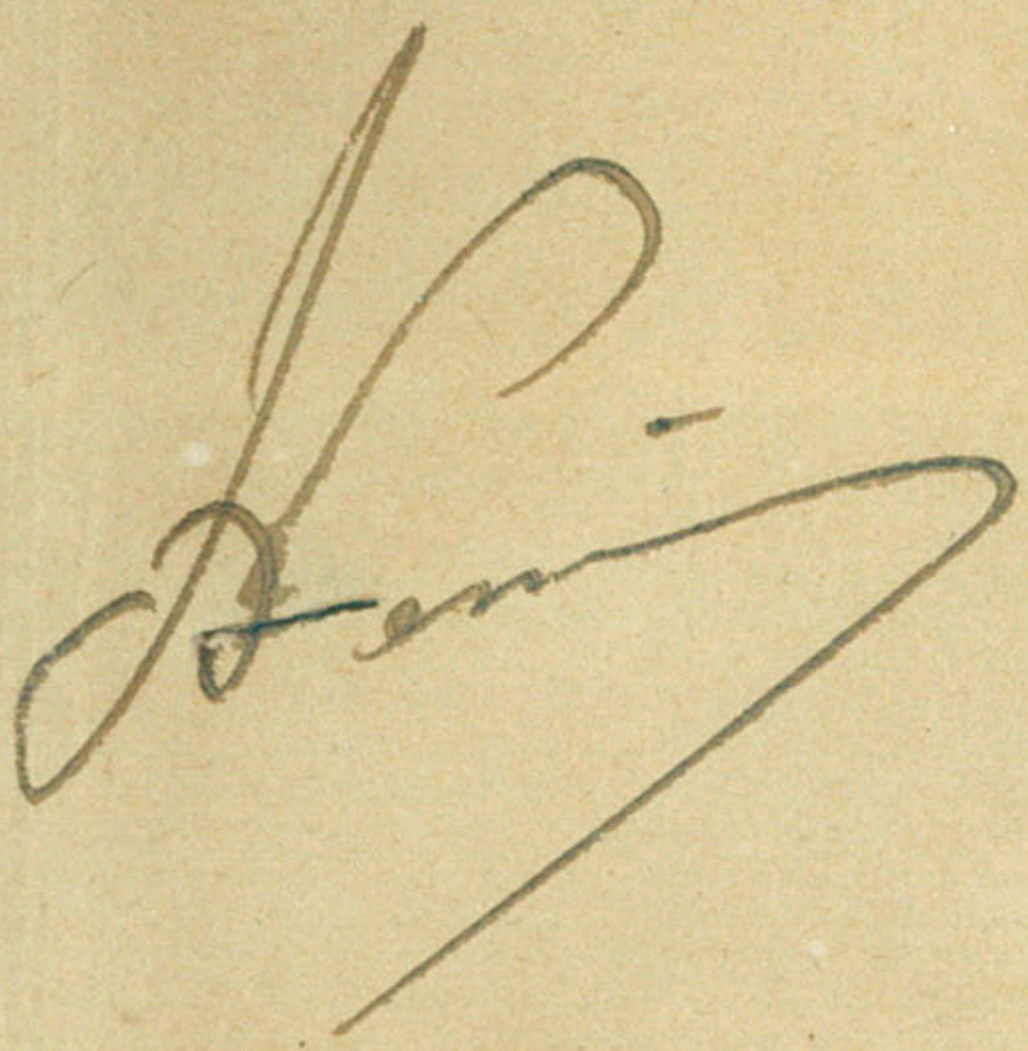

The Muses' Library

POEMS

OF

WILLIAM BLAKE

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WILLIAM BLAKE

EDITED BY

W. B. YEATS

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INTRODUCTION

EARLY in the eighteenth century a certain John O'Neil got into debt and difficulties, these latter apparently political to some extent; and escaped both by marrying a woman named Ellen Blake, who kept a shebeen at Rathmines, Dublin, and taking her name. He had a son James, I am told, by a previous wife or mistress, and this son took also the name of Blake, and in due course married, settled in London as a hosier, and became the father of five children, one of whom was the subject of this memoir. John O'Neil had also a son by his wife Ellen; and this son, settling in Malaga, in Spain, entered the wine trade, and became the founder of a family, and from one of this family, Dr. Carter Blake, I have the story. James Blake was living over his shop at 28, Broad Street, Golden Square, when, in the year 1757, his son William Blake was born. He had already a son John, the best beloved of father and mother, who grew up to be the black sheep of the family, and he begot afterwards James, who was to pester William with what Tatham calls "bread and cheese advice", and Robert, whom William came to love like his own soul, and a daughter, of whom we hear little, and among that little not

