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BLAKE AND SWEDENBORG

William Blake's philosophical system is a highly original adaptation of achievements of several philosophers and writers. It derives elements from very distinct sources: the idealistic tradition, the reaction against rationalism and materialism and the writings of Dante and Milton. The most important source is the inspiration of the idealistic tradition, understood here as the tradition of thought recognizing the primacy of idea over matter. In this sense it includes the works of Plato, the Neoplatonists, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Boehme, Swedenborg, and Berkeley. All these philosophers and mystics were acknowledged by Blake as his teachers, and there exist annotated works by some of them left by Blake¹. Of all the above mentioned philosophers the influence of Swedenborg on Blake is probably the greatest. Swedenborg, of all great philosophers, was the nearest in time to Blake, and the second half of the eighteenth century was the time when the writings and doctrine of the Swedish mystic gained him a great number of devotees in England. Blake's father and some of the poet's friends belonged (at least for some time) to Swedenborg's New Church, and Blake could very early become acquainted with his writings².

Emanuel Swedenborg was born in 1688 in Sweden. For a long time he devoted his attention to an enormous number of subjects including metallurgy, mining, fiscal reforms, legislation, ana-

¹ K. R a i n e, *Blake and the New Age*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1979, p. 75.

² A. G i l c h r i s t, *Life of William Blake*, Everyman's Library, London 1945, p. 13.

tomy, physiology and philosophy. In 1743 a remarkable event occurred in his life. He described it in a letter to an English clergyman:

I have been called to a holy office by the Lord Himself who most mercifully appeared before me, His servant, in the year 1743, when He opened my sight into the spiritual World, and enabled me to converse with spirits and angels, in which state I have continued up to the present day. From that time I began to print and publish the various secrets that were seen by me or revealed to me about heaven and hell, the state of man after death, the true worship of God, the spiritual sense of the World, besides many other most important matters conducive to salvation and wisdom³.

From that time Swedenborg recognized that all his learning had been merely a preparation for the mission to which he was to devote the remainder of his life. He started studying the Bible and writing his great theological works. Two of them must be mentioned here: "Arcana Coelestia" and "Heaven and Hell". The first work - of which the full title is "Arcana Coelestia. The heavenly secrets which are contained in the Holy Scriptures, a Word of the Lord, disclosed in Genesis and Exodus, together with wonderful things seen in the world of spirits and in the heaven of angels" - is an unfolding of the internal sense of the Bible. Swedenborg states there that the world of the Old Testament includes secrets of heaven and its whole contents, in every detail, are about the Lord, His Heaven, the Church and faith. These contents signify and involve spiritual and celestial things. This must be so because the Word, since it is of the Lord and from the Lord could not possibly be given without containing things of Heaven, the Church and faith.

Swedenborg compared the Word with man who is external and internal. The latter is the soul, the former is the body, which, when separated from the soul is dead. It is the soul that lives, and causes the body to live. The Word, viewed as to the latter alone, is like a body without a soul⁴.

³ S. J. B o g g, Swedenborg, Seminar Books, London 1974, p. 17.

⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

The second important work is "Heaven and Hell". (The full title is "Heaven and its Wonders, and Hell, from Things Heard and Seen"). Here Swedenborg shows that the Lord Jesus Christ, is the God of heaven; that there are three heavens, each consisting of innumerable societies, and that there are three hells also divided into societies. He also deals with the Spiritual Sun, light and heat in heaven, little children, the wise and simple, marriages in heaven and happiness. The Lord rules the hells, which act against the three heavens, which likewise react against the hells. From this action and reaction results spiritual equilibrium, in which man is maintained by the Lord, so that he may enjoy the liberty of choosing his final state. The man who wills and loves evil casts himself into hell after death - this casting down being not done by the Lord but by the man himself.

