



John Beer

BLAKE'S  
HUMANISM

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'William Blake in Youth and Age' (by George Richmond after Frederick Tatham)  
*Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection*

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## Preface

Those who now study the work of William Blake find their path eased by the wealth of scholarship which has preceded them. In the last few years, particularly, the devoted work of scholars such as Sir Geoffrey Keynes, G. E. Bentley, Junior, and David Erdman has made Blake's text universally accessible—down to the last thumb-nail scoring by a passage in Swedenborg which impressed him. The visual art is still not as generally available as one could wish, but here the Trianon Press editions mark a great step forward; through the labours of Geoffrey Keynes and others, moreover, most of the paintings and drawings are now published somewhere.

In detailed interpretations of the work of Blake I have been particularly helped by the studies of S. F. Damon, Northrop Frye and David Erdman. There are few books which do not add to the corpus of knowledge about his work, however, and to acknowledge specific debts is not always easy. Interpretations which seemed unlikely when first read may become, in a fuller context, thoroughly acceptable—by which time one may have forgotten where one first came across them. If due acknowledgment has been omitted anywhere, I ask to be pardoned.

Among writers on Blake, Kathleen Raine should be particularly mentioned. Her work had not at the time of writing been published in its final form, but I have been able to follow its progress in published articles and also to watch it unfolding in various lectures which I was privileged to attend. Although my own view of Blake differs from hers in certain important respects her work has been a constant stimulus, without which my own would have suffered. The studies by Harold Bloom and Desirée Hirst were published when my work was largely completed, but enabled me to mention some points which I found particularly valuable.

It is one of the delights of studying Blake that those who have gained most from him are often to be found a long way from the universities. Some of the most enlightening commentary, for example, is to be found indirectly in the creative work of writers who have learned from him—writers as diverse as W. B. Yeats, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Saul Bellow and Kathleen Raine herself. I remember with pleasure conversations with enthusiasts such as Frank Freeman, Judith Law, William Hughes and the late Alfred Winter.

I am particularly grateful for the help and encouragement of my wife, who was reproved by her grandfather for reading Blake at the age of seven and has been enjoying him ever since.

The study on which this book is based was first begun towards the end of my tenure of a Research Fellowship at St John's College, Cambridge. My thanks are due to the

College not only for that Fellowship but for providing me with rooms and dinners for a few months after its expiry in May 1958, thus enabling me to survive as a scholar at a crucial time. The University of Manchester, under the auspices of which the major part of the work was done, has always been extremely generous in allowing time for research and grants for travel, besides providing the opportunity for discussions with colleagues such as Professor Frank Kermode, Professor John Jump and Dr Arnold Goldman, and for seminars which enabled various theories to be given an airing. A room for research was provided by the munificence of Manchester Central Library, where the use of a study carrel for several years enabled work on this and other projects to go forward. My particular thanks are due to the Librarians and staff of that library for their unfailing courtesy and efficiency, and to the staffs of the John Rylands Library; the Manchester University Library; the Pierpont Morgan Library; the Harvard University Library; the Fogg Museum; The Cambridge University Library; the Fitzwilliam Museum; the Victoria and Albert Museum; and the Reading Room, Students' Room and Print Room of the British Museum. Nor should I forget the efficiency of the Lost Property Department of British Railways, which rescued an early draft of the manuscript after it had been thrown off a train in which I was travelling by an over-zealous porter at Stafford. Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Mr Martin Butlin of the Tate Gallery, Mr Malcolm Cormack and Mr E. C. Chamberlain of the Fitzwilliam Museum and Mr David Erdman of the New York Public Library have all responded with kindness and alacrity to my requests for help on particular points. My final debt of gratitude is to the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse, where this book has been finally prepared for publication and where I have been enabled, after several years, to bring together my teaching and research into one place again.

J. B. B.

Cambridge 1967

## A Note on Texts and Blake's Punctuation

The text of this book has been corrected generally to accord with that of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, New York, 1965 (E). Blake's own punctuation, used here, is eccentric—it often indicates emphasis rather than connection, for example—but it is not perverse and the real obscurities in the text are not elucidated by making it orthodox. Since English readers are more likely to have access to the Nonesuch editions of Blake, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, nevertheless, references are also given in the notes to the Nonesuch edition of 1939 (NB) and to the Nonesuch Variorum edition of 1958 (NC). The original Nonesuch edition of 1927 (NA) has a different pagination from either of these editions; a conversion table from NB to NA is furnished by A. S. Roe in Blake's *Illustrations to the Divine Comedy*, Princeton, 1953.

