THE POEMS OF WILLIAM BLAKE

SELECTED,
EDITED, & INTRODUCED BY
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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
FROM BLAKE'S
ILLUMINATED BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

AMONG great poets William Blake is unique in the neglect paid to his work for almost a century after he wrote. During his lifetime (1757–1827) even his short poems found few readers; his long "prophetic" poems were regarded as unreadable. Part of this neglect was due to the fact that his poems were not actually published; instead Blake engraved and printed them on his own press, with illustrations colored by hand, in very limited editions. For Blake was by profession an artist – an engraver of other men's designs, an illustrator of poems, a painter of remarkable force and originality. Yet his painting, like his poetry, was ignored during his lifetime, or even dismissed as the work of a madman. Thirty-six years after his death, with the appearance of Alexander Gilchrist's pioneering biography, his genius began to be recognized – but more as a painter than a poet. To most nineteenth-century readers Blake continued to be known as a simple-hearted writer of children's verse. Even Swinburne, his champion among Victorian critics, found the prophetic poems a chaotic "sea of words," all "whirling foam and rolling weed." Not until the Ellis and Yeats edition of 1893 was a complete (though still far from satisfactory) text of Blake's work published at last.

If it took almost a century for Blake's poems to become generally available, it has taken another half-century for them to become generally understood. Yeats and Ellis remade Blake in their own image, as a wild Irishman (which he was not) whose imagination had fed on Celtic myth and cabalistic lore. This view of Blake's work as primarily esoteric and otherworldly has died hard. Even today he is often described as a mystic: but in any accepted sense of the term – one who has had an incommunicable experience of union with a transcendent God, in a peace beyond all understanding – Blake was almost the opposite. He was a visionary poet of the order of Dante, who recorded his experience in the most precise possible detail. His idea of Godhead was the complete humanity immanent in every

man, though realized only in the greatest such as Christ: "All deities," he insisted, "reside in the human breast." And the supreme spiritual experience for him was not the abrogation of identity but its full achievement, in a heaven not of peace but of joyous striving energy. Critics of the last few decades have given us a new picture of Blake: as an artist and thinker of remarkable breadth of tradition, which he reshaped in forms of unique coherence and complexity; and as a man deeply involved in the social and intellectual crises of his times, waging unwearied the long "mental fight" to rebuild England in the image of Jerusalem, the City of Peace.

By temperament and upbringing, Blake was a revolutionary in an age of revolution. Born in London in November 1757, he was the third son of a small tradesman who recognized his talents and did not force him into the stultifying schools of the time, "to be Flog'd into following the Style of a Fool." Instead the boy was free to wander for many happy hours in the fields near his home, "from Islington to Marybone, / To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood" – the setting of his lifelong vision of Innocence. Growing up in a non-conformist family, Blake also escaped the empty formalism of the Established Church of that time. His earliest reading was the Bible, which became the primary source of his art and poetry as well as shaping his first visions – of angels in a field of haymakers, of the prophet Ezekiel under a tree, of God looking in at a window. Blake apparently possessed to an unusual degree the eidetic faculty, common among children and artists, of visualizing his ideas, "organized and minutely articulated."

At the age of ten he was sent to Mr Pars', the best drawing school in London; at fourteen he was apprenticed for the usual seven years to James Basire, a respected engraver. Blake's training in this craft assured him of a steady if modest livelihood, independent of public reaction to his poetry and painting. At twenty-one he enrolled in the Royal Academy School, where he argued openly with the principal and with Sir Joshua Reynolds, the President of the Royal Academy himself. Already deeply versed in Gothic and Greek art, Blake could only despise Reynolds' fashionable neo-classicism. He found far more creative stimulus with the young avant-garde painters of the time – Barry, Fuseli, and Flaxman. Revolt was in the air in 1779.

The citizens of London were rallying to "Wilkes and Liberty," and openly sympathized with the American revolutionists. Blake was caught up in the Gordon Riots of 1780, an experience which seems to have inspired his first great design, "Albion Rose," the earliest expression of his apocalyptic vision of England rising and shaking free of the chains of social and spiritual tyranny.

Meanwhile he was writing his first poems. The *Poetical Sketches*, privately printed in 1783, were composed during his apprenticeship: the song "How sweet I roam'd from field to field" was written before he turned fourteen. Blake was in fact much more precocious as a poet than as a painter. *Poetical Sketches* was a daringly experimental first volume, exploring a wide range of English poetry from the medieval ballads to the pre-romantic poets of the time, recasting old forms, infusing familiar themes with new meaning. His next work, *An Island in the Moon*, was astonishingly different – a prose satire mocking the pretensions of the literary and artistic circles he had begun to frequent. Yet in the midst of this farrago of Swiftian irony and Shandean nonsense appear early versions of three of the *Songs of Innocence* – a context which raises some complicated questions as to Blake's intentions in the *Songs of Innocence* as a whole.

