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Richard Gravil

## Blake in Boston: When and How?

The affinity between Emerson and Blake is one of the least understood facets of Anglo-American transactions in the Romantic period. In *Nature*, for instance, there seems to be an uncanny echo of Blake when Emerson writes that for fallen humanity ‘the axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque.’ It is impossible for a Romanticist not to be reminded of Blake’s ‘if the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite’, or ‘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.’ If Barbara Packer had not, in a brilliant essay, shown this to be a synthesis of Newtonian and Coleridgean metaphor, one would suspect a direct echo of Blake, or a mutual echo of Swedenborg or Boehme (see Barbara Packer, ‘The Instructed Eye’, in *Emerson’s Nature: Origin, Growth, Meaning*, ed. Merton M. Sealts and Alfred R. Ferguson, 2nd edn. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969, 209–21).

Again, in ‘The American Scholar’ Blake’s determination to construct his own system rather than be enslaved by another man’s seems echoed in Emerson’s striking trope: ‘I had better never see a book than be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system.’ In ‘The Over Soul’ he seems to unspring Blake’s memorable pair of couplets—

‘To see a world in a grain of sand,  
Or heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
Or eternity in an hour’  
(*Auguries of Innocence*)

—into the somewhat flattened statement that the spirit ‘Can crowd eternity into an hour, / or stretch an hour to eternity.’

In my first example Emerson—rather poignantly—uses Newtonian metaphor to express an insight which is conceptually very close to Blake’s anti-Newtonian procedure. In the second, he translates Blake’s barely perceptible metaphor into a far more striking one. In the third, he prozes a brilliant paradox.

The reason for being uncertain whether these are echoes or simply parallels arising from what Coleridge called ‘genial coincidence’ is that Emerson does not

quote Blake directly, in any published or unpublished text, until the revised version of 'Poetry and Imagination' as it appears in *Letters and Social Aims*. In any case, the first documentary proof that Emerson had any direct acquaintance with the particular Blake texts which appear to leave their mark on him—the *Auguries of Innocence* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—comes in late 1863 and early 1864 when he repeatedly borrowed from the Boston Athenaeum both volumes of the Gilchrist/Rossetti *Life* (virtually a 'Portable Blake', with its extensive quotations and excellent photolithography).

Of course Emerson would have known Blake by name, and as the author of some beautiful lyrics, and perhaps as a fellow Swedenborgian, in the 1830s. He probably read of him in the *New Jerusalem Magazine* in 1832, though not in terms which seem likely to have inspired much interest. It is at least likely that one of the Boston pedagogues—Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, Anna Cabot Lowell—owned a copy of Benjamin Heath Malkin's *A Father's Memoirs of his Child* (London: 1806), which memorial of an infant prodigy includes a twenty-three page 'life and works' of one of the child's admirers—William Blake, though I have found no reference to this work in the records of this group, or of the Boston Athenaeum. In any case, this work, in itself, like most early accounts of Blake, even the enthusiastic chapter in Allan Cunningham's very well known *Lives of the Painters* (1830) gives little insight into the 'Emersonian' Blake of the 'Auguries' and *The Marriage*. These texts did not become public knowledge until Gilchrist's *Life*.

The lyrical Blake, however, was very well known to Bostonians in the 1840s. Elizabeth Peabody told Wordsworth in May 1842 that she was reading Blake 'for the first time'—presumably in the 1839 edition by J. J. Garth Wilkinson (of which she gave a copy to Emerson) and yearning to see 'the quarto edition with his own illustrations' (Dove Cottage MS. A/ Peabody/7). In 1843 Anna Cabot Lowell anthologized three of Blake's songs in her *Poetry for Home and School*, a work dominated by the poems of Mary Lamb and giving Mr and Mrs Southey equal prominence.

In April—June 1848 Emerson was frequently in the company of two stalwart Blakeans, Henry Crabb Robinson and J. Garth Wilkinson, the editor of Blake and translator of Swedenborg, both of whom were intimate friends of Blake's patron, C. A. Tulk. Robinson records of a dinner given by Edwin Field for himself, Wilkinson, Emerson, and Emerson's English publisher John Chapman, 'we talked only about Blake— [Wilkinson] will call on me to see what I have by B: And I expect Emerson also' (cited from Raymond H Deck, *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 31: 122 [1980])

188). Yet there is, surprisingly, no reference to Blake in Emerson's surviving letters until 1861, when he received from James Thomas Fields, of Ticknor and Fields, a copy of 'Blake's Poems.' (Ticknor was among the earliest American pilgrims to Rydal Mount; Fields was an American Crabb Robinson in terms of the breadth and depth of his connections, and his widow cites Blake from memory when characterizing her husband's joyfulness in her memoir. Among his numerous correspondents was Richard Monkton Milnes, a known owner of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.) But what—and whose—is the book referred to? It is most likely to be another copy of Wilkinson's edition. But the illuminated Blake was not unknown in Massachusetts: copy U of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, for instance, was owned for a time by H. D. Chapin of Beacon Street, Boston.

By 1880 all of Boston could have experienced the poetry, some of the painting, and a selection of the illuminated works through the exhibition mounted in the Museum of Fine Arts, and built around Mrs Gilchrist's substantial collection—a collection which was in America, very appropriately, as a result of the gravitational attraction of Walt Whitman. Other substantial collections were loaned to this exhibition by E. W. Hooper, by H. E. Scudder (the biographer and reader for Riverside Press), and by R. C. Waterston. For how long had these items been in private circulation in Massachusetts?

Did Emerson's first serious encounter with Blake arise through the friendship of Crabb Robinson and Wilkinson in 1848? Or could it have occurred somewhat earlier, through the Alcott-Lowell-Peabody connection? Or was there further, and perhaps earlier contact with other such literati (in England and New England) who possessed and passed around their own copies of individual works?

Symbiosis would like to hear from anyone who can shed light upon these matters. The case of Blake is a reminder of how much remains to be understood about the breadth or depth of transatlantic literary communication in the Age of Emerson. Emerson's challenging distillation of English Romanticism, especially in *The American Scholar*, *Nature*, and 'The Over-Soul', seems to many readers decidedly Blakean in vision and expression. Both writers, however, have Plato, Bacon and Newton in their heritage, and both are shaped in some degree by an acquaintance with those consciousness-expanding substances Boehme and Swedenborg. It must be of equal interest to Blakeans and Emersonians to know whether the Emersonian version of the visionary inheritance was achieved with, or without, an acquaintance with Blake.