

# William Blake, Thomas Thorild and Radical Swedenborgianism

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## I.

On 14 April 1789, the English poet and painter William Blake (1757-1827) and his wife, Catherine, attended the First General Conference of the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church at the chapel in Great Eastcheap (now Cannon Street) in London's East End. The conference was held in response to a circular letter of 7 December 1788, which had been distributed in 500 copies to "all the readers of the Theological Writings of the Hon. Emanuel Swedenborg, who are desirous of rejecting, and separating themselves from, the Old Church, or the present Established Churches." The letter drew up forty-two propositions outlining the terms for a separation and was signed by the Blakes as a prerequisite for attendance.<sup>1</sup>

The Swedenborgian Church is the only religious institution we have any record of Blake ever having attended. However, his affiliation was not lasting. His scathing satire on Swedenborg, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (produced in 1790, if we are to trust the date Blake scribbled in blue ink on copy K of this work), stands

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the Blakes signed as sympathisers, not as Church members. Among the seventy-seven signers, fifty-six were actual members, while the eighteen other names (among which we find William and Catherine) did not commit themselves to membership. The document and other papers related to the New Jerusalem Church have been reprinted in "New Jerusalem" 121-32.

as a testimony to the break.<sup>2</sup> Blake had an interest in Swedenborg since the late 1780s when he annotated several of the prophet's books.<sup>3</sup> But Blake did not only immerse himself in the millennial occultism of Swedenborg and others; he also read the political writings of the arch-radical Tom Paine, who, from the vantage point of enlightened *reason*, welcomed the French Revolution in *Rights of Man* (1791-92) as an inspiration for reform in Britain. Paine had earlier spoken in favour of American liberation from British monarchy in *Common Sense* (1776). Blake combined the strands of Painite republicanism and Swedenborgian spiritual Millennialism in the poems *The French Revolution* (1791) and *America: A Prophecy* (1793).

Below, I will make a comparison between Blake and the Swedish poet Thomas Thorild (1759-1808), as Thorild was not only politically radical, but also had an ambivalent relationship with Swedenborg. Furthermore, he is known to have been affiliated with the New Jerusalem Church in London approximately at the same time as Blake. The tendency in both Blake and Thorild scholarship has been to see the poets' attraction to Swedenborg as an intellectual detour unrelated to their political radicalism. I shall argue, however, that for both Blake and Thorild, social and political commitments were intrinsically tied up with a notion of promoting True Religion; and that Swedenborgianism, as it was developed by some interpreters in the London circle, was an important conduit for political radicalism that helped shape their writing.

It is not at all unlikely that Blake would have met Thorild, as the Swedish poet was in London between October 1788 and July 1790. During this time, he made contact with Carl Bernhard Wadström, a visiting Swede, who was baptised into the New Jerusalem Church in Great Eastcheap on Christmas day 1788 (Tafel 2: 811). Wadström had been president of the Swedenborgian Exegetical and Philosophical Society in Sweden and became a

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<sup>2</sup> For the reasons behind Blake's dispute with the increasingly conservative New Jerusalem Church, see Rix.

<sup>3</sup> On the dating of the annotations, see Bentley 1988: 128.

leading member of the New Jerusalem Church in London. His political sympathies were clear. Wadström combined his interest in Swedenborg with frequent visits to the reformist Manchester Constitutional Society.<sup>4</sup> In 1795 he left for France to offer his services to the French Directory, and was later appointed chief director of the *Crédit agricole* in Paris, where he lived until his death in 1799 in high favour of the Directory and Napoleon.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1780s, Blake was writing semi-Shakespearean plays with political content in *Poetical Sketches* (1783) and social satire in the unpublished novel *An Island in the Moon* (c.1784). Thorild was advocating democracy and liberty in his journal *Nya Granskaren* [New Enquirer], which he began in Sweden in 1784. In a letter of the same year, Thorild shows that his radical aspirations went beyond Sweden. He was making plans to travel to England to collaborate with celebrated men of the opposition for a pan-European revolution. However, when Thorild returned home in the late summer of 1790, he had failed to establish a network of connections on the scale he had imagined. Despite the disappointment, he continued to write polemical tracts, articles and literary works throughout the 1790s, in which he presented a clearly socialist programme. His aim was to eradicate all inequalities between rich and poor, master and servant. A pamphlet entitled *Ärligheten* [Honesty] was deemed seditious, and he was forced into exile in 1792. Over the next couple of years, he sought refuge in Denmark and Germany.

Meanwhile in England, Blake had scribbled a memorandum in his notebook: "I say I shant live five years And if I live one it will be a wonder" ([dated 1793] Blake 694). This seems to allude to the possible threat of imprisonment in typhus-ridden Newgate gaol, deportation to Botany Bay, or even execution, which were the punishments awaiting radicals who were found guilty of publishing

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<sup>4</sup> Invitation cards from the Manchester Constitutional Society can be found among C.B. Wadström's papers in Norrköpings Stadsbibliotek.

<sup>5</sup> Two rather different biographies are offered by Hagen, who lauds him as a Swedish national hero; and Nelson, who presents a more critical and less flattering picture.

material or engaging in activities of a seditious or treasonable nature. In fact, Blake was prosecuted in 1803 for having uttered words in front of one of the king's soldiers, which, according to the indictment, "wickedly and seditiously" intended "to bring our said Lord the King into hatred and Scandal" (Bentley 1977: 132). Fortunately, Blake was acquitted.

During his stay in England, Thorild wrote several works that could be perceived in a similar manner. But, like Blake, he seems to have kept the most seditious material in notebook draft. One example is the unpublished *The Royal Moon or on Insanity in Politics* of 1789, which was a republican and anti-Pittite tract. In this, Thorild praises the "magnanimous Opposition now in France," which, in the early years of the Revolution, was generally acceptable. More problematic was the reference to "insanity" in the title, as the "mad" King George III had just recovered from his bout of mental instability in February of that year. Thorild does not mince his words, calling George III the "little cunning fumbler of a mad King!" and referring to England as a place where "the influence of a Court cannot be distinguished from the influence of a Bedlam" (2: 305-6, 313).

Thorild pursued the republican track further when he composed the poem *Cromwel: A Sketch of an Epic Poem* (Thorild 1: 195-97), which remained in draft. It contained another transparent reference to George III: "Cromwel – at this drear name the maddened brains/ Of Kings are struck." In line with those of the English radicals who saw themselves as political heirs to the Civil War activists, Thorild calls Cromwell a "hero" who "strikes foes, priests, kings" in "wrath" and whose name is a "dread thunder" in the ears of "rogues Majestic," confirming his status as both regicidal punisher and visionary champion of elected parliaments. Blake had weaved his republicanism into the thinly disguised allegory *Gwin: King of Norway* from *Poetical Sketches*, in which we find the wish to "Pull down the tyrant to the dust,/ Let Gwin be humbled" (Blake 418). Under the cloak of a Shakespearean history play from the same collection, *King Edward the Third*, he had criticised a constantly warring monarchy which would invade France under the

pretext of pursuing "glorious liberty" for Englishmen (5. 53-54; Blake 436). This was continued in the works of the early 1790s. The violent outcome of Cromwell's and the French Republic's accomplishments was given graphic expression in *The Book of Ahania* (1795). In the "illuminated printing," combining text and picture, plate five accompanies the story of the struggle to overthrow a tyrannical father with a design depicting a jumbled assembly of a severed head and dismembered body parts.