Swedenborg's influence on Blake is very complex: it deals with a great number of subjects of which some are not Swedenborg's genuine thoughts but the effect of the influence on him of earlier writers. Still his thought is one of the greatest achievements of mysticism, and therefore was admired by Blake, but at the same time this thought quite often diverges from idealism to materialism and because of this it was also severely attacked by Blake. Of the great number of subjects where Swedenborg's influence on Blake is seen the most important is the presentation of the states of innocence and experience, and the imagery connected with those two states. Swedenborg writes of innocence that it is a "willingness to be led by the Lord and not by oneself"⁵, and further he describes this in terms very similar to those of Blake, especially using the images of little children and of a lamb - "for a lamb signifies innocence"⁶. In Blake's poem "The Lamb" the same two images are presented and also in Blake's symbolism they signify innocence. In Swedenborg Blake also found inspiration for his doctrine of contrary states, present in Swedenborg's thought as correspondences:

⁵ E. Swedenborg, Heaven and Hell, The Swedenborg Society, London 1966, p. 237.

⁶ Ibid, p. 189.

The whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world [...] therefore, whatever in the natural world comes into existence from the spiritual world, is said to be in correspondence with it. It must be known that the natural world comes into existence and continues in existence from the spiritual world, precisely like an effect from its effecting cause.

Further, Swedenborg writes that all states are presented in terms of images corresponding to an inner spiritual condition, and thus when talking about:

good affections, there are exhibited beautiful, tame and useful animals as sheep, lambs [...]. But the discourse concerning evil affections is represented by beasts of a terrible appearance, fierce, and useless, as by tigers, bears, wolves, scorpions, serpents [...]⁷

The analysis of "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" shows perfectly the same kind of correspondence between states and images: Innocence is connected with birds, flowers, children, lambs, whereas Experience is illustrated by dreadful nights and beasts, unhappy people and sick nature. This system of correspondence of spiritual things with natural was thoroughly developed in theology by Swedenborg and found its apogee in the prophetic writings of Blake.

Swedenborg opposed the state of ignorant childhood with its external innocence, to the state of internal innocence of the old connected with wisdom:

[...] man has been so created that during his childhood he is in innocence, though external, and when he becomes old he is in internal innocence, to the end that he may come by the former into the latter, and from the latter return into the former [...]. This is why, in the Word a little child signifies one who is innocent, and an old man signifies one who is wise in whom is innocence⁹.

⁷ Ibid, p. 60.

⁸ Ibid, p. 60.

⁹ Ibid, p. 185.

Blake also deals with two opposing states: Innocence (Swedenborg's ignorant childhood and external innocence) and Experience (internal innocence). Only life compound of these two states is complete and real, although the state of internal innocence and wisdom (Blake's Experience) can be full of suffering, sorrows and sadness. The passing from external into internal innocence, so stressed by Swedenborg, is presented by Blake in "The Book of Thel" and in "Visions of the Daughters of Albion". "The Book of Thel" is a poem about false innocence and the failure of passing from the state of Innocence into the state of Experience. Thel's life is without service in the valleys of Har - she encounters all life around her only as a pleasure of the senses:

I walk thro' the vales of Har, and smell the sweetest flowers,
 But I feed not the little flowers. I hear the warbling birds,
 But I feed not the warbling birds: they flee and seek thier food:
 But Thel delights in these no more, because I fade away¹⁰.

She laments her mortality and transiency, and in three dialogues with creatures lower and more transient than herself, reveals what she lacks - the sense of function, the ability to sacrifice herself, and trust when rewarded with love. Blake shows her state as false innocence, a mere imitation of the Innocence of nature. She must flee back to her prison - to the unborn world, the world of non-existence, - because nothing that tries to omit contrary states can exist. The contrary states of Innocence and Experience function in nature as one. Where life is taken without questioning, full of sacrifice and love, nature has its deep sense unperceived by the creatures. Thel is incapable of living and understanding pure Innocence and that is why she is also unable to understand Experience, and in consequence - life. The fact that contrary states are inseparable means that everything achieves its reality only by undergoing Experience and physical existence. This statement becomes one of the several dogmas of Blake's system.

¹⁰ W. B l a k e, Poems and Prophecies, ed. M. Plowman, Everyman's Library, London 1976, p. 40. Hereafter cited in the text as Poems and followed by page reference.

The theme of internal innocence is undertaken by Blake in "Visions of the Daughters of Albion". Whereas in Thel's world everything is harmless and aerial, in Oothoon's everything is energy, and the lambs and lillies of Thel are changed for eagles, wnales, tigers and sea fowls. Oothoon understands participation in nature and takes part in it, while Thel escapes from nature in terror. It is one of Blake's paradoxes that Oothoon, though ravished, is truly innocent, whereas Thel, the virgin so terrified of Experience is living in only an imitation of Innocence.

