

**William Blake: Glances on His Engagement with the Theosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg**  
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William\_Blake\_watercolor\_portrait  
Watercolor of William Blake

Most students of literature and of the Romantic poets possess more than passing familiarity with William Blake (1757-1827). Volumes have been written on his style, eccentricities and influences. But many may be surprised to learn that one of his most provocative influences came from the eighteenth-century theosophist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish illuminati who spent long periods of time in Blake's London and who was well-known among the kabbalists and esotericists of the city. There is a traceable evolution of Swedenborgian engagement and of an intriguing discourse between members of the newly formed Swedenborgian community in London and other artists in Blake's circle.

William Blake—poet, engraver and early member of what became known as the Romantic school of English literature—was born in London in 1757 (the year Swedenborg claimed the Last Judgment occurred in the spiritual realms). His circumstances were good compared to many of the time; his father was a hosier who supported his young son's desire to become an engraver. Some scholars also report that his parents were Swedenborgians, or at least were familiar with the works of Swedenborg and kept several volumes in their home, but these reports are varied and inconsistent. The European Enlightenment (note the plural) were developing throughout Europe, and the young Blake was very personally to experience the dynamic tension between the rise of scientific reason and spirituality that Emanuel Swedenborg also felt in the last years of his life. Both Swedenborg and Blake can be placed as prominent figures in what has been called the Mystical Enlightenment, which amassed in significant ways in eighteenth-century England through various mixtures of Romanticism, the new prowess of the natural sciences, kabbalah, occultist theories, and numerous versions of Christian mysticism. Blake was but fifteen when Swedenborg died (in London), but Swedenborg's reputation and imprint were strongly present in the environment in which Blake came of age.

Blake was fairly obscure during his own time, but he was noticed by Coleridge, who was immensely famous during his short lifetime. The art patron C.A. Tulk published a letter in London University Magazine in 1825 (just two years before Blake's death) trying to elicit interest in the little-known Blake and relates having taken the great Coleridge to Blake's home that year to view Blake's magnificent, "Last Judgement." Tulk writes, "Blake and Coleridge, when in company, seemed like congenial beings of another sphere, breathing for awhile on our earth; which may easily be perceived from the similarity of thought pervading their works." One can couple this with one of Coleridge's published letters to the British writer and critic H. F. Carey, in which Coleridge avers Blake to "be a Swedenborgian—certainly." (Deck, 1978)

A key early attraction of Blake to Swedenborg was the Swedish theosophist's reputation as one who had extensive mystical visions. The young William reported his first vision at the age of eight, when he related to his parents that he saw a tree whose boughs were full of angels. His mother was supportive, but some accounts note that his father, upon hearing the news, set out to thrash him. And so one of his earliest understandings was that mystical experiences could be physically dangerous when revealed to the unsympathetic. "Blake was coming of age in the Age of Reasons, an era enamored of its new goddess, Science, and her handmaiden, Mathematics...Henceforth all matters, cosmic and pedestrian, sacred and secular, were expected to yield their dark secrets to the Enlightenment and her vanguard of scientists...Blake's psyche, however, had not evolved the appropriate wheels and gears to mesh with the new mathematical logic" (Bellin, 1985).

Blake studied at one of London's drawing schools and was apprenticed to an engraver, James Basire, from 1772 to 1779. At the age of 25 in 1782, he married Catherine Boucher, whom he taught to read, write and draw. It was under the tutelage of Basire, that Blake first encountered the writings of Swedenborg. Blake owned at least three of Swedenborg's major works: *Heaven and Hell* (1758), *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* (1763), and *Divine Providence* (1764). They were found among his estate annotated in his own hand. We also know that he became familiar with Swedenborg's ideas on love and eros in his 1768 work, *Conjugal Love*, as he later noted its influence on some of his writings and drawings. From his earliest adult years Blake was drawn to radical ideas, one of them being kabbalistic and Tantric ideas surrounding the ability of sexual trance to bring one closer to God. There is evidence that he was familiar with Moravian and Sabbatian groups, both of whom were writing about and practicing antinomian behavior. One of Swedenborg's most contentious ideas is that of concubinage and its potential worth in marriage. In *Why Mrs. Blake Cried*, Marcia Keith Schuchard notes: "In 1893, when Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats brought out their ground breaking editions of Blake's works, they repeated (earlier reports): 'It is said that Blake wished to add a concubine to his establishment in the Old Testament manner, but gave up on the project when it made Mrs. Blake cry.'" (Schuchard, 2006, p.3)

