of Spensonia* (1795), illustrating Spence's penchant for plagiarizing himself. One of the characteristics of paradise is that "the corn is cultivated in rows."

