WILLIAM BLAKE

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WITH A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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The Angel who presided at my birth
Said: Little creature formed of joy and mirth,
Go, live without the help of anything on earth.

THESE lines were written by William Blake in a manuscript book of stray thoughts and fancies jotted down from time to time. One could find no fitter clue to Blake's essential nature than these words of true self-insight. Innocent and ardent joy, independence of the world, which indeed gave him nothing, these sustained and animated Blake in his life, in his art, and in his song, through outward circumstances that to most men of genius would have spelt wretchedness, lamentation, and despair.

Blake was born poor and died poor; for the latter part of his life he and his wife lived and worked in a single room, and he worked incessantly, with an industry unparalleled. Yet if the power to stand above external conditions and to achieve the main desire and purpose of one's nature means success, Blake was successful beyond most men. He was certainly far happier than most, happier beyond

most men's dreams of happiness: for devotion to his art was his single aim, and the purity and intensity of his purpose were matched by the fulness of its realisation. Whatever opinion we may hold of the value of his production, we must all join in admiration of a loyalty so perfect, of a life so victorious and so pure. Rarest thing of all, Blake preserved to the end the radiant sweetness of nature (flashing out in wayward fires of wrath and scorn on occasion, but never inwardly embittered) with which he started. Ascetic pride, parade of poverty, or moroseness of too conscious virtue, were as far from him as the impotent plaintiveness of characters like Romney. He retained throughout the child-like power of joy which is natural to genius, and surely a virtue far more precious and productive than most of the virtues to which the world pays homage. Blake loved laughter, he hated "scarce smiles."

Is this the character of a madman? If it is, would not we all be better for a tinge of such madness?

The wildness of Blake's later utterances has given a pretext to the charge of insanity. It may be that the learned in mental diseases can give a name to the special extravagance of his mind. But this need not concern us. The labours of Mr. Swinburne and Messrs. Ellis and Yeats have proved that the obscurity of the prophetic books is one of words rather than of thought; he used a confused phraseology which needs a patient study, but which clothes intelligible ideas. What is certain is that in his main conceptions he put forth a doctrine specially needful for his own age, and of power and worth for all ages.

In the life of a man so detached from circumstances of the

world, there is little indeed of incident to record. The details of his biography are familiar, or easily accessible in Gilchrist's life. I shall not linger over facts, merely noting what is significant and illuminating for the understanding of his art and writings.

Blake was born in 1757. Few times, if any, in the history of modern Europe, could have been more opposed in temper to his own. From his birth he was a rebel. A few contemporary influences affected him in some degree, such as the Ossian poems, first published in 1760, and immensely read and discussed during Blake's youth. He believed in the genuineness both of Ossian and of the Rowley poems of Chatterton; and the former had a bad effect upon his later style. But for the most part his own age affected him by reaction; his recoil from it intensified his own views, and made his attitude more extreme in character. While rejecting the ideals of his own day, he sought all accessible inspiration and support in those of past ages. Instead of studying Pope and Rowe and Thomson, he found his favourite reading in Shakespeare's and Ben Jonson's poems. Apprenticed as an engraver to Basire, he was set to draw from the monuments in Westminster Abbey and other churches; and Gothic art was ever afterwards a home to his imagination. This was from 1773 and onwards, for some four or five years.

Before this, while yet a child, he saw his first vision on Peckham Rye. Though Blake was born and bred a Londoner, and passed his entire life, save for four years, in London, we must remember that our now monstrous city was then a delightful town with suburbs of almost romantic beauty, leading soon by a hundred ways to

green fields and smokeless air. This vision of a tree filled with angels witnessed to a special gift of Blake's, the one which of all others marked him off from other men. It was a gift sedulously and consciously cultivated. He advised others to acquire the habit. "Work up imagination to the state of vision," he said to a friend in later life, "and the thing is done." But it is important to note that he never confused these visions with material things; he recognised that they were in the brain. He gave a charming description of a fairy's funeral to a lady, who wanted to know where he had seen it. He tapped his forehead for answer. At the same time he imputed to these visions an authority and reality entirely transcending the sense-impressions of the material world. Side by side with his instinct of the idealist, which led him, with all the philosophers, to deny the reality of sense-impressions, he had the sensuous instinct of the artist, leading him to clothe his ideas in symbols of shape and colour. For the "real world" of the philosopher, apprehended by the reason, he substituted a real world of the imagination. It was inevitable that such a conception should lead to confusion not only in the minds of those who look at his work, but in his own mind also; for his world of imagination was made up not only of embodied ideas and principles, but of visions that came to him, as dreams come, accepted with implicit faith in their authority.

Of education, in the ordinary sense, Blake had little. For this we should perhaps be thankful, though I scarcely think that even the most regular and complete of educations would have had power either to swaddle his sturdy mind or to give it much more than he

found out for himself. No one is taught effectively but what he is willing to learn; and Blake, unteachable in some things, had the more enthusiasm in that he chose his teaching for himself. In his last years he learnt Italian in order to read Dante, and all through his life he seems to have read assiduously.

On the side of art he had more training from without. Before his apprenticeship he drew from casts at Pars' school in the Strand (1767–71), and when he was out of his indentures he drew from the life at the Academy schools. Hence he acquired a useful working knowledge of the human body. But he disliked drawing from the life, and used the figure, never for its own sake, but as an instrument for the expression of very definite emotions—pity, anger, torment, rapture. His choice of types was influenced by little in the art of his day. His conception of childhood was indeed little different from that of his contemporaries; but for figures of nude vigorous youth and bowed old age he drew on the prints after Michael Angelo, and still more on the engravings by Italian successors of Marcantonio, which he bought at print-shops or at auctions.

With such natural predilections and such external surroundings, Blake began his own original production. But that was not of a kind to earn him daily bread: for this he had to depend on his profession as an engraver. He began by engraving illustrations for booksellers, and this or similar work provided him with the means for subsistence. His early plates were mostly designed by Stothard, whose style affected his own compositions, and whose friend he became. Through Stothard he came also to know

Flaxman. Some have presumed an influence from the sculptor's side also. But Flaxman, only two years older than Blake, had not in the first years of their friendship done much beside designing for Wedgwood, and could have taught little to the author of the print called "Glad Day," produced in 1780. The famous outlines to Homer date from a decade and more later.

In 1782 Blake married. His first love affair had ended in estrangement. Sent to Richmond to recover his spirits, he lodged with a nursery gardener named Boucher. The gardener's daughter Catherine, on seeing their new lodger, turned pale with a presentiment that this was her destined husband. She gave him sympathy, which speedily quickened to love. Blake went away from her for a year, working hard to earn a sum that should enable them to marry. Unlikely as the wise might have thought it, the marriage proved a singularly happy one, and Catherine a wife of rare devotion. She learnt to read and write, and later to help her husband print, colour, and bind the books that he produced.

Two years after the wedding he opened a print-shop in Broad Street. His favourite brother Robert lived with the pair till 1787, when he died, and the Blakes removed to Poland Street.

In 1789 the two first of the now famous books,[1] the *Songs of Innocence* and *Thel*, appeared. The manner of their production will be dealt with later on. The *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* followed in the next year; the *Gates of Paradise*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *America* in 1793; *Songs of Experience*,

[1] This is not to reckon the two small tracts, *There is No Natural Religion* and the original stereotype of *The Ghost of Abel*, both belonging to 1788.

Europe, and *The First Book of Urizen* in 1794; *Los*[1] and *Ahania* in 1795. Between the first of these and the last a decided change has come over the artist. The "sweet, liquid, rainbow tints" (in Rossetti's phrase) of *Thel* and the *Songs of Innocence* give place to a deep, strong, opaque colouring. And a corresponding change has come over the poet's mind. The morning air of glee, the aerial carol of his verse, is lost in cloudy language, broken rhythms, and shadowy images. On the poetic side the loss is complete, but on the artistic side there is compensation in a new power of calling up colossal shapes, of suggesting terrible and elemental forces, in designs of great impressiveness.

All this original work was carried out in the leisure of Blake's arduous profession. He was never known to take a holiday, nor to understand why anybody should need one. It is said that at one period of his life he never left his rooms for two years, except to fetch the porter for his dinner. For a short time indeed (about 1784) he had figured as a social being at the house of Mrs. Mathew, where he had sung his songs at parties to airs of his own invention. But a habit of outspokenness displeased that polite circle, and since then Blake had resumed solitary ways.

An engagement in 1791 to do work for Johnson, the Republican bookseller, brought him into the company of Tom Paine, Godwin, Priestley, Fuseli, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Like many another ardent spirit of that time, he thought a new age of light was heralded by the throes of the French Revolution.

[1] There are two separate works, *The Song of Los* and *The Book of Los*, both of which appeared in this year.

He remained to the last a Republican in no fanatic sense, but the Reign of Terror destroyed his sympathy with the Revolution itself; nor had he any sympathy with the rationalism which Godwin and his circle had derived from Voltaire. Indeed, it was of all moods of mind the one which he most abhorred. Far from orthodox though he was, and finding little but apathy and negation in the Church, he was above all things a man of faith. What was needed in the spiritual life of his age was, he saw, imagination, the imaginative perception of truth. Neither moral codes accepted as eternal laws, nor sterile speculations and philosophic denials, could satisfy him; and in this he stands forth as the true poet of regenerative ideas. He asserted the needs of the soul, neglected by both schools of thought in his own age, and always in danger of neglect.

Toil in London was at last interrupted. In 1800 Blake went for the first time into the country, and settled in a cottage at Felpham on the Sussex coast. He went at the invitation, made through Flaxman, of William Hayley, an amiable bad poet, the friend of Cowper and of Romney, who, wishing to help Blake, commissioned him to illustrate verses of his own, and procured him orders for miniatures from people in the neighbourhood. Blake was at first extremely happy.

"Felpham is a sweet place for study, because it is more spiritual than London. Heaven opens here on all sides her golden gates; her windows are not obstructed by vapours; voices of celestial inhabitants are more distinctly heard, and their forms more distinctly seen; and my cottage is also a shadow of their houses."

But after a year or more the well-meant friendship of Hayley, and his "good advice," began to irritate. Blake's letters to Thomas Butts, the constant friend whose steady commissions for pictures and drawings shielded him for so many years from the extremities of poverty, show us what Blake was feeling. Hayley and his friends were all for turning him from his original designs to remunerative and popular work. This Blake deeply resented. "The thing I have most at heart—more than life or all that seems to make life comfortable without—is the interest of true religion and science. And whenever anything appears to affect that interest (especially if I myself omit any duty to my station as a soldier of Christ), it gives me the greatest of torments." Again, with reference to Hayley, "*He who is not with me is against me;* there is no medium or middle state; and if a man is the enemy of my spiritual life while he pretends to be the friend of my corporeal, he is a real enemy."