In an earlier work, Schuchard give more details. "In fact, it was through the Swedes' influence on the Swedenborg Society in 1788-90 that the first evidence of Mrs. Blake's difficulties with her husband's sexual theosophy begins to emerge. In March 1788 Charles Bernhard Wadström, ..., arrived in London with the manuscript of Swedenborg's spiritual diary. Though Blake's friend John Augustus Tulk offered to subsidize the publication of these "memorabilia" from the spirit world, some of the English Swedenborgians were horrified at the erotic and magical scenes described in them. In February 1789, ... bold advocacy of Swedenborg's sexual and alchemical theories exacerbated an emerging liberal-conservative split in the society. Though the London society was linked with Swedenborgian Masonic lodges in Avignon, Paris, Berlin, and Stockholm, a minority of English members distrusted the revolutionary leanings of the foreigners, and they determined to establish a separate dissenting church at Great Eastcheap. When the Blakes attended the Great Eastcheap Conference in April 1789, the factions attempted to patch over their quarrel, and they issued a compromise manifesto, which both William and Catherine signed. (Schuchard, "Why Mrs. Blake Cried: Blake, Swedenborg, and the Sexual Basis for Spiritual Vision," *Esoterica*, 2000, 65). That, however, is the last piece of evidence that either of them continued mingling with organized Swedenborgian meetings.

Though there were both known for mystical experiences, as personality types Blake and Swedenborg were opposites: the artist emotionally explosive, the natural philosopher reserved and methodical. Yet they were both immensely creative men who liked to work independently and outside the confines of human institutions, and they both proved lasting architects of new movements in their respective fields. And they both drew heavily from some of the same underground currents of thought in their quest to address the great questions of religion and philosophy. Today they stand forth as receivers of and contributors to a broad stream of Western esotericism in which some particular ideas and concepts loom large in each career. Foremost would be an unfettered commitment to a transcendental realm which holds the natural and phenomenal world in its care. Equally compelling is a shared understanding of some of the principles of relating to that realm: correspondences, influx, the Divine Human (and the idea of the human form as a metaphysical microcosm of the cosmos). And as well they shared a symbolist view of sacred scripture, which each held as a privileged divine text.

Many Blakean scholars know little about Blake's esoteric passions, including his off-and-on interest in Swedenborg. And many Blakean scholars believe only the early Blake was interested in Swedenborg. That doyen of Blakean scholars, Kathleen Raine, nevertheless describes three phases of Blake's relationship to Swedenborg: early enthusiasm, middle hostility, and late renewed appreciation (as the 1825 Coleridge visit attests). In examining Blake's *Songs of Experience* and citing Blake's deployment of such Swedenborgian concepts as the Divine Human, the succession of epochal "churches," and the nature of regeneration, Raine concludes, "The influence of Swedenborg, if anything, is clearer in the last works than in the first." (Bellin, p. 101)

Blake's rise from obscurity came from a popular biography of him published in 1863 by Alexander Gilchrist. He speculates on the artist and Swedish sage coincidentally crossing paths on London streets one afternoon in 1772: "The coincidence is not a trivial one. Of all modern men the engraver's apprentice was to grow up the likeliest to Emanuel Swedenborg; already by constitutional temperament and endowment was so: in faculty for theosophic dreaming, for the seeing of visions while broad awake, and in matter of fact hold of spiritual things. To savant and to artist alike, while yet on earth, the Heavens were opened." (Life of William Blake, Alexander Gilchrist, p. 15)