Swedenborg's influence on Blake is also very clearly seen in the treatment of nature - Swedenborg, following the idealistic tradition, treated nature as the shadow and reflection of eternity and a correspondence of the real world (i.e. the spiritual one):

In general [...] nothing natural can exist without something spiritual corresponding to it. All things that are in the world and its three kingdoms correspond to the heavenly things that are in heaven, that is, the things in the natural world correspond to the things in the spiritual world. By correspondence the natural world is conjoined to the spiritual world. For this reason all nature is a theatre representative of the Lord's kingdom¹¹.

Blake follows Swedenborg very strictly, for him also everything found in nature must have a spiritual cause and this world is only a shadow of real Eternity:

[...] every Natural Effect has a Spiritual Cause, and Not
A Natural, for a Natural Cause only seems: it is a Delusion.
(*"Poems"*, p. 140)

There Exist in Eternal World the Permanent Realities
Of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable
Class of Nature. All Things are comprehended in their
Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Saviour, the
True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination.
(*"Poems"*, p. 358)

¹¹ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell...*, p. 366 and p. 68 note.

Swedenborg's teaching that heaven and hell are not in space but in mind, and that nature is a shadow of real, eternal existence is the starting point for Blake's theory of Imagination and universe, the Imagination being the divine part of man and both the real world and means of its projecting. Blake's universe is the Swedenborgian "state", it does not exist in space or time but in the human mind, Imagination, and therefore it is a psychic state and not a physical phenomenon. It was also Swedenborg's teaching that God is within all humankind and that God is a man and that the created universe is His image:

God's Omnipresence is infinite presence in all the things
that have gone forth and that do go forth from Him [...]
God alone is and exists in Himself; and every other
thing is from Him [...]
God is the soul of the whole, from which all beings
and all things are, live and move¹².

All this teaching leads to the conclusion that as God is Omnipresent and as God is man, man can find the image of God and of himself in the universe all around him. Blake arrived at the same conclusion - in "The Divine Image":

For Mercy Pity Peace and Love
Is God our father dear,
And Mercy Pity Peace and Love
Is Man his child and care.

("Poems", p. 14)

In the above poem the same attributes are shared by both God and man. Also "Auguries of Innocence" are an affirmation that eternity and infinity (attributes of God) are not in space but within man himself, and therefore man's task is:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,

¹² E. Swedenborg, The Canons of the New Church, The Swedenborg Society, London 1954, p. 15.

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

("Poems", p. 333)

Blake's theory of imagination where Imagination is both Divine Body and a human power, also is in accordance with the teaching about God's Omnipresence. In a letter-poem to Thomas Butts, Blake wrote:

[...] Each grain of Sand,
Every stone on the Land,
Each rock on each hill,
Each fountain and rill,
Each herb and each tree,
Mountain, hill, earth and sea,
Cloud, Meteor and Star
Are Men Seen Afar.

("Poems", p. 319-320)

This poem is an exemplification of Blake's belief (based on Swedenborg's writings) in the omnipresence of man, man being an image and part of God.

Blake accepted Swedenborg's teaching in some other aspects, such as the distinction between light and heat; between the spiritual and material sun; and both accepted Jesus as the only God, who contains the two other members of the Trinity as aspects but not as persons¹³. At the same time Blake realized that Swedenborg did not understand everything he had seen and had been told in Heaven and that a great deal of Swedenborg's work was already presented by other, earlier writers, and that in his original work he committed some significant mistakes. Therefore Blake attacked those mistakes very aggressively. This attack and the disposition of Swedenborg's teaching, or rather the false part of it, was given in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell". Not accidentally it was done in this work - in a work produced in the years 1758-1763, "The Last Judgment and Babylon

¹³ F. S. D a m o n, A Blake Dictionary, Thames and Hudson, London 1973, p. 393.