In October, 1803, then, he was back in London, never again to leave it. He settled in South Molton Street. Reaction, it may be, from the mental atmosphere of Felpham intensified in him the instinct to revolt from accepted ways of thought and speech. *Jerusalem* (1804) contains some of the grandest, as well as some of the most successfully fantastic of his designs,[1] and is the most difficult and baffling of his prophecies. *Milton*, the last of the Prophetic Books to be published, dates from the same year; this, on the other

[1] Gilchrist asserts that these can only be properly judged by a copy like that of Lord Crewe's, printed in warm brown-red. As a matter of fact, this colour limits the range of tone and destroys the sense of atmosphere. The grey-green of the Print-Room copy is infinitely more adapted to the character of the designs, and far more beautiful in itself.

hand, has very beautiful passages, and the irregular rhythms are with those of *Thel*, the most successful of Blake's experiments.

More popular productions came from a connection with the engraver and publisher Cromek, in the celebrated illustrations to Blair's *Grave*. But Cromek treated Blake with little consideration and brought about a quarrel between him and his old friend Stothard. Cromek discovered that Blake was busy on a composition of the Canterbury Pilgrims, and without mentioning the fact commissioned a painting on the same subject from Stothard. The latter's production was as successful with the public as Blake's was unsuccessful. It was exhibited by Cromek all over the kingdom and the engraving by Schiavonetti had great vogue. Blake, on his part, determined to exhibit his picture; and it was shown, with a number of other paintings and drawings, at his brother's house in Broad Street, in May, 1809. The descriptive Catalogue made for this exhibition is characteristic of Blake's most violent and arrogantly assertive mood, wild opinions mixed with shrewd and subtle sayings. But two or three were attracted to the show.

Thus all Blake's attempts (chiefly of others' contriving) to reach the great public had failed. Yet he was not daunted. In these years he became poorer and poorer, and even less known to the world than formerly. In 1818, however, he made a friend, to whom his latter years owed much. This was John Linnell, then a young and struggling artist. Through Linnell others came to sit at his feet and to help him in such material ways as they could: George Richmond, Samuel Palmer, Oliver Finch, and nearest in spiritual kinship to his master, Edward Calvert. Surrounded by this young

and enthusiastic company, Blake regained serenity. His ever-increasing poverty did not trouble his peace. In 1821 he moved to the single room in Fountain Court, off the Strand, where, seven years later, he was to die. This was the year in which he made his first and only woodcuts, those for the *First Eclogue of Virgil*, in which his gift is seen at its happiest. They proved the starting-point for the lovely idylls of Calvert.

One of the happiest glimpses we have of Blake in his patriarchal old age is given us in the *Life of Calvert*, written by his son. Samuel Palmer used often to take the Calverts to his grandfather's home at Shoreham, in Kent. On one occasion Blake was persuaded to join the party. They travelled from Charing Cross in a covered stage waggon drawn by a team of eight or ten horses, and Blake seems to have stayed some days at the Palmers' cottage.

The illustrations to the Book of Job are the greatest works of Blake's old age, and the most representative memorial of his genius. The designs were made for Mr. Butts, though the engravings were commissioned by Linnell, who also commissioned a set of illustrations to Dante. Blake made a hundred drawings, and was engaged on the engraving of them, in a freer and finer manner than anything of his earlier work on copper, when death interrupted him. Seven of the plates remain. Blake died on 12th August, 1827, not only serene, but improvising hymns of joy. His wife survived him but four years.

What, then, are we to say, in sum, of Blake the Man? Like other men of genius, he was an apparition, born "out of due time." But while others seem to have appeared upon earth one century or two centuries too early or too late, he seems to alight on eighteenth-century England across whole continents of time. He is primitive beyond the primitives; his natural speech and language were those of some fabled Arcadia; nay, still more aboriginal; an innocent nudity befits him; he wears the fashion of his time unconsciously; and just as it is said to have pleased him to sit in a bower with his wife in the state of Adam and Eve, so his imagination is impatient of mental clothes that others wear as things of course. His verse is happiest when it is a sort of exclamation, careless of the links of speech and the elaboration of grammar. He sees the world as the earliest artists saw it, and as children see it, in few and definite outlines, with simple and definite colours. As his mind grew and took in the pity and terror of the world, his imagination goes back to the antique East, whence all the religions of the world have come; it conjures from the unknown monstrous and impressive shapes of dream strangely resembling those mythic and symbolic creatures which people Eastern art. In his *Jerusalem* human-headed bulls are pacing as in the porches of Assyrian palaces; when he desires a symbol for the destroying elements of nature, he pictures the tiger burning in the forests of the night, just as it has been pictured, with similar meaning, by countless generations of Asian artists. He claimed to have been "taken in vision into the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia"; and he divined the overpowering architecture of Egypt from a hint of the

haunting image of Stonehenge. Blake had a firm belief in the pre-existence of the soul, and indeed, if any man was a reincarnation, one would believe it of him, for in his spirit there seems born anew one of those makers of mythology and religion who shaped and coloured the thoughts of the human race thousands of years ago.

BLAKE THE ARTIST

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BLAKE was an idealist. Not only was he totally indifferent to worldly success, but he lived as if what we call the world had no significance or existence for him. His daily interests and preoccupations were wholly in a world unseen. Such men are rare in any age and country; in our modern Western life particularly rare. But there was a further singularity about Blake. He was an idealist who was also an artist. And, being an artist, he had inborn in him an eager delight in beauty, and an instinctive desire to express his ideas through lines and shapes and colours. How could preoccupation with the unseen world be reconciled with this instinct?

Blake denounced the traditional divorce between the body and the soul. The naked human body was to him divine, a thing of glory and of splendour. Just in this we find the explanation of two often opposed attitudes. The body was, to Blake, the symbol of the soul. He never uses its sensuous beauty as a motive in itself; indeed, his weakness is to violate and pervert that beauty; intent upon a world beyond, he too often refuses and ignores the infinite suggestions of Nature, the avenues to undiscovered beauty open to the imagination, and, using human forms as characters in a

language, writes his thoughts upon the background of the unknown darkness.

One of the finest and most famous of Blake's drawings is called "Fire." It represents a city in flames. In the foreground, on one side, is a group of pale women and children, awed into attitudes of terror; on the other, two young men carry on their bowed shoulders a great chest towards an old man whose treasure it seems to contain. The figures are cast into strong relief, or lit up with hovering gleams, by the conflagration beyond. There the sanguine flames, arising and triumphing, shoot up into the sky, twisting and moving continually among the glowing spires and pinnacles and columns, that will soon be ashes. No human inhabitant survives; the flames alone have become the beautiful and exulting population of the city. I understand why Nero played his fiddle to burning Rome, for the flames in their motion are like music, and seem calling for an answer. On the face of one of the watching children can be read an expression that seems rapture.

Who can look at this drawing and not feel that Blake's heart is with the flames, triumphing and devouring the proud works of men, and creating, in their exuberant beauty, an apparition of power and glory, that makes the terrified efforts of these savers of material treasure seem impertinent and ridiculous?

Throughout Blake's art the image of fire and flame is a constant and haunting presence. It inspires his design so much, that not only do these wavering yet energetic forms play a signal part in his decorations, but the human bodies, that people his art, bend and float and aspire, rush, recoil, embrace and tremble, with an accordant

vehemence of motion. There was indeed something flame-like in the nature of the man himself. One can see a justness in those fanciful flames of hair which Mrs. Blake gave her husband in that very interesting pencil portrait belonging to Mr. Herbert Horne. And, without the aid of allegory, we can find, in this particular passion of the artist, a purely artistic source of power and subject of invention. Rhythmical line, radiant colour—mastery of these is of the essence of art; and in the shapes of fire Blake could find, without distortion, a theme entirely congenial to his eye and hand. But it was also congenial to his soul. I cannot remember that any other European artist has treated this element with the peculiar imaginative joy of Blake. Those who have painted scenes of fire, from Raphael to Millais, have made the human terror and human courage evoked their subject. But of Blake I cannot but think that he rejoiced with his flames in their destruction of the materials of this world. Here certainly we seem to find an attitude quite opposite to that of the normal painter, prizing so much the world's fair surface that ministers to his work and his delight. Yet the opposition is only apparent. It could only be real if art were indeed but imitation of nature. But art is never this. All creative minds, in whatever sphere they work, need to destroy the world that they may rebuild it new. Blake is only an extreme type.

Art, in proportion to the greatness of the artist, communicates, always through the eye, realities that are vital to the soul, realities that liberate, expand, rejoice, and awe. These realities dwell behind the surface of material fact presented us by nature, and are discovered and communicated only by the dissolving and recreating

mind. But in visible shape and colour they can be presented, through the invention of rhythm in line, harmony in colour, and by draughtsmanship which emphasises certain things, to communicate the sense of motion, force, weight, resistance, and aspiration. What, in the visible world, can express these ideas in the most naked and direct terms? Shapes of elements: the running lines of water, the soaring lines of fire, the inert mass of stony earth; above all, the naked human body, the portrayal of which, in its numberless gestures and attitudes of effort or endurance, moves us in corresponding fashion, with nearer and more subtle sympathy than any other thing. It is just these that Blake takes for his subject.

But now, for a moment, consider the general aspect of art in the time of Blake's birth and upbringing. It was concerned, as art had been concerned since the Renaissance, mainly with the beauty and significance of material life. The joy of living, the glory of human power and achievement, the delight of choice surroundings, the proud assertion of personality—these inspired Renaissance art; since then the high glow had gone indeed, the pulse of life grown calmer, lyrical joy had ebbed to easy pleasure, the imagination of men was tamed, fact and reason dominated thought. Yet a noble art was still possible, and masterpieces were being painted. Beauty was still sought and found. But the deliberate, patient way of Reynolds seemed like cold indifference to the impetuous passion of Blake; eager to reach by the directest road the essential forms of imagination, he could not understand the temper that seeks through tender unveilings to disclose reality, is fearful to snatch rudely or hastily at beauty, and accepts the accident and fashion of the time

as natural ceremony in the rites of art. Blake's scorn for his famous contemporaries was that of a headlong lover for the formal ways of wooing. Starting from an *à priori* conception of full-blown beauty, he deemed the general view of art in his time as an adornment and amenity, enhancing the enjoyment of this world as man's home, the height of folly and wrongness. Without interest in his material surroundings, he hated drawing from the model; it smelt to him, he said, of mortality. And we have his famous assertion in old age, that the contemplation of natural objects weakened, and had always weakened, imagination in him. His contrast with his fellows was like that of a naked man walking among the carefully and choicely dressed.

Revolt from the art produced and popular among his own generation drove Blake into exaggeration and extreme, both in theory and practice. But there was innate in him a disability to appreciate and see the justification of the art he scorned. The hints of beauty in the everyday life of a house, the ways of light falling through half-opened doors, the faith of *nihil humani alienum* overflowing for the painter's eye all homely things used by human hands, motives inspiring the finer genre pictures of seventeenth-century Holland and the work of Chardin—all this was probably lost to Blake, certainly is lost to the most of his special admirers, who see nothing in such painting but the objects represented. That kind of art, it is true, has oftenest been the resort of dull minds, who have produced an abundance of tiresome works; but the kind of art which Blake produced is in inferior hands perhaps even more tiresome, though it is certainly far more rare.

On the other hand, the many who utterly reject Blake as an artist are biassed by the prevailing character of European art, which, it must be confessed, partakes all too largely of triviality and imitation.

