

A Visionary among the Radicals:
William Blake and the Circle of Joseph Johnson, 1790-95

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ABSTRACT

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Blake's critics have never attempted to illustrate in a systematic manner how Blake used information he learned from writings published by members of the circle of Joseph Johnson in his own works during the period 1790-95. Although Blake was a peripheral figure in the Johnson circle – known to them through his profession of engraving and marginalized on account of his social position and lack of university education – his works reveal a continuing engagement with topics addressed in the writings of authors associated with Johnson, perhaps signifying Blake's desire to be recognized as an author participating, like them, in the literary deliberations of the public sphere.

Chapter 1, 'Blake, Priestley and Swedenborg', examines Blake's treatment in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* of body and soul, the natures of God and Jesus Christ, and Swedenborgianism in relation to Joseph Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) and *Letters to the Members of The New Jerusalem Church* (1791).

Chapter 2, 'The Voice of a Devil and the Printing House in Hell', considers *The Marriage* as an attempt to join the Revolution controversy and compares this work with writings by Richard Price, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine. Chapter 2 also assesses the relationship between *The Marriage* and radical diabolism and Blake's engagement with 'energy' as a distinctively radical concept in the work of Erasmus Darwin, Henry Fuseli, William Godwin, Priestley and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Chapter 3, 'Topical Representations in *The French Revolution*', considers Blake's engagement with Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and the Bastille in relation to responses to *Reflections* by Wollstonecraft, Paine and other authors published by Johnson. Chapter 3 concludes with an analysis of the response *The French Revolution* might have elicited from the *Analytical Review*.

Chapter 4, '*The French Revolution* and Three Contemporary Discourses', approaches this poem in terms of the discourses of ancient liberty, nature and the sublime, once again in comparison with responses to *Reflections* by members of the Johnson circle. My discussion of the sublime considers the possible influence on *The French Revolution* of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Bishop Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1787).

Chapter 5, 'The Continental Prophecies: Prophetic Form and Contemporary Prophecy', examines *America*, *Europe* and *The Song of Los* in relation to writings concerning prophecy published by Johnson (with special emphasis on Lowth's *Lectures* and Priestley's 1793 and 1794 Fast Day sermons). The second part of Chapter 5 compares aspects of the works of Blake and Richard Brothers with Priestley's Fast Day sermons, suggesting that Priestley and Blake's works of 1793 and 1794 are rather less dissimilar than traditionally assumed.

Chapter 6, 'Blake's "Bible of Hell" and Contemporary Critics of the Bible', discusses *Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los* in light of biblical criticism from the 1780s and 1790s (with particular reference to the *Analytical* and the writings of Alexander Geddes, Priestley and Paine). The final section of Chapter 6 reads *Ahania* in terms of the contemporary debate regarding the doctrine of the Atonement.

The Conclusion, '“melting apparent surfaces away”: Continuities in the Thought of Priestley and Blake', revisits my discussion in Chapter 5 of similarities between Priestley and Blake and proposes that they are not so far apart in ideas and the content of their works as modern scholars usually argue.

For my daughter,
Gretchen Ann Mertz

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² Bodleian shelfmark: Arch. G d.53 (frontispiece).

³ Variations in binding order cause plates to be numbered differently in some copies of Blake’s Illuminated Books. Plate numbers in brackets correspond to the order for each work established by G.E. Bentley, Jr, in *Blake Books* (1977).

