

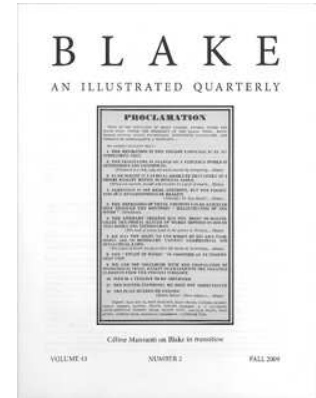
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R E V I E W

Robert Rix, *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity*

Andrew Lincoln

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unmediated personal creativity. If the genuinely creative artist is, as was often quoted, more inspired than calculating, more driven by an eye "in a fine frenzy rolling" than by an eye glued to the works of past masters, then the self-dramatizing works of the artists considered in *The Artist as Original Genius* force us to confront the inevitable and perhaps irreconcilable conflict between vision (unvitiating content) and execution, between art and craft. By 1786 the eighteenth-century Shakespeare craze had led to John Boydell's concept of the Shakespeare Gallery, the popular but unprofitable venture that went public during the 1790s. That it did prove largely unprofitable tells us much about the direction that the popular taste was taking by those years. History painting was widely admired but nothing more, rather in the manner of Dr. Johnson's famous remark about *Paradise Lost* being "one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again." To Keats's friend Benjamin Robert Haydon, perhaps the last of the grand-style history painters in Britain, this disregard for history painting was particularly galling. As Tom Taylor put it after Haydon's death, "he would paint large pictures with a high aim. The patrons did not want such pictures, the Academy did not favour them, the public could not buy them. They flocked to see them exhibited, but that was all."<sup>1</sup> What did sell—and the Shakespeare Gallery artists were quick to pick up on this—were genre pieces, sentimental renditions of moments of "sensibility" as the eighteenth century understood them, and fantastically "soft" portrait-impressions of Shakespeare's characters. All these could be—and were—reproduced in engraved form for the "popular" consumer who could afford them. Grand-scale history paintings could not be reduced in this fashion, either in size or in medium, without becoming fairly silly: without their grand scale, there was little to recommend them to the emerging bourgeois viewer and would-be connoisseur. And so while Shakespeare the native original genius continued to prosper as an image, a myth, and a capital industry, that variety of visual art that had sought at once to emulate and to popularize a (self-serving) vision of this sort of original artistic genius was, relatively unceremoniously, edged out of the market.

While Blake is mentioned in passing throughout *The Artist as Original Genius*, he is nowhere the focus of sustained commentary, in part because his extra-institutional status necessarily excludes him from a discussion that is so centrally grounded in the Royal Academy, its members, and its doings. The one exception to this rule is Pressly's fascinating suggestion, in a chapter called "Alienation, Persecution, and Liberation through Sacrificial Death," that the figure in Blake's famous *Albion Rose* (*The Dance of Albion*) "was originally conceived as an image of Blake as Chatterton in the same manner as Flaxman's conception of himself as Chat-

terton" (179; Flaxman's drawing is reproduced as fig. 112). Pressly makes a compelling argument, and the resemblance between the two drawings is striking, despite some obvious differences in subject and treatment. Moreover, Pressly's explanation of the image's relation to Blake's personal circumstances (including his dramatically altered estimate by 1808 of his former friend Flaxman) makes a good deal of sense. Indeed, within the context of Pressly's discussion of the cultural and mythological function of the suicidal Chatterton for all of these artists, there is much to think about here, even if Pressly himself admits that he does not have that proverbial smoking-gun proof for his claim. In any event, Blake is nevertheless present everywhere in the book, if only by implication, and the profusion of illustrations (none, alas, in color) will provide the viewer with many obvious contexts for Blake's visual works, putting Blake, his art, and its visionary singularity into productive dialogue with the artists and works that were his contemporaries during those volatile years.

Robert Rix. *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. x + 182 pp. £55.00/\$99.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Andrew Lincoln

ANYONE who has tried to keep up with the developing field of Blake studies will find in this book much that seems familiar. But Robert Rix surveys the field of Swedenborgianism and related movements with a thoroughness that clarifies many issues. He demonstrates that in order to deal adequately with the question of how Blake was influenced by Swedenborg and other religious writers, we must take into account "the reading practices of late eighteenth-century interpretive communities" (1) and be alert to the intricate relations and rivalries among them. The complexities are expertly unraveled and lucidly explained here, which will make this book a helpful introduction for anyone new to the field and a useful point of reference for seasoned scholars. At the same time, though, the study exposes the difficulty of evaluating the relevance of historical "microcultures" to an understanding of Blake's works.

