

Anti-Hegemony: The Legacy of William Blake

This has been a long, and perhaps strange, way into William Blake.* On one matter I am impenitent. Blake can't have dreamed up a whole vocabulary of symbolism, which touches at so many points the traditions which I have discussed, for himself *ab novo*. Nor can he have put it together like mosaic from his reading. Things don't happen like that. Nor can it have arisen just from a reading of the Bible, for this presupposes the Bible, and particular passages of *Genesis*, read *in a particular way*. The author of the Prefaces to *Jerusalem* and the 'Annotations to Watson', of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *The Everlasting Gospel*, was writing within a known tradition, using terms made familiar by seven or eight generations of London sectaries.

Certainly my argument does not stand or fall upon the Muggletonian hypothesis. What this does is to give the argument concretion and indicate one possible actual context. Whether or not Blake's family, or any of them, came from this particular church is not the critical question. There were other

sects and other milieux, whose records may be irrecoverable. Coppinists and 'Sweet Singers of Israel' perhaps had meetings and discourses over doctrine of a similar kind, at least until the 1740s or 1750s. The astonishing survival of these Muggletonian records shows at least that such kinds of people were about, that their faith was strong and that the seventeenth-century antinomian traditions ran strongly through to Blake's time. He must have come from some such familial context.

By 1750 or 1760 it is probable that most of the petty sects reported as existing in 1706 no longer survived in their old forms. But the vocabulary survived, and it was continually in search of new vehicles for its expression. The sects had never been hermetically sealed against each other; part of the intellectual excitement of sectarianism (then, as now) had been found in the factional disputes between sects, the open debates, the struggle to convert each other's disciples. An earnest seeker might sample different sects, and move on from one to another. Such seekers were still to be found at the end of the century, like the earnest artisans, John Wright and William Bryan, who, in 1789, walked all the way to Avignon in search of spiritual revelation.¹ And the same fierce intellectual disputes continued. When the Reverend Richard Clarke came to the city in 1788 and preached universal redemption, 'the sectaries were ready to tear him out of the Pulpit; and one person called out when preaching at the Temple Church, "This man preaches false doctrine."' ² We will do best to think of a sectarian and antinomian gathering-ground in London, where heretical tracts were cherished, where sects suffered secessions and new hierarchs arose, where Behmenists disputed with Universalists, and where seekers shopped around among preachers and little churches. If James Blake, Senior, can be shown to have been, at some moment, a Baptist or a Moravian, or if Catherine Hermitage was at one time a Muggletonian, this does not go to prove that they remained in these churches always. It is more relevant that we should see them within this general gathering-ground, with its intellectual and sometimes passionate concern for heretical doctrine. And it was from this same gathering-ground that some of the first members of the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church were to be drawn.

The Ambiguity of Antinomianism

By the end of the eighteenth century this tradition of plebeian and tradesman Dissent had drifted a great distance away from the polite and rational religious culture—a culture which, with its uneasy memories of the Commonwealth, still feared 'enthusiasts'. And the derisory judgement which the learned and the accomplished then made upon these enthusiasts still imposes itself upon us today. We see them only as eccentrics or as survivors. At a casual glance it seems self-evident that those who turned their backs upon rational (and historical) biblical criticism, and who even ignored or traduced all the

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¹ J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming*, pp. 69–72. A brisk account of this episode is in Robert Southey, *Letters from England*, 1807, vol. III, chapter LXVIII.

² Dr Williams's Library, Walton Papers, MS I.1.43, Langcake to Henry Brooks, 1 August 1790.

advancing findings of the natural sciences (as did the Philadelphians, Hutchinsonians and Muggletonians), must have been locked into a religiose fantasy-world; they are quaint historical fossils. Donald Davie, who has cast a casual and partial eye upon the 'antinomian and heretical sects' which '*effectively* influenced Blake', has concluded that 'as specifically *religious* insights, their ideas are beneath contempt'. And he asks whether we may not have, in Blake, 'a case of an imaginative genius born into a stratum of religious experience too shallow to sustain him'.³

In my view, the reply which Davie predicates, in the manner in which he proposes the question, is profoundly wrong, and this book is offering a different answer. But Davie is still asking a necessary and significant question.

I cannot see how an answer can be provided, by one who is not a Christian, at the level of arguments as to the rationality of particular religious beliefs. How are we to say which view is 'shallow': the doctrine of the Virgin Birth or the Muggletonian doctrine of God's transmutation in Mary's womb into Christ?

