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R E V I E W

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Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, Joachim of
Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the
Nineteenth Century; Colleen McDannell and
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"An Unperishing Sun
... This Golden Age":
Joachimism and Heaven
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Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould. *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. x + 365 pp. 3 illus. \$65.00. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang. *Heaven: A History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988. xiv + 410 pp. 69 illus. \$35.00.

Reviewed by
Joseph Wittreich

Diminishing in number over the last decade, contextualizations of Blake (if we may judge from the two books here under review) are undiminished in their historical savvy, methodological sophistication, and critical acuity. Rigorous interrogations, both books effect reconsideration, refinement, and sometimes a complete recasting of critical clichés and cultural commonplaces. Moreover, each of these books confirms what has become a working premise of Blake criticism: namely, that what matters for Blake is less the tradition than his transgressions of it.

Taking Joachim of Fiore as "a classic example of the problems which arise in assessing the nature and extent of influence in the realm of ideas" (7), Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould challenge a line of historical investigation that, commencing with G. K. Chesterton, also comprehends J. G. Davies, A. L. Morton, Désirée Hirst,

and J. F. C. Harrison, according to whom Joachimism is a shaping influence on Blake. But it is an influence not so much direct as oblique and trackable chiefly through the writings of mid-seventeenth-century millennial tracts. The authors of this book are insistent questioners: "what substance is there in the claim that he [Blake] knew of, and consciously drew upon, the Joachimist myth of the Eternal Evangel?" To which question they respond emphatically, thus giving their imprimatur to a conclusion also advanced by David Erdman: "a Joachimist perspective in Blake's poem does not provide a satisfactory reading of the poem, nor does it really cast any new light on Blake's antinomianism, nor does it help us to understand his other 'prophetic books,' nor does it really contribute to our understanding of his concept of the alternating of 'good' and 'evil'..." (33-34). Nor has the case for an allusion to Joachim in Blake's title, "The Everlasting Gospel," been proved (38). Rather, Reeves and Gould argue, there is "no clear evidence of a consciously held Joachimist tradition that can be found among the mid-seventeenth-century English sectarians," and while they have "no quarrel with the view that Blake was heir to a complex antinomian tradition," they nevertheless spurn the notion that "this tradition was in itself a Joachimist one, and that Blake saw it as such":

The conclusion must be . . . that the medieval heresy of the *Evangelium Aeternum* adds nothing to our appreciation of Blake and that it could not have formed a significant part of his sources in the literature of the preceding two centuries. [In no way did Blake] initiate the nineteenth-century awareness of Joachimism. In so far as there can be discerned any interest in the subject prior to George Eliot's, it is to be found, not in the writings of the millenarians and millennialists, but in the learned pages of the *British Magazine* in 1839-40, where the Hon. Algernon Herbert wrote as an unsympathetic antiquary on *Antichrist in the Thirteenth Century*. (39)

The conclusion, very simply, is that "Of Joachim of Fiore's complete system of thought . . . there would appear

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to have been little knowledge in the later seventeenth and eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries" (40-41). The obvious caveat is that

influence is often oblique, not direct, and is to be charted according to hidden roads, not well-trodden paths.

As Morton Paley remarks, Richard Hurd (1772) reveals "an awareness of millenarian interpretation, . . . even referring to Joachim of Fiore."¹ Or in Mary Shelley's *Valperga* (1823), Beatrice is represented as one who "delighted to read and pretended to explain the prophecies of the sacred writings, and the modern ones of Merlin, the abbot Joachim and Methodius."² Not just these but other such exclusions, once documented, tear at the fabric of Reeves's and Gould's argument wherein complicating—even contradictory—evidence occasionally goes unnoticed. For example: B. S. Capp's citation of John Securis whose almanac of 1569 draws on the prophecies of Joachim, as do the writings of Francis Moore or even those of Restoration figures like William Lilly who turn to popular traditions that for Capp (if not for Reeves and Gould) derive ultimately from Joachim of Fiore.³ Or witness T. Wilson Hayes's reference to Collier Putney, one of whose sermons