In both his writings and letters written prior to his arrival in London, Thorild had criticised Cromwell as a "beast" of the social world. But in England he is evidently swayed by the radical ideas of his new environment, and Cromwell is mythologized to become a *typological* and *prophetic* embodiment of revolutionary energy, which transcends the historical figure. Thorild's "Cromwel" defeats the "Ghost Divine" of *all* "Tyrants": Egyptian, Greek, Ottoman, and Imperial Rome. He descends on "deeds tremendous of dark ancient times,/ Empires gigantic crushed," so "colossal kings" are "Hurled headlong down." In comparison, Blake's contemporaneous work, *The French Revolution*<sup>6</sup> (a highly inaccurate account of the early stages of the Revolution), subsumes people and events within a larger *typological* reading of history.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the King calls on his minister, "Rise, Necker: the ancient dawn calls us/ To awake from slumbers of five thousand years" (lines 7-8; Blake, 286), indicating that Louis XVI is really a name for *all* tyrannical kingship. This is further confirmed by the references to the monarch as the "terrors of ancient Kings" and the "spirit of ancient Kings" (lines 59, 72; Blake 288-89).

Like "Cromwel," the revolutionary hero of Blake's poem, "Fayette" (i.e., the Marquis de Lafayette, 1757-1834), also transcends the historical person. He is an agent who activates the

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<sup>6</sup> The typescript is dated 1791, but this was probably in anticipation of the time of publication, which never took place. It was probably written the year before.

<sup>7</sup> A long time ago, Halliburton suggested Erich Auerbach's term *figura* for Blake's mode of representation in *The French Revolution*.

libertarian iconoclasm of Rousseau and Voltaire;<sup>8</sup> he gives *body* to a revolutionary *spirit*, which is eternal but has hitherto been disembodied. Supporters of the Revolution in England held Lafayette in high regard, not least Paine, who dedicated the second part of *Rights of Man* (1792) to him. Both “Fayette” and “Cromwel” are prophetic deliverers inaugurating the Millennium. Fayette has the Christ-like power to awaken “the spirits of the dead” from their “graves” (lines 284, 301; Blake, 299). Thorild eulogises Cromwell as a “mortal Jove/ The Hero chosen of Revenge Divine,” who to Bishops is the dread sound of “the last judgment or of hell-gate’s jarring.” Common to both poets, the new age is, above all, the end to the mystifying power of the churches that have kept the people in mental chains. In Blake’s *The French Revolution*, the pious monks of France are “Driven out by the fiery cloud of Voltaire, and thund’rous rocks of Rousseau” (line 276; Blake 298) as a harbinger of the end to all the chaste and life-denying principles that have restrained man. This can be seen as a counter to Edmund Burke’s claim in his hugely influential anti-revolutionary tract, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which “the confiscation of the goods of monks and nuns and the abolition of their order” serve as a symbol of the dissolution of the social morality which was the very basis of civilised society (260).

Blake’s prophetic voice of radical politics is echoed in much of the writing on prophecy that swamped the market in the wake of the French Revolution.<sup>9</sup> In *Religious Politics; or, the present Times foretold* (1795), the biblical prophecy of Micah is interpreted as a series of “*metaphors, types, similitude &c.*” by which the prophet is “discovering to us the nature of those powers and authorities, that have both in Church and State, usurped dominion over the minds and bodies of men in all parts of the world” (1-2). Hence, when it is prophesied that “all graven images” will be “beaten to pieces” (line 5), this is interpreted to mean that “all insignias” of royalty and “the

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<sup>8</sup> Over Fayette’s head “the soul of Voltaire shone fiery, and over the army of Rousseau his white cloud unfolded” (line 282; Blake 299).

<sup>9</sup> For a general overview, see Mee.

priestcraft by which the clergy obtain so much wealth shall be destroyed by the fiery rage of an oppressed and incensed populace ... all their honorary titles and distinctions, whether Monks, Friars, Jesuits, Popes, Bishops, Lords, Esquires, Reverends, and Right Reverends ... shall all be abolished." This, the exegete adds, "also has been done in France" (19).<sup>10</sup>

For Blake and Thorild alike, the divine spirit of revolution was not felt to be symbolised to full justification by any historical characters, so they would both invent mythological figures to give full justice to the magnitude of this revolutionary energy. For Blake, this led to the introduction of Orc, who is first named in *America* (1793). Yet, earlier in "A Song of Liberty," the concluding verse prophecy of the *Marriage* (pl. 25-27; Blake 44-45), a prototype of Orc is incarnated as "the son of fire." It requires only a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible to recognise that Blake consciously raids the storehouse of imagery found in the Revelation of St. John to give his poem a determinedly millennial feel. It seems to have gone unnoticed, however, that the "son" is an aggrandizement of "Fayette" on a prophetic scale. The "son" is first seen standing on "the infinite mountains" on the other side of the "atlantic sea" as a prodigy of American Liberty extending its influence across the ocean to Europe. This geographical journey parallels Lafayette's career. Having fought on the side of the Americans against British royalist forces (1777-82), Lafayette went on to command the French National Guard (1789-92). The "son of fire," who is seen falling "like the sinking sun" to appear triumphantly "in his eastern cloud," is perfectly analogous with Fayette, who is described as a "sun" rising "from dark mountains" like "a flame of fire" (lines 270-76; Blake 298). Fayette puts the royal army to flight (lines 287-93; Blake 299) just as the "son" will rout the king and his host and drive them to wander "the waste wilderness."

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<sup>10</sup> The exegesis of Micah, in which the interpreter finds *typological* references to King George III's Civil List, Prime Minister Pitt's raising of taxes and the government's suspension of the Habeas Corpus act to contain radical activists (99), was published by the radical printer Daniel Isaac Eaton, who was convicted of sedition no less than eight times.

The “son” (or sun) is the allegorical light of a new consciousness that defeats the “night” and “dark dismay” that the “gloomy king” inhabits. Embodying the uncontrollable energy of revolution, the “son” is an ambiguous hero; he is “the new, born terror” both welcomed and feared. Similarly, Thorild’s “Cromwel” is a “terrific giant shade” (a very Blakean phrase indeed), who defeats the “mental night” that is “*Oppression*”; he is the “germ” of the “hero” who “shall be born / To punish nations and to punish kings.” He can only be admired, Thorild tells us, “half-trembling” as one admires a “delightful awe from thunder.”