even her name. This family grew up among ideas less conventional than might be looked for in the house of a small shopkeeper. Swedenborgianism was then creeping into England, and the hosier's shop was one of the places where it had found shelter. The prophecies and visions of the new illumination were doubtless a very common subject of talk about the tea-table at night, and must have found ready welcome from William Blake. One prophecy certainly did sink into his mind. Swedenborg had said that the old world ended, and the new began, in the year 1757. From that day forward the old theologies were rolled up like a scroll, and the new Jerusalem came upon the earth. How often this prophecy concerning the year of his birth may have rung in the ears of William Blake we know not; but certainly it could hardly have done other than ring there, when his strange gift began to develop and fill the darkness with shadowy faces and the green meadows with phantom footsteps. He must often have thought that so strange a faculty may well have come not wholly unannounced, that it was the first glimmer of the great new illumination. In later life he called the seeing of visions being in Eden; and in his system Eden came again when the old theology passed away. The profound sanity of his inspiration is proved by his never having, no matter how great the contrast

between himself and the blind men and women about him, pronounced himself to be chosen and set apart alone among men. Wiser than Swedenborg, he saw that he had but what all men might have if they would, and that God spoke through him but as He had spoken through the great men of all ages and countries. The first vision we have record of looks strange enough through the clouded glass of Crab Robinson's diary. "God put his forehead to the window"; and Blake, being but four years old, set up a scream. Another authority tells how he strayed later on into the fields at Peckham Rye, and passed a tree full of angels, their bright wings shining among the boughs. There is record, too, of his finding Ezekiel sitting one summer day in the open fields, and of his being beaten by his mother for bringing home so unlikely a story.

His preparation for his great calling went on all the more smoothly in that he was never sent to school. He began early to prove his aphorism, "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction," and to govern his life by thought and impulse alone. His father noticing how ill he brooked any kind of authority, and to what great anger he was moved by a blow, resolved to spare him the contest that must needs have arisen between his passionate mood and the narrow pedagogy

of the time. He left him to steer his course unaided, and the boy made excellent use of this freedom, reading all that came to hand, poring over Swedenborg, and even, it has been surmised, dipping into profound Boehme, then coming out in translation under the editorship of William Law. Paracelsus, a hero of Blake's later days, has written that "he who would know the book of Nature must walk with his feet upon its leaves." Blake began early to fulfil the saying, and to bridge over the gaps in his reading with meditations in the country lanes, and to store his memory with the country sights and sounds that shine and murmur through all his verse. The sulphurous tide of London brick and stone had not then submerged all pleasant walks and kindly solitudes; for a little to the north of Golden Square, and almost abutting upon Oxford Street, were "the fields of cows by Wellings' Farm"; and away westward, at Bayswater, were willow-bordered brooks, where perhaps a stray kingfisher might still be found; and but little to the south, spread far and wide the green lanes and shadowy boscage of Surrey. He had ever close at hand the two things most needed for noble meditation—multitude and solitude.

His father, seeing the imaginative bent of his mind, resolved to make a painter of him; but the boy, hearing how great

a premium must be paid for his apprentice-ship, said it would be unfair to his brothers and sister, and asked to be set to engraving instead. Accordingly, after three or four years' study at the drawing-school of a certain Parr, whose house stood where now King William Street joins the Strand, we find him working with an engraver called Basire. Basire was an excellent engraver, but belonged to a school then giving way before more graceful if less austere methods. His influence never forsook Blake, who always preserved an enthusiastic remembrance of him and his methods. He was not the master first selected. Blake had been brought to the studio of one Rylands, then at the summit of popularity, but had said, "Father, I do not like the man's look; he looks as if he would live to be hanged"—a prophecy that was fulfilled twelve years later, when Rylands was hanged for forgery.