The reader who wishes to consult a text with Blake's own 'illuminations' should, ideally, have access to the facsimile editions published by the Trianon Press. Failing this, the most compendious edition of the illuminated books is still (surprisingly) the third volume of Blake's *Works*, edited by E. J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats, London, 1893.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since these words were first published, Oxford University Press has published *The Illuminated Blake*, edited and annotated by the late David Erdman (1975), which meets this need better

# 1 Blake and his Readers

When generalizations are made about art or poetry William Blake is one of the first exceptions who has to be accounted for: the necessary adjustment is usually made either by calling him a 'genius' (with the suggestion that this compensates for certain disadvantages) or by referring to him as 'mad' (with an indulgent inflection of the voice to allow for admiration of his achievements). He has always been an odd man out, the joker in our neatly sorted eighteenth-century pack.

To write connectedly and at length about such a figure might seem to be attempting the impossible. It is not just that he refuses to reduce to our categories, escaping like quicksilver from our carefully wrought patterns of organization. With Blake, there is a further disturbing fact. His words sometimes improve when taken out of context.

I behold London; a Human awful wonder of God!

Such a line takes on new virtue when read in isolation from the page on which it occurs<sup>1</sup>—it is as though the very space around the line gives the words greater resonance.

The final truth about Blake does not rest there, however. He had no desire to go down to history as a writer of inspired fragments—on the contrary, he wanted to produce work on the grand scale, to write an epic poem: and the effects of his desire are inevitably a part of his presented work. We must study the total context of that work if we want to see it as anything more than an obscure landscape lighted by periodic flashes; and we must sometimes do this in order to get the full effect of the 'flashes' themselves. The sort of positive qualities which Blake possessed automatically involved a certain relationship with the art, the literature and the society of his time: even his antagonisms and defensive gestures give his art some of its essential character.

Once we look into that relationship, moreover, we find ourselves involved with the widest issues. Blake was one of those men who, by standing at an angle to his age, causes us to look at it, as a whole, with new eyes. Its artistic, social and religious presuppositions are both challenged and thrown into relief.

We may begin with the question of genius and madness. The idea that there is a

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<sup>1</sup> *Jerusalem*, 38(34). 29. NB 480; NC 665; E 178.

link between the two is one of those persistent commonplaces which remain alive because their suggestion is more potent than their statement. In the eighteenth century it had a particularly strong appeal. Reason and social conformity were the current values. It was only natural that any phenomena which did not fall in with them should be classified in the same category and assumed to be of the same order.

Nowadays the word 'genius' is a term of overwhelming approval; in the eighteenth century it was not so absolute. A poet could refer to his Genius in the same way that he might refer to his Muse. It was a convenient way of referring to forces beyond his rational control; it involved humility as well as presumption. In 1776 Elizabeth Gilding could publish her poems under the title of *The Breathings of Genius* without appearing presumptuous: and James Beattie could, without offence, sub-title *The Minstrel* 'The Progress of Genius'. Genius was not then absolute and self-justifying, but a mysterious, somewhat attractive power which might excuse artistic divagations from the strict path of reason.

With the growth of romanticism, however, genius became the subject, first of Gothic approval, then of critical discussion. It began to be referred to, coolly, as a necessary element in all true art.

Coleridge took the discussion a stage further in *Biographia Literaria* by examining more closely the relationship between genius and power.<sup>2</sup> He discriminated between two forms of genius, 'absolute' and 'commanding'. Men of commanding genius might be found in any field; but their genius demanded to be made actual in some outstanding way, so that they were likely to exercise themselves in vast works of physical creation or destruction. Men of absolute genius, on the other hand, who were more likely to be artists, demanded no such violent expression: such men, he wrote, 'rest content between thought and reality, as it were in an intermundium of which their own living spirit supplies the *substance*, and their imagination the ever-varying *form*'. His prime examples of the two types of genius were Napoleon and Shakespeare.

Coleridge's distinction is particularly relevant to Blake. He, of all men, lived content between thought and reality: in one sense the substance and form of his work were provided, respectively, by his own spirit and imagination.

Here we have a link between the phenomena of genius and madness. The madman, too, lives between thought and reality. And although Blake's sanity has been frequently and successfully defended by his biographers,<sup>3</sup> one has to acknowledge a perceptible affinity between the spirit of some of his designs, particularly those which show a spiky flaminess, and those executed by patients suffering from paranoia.

This need not astonish us. The distinction between sanity and madness, popularly

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<sup>2</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ch. ii, ed. J. Engell and W. J. Bate, *Collected Works* 7, Princeton, NJ and London, 1983, I 31-3; See also the discussion in my *Coleridge the Visionary*, 1959, pp. 226-8.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Mona Wilson, *Life of William Blake*, 1948, pp. 65-7; 71. D. Figgis, *Paintings of William Blake*, 1925, ch. vii.

regarded as a defined frontier, is, we know, nothing of the sort. There is always, for one thing, a social element involved. Insanity is often measured in the public mind by the degree of anti-social behaviour involved, while anti-social behaviour is always liable to be treated as madness. Two results follow. The madman, by being automatically released from social constraints, may reveal to society facets of the human personality normally suppressed by social man: equally, anyone who wishes to express those facets may, by the very fact of his rejection of society, induce some of the secondary phenomena of madness.