In 1787 (the year before his departure for England), Thorild drafted *Harmen* [Indignation], which is a similarly prophetic poem about Thor – a god-hero defined by his thunders – who strikes fear in the hearts of tyrants. Thor, who has little to do with the god of Nordic mythology, has been compared with Goethe’s Prometheus, but he is equally close in conception to Blake’s Orc in *America*, who also has the countenance of thunder-god.<sup>11</sup> Orc and Thor are united in their struggle to overthrow the religious tyranny of theocratic rulers, who base their power on commanding the Holy Word. In *Harmen*, Thorild’s god-hero proclaims: “My name is not THOR: I am INDIGNATION” (Thorild 1: 86; my translation).

It is in the nature of True Religion to shake up the blind acceptance of wrongs. Strife is at the core of the Gospel message, as Blake makes clear in the proclamation in the *Marriage* that Jesus “came not to send Peace but a Sword” (pl. 17; Blake 40). This emphasis is felt throughout, as when the prophet Isaiah states that “the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God” (pl.12; Blake 38). For whatever differences there may be between Blake and Thorild in terms of theological doctrine, they both see True Religion as something that, under the present circumstances, must be fought for; it is a dynamism that must awaken man to action against the false religion of the Church which has pacified him to a state of slumber.

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<sup>11</sup> As the thirteen colonies awaken to a new consciousness of Liberty, “deep thunder roll’d / Around their shores indignant burning with the fires of Orc” (lines 13-14; Blake 55),



## II.

In both Blake's and Thorild's writings of the late 1780s and early 1790s, we find an attempt to define the nature of True Religion by way of amending the errors of misguided theologies and philosophies. For both poets it is "indignation" rather than the traditional Christian virtue of "humility" that constitutes True Religion. A parallel can be drawn to Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1794-95), in which he attacks the "feigned or fabulous morality" of Christianity, which teaches the pacifying morality that "*If a man smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*" This is not only "assassinating the dignity of forbearance" but also "sinking man into a spaniel" (Paine 598). Thorild anticipated such criticism in *On the Dignity of a Free Death: With a View to State that Grand Right of Man* (c.1788-89),<sup>12</sup> in which he writes: "Humility is a base stupid Lie, called godliness, to deny every worth & grandure in Man, deny his own *true right* ... kiss the dust & glory in wretchedness. Patience, in consequence, is the woefull resignation to every shame and tyranny" (Thorild 5: 515). One may here recall Blake's "The Human Abstract" of *Songs of Experience* (1793), in which it is precisely "Humility," which is the seed from which the Tree of Mystery will grow and cast its shadow over mankind.

Thorild pursued his critique of church Christianity most vehemently in the prose tract *The Sermon of Sermons* (1790). In its very last sentence a hope is raised that the words on the page will eventually ignite the flames of revolutionary fervour: "the Sentiments of this Sermon are only some Sparks of Indignation" (Thorild 2: 349). He praises the prophetic voice that speaks the "Divine Truth," which flies above the "Languages upon Earth" and which have been "wrung by Design, or mistaken by Weakness" to allow an 'immense Confusion of Lies, Imposture, and Tyrannies [to] spread over the Earth" (Thorild 2: 399-400). Thorild's bardic voice is prophetic in the way that Blake's bards are prophetic: their

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<sup>12</sup> The tract was written in England and survives only in a manuscript transcribed Thorild's friend Sven Heurlin.

truth challenges the social restraints imposed on man by false morality. In Thorild's poem "Skaldekonsten" [The Bardic Art] (published 1789, but written before he left for England), he proclaims, "Sing with ecstasy! BARD, your own glory" (Thorild 1: 178; my translation). This is more that a little reminiscent of Blake who, in the "Introduction" to *The Songs of Experience*, admonishes the reader "Hear the voice of the Bard!" (Blake 18), and in "The Voice of the Ancient Bard" of the same collection, describes the bardic words as "truth new born" (Blake 31).

Thorild defines the bardic voice as what upholds "Justice" and "righteousness." By virtue of its "prophetic horror of stile," its effect is to "brighten" and "inflame the sense" in a way the "frigid literal speller of truths" cannot. The prophet's feat is that he "has dared to *blame*" the ruling powers of oppression (Thorild 2: 324). Thorild's prime example of this is Isaiah, just as it is for Blake, who, in the *Marriage*, has Isaiah proclaim that he "cared not for consequences but wrote" (pl. 12; Blake 38). Yet it is the lot of the prophetic voice to suffer persecution. In Thorild's "Harmen," Thor's championing of an original and uncorrupted faith is a threat to the artifice of the priests, who react by calling for his punishment as a heretic: "Burn!/ Burn him! cry/ The holy men, the tyrants and learned men:/ And the fire flames against the cloud in the sky" (1: 190; my translation). Similarly, in "The little Boy Lost" from *Songs of Innocence*, Blake reminds us that those who speak an unpopular truth must suffer on "Albion's shores." The "little boy" speaks the truth immediately visible to a child of innocence. As this challenges established Church doctrines, a "Priest" has him "burn'd ... in a holy place/ Where many had been burn'd before" (Blake 29).

In *On the Dignity of a Free Death*, Thorild draws heavily on Enlightenment reason in a way untypical of Blake; yet he gives it a familiar prophetic/ millennial framework. The tract is introduced as a manuscript written by a prophetic "Druid," which has been discovered and now is translated "from the original Celtic." This

literary gesture is clearly inspired by Macpherson's "discovery" of Ossian's writings, which Thorild admired greatly – as did Blake.<sup>13</sup> But where Ossian defined *heroism* as the warrior's martial fortitude against a tyrannical power, Thorild's Druid addresses the nature of moral prowess against religious tyranny. Suicide is made the touchstone for man's self-determination in the face of priestly attempts to control human life even beyond death. In a letter of 1791, Thorild made clear the radicalism which is central to this claim; *On the Dignity of a Free Death* was written "against all the kings and priests, and the persistence of Slavery" (cited in Arvidson 417; my translation).