Rix has a deep and wide knowledge of the intriguing world of religious groups relatively little known beyond the realm of Blake studies. This usually allows him to avoid settling too easily on an individual strand or tendency as the key to Blake and to provide a gentle corrective for those who do. In the face of previous attempts to compare or associate Blake's ideas

1. Benjamin Robert Haydon, *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846)*, ed. Tom Taylor, new ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926) 2: 825.

with those found within specific "antinomian" groups, he points out that antinomianism "was not a well-defined sectarian position, but a tendency that could be found with varying emphases across the board of the religious spectrum" (19). Blake's phrase "Everlasting Gospel" cannot be identified with a single tradition or set of ideas, since it was applied "loosely" within a "number of traditions, sermons and publications in England." "It was favoured by radical seventeenth-century dissenters. It was also habitually employed in Behmenist and other mystical circles" (16-17). Rix offers an alternative to the "unbroken tradition" model of antinomian influence proposed by A. L. Morton: "that Blake radicalized antinomian ideas inherited from Moravian or similar milieus" (28). In developing this view—which builds on the discovery by Marsha Keith Schuchard and Keri Davies that Blake's mother was a Moravian—Rix characteristically emphasizes the plurality of influence, outlining the connections between Moravianism and the traditions of continental mysticism and insisting that it makes little sense to identify Blake simply as a Behmenist or a Swedenborgian, since "each of these traditions meant several and often contradictory things at Blake's time" (2). He also shows that hostility does not preclude affinity, and that those with different aims can follow parallel routes. In his discussion of the "Visionary Marketplace," which reviews the commercial dimension of "vision and spirit communications" (135), he considers animal magnetism, a treatment sought by affluent Londoners and a favored pursuit among Swedenborgians. As Rix notes, Blake was critical of three contemporary magnetizers, but may nevertheless have been attracted to some aspects of the rhetoric of magnetism—which provided a kind of analogy with his own work (conceived as "a sort of faith healing" [139]).

One of the strengths of this book is Rix's willingness to concede that evidence of historical connection is not necessarily evidence of influence. So, for example, his brief historical overview of the Moravians carries the warning that there are no "definite signs of Moravian doctrine" (11) in Blake's writing. But this does not make the Moravian example irrelevant: the more progressive circles of Moravianism had an interest in prophetic and visionary culture that predates the spate of prophetic publications which appeared in the wake of the French revolution. And if there is no clinching evidence of specific Moravian ideas, Rix finds elements "characteristic of a certain kind of dissent" (22) that is compatible with Moravianism. In particular, he examines two relatively neglected works, "The Couch of Death" and "Samson," relating them to the doctrine of free grace, and comparing them with Charles Wesley's "Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin?" (said to have been written on a night of "decisive religious experience ... among Moravians") (22-24). The argument provides a good illustration of how a discussion of influence can be illuminating while remaining tentative in its claims.

Swedenborg emerges as the central focus in this study, a cultural presence that catalyzes Blake's thinking and an important interpretive context for individual works. Swedenborg is

seen not simply as a writer who can be accessed through his texts, but as a field upon which the opposing interests that constitute Swedenborgianism contend. Rix reminds us of the extent of the contemporary fascination with the Swedish writer, and of the hostile reactions his legacy provoked (often exaggerated and sensationalist). He offers brief accounts of the Swedenborgian discussion group, the Theosophical Society (attended by Philip James de Louthembourg, Richard Cosway, John Flaxman, and William Sharp), and of the First General Conference of the New Jerusalem Church (which Blake and his wife attended), and he carefully reviews the divisions within the London Swedenborgians—on the one hand, the move towards ridding the New Jerusalem Church of its radical associations (exemplified in, among other things, Robert Hindmarsh's criticisms of Thomas Paine), and on the other, the "widespread tendency among the London Swedenborgians to turn their prophet's teaching into a social gospel fitting a radical and anticlerical outlook" (74). Chapter 5 focuses on a group of radical believers who were active in the New Jerusalem Church around the time that Blake attended its conference, including Benedict Chastanier, Count Grabianka, "Count" Cagliostro, and the diplomat Carl Frederick Nordenskjöld (the translator of Paine's *Rights of Man* into Swedish).