This was especially true in the latter part of the eighteenth century. A prophet who cried out against the dominance of Reason was bound to be regarded by many as insane—even to be pushed towards the borders of sanity by their treatment of him. Blake is the culminating figure in a line which includes men such as Collins, Smart and Cowper.

The complicated issues of cause and effect which are raised by such a situation must be ignored here. A more important question is that of control. All men, whether they know it or not, exist between thought and reality. We judge them according to their success in reconciling the two—and even then we allow a degree of freedom. If we sense danger when thought begins to exist in a self-sufficient circle away from the world of sense-data, we also recognize that the mind has its own dynamisms, and should be allowed the graces and gestures that express them. We allow the mythologist a good deal of play in embellishing his narrative so long as we think that he knows what he is doing.

These criteria, so easy to apply to *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *Prometheus Bound*, lose their clarity when one opens the writings of Blake. Reasoning mingles with fantasy, social realism with visionary assertion. The reader, confused by the contradiction between lucidity of style and apparent incoherence of events, might easily give up in despair.

Blake was sometimes carried too far by his own creative excitement. There are in the Prophetic Books bursts of rhetoric or narrative which can be justified neither as interpretative mythologizing nor as poetic utterance. To read Blake is to witness an extraordinary contest between enthusiasm and control—the greatest, perhaps, that has ever taken place in an artist. There is hardly a single piece of Blake's poetry where his devotion to mythology does not compromise the singleness of the work of art. Yet he never finally relinquishes his grasp of reality. A link always exists, however tenuous; indeed it is precisely at the point when Blake seems to have launched into a cloudy empyrean of his own fantasy that he is to be found on earth again, solidly approaching human experience from a fresh angle. These unpredictable twists and turns tempt one to speak, as he himself sometimes did, of his 'visions' rather than his 'vision'. The existence at once of so many diverse 'visions' (with corresponding changes of mode) and his seeming inability, perhaps unwillingness, to incorporate them into a single, comprehensive 'vision' make him at once the most attractive and the most exasperating of artists.

Small wonder, then, that some critics have chosen to see him consistently from one particular point of view. His realism, for example, has prompted a number of studies. We have had Blake the adversary of industrialism, Blake the prophet against the churches, Blake the apostle of free love. The two major ideologies of the contemporary world have both claimed him for their own. Not many years ago, an American scholar produced a study with the title, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*; and when, in December 1957, Russian writers, artists and others gathered at the Art Workers' Club in Moscow to commemorate the bicentenary of his birth, a speaker stated that recent Russian criticism 'saw in Blake's fantastic legends a new and original way of attempting to interpret the revolutionary upheavals of his time'.<sup>4</sup>

There is no need to deny the validity of any of these approaches to Blake. Each can be backed by evidence from within the writings themselves, each witnesses to Blake's preoccupation with the world in which he found himself. But this series of limited interpretations has led to a situation in which a reader may wearily remark that any book on Blake is utterly convincing—until you open the next book on Blake; or, indeed, until you return to the writings themselves. Let us glance, for example, at a specimen of Dr Bronowski's rhetoric as he depicts Blake, the voice crying against the evils of the Industrial Revolution:

It is an astonishing vision. The reader must turn the pages of the last prophetic books himself, at random: and find everywhere the same sooty imagery, the air belched by industry. Men of letters, whom the machine keeps clean, have groped through this sulphurous rhetoric for the names tidily listed in the books of mystics. The names are there, and they are worth the finding. But Swedenborg the mystic had been an inspector of mines; Paine the deist planned iron bridges; Blake the poet lived in the Industrial Revolution bitterly in the decay of his engraver's craft. The oratory of *Vala or the Four Zoas*, of *Milton*, and of *Jerusalem* is loud with machines, with war, with law; with the cry of man preying on man; and with the rebellious mutter of working men.<sup>5</sup>

One would like to believe this. It would be refreshing to find a pristine critic of industry in Blake. But the reader who makes the experiment to which Dr Bronowski invites him will not find at every turn air that has been belched by industry or hear everywhere the rebellious mutter of working men. He will come across them from time to time, and be grateful to Dr Bronowski for having drawn attention to them. Their presence is a guarantee that Blake was no mere dreamer, removed from the issues of this world. But they do not give the dominating tone to the works, the tone which the reader most readily associates with them.

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<sup>4</sup> *Soviet Weekly*, contemporary report.

<sup>5</sup> J. Bronowski, *A Man without a Mask*, 1943, pp. 85-6.