According to Thorild in *On the Dignity of a Free Death*, tyrannical men have capitalised on man's forgetting his inherent divinity and, as a consequence, "have given us Kings instead of eternal Right; and Priests instead of eternal Truth; and Superstition with dreary grimaces instead of lovely divine Nature." He yearns for a lost age when "It was not said the King is divine; but *Man is divine*: not this Emperor is a native god, but *Man is a Native god*." Thorild's advice is that the "Man who feels in his breast the spark of Divinity" ought "1. to learn Thruth [*sic.*] & Magnanimity" and "2. to slay the Tyrant" insofar that "he will not disdain his [own] being," but "soar." Or, as he also states, a "divine spark must kindle in the breast of every Man; and he must disdain even the shadow of misery, must glow in fiery indignation at the very mien of Tyranny" (Thorild 5: 502, 498, 506, 515). In *The Sermon of Sermons*, Thorild further laments that man's forgetting of his divinity has made it possible for "haughty Kings" to "proclaim their most mad Law in the Temples, as from the authority of God" (Thorild 2: 344). This warrants comparison with plate 11 of Blake's *Marriage*, where we find a similar history of how oppression is enabled by men having forgotten "that All deities reside in the human breast." The loss of contact with the internal Divine has allowed priests to tyrannise man through the moral cramming "that the Gods had orderd such

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<sup>13</sup> Thorild writes in the "Preface" to *Cromwell*, "I love among the Poets only Ossian and Shakespeare" (Thorild 1: 195). For Blake's views on Macpherson, see his annotations to Wordsworth's *Poems* (Blake 666).

things” (Blake 38). A likely common source for both poets’ formulations may be Swedenborg, who in *True Christian Religion* explained that the original religion of “the most antient People in the World, who lived in that time which is called the golden Age” was corrupted with “the Establishment of Monarchical Power, when worldly and sensual Affections began to close up the superior Parts of the Understanding” (n9).<sup>14</sup> It is Swedenborg’s hostility to priestly tyranny that provides the link between the political radicalism of Blake and Thorild and Swedenborgianism, as I will now discuss.

### III.

Of the works written in English during the sojourn in London, Thorild most clearly appropriates Swedenborg in *True Heavenly Religion Restored* (1790), which was published by Robert Hindmarsh, the artisan printer who founded the New Jerusalem Church. The main body of the work consists of musings on the Divine Order of the Universe, which mostly continue themes already familiar from his previous writings. But in an appendix entitled “The Principal Beauties of Swedenborg,” Thorild makes the following dedication:

And now I dare tell you – that this true and Divine Religion is, as to the general Character, even that of EMANUEL SWEDENBORG: Who, if God, Spirits, a Religion, be at All – has certainly brought us sublime Revelations, and may be considered as a Prophet of a third rising Covenant, or that of *open Truth* (Thorild 2: 412-17).

Thorild praises Swedenborg for speaking “open Truth,” which we must take to stand in contrast to the mystification of religion to be found in the churches. Swedenborg had contended that his teaching was a new revelation that would replace the corrupted beliefs perpetuated in all previous Christian churches. And although Swedenborg never lent support to any directly radical or

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<sup>14</sup> All references to Swedenborg’s works are marked with “n” for the section number.

revolutionary party ideology, comments made by readers of Swedenborg in London at the time make it clear that in setting individual illumination as the desideratum of True Religion, he unwittingly gave confidence to those in society who felt disempowered under the traditional ecclesiastical institutions. We know that in the early years of the New Church, the membership consisted largely of persons who had “come out of the ‘liberal’ and ‘dissenting’ ecclesiastical bodies; and brought with them into the New church their old and favourite notions of democratic government” (Odhner 37). The politicisation of Swedenborgian doctrines penetrated the Church to its very core. William Hill, an Anglican minister and Swedenborgian confessor, found reason to complain in a letter of 1794 to Swedenborgians in America that the New Jerusalem Church in England had been engaged in “questions relating to modes of government, both ecclesiastical and civil.”<sup>15</sup>

There was a widespread tendency among segments of the Swedenborgians to turn the prophet’s teaching into a social gospel that fitted a radical and anticlerical political outlook. We may here remember Blake’s comment in the *Marriage*, “It is so with Swedenborg; he shews the folly of churches & exposes hypocrites,” as evidence of this posture. Yet, as Blake was becoming critical of the prophet, he would add that Swedenborg, imagining he was the “single one on earth that ever broke a net [of false religion],” in fact had made his teaching yet another “religion” claiming absolute priority over all other religions. For this reason “Swedenborg has not written one new truth,” Blake claims, but “all the old falsehoods” (pl. 21-22; Blake 43). For Blake, as for Thorild, the freedom of a personal (inner) religion free of all priestly dictates had absolute priority.

It is significant that Thorild’s collection of sixty-one *Maxims and Reflections concerning Religion, Morals and Nature* (1790) was published by the Fleet Street bookseller G. Kearsley.<sup>16</sup> We have no information of

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to Robert Carter of the Swedenborgian Society in Baltimore (quoted in Block 329).

<sup>16</sup> Although Thorild’s name does not appear on the publication, various notes and letters by people who knew him certifies the attribution of the book to him. See the editorial notes in Thorild 9: 245-49.

their relationship, but, considering Thorild's radical inclinations, the connection seems not entirely arbitrary. In the same year, Kearsley published the pro-revolutionary *The History of France from the first establishment of that monarchy to the present Revolution* and the translation of the notorious Revolution text *The Livre Rouge, or Red Book*.

Several of the *Maxims* continue the anticlericalism of Thorild's other English writings. But most of them express a positive theology, in which the restoration of man's sense of his own divinity is posited as the means to overcome the restraint brought on by a coercive priesthood. In an implicit counter to all priestly attempts at humbling man, Thorild praises the "desires of the Soul," its "perpetual wants," as "for ever increasing and boundless" (Thorild 5: 525-26). It is with the same aim Blake in *There is No Natural Religion* (1788) had applauded "The desire of Man" as "Infinite" and hence claimed its "possession" was "Infinite" (Blake 2-3).

In the *Marriage*, Blake proclaims that "God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men" (pl. 16; Blake 40). The *Marriage* is Blake's attack on attempts to "abstract the mental deities"; this was what led to the creation of "Priesthood" and "men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (pl. 11). For comparison, Thorild, in the *Maxims*, also criticised the idea of an external Godhead as imposing "Prejudices for the purpose of covering over a number of vile inclinations." "God," he further proclaims, "is pleased to shew men their weakness in order to induce them to confide in his Omnipotence," and it is in this way that priests are created as "*Politic people*" (Thorild 5: 528).

In the miscellany of genres and styles that makes up the *Marriage*, Blake includes a section containing seventy-two "Proverbs of Hell" (plates 7-10), which he may originally have thought of as a separate project (Viscomi 321-22). Here, conventional wisdom is turned on its head, providing us with a series of truths that he proudly calls "infernal wisdom," because pious men of religion will see them as hellish doctrines. Proverbs have traditionally been used to teach restraint by admonition, but Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" and Thorild's *Maxims* (most likely written in 1790) are a series of antinomian and anti-authoritarian statements, encouraging man to free his impulsive

energies. Blake's assertions are meant to challenge the tyrannical forces that teach humility to man: "The pride of the peacock is the glory of God/ The lust of the goat is the bounty of God/ The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God/ The nakedness of woman is the work of God." Blake sees the priestly banishment of man's natural desires as political in both *intent* and *effect*. "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion" (pl. 8; Blake 36).