This kind of study certainly helps to create an appropriate intellectual milieu for Blake. However, the relevance of the lovingly detailed exploration of microcultures to the interpretation of Blake's poems is sometimes, perhaps inevitably, unclear. The key issues of doctrine upon which interpretation appears to depend may be contained in isolated phrases, removed from their immediate context in Blake's writing; the relevant "vocabulary" may be represented by a relatively small number of favored symbols; the analogies with Blake may be fleeting. The historical context, on the other hand, can expand almost indefinitely, unimpeded by the requirements of specific interpretation, once some kind of parallel has been established with Blake's own career or beliefs. At one point Rix acknowledges that "there are no records of Blake using identifiable magnetic techniques ... when composing his poetry. But someone who did make use of such techniques was the diplomat and writer George Baldwin" (145). The non sequitur opens the door for a brief outline of Baldwin's career. This outline is interesting in itself and potentially illuminating (since Blake was certainly aware of Baldwin, and criticized him in a *Notebook* poem). But here, as the awkward handling suggests, the outline seems oddly inconsequential, as if Blake has become a peg upon which to hang information.

In terms of its interpretive value, the most secure part of this study is chapter 7, which discusses *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as a satire on Swedenborg. Rix claims with some justice that "the extent to which he [Blake] subverts the theosophist's conclusions through close parody has not been fully realized" (121). He suggests that the work targets a particular kind of reader, one familiar with Swedenborg's *True Christian Religion*, and that it satirizes those Swedenborgians who re-

garded the theosophist's writing as the word of God. He shows how Blake appropriates Swedenborg's own terms as weapons (for example, Swedenborg's terms for false preachers: "religious" and "apes"), or parodies specific episodes (Swedenborg's imagined conversion of Luther from the doctrine of justification by faith alone, or his description of a house in hell with many apartments). Rix is well aware that Blake's criticism in *Marriage* is not limited to Swedenborg, but he shows convincingly how a knowledge of Swedenborg's texts, and of the assumptions of his followers, can help illuminate some of the obscurities of Blake's work.

In other areas, the interpretive payoff is more questionable. Rix tends to discount the literal in Blake in ways that recall Swedenborg's separation of the natural and the spiritual. He claims, for example, that the "theological vocabulary" of "The Little Black Boy" "points directly to Swedenborg's idea of God represented as a spiritual Sun," a sun, according to Swedenborg, "distinct from that of the Natural World" (114). One might with more justice see the poem as conspicuously refusing such a distinction. Oothoon's offer to catch girls for Theotormon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is seen, Urizenically, as "not about satisfying carnal lust" but as "a sort of parable of a spiritual principle: the utmost reach of unselfish love" (103). Rix argues that "when Blake wrote his late epic *Jerusalem*, he did not, like [Richard] Brothers, imagine

the Heavenly City to be built with bricks and mortar. It was the same London, but its inhabitants would be reformed to become a community of true Christianity" (106). This is to separate the resurrected community from its habitation, to ignore the importance Blake gives to poetic genius, to the arts and sciences (including the art of architecture), and to forget that Blake's figure for the eternal prophet, Los, is often seen with a hammer in his hand. A true Christian community would surely strive to rebuild London brick by brick. In such instances it seems (to this reader, at least) that the close encounter with Swedenborg has tended to obstruct, rather than to clarify, Rix's understanding of Blake's quarrel with the theosophist.

I have two other minor criticisms of this study. One is that, in the absence of concrete evidence, Rix allows reasonable inferences to harden into factual certainties, as when he assumes (as his argument demands) Blake's "extensive reading in the writings of contemporary radicals" (34), or asserts that "Blake was most certainly familiar with" Volney's *Ruines* (37) (I assume Blake did read Volney—but there is no certainty about this). Rix argues plausibly that, in the wake of Burke's attack on Richard Price's "enthusiasm," Blake's poem *The French Revolution* may have become "a casualty in the campaign for respectability of [the publisher] Johnson and his associates" (151). This interesting suggestion quickly solidifies into a factual premise: "Johnson's decision to cancel the publication of Blake's poem undoubtedly contributed to Blake's decision to set up as an independent bookseller of his own works" (153). This kind of unnecessary rhetorical coercion weakens, rather than strengthens, the authority of the argument. As my own proofreading is poor, I hesitate to mention the second criticism—but there are quite a few typographical errors here, some of which (random movements between font sizes, obviously malformed words) can be laid at the door of Ashgate (did they provide a copy editor?).

In his conclusion Rix claims that the cultures of radical Christianity "have inhabited only the fringes of scholarly interest," and their absence has "shaped the distorted image of Blake as either an isolated genius or as a poor madman" (155). But surely the efforts of several generations of scholars have made this area a familiar part of the mainstream of Blake studies, and only those needing to justify another contribution to this well-populated field have an interest in maintaining the idea of its marginality, or in resurrecting the obsolete image of Blake. Rix's own contribution can be justified on other grounds—his book is lucid and readable, and in its exceptional grasp of the complex interrelations between religious traditions and reading communities in Blake's age it sets an example that exposes the limitations of some earlier studies of influence, an example that others will be able to build on.

