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Robert Rix

William Blake:

Trance, Therapy and Transcendence

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Trance, Therapy and Transcendence

Robert Rix

Romanticism and Magnetism

A central concern in the art of the graphic artist and poet William Blake (1757-1827) is the restoration of man and society to spiritual health. In the early work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790), Blake alludes to his work as "salutary and medicinal". The claim is here that truth represented in written and pictorial form will restore and heal man to his ancient spiritual strength.¹ In his poetic works, Blake's recurrent references to sickness and cure not only appear at key junctures, they also determine the narrative structures at the most fundamental level. In this paper, I will discuss the extent to which Blake's writing reflected the contemporary healing practice of animal magnetism, which, in its mystical formulation, also claimed to restore mankind.

Note: This publication is an extended version of the paper given at the symposium *Romantik og Videnskab*, organized by Dansk Selskab for Romantikstudier and DPU, on 28 November 2008, at DPU, Copenhagen, Denmark. The paper examined areas not included in my "Healing the Spirit: William Blake and Magnetic Religion", *Romanticism on the Net* 25 (February 2002), <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/25rix.html>, which can be consulted for the general discourses taken up below.

¹ *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, rev. ed., 1988), 39. All references to Blake's works are taken from this edition and are marked by parenthesis in the text.

Animal magnetism refers to the intangible force that allegedly influences all humans. The German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) introduced the term to explain the theory behind his unusual treatment of patients. Mesmer claimed that a principle of attraction harmonizes heaven and earth, the visible and the invisible, nature and humanity. He wrote in a work of 1781: “Magnétisme-Animal ... ces opérations universelles de la Nature, dont l’action, déterminée sur nos nerfs, offre ... UN MOYEN UNIVERSEL de guérir & de préserver les hommes”.² Mesmer held that all diseases result from disruption in the flow of a universal magnetic fluid. Therefore, cure was a manipulation of the part of the fluid permeating the patient.

Because animal magnetism provided a view of the world that put continuity and universal harmony before scientific analysis and division, David Morse has argued that “Mesmerism represented an intellectual and philosophical outlook that had important affinities with Romanticism”.³ The discussion of the links between romanticism and the growth of magnetic theory has steadily attracted critical commentary.⁴ It is not my purpose to examine the broad outlines of these parallels. Instead, I will argue that some of Blake’s metaphors make new sense when read within the framework of magnetic ideology as this was re-conceived by a culture of spiritual healers, in particular the Swedenborgians, with whom Blake was acquainted.

² “Animal Magnetism ... these universal operations of Nature, whose action, on our nerves, offers ... A UNIVERSAL MEANS to cure & preserve mankind” ; Franz Anton Mesmer, *Précis historique des faits relatifs au magnétisme-animal jusques en Avril 1781* (London [i.e. Paris?], 1781), 2.

³ David Morse, *Perspectives on Romanticism: A Transformational Analysis* (London and Basingstoke, 1981), 89.

⁴ See for example Eric Wilson, *Romantic Sleepwalkers: On Matter and Spirit in the Age of Animal Magnetism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Matthew Bell, *The German Tradition of Psychology in Literature and Thought, 1700-1840* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 168–207; Charles J. Rzepka, “Re-collecting Spontaneous Overflows: Romantic Passions, the Sublime, and Mesmerism”, *Romantic Circles* (1998), www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/passions/rzepka/rzp.html.

Mesmer’s clients were hypnotized (before the term was used). In their sleep-like trances, some patients would attain to clairvoyance and see visions. These were states Mesmer wrote off as side effects when the body was reinvigorated by the fluid. At all times, Mesmer maintained that his curative practice was based on reason and the laws of nature. Nonetheless, in the hands of others (especially the Swedenborgian healers), an interest in *somnambulism* developed. As the French writer Jean-François Fournel explained, in a book translated into English by the avid magnetizer John Bell, this involved numerous cases of subjects having clairvoyant visions and discovering various extrasensory abilities.⁵

Before discussing Blake’s use of magnetic metaphors, it is worth pointing out that he is not the only English romantic poet who referred to magnetic phenomena. In 1910, Lane Cooper analyzed Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* (written 1797–8) in such terms, adding evidence from two poems written around the same time: “Christabel” and the famous dream-vision “Kubla Khan”.⁶ Later, John Beer focussed on magnetic sleep and its accompanying visionary phenomena in connection with Coleridge’s discussions of consciousness, imagination and genius.⁷ Another Romantic poet interested in magnetism was Percy Bysshe Shelley. He was magnetized for his violent paroxysms, after which he wrote the poem “The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient” (1832).⁸

⁵ *An Essay on Somnambulism, or Sleep-walking, produced by animal electricity and magnetism* (Dublin, 1788).