In the painting to which we are accustomed, the acceptance of Nature's accident and detail preponderates so vastly, that Blake seems a very singular exception. Yet there already existed in the world a great school, illustrated by countless painters, in which Blake would have taken his place as a normal example and his English contemporaries have stood out as exceptions. But this was not in Europe; it was in Asia. The Chinese painters of a thousand years ago chose their subjects with the same sort of intention as that which moved Blake; they too dwelt on rhythmically sweeping lines; they too loved to evoke, in bold and happy symbol, the shapes of flame and water; they too cared nothing for full realisation, only for the seizure of life in what they saw; they too, led by the same instinct of the idealist, rejected chiaroscuro, and worked in light washes and vivid outlines of water-colour, or in glowing tones enriched with gold on a sombre ground. And just as Blake despised the naturalism of his contemporaries, so the Japanese inheritors[1] of this Chinese classical tradition reproached the art of Europe, when first brought within their ken, for its imitative spirit and its appeal to the bourgeois mind. Flaxman possessed, and admired, some

[1] A Japanese contemporary, Soga Shōhaku, provides a curious parallel to Blake. Shōhaku lived in poverty, was thought insane, and worked in isolation. He despised and abused the naturalism of his famous and popular contemporary, Okio, as Blake despised and abused Reynolds, and in his own art reverted to the idealism of the fifteenth-century masters, declaring himself the reincarnation of Soga Jasoku. He could not, however, quite recapture the grandeur of the early style, and his force and fire are tinged with grotesqueness and mannerism.

Chinese paintings, which Blake may have seen, though it is unlikely that they were of a fine period. And, in one respect, the example would not have served him; for the art of Asia, in its ideal schools, has eschewed entirely the naked human form.

Was there nothing in European art to provide a noble and inspiring model for such an art as Blake desired? There was one transcendent example—the art of Michael Angelo. Disdainful of almost everything that painters choose and delight in, Michael Angelo created his visions of beauty, pity, power, and terror through the sole instrument of the human body. Here was an art far removed from the ordinary sympathies of the painter. Blake collected prints after Michael Angelo when he could; and the abiding remembrance of that stupendous art became a more and more powerful influence. Yet though Michael Angelo gave him much, showed him the heights of towering imagination, the influence was onesided, and not wholly good. We must remember, first, that he only knew the Sistine ceiling and the "Last Judgment" in prints; and everyone who knows the prints that were available to him, knows how poor and often false translations these were. Again, Blake's own defects of nature and of training hindered him. A certain arrogance was at the root, perhaps, of those defects. He claimed that what he saw with his imagination was far clearer, more defined, and beautiful, than what other men saw with their eyes. He claimed to copy his visions no less exactly than those others copied Nature. But, alas! when we turn to the forms that people Blake's imagination, we find something that (apart from attitude and movement) does not transcend in beauty what we see with our eyes. Nay,

more, we see that there is much in these imagined types which comes not direct from heaven, but is unconsciously taken from art which he admired. From the "Last Judgment" of Michael Angelo, and from later imitators,[1] is borrowed the full muscular development which shows often so strangely on his unearthly forms. And not well borrowed; for, with Michael Angelo, these extreme Herculean types are but the last fruit of a life's concentrated labour on sculpturesque form, of patient study fed by much familiarity with the nude in nature, as well as by the models of antique sculpture and the previous achievements of men like Donatello. Whereas, with Blake, this element is added on, from the outside, to an art whose essential instinct has a different bias.

In speaking of Michael Angelo and Blake together, I would guard myself from being supposed to suggest, as Gilchrist and others have done, that the two may be compared in stature. No one can understand Blake truly who does not realise the infinite superiority of Michael Angelo. Once and again, indeed, by force of imagination, Blake rises to something like the "terribleness" of the Florentine. "Elohim Creating Adam," the large water-colour in the Butts collection, is a splendid conception. Michael Angelo, in the same subject, dwelt on the effortlessness of power in the Creator; and Adam, in unrealising lethargy, waits but the finger of command to rise in his heroic stature and unmarred beauty. But, in Blake's picture, the act of creation is an agony, felt with overpowering effect by the spectator; his Adam, with the serpent coiled about his legs,

[1] In a print by Luca Penni are to be found types of human form which Blake seems to have taken over bodily. Such types are not to be found in Michael Angelo.

seems dragged reluctantly, as if conscious in his awakening of the full tragic meaning of human destiny, from the kind oblivion of elemental earth. Here, in a subject where Michael Angelo provided a direct model, there is no visible influence of Blake's great precursor. The painter is here working with natural fire in his own vein; and, instead of dwelling on muscular form and sculptured mass, achieves his effect by grand and energetic rhythm of line. And this aim is that predominant in all Blake's most successful works.

There was, indeed, in Michael Angelo's art something that conflicted with Blake's inborn ideals, both spiritual and artistic. For the instinct which led him to repudiate chiaroscuro, and to express his ideas in pure and sweeping lines, corresponded with his scorn for the material world. I cannot but think that the tyrannical example of Michael Angelo led him astray. Among other Italians, Botticelli would have been a happier model. In the famous drawings to Dante, especially those to the *Paradiso*, there is much that Blake must have found akin, and enthusiastically admired. But Botticelli, like Giotto and the early Sienese, with their more ideal atmosphere, was, necessarily, unknown to Blake.

There was, however, the medieval sculpture of Northern Europe, in which a similar atmosphere was intensified, and which stood in still sharper contrast with the material pride and splendour of the Renaissance; and this, in such monuments as were accessible, Blake studied assiduously and with devotion. For whole years of his apprenticeship he studied and drew from the Gothic tombs in Westminster Abbey: as Mr. MacColl says, "their supine figures

haunt his design." One feels that the slender figures and flowing draperies of medieval sculpture, such as the great statues of Chartres Cathedral, are more consonant with the spiritual fervour of Blake's mind, and with the natural conventions of his art, than the earth-born energy and passion of great masters of the nude. But, besides the Abbey sculptures, I cannot but think that Blake must have seen some medieval manuscripts.[1] In any case his own decorated books revive the spirit of illuminated missals; and this field afforded scope for a side of his art in which Michael Angelo could give him nothing: the innocent playful delight in the pleasantness of green leaf and curling tendril, the sense of spring and morning, which the Renaissance had lost, flower into decorative fancies about the borders of his pages.

In this turning back to the Middle Ages, a movement already beginning to awaken in more minds and more various ways than we are apt to remember, but especially in such memorable work as Chatterton's poems, we find at once Blake's relation to the earlier imagination of England, and his inspiring potency for the future in the renewal of English art by Rossetti and his followers. But this return was no formalised revival, like the German school of "Christian" painters; Blake was far too fiery a spirit to submit his

[1] Stothard certainly made copies from illuminations in the British Museum. But there are striking occasional affinities between Blake's work and work of the Middle Ages which he could not possibly have seen. For instance, in the "Très Riches Heures of the Duc de Berri" at Chantilly, by the brothers Limbourg, there is a mystical subject representing the influence of the signs of the zodiac on the different parts of the human body, with a type of human figure strangely recalling that of Blake's art, even to the flame-like pyramid of hair. Such coincidences are interesting as showing the natural bent of Blake's pictorial instinct to move on the same lines as his medieval predecessors.

ways so humbly to those of any past; the positive and revolting element in him added passion and exuberance to kindle what was indeed a wholesome reinsistence on decorative qualities in art, but for which, in Blake's hands, decoration seems a tame word. Yet as the imaginative and poetical side of his art has been so constantly and too exclusively dwelt upon, it is well to insist on this other side, and its value to succeeding art. His design suffers, it is true, from its reliance on crude and obvious symmetry; but the very audacity with which the principle is used, and the pervading fire of the conceptions and draughtsmanship, often bring off success, where more subtle mastery of design, without these compensating qualities, might well have failed.

Nourished and supported by no living tradition in his own age, hampered by want of opportunity and training, it is small wonder that Blake's production was marred in its growth. Where the lack of satisfying example reduced him to his own resources, we see him unconsciously falling back on the conventions of his age; the eighteenth century steps in, and he becomes, for the moment, a companion of Fuseli and Mortimer. The conventions of his age infected him, indeed, far more than his admirers usually allow. Blake preached furiously against the precept of generalising form, which was one of the dominant ideas of the time; he wrote eloquently of the beauty of precision and particularity. Yet his own forms are always generalised. Also, that other element in his mind which led him to take Michael Angelo for a model warped him, as I think, in its working out; and though, in the vein of sombre and marmoreal imagination, he produced, as in certain pages of

Jerusalem, magnificent designs, his later work is oftener marred by the distortion and unrealised effort at grandeur, which went with the troubling and over-shadowing of his poetry in the later Prophetic Books. He lost the sweetness, the clear and fluid grace, of his earlier imagination; only at last in the *Job* the two strains are grandly married and made one.

This and the other books will probably always stand as Blake's great achievement in art. His instinct was for improvisation, and as a painter he is happiest when he is working with slight materials. His use of water-colours, limpid radiant washes enforced with a reed-pen outline, produced examples that remain among the happiest works in that medium, preserving, with true insight into the genius of his materials, the lightness and unlaboured character of a drawing. "The River of Life" is, surely, one of the loveliest water-colours that have been made in England. The mastery over floating and rushing movement shown in the figures of this and many another design would alone suffice to vindicate Blake's extraordinary power of expressive draughtsmanship. His claim is true that those spoke falsely who said that he could conceive but could not execute. What he wanted to express his hand was entirely equal to expressing. That he used arbitrary proportions is nothing to the point, for all imaginative artists use these more or less. I think we should rather complain that his drawing is not arbitrary enough, that there is too much concession to natural appearance; for it is just the presence of muscular play on nudes that are hardly more in essential than symbolic figures which makes the eye crave for completer realisation. If there were nothing which challenged

direct comparison with nature, the imagination would be better satisfied. For the evolution of great and complex works Blake was unfitted by temperament as by artistic creed; yet his more considerable paintings, executed in opaque pigment, are often of extreme interest for the invention of a technical method admirably harmonised to the effect in view; and in some, as in *The Bard*, where the summary character of a sketch is retained, we do not miss the want of elaboration, and can enjoy without reserve the originality and fire of its creator. I think many must have experienced a certain disappointment on seeing again some of Blake's compositions; they seem shrunk even in dimension from what we had remembered; and this in effect is a notable tribute to his power, which has been able to transcend the bounds of his handiwork and, growing in our imagination, fill us as with the breath of his living spirit.

BLAKE THE POET

BLAKE THE POET

BLAKE'S assured title to fame among the poets of England rests entirely on his earlier works. Had the Prophetic Books alone survived he would rank with those splendid failures in whose writing students may indeed find a hundred things of power and interest, but he would not live, as now, upon the lips of English youth. The *Poetical Sketches*, the *Songs of Innocence*, the *Songs of Experience*, the *Book of Thel*, with certain pieces posthumously published, constitute the enduring work of Blake as a poet; and to these we ought to add another early book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which, though mainly in prose form, is the greatest memorial of Blake's imagination and peculiar thought.