In regard to Thorild's English publications, there are some interesting bibliographic details that warrant attention. *The Sermon of Sermons* was printed by the bookseller W. Nicoll, who was known for publishing radical tracts, but it was published at the author's own expense. This does not mean that Nicoll necessarily disagreed with its political content, but – more likely – that he was not convinced of its commercial appeal. Was there a market for prophetic radicalism? Thorild came in for a harsh treatment when *The Sermon of Sermons* was reviewed in *The Analytical Review* on 13 September 1790. The journal was devoted to the dissemination of liberal ideas and was published by the radical bookseller Joseph Johnson, who was Blake's most consistent employer throughout the 1790s, commissioning from him numerous engravings. Thus, it is not for its political conclusions that it is faulted, but for its religious Enthusiasm. Its prophetic and millennial accents seem to have caused problems:

This sermon, as the author is pleased to call it, appears to be the ravings, rather than the reveries, of a disturbed imagination; yet now and then, a just thought occurs, quaintly expressed, resembling flashes, which sometimes are mixed in the rant of those poor wretches, whose faculties are no longer under the direction of their judgment. (IV [1790]: 108)

Johnson and the group of British radicals who frequented his famous dinners were "liberal in [their] politics, but also rationalist in methodology, Socinian in theology and sceptical in regard to prophecy, miracle, and other manifestations of transcendental revelation" (Essick 192). Visionary and prophetic enthusiasm was seen as less than respectable. For many rationalists, it was believed

simply to propagate the religious unreason that reason was meant to oppose in order to further the perfectibility of society. It may therefore strike us as remarkable that Johnson sold *True Heavenly Religion Restored* from his shop in St. Paul's Churchyard.<sup>17</sup> This indicates that some of Johnson's customers did bridge the gap between Painite rationalism and Swedenborgianism. Paine and Swedenborg were philosophically compatible for Blake as they were for his friend and fellow engraver, William Sharpe, who was both a member of the Theosophical Society (a forerunner of the New Jerusalem Church) since 1787 *and* the Society for Constitutional Information, a reformist organisation which had been given a new lease of life in the early 1790s to promote Paine's writings.

The ambivalence of the Johnson circle's attitude towards their religiously inspired consorts in radical politics may be seen in the fact that Johnson prepared a typescript of Blake's *The French Revolution* for printing in 1791, but – for reasons never explained – decided against publishing it. Perhaps, one may speculate, after having seen the reception that Thorild got among his reviewers and regular customers, Johnson had second thoughts about publishing a work like Blake's, which indeed could read like the “reveries of a disturbed imagination”?

#### IV.

Prior to his England visit, Thorild had propagated what he himself named *Pantheism*. This was an exultation derived from contemplating all living beings. It can best be described as a self-made, idiosyncratic philosophy, although it borrows much of its theological substance from Spinoza.<sup>18</sup> In the notebook he kept while in England (Thorild 2: 419-31), Thorild mentions David Williams, an English deist and radical, who was often referred to as “the Orpheus of Nature.” His *Apology for professing the Religion of Nature* (1788-89) would have appealed to Thorild in its making clear the

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Johnson is identified as the seller of the pamphlet on the title-page.

<sup>18</sup> Generally on Thorild's religious and pantheistic views, see Herrlin.



political justification behind nurturing a Religion of Nature. The Divinity of the Natural Universe was available to *all* mankind and spurned religious superstition based on priestly secrecy, mystification and monopolising tendencies. Williams' reputation was great enough for the French Convention to invite him to help writing their new constitution, and he was made an honorary citizen of France.

But Thorild never embraced any cold mechanistic deistic position. Throughout his writing, he is driven by what he calls "Passion" (his term for the soul's *eros*), which is the endeavour to merge with the higher Order of the Universe. In the celebrated poem *Passionerne* [The Passions] (1775), Thorild explains his poetics as the desire to see "in the minute the great, in the existing what is to come, in the visible the invisible, in the finite the infinite" (Thorild 1: 52; my translation). This is similar to Blake, who would stretch his perceptive powers "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower" ("Auguries of Innocence"; Blake 490).

Even in such theological statements, seemingly unhampered by politics, there are inevitable links to Swedenborg's diatribe against the Christian churches and the way they have lulled man into spiritual inaptitude. In the *Marriage*, Blake asks the very Swedenborgian question: "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" (pl. 7; Blake 35). Beyond the echo of a line from Thomas Chatterton,<sup>19</sup> what most clearly stimulated Blake to this line of questioning was Swedenborg's constant affirmation of a divine world beyond the five senses. In *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* (1788), which Blake owned and annotated, Swedenborg elucidates at length how the Divine in the natural universe has been obscured by the churches. He complains how "all the Things of Religion, which are called Spiritual, have been removed out of the Sight of Man," by "Councils and certain Leaders in the Church." They have misled Christians to "blindly" believe that being born to a "natural" world, they cannot perceive anything "separate from what is

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<sup>19</sup> See Harold Bloom's commentary in Blake 898.

natural." To preserve their worldly privileges, these religious tyrants have conned their subjects into believing that the "spiritual" world "transcend[s] the Understanding." Priests have deceived the people by claiming that the spiritual level of cosmos is ungraspable and unreachable; it is "like a Bird which flieth above the Air in the Aether where the Eye-sight doth not reach." Swedenborg defied all such mental restrains imposed by the churches. He wanted to empower man and staked the claim that the spiritual dimension present in all living matter is visible to all who dare open the doors of perception closed by priestly lies. The spiritual world is "like a Bird of Paradise, which flieth near the Eye, and toucheth it's Pupil with it's [*sic*] beautiful Wings, and wisheth to be seen." And "seeing" in this way is true faith and religion, because by "the Sight of the Eye is meant the Sight of the Understanding" (n334).

After having made contact with the Swedenborgians, Thorild's theory of perception underwent a subtle and yet remarkable transformation, which draws his English works closer to a Blakean vision of the world. In *Maxims*, Thorild pushes his former Deistic theories aside to explain that there is both "Reason with and without Revelation," and the relation between the two is "the same as between restored and fallen Man" (Thorild 5: 523). He will now proclaim that "we harbour [*sic*] a higher being within us" which "exculpates the Sciences" and "refutes the abettors of a merely animal Life." Without our "desires appertaining to a sublimer sphere ... it would soon appear, how little so simple and narrow a world" the material universe would be. From this he concludes: "how much more therefore is Man of a Spiritual, than of a corporeal Nature!" (Thorild 5: 537).