It might be more helpful to consider, not individual doctrines but the degree to which different traditions were capable of sustaining, in the vocabulary of their doctrines, a disciplined and consistent pursuit of knowledge and an enquiry into value, even when subsequent ages have come to the view that much of this vocabulary was erroneous. Where most kinds of positive knowledge are concerned (scientific, historical) then the answer would seem to be flatly on Davie's side: the mystical and antinomian sects were not only shallow, they adopted a counter-Enlightenment stance which was obscurantist. But where social or political assumptions or enquiries into value are at issue, then the answer must be very much more complex.

The danger is that we should confuse the reputability of beliefs, and the reputability of those who professed them, with depth or shallowness. I have already suggested, in discussing justification by faith, that the antinomian position was consciously anti-hegemonic. That is, if we accept the view that in most societies we can observe an intellectual as well as institutional hegemony, or dominant discourse, which imposes a structure of ideas and beliefs—deep assumptions as to social proprieties and economic process and as to the legitimacy of relations of property and power, a general 'common sense' as to what is possible and what is not, a limited horizon of moral norms and practical probabilities beyond which all must be blasphemous, seditious, insane or apocalyptic fantasy—a structure which serves to consolidate the existent social order, enforce its priorities, and which is itself enforced by rewards and penalties, by notions of 'reputability', and (in Blake's time) by liberal patronage or by its absence—if we accept this large mouthful, then we can see that these antinomian sects were hegemony's eighteenth-century opposition.⁴ More than this,

³ Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church*, 1978, p. 52.

⁴ In my view John Barrell's persuasive argument as to the classical character of Blake's views of art and its function takes too little account of this anti-hegemonic stance: see *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, New Haven 1986, chapter 3.

antinomianism's intellectual doctrines (the suspicion of 'reason', justification by faith, hostility to the Moral Law) constituted in quietist periods a defence against the reigning hegemony, in more active periods a resource for an active critique not just of policies or personalities but of the deep assumptions of the social order.

And we can take this argument a little further. For what the antinomian or Muggletonian declaimed against as 'Reason' we might today prefer to define as 'Ideology', or as the compulsive constraints of the ruling 'discourse'. Antinomian doctrine was expressive of a profound distrust of the 'reasons' of the genteel and comfortable, and of ecclesiastical and academic institutions, not so much because they produced false knowledges but because they offered specious apologetics ('serpent reasonings') for a rotten social order based, in the last resort, on violence and material self-interest. In short, the antinomian stance was not against knowledge but against the ideological assumptions which pretended to be knowledge and the ideological contamination of the rest.

I am bringing into emphasis a *resource* of antinomianism, a *stance* towards the polite culture, whose strength is most evident in the confidence which it gave to Blake. But this emphasis also enables us to put into a single place a sociological and an intellectual analysis of this minority tradition. For in cultural or intellectual terms it is significant that antinomianism is an artisan or tradesman stance. Notations of class derived from the categories of an industrial society will always be anachronistic and misleading when brought to English eighteenth-century society. In between the basic polarity of the gentry and 'the industrious sort' or 'the labouring poor' there is an immense range of different social gradations and aspirations, but we are taken little further if we try to categorize these as 'petit-bourgeois', or 'middle class'. For what may define the consciousness of these groups more clearly will be such factors as their degree of *dependency*; that is, their dependence on or independence of the lines of interest, influence, preferment and patronage which structured that society from top to bottom. In so far as some—but by no means all—tradesmen and artisans had a degree of occupational independence from interest and patronage somewhat greater than their more affluent neighbours who were petty clergy, tutors, clerks in public office, soldiers or sailors, attorneys and even (in some cases) journalists or artists, so it was possible for a more robust, anti-Court, and sometimes republican, consciousness to be nourished in this milieu.

And to this we must add a further cultural or intellectual definition of 'class'. Everything in the age of 'reason' and 'elegance' served to emphasize the sharp distinctions between a polite and a demotic culture. Dress, style, gesture, proprieties of speech, grammar and even punctuation were resonant with the signs of class; the polite culture was an elaborated code of social inclusion and exclusion.⁵ Classical learning and an accomplishment in the law stood like difficult gates-of-entry into this culture: the grammarian must show his expertise in

⁵ See Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791–1819*, Oxford 1984.

derivations and constructions, the politician a familiarity with the models of Rome, the poet and artist a fluency in classical mythology. These accomplishments both legitimated and masked the actualities of brute property and power, interest and patronage. A grammatical or mythological solecism marked an intruder down as an outsider.