⁶ Lane Cooper, “The Power of the Eye in Coleridge”, repr. in *Late Harvest* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1952), 65–100.

⁷ John Beer, *Coleridge’s Poetic Intelligence* (London and Basingstoke, 1977), *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970).

⁸ Shelley’s interest in the curative practice is investigated in P. M. S. Dawson, “A Sort of Natural Magic: Shelley and Animal Magnetism”, *Keats-Shelley Review* 1 (1986): 15–34.

Magnetism, Swedenborgians and Spiritual Cure

We know Blake was familiar with animal magnetism as a therapy involving electrical remedies to manipulate energies. In a letter dated 18 December 1804, Blake tells a correspondent of his wife, Catherine, who was cured for her rheumatism by "M^r Birch" and his "Electrical Magic" (*Blake* 758–9).⁹ Dr. John Birch was a surgeon of St. Thomas's Hospital in London, where he established a department for treating patients with medical electricity. Birch described his methods and machines in *Essay on the Mechanical Application of Electricity*, which Joseph Johnson, Blake's most consistent employer for book illustrations, published and sold in 1802.

In his letters, Blake refers to Birch in favourable terms (*Blake* 717, 728). But more importantly, he also used electrical manipulation of the body and its energies as a metaphor for curing an ailing social world, which was spiritually devastated. On the frontispiece of the long poem *Jerusalem* (1804 – c. 1820), Blake depicts a figure entering a portal carrying in his right hand a spherical disc of concentric circles, which emits a radiant light. What at first appears to be a solid lamp will on closer inspection reveal that the figure's thumb and fingers can be seen through it. Albert Boime has persuasively argued that the ball-shaped lantern is an "image of a rotating glass globe used to generate electricity in contemporary electrical experiments", of which several illustrations were printed in Joseph Priestley's *History and Present State of Electricity* (1767).¹⁰ What Boime does not mention is that Blake is likely to have seen such apparatuses with his own eyes at Birch's clinic.

This opening image of *Jerusalem* ties in with Blake's use of sickness as a key metaphor in the poem. Blake symbolically embodies England as the grand

form Albion, who is "sick to death" (*Blake* 182), because "the inhabitants" of England are "sick to death" (*Blake* 219). Cure is to be found through spiritual rather than literal electricity. This is clear from Blake's description of his poet-hero Los, who fears that "Albion should turn his back against the Divine Vision" and therefore takes "his globe of fire to search the interiors of Albions Bosom" (*Blake* 194). Here, Los acts in his capacity as a prophet who with his "thunderous Words" (*Blake* 250) will restore Albion to health. A cure for England that will turn it into a New Jerusalem is at hand: it is the spiritual revival that comes from reading the poem itself.

However, to examine Blake's metaphors of spiritual cure, we must look beyond the practical-scientific branch of the magnetic healing and turn to the Swedenborgian milieu. A number of Swedenborg-inspired believers took up ideas of animal magnetism, evidently because the theory harmonized with the teaching of *Correspondences* between the visible and invisible, as the Swedish scientist and Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) explained it in his numerous works.

Swedenborg's appeal to the age was his ability to organize occult learning according to the taxonomies of Enlightenment science. The success of the taxonomic project of the eighteenth century had created an opening for investigations into the unseen universe. Swedenborg mapped the spiritual knowledge it omitted. Swedenborg, before his spiritual awakening in the 1740s, made significant contributions to geometry, chemistry and metallurgy. In his post-conversion works, he revealed a higher spiritual reality hidden in the smallest of visible objects on earth, as well as in the grand construction of the universe. His most ardent English followers often combined scientific and spiritual pursuits. Robert Hindmarsh, the leader of the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church in London, took time out from his busy programme of publishing Swedenborg's mystical theology to print George Adams's popular *Essays on the Microscope* (1787) and

⁹ On Catherine's rheumatism and the "swelling of her knees", see *Blake* 756.

¹⁰ Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution 1750–1800* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 351–2.

Astronomical and Geographical Essays (1789). Charles Augustus Tulk, Blake's patron in later years, took up chemistry and physiology to combat Enlightenment materialism on its own ground. He wanted to offer a scientific alternative to materialism by referring to Swedenborg's description of a universal connection between matter and spirit through an unbroken series of "Discrete Degrees".¹¹

In April 1789, Blake signed a document of forty-two proposals in sympathy with the doctrines of the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church at its inaugural meeting. Two Swedes, August Nordenskjöld and Bernhard Wadström, were among the organizing members, and their signatures appear alongside Blake's on the document.¹² In Sweden, Nordenskjöld and Wadström had been members of the Swedenborgian Exegetical and Philanthropic Society, which was deeply interested in the millennial prospects raised by animal magnetism. The Society authored a famous letter dated 19 June 1787 to the Mesmerist Société des Amis Réunis at Strasbourg with a pledge that the two societies ought to co-operate in restoring humanity to its ancient glory by disseminating each other's works. The letter explained that magnetism was to be directed "to the spiritual good of the soul".¹³ The letter was coldly received in Strasbourg and nothing came of the suggested collaboration.¹⁴

¹¹ Charles Augustus Tulk, *The Science of Correspondency*, ed. Charles Pooley (London: James Speirs, 1889).

