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Review: **Sarah Haggarty, *Blake's Gifts: Poetry and the Politics of Exchange* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)**

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Sarah Haggarty's book, *Blake's Gifts: Poetry and the Politics of Exchange*, explores gifts and gift-giving within five areas: Economy, Patronage, Charity, Inspiration, and Salvation. The author's persuasive thesis uses Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida in relation to their theories of gift exchange and reciprocity to assess Blake's presentation of gift-giving. Studying his letters, annotations, poetry and illustrations, Haggarty deftly raises key questions about the nature of the gift in relation to Blake's life and art by asserting that 'gift-giving shapes biographical and poetic transactions in a process that is both generative and reciprocal' (2). Her work explores the broad historical conditions of gift-giving, without losing sight of the contemporary context of Blake's milieu.

The author discriminates between 'gift relationships' (3), which involve an expectation of response that 'is hoped for but cannot be counted on' (3), and the 'pure or free' gift which is irreconcilable with exchange; Haggarty rightly challenges critical assumptions that the Blakean gift excludes reciprocity. Apportioning Blake's 'corporeal' gifts within the areas of economy, patronage and charity and the 'spiritual' gifts within inspiration and salvation, she convincingly argues that Blakean gift-giving *does* in fact expect engagement and exchange. It is within the last two chapters that this idea becomes particularly telling for Blake studies in general; the receiver of spiritual gifts should recognise that these are not 'free', but ones that anticipate a response.

In the first chapter, 'Economy', Haggarty exposes the complex resemblance between gift and commerce. Although Blake 'spoke of his horror of money' (22), Haggarty argues that he incorporated aspects of both 'gift-giving' and commodity exchange by varying prices

between friends and strangers. The author maintains, however, that cash value was not the priority for the production of his art. Indeed, a social or spiritual exchange between donor and recipient very often took precedence, since ‘Blake’s treasures exceed the quantifiable world’ (12).

Chapter two, ‘Patronage’, examines Blake’s wish for a mutual giving (between artist and patron) rather than a forced obligation. Haggarty explores the awkward interchange in Blake’s patronage between gratitude and debt. Moreover, she emphasizes that Blake was ill at ease with the flattery of polite compliments that was customary in Hayley’s circle: a “Pick Thank” [used in one of Blake’s poems about Hayley] ‘is a flatterer [...] one who steals a compliment, rather than waiting to accept one as a gift’ (75). Haggarty uses Bourdieu’s theory of the violence of the gift to represent Blake’s discomfiting relations with Hayley, showing, by contrast, how Mauss’s theory of reciprocity can be compared to Blake’s views on patronage (61-62). There is an obscure mingling between those whom Blake called his friends and those he called his patrons, which, she rightly reveals, expresses an exercise of the poet’s control through the levelling of social status.

The third chapter reads the ‘Annotations to Thornton’ to demonstrate Blake’s unease with charity, which he saw as ultimately self-interested. Giving an elucidating exposition of Derrida’s theory of the free gift, Haggarty shows how Blake’s contemporaries engaged in contrasting discourses on natural law and poverty, such as those expounded by Thomas Paine and Thomas Malthus. Her discussion of debt and forgiveness is particularly interesting in its connection to Blake’s treatment of possession and self-annihilation.

The last two chapters discuss the spiritual gifts of ‘Inspiration’ and ‘Salvation’. ‘Inspiration’ deals with the question of the artist’s necessity of accepting such a gift, sometimes, as Blake said, ‘against my Will’ (111). This gift, Haggarty reminds us, is intermittent, and functions on a different level of temporality to monetary gifts and exchange.

Even as the author depicts the gift of inspiration as a Derridean pure gift, one that cannot be reciprocated in the way that corporeal exchanges can, she rightly shows that inspiration is a gift which involves sharing, as ‘it raises up the capacity of the human mind to meet and collaborate with divine donation’ (114). One thing notably absent in this chapter, however, was a reference to the poet’s ‘gift’ of inspiration to the reader, considering Blake’s concern with this in *Jerusalem*.

The last chapter looks into the possibility of salvation as gift-giving, whilst exposing Blake’s varied representations of sacrifice. The author compares the theories of sacrifice and salvation of John Calvin, Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine through an insightful reading of Blake’s poetry. Finally, Haggarty studies Blake’s depiction of Jesus’ salvation as exemplary. In so doing, she concludes her argument that ‘Blake, unlike Derrida, refuses to disengage the gift from relation’ (169).

This text is useful for anyone with more than a cursory interest in Blake. It would also appeal to a wider audience in its coverage of contemporary theories and historical discourses. Haggarty’s book is an engaging, persuasive, and highly informative piece of writing.