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Abbreviations and notes

<i>AR</i>	<i>The Analytical Review</i> (1788-98)
<i>BB</i>	G.E. Bentley, Jr, <i>Blake Books</i> (1977)
<i>BBS</i>	---- <i>Blake Books Supplement</i> (1995)
<i>BR</i>	---- <i>Blake Records</i> , 2 nd edn (2004)
<i>BodL</i>	The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
<i>Christie</i>	Thomas Christie, <i>Letters on the Revolution of France</i> (1791)
<i>Corruptions</i>	Joseph Priestley, <i>An History of the Corruptions of Christianity</i> (1782)
<i>Disquisitions</i>	---- <i>Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit</i> , 2 nd edn (1782)
<i>Erdman</i>	David V. Erdman, <i>Blake: Prophet Against Empire</i> , 3 rd edn (1977)
<i>Essick</i>	Robert N. Essick, 'William Blake, Thomas Paine, and Biblical Revolution', <i>Studies in Romanticism</i> (1991)
<i>Ferber</i>	Michael Ferber, <i>The Social Vision of William Blake</i> (1985)
<i>Frye</i>	Northrop Frye, <i>Fearful Symmetry</i> (1947)
<i>Fuller</i>	Reginald C. Fuller, <i>Alexander Geddes, 1737-1802: A Pioneer of Biblical Criticism</i> (1984)
<i>Gilchrist</i>	Alexander Gilchrist, <i>Life of William Blake</i> , new edn (1880)
<i>Godechot</i>	Jacques Godechot, <i>The Taking of the Bastille</i> , tr. Jean Stewart (1970)
<i>Habermas</i>	Jürgen Habermas, <i>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere</i> , tr. Thomas Burger (1989)
<i>Lowth</i>	Robert Lowth, <i>Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews</i> , tr. G. Gregory (1787)
<i>McGann</i>	Jerome J. McGann, 'The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes', <i>Studies in Romanticism</i> (1986)
<i>Mee</i>	Jon Mee, <i>Dangerous Enthusiasm</i> (1992)

- Paley* Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination* (1970)
- Paulson* Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (1983)
- Philosophical Enquiry* Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. David Womersley (1998)
- Reflections* ---- *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [and *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*], ed. L.G. Mitchell (1993)
- Rights of Man* Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, ed. Eric Foner (1984)
- Roper* Derek Roper, *Reviewing before the 'Edinburgh', 1788-1802* (1978)
- Schorer* Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (1959)
- Stranger* G.E. Bentley, Jr, *The Stranger from Paradise* (2001)
- Tannenbaum* Leslie Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies* (1982)
- Tyson* Gerald P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* (1979)
- Viscomi* Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993)
- Wollstonecraft* Mary Wollstonecraft, *Political Writings*, ed. Janet Todd (1993)

For details regarding publication, see the bibliography.

All quotations of Blake's works are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, newly revised edn (New York, 1988), cited parenthetically in the text as 'E' followed by page number(s). Where applicable, references within works are indicated by Blake's pagination (p.), or by plate number (pl.), followed by the line(s) quoted.

Titles published by Joseph Johnson (excluding the *Analytical Review*) are italicized and underlined in the footnotes. Although not published by Johnson, I italicize and underline footnote references to modern editions of Mary Wollstonecraft (for both *Vindications* [1790 and 1792]) and Thomas Paine (for the first part of *Rights of Man* [1791]) because Johnson published contemporary editions of these three works.

All quotations of the Bible are from the King James Version.

Emphases are in the original texts unless indicated otherwise.

Preface

There are two reasons I felt the need to add another volume to the many fine studies of William Blake already in existence. First, I have often felt unsatisfied with the frequent collocation of Blake and the Johnson circle in biographical and critical accounts. In many cases, it seemed too facile an observation and, his or her point ‘demonstrated’, the writer moved on to other matters rather too quickly. Three notable exceptions are G.E. Bentley’s *Blake Records*, 2nd edn (2004), Robert Essick’s superb essay, ‘William Blake, Thomas Paine, and Biblical Revolution’ (1991), and Jon Mee’s *Dangerous Enthusiasm* (1992). The value of these three works for the present study will be evident to my reader, as I frequently re-examine leads suggested by Bentley, Essick and Mee. My second reason (borrowed from Leslie Tannenbaum) will explain why I ended with a different piece of work than I expected. When asked by a colleague why he felt the need to add another work to the shelves full of Blake criticism, Tannenbaum quoted William Godwin’s *The Enquirer*: ‘When a man writes a book of methodical investigation, he does not write because he understands his subject, but he understands the subject because he has written.’¹

My approach to Blake can be summarized quite simply. I am interested in what Blake may have learned from members of the Johnson circle and their publications and how he appears to have used this material in his own works during the period 1790-95. Perhaps the most significant precursor to my study of Blake is Mark Schorer’s *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (1946). Schorer was the first scholar to analyze the content of Blake’s work in terms of his association with the

¹ Tannenbaum, ix.