The first obvious characteristic of Blake's poems is their intensely lyrical quality. His best songs sing themselves. As we know, he made airs to them, and sang them himself to those airs. This singing nature is as rare as it is precious. To have sung such perfect songs as "How sweet I roamed from field to field," "Whether on Ida's shady brow," "Infant Joy," "The Tiger," and a number more, is surer pledge of immortal remembrance, of a life in the delight of men's hearts, than to have built those monuments in verse which for how many poets preserve their names but as tombstones do!

Blake was so essentially lyrical in nature that the "building of

lofty rhyme" wearied and baffled him. Of a piece with his indifference to materials was his impatience of the architecture of poetry. Epic and drama were impossible to him. There are lovely strains and noble passages in his *Edward III.*, but no drama. His verse was ever a chant or carol of the soul. A little obstacle in his improvising was enough to disconcert his rhythm and his grammar, but instead of seeking another way of expressing the sense, he leaves it, careless even if the result be doggerel.

In the *Poetical Sketches* are evident traces of the models he had taken to himself, the songs of the Elizabethans. Malkin notes the similarity of motive between "How sweet I roamed from field to field" and a lyric of Ben Jonson's in *The Hue and Cry after Cupid.* Shakespeare's "When icicles hang by the wall" seems to have haunted his mind. In the same vein Blake lightly celebrates in happy pictures the pleasantness of rustic life, its sunburnt labour and evening sports on the green. But there is a difference of touch. Blake's picture is less actual, less solid: there is a transparency as of a water-colour about it. He is vivid, but the things seized on are such as heighten the impression of ethereal glee. Shakespeare gives us frank reality—

"Marian's nose looks red and raw,"

slipping in a moment after a sudden touch of shy and tender beauty—

"And birds sit brooding in the snow."

But Blake's vividness is of another kind—

"And Mary and Susan and Emily
With their sweet round mouths sing, Ha, ha, he!"

It is in touches like this that one sees the real incommunicable quality of Blake's verse. Just as Keats shouted with delight over Spenser's "sea-shouldering whale," so must Rossetti surely have shouted with delight over the "sweet round mouths singing, Ha, ha, he." In such delicious fearlessness of naïveté Blake is unsurpassed. And because art is perpetually growing and decaying, and if it is to live must always be renewing itself and becoming a child again, Blake's songs must always be an inspiration to poets. His poetry would indeed have been a far more productive force if it had not been of its nature limited as to its subject-matter. His songs are those of an inspired child. If children of normal gift and unsophisticated mind be set to write poems, experience proves that they will write of just such themes as Blake wrote of. Their verse may be formless externally, it will partake of the nature of an exclamation of joy or wonder; but what they seize on is the beauty of flowers, the brilliance of stars, the ways of falling snow, the bright life of birds; the forms that are large and simple, the colours that are radiant and clear. If they had Blake's faculty for verse, they would write in strains like his—

"Thou the golden fruit dost bear,
I am clad in flowers fair;
Thy sweet boughs perfume the air,
And the turtle buildeth there."

It is a grand defect in our civilisation that all its tendency is to educate the child out of us, to smother innocent delight in dull ambitions of middle-age, to sophisticate it with the pompous idols of convention. We boast that we put away childish things, and to

what a heavy yoke do we put our necks with pride! Yet to mature intelligence what failure do our laborious efforts often seem beside the radiant child, victoriously living! What pity and contempt have Europeans had for a nation like the Japanese, for whom natural beauty is all their life long a cherished fountain of innocent happiness! We called them a nation of children; and now, behold an heroic people, whose clearness of will and power of efficiency excel our own. Let us be thankful that we have so much to learn. Genius has always the child in its heart, and from the fires of genius, piercing through the inertness of our full-fed complexity of life, the world learns best. Of such was Blake. It is the child in him that gives his life and verse the character of a *challenge*—a challenge to the worth of our accepted ideas, a challenge to our ways and thoughts. "Mighty Prophet, Seer Blest," sang Wordsworth of the speechless infant,

> "On whom those truths do rest
> Which we are toiling all our lives to find."

Blake is prophet and seer by the same virtue, but refusing the yoke of years and custom, retains the "vision splendid" and the "blessedness" with the articulate speech and habit of the grown man.

How could such a thing happen? For assuredly those most sensitive to natural joy are those whom the evil of the world hurts deepest. Blake did not grow to manhood without perceiving the evil. He saw that the world made war on innocent happiness; he could not turn his face away from so insistent a fact. What account did he take of it in his poetry?

BLAKE THE POET

Five years after the *Songs of Innocence* come the *Songs of Experience.* The world-exiled spirituality of Blake's genius is at once apparent in the second group. Most poets to whom experience has brought added material of emotion write on from the same standpoint with which they started, only with a deeper and a graver colour tingeing the aspect of their verse. The contact of experience tends to drive them to an objective expression, to drama and to narrative, as the most adequate forms in which to throw their mature conceptions of the world. But with Blake the very sharpness of apprehension by which he feels the pain and evil of existence prevents him from assimilating experience, so as to blend the new strain with the old. It remains an intellectual apprehension, instead of becoming an absorbed emotion. And so with fearless faith he hymns the evil side of things, mating each assertion of the joy of innocence with its polar opposite.

"Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we."

This is set against

"For mercy, pity, peace and love
Is God our Father dear;
And mercy, pity, peace and love
Is man, his child and care."

But it is not in the human mind to rest content with the apprehension of two contrary aspects of truth. In the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* published four years before, and only one year after the *Songs of Innocence,* we see to what Blake's mind was tending. There we find the secret of Blake's apparent "enthusiastic

acceptance" of the dualism of nature. The signal thought emerging from experience is this: *Without contraries is no progression.* From this starting-point is developed Blake's whole system of thought and his mythology. For him the grand antagonists, by whose eternal conflict the soul lives, appear as Reason and Energy; yet because of their very conflict they can never be separated. Reason is a limit or curb to Energy, and without Energy Reason could have no ideas to build on. Formalised religion has always tended, by insisting on the divorce between body and soul, to identify what Blake calls Reason with Good as being only from the soul, and Energy with Evil as being only from the body. We may quarrel with the terminology, but if we set ourselves to understand Blake's meaning, we shall see the value of his impassioned protest.

It is, at least, a challenge to our received notions, a provocative to thought; and this is the first step, as Plato said, to a real understanding of the world. There is something stimulating and bracing in the bold thoughts of a keen mind, even when the thoughts themselves do not carry conviction. But with Blake there is nearly always, behind the paradox of his expression, a trend of thought which yields to unprejudiced study a substantive side of truth.

That good should partake of negation seemed an impious notion to Blake's positive and fiery faith. Dull and blind, as misers hugging gold, are those who make a positive virtue of self-control. Self-control is of no worth save to increase the soul's energy, as we straiten a stream in narrow banks only that it may flow with fuller volume.

"Men are admitted into heaven, not because they have curbed and governed their passions, or have no passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of heaven are not negations of passion, but realities of intellect, from which all the passions emanate, uncurbed in their eternal glory. The fool shall not enter into heaven, be he ever so holy; holiness is not the price of entrance into heaven. Those who are cast out are all those who, having no passions of their own, because no intellect, have spent their lives in curbing and governing other people's by the various arts of poverty and cruelty of all kinds."

Here, paradoxically put, is the core of Blake's philosophy; and if we keep it in mind we shall find a clear meaning in much of the Prophetic Books which seemed obscure. With the courage of a male intelligence, Blake sees that the world in general lies in bondage to its ideas of good and evil. Good is good, and evil is evil; but what is good and what is evil, to this question we must keep our minds for ever innocent and alert, not sleep in acquiescence to any blind authority of tradition.

It is obvious that the idea of good, as applied to human beings, has been tamed and degraded till its general and accepted meaning is scarcely positive any longer. It is obvious too that there is something wrong in our ideas if mere avoidance of injury and self-control are called goodness, while greatness and energy of nature are not allowed that praise. What Blake attacks, provoking the world's professions "with all the fury of a spiritual existence," is that unconscious transference of ideal, by which, because men work better with set conditions, control and restraint have come

to be honoured as ends in themselves. And we may compare Wordsworth's lines in the *Ode to Duty;* lines cancelled, it is true, after 1807, but we do not know for what reason.

> "Denial and restraint I prize
> No farther than they breed a second will more wise."

Aristotle's doctrine of the Mean has been misunderstood through a false association of ideas. That it need not carry any sense of moderation in virtue is apparent if we remember that in colours, for instance, the purest and intensest red is that which is midway or a mean between orange and purple. But as ordinarily understood such a conception would be hateful to Blake. According to him, what is good cannot be too good; he desired to go the whole way, to do utterly, "even unto seventy times seven," what the soul had chosen for its good. And general praise of moderation provoked him to paradoxes in praise of excess (perhaps meaning rather *intensity*); in all which we must remember Blake's own supreme spirituality, and also that he was a producer; his main effectuation in life, like that of all artists, was in production more than in conduct. And the thing that mattered to him about a man was his state of soul, what he was rather than what he did.

> "Abstinence sows sand all over
> The ruddy limbs and flaming hair;
> But desire gratified
> Plants fruits of life and beauty there."

The literal acting out of such a principle by ordinary men would bring wild and ignoble results. But from Blake's mouth how confidently innocent it comes! Only a really and singularly pure nature,

for whom the body could not be separated from the soul, could have uttered it. It is, on the one side, a serious and sincere protest against the spiritual self-maimings of perverted religiousness, "self-enjoyings of self-denial," and all the tyranny of ideas built up by the fears of the consciously impure.[1] On the other side, it is intimately connected with his æsthetic ideal; we may connect it with that other saying, "Exuberance is beauty." Again, to resume Blake's assertion of the virtues of revolting energy, Milton, in his view, showed his poetic instinct in making Satan the "hero" of *Paradise Lost;* and the Book of Job especially appealed to him, with its conception of Satan not as a malignant brute tormentor, but as the appointed adversary or examiner of man, the challenger and tester of his faith, whether it is to be real or unreal.

In the mythologies of the world we see the human imagination shadowing forth the same truth that Blake insists on; the gods of this world, representing mere restraint and government, have always something of stupidity and weakness. Prometheus, though he suffers, is nobler than his oppressor. And to Blake the merely moral law is "a stony roof" built by the gods of this world, by Urizen in Blake's mythology. In *The Everlasting Gospel* he brings, with great ingenuity and boldness, the words and deeds of Christ to witness for the pure revolt of the soul against this merely moral law, which is concerned with the things of time and space alone.

So much for the rebellious side of Blake's doctrine. But it would be a mistake to suppose him, with all his violence and

[1] Developed in the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion.*

extravagance of language, an antinomian merely. He revolts, but he also asserts.

Men are admitted into heaven, he said, for having cultivated their understanding. Not the whole truth, perhaps, yet an aspect of it which has been and is continuously neglected, and which will always need to be vindicated. For the gospel of love is degraded and misunderstood when conceived as a precept to the affections merely, and opposed, as it so often has been, to intellectual virtue; amiability does not make incompetence or stupidity a good; the meekness is unjustified and rightly contemned which comes not of a spirit too pure for pride in the world's homage. "A tear is an intellectual thing," wrote Blake; and the pity that ennobles is wise and full of knowledge. The brutalities inherent in the materialism of our civilisation—a materialism rooted in the mind—will never be softened by sentiment, nor cured by patchwork efforts of philanthropists: profuse benevolences of the rich are as nothing compared with the example of lives inspired by the imagination which conceives in its reality the unity of the race and the wholeness of human life. Without love we cannot understand, and to understand is the best part of love. Imagination fuses the two.