¹² "New Jerusalem Church, Great East Cheap, London, 7 Dec. 1788", rpt. Robert Hindmarsh, "An Account of the First General Conference of the Members of the New Jerusalem Church, London, April 13–17, 1789", in *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is True Friendship*, ed. Harvey Bellin and Darrel Ruhl (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1985), 120–32.

¹³ The letter is printed in George Bush, *Mesmer and Swedenborg: or, the relation of the developments of Mesmerism to the doctrines and disclosures of Swedenborg*, 2nd ed. (New York: J. Allen, 1847): 247–57.

¹⁴ Al Gabay, "Swedenborg, Mesmer, and the 'Covert' Enlightenment", *The New Philosophy: The Journal of the Swedenborg Scientific Societies*, 100 (1997): 619–90, at 674–84; Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 67.

Baron Göran Silfverhjelm, the leader of the Swedenborgian movement in Sweden, a nephew of Swedenborg and ambassador to London, wrote in a book of 1787 that even though he considered the healing properties of magnetism unassailable, this aspect was of little importance compared with its real worth. This was to "både på bredden och höjden utvidga HERRENS rike" ("extend the Kingdom of the LORD both in breadth and width"). Magnetism was an "Introduktion i Himmelska Saker" ("introduction to heavenly matters").¹⁵

The Swedenborgians who took up magnetism saw themselves as essentially faith healers curing the underlying moral disease of the patient which manifested itself through somatic symptoms. The connection between cure and true faith was biblical. Certainly, Jesus discussed his many healings in an eschatological light; that is they were signs of the coming the kingdom of God (Matthew 10:7–8, 12:28, Luke 10:9, 11:20). Magnetic cures became a vehicle for bringing about the Swedenborgian belief in the "New Jerusalem", which was not an external happening but an internal transformation of the individual. For the Swedenborgians, the real benefit of magnetism was the revelation of divine truth and wisdom.

It was claimed that during the magnetic trances, or artificially induced somnambulism, dead or distant spirits channelled their messages to the patient. For some magnetizers, it became an end in itself to induce somnambulism, since it enabled various degrees of enhanced perception, in line with what Swedenborg had described. In the mystical-spiritualist version of magnetism, Mesmer's magnets, the *baquets* (magnetic baths) and other nostrums were abandoned and gave way to experiences with spirit communication. In the words of Robert Darnton, Mesmer's original claim to introduce a new scientific therapy "escaped his control and had run wildly through supernatural regions where he believed

¹⁵ Göran Ulrik Silfverhjelm, *Inledning til kunskapen om den animale magnetismen och somnambulismen. Förste fortsättningen* (Stockholm, 1787), 2.

they had no business ... Mesmerists tended increasingly to neglect the sick in order to decipher hieroglyphics, manipulate magic numbers, and communicate with spirits".¹⁶

A good example of this was Benedict Chastanier, who was a high-ranking Mason from France, was among the prominent Swedenborgians in London. He was one of the organizers of Swedenborgian meetings during the 1780s. His signature can be found in support of the New Jerusalem Church alongside Blake's. His experiments with trances revolved around the attempt to contact the spirits of the dead.¹⁷ In an advertisement of 16 June 1786, Chastanier announced the opening of a clinic offering: "INTELLECTUAL TREATMENT OF DISEASE BY SENSATIONS, HITHERTO CALLED ANIMAL MAGNETISM".¹⁸ Clearly, what was at stake went beyond a limited interest in the physical body. The new direction was deeply concerned with religious redemption.

For a ten-month period during 1786, Chastanier served as the chief assistant to John Bonniot de Mainauduc, the high priest among magnetizer in England. De Mainauduc saw Fludd, Kircher, Swedenborg, and especially Paracelsus – also Blake's intellectual hero (see *Blake* 43 and 707) – as the real discoverers of animal magnetism. He held that Mesmer had debased the true mystical wisdom of the art. In the conclusion to his *Lectures*, de Mainauduc claimed to perform "the Almighty's real science", which he aligned with the spiritual cures performed by Christ and his disciples. The object of Christ and magnetism was the same "to escape future punishment and enjoy eternal bliss".¹⁹

¹⁶ Darnton, *Mesmerism*, 69–70.