Blake worked two years at Basire's house, 31, Great Queen Street (now a carriage-builder's) and just opposite the *Freemason's Tavern*. Then some trouble arose among the apprentices, and Basire thought best to send him from amongst them. One authority, Malkin, says he did so because Blake "declined to take part with his master against his fellow-apprentices", and that Basire declared him to be "too simple and they too cunning";

while another authority, Tatham, who probably had his information from Mrs. Blake, sets it down to "matters of intellectual argument" between Blake and his fellows, which sounds likely enough, and rejoices greatly in the change, for, "had things gone otherwise, he might never have been more than a mere engraver." Both causes may have weighed with Basire, and certainly it is well for Blake that the change came, though we may doubt if his insurgent will and obstinate heart would ever, despite Tatham, have let him rest content to be a mere inscriber on steel or copper of other men's imaginings, whether "things had gone otherwise" or no. He was packed off to Westminster Abbey to draw the monuments, pillars, and the like, and was kept there five years. At first he was greatly annoyed by the Westminster students, who had then the right to stray about the Abbey as they would. The man or boy of genius is very generally hated or scorned by the average man or boy until the day come for him to charm them into unwilling homage. Until that day he has often to cry with Blake, "Why was I not born with a different face?" for his abstracted ways and his strange interests arouse that hatred of the uncommon which lies deep in the common heart. It is said that if you tie a piece of red cloth to a gull's leg its fellow-gulls will

peck it to death. Shelley, tormented by the gull-like animosity of his schoolfellows, plunged a pen through the hand of a tormentor. Blake leant out from a scaffolding where he sat at work and flung a Westminster student from a cornice, whither he had climbed the better to tease him. The boy fell heavily upon the stone floor, and Blake went off and laid a formal complaint before the Dean. "The tigers of wrath" vindicated their wisdom, for the students were ever after shut out of the Abbey. Blake knew well how to temper anger with prudence and make it a harmless and obedient servant. It has been told of him that he once grew angry with a plate he was engraving, and flung it across the room. "Did you not injure it?" asked some one afterwards. "I took good care of that", was the reply. Then, too, we have his own aphorism—

> "To be in a passion you good may do,
> But no good if a passion is in you."

No matter how enthusiastically he commended enthusiasm, alike of love and of hate, he ever intended the mind to be master over all. He explicitly condemns, likewise, all anger aimed against persons instead of states of mind, though his own practice sometimes but ill conformed to his precept. He, however, held any enthusiastic hatred to be better than the mildness founded upon unbelief and cowardice, for it was his firm

conviction that the cold, logical, analytic faculty was the most murderous of all. It was necessary even for the unwise man to grow fierce in the defence of falsehood, "that enthusiasm and life may not cease." He is unlikely to have thought out these matters in detail in the early days we write of; but few men have ever mirrored their temperament in their philosophy as clearly as he did, and to his philosophy, accordingly, we must turn again and again.

If Blake learned Nature in his long rambles southward in Surrey, and up northward by Wellings' Farm, he learned to know Art among the tombs and pointed ceilings of the Abbey. Its towers and spire are hieroglyphs for poetic inspiration in more than one of his later drawings. "Gothic form", he was wont to write, "is living form"; and the shadows of the great Abbey may well have been the shelter that preserved him from the pseudo-classical ideas of his time. In some lines added at a later date to an engraving made now, he compares the great Gothic churches to the tomb of Christ. Christ was his symbolic name for the imagination, and the tomb of Christ could be no other than a shelter, where imagination might sleep in peace until the hour of God should awaken it. What more beautiful shelter could he have found than this ancient Abbey? Outside the "indefinite" multitude brawled and

pushed, and inside the "definite" forms of art and vision congregated, and were at peace.

One day certain shapes, purporting to be the twelve Apostles, gathered about the altar; and doubtless many another vision appeared likewise, though he probably did not yet begin to think much about their meaning and their message. He was now busy with *Edward III* and other historical fragments, and may have caught something of his historical enthusiasm from the monuments about him. Another inspiration came to him in the works of Chatterton, who, five years his elder, had lately published the poems of "T. Rowlie." The "Bard's Song", at the end of *Edward III* shows the influence of the "English metamorphosis" very visibly. He must also have read Spenser and the Elizabethan dramatists. This was the only purely literary and purely artistic period of his life; for in a very short time he came to look upon poetry and art as a language for the utterance of conceptions, which, however beautiful, were none the less thought out more for their visionary truth than for their beauty. The change made him a greater poet and a greater artist; for "He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it."