By imagination, said Blake, we are redeemed: the love that redeems *is* imagination, by which we are born anew. For without imagination we are prisoners to our particular time and place. The want of it makes both criminals and pedants, and has caused nearly all the cruelties of history. All those are materialists, slaves and enslavers to materials, who act in denial of that liberating saying, "The Sabbath was made for man," and teach in whatever field the

contrary spirit, asserting that man was made for religious forms in his belief, for the customs of law in his conduct, for grammar in his speech, for rules in his art. From all such bondage it is the imagination which redeems us; which enables us to see "not with the eye, but through the eye":

"To see the world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour."

So it must always be to a living faith. We may analyse into division of body and spirit, of this world and another, but the analysis is formal and not real. The Puritanism which would deny the body is a kind of infidelity, no less than the doctrine that denies the soul. To the eye and ear of faith, of imagination, no sight nor sound nor word nor act but is of meaning in the eternal whole. Nothing exists by and for itself.

"Each outcry of the wounded hare
A fibre from the brain doth tear;
A skylark wounded on the wing
Doth make a cherub cease to sing."

The soul which is thus liberated, vibrating to the frail and infinite sympathies of all life, and apprehending the realities that transcend the chaos of brute facts, will be freed also from that desire to impose chains on others, to materialise its ideals, with which the "mania of owning things" afflicts in so various ways mankind—

"He who bends to himself a joy
Does the wingéd life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise."

We can now see what meaning of vindication thrills through the concluding trumpet cry of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (repeated in other prophecies)—

"For everything that lives is Holy!"

Such, if I understand them rightly, are the main ideas which animate the poetry and the prophecy of Blake. Destructive criticism is easy if it dwells upon the actual form of their expression. Blake falls himself into the errors he denounced when he opposes imagination to reason. For each, of a truth, is helpless without the other. To condemn reason is to undermine faith. It is reason working through imagination that has done the most for the liberation and enlightenment of men. But this is not the positive trend of Blake's doctrine; he had not the discipline fitting him to use words with precision, and he gave to reason a limited, degraded, and negative sense. Setting aside all verbal criticism, allowing for wilful paradox, and taking the positive ideas in the sense which Blake intended, we must feel that they are the kindling and regenerative ideas of a prophet. Yet, alas! when we turn to the Prophetic Books themselves, we are puzzled, bewildered, maddened, rather than kindled and regenerated. There is more than one cause of this disappointment. Blake, with his primeval character of imagination, chose to expound his thought through a mythology. Myths are the language of the human imagination. The Greek mythology, so far from being, as it seemed to Carlyle's stupidly blind "reason" (adopting for the moment Blake's use of the word), mere "dead dog," is full of living meanings even to-day. But a

poet's instinctive desire is for a mythology of his own race, embodying its far-descended conceptions of the world. "English Blake," as he proudly called himself, could not satisfy this desire; nor could alien mythologies content him, so he was driven to invent a cosmogony of his own, in which Albion, the Genius of England, plays an eminent part. If we are to believe Messrs. Ellis and Yeats, much of Blake's mythology is traditional among the mystics; but this will hardly help to make it more acceptable and intelligible to men in general.

The second cause of disappointment in the Prophetic Books is in their style and language. This is a far greater stumbling-block. Blake wilfully chose a medium that in effect has the harmonies neither of verse nor of prose; though in *Thel* and in some passages of the later books he seems always on the brink of discovering a kind of verse, the rhythm of which should have for its beauty a certain wavering and indefinite modulation,[1] like the tremulous shapes of smoke ascending, rather than the regular roll of waves. The general impression made by the language is, too, one of "stumbling on dark mountains," where every step is an effort, and the way increasingly obscure.

Of all the books *Milton* contains the finest bursts of poetry. It is in this book that the sons of Los "build Moments and Minutes and Hours," an apocalyptic vision of the palace of Time; and in it, too, is the beautiful description of the flowers, the White-thorn,

[1] The kind of modulation I mean is suggested in verses of the poem called "Mary," especially in such delicate and fragile rhythm as—

"Her soft memory imprinted with faces of scorn.

opening "her many lovely eyes," and in a line of delightful rhythm—

"And Meadow-sweet downy and soft waving among the reeds."

Also the perfect picture of the Lark—

"The Lark sitting upon his earthy bed, just as the morn
Appears, listens silent; then springing from the waving cornfield, loud
He leads the Choir of Day! trill, trill, trill, trill!
Mounting upon the wings of light into the Great Expanse,
Re-echoing against the lovely blue and shining heavenly shell,
His little throat labours with inspiration; every feather
On throat and breast and wings vibrates with the effluence divine.
All Nature listens silent to him, and the Awful Sun
Stands still upon the Mountain, looking on this little bird
With eyes of soft humility and wonder, love, and awe."

But these are as fountains in the desert. Poetry is nothing if not a home-bringing to the heart of the treasures of imagination. The songs of the strife of Los and Urizen assuredly embody ideas that are near and real to human life, but the poet fails to bring them home. Whether from some essential defect, or from the misfortune of extreme untimeliness, the language native to Blake was clouded as it left his lips on the alien atmosphere, like breath on a frosty day.

Finally, there is a reason lying deeper than any strangeness or incoherency of expression why Blake could never in such work reach a wide audience directly. We ought not perhaps to call that singularity of nature a defect which lifted Blake above necessities of circumstance, and gave him ethereal buoyancy of soul; yet it is certain that this disabled him as a poetic influence. The very force of the idealist in him too often got the better of the poet. We have

seen already how, as an artist, he was weakened by that instinct which made him confess that contemplation of natural objects deadened his imagination. So too as a poet, while he had a marvellous sense for the elemental, the naked, the extreme, he was indifferent to and contemptuous of the intermediate obvious world which forms the interests of ordinary men; and though saved by this from being ever enmeshed by trivialities, he lacked that powerful and sympathetic humanism which in the greatest poets and artists finds nothing in nature or human life unworthy the uses of interpretative art. Hence he illuminates by lightning flashes rather than by radiant and pervading sunshine; he is a child of fire rather than a child of light; without the serenity and coherence of the great creators, he is wont to scatter his force in dazzling paradox and aphorism. His doctrine is too heady wine for most, but he is of those whose genius is seen not least in its faculty for kindling the thoughts of others.

Yet after all, for direct and positive and undisturbed delight we come back from Blake at war (though he, like Heine, has earned both sword and laurel for his grave by his battle for humanity's liberation) to Blake at peace; to the Blake who pictured Glad Morning alighting on the hilltops, and who sang the *Songs of Innocence*. We look back to his radiant primal confidence of joy through the murk and travail of his experience as to the glory of the Sunflower, to which he made such longing and beautiful appeal—

> "Ah, Sunflower, weary of Time,
> That countest the steps of the sun!"

THE ILLUSTRATIONS TO JOB

THE ILLUSTRATIONS TO JOB

THE illustrations to the Book of Job rank with the very finest of Blake's designs. The serenity of his old age brought back something of the clear sweetness of his early art, harmonised with the power and grandeur of his maturer work. They also show him at his best as an engraver. Under Basire Blake had learnt a serviceable and unaffected, though somewhat mechanical, method of translating other men's work into black and white line. The few original engravings which he had hitherto produced had been wrought in a modification of the same manner. But in the Job his manner is far more direct and personal. Later, in the seven unfinished Dante plates, he was to find a still freer mode of handling the burin.

According to Gilchrist it was the sight of some prints by Bonasone, shown him by Linnell, which more than anything else revealed to Blake how far more freely and beautifully the copper might be engraved than by the clever reproductive engravers of the eighteenth century. This is a little puzzling, especially when coupled with the statement that it was only through Linnell that he knew the prints of Durer and Marc Antonio, for Blake must have been

acquainted from boyhood with those masters of engraving, who could teach him far better than Bonasone. He had a great admiration for Durer, whose prints he must therefore have seen; and from what we are told of his constant attendance at sales he must have known the work of Marc Antonio and his followers. What would be interesting to know is if he had ever seen prints by the early French engraver, Jean Duvet, whose prints have in some ways so curious a resemblance to his own. However this may be, he certainly seems to have now, in 1823, when he was sixty-six years old, considered anew the practice of the burin. His burin work on copper had hitherto been almost entirely reproductive work, done for a public which looked for the fashion of the time. Linnell's commission left him free to choose his own fashion, and it would be a natural instinct to turn to the great original engravers of the past. Since the time of Durer and Mantegna, engraving had deserted its first use and had become harnessed to commerce and the reproduction of famous paintings. But its first tradition, as a means of direct execution by an original artist—the print itself being his final aim—had produced those engravings which continue to have the greatest interest and value. To plough the copper with the burin is a work of such labour that few original artists have cared to pursue it, and those who, like Rembrandt, felt the fascination of the printed line, turned to the more facile method of etching. To Blake, however, long practice had given ease; and his industry was inexhaustible. The illustrations to the Book of Job are, therefore, of high importance in the history of engraving as being among the very rare original works produced by artists. Of their

other qualities I shall say what may seem useful or necessary in brief notes upon the several plates. But first a word must be said about the relation of the plates to the original drawings. These had been made for Mr. Butts, from whose son's collection they passed into that of Lord Houghton. They were sold at Lord Crewe's sale in 1903 to Mr. Pierpont Morgan. I doubt if Blake had the thought of engraving them in his mind at the time of execution: but after selling them to Mr. Butts he thought they might be issued as engravings. He borrowed them back, but could not find a publisher to undertake the venture; and it was then that Linnell came to the rescue. A second set of drawings, more finished and richer in colour, was made for Linnell, and is still with his family. Such is the account of Gilchrist, who adds that both sets of drawings are superior to the prints. "No artist can quite reproduce even his own drawings. They are necessarily very much finer than the prints." With this I cannot agree. Having examined the Butts set of drawings, which are in Indian-ink tinted with water-colour, I feel no hesitation in asserting that they are decidedly inferior to the engravings. They are wrought in a tamer and more pensive mood; and beautiful as they are in colour and general effect, are less forcible and impressive. There are a good many differences between the drawings and the prints, and the changes made are all towards greater coherence of design, more vigour and expressiveness in the types. More than this, the burin was an instrument more congenial to Blake's impetuous force than pen or brush. The beauty of an engraved line is the sense of motion in the line which it communicates; and it was admirably

adapted to bring out and enhance the special qualities of Blake's drawing.

The Book of Job could not fail to have had a peculiar and strong attraction for Blake, as it had for Shelley and for Byron. The fearless challenge in Job's profound faith, the discomfiture of the orthodox consolers, the conception of Satan as the servant of God and examiner of man; these made instinctive appeal to his own spirit, in which a vehement revolt but strengthened a splendid faith. It has also been suggested that Blake regarded the poem as emblematic of his own life.