In *All Religions are One* (1788), Blake would similarly clarify that "the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences" (Blake 1); i.e., to *know* one must *experience*. But as "none by traveling over known lands can find out the unknown," he deduces that "an universal Poetic Genius exists." Blake presents this as a prophetic truth spoken to man in the fallen world by what he in the epigram calls "The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness" (Blake 1). The limitations imposed on man when relying merely on

physical perception is explained in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), where Blake, in a near echo of Thorild's maxim, has Oothoon complain, "They told me that I had fives sense to inclose me up/ And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle" (2: 31-32; Blake 47).

For Blake, the "Poetic Genius" is equally a creative and experiencing faculty. It is the origin of all religious mythologies, for this faculty of higher inspiration is what "by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit/ & Demon." This is close to Thorild's notion of "Kraft," which is his word for Imagination. In a Swedish essay of the late 1780s, he writes that "Kraft" is what has "filled nature with spirits ... and is now the belief of all peoples today. The Greek's Demons, Sylphs, Gnomes; Devils, Ghosts, ... God and the Devil." It is, however, destroyed by those Christians who separate the divinities from the praise of all living Nature and create "empty abstractions," "a power without an object" ("Kraft," in Thorild 1: 358-60; my translation). Blake seems to have seized on a similar notion. His history of the development of "abstract" religion on plate 11 of the *Marriage* (referred to above) may here be quoted in full:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive. And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country. placing it under its mental deity. Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood. Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had orderd such things. Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast. (Blake 38)

It is possible that Swedenborg, who raged against the Christian churches and their priests, provides a model for the notions here. In

his discussion of the biblical Commandment "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," Swedenborg explains that it was the lapse from a heightened imagination to mere physical perception that resulted in man idolising false deities:

the Worship of Idols prevailed in great Part of the Kingdoms of Asia ... Types and Representations, were such, that Divine Things were exhibited under various Figures and Sculptures, which the Vulgar, losing Sight of their Significations, began to worship as Gods. (Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion* n291)

Blake's proclamation in *America* that "To make the deserts blossom" man must realize that "every thing that lives is holy" (8.8-13; Blake 54) indicates that tyranny exists only when man is locked in behind the doors of the five senses; therefore the final liberation in *America* is an apocalyptic event by which "the five gates ... [are] consum'd, & their bolts and hinges melted" (16.22; Blake 58).

The phrase, "every thing that lives is holy," first appeared, appropriately, as the concluding statement of "A Song of Liberty" in the anti-Swedenborgian *Marriage*. Swedenborg had written that the Law was the most important gift of God to guide man, and thus "The commandments of the Decalogue" were "so holy that nothing could be holier" (Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion* n283). Blake's statement reads as a counter to the prophet, of whom he was evidently becoming sceptical. In the annotations to *Divine Providence*, Blake turns Swedenborg's anticlericalism, in which he had found much of his inspiration, against the prophet and accuses the author of serving the "Priests interest" (Blake 609).

*The Sermon of Sermons* was apparently written at a time when Thorild was less keen on Swedenborg, and he searches for reasons why a large number of dissenters would convert to Swedenborgianism. "It is strange," he observes, how so noble a Man

as a Quaker, from the *divine* vivid LIGHT of his Soul, now can throw himself in the Dreams and Sophistry of a Hundred Volumes” (Thorild 2: 348). The mere fact that Swedenborg’s *Arcana Coelestia* in its English translation ran into twelve volumes and filled eight thousand pages would in itself be enough to warrant such commentary, but looking at the lists of available material printed at the back of Robert Hindmarsh’s publications only adds to the impression. Swedenborg’s voluminous production also becomes the object of Blake’s irony on plate 19 of the *Marriage*, where the speaker tells us how he, on his celestial journey into the sun, finally “sunk from the glorious clime,” being weighed down by “taking in my hand Swedenborgs volumes” (pl. 19; Blake 42).

## V.

There was one part of Swedenborg’s doctrines, which seems to have attracted both Blake and Thorild. When speaking in favour of “The Principal Beauties of Swedenborgianism,” Thorild holds that the most “sublime and wonderous [*sic*]” of Swedenborg’s doctrines is that of “*Conjugal Love*.” He finishes the appendix with the following statement:

... though all these Doctrines be sublime and wonderous, there still is one Doctrine so peculiar to Swedenborg that it will appear not less new than astonishing in itself. That is his Idea of *Marriage* or *Conjugal Love* – which he looks upon as the very *Essence of heavenly Joy*, and the only State of Man where the Divine Influence can be truly received; because the mystic Union of Man and the Lord himself is nothing else the just such a Love ... conjugal Love is clearly the first noble Trial of heavenly Love here below, being a Sacrificing of one’s *Self* for a higher and Divine Order of Happiness. (Thorild 2: 416-17).

In emphasising Swedenborg’s theories of the mystical-divine union between the two sexes, Thorild evidently joined forces with his

Swedenborgian contact, C. B. Wadström, who with five other members of the New Jerusalem Church (among them Robert Hindmarsh, who printed *True Heavenly Religion Restored*) had been excluded in 1790 for propagating Swedenborg's sexual doctrines. These had remained unpublished, as conservative members considered them to be heterodoxy. That Thorild's tract was published around the very time of this dispute makes it difficult not to see the statement as being deliberately polemic.

We may here turn to Wadström, who with another Swedish Swedenborgian, August Nordenskjöld, and some of their international Masonic contacts, published a pamphlet in English describing a plan for establishing a colony on the coast of Sierra Leone which was to be founded and run on Swedenborgian principles. Its title is more than a little indicative of the politics underwriting the project: *Plan for a Free Community upon the Coast of Africa under the Protection of Great Britain; but Intirely Independent of All European Laws and Governments* (London: Robert Hindmarsh, 1789). In an appendix to the pamphlet, a number of articles for governance in the colony are set up. These are conceived on a fairly democratic basis with suffrage for all adult males to an assembly and the dissolution of all social classes. Central to the argument of the *Plan* is the eventual abolition of slavery, and that the "European" and the "Negro" should live together in harmony (see esp. Article xv). The political intentions go beyond the question of abolition, for, as the authors ask, "To what purpose is Spiritual Liberty without Civil Liberty?" (xi). There are in fact two kinds of slavery to be abolished: that of the Negro's literal and the European's "Civil slavery" under the "abject servility to innumerable monied Tyrants" (iv-v; *Plan* 50).

If we go beneath the veneer of polite social utilitarianism in the *Plan for a Free Community*, it is quite clear that the whole project was nurtured in the soil of millennial Enthusiasm – a return to innocence. Already on the page following the title, Revelations 21: 5 is quoted: "Behold, I make all Things New." The Swedenborgians saw here an opportunity of establishing an external kingdom in which Swedenborg's dispensation of an "internal" Millennium could

thrive. For the Swedenborgians, socio-political liberation and millennial thinking were indiscriminate areas.