In his twentieth year his apprenticeship came to an end, and he began engraving

and drawing upon his own account. Now, too, he made the acquaintance of Flaxman and Fuseli, who became his life-long friends, despite one short interruption in the case of the first, brought about by a sudden descent of "the tigers of wrath." At this time also he began courting one Polly or Clara Woods, "a lovely little girl", who took walks with him here and there, and then whistled him down the wind. Many of his descriptions of "Vala" and other symbolic women, and some few of the illustrations to the "Prophetic Books", such as the false, smiling face at the bottom of one of the pages of "Vala" (see *The Works of William Blake*, page 5 of the lithographs from "Vala"), and more than one of the lyrics, such as "Love's Secret", may conceivably owe their inspiration to her. Indubitably a certain type of feminine beauty, at once soft and cruel, emotional and egotistic, filled Blake with a mingled terror and wonder that lasted all his days. And there is no clear evidence of any other woman beside this Clara or Polly Woods and his own good wife, having come at all into his life. The impression made upon him by this girl was quite strong enough to have lasted on; for Tatham has recorded how his love for her made him ill, and how he had to be sent for change of air to the house of the market gardener, Boucher, at Richmond, where he met the girl he was to marry.

The market gardener had a pretty, "bright-eyed" daughter, named Catherine, who, whenever her mother asked her whom she would marry, was wont to answer, "I have not yet seen the man." One night she came into the room where her family were sitting, and saw for the first time a new comer, with young, handsome face and flame-like hair—her own pencil sketch is the authority—and grew upon the moment faint, as the tale has it, from the intuition that she saw her destined husband. She left the room to recover, and upon her return sat down by Blake, and heard from his lips the story of his great love for the false beauty, and of her fickleness and his wretchedness. "I pity you from my heart," she cried. "Do you pity me?" he answered; "then I love you for that." Humiliated by his ill-starred love, he was grateful for a little womanly kindness; and from such gratitude, not for the first time upon the earth, sprang a love that lasted until life had passed away. This pretty tale has reflected itself in the great mirror of the "Prophetic Books." In them Pity is ever the essential thing in a woman's soul. "The Book of Urizen" describes thus the making of Enitharmon:

> "Wonder, awe, fear, astonishment,
> Petrify the eternal myriads
> At the first female form, now separate:
> They called her Pity, and fled."

Enitharmon is "the vegetable mortal wife

of Los ; his emanation, yet his wife till the sleep of death is passed." And the symbolic being Los, though he is Time, and more than one other great abstract thing, is also Blake himself, as may be seen by even a rapid reading of *Milton*.

When Blake had told Catherine Boucher that he loved her, he returned to his work for a year, resolved not to see her until he had put by enough to set up house upon. At the year's end, on August 13th, 1782, they were married, and began housekeeping at 23, Green Street, Leicester Fields, now Leicester Square. Mrs. Blake, knowing neither how to read nor write, had to put her mark in the register. In the course of a few years she had profited so well by her husband's teaching that she probably learnt to copy out his manuscripts ; for there is little doubt that a certain neat and formal handwriting which crops up here and there is hers, and she certainly helped to colour his illuminated books. She learnt even to see visions, beholding upon one occasion a long procession of English kings and queens pass by with silent tread. She had no children, but repaid her husband for the lack of childish voices by a love that knew no limit and a friendship that knew no flaw. In the day she would often take long walks with him, thirty miles at a stretch being no unusual distance, and having dined at a wayside

inn, return under the light of the stars; and often at night, when the presences bade him get up from his bed and write, she would sit beside him, holding his hand.

A year after his marriage his first work, *Poetic Sketches*, was published at the expense of Flaxman and of some dilettanti friends, who were accustomed to gather at a Rev. Mr. Matthews', of 28, Rathbone Place. No. 28 is now a chair and umbrella mender's shop, but was then a very fashionable house on the most northernly fringe of London, upon the way to "the Jew's Harp house and the *Green Man*." The preface tells that the poems were written between the ages of twelve and twenty. He was now twenty-six, and must have been silent for these six years. He was in a period of transition. He had lost interest probably in his purely literary work, and not yet learnt to set his symbolic visions to music. The poems mark an epoch in English literature, for they were the first opening of the long-sealed well of romantic poetry; they, and not the works of Cowper and Thompson and Chatterton, being the true heralds of our modern poetry of nature and enthusiasm. There is in them no trace of mysticism, but phrases and figures of speech which were soon to pass from the metaphorical to the symbolic stage, and put on mystical significance, are very common. The singer of the "Mad Song" compares himself to a "fiend hid in a cloud";

and we shall presently hear in definitely mystical poems of "a child upon a cloud", and of "My brother John, the evil one, In a black cloud, making his moan"; for cloud and vapour became to him a symbol for bodily emotions, and for the body itself. *Edward III* tells of "golden cities", though as yet the poet knows nothing of the ages of gold, silver, and brass; and tells of the times when the pulse shall begin to beat slow,