¹⁷ Chastanier later renounced these experiments in *A Word of Advice to a Benighted World; or Some of Benedict Chastanier's Spiritual Experiences, Relative to the Lord's Second Advent, His New Church, and Its Antitype* (London, 1795).

¹⁸ *Collectanea: or, a Collection of Advertisements and Paragraphs from the Newspapers, Relating to Various Subjects*, ed. Daniel Lyson (British Library, Pressmark, 1881), vol. 2, 2: 156–7.

¹⁹ John de Mainauduc, *The Lectures of J. Mainauduc MD* (London: Executrix, 1798), 222.

Although Blake's affiliation with the New Jerusalem Church appears only to have been short-lived, a number of Blake's acquaintances were Swedenborgian advocates and dabbled in magnetic experiments. On the list of de Mainauduc's patients, one finds Blake's fellow engraver and friend, William Sharp, as well as Richard Cosway, the miniature painter.²⁰ Cosway became an avid magnetizer himself, amusing and amazing his fashionable friends at Schomberg House, in London. Cosway also painted a portrait picture the famous healer for de Mainauduc's published *Lectures*. Another healer was the Swedenborgian painter Philip de Loutherbourg, who opened a magnetic clinic around 1789. It was claimed that he dispensed his cures with divine providence.²¹

Blake in the 1790s

In his poetic works of the 1790s, Blake was attuned to the ideas of animal magnetism, deriving several metaphors from the spiritualist re-orientation of the practice and its theory, as will now be examined.

According to de Mainauduc, all beings in the created universe are made up of "pores", which "allow the passage or circulation" of the invisible "fluid". This, "the Almighty Wisdom" has created so that it may "pass in and out of all forms" in the universe. The "Great Creating Hand" has installed man with "sensible strings ... for the purpose of transmitting impressions", controlled by the "Power" of "a very superior SOMETHING".²² De Mainauduc links the "Spirit" intimately with the "Corporeal": for "though [as it appears in the Bible] there appears to be two powers in Man, one being the Spirit, the other the Body", the body is "perfectly dependable" on the spirit.²³ An energetic divinity

²⁰ Patricia Fara, "An Attractive Theory — Animal Magnetism in Eighteenth-Century England", *History of Science* 33 (1995): 127–77, at 163 n.

²¹ Mary Pratt, *A List of a Few Cures Performed by Mr. and Mrs. De Loutherbourg of Hammersmith Terrace without Medicine* (London: J. P. Cooke, 1789), 9.

²² De Mainauduc, *Lectures*, 19–21, 36, 58, 67.

²³ *Ibid.* 68–71.

operates on “the nervous system”, the “medium through which every impression received ... is announced ... under five separate divisions, called senses”.²⁴ In line with this, Blake explains in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790) that “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul” because “the chief inlets of Soul in this age” are the human senses, and that “Energy is the only life and is from the Body” (Blake 34).

De Mainauduc’s teaching is also revealing for some of the concepts Blake introduced in his self-invented mythology of how the human world was created. De Mainaduc founded his magnetic cures on a cosmology in which the nervous system of the human body is placed in an “atmospheric” system made up of “conductors” or “Atmospheric Nerves”.²⁵ He diagnosed sickness as the blocking of the circulation of the atoms flowing in and out of the body, thereby reaching “a state of solid coagulation”.²⁶ The treatment is thus essentially a spiritual process in which the magnetizer uses his spiritual power to re-establish a free circulation of the atoms by breaking down the impediment.²⁷

In the semi-biblical creation narrative, *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794), Blake describes the Urizenic (i.e. the reductively material) universe as “A wide world of solid obstruction” (Blake 72). Significantly, the blocking out of divine vision for men on earth coincides with “their Nerves change into Marrow/ And hardening Bones began/ In swift diseases and torments ... The Senses inward rush’d shrinking” (Blake 82). In accordance with a Magnetic paradigm, the fallen world of solidification is one in which man lives in “ghastly torment sick” (Blake 76). In *Book of Los* from 1795, the same loss of communication with the divine is presented as a bodily “obstruction, a Solid/ Without fluctuation, hard as adamant” (Blake 91).

²⁴ Ibid. 42.

²⁵ Ibid. 45.

²⁶ Ibid. 8.

²⁷ Ibid. 69, 106, 115–16.