The Title. The beauty of flight in the angels' figures is expressed as very few but Blake have ever been able to express it. Luini and Botticelli have made angels float in lovely motion, but have not given the sweeping and soaring rhythm that delights us here and is still more wonderfully rendered in a water-colour illustration to Job (not engraved) in the Butts collection.

Plate I. The feeling of unity and peace is enforced by the gathering of the composition together in the centre of the space, with the great sheltering tree in the very middle. This yields tranquillising spaces on either side, filled with the peaceful lines of the mountain range in the distance. Note the Gothic architecture of the church. No other architecture could express religion to Blake's mind.

Plate II. The figure of the Adversary in the centre is one of those extravagant forms which it was the weakness of Blake's art to

indulge in, when he uses the human body as a hieroglyph for an emotion or state of mind, without respect for its natural possibilities of movement. It occurs again in the colour-print sometimes called "The Flames of Furious Desire" in *Urizen.*

Plate III. A magnificent design. How characteristic of Blake to show the Evil Power embodied and dominating the scene, instead of representing merely the fall of the house in the great wind! So in his designs to Milton's *Penseroso* he introduces the sun "flinging his flaring beams" as an actual human figure darting javelins.

Plate IV. The most striking effect in this design is the overpowering haste and urgency of the two runners, one running after the other; the two are very skilfully brought into the design and placed in opposite directions, so that each accentuates the other's motion.

Plate V. Here, as in other plates of the series, Blake's great gift of design is seen in the power of making every line and detail expressive of the mood behind. Its impressiveness is in the contrast between the peace of resignation in the lower part and the trouble of heaven above. Job, still strong and calm, gives alms to an old man; his wife clings to him in a beautiful attitude of tender grief; their two angels float on either side to bless them. There is no hint in the still figures and serene landscape of the further affliction to come. But close above Satan holds the phial of burning desolation; heaven opens between the shuddering seraphs to the

very throne and grieving vision of the Almighty. And here, though the forms of Satan and the angels are brought into the rhythm of the design with marvellous skill, every line, except in the grand central figure, throbs and burns.

Plate VI. The scene is changed to utter prostration, dominated by the gigantic and exulting form of Satan, while the sky, charged with tumultuous clouds, rolling over the sinking sun, echoes the mental horror and despair. The bowed figure of Job's wife has a naturalness of pathos in attitude and gesture, which is rare in Blake. Sir Charles Dilke possesses a water-colour version of this subject in which Satan has red wings, and the whole colour-effect is very splendid.

Plate VII. Blake was very fond of echoed or reiterated lines like those in the figures of the three would-be comforters, each with uplifted arms. The effect is matched in the art of the author of the poem. One is irresistibly reminded of the arrival of the three messengers one after the other, with the repeated cry, "And I alone am escaped to tell thee." Fuseli and others tried similar effects, but the felicity with which Blake varied the repeated movement in the hands was beyond them. The depth of desolation in the motionless Job is finely contrasted with the mere agitation of lament in his friends. How beautiful and yet how briefly expressed is the image of listless sorrow in the figures sketched within the border!

Plate VIII. One of the finest of the series for concentrated intensity. The whole soul of Job cries aloud, "Let the Day perish

wherein I was born"; his figure, with its energy of upthrown arms, is like an embodied exclamation of despair shooting up among the bowed forms about him, and crushing them in horror yet nearer to the earth.

Plate IX. The expression of terror and awe is conceived with the utmost vividness. But note the contrasted calm, as of authority and conviction, in the figure of him who relates the vision; in the design it is made to answer and repeat the majestic stillness of the Apparition above.

Plate X. Again, a wonderfully forcible effect is produced by the boldly reiterated yet cunningly varied "fingers of scorn."

Plate XI. Was the horror of dreams ever shown in such living embodiment as here? We feel the clutching hands of the climbing demons as if on our own limbs, the insistence and closeness of the overshadowing Terror, the weight of the coiling serpent, and with it all the paralysed immobility of the tormented dreamer. There is no rest in any corner of this fierce design, round which in the border tongues of fire leap and tremble. How bold is the thought of the *black* flames on the lower edge, showing glimpses of white heat beyond.

Plate XII. After the fury of the last vision we return to a mitigated scene on earth. The great stars give peace and coolness to the sky, and a new interest flickers over the faces of Job and his

friends at the interruption of the young Elihu. Only Job's wife will hear nothing.

Plate XIII. A new beauty, as of cleared air and rushing motion, inspires this design, where the glory of God appears through the whirlwind. Note the way in which the whirlwind of the apparition envelops and possesses the lines of the whole composition with transparent curves, and seems to annul and obliterate the cowering forms of the three friends. Beautiful too is the border, with its vision of positive power in the rushing figures above answered by its result below in the collapsed and prostrate trees.

Plate XIV. Probably the most famous of all Blake's creations. The row of seraphs is indeed a magnificent idea in the engraving, and, as Mr. Rossetti says, infinitely superior in imaginative effect to the drawing, in which the upraised arms at either side of seraphs unseen do not appear. The same invention is used in "David delivered out of Many Waters," in the National Gallery, and other drawings.

Plate XV. Not wholly satisfactory in its upper part (for the figure of the Almighty is cramped and unintelligible) this plate is notable for the originality with which the vision of Behemoth and Leviathan is introduced, and the extraordinary skill with which their monstrous forms are controlled in the unity of design yet remain impressive of hugeness and strange reality.

Plate XVI. "Hell is naked before him" could hardly be more vividly illustrated than by these headlong figures rushing with such inevitable speed of motion to the flames below.

Plate XVII. From now onward the restored peace of Job is expressed in increasing simplicity and repose of design, as here and still more in the next composition.

Plate XVIII. This plate shows Blake's tendency in design to excess; the tendency to build all the elements of the composition, including human figures, into a pattern of spaces, here of mathematical symmetry. The crouching figures, the altar and the great heart-shaped flame make one pyramid; and Job's outstretched arms form a chord of the circle of the glory of heaven. Such symmetry would strike us as artificial, were it not for the intensity of mood which seems to have naturally persuaded the materials at hand to fall into forms that symbolise the fervour of aspiration and prayer.

Plate XIX. Perhaps the most beautiful parts of this plate are those hovering figures in the border round it, which, invisible to the actors, yet share in the joy of their new peace and carry it up and out, vibrating through the heights and depths of space. Real as such presences always were to Blake, he has made them real to us.

Plate XX. Here we return to that centrality of composition which was in the first plate. Again, the extreme symmetry of design is made acceptable by its inner vitality. The device by which the scenes of Job's affection are made visible and near to us, as the

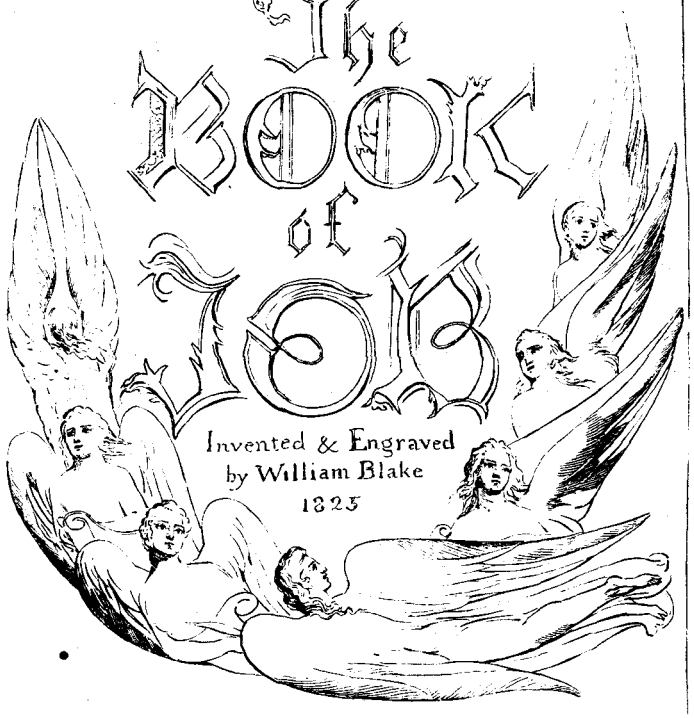
words of his lips to his listening children in the pictured panels of the room, shows the pictorial genius of Blake at its happiest. It is as if Job's house were dyed in the experiences of his soul; and the intensity of imagination, making every corner and detail significant, reminds one of the splendid drawings of Rossetti.

Plate XXI. A unison of peace and joy is the theme of this composition, toward which every line in it conspires. It has the effect of a grand concluding chorus.

סֵפֶר אִיּוֹב

ILLUSTRATIONS of

The Book of Job



Invented & Engraved
by William Blake
1825

London. Published as the Act directs March. 8. 1825 by William Blake N° 3 Fountain Court. Strand

Our Father which art in Heaven

hallowed be [redacted] Name

1

Thus did Job continually

There was a Man in the Land of Uz whose Name was Job. & that Man was perfect & upright

The Letter Killeth
The Spirit giveth Life

It is Spiritually Discerned

& one that fe[illegible]ed God & eschewed Ev[illegible] & there was born unto hi[illegible]Seven Sons & Three Dau[illegible]ters

WBlake inv & s[illegible]p

[illegible] Published as the Act directs. March [illegible]1826. by Wm Blake No Fountain Court Strand

Proof

I beheld the Ancient of Days

Hast thou considered my Servant Job

The Angel of the Divine Presence

מלך יהוה

I shall see God

We shall awake up

Thou art our Father

in thy Likeness

When the Almighty was yet with me, When my Children were about me

There was a day when the Sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord & Satan came also among them to present himself before the Lord

Published as the Act directs March 8. 1825 by Wm. Blake No 3 Fountain Court Strand

The Ancient of Days

And the Lord said unto Satan Behold All that he hath is in thy Power

Fallen from Heaven

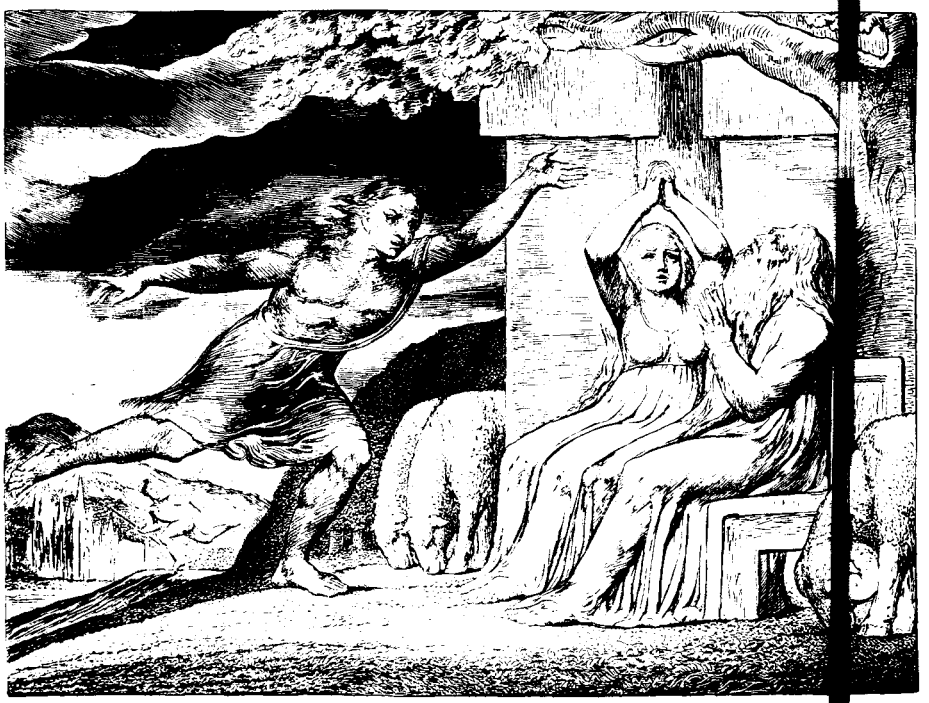
Thy Sons & thy Daughters were eating & drinking Wine in their
eldest Brothers house & behold there came a great wind from the Wilderness
& smote upon the four Faces of the house & it fell upon the young Men & they are Dead