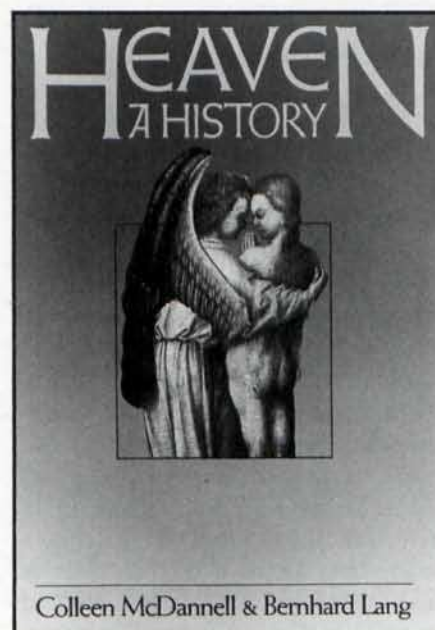
is said to contain a "clear statement of the Joachite concept [of history]"; or Katharine Firth's contention that John Knox's quotations of, John Bale's use of, and John Foxe's comments upon Joachim evince that his writings are part of the "intellectual inheritance of the Reformation," even if their influence is not easily summarized or ascertained.⁴ And witness further Richard Bauckham's acknowledgment of "the paucity of *direct* Joachist influence . . . [in Tudor England], despite the high reputation which Joachim and his followers enjoyed," together with the "many echoes of Joachist exegesis" that appear in some writers.⁵ Consider, moreover, the contrary argument of Frank and Fritz Manuel that Joachism, "a hidden force in heterodox medieval thought," is also "an active, unbroken tradition well into the seventeenth century" when much of the discourse (and very notably Winstanley's) has "a Joachimite resonance."⁶ If such resonances go unheard, the silence may be owing to the seemingly faulty premise (enunciated by Reeves) that the bond of prophecy, the conception of history shared by the Middle Ages and Renaissance, thereafter ceases to be of importance, "except on the fringes of modern civilization."⁷ Quite to the contrary, M. H. Abrams has shown the extent to which prophetic and apocalyptic traditions, including their respective visions of history, are at the center of romanticism, the first phase of modernism. Like Reeves and Gould, Abrams refers to the passage concerning "the time of a *neweverlasting Gospel*" from G. E. Lessing's *The Education of the Human Race* (1780); but Abrams also argues, contrary to Reeves and Gould, that the citation of "certain visionaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" comprehends "Joachim . . . and his followers." Later, Abrams speaks of "Schiller's *drittes Reich*" (not mentioned by Reeves and Gould) as "an unmistakable allusion to the apocalyptic 'third kingdom' which had been prophesied by Joachim of Fiore."⁸

The point is not that Reeves and

Gould are wrong. They simply do not engage—and thus they are unable to extinguish—these contrary opinions. There is insufficient review, not to mention probing, of alternative perspectives: that Joachim is a point of reference in Blake studies not because *he* influenced Blake but, instead, because he was a crucial figure in traditions—let's say of exegesis on The Book of Revelation—that most assuredly *did influence Blake*; that the influence may be second-hand, deriving from esoteric traditions and sometimes figures like J. C. Mosheim who are its conduits—or even on occasion from such marginalized writers as Mrs. Attaway and Jane Lead; that even if Blake is not *the* romantic Joachimist, romanticism may very well have had a Joachimist in Perch Bysshe Shelley whose visions of hope, whose envisioning of a quickened and enlarging consciousness, may have moorings in Joachim's notion of *renovatio mundi*.

If the pages dealing with Blake should be read with a suspicious eye, those devoted to later authors—Pierre Leroux, George Sand, George Eliot, Ernest Renan, and Matthew Arnold, as well as (indeed *especially*) those devoted to John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and W. B. Yeats are rich, rewarding, riveting. In a powerful argument, full of deft observation, Yeats is shown to have used "Joachim and Nietzsche to 'complete' Blake in what amounts to a revision of his earlier thinking about the English poet and artist whose works he had edited in 1893" (202). Giving "a Joachimist slant" to Blake, imposing "a Joachimist gloss" upon his writings, Yeats quickly turns a "Joachimist reinterpretation of Blake . . . into a recognizably Nietzschean rereading of Blake" (232, 234).

Joachimism thus becomes a point of contact between Blake and one of his most eminent critics—and between Blake and the Romantic poet Shelley with whom he displays the greatest affinities, these two poets humanizing apocalypse, historicizing prophecy, and simultaneously interiorizing both.



A less rigorously particularized scrutiny of Blake's traditions is afforded by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang in *Heaven: A History*—a book that declares itself to be "a 'social and cultural history' of heaven" (xii) and that captures within its large embrace apocalyptic and Hellenistic Judaism, early Christianity, the Church Fathers, Renaissance artists and writers (both Catholic and Protestant), plus Milton, Swedenborg, and Blake quite notably. Early in the Renaissance, this book argues, "heaven was split into two levels, one human and one divine" with both heavens thus receiving their due but also with "the human side of heaven gain[ing] more prominence" as concepts like the earthly garden, the new Jerusalem, and heavenly love are "redefined and brought into a new configuration" (111, 112). The Renaissance initiates the processes of historicizing, humanizing, secularizing, and interiorizing that romanticism completes.