Wadström, Nordenskjöld and their associates saw love between married couples laid waste by a degenerate social structure: "It is distressing to observe marriages in their present state are but Seminaries for a corrupt Generation ... false Religions and false Politics have enveloped them in such a thick Darkness" (v-vii). Matrimony as a ruinous bond is also a recurrent theme in Blake's writing. He refers memorably to the "marriage hearse" ("London"; Blake 27) and laments that "she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot; is bound/ In spells of law to one she loaths" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 5: 21-12; Blake 49). On the frontispiece design, this is illustrated by the central female character in the poem, Oothoon, being bound with chains to her rapist and tormentor, Bromion. The pain of real love banished is symbolised by Oothoon's ineffectual lover, Theotormon (a name often interpreted to mean "tormented by theology"), who sits behind them in a contracted position, hiding his head.

In the Swedenborgians' *Plan*, the economic and political basis underwriting the establishment of a "free community" revolves around the restoration of man's erotic life:

The ultimate Foundation of all kinds of *Powers*, as well in Individuals as in whole Communities, consists in that Class which I call Virility or Conjugal Power . . . Now the first elementary, powerful, and universal Union, or Bond of Society, is the *Love of the Sex*. If we deprive ourselves intirely of this, we shall never be able to become rich and great, because then we are incapable to any kind of social Life . . . Nothing . . . is more true, than that the *Love of the Sex*, and the constant exercise thereof, which is the Virile Potency, is the very basis to the accession of all other kinds of *permanent Powers*. All activity and every executive impulse is in such complete conjunction with the *Virile Power*, that they all advance step by step, and can never be separated. (35)

The sexual programme in the *Plan* is based on an informed reading of Swedenborg's tract *Delitiae sapientiae de amore conjugiali* (1768); normally translated into English as *Conjugal Love* (the adjective "conjugal" denoting a sublime, divinely ordained love between two partners). Swedenborg's tract was a collection of guidelines for spiritual living. It deals with many practical matters regarding the relationship between man and woman, such as courtship, betrothal, jealousy, temptation, disaffection, sensuality, prudence, and courtesy. But the controversy arose from Swedenborg's evident interest in the power of the sexual as a sacral act. For this purpose, Swedenborg endorsed that men of the New Jerusalem Church – under certain circumstances – could hold concubines. At the time the *Plan* was published, Swedenborg's tract existed only in an obscure Latin edition published in Amsterdam. The suggestion of its being translated into English caused outrage and dissension among the Swedenborgians and led to the exclusion of Wadström, Nordenskjöld, Hindmarsh and others who supported the sexual doctrines.

Swedenborg's authorisation of concubinage must be seen within the larger context of his mystical theology of *conjugal love*. Rather than the traditional mystic's solitary forgetting of the body and cultivation of a passivity of mind, the mystical experience for Swedenborg could come about through the physical activity of sex. Access to the divine state of the human through "conjugal love" lies not only in the unification of minds but also "in the organs consecrated to generation" (Swedenborg, *Conjugal Love* n447, n310).<sup>20</sup>

Despite the dubious oral tradition that Blake "proposed to add a concubine to his household" (Wilson 72), we do not know if he took a stance in the debate, but it is clear that Blake, in the poetry produced in the early 1790s, focuses on free love as a spiritual ideal. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is Blake's most sustained attempt at

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Southey, who had studied the Swedish prophet for his semi-autobiographical *Letters from England*, wrote that Swedenborg "dilate[s] with more pleasure" on conjugality, which is what "flows from the Creator into all things; from the Creator it is received by the female, and transferred through her to the male ... it finds its way through the breast into the genital region" (387).



describing a pathology of sexual violence conjoining sexual liberation with human freedom. Here we meet the female Oothoon castigating her lover Theotormon for his "hypocrite modesty." Oothoon describes herself as "A virgin fill'd with virgin fancies"; and, in reference to the image of the virtuous woman at the time, she is barred from expressing her true sexual desires.

In what appears to be a landscape setting akin to the paradise on the coast of Africa described in the *Plan*, Oothoon describes a utopian time of free love, where she can catch girls for Theotormon and lie "on a bank & view their wanton play/ In lovely copulation bliss on bliss." This is a vision of a future when "Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love!" can be "Free as the mountain wind" (7: 16-30; Blake 50). The reference to "happy copulation" has attracted some attention, as several critics from Desirée Hirst to Morton D. Paley and E.P. Thompson have pointed to plate 7 of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* as a possible allusion to an idea of concubinage. Yet, Oothoon's vision is really no more than a wish for an end to puritanical morality that preaches female chastity. Oothoon has plucked the "bright Marygold" to "glow" between her "breasts" (1: 6-13; Blake 45-46) as a symbol of acknowledging her own sexual desire. Blake sees the submission to a code of sexual repression as what would make "Oothoon a whore indeed" and turn "all the virgin joys/ Of life" into "harlots" (6: 18-19; Blake 50).

For Blake, the paradigmatic form of oppression is sexual, and marriage out of necessity is the primary form that such sexual oppression takes. In *America*, Orc's political liberation of the thirteen states concords with a defeat of religious tyranny and a defeat of the sexual restraints imposed on women. The enthusiasm of liberation becomes a millennial event: "The doors of marriage are open, and the Priests in rustling scales/ Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc," and "the female spirits of the dead pining in bonds of religion;/ Run from their fetters ...." (15. 19-24; Blake 57).

Though it is somewhat of an overstatement, Swinburne wrote that female emancipation "never had a more violent and

vehement preacher” (Swinburne 109). Another contender to that pulpit was Thorild, who, while resident in England, wrote two tracts of interest in respect to sexual and political liberation. One was *Harmonien; eller Allmän Plan för en Uplyst och Ägta Kärleksförening* [Harmony; or a General Plan for an Enlightened and True Union of Love], in which he praises love as divine “harmony.” It was not published before 1793, after he was forced into exile in Germany. It was published in Swedish, but the Preface informs us that since it was originally written in England, its original language had been English. Unfortunately, no copy of the original manuscript survives. Although Thorild mentions Swedenborg in the tract, he does not acknowledge him as a source. Yet his doctrines about the divinity of Love are in accordance with Swedenborg. He also displays a similar alchemical influence when he writes that

... woman, in her being, is a reflection of all joy of life that exists: and no purpose in nature will contribute in a higher degree to a delightful harmony in a woman than a man, for his being is a reflection of all the strength or the power which enlivens the world. So that both these beings are for each other NATURE in miniature: and, in their small circle, unite all that HUMANKIND finds joyous and divine. (Thorild 4: 128; my translation)

We may here look to the founding member of the New Jerusalem Church, Robert Hindmarsh, who published Thorild’s *True Heavenly Religion Restored* and took profound enough interest in sexual alchemy to get Hindmarsh excluded from the church. In 1792, when he defended Swedenborg against attacks published by the famous Unitarian radical Joseph Priestley, he specified that “the distinguishing characteristic of a male is *activity*; while that of a female is *re-activity*. Thus God, as an *active* Creator, is properly *male*; and the whole creation, as a *re-active* subject, is properly *female*” (Hindmarsh 232).