Blake’s works of the early 1790s were political. It is interesting to look at how he used references to animal magnetism in this connection. Animal magnetism was often used as a metaphor for demagogic politics, based on the magnetizer’s seemingly unlimited hypnotic control over his patient. For instance, the radical S. T. Coleridge spoke critically of Prime Minister William Pitt in such terms. In his lectures of 1795, Coleridge referred to Pitt as “the great political Animal Magnetist”, who “has most foully worked on the diseased fancy of Englishmen” and “thrown the nation into a feverish slumber, and is now bringing it to a crisis which may convulse mortality!”.²⁸ The same year, the establishment newspaper *The London Times* used a similar metaphor, turning it against the radicals. Swedenborg is accused of being “the chief of the somnambulists”, whose influence on the “revolutionarily exalted” has prepared the public mind for “great political convulsions”.²⁹ The intention here was to correlate the Swedenborg-inspired societies with the mythologized Bavarian Illuminati, who were accused of seducing ordinary Masons with a plot to overturn European governments. Swedenborgianism, which did have strong links with radicalism, was often seen as politically dangerous, such as in the popular works of the prolific anti-Jacobin writers Augustin Barruel and John Robison.³⁰ Both quotes refer to “convulsions”, which were the various recognizable phenomena connected with magnetic crisis: violent spasms, epileptic seizures, high fevers, and chills.

Blake referred to magnetic hypnosis in his graphic work *America: A Prophecy* (1793), which was a spiritual “history” of the American Revolution. The illustration on plate 16 shows a woman stretching out her arm and hand in a

²⁸ Quoted in Tim Fulford, “Conducting the Vital Fluid: The Politics and Poetics of Mesmerism in the 1790s”, *Studies in Romanticism* 43.1 (2004): 57–78, at 57. This article outlines the metaphoric connections between politics and magnetic practises, especially in relation to Coleridge.

²⁹ *The London Times*, 4 March 1795; quoted in Marsha Keith Schuchard, “Blake’s Healing Trio: Magnetism, Medicine, and Mania”, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 23 (1989): 23.

³⁰ See my *William Blake and the Culture of Radical Christianity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 67–85.

hypnotic gesture towards a young boy held in suspense. The image of the boy, docilely resting his arms on a pile of books and with his hands folded in prayer, has been interpreted as a scene of educational brainwashing.³¹ However, the snake that starts forward from between the woman's legs, also fixing its gaze on the boy, spells out the image's connection with magnetism. The snake's ability to terrify its prey into submission was often chosen as an example when natural philosophers speculated on optical powers of enchantment.³² De Mainauduc and the new generation of magnetic healers believed that the body could be influenced simply by the magnetiser fixing his gaze on the patient, staring intensely into his or her eyes. This early hypnotic technique was often depicted in contemporary prints.³³

In *America*, Blake presents a negative image of political tyranny exercising a hold over the population, but cure through hypnotic enthrallment is given a positive turn in Blake's *The French Revolution* (1789), which will now be examined.

Blake begins the poem with a description of a foul miasma: "Sick, sick: the Prince on his couch, wreath'd in dim/ And appalling mist" (*Blake* 286). The removing of miasma was the goal of some magnetic cures. But, in Blake's poem, this must be done on a cosmopolitical level, since "Kings ... are sick throughout all the earth" (*Blake* 288). There are inevitable connections between animal magnetism and Revolution in France. The popularity of Mesmerism had alarmed the monarchy, nobility and police, because the secret societies propagating it posed a threat. A main worry was that Nicolas Bergasse and other revolutionary agitators in the Mesmerist Society for Harmony opposed the

established order and used the new therapy as a platform for social and political subversion.³⁴

A central figure in *The French Revolution* is Marquis de La Fayette (Blake's "Fayette"), who had enrolled as a disciple of Mesmer. When he went to America, where he was celebrated as a revolutionary hero, he spoke to George Washington about the art and addressed the Philosophical Society in Philadelphia about its wonders.³⁵ It is the liberal Duke of Orleans (who later became known as Philippe Égalité), however, who administers the restoration to social health in France. The pivotal moment in Blake's poem is Orleans's mesmerizing speech to the National Assembly. The effect that this has on the *ancien regime* uses magnetic therapy as its model:

Then Orleans generous as mountains arose, and unfolded his robe, and put forth
His benevolent hand, looking on the Archbishop, who changed as pale as lead;
Would have risen but could not, his voice issued harsh grating; instead of words
harsh hissings
Shook the chamber; he ceas'd abash'd. Then Orleans spoke, all was silent,
He breath'd on them, and said, O princes of fire, whose flames are for growth not
consuming,
Fear not dreams, fear not visions, nor be you dismay'd with sorrows which flee at
the morning

(*Blake* 294)

Orleans "breathes" upon the Assembly to deliver his message of liberty and sympathy among men – a strange séance akin to the magnetizer's manipulation

³⁴ See Douglas J. Lanska and Joseph T. Lanska, "Franz Anton Mesmer and the Rise and Fall of Animal Magnetism: Dramatic Cures, Controversy, and Ultimately a Triumph for the Scientific Method", in *Brain, Mind and Medicine: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Neuroscience*, ed. H. Whitaker et al. (New York: Springer, 2007): 301–20, at 308.