This volume, printed in 1789, may have originally been planned as a money-making venture: a collection of religious poems for children, such as were popular at the time, illustrated in Blake's new method of "illuminated printing." Yet their translucent purity of tone connects them much more closely with Blake's experience at the death of his beloved younger brother Robert in 1787. Blake, who had nursed him almost without rest through the last weeks of his illness, had a vision of Robert's soul ascending through the ceiling, "clapping its hands for joy." From this time on Robert was a constant presence in his imagination, and this sense of renewed communication with a spiritual world inspired a new creative surge in his work. The *Songs of Innocence* are a re-creation of childhood joy by a man who, at thirty-one, had already experienced loss and disillusionment, including the disappointment of a childless marriage.

Innocence is not a world of unshadowed happiness. From the simple joy in life of "Laughing Song" and "Spring" it moves through a growing awareness of adult restrictions ("Holy Thursday") and racial prejudice ("The Little Black Boy") to a calm

recognition of economic exploitation and human cruelty ("The Chimney Sweeper"). Yet in all these poems the child's faith in the essential goodness of life triumphs: a faith based on the reality of the protective love of parents, extended to a Father in Heaven who tenderly cares for all his creatures in a universal family of young and old, man and nature, visible and invisible. The child's first idea of God is of a child like himself, mysteriously called a Lamb, consecrating his instinctive love for the young animal who seems instinctively to love him. But this notion develops into a figure of essential humanity, the God who became a child so as to share in all the sufferings of living things and thus relieve them ("On Another's Sorrow"). So in "Night," sickness and pain and death are transmuted by faith in this God whose "meekness" leads to his ultimate triumph, the "health" of immortal life.

Five years later Blake added the *Songs of Experience* to the *Songs of Innocence*, with the subtitle "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." The relation between these "contraries" is debatable. Innocence can be seen as man's true and original condition of unity with God and nature and within himself, from which he has somehow fallen into the divisions of Experience. Or Innocence may be viewed as the transitory state of childhood whose weakness and inexperience make it vulnerable to the evils of this world which Experience can more effectively oppose. Or finally each state may be necessary to the other in the struggle toward a higher level of being that Blake called "Organized Innocence": as he remarked in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Without Contraries is no progression." Only one thing is certain, that between 1789 and 1794 Blake underwent much new and bitter experience – of disillusionment with the institutions of marriage and religion, of widening awareness of social and economic injustice, of involvement in the great political dilemma of the age.

The fall of the Bastille in 1789 and the subsequent founding of the French Republic seemed to Blake and his fellow radicals an "opening morn" of freedom and brotherhood; but it soon clouded over with the execution of Louis XVI, the outbreak of war, the Reign of Terror and the establishment of the Directory in France, and the spread of political repression in England. The tension between ideal and reality gives the *Songs of Experience* their terrifying urgency.

Many of them are searing parodies of their parallel poems in *Innocence*. The jealous Nurse denies her children their free play; the self-righteous parents of the Chimney Sweeper are blind to his misery; the "little boy lost" is not rescued by a fatherly God but burned at the stake by a zealous priest. "The Human Abstract" is a merciless exposure of the virtues of Innocence hymned in "The Divine Image." Pity and mercy are now seen to depend on the sufferings of others for their very existence; peace is a mere balance of power or mutual fear, love is essentially self-regarding.

These "virtues," Blake suggests, are in fact mere pious names for hypocrisy, indifference, mistrust, and egotism, from which spring the values that govern the "real" world – humility or self-hatred, cruelty, mystery or faith in irrational religion, and deceit. Yet, Blake insists, this "poison tree" is created in the human brain and does not exist in nature. Rather nature supplies the force that can break "the mind-forg'd manacles" of oppression, with its vital impulses of freedom resisting enslavement, youth prevailing over age, strength nourished by struggle itself. Experience is a world of evil only to those who succumb to it: its values are not those of Innocence, meek acceptance and faith, but of questioning and protest. So the Tyger, Blake's symbol for the forces of revolution, is as much an expression of divine purpose as the Lamb, of sacred energy working through the disorders of 1793 toward a new order, "fearful" yet symmetrical.

Blake's drama of the contraries soon required a larger stage than the contrasting lyrics of *Innocence* and *Experience*, and the impulse which led him to illustrate the *Songs* proliferated in a world of mythological beings embodying the "states of the human soul" in eternal conflict with each other. So his early prophetic poems were born. *The Book of Thel* (1789) and its companion piece *Tiriel* are studies of repression and frustration: *Tiriel* depicting the attempt to control life by a tyrannical king whose laws merely drive his sons to revolt, and *Thel* showing the attempt to evade life by a fearful virgin whose reluctance to submit to the conditions of bodily existence dooms her to eternal sterility.

Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793) is a more complex study of sexual experience in a social context. Oothoon fearlessly seeks out sexual love only to find herself enslaved and condemned by society. Yet she refuses to accept the idea of a universal law curbing and

regularizing the infinite exuberance of life: for "Everything that lives is holy." This is also the conclusion of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), a satire on contemporary religious thought, which explodes the traditional dichotomies of good and evil, soul and body, reason and energy, and sets the contraries working together toward a vital totality of being. In "A Song of Liberty" the opposition of reason and energy takes political form: a "starry king," guardian of "the stony law," is overthrown by a "new born terror," "the son of fire" proclaiming the end of empire. *The French Revolution* (1791) translates the conflict into terms of contemporary history, recasting the two months leading up to the sack of the Bastille as a single apocalyptic night preceding the Day of Judgment.

In *America* (1793), a jubilant prophecy of a new birth of freedom, the historical action is set still more firmly against the mythological background. Orc, the youthful spirit of revolution who has been chained Prometheus-like to a rock since his birth, breaks free and unites with the spirit of enslaved humanity in rebellion against the sky-tyrant Urizen. But in the following year, in *Europe*, Blake confronted the question of why, with the advance of revolutionary power in France, liberty was yielding to new forms of oppression. The answer seemed to lie beyond politics, deep in the past – in the development of repressive religion and abstract rationalism that had subverted the revolutionary message of Christ himself.

In *The Book of Urizen* (1794) Blake pushed his search for the origin of evil back to the beginning of time and the very nature of physical reality. Urizen,[1] embodiment of all that Blake hated in eighteenth-century thought, now appears as the false God of the material world, who by separating himself from the infinite life of Eternity in order to impose his "one Law" on existence, effected the Creation and the Fall in a single stroke. But he raises up his own antagonist in Los, the creative principle that brings life and form and meaning to Urizen's dead world of mechanistic materialism. With *The Book of Ahania*, *The Book of Los*, and *The Song of Los* (1795), Blake rounded out his first group of prophetic poems in a cycle

[1] His name is an example of Blake's Joycean skill in word-creation: it is a compound of "Your Reason" and *horizein*, the Greek verb "to limit" (like a horizon). Similarly the name of Orc fuses *cor* (heart), *orca* (whale), *Orcus* (King of Hell), and *orcheis* (genitals). Los is an anagram of *sol* (sun) and possibly "soul," as well as a pun on "lo," "loss," and *Logos*.

stretching from Creation to the present and spanning four continents in its search for the causes – cosmological, philosophical, historical – of the crisis of his time.

The central theme of Blake's work thus emerges as the problem of how mankind, once whole and happy, has fallen into its present discord and slavery, from which it can be rescued only by some apocalyptic upheaval. Man's fall and possible salvation could be defined in a variety of terms – political, economic, anthropological, theological, artistic. But increasingly after 1795, with the rise of Napoleon and the betrayal of the Revolution, Blake came to see the problem of regeneration not primarily as social or external but as individual and inward. His long poem *Vala*, later retitled *The Four Zoas*, extends and consolidates the earlier cycle of prophecies with a shift of emphasis to the psychological. All human experience is subsumed in the story of the Eternal Man, Albion, who has fallen from spiritual unity into a psychotic state of conflict between the four principles of his being – reason, imagination, emotion, and body or sense. Orc is now seen not as the saving spirit of revolt who will usher in the Millennium, but as the Satanic will-to-power which periodically erupts in history only to harden into a new form of repression. At the end Albion is restored to spiritual health when Urizen renounces the rule of false rationalism, and the creative spirit of Los, or Imagination, inaugurates a new harmonious order among the Zoas. In *Milton* (1804–8) this cosmic drama is recast as the fall and redemption of a single individual, John Milton, who is shown returning to earth a century after his death to undo the errors of rationalistic and moralistic religion that have sprung from his work. Uniting with Los, the spirit of prophecy, and with Blake, the prophet-poet of the new age, Milton proclaims a new religious vision of nature and mankind redeemed and united by the indwelling divinity of life.

By this time Blake had returned, on his own unorthodox terms, to a Christian faith in salvation through Christ's example of death to the isolated self. At the same time he was being driven increasingly in upon himself by the forces of political repression – in 1804 he had to stand trial for sedition because of a rash remark to an insolent soldier – and still more by the public's rejection of his art with the failure of his exhibition of paintings in 1809. *Jerusalem*, his last great

prophetic poem, was written during the following decade in poverty and obscurity. Once again it states Blake's master theme of Creation, Fall, and Last Judgment, in a synoptic view of human thought in which Christ's sacrifice makes possible man's spiritual rebirth from the false religions which have led him astray since the beginning of history.

From these years of failure Blake emerged as one who had "kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble," as he said of his artist-hero Los. Unexpectedly he found recognition in a small band of young painters, and in the work of his last decade – the Job and Dante designs especially – he achieved a new strength and sublimity. He died in Job-like contentment, singing (as his wife reported) extemporaneous hymns of praise. As his art embodied a unique religious vision, his life expressed a profoundly religious commitment to art. He was the exemplar of his own belief, that man is finally redeemed by his own creative labors.

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