What gives Thorild’s tract a contemporary social dimension is the fact that it was meant to be a critique of the custom of marrying for money, as Thorild makes clear in the “Preface.” Throughout, a

distinction between Love as an inner “unity” and an outward “bond” is upheld. The latter is the union forged between the sexes that “the priest but not God has blessed,” whereas only the former, a marriage out of Love, will assure man’s happiness (Thorild 4: 123-24; my translation). This roughly follows the same lines of argument that we find in Wadström and Nordenskjöld’s *Plan for a Free Community*. But it did not lead Thorild to propose an African colony or the establishment of any separatist community; instead he wants to lay the foundation for a philosophical/ scientific system that can measure what human happiness is. Once this is in place, men and women will soon realise that only a marriage based on true Love can lead to a life of sublime Harmony with the Divine Order of the Universe. Although the sexual aspect of Love is not the focus for Thorild, he does not shy away from explicitly proclaiming “desire” to be an important component in establishing a cosmic Harmony. It is not impossible that what is now available to us only in edited and tempered form was originally meant to support more clearly the faction of sexualist interpreters of Swedenborg, with whom he associated.

Another important tract is one of Thorild’s best known and most often translated works, *Om quinnokönets naturliga höghet* [On the Natural Glory of the Female Sex]. This was also written in England but not published before 1793.<sup>21</sup> The main thesis of the tract is bold. Not only does Thorild attack the bondage the female sex must suffer in a patriarchal society, but he goes as far as to place women above men. Thorild was undoubtedly inspired by the arguments for female emancipation he encountered in England, because it is clear, though he says nothing of women’s social, political or judicial rights, that female emancipation becomes a symbol for his democratic hopes of equality for all classes of mankind. Rather than “being something else first,” “Such as mere woman, child, servant, farmer, cavalier, master, prince,” liberated mankind is first and foremost human. Women’s liberation embodies the greater struggle against “those who deceive in the name of God, and tyrants with fire and sword, and all bloody and mad vices, in a word, the

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<sup>21</sup> For evidence that a version of the tract was completed and ready for publication by 1791, see editorial notes in Thorild 2: 434, 439-40.

ancient potentates Stupidity and the Lie, which have been the true rulers of the earth” (Thorild 3: 352, 354; my translation). The entire argument is subtly spiced with millennial hopes. In reference to the traditional reckoning for the Last Judgment (also used by Blake in *The French Revolution* and numerous other places throughout his writing), Thorild claims that the 6000 years of error have now come to an end.

## VII.

Thorild scholars have questioned the honesty of the poet’s Swedenborgianism, just as objections to Blake’s actual commitment to Swedenborgian doctrine have been raised.<sup>22</sup> What are we to make of the *Maxims*, which was published after Thorild had left London? The publisher writes in an “Introduction” that the pamphlet has been translated “from the Swedish,” and it is unclear if Thorild had the chance of proof-reading the finished translation. Did a translator or editor with a metaphysical bent twist some of Thorild’s original intentions out of shape? In regards to *True Heavenly Religion Restored*, why does Thorild opt for anonymity, only identifying himself on the title-page as “A Philosopher of the North”?

Part of the explanation for Thorild’s turn to Swedenborg can probably be explained by the fact that he received patronage from C.B. Wadström. From a letter, we know that Wadström helped Thorild financially, when the latter had run up a large debt (see the editorial commentaries in Thorild 9: 208). The circumstances of financial dependency could give occasion to wonder about Thorild’s motives behind supporting Swedenborg in *True Heavenly Religion Restored*. But that he did, at least at one point, sympathise with Swedenborgian tenets is evident in the ultra-short essay “Swedenborg” (undated), in which the prophet is praised as a “great and knowledgeable philosopher, who has bestowed honour upon his nation” (Thorild 3: 418; my translation). In many ways, Thorild’s

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of Thorild; see the editorial commentaries in Thorild 9: 147-61 and Herrlin below. For Blake paying lip-service to Swedenborgianism while undermining its theological points; see Thompson 168-69.

relationship with Wadström parallels that of Blake, in later years, with his patron, C.A. Tulk. Around 1815, Blake procured patronage from this wealthy Swedenborgian, who was son of John Tulk, one of the original founding members of the New Jerusalem Church. This meant that Blake took up Swedenborgian themes, and that he again referred to the Swedish prophet in favourable, though not unqualified terms.

Olle Herrlin, who has written of Thorild's religious views, believes that the divergences in *True Heavenly Religion Restored* can only mean that it was not written on his own accord, but must have been work commissioned by the London Swedenborgians (Herrlin 190). However, these assumptions appear to me not to represent a balanced view. The circumstances of printing may well indicate that Thorild could have received patronage for his book, but there is no reason to believe that he was "faking it." First of all, the main body of text contains many of Thorild's recognisable and already rehearsed sentiments. Secondly, *True Heavenly Religion Restored* would make a rather unsatisfactory result as a "commissioned" work, as Thorild, in the Swedenborgian appendix, spreads his sympathies rather liberally, praising the Quakers as the true followers of Jesus and hailing Mysticism as the "only idea left of true Religion." Thirdly, he spells out that "The principal Doctrines of Swedenborg are *mere Traits of Divine Order*" and not final truth. They are only "*clear Corollaries* of that only System conceivable above [i.e. what Thorild has outlined in the main body of his work]" (Thorild 2: 413).

Taking these facts into consideration, Thorild appears to be making an honest attempt to search out Swedenborg's writings for ideas akin to his own – much like Blake was doing in his sympathetic comments to Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, which was probably annotated around the same time as Thorild published his tract. The constant attempt to manipulate Swedenborg's statements so they can be reconciled with his own thought, which is evident here, indicates that Blake was never fundamentally a Swedenborgian. The prophet's theology is only a starting point for seeking out deeper spiritual aspects of existence. For instance, when Swedenborg speaks of "The Negation of God" as

what "constitutes Hell," Blake rephrases it "the Negation of the Poetic Genius" (Blake 603).

By way of conclusion, it appears that both Thorild and Blake at one time found inspiration in Swedenborg's writing and allowed for points of agreement between their own philosophical convictions and those of the prophet. In neither case is there any indication that either ever fully "converted" to Swedenborgianism. The Swedenborgian J.J. Garth Wilkinson once accounted in a letter that "Blake informed Tulk that he had two different states; one in which he liked Swedenborg's writings, and one in which he disliked them" (Bentley 1977: 38). That the ageing Blake should have spoken this to his Swedenborgian patron indicates a significant ambivalence in his attitude which is not easy to solve. Just as with Thorild, Blake's Swedenborgianism must remain a vexed question.

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