³⁵ Robert Silverberg, *Scientists and Scoundrels: A Book of Hoaxes* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965), 24.

³¹ Stephen Behrendt, *Reading William Blake* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 119.

³² In the early nineteenth century, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* still defined the snake's gaze as analogous to magnetic attraction; see Fara, "Attractive Theory": 145.

³³ *Ibid.* 140, 144.

of his subjects. The idea of breathing upon a subject to induce a magnetic hypnosis was often described in the literature on animal magnetism.³⁶ Had Orleans bothered to read Blake's poem, he would have understood such allusions, since he was a frequent visitor to Cosway's magnetic salon in London. However, Blake's metaphor of breathing may also allude to Swedenborg's exegesis of Jesus breathing upon his disciples with the words: "Receive ye the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22), which the prophet explained as an external "correspondence" of how man receives divine influx.³⁷

Blake's emphasis on Orlean's generosity and benevolence is important, since magnetism was often connected with altruism. That the magnetizer should apply benevolence and sympathy in his treatment was often prescribed in manuals.³⁸ Or as the Swedish Swedenborgians formulated it in their famous letter: the "act of magnetizing is chiefly a moral act", and its "operative cause is the magnetizer's *strong desire* to benefit his neighbor".³⁹

Orlean's gaze functions here as a hypnotic spell, making the Archbishop incapable of rising or speaking. This was a well-known effect of magnetic manipulation, so was the loss of speech. Blake is likely to have known such phenomena; if not from first hand experience, then at least from the many

³⁶ See e.g. Joseph Philippe François Deleuze, *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism*, trans. T. C. Hartshorn (Providence: B. Cranston & Co., 1837), 31; William Gregory, *Letters to a Candid Inquirer, on Animal Magnetism* (London: Blanchard and Lea, 1851), 188; and Adolphe Didier, *Animal Magnetism and Somnambulism* (London: T. C. Newby, 1856), 140. The 1831 *Encyclopaedia Americana*, ed. Francis Lieber (Philadelphia: Lea & Carey, 1831), vol. 8, 205, explains: "The principal means used to produce the effects of animal magnetism, are such as touching and stroking with the hands, according to rule (*manipulation*), breathing on a person, fixing the eyes upon him, &c.; the magnetized person must always be of a weaker constitution ...".

³⁷ Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion*, trans. John Clowes, 2 vols. (London: J. Phillips et al., 1781), §140.

³⁸ See for example *The Secret Revealed, or Animal Magnetism Displayed*, 2nd ed. ([London]: T. Hawkins, 1790?), 7, in which Magnetic practise is described as centrally dependent upon the magnetizer's capability of sympathy and a "strong, fervent, benevolent wish to perform ... wonder or cure".

³⁹ Bush, *Mesmer*, 252.

publications on magnetic practice which flooded the market. A Royal Commission appointed by King Louis XVI of France in 1784 examined these and other physical signs connected with magnetic therapy. A highly sceptical report was submitted by Benjamin Franklin and the commissioners.⁴⁰ The report was translated into English in 1785 for the bookseller Joseph Johnson, Blake's employer. It was Johnson who would later set up the only extant manuscript of Blake's *The French Revolution* in typescript. But at the last minute, he rejected it for publication. The reasons are not known, but perhaps it was because the poem evoked the mystical, spiritualist branch of radicalism, from which the Johnson circle of political activists were keen to dissociate themselves.

The result of Orleans' salutary speech is that France is shaken by convulsions as part of its restoration.⁴¹ The immediate effect is that "Great Henry's soul shuddered" (Blake 295). The descriptions that follow merge familiar accounts of magnetic *crises* with apocalyptic imagery from the Revelation of St John: "France shakes! And the heavens of France ... vibrate", "the Bastille trembles", and its "dens shook and tremble" (Blake 286). The body politic is cured of monarchy as the "nerves of five thousand years ancestry tremble, shaking the heavens of France" (Blake 289). This is an apocalyptic vision of the world renewed, of course. But it cannot be separated from the similar metaphor of the body politic being repaired to divine liberty by going through a magnetically-induced crisis: the "frozen blood reflow'd" (Blake 299). This reminds us of Mainauduc's treatment of diseases, "the stagnant blood must be

⁴⁰ For the inability to move, paralysis of limbs, and loss of speech when magnetized, see *Report of Dr. Benjamin Franklin and Other Commissioners Charged by The King of France with the Examination of the Animal Magnetism as Now Practised at Paris* (London: J. Johnson, 1785), xii, 68, 74–5, 76, 89 and 103.