Antinomianism, and in particular Muggletonianism, can be seen as an extreme recourse open to the excluded. It challenged the entire superstructure of learning and of moral and doctrinal teaching as ideology: the Reason of the Seed of the Serpent, now embodied in the temporal rulers of the earth. If we read this as a simple opposition between reason and unreason (or blind faith) then this is self-convicted irrationalism. But if we consider the *actual* assumptions of the 'Age of Reason' then the antinomian stance acquires a new force, even a rationality. For it struck very precisely at critical positions of the hegemonic culture, the 'common sense' of the ruling groups, which today can be seen to be intellectually unsound and sometimes to be no more than ideological apologetics. In particular, the dominant mechanistic (environmentalist or associationist) psychology with its set of stepping-stones from self-interest to rational benevolence (whose evidence is useful works) is challenged by the antinomian doctrine of the unlawed impulses of faith and love. The increasingly remote and impersonal image of God, the Newtonian prime mover of 'Natural Religion', is challenged by the personal embodied image of God/Christ. The profoundly paternalist character of the dominant social thought and moral sensibility is curtly challenged by the antinomian vocabulary of the humble saints persecuted by the temporal powers. Above all, antinomianism offered a central challenge to the Moral Law in a society whose legitimating ideology was precisely that of Law. And when we recall that this same polite and rule-governed society multiplied new prohibitions and capital offences on every side, placing the altar of Tyburn at the centre of its institutions, can we decide so easily on which side 'reason' is to be found?

An Artisan Independency

This may help us also to place Blake. Blake came, very firmly, from a background of London *tradesmen*. His father and mother were hosiers (although not, it seems, enrolled in the Guild), his wife was probably a tradesman's daughter, and the same social status was maintained throughout life by his younger brother, James, who was described by Gilchrist as 'an honest, unpretending shopkeeper in an old-world style'. Blake grew up in the strongest centre of tradesman and skilled artisan *independency* in the kingdom: both his father and his mother's first husband voted for the anti-Court candidate in the face of every resource of influence and courtly pressure in the dramatic election of 1749; and we may at the least assume that an anti-Court propensity was implanted in him in childhood. When Erdman tells us that Blake's interest in the paintings of Mortimer, Barry and Fuseli 'had aligned him with the underdog in the art community' I suspect that he has placed the cart before the horse. Blake was already disposed to take their part because 'while Sir Joshua [Reynolds] was rolling in Riches' and while 'only Portrait Painting [was] applauded & rewarded

by the Rich & Great' they were deprived of fame and patronage. Blake had been taught in childhood to place a critical distance between himself and the Rich and Great. And the distance was never closed. Annotating *The Works of Joshua Reynolds* he came upon a list of members of the Literary Club which included Reynolds, Dr Johnson, Edmund Burke, Sir John Hawkins, the Hon. Topham Beauclerk and Dr Goldsmith, and he noted: 'Oliver Goldsmith never should have known such knaves' (E629). By the late 1780s and 1790s, when perhaps we may begin to use the term 'middle class', Blake found many of his friends and associates among artists and intellectuals from a middle-class milieu. Even so, his relations with gentry or clergy (William Hayley, Esq., the Reverend Dr Trusler) remained exceedingly tetchy, watchful against any controlling gesture of patronage, full of the susceptibilities of one who doubted whether he should know such knaves.

The difficulty is that, in today's received wisdom, tradesman or shopkeeper is suggestive of conservatism and dependency: 'petty-bourgeois' has become a term of commination. But in eighteenth-century London the tradesmen were, exactly, where a robust, Wilkesite, radical independency was located. And if we suppose that Blake's family were adherents at some time of an antinomian faith, then this independency would have had an uncrackable doctrinal defence, a profound cultural resource in faith, a presumption of spiritual superiority over the Rich and Great. What most distinguishes these pockets of radical Dissent among the trades is a stubborn lack of deference, both social and intellectual.

This lack of deference is the veritable signature of William Blake. It is true that the gifted tradesman's son found entrance into the 'republic' of artists—or into what, in today's jargon, may be seen as an upwardly mobile profession—taking him away from the stodgy station of his brother James. It is also true that the arts are professions with their own long historical traditions, some—but by no means all—of which are strongly resistant to deference. Blake's chosen masters and friends—Barry, Flaxman, Fuseli—will have confirmed him in his anti-deferential stance, his fury against patronage, his desire for an enlightened 'public' and an open market for artistic talent: 'Liberality! We want not Liberality We want a Fair Price & Proportionate Value & a General Demand for Art' (E626).

