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*William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* by  
Robert Rix (review)

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comparison of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (the second clearly a response to the first), Greenblatt observes that Shakespeare "at once borrows from *The Jew of Malta* and repudiates its corrosive, merciless irony" (*Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Norton, 2004, 286). What Greenblatt finds in *Merchant* instead of Marlovian irony is what he calls "shoots of a strange, irrepressible imaginative generosity." Generosity may be nothing but economic self-interest, of course, but people have developed different words for thinking about it, including "grace," "faith," "hope," and "love," which have not been conceived as identical to each other and are not necessarily in every instance nothing but bad faith. If one begins with the assumption that all these things are a delusion, the evidence to support the assumption can certainly be found. Hypocrisy is certainly a reality, and so are self-deception, exploitation, and punitive cruelty in the name of God. Parker sets out to convince his readers that the Christian record and Christian reasoning show nothing but these things, and it would be foolish to deny the brilliance and erudition of his effort. All I can say is that this reader, for one, remains unconvinced of Parker's basic assumption.

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***William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity.*** By Robert Rix. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007. ISBN 978-0-75465600-5. Pp. 182. \$99.95.

Anyone who has ever read or attempted to teach the poetry of William Blake will understand both the difficulty and the value of Robert Rix's project. Blake's work is difficult. Even work that seems simple is not so. Even the loveliest lyrics in *The Songs of Innocence*, the most absolutely straightforward, can make complex demands on a reader because they are parts of a larger, much less transparent whole. One is always being forced to consider the context of the speaker and the situation of those characters in the poem being spoken to or being spoken about. You also have the visual aspects of the works to consider.

Of course, *The Songs of Innocence* as a set of poems cannot be understood apart from, or out of context with *The Songs of Experience*, where similar questions of context are ever occurring. In the "Little Black Boy," from *The Songs of Experience*, the narrator is an African woman, a slave or former slave, attempting to explain to her child his relation to God and to the English boy who won't befriend him. How shall we appraise her perspective? Is she a guardian figure like those in *Innocence* who we mostly learn to trust, or is she more like those custodians of the poor in *Experience* we learn to despise? Does she teach the son to worship a debased, fallen image of God? Does she pass on to him a sort of pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die religiosity, thus unintentionally serving the master, or does she proclaim the real thing revealed to her despite her and her son's master's worst intentions? Will the boy be consoled? Should he be? And how shall the reader respond?

Rix does deal with this poem, and other poems from *The Songs of Innocence* and *The Songs of Experience*, as he declares himself most interested in the period of the 1790s, Blake's early period, but the interpretative difficulty he takes on is more external than internal. That is, Rix puts the "Little Black Boy" poem in context with an abolitionist movement in England both informed and motivated by Swedenborgian thought and movements that swirled around Blake, even if Blake himself at various times distanced himself from Swedenborg and Swedenborgians. It is Blake Rix attempts to put in context, and Blake's poems, not so much with each other as with the cultural situation out of which they came, seeming to assume, rightly, I think, that the Blake industry has done a credible job dealing with many if not most of the internal interpretative cruxes, and the bigger problem is making him less the lonely, isolated genius and more the man of or in dialogue with his times.

So Rix's book is an influence study, religious influence more than any other. The main influence, or gravitational force to which Blake is at first drawn, is Swedenborg, and the poem that Rix makes most central to our understanding of Blake's dynamic relationship with Swedenborg and Swedenborgians is "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

The book is comprised of eight chapters. The introduction and first chapter very carefully map out the overall religious landscape of late eighteenth-century England, and here Rix is very careful as he defines his terms and establishes the major themes he will address, including, and especially, antinomianism and enthusiasm as important aspects of theosophical thought and practice. Rix's treatment of Moravianism as that continental ecumenical reform movement that most prepared the ground in England for Methodism as well as for Swedenborgianism seemed to this reader very carefully rendered, even if the connection to Blake's own religious formation, through the influence of his mother, for a time a member of Moravian congregation, can only be a matter of conjecture. Rix points out all sorts of ways Blake's early work *might* show the influence of Moravian thought and piety, even as he reminds us that Blake never explicitly acknowledges the connection. The Moravian Pietist effect on others—on Wesley, on Kant, on Schiller, Goethe, and Schleiermacher—Rix claims with greater confidence, and if the influence on Blake can't be proven, Moravianism's profound influence on his age Rix still finds worth showing in some detail.