Johnson circle, but I feel that Schorer's characterization of their influence as 'an atmosphere of opinion in which [Blake] found a direction rather than a set of fixed ideas'² understates the complexity of Blake's relationship with Johnson and his authors. I agree with Morris Eaves's suggestion that Blake's critics have been 'too busy interpreting and not busy enough looking in the historical archives for the "precise occasion[s]" for Blake's language and images'³ (though recent work by Keri Davies,⁴ Saree Makdisi,⁵ Mee⁶ and David Worrall⁷ has done much to illuminate Blake in his literary, political and social contexts). While I do not claim always to have found the 'precise occasions' for Blake's language and imagery, I have assumed that his professional (and sometimes social) relationship with the Johnson circle, above and beyond Blake's own polymathic explorations, provided a great deal of information for his creative purposes.

During the years I spent writing this thesis, I have benefited from the friendship, kindness and support of many people. Members of the staffs in the following institutions have provided wonderful environments for work and have assisted me in many ways: The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; The Library

² Schorer, 134.

³ Morris Eaves, 'On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58 (1997), 429.

⁴ 'William Blake's Mother: A New Identification', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 33 (1999), 36-50; Keri Davies and Marsha Keith Schuchard, 'Recovering the Lost Moravian History of William Blake's Family', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 38 (2004), 36-43.

⁵ *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago and London, 2003).

⁶ 'Apocalypse and Ambivalence: The Politics of Millenarianism in the 1790s', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 95 (1996), 671-97; '“The Doom of Tyrants”': William Blake, Richard "Citizen" Lee, and the Millenarian Public Sphere', in DiSalvo, Rosso and Hobson (eds), *Blake, Politics, and History* (New York and London, 1998), 97-114; 'The strange career of Richard "Citizen" Lee: poetry, popular radicalism and enthusiasm in the 1790s', in Morton and Smith (eds), *Radicalism in British Literary Culture* (Cambridge, 2002), 151-66; 'Bloody Blake: Nation and Circulation', in Steve Clark and David Worrall (eds), *Blake, Nation and Empire* (Basingstoke and New York, 2006), 63-82.

⁷ *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), 43-47; 'Blake and 1790s Plebeian Radical Culture', in Steve Clark and David Worrall (eds), *Blake in the Nineties* (Basingstoke and New York, 1999), 194-211; 'William Bryan, Another Anti-Swedenborgian Visionary Engraver of 1789', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 34 (2000), 14-22.

of Congress (Rare Book and Special Collections Division); The New York Public Library (The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle); The Newberry Library, Chicago; The John M. Olin Library, Washington University in Saint Louis; and Pius XII Memorial Library, Saint Louis University. For particular favors, I am grateful to Kathryn Barush, Bruce Barker-Benfield (Department of Special Collections and Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian), Daniel de Simone (Curator of the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, The Library of Congress), the Reverend Dr Reginald Fuller, Alan Jutzi (Chief Curator of the Rare Books Department, The Henry E. Huntington Library), Martin Kauffmann (Department of Special Collections and Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian), Alistair MacGregor (Ushaw College, Durham), Jean-Pierre Mialon (Duke Humfrey's Library at the Bodleian), Michael Phillips, Ashley Reed (The William Blake Archive), Sue Usher (English Faculty Library, The University of Oxford), Stephen Wagner (Curator of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library), Abby Yochelson (The Library of Congress) and the Reverend Dr Lowell Zuck (Eden Theological Seminary, Saint Louis).

I should also like to thank those people who have influenced me as a student of literature. My favorite undergraduate professor, Raymond Benoit of Saint Louis University, introduced me to Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and Wordsworth. I hope that the completion of this thesis will be a welcome (though belated) expression of gratitude to Roy Park for his encouragement of a nervous American whose first trip abroad led almost directly to Roy's dark and smoky office above High Street in October 1993. Jon Mee suggested the topic of this thesis and I benefited greatly from our discussions during the early stages of my work. I thank G.E. Bentley, Jr, for his

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I am grateful to my friends for traveling with me to the realm of thought-creating fires. I am particularly honored to have the friendship and support of Bryonie Carter, Elizabeth Crowley, Robert Feren, Brendan Fleming (who bravely read an early draft of this thesis), Ian Gordon and Gregory Taylor. Finally, my love goes to my daughter, Gretchen, who has endured my absences and distraction for a little too long. Tout comprendre rend très indulgent.

J.B.M.
Saint Louis, Missouri
17 January 2010