London Published as the Act directs March 1 1825 by Wm Blake No 13 Fountain Court Strand

And there came a Messenger unto Job & said. The Oxen were plowing & the Sabeans came down & they have sl[ain] the Young Men with the Sword

Going to & fro in the Earth

& walking up & down in it



And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

While he was yet speaking
there came also another & said
The fire of God is fallen from heaven & hath burned up the Sheep & the
Young Men & consumed them & I only am escaped alone to tell thee

W. Blake Invent & Engrave

Proof

... Did I not weep for him who was in trouble Was not my Soul afflicted for the Poor

Behold he is in thy hand: but save his Life

Then went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord

And it grieved him at his heart

Who maketh his Angels Spirits & his Ministers a Flaming Fire

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Proof

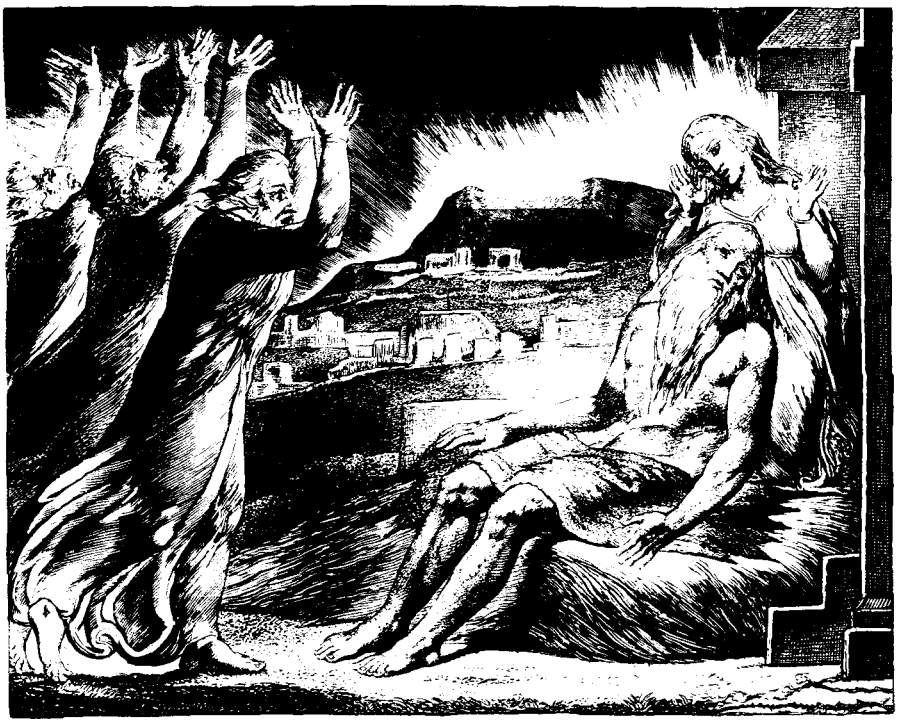
Naked came I out of my mothers womb & Naked shall I return thither
The Lord gave & the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord

And smote Job with sore Boils
from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head

W. Blake inv. & sc.

London Act directs Published March 8. 1825 by William Blake 13 Fountain Court Strand

What! shall we recieve Good
at the hand of God & shall we not also
recieve Evil



And when they lifted up their eyes afar off & knew him not
they lifted up their voice & wept, & they rent every Man his
mantle & sprinkled dust upon their heads towards heaven

Ye have heard of the Patience of Job and have seen the end of the Lord

W Blake inven & sculpt

as the Act directs March 8. 1826 by William Blake No 3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

Lo let that night be solitary
& let no joyful voice come therein

Let the Day perish wherein I was Born

And they sat down with him upon the ground seven days & seven nights & none spake a word unto him for they saw that his grief was very great

London Published as the Act directs March 8 1825 by

Proof

Shall a Man be more Pure than his Maker Behold he putteth no trust in his Saints & his Angels he chargeth with folly

Shall mortal Man be more Just than God? Shall a Man be more Pure than his Maker Behold he putteth no trust in his Saints & his Angels he chargeth with folly

Then a Spirit passed before my face
the hair of my flesh stood up

London. Published as the Act directs March 2. 1825 by William Blake [illegible] Broad Street Golden Square

Proof

But he knoweth the way that I take
when he hath tried me I shall come forth like gold

Have pity upon me! Have pity upon me. O ye my friends
for the hand of God hath touched me

Though he slay me yet will I trust in him

The Just Upright Man is laughed to scorn

Man that is born of a Woman is of few days & full of trouble
he cometh up like a flower & is cut down he fleeth also as a shadow
& continueth not And dost thou open thine eyes upon such a one
& bringest me into judgment with thee

London Published as the Act directs March 8: 1825. by William Blake N.3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

My bones are pierced in me in the night season & my sinews take no rest

My skin is black upon me & my bones are burned with heat

The triumphing of the wicked is short, the joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment

Satan himself is transformed into an Angel of Light & his Ministers into Ministers of Righteousness

With Dreams upon my bed thou scarest me & affrightest me with Visions

Why do you persecute me as God & are not satisfied with my flesh. Oh that my words were printed in a Book that they were graven with an iron pen & lead in the rock for ever For I know that my Redeemer liveth & that he shall stand in the latter days upon the Earth & after my skin destroy thou This body yet in my flesh shall I see God whom I shall see for Myself and mine eyes shall behold & not Another tho consumed be my strength in my

Who opposeth & exalteth himself above all that is called God or is Worshipped

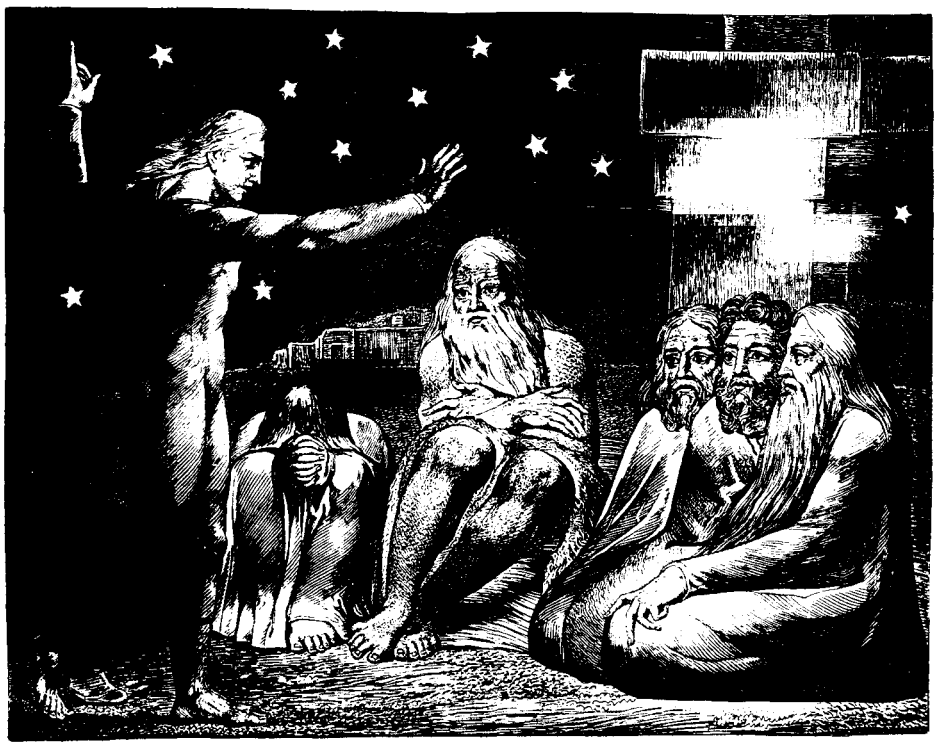
London Published as the Act directs March 2. 1825 by Wm Blake, 13 Fountain Court Strand

For God speaketh once yea twice
& Man perceiveth it not

In a Dream in a Vision of the Night
in deep Slumberings upon the bed
Then he openeth the ears of Men & sealeth their instruction

That he may withdraw Man from his purpose
& hide Pride from Man
If there be with him an Interpreter One among a Thousand
then he is gracious unto him
& saith Deliver him from going down to the Pit
I have found a Ransom

For his eyes are upon
the ways of Man & he observeth
all his goings



I am Young & ye are very Old wherefore I was afraid

Lo all these things worketh God oftentimes with Man to bring
back his Soul from the pit to be enlightened
with the light of the living

Look upon the heavens & behold the clouds
which are higher
than thou

If thou sinnest what
doest thou against him & if thou be
righteous what givest thou unto him

W Blake inventit & sculpt

London Published as the Act directs March 8: 1825 by Will.m Blake No 3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge

Then the Lord answered Job out of the Whirlwind

Who maketh the Clouds his Chariot & walketh on the Wings of the Wind

the Drops of the Dew

Hath the Rain

a Father & who hath begotten

W. Blake inventor & sculp

London Published as the Act directs March 6: 1825 by William Blake N.3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof


Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion
Let there Be
And God made two Great Lights
Sun
Moon
Let the Waters bring forth abundantly
Let the Earth bring forth
Cattle & Creeping thing & Beast
When the morning Stars sang together, & all the Sons of God shouted for joy

Can any understand the spreadings of the Clouds
the noise of his Tabernacle

Also by watering he wearyeth the thick cloud
He scattereth the bright cloud also It is turned about by his counsels

Of Behemoth he saith He is the chief of the ways of God
Of Leviathan he saith, He is King over all the Children of Pride