The same is true for the works of Jacob Boehme, whose importation into England Rix traces through his most prominent translators and publishers to a variety of English reading groups, writers, and preachers, some comfortably within the fold of the Church of England, some not. According to Rix, it was the combination of Moravian pietism, with its emphasis on a religion of the heart, with Behmenist mysticism with its renovation of medieval enthusiasm, that provided the rich soil in which theosophical religious thought generally and Swedenborg's thought in particular took root and flourished in England. Blake did acknowledge

the influence of Jacob Boehme, which puts Rix on firmer ground connecting certain aspects of Blake's nomenclature with that German mystic. A reader not familiar with the concepts of enthusiasm and antinomianism, as they relate to Protestant thought generally and the theosophical tradition in particular, will find these early chapters most valuable, as they are crucial to a proper understanding of Blake and his times.

Rix's second chapter, titled "Libertines, Liberators, and Legislators," puts Blake's antinomianism and enthusiasm into the context of the social and political debates of the late eighteenth century, thus beginning to draw together what Rix claims was never separate in late eighteenth-century English thought and discourse, that is, the religious and political spheres. Only experts on this period or of this tradition of religious and political dissent would know any if even a few of the principal actors involved in the story Rix relates, except for Thomas Paine, or course, whom Blake read, admired, and wrote about. Rix's treatment of Blake's reading of Paine is particularly interesting and nuanced, demonstrating a great command of this intellectual world as well as a great understanding of Blake's practices as a reader and misreader. To show the influence of such contemporary religious and political debates on Blake's work, Rix examines several poems by Blake of this time period, including sections of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "A Song of Liberty," which Blake bound to all versions of *Marriage*, and *America: A Prophecy*. Rix's readings of Blake are very helpful in showing how Blake's antinomianism and enthusiasm come together, how his image of a "Rebel Christ" (34) evolves, and how typical his reading of the American Revolution will become, as a revolt against spiritual thralldom more basic than any other kind.

Chapters 3 through 7, the heart of the Rix's book, deal with Blake's complex relationship to Emanuel Swedenborg. Rix sticks close to the facts: that Blake did once attend a Conference of the New Jerusalem Church, the London Swedenborgian church, in April of 1788, and was a signatory, with his wife, of a letter listing forty-two doctrinal reasons for separating from the Church of England. Though Blake and his wife signed the letter, they did not by doing so commit themselves to membership in the Church.

Rix tracks Blake into Swedenborg's works by way of Blake's own annotations, suggesting a possible order of reading as well as reasons for why the complexion of those annotations changed. Two years after attending that conference, Blake signals his rejection of Swedenborg in his poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which Rix analyzes in his seventh chapter.

Readers with an interest in the history of evangelical Protestantism and the theosophical tradition may find these chapters fascinating whether or not they know or care about William Blake. It occurs to this reviewer, writing from China, that the intellectual tradition this book traces, with Swedenborg at its center, exists in a relationship of contrariety with the Enlightenment tradition one might compare to the Chinese notion of yin and yang. Rix suggests as much, though without the

Eastern analogy, when he compares the impact of Swedenborg in his time to that of Kant in his. This reviewer has always preferred Blake's critique of pure reason to Kant's, but since reading this book he feels compelled to think of that critique as heavily indebted to Swedenborg and Swedenborgians.

Rix has amassed a tremendous amount of information about the print culture in England and on the continent that gave circulation to writing by and about Swedenborg; he knows the translators, the printers and publishers, the apologists, the critics, the alarmists. He also knows everyone Blake knew, every patron, friend, fellow artist, or enemy, in whose circle Blake ever moved, who ever lent Blake a book or bought from him a print, who ever had any connection to Swedenborg or the New Jerusalem Church. There is not an idea or phrase in Swedenborg that also occurs in a Blake poem that Rix doesn't mention or try to account for. He mentions meetings Blake *might* have gone to, meetings Blake's friends attended, with or without him, where Swedenborg was discussed. He suggests the sculptor John Flaxman *may* have been the catalyst who lit the Swedenborgian spark in his friend William; he notes Blake's future patron, William Hayley, with whom Flaxman exchanged books by or about Swedenborg, entrusted his son to Flaxman's tutelage. The message seems obvious: Blake couldn't spit and not hit a Swedenborgian.