Destroyed", Swedenborg described the events which he had seen and witnessed in the spiritual world in the year 1757. At that time:

the Last Judgment had been accomplished, and the new Church which is meant by the Holy Jerusalem was about to be established by the Lord. It was foretold by the Lord in the Revelation that after the Last Judgment had been accomplished genuine truths were to be revealed, a new Church was to be established, and the spiritual sense of the Word was to be disclosed¹⁴.

Blake was born in 1757, and when writing "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" he was the age of Christ - 33. These circumstances account for the fact that Blake in this prophetic book presented his philosophy and his own teaching. He realized that Swedenborg's spiritual world in its mechanistic equilibrium was quite foreign to his own theory of creative energy and imagination, and that it had more in common with materialism than with Blake's own thought. As S. Foster Damon observes, Swedenborg's greatest error, according to Blake, was his misunderstanding of the real nature of evil and in consequence his acceptance of conventional morality (one of the aspects of this morality was Swedenborg's giving laws of the New Church - another established religion so hated by Blake). Consequently, everything is classified by Swedenborg as Good or Evil, and the universe in its final state is no universe, being irreparably split in two: the Heaven of the Good above and the Hell of the Evil below¹⁵. Blake in "The voice of the Devil" specifies the three main errors of conventional religion (Swedenborg's including): that man has two real existing principles - body and soul; that energy is called Evil (because it is from the body) and that Reason is called Good (because it is from the soul) and finally that: "God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies" ("Poems", p. 43). The contrary truths are voiced by the Devil and are in favour of Energy, Liberty and Imagination.

¹⁴ E. Swedenborg, Divine Providence, The Swedenborg Society, London 1949, p. 210.

¹⁵ Damon, A Blake Dictionary..., p. 393-394.

Disagreeing with Swedenborg's understanding of the terms "Heaven" and "Hell" Blake united them in the title of his book making One in place of Swedenborg's two split elements. At the same time Blake satirized the title of Swedenborg's work ("Heaven and Hell"), and the Memorable Fancies are intended to be a mockery on Swedenborg's passages called "Memorable Relations", finally Blake's Devil personifies Energy, which in the light of the poet's teaching is good, whereas Swedenborg's Angel personifies Reason and conventional religion, which are bad. Blake's definite attack on Swedenborg is the text preceding the last Memorable Fancy, devoted to general criticism of the philosopher and his writings:

Thus Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new, tho' it is only the Contents or Index of already publish'd books [...] Now hear a plain fact: Swedenborg has not written one new truth. Now hear another: he has written all the old falshoods. And now hear the reason. He conversed with Angels who are all religious, and conversed not with Devils who all hate religion, for he was incapable thro' his conceited notions.

Thus Swedenborg's writings are a recapitulation of all superficial opinions, and an analysis of the more sublime, but no further.

("Poems", p. 52-53)

The above fragment shows how violently Blake attacked what seemed to him errors in the doctrine of Swedenborg. His attack was so violent because Blake recognized Swedenborg as a great man, and errors of great men are especially dangerous.

To end this presentation of the influence of Swedenborg on Blake it is worth quoting an important and positive opinion of Blake about his master:

He was a divine teacher - he has done much good - he has corrected many errors of Popery and also of Luther and Calvin [...]¹⁶

Blake's reception of Swedenborg's thought is a perfect example of the poet's usage of sources in creating his own system. He

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 393.

assimilated what was in agreement with his point of view, changed things which differed and mercilessly criticized what was in opposition to his own thought.

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Blake w swoim systemie filozoficznym w twórczy sposób wykorzystał osiągnięcia filozofów i alchemików - Platona, neoplatoników, Paracelsusa, Boehmego i Swedenborga. Właśnie ten ostatni wywarł na Blake'a największy wpływ. Jest to szczególnie widoczne w podstawowym elemencie systemu Blake'a - idei przeciwieństw (*contraries*), która odpowiada ściśle temu co Swedenborg zawarł w swych pismach teologiczno-filozoficznych. Również symbolika Blake'a bliska jest symbolice Swedenborga - obydwaj mistycy posługują się podobnymi obrazami do opisanego stanów niewinności i doświadczenia. Blake wykorzystał z systemu Swedenborga to, co było zgodne z jego własnymi poglądami, lecz stanowczo odrzucił to, z czym nie mógł się zgodzić: materializm mechaniczny oraz sztywne ramy religii.