But the stance itself, which extends far beyond the arts and into matters of intellectual, political and religious judgement, has got that kind of cultural confidence and hostility to genteel hegemony which we have found in the sectarian traditions of radical Dissent. There is the abrupt dismissal of Bacon's *Essays* as 'Good Advice for Satans Kingdom'; 'the Wisdom of this World is Foolishness with God' (E609). When Bacon comments suavely that 'triumphs, masks, feasts, weddings, funerals, capital executions, and such shews . . . are not to be neglected', Blake notes: 'Bacon supposes that the Dragon Beast & Harlot are worthy of a Place in the New Jerusalem' (E616). The oppositions proposed are between Caesar and Christ, or between Jesus and 'the Prince of darkness' who 'is a Gentleman & not a Man he is a Lord

Chancellor' (E612). What belongs to Caesar is power, riches and war, and an attendant ideology which masks, apologizes for and rationalizes power or 'Satans Kingdom'. Hence there follows a profound and critical suspicion of classical learning, of Greek or Roman models in philosophy, politics or art, which are the innermost defences and ornaments of the polite culture. 'Moral Precepts' [i.e. the Moral Law] 'belong to Plato & Seneca & Nero' (E608); Bacon's references to Sylla, Caesar and Augustus are dismissed with the comment, 'Roman Villains' (E618); and, in his last year, annotating Thornton: 'The Greek & Roman Classics is the Antichrist' (E656). Thornton's God 'is just such a Tyrant as Augustus Caesar & is not this Good & Learned & Wise & Classical' (E658). As for the hegemonic rhetoric of his society, in terms of Constitution and Law, the judgement is explicit: 'All Penal Laws court Transgression & therefore are cruelty & Murder' (E607). And 'Satans Kingdom' is seen as of one piece, as a *systematic* order: the power and the ideology must be taken together. Those intellectuals and artists who are corrupted by patronage or who act as apologists for the status quo are doubly damned, for it is art's divine mission to be eternally at war with this Kingdom. On the title page of Reynolds' *Works*: 'This Man was Hired to Depress Art' (E624). Blake frequently falls back upon abuse of 'hirelings' or 'Cunning Hired Knaves':

The Enquiry in England is not whether a Man has Talents. & Genius But whether he is Passive & Polite & a Virtuous Ass: & obedient to Noblemens Opinions in Art & Science. If he is; he is a Good Man: if Not he must be Starved. (E632)

But this situation is maintained also by the ideological defences of polite rational philosophy. Reynolds' assertions are grounded upon Bacon, Locke, Newton and Burke, for whose works Blake feels 'Contempt & Abhorrence' since 'they mock Inspiration & Vision' (E650). This is the old antinomian antinomy, but faith has been replaced (although not always) by inspiration, imagination or the poetic genius. These are engaged in eternal war with Satan's Kingdom, and that war is on every front: material, ideological, artistic, political. When Malone, introducing Reynolds, refers to England's 'unparalleled state of wealth and prosperity' (in 1798!) and ridicules the 'seditious declamations' of reformers, Blake comments: 'This Whole Book was Written to Serve Political Purposes' (E630). And, nearly thirty years later, he wrote on the title page of Thornton's new translation of the Lord's Prayer, 'I look upon this as a Most Malignant & Artful attack upon the Kingdom of Jesus By the Classical Learned' (E656).

Not many antinomians delivered such shrewd and accurate blows against the ideological defences of their society as did Blake. They preferred, in the eighteenth century, to disengage from the combat and to nurture a somewhat spiritually complacent faith. But it is their confident stance, their robust contempt for the ruling ideology, which was transmitted to Blake. And if we follow any of Blake's annotations closely, we are left in little doubt as to who is shallow. Examine the 'Annotations to Watson'. Who is shallow? Blake, or the utterly self-satisfied and intellectually complacent bishop, with his justifications for genocide ('The Word of God is in perfect harmony with his work;

crying or smiling infants are subjected to death in both') and his bland composure: 'Kings and priests . . . never, I believe, did you any harm.' That the antinomian tradition had limitations is apparent; yet 'shallow' can scarcely be the right word for a tradition nurtured so long and so tenaciously, or for one so close to the impulse of John Milton and John Bunyan. By the end of the century, certainly, it was becoming cranky, esoteric or a mere family habit. Blake, himself almost certainly a child of the tradition, let his whole intellectual and imaginative genius play upon its detritus, recomposed some of its elements in new and more challenging forms, and redirected it forward to us.