So chapter 3 introduces Swedenborg's ideas, but even more so the London milieu that might bring Swedenborg and Swedenborgians together with Blake. Chapter 4 illustrates to what an extent Swedenborg became a platform, even launch pad for radical politics, which Rix explores through the distorted lens of the most vocal orthodox alarmists. It is in this chapter Rix argues that Blake's falling out with Swedenborg was ultimately caused by the creation of a sectarian Swedenborgian church, a new orthodoxy not so unlike the old ones in Blake's mind. Chapter 5 broadens the story of Swedenborg and the New Jerusalem Church to include a number of international figures and movements, which Rix suggests further broadens the context in which we might locate the life and work of William Blake. It is in chapter five that Rix connects Blake's poem "the Little Black Boy" from *The Songs of Experience* with an international Swedenborgian abolitionist movement that sprung from certain Swedenborgian notions about Africa and Africans. In this chapter, Rix also deals with certain notions Swedenborg had about human sexuality, in this life and in the afterlife, that may explain or at least parallel certain issues related to sexuality in Blake's poetry, art, and personal life.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus somewhat, from millennialist dreams of spiritual rebirth and universal brotherhood to Swedenborg's notions of faith and charity, and how those ideas shaped theories and practices of philanthropy, which may have informed or influenced Blake's treatment of love and charity, especially in *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*. In other chapters, Blake can sometimes disappear from sight, or become but one of many artists, printers, and thinkers orbiting Swedenborg and the New Jerusalem Church. In this chapter, Rix does an excellent job helping us to understand how Swedenborg's notion of the Divine

Image is absolutely foundational to Blake's vision. Here Rix may be at his best, and the proportions most perfect, for this reader, anyway, as Rix balances his interest in Swedenborg and Blake, in the poetry, its production, circulation, and reception.

Rix devotes an entire chapter, chapter 7, to Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which makes perfect sense, given the fact that it is an early work, often read as Blake's *Principia*, where more than anywhere else he confronts Swedenborg as a failed prophet who lapsed into what Blake called priestcraft. Rix's reading shows how Blake uses Swedenborgian terms even as he subverts Swedenborg's message, taking him to task for being "an enemy to antinomian liberty" (123). Rix's great command of Swedenborg and theosophical literature generally allows him to see connections and parodic moves on Blake's part that most reader would miss. He also makes a good case that Blake's quarrel is as much with Swedenborgians and the New Jerusalem Church as with Swedenborg himself, who would recur in later works as often a sympathetic, even heroic character.

This reviewer began to lose interest a bit in the last chapter that dealt with "the Visionary Marketplace" and such cultural phenomena as animal magnetism. The connections to Swedenborgian interests in psychic health, and further, to Blake, seems valid if a bit of a strain. Even so, this is a fine book, carefully and thoroughly researched, lucidly written, and most welcoming to anyone interested in William Blake and/or the theosophical tradition of late eighteenth-century England. William Blake will forever frustrate our efforts to put him in context, even as he and his work challenges us to do so. Hats off to Robert Rix, who has tangled him up with the Swedenborgians as well as anyone could.

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***Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation.*** By Ben Saunders. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. ISBN 0-674-02347-5. Pp. xii + 248. \$35.00.

***John Donne, Body and Soul.*** By Ramie Targoff. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008. ISBN 0-226-78963-7. Pp. xii + 208. \$29.00.

These two recent books are disappointing because they provide little insight or information about John Donne. Both authors neglect the work of the poet and preacher for idiosyncratic interests of their own, which reflect the preoccupations of twenty-first century academics rather than the significance of Donne's works. Instead, they exemplify in their different ways the result of binding the interpretation of an early modern writer to the institutional protocols of the postmodern university.