This book goes a long way toward confirming the suspicion that Copernican theory, in a poem like *Paradise Lost*, is an aspect of the poet's "science of salvation" (157), implying an analogy between the physical and spiritual suns. Thus, as astronomy was heliocentric, so religious life was theo- or Christocentric, "with the soul moving

around the deity as its center" and with woman herself coming increasingly to fill "one part of that divine center" (157, 167). This book provides an underpinning logic for Milton's centering of both Christ and Eve in *Paradise Lost* and for the prominence later accorded the emanation in Blake's mythological system. Between Milton and Blake, Swedenborg derives certain perspectives from Milton, even occasionally echoing Milton's writings. In the process, Swedenborg subverts the "theocentric model" of heaven where worldly activities have no place and where the whole matter of "doing" is irrelevant: "the modern heaven comes clearly into focus: a heaven near at hand, material, full of activity and progress, and based on social relationships" (178, 228). If Milton is "a transitional figure in the development of an anthropocentric heaven," Swedenborg is the principal precursor of Blake and other romantic innovators for whom man and woman are "fragments of a once primordial whole" and for whom heaven is a place of intense mental activity, as well as highly developed social relationships—a place that, for Blake no less than for Wordsworth, is to be found *in this world*, or not at all (233, 234, 245). Among the unexpected rewards of this book are the paths of influence it charts between Milton and Swedenborg and then the heady observations it makes on Blake's Swedenborgianism.

Both of these books remind us that The Age of Blake was rife with prophetic expectations, which, if they invoked the idea of returning to an Age of Gold, also made clear that what really mattered was the forward thrust of history. The process envisioned was less a return to, or renewal of, past history than escaping from it into a future that was, nevertheless, always located within history, though history in the future tense. The prophet was

not a proponent but rather an opponent of the reigning orthodoxies; his obligation was not to predict but to create a future; and his—or her—means to that end was (Joachim-like) to roll stones away from the mind, letting the light shine forth; or (Blake-like) to open the doors of perception, thereby enlarging human consciousness and, simultaneously, bringing history to its consummation. Whether or not the romantics read him, Joachim of Fiore prophesies their agenda and in the case of the Shelleys, Mary no less than Percy, particularizes their program, giving definition to their heaven on earth—their paradise in history.

The terms in the title of this essay derive from a poem, "Eternal Evangel," in the second volume (entitled *Medieval Legends*) of the Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlický's *Frescoes and Tapestries* (Prague, n. d.) 166–68, reprinted in Reeves and Gould, *Joachim of Fiore* (323–25).

¹ Morton Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1986) 32.

² 3 vols. (G. and W. B. Whittaker, 1823) 2: 42.

³ B. S. Capp, *English Almanacs 1500–1800: Astrology and the Popular Press* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell UP, 1979) 166, 174, 252.

⁴ See T. Wilson Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1979) 225; and Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) 2, 4–5.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* (Oxford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978) 25, 211 (my italics).

⁶ Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1979) 50, 210.

⁷ Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study of Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969) 508.

⁸ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1971) 202, 351.

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Reviewed by
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The most recent edition to the *Critical Essays on British Literature Series*, under the general editorship of Zack Bowen at the University of Miami, is *Critical Essays on William Blake*, edited by Hazard Adams. For this volume Adams includes an introductory essay, sixteen previously published essays, an afterward, and a selected bibliography. His introduction, like the volume itself, is divided into two parts.

Part one of the introduction provides a thumbnail sketch of Blake's reputation and notes the enormous amount of Blake scholarship accumulated during the past few decades. Adams then cites landmarks in modern Blake scholarship beginning in 1924 with the publication of S. Foster Damon's *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols*, followed in 1947 by Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*, and in 1954 by David V. Erdman's *Prophet Against Empire*. Although other scholars continued to follow the leads of Damon, Frye, and Erdman, the next major event does not occur until 1964 with the recognition of the important relationship between text and design. Inspired by Northrop Frye's pioneering essay "Poetry and Design in William Blake" published in 1951, the first detailed examination of this new avenue of scholarship begins with the publication of Jean Hagstrum's *William Blake: Poet and Painter*, and is followed by the scholarship of David V. Erdman, David Bindman, Raymond Lister, W. J. T. Mitchell, John Grant, Robert N. Es-