It is not even certain that engraving was so depressed a craft at this time. Blake earned a meagre living, but he seems to have had work always at hand when money was required. His complaint was not that he could not find employment, but that his patrons and employers would not let him do the work to which he felt himself impelled.

Blake was aware of the ills of his time, but his awareness was always supplemented by a belief that human ills are most surely dealt with by curing the 'mental' ills which lie behind them. Dark satanic mills arise in towns because men have dark satanic mills in their minds.

In the same way, assertions which are confidently made concerning Blake's views on other aspects of life will often be found to cancel each other out. It would be instructive, perhaps amusing, to promote a symposium in which scholars would be asked in turn to state simply Blake's opinions on religion, politics and sex. The many apparent self-contradictions in Blake's own work would immediately come to light: and the audience would be left wondering whether Blake was an orthodox Christian or an uncompromising rebel against religious forms; a preacher of free love, or a firm upholder of the marriage contract.

One attempt to deal with such contradictions was made by H. M. Margoliouth, who suggested that Blake, as the result of some sort of 'conversion' about the year 1799, was more orthodox in the religious beliefs of his later life.<sup>6</sup>

The case for some change in his beliefs is not unconvincing, but it can hardly be made in so clear-cut a fashion. Many of Blake's most 'Christian' utterances occur before that time; many outspoken criticisms of orthodoxy, including *The Everlasting Gospel*, appear later. What happened at that time is more likely to have been one of many shifts of opinion as he tried to reconcile all the positive affirmations which he, the most positive of men, wished to make at one and the same time.

Alongside the various attempts to interpret Blake according to his realism, there have appeared a series of studies grounded in the supposition that he is, first and foremost, a symbolist poet.

The first long study of the kind appeared in the late nineteenth century, when symbolism was a new vogue. E. J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats produced a comprehensive edition of Blake's works, with extensive commentaries and large charts to set out his mythology in detailed and complicated schemes. In places the charts are useful and revealing; more often they disappoint and confuse the reader. If they are correct, one feels, Blake's symbolizing was so arid and arbitrary as to be largely valueless.

Most later attempts to organize Blake's symbolism are open to similar criticism. The studies by S. F. Damon, M. O. Percival and Northrop Frye, to name only three, contain much that is valuable and exciting to anyone who wants to discover what Blake was saying, yet the total impression is always unsatisfactory. Confident statements about

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<sup>6</sup> H.M. Margoliouth, *William Blake*, 1951, pp. 124-5. Margoliouth's evidence is mainly Blake's letters to Hayley of 1 April 1800 and 6 June 1800

the meaning of individual symbols in one study conflict with equally confident statements in another. Strong assertions, which seem to be leading to a positive conclusion, die out in a mass of associative imagery. Northrop Frye's exploration, for example, serves valuably to illustrate the weight of human experience in mysticism, folklore and literature behind some of Blake's images: one is given an unusually vivid picture of the lights and colours at play in his imagination. Yet in the end the wealth of images is more like a welter and we are left contemplating a landscape which is attractively coloured but not fully articulated.

The sort of irritation which assails the reader of such studies can best be indicated by quoting a sentence or two from H. M. Margoliouth's preface to his edition of *Vala*:

...Vala is a veil between Man and reality. The actual genesis of the name may be before our eyes in the opening line of the Fragment on 71R ...

Beneath the veil of Vala rose Tharmas from dewy tears.

... If afterwards, as the drawing on 2R may suggest, he also thought of this world's vale, that would be quite like him.<sup>7</sup>

Such affectionate gestures ('that would be quite like him') get us nowhere. The combination of symbolisms involved in making the images of a vale on one hand and a veil on the other cannot produce anything but a blurred effect, since the two images do not readily assimilate together. And if we take either interpretation separately, we shall need to set it within a more fully organized structure of meaning—or Blake emerges as an arbitrary symbolist, for whom no higher status can be claimed than that of an inveterate fantasy-monger, unable to stop himself from playing continual little pranks on his readers,

A good deal of work in this tradition is more stringent—but even so, varying interpretations are too often reconciled by the useful phrase, 'different levels of meaning', without proper consideration of the conflicts which may still exist between such 'levels'.

Miss Kathleen Raine's work, which has not at the time of writing appeared in its final form, takes a particularly direct line with Blake's images. Where Frye would think in terms of Jungian archetypes, leaving open the possibility of various psychological interpretations, she asserts roundly that the images are metaphysically valid and reconcilable with the tradition of the Perennial Philosophy, which she sees as the major source of Blake's inspiration.

Here the answer to realist interpreters of Blake is developed to its fullest extent. Against their picture of Blake as prophet of humanism appears Blake as priest of the *philosophia perennis*, heir to the Neoplatonists and to the mystics of the centuries.

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<sup>7</sup> H. M. Margoliouth, *William Blake's 'Vala'*, Oxford, 1956, p. xix.

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