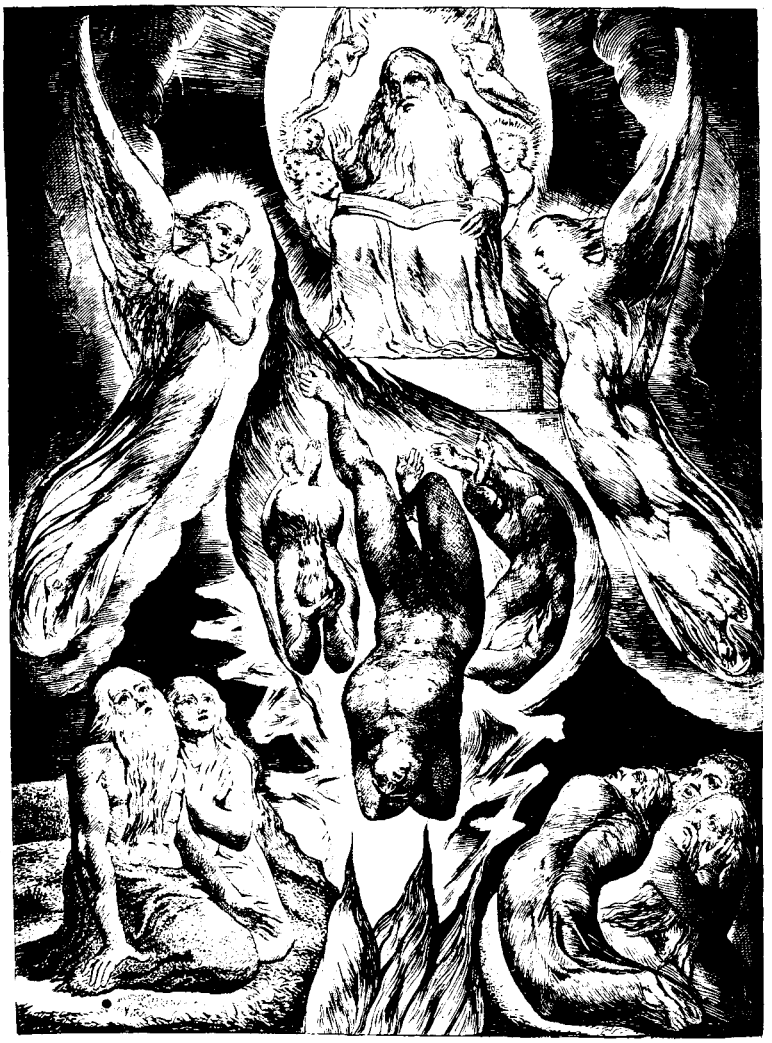
Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee

W Blake invenit & sculpt

London Published as the Act directs March 6. 1805 by W. Blake, 13 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

Hell is naked before him & Destruction has no covering



Cast them by searching find out God
Cast them out by the Almighty to perfection
The Accuser of our Brethren is Cast down
which accused them before our God day & night
It is higher than Heaven what can'st thou do
It is deeper than Hell what can'st thou know
The Prince of this World shall be cast out

Even the Devils are Subject to Us thro thy Name Jesus said unto them I saw Satan as lightning fall from Heaven

Thou hast fulfilled the Judgment of the Wicked

God hath chosen the foolish things of the World to confound the wise
And God hath chosen the weak things of the World to confound the things that are mighty

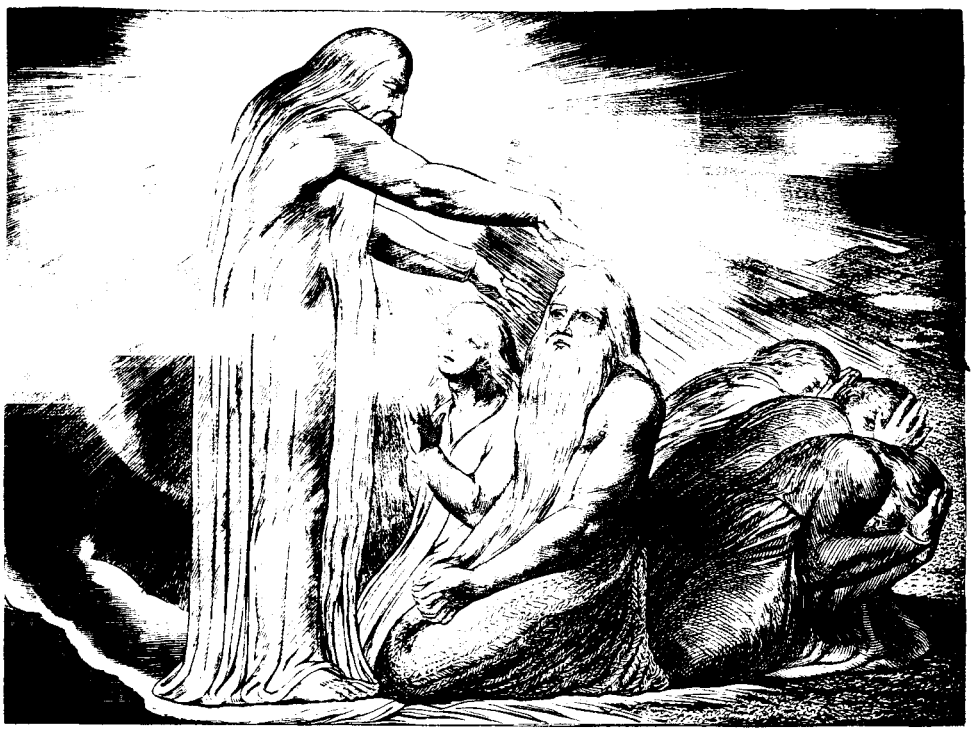
W Blake inv & sculp

London, Published as the Act directs March 1. 1825 by William Blake, No 3 Fountain Court, Strand

He bringeth down to the Grave & bringeth up

We know that when he shall appear we shall be like him for we shall see him as He Is

When I behold the Heavens the work of thy hands the Moon & Stars which thou hast ordained, then I say What is Man that thou art mindful of him & the Son of Man that thou visitest him



I have heard thee with the hearing of the Ear but now my Eye seeth thee

He that hath seen me hath seen my Father also I & my Father are One

If ye had known me ye would have known my Father also henceforth

Believe me that I am in the Father & the Father in me

He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father

I am Father

For he dwelleth in you & shall be with you

At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father & you in me & I in you

If ye loved me ye would rejoice because I said I go unto the Father

He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father & I will love him & manifest myself unto him

And the Father shall give you another Comforter that he may abide with you for ever

Even the Spirit of Truth whom the World cannot receive

Published as the Act directs March 1825 by William Blake No 3 Fountain Court Strand

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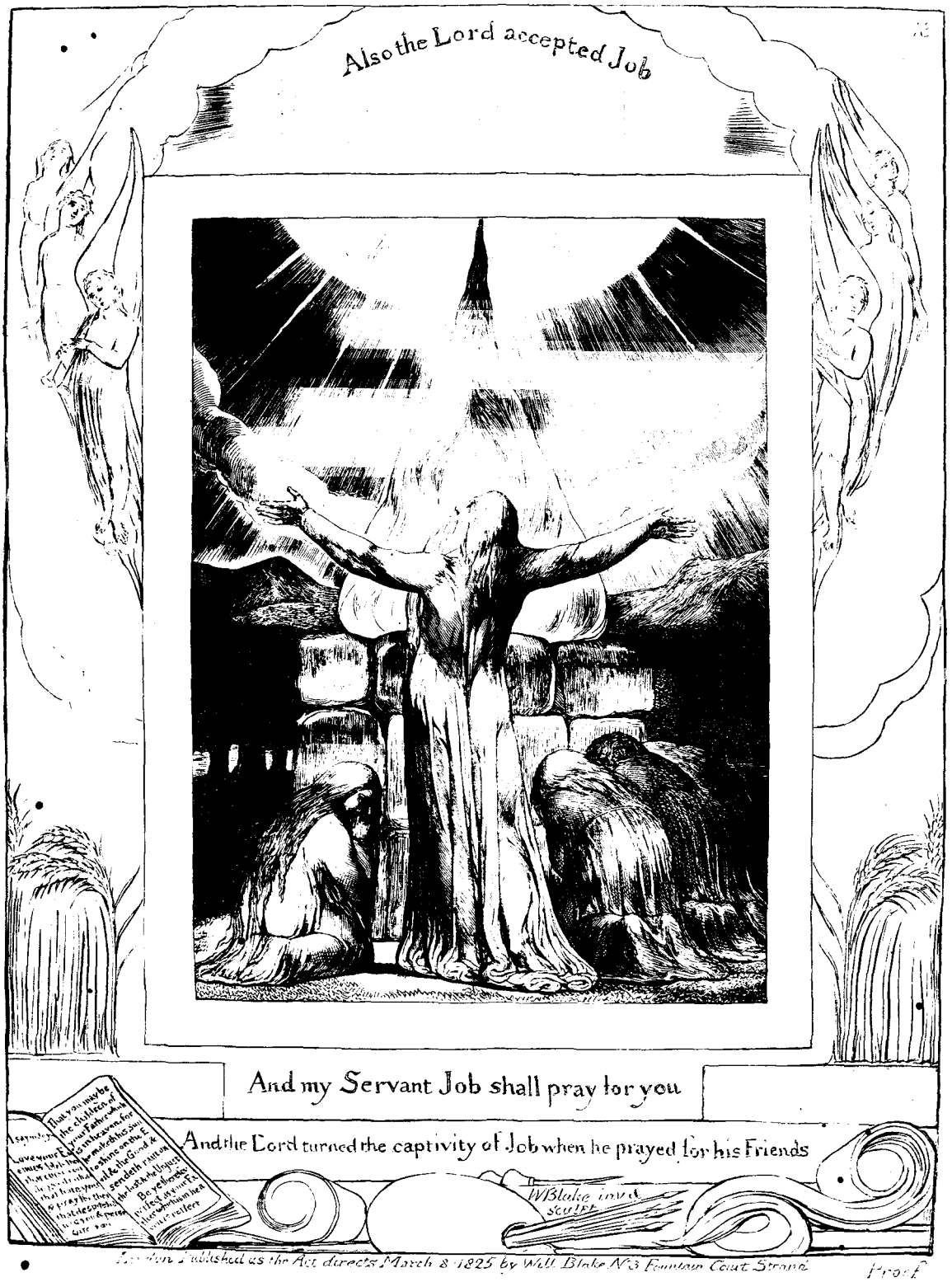

London Published as the Act directs March 8 1825 by Will. Blake No 3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

The Lord maketh Poor & maketh Rich

He bringeth Low & Lifteth Up

who provideth for the
Raven his Food
When his young ones cry unto God

Every one also gave him a piece of Money

Who remembered us in our low estate
For his Mercy endureth for ever

W. Blake inv & sculp

London. Published as the Act directs March 2: 1823. by William Blake 13 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

How precious are thy thoughts
unto me O God
how great is the sum of them

There were not found Women fair as the Daughters of Job
in all the Land & their Father gave them Inheritance
among their Brethren

If I ascend up into Heaven thou art there
If I make my bed in Hell behold Thou
art there

London Published as the Act directs March 2:1825 by William Blake 13 Fountain Court Strand

Great & Marvellous are thy Works
Lord God Almighty

Just & True are thy Ways
O thou King of Saints

So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job
more than the beginning

After this Job lived
an hundred & forty years
& saw his Sons & his
Sons Sons

. even four Generations
So Job died
being old
& full of days

In burnt Offerings for Sin
thou hast had no Pleasure

W Blake inv & sculp

London Published as the Act directs March 6 1825 by William Blake Fountain Court Strand Proof