⁴¹ The convulsions were described in minute detail in the Franklin commission's report, see 26–8, 95–6.

pushed on to circulation, and a free passage produced for [circulation of] the general atmosphere".⁴²

When Blake presents the mental change that led to the Revolution in France in terms of magnetic healing, it fits with his key metaphor of a diseased society. For Blake, restoration of health is inseparably connected to return of lost Vision. Notably, Orleans' cure for the diseased body politic finds expression as the advice of a religious enthusiast: "Fear not dreams, fear not visions" (l. 61). It was precisely the phenomena of clairvoyance and visionary somnambulism which characterized the radical form of animal magnetism.

Spirits and Poetry

The 1780s and early 1790s saw a widening gap between those who considered Swedenborg's writing a fully completed Gospel and those who believed that it could be augmented – especially by spirit communication. The London congregation of Swedenborgians was quick to denounce spiritist experiments. Robert Hindmarsh, the founding member, published in his journal *New Magazine of Knowledge Concerning Heaven and Hell* a series of hostile letters and articles officially denouncing all Swedenborgians who practised magnetism as a means to gain visionary experiences.

In the May issue of 1790, a letter speaks negatively of "the numerous persons who now practice *animal magnetism* ... in the habit of *conversing with spirits*". The correspondent warns that "obtaining information concerning the spiritual world, by means of animal magnetism, is highly dangerous. And ought not to be pursued".⁴³ The reason for seeking spirit guidance was to achieve a spiritual healing of man, connecting him with the world of the Heavens (which Swedenborg had described with minute accuracy). For those magnetizers who

drew on Swedenborgian and Paracelcian notions of the human soul as operated upon by spiritual agents, it was believed that disease was caused by evil influences of spiritual origin. Cure entailed the dislodgement of the malignant spirit to allow for a benign spirit to take possession. For this reason, magnetizers such as the Swedenborgian Philippe de Louthembourg and others practised a mild form of exorcism as part of their cures.

The anti-Spiritualism letters that appeared in Hindmarsh's magazine were part of a campaign to rid the New Church of its association with the occult interpretations of Swedenborg that held sway among a group of notorious international Masons. In another letter of November 1790, the Masons of the revolutionary society at Avignon are attacked head-on for being the main propagators of spiritualist magnetism. The correspondent scorns them as "*mystico-cabbalistico-magnetical practitioners*".⁴⁴ Connected at some time or another with the society at Avignon were such notorious eighteenth-century Masonic figures as Dom Pernety, Marquis de Thomé, Count Grabianka, and not least, the infamous mystic and charlatan Cagliostro. There are no records of Blake communicating with these Masons, but his consistent exploration of supernatural realms as a resource for higher truth is likely to have been a contributing factor to his alienation from the New Jerusalem Church.

At the very least, Blake makes the defence of Vision a central issue in his annotations to Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* (1788). Blake picks a passage from Swedenborg which he finds speaks in favour of extrasensory knowledge, commenting: "Who shall dare to say after this that all elevation ... is Enthusiasm & Madness" (Blake 606). A little later, Blake writes: "Is it not false then, that love receives influx thro the [worldly] understand^s as was asserted in the society" (Blake 608). Here, Blake is evidently pointing to the

⁴² De Mainauduc, *Lectures*, 150.

⁴³ *New Magazine of Knowledge concerning Heaven and Hell* (May 1790): 124–6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (November 1790): 401–06.

reactionary Swedenborgians, who clamped down on visionary interpretations of the prophet.

Between 1800 and 1803, Blake was separated from the London circles of spiritualist magnetism, as he had taken up residence with his patron William Hayley in Felpham, Sussex. However, Hayley took a keen interest in animal magnetism, purchasing an “electrical machine”, which functioned as a healing “shower bath”.⁴⁵ In a letter to Hayley, Blake connects poetry and electrical phenomena: “My fingers Emit sparks of fire with Expectation of my future labours” (16 Sep. 1800, *Blake* 709).

Even though we know nothing of the exact circumstances under which Blake received his poetic inspiration, his personal correspondence during the years in Felpham shows an increased interest in attributing the origin of his poetry to spirit communication. For example, in another letter to Hayley, Blake confirms that he speaks daily and hourly with his dead brother Robert, who dictates to him (6 May 1800, *Blake* 705). In another letter to his friend Thomas Butts, Blake describes how he composes a “Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will”, since he can “converse with ... friends in Eternity. See Visions, Dream Dreams, & Prophecy ...” (25 Apr. 1803, *Blake* 728–9). Blake also refers to himself as a mere “Secretary” as the “Authors” of his poetry are “in Eternity” (letter to Butts, 6 Jul. 1803, *Blake* 730).

In this connection, an interesting figure in the milieu of magnetizers was George Baldwin, a friend of Cosway. As British consul in Egypt, he built a special temple for magnetic healing in the consulate grounds in Alexandria. Here, Baldwin experimented with magnetising the Italian poet Cesare Avena de Valdiere. While in enraptured states, de Valdiere poured out numerous verses dictated by spirits, which Baldwin then recorded and later published—the first

time in a privately published edition of 1801.⁴⁶ Upon his return to London, Baldwin set up a magnetic clinic.

Blake’s most “magnetic” work is the long poem *Milton* (c. 1804–1811). Blake here writes that “Within the vegetated mortal Nerves ... every Man born is joined/ Within into One mighty Polypus ...” (*Blake* 127). This is in line with de Mainauduc’s theory of a “universal connection” of astral nerves between all living beings. The plot in *Milton* revolves around the communication with otherworldly spirits, for it is through imparting divine knowledge to the fallen world that a Golden Age can be revived. Milton is called upon as the dead spirit of the greatest Christian poet to cure the failure of faith in his nation. The vocabulary here is more than a little reminiscent of magnetism. In the beginning of the poem, Blake invokes his “Muses” to “Come into my hand/ By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm” (*Blake* 96). The cure is figured in the terms of the electrical currents often used in magnetic clinics: “Now Albion’s sleeping Humanity began to turn upon his Couch;/ Feeling the electrical flame of Miltons awful precipitate descent” (*Blake* 114).

In *Milton*, spirit communications are described in biographical terms as both the origin and end of Blake’s poetry: “My Vegetated portion was hurried from Lambeths shades ... that in three years I might write all these Visions” (*Blake* 137). Spiritism is the central issue around which the plot revolves, for it is through the communication with spirits that the fallen world may recapture a lost Golden Age. Blake returns several times to Milton’s sleep and dreams in reference to somnambulistic visions, where his “Sleeping Body” makes companion with the divine “Spirits of the Seven Angels”, “walking” with them “as one walks/ In sleep” (*Blake* 109).

⁴⁶ Cesare Avena de Valdiere, *La Prima musa Clio; or, The Divine Traveller; Exhibiting a Series of Writings Obtained in the Extasy of Magnetic Sleep*, trans. G. Baldwin, 3 vols. (London: G. Richards, 1810?). The poetry is also featured in *Mr Baldwin’s Legacy to his Daughter or the Divinity of Truth*, 2 vols. (London: W. Bulmer, 1811), 1: xli–cccxxxiv.

⁴⁵ (Morchard Bishop, *Blake’s Hayley* (London: Gollanz, 1951), 95–6.

Sifting Vision from Quackery

In conclusion, we may turn to the social perspectives of animal magnetism. Roy Porter and Simon Schaffer have written on how impresarios pretending to be physicians commercialized magnetic therapeutics in Georgian England.⁴⁷ Blake, as we have seen, subscribed to a distinctly millennial version of magnetism. He seems to have abhorred its corruption into showmanship and lucrative treatment of society ladies' minor ailments. In a satiric Notebook poem of unknown date, Blake attacks three contemporary magnetizers — Richard Cosway, George Baldwin and William Frazer. We know Blake's one-time patron George Cumberland criticized Cosway on a memorandum scribbled on the verso of a broadsheet entitled "A Syllabus of Dr. de MAINAUDUC's INSTRUCTIONS". Cumberland here denounces Cosway as part of a "Sect" headed by de Louthembourg, "who I suspect have a Scheme to empty the pockets of all the credulous christians they can find".⁴⁸ Of "Frazer" we know little, but he has been identified as a student of de Mainauduc's.⁴⁹ Blake rages that the three magnetizers "Fear to associate with Blake", and he proceeds to criticize them for capitalizing on the popular market at the expense of higher spiritual purpose: "This Life is a Warfare against Evils/ They heal the sick he [Blake] casts out Devils" (*Blake* 505). If we are to interpret Blake's offensive in the Notebook, it shows his dedication to further the Millennium on the basis of spiritualist version of animal magnetism. From this, he felt others had fallen off — not least his Swedenborgian companions.

⁴⁷ Roy Porter, "The Sexual Politics of James Graham", *The British Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 5 (1982): 200–6; Simon, Schaffer, "The Consuming Flame: Electrical Showmen and Tory Mystics in the World of Goods", *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 489–526.

⁴⁸ The broadsheet is repr. in Gerald Bentley, "Mainauduc, Magic and Madness: George Cumberland and the Blake Connection", *Notes and Queries* (September 1991): 294–96.

⁴⁹ Marsha Keith Schuchard, "Blake's Healing Trio: Magnetism, Medicine, and Mania", *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 23 (1989): 20–32, at 21.

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