> "And taste, and touch, and sight, and sound, and smell,
> That sing and dance round Reason's fine-wrought throne,
> Shall flee away, and leave him all forlorn"—

though as yet the poet has not learned to count and symbolize these senses, and call them "the daughters of Albion", and draw them dancing about fallen man among the Druidic monuments of ancient Britain. (See, *Jerusalem*, page 221, and elsewhere).

A book called by its present owner, Mr. Murray, from a phrase in the first paragraph, *The Island in the Moon*, was written probably soon after the close of the six silent years. It shows in a flickering, feeble way, the dawn of the mystical period. It is a clumsy and slovenly satire upon the dilettanti and triflers who gathered about Mr. and Mrs. Matthews, but contains some lyrics not to be found elsewhere, and here reprinted from *The Works of William Blake* (B. Quaritch). The prose, touched now and then with a faint humour, has

little but autobiographical interest. Of this there is, however, plenty, for the whole manuscript lightens with a blind fury against the shallow piety and shallow philosophy of his day. The thing should be read once in "The Works", and then forgotten, for it belongs to the weak side of a strong man, to his petulance, to a certain quarrelsome self-consciousness which took hold upon him at times. There is in it a peculiar and unpleasant poem upon surgery, which was, in all likelihood, his first symbolic verse, and several poems afterwards included in "The Songs of Innocence." In 1804 he was to write of being "again enlightened by the light" which he had "enjoyed" in his youth, and which had "for exactly twenty years been closed" from him, "as by a door and window shutters." Was this darkening of the spiritual light caused by the awakening of his anger against the men and women of his time? "The Argument" to "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", now soon to be written, tells how "the just man", the imaginative man that is, walked the vale of mortal life among roses and springs of living water until the "villain", the unimaginative man, came among the roses and the springs, and then "the just man" went forth in anger into "the wilds" among the "lions" of bitter protest. However this may be, the closing out of the light "as by a door

and window shutters", if Blake's recollection do not play him false about the twenty years, the writing of "The Island of the Moon", and a quarrel with the Rathbone Place coterie, of which we have some vague record, must have come all very near together.

In 1784, upon the death of his father, William Blake moved into a house next door to the one where he had been born, and which his brother James had now inherited, and started a printseller's shop in partnership with a fellow apprentice, and took his brother Robert for apprentice to engraving. In 1787 Robert fell ill and died, Blake nursing him with such devotion that he is said to have slept for three days when the need for him was over. He had seen his brother's spirit ascending clapping its hands for joy, and might well sleep content.

Soon after the death of Robert, disagreement with his partner brought the print shop to an end, and Blake moved into neighbouring Poland Street, and started what was to prove the great work of his life. One night, a form resembling his brother Robert came to him and taught him how to engrave his poems upon copper, and how to print illustrations and decorative borderings upon the same pages with the poem. In later years he wrote to a friend, "I know that our deceased friends are more really

with us than when they are apparent to our mortal part. Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, and see him in remembrance in the region of my imagination. I hear his advice, and even now write from his dictates. Forgive me for expressing to you my enthusiasm, which I wish all to partake of, since it is to me a source of immortal joy, even in this world. May you continue to be so more and more, and be more and more persuaded, that every mortal loss is an immortal gain. The ruins of time build mansions in eternity."

He set to work at once to carry out the directions of the spirit. He had now a number of lyrics by him, and began at once printing "The Songs of Innocence." He drew the poems upon metal with a varnish chiefly composed of pitch and turpentine. The plate was then placed in a bath of acid, and all the parts not covered by the varnish deeply bitten, until writing and drawing stood up in high relief, ready for ink and roller. He then printed off the sheets in a press for which he paid, Mr. Linnell's diary tells us, forty pounds, and afterwards coloured, and in some cases gilded them by hand. All the clean legible text of song and prophecy was written *backward* upon the copper with marvellous accuracy and patience.

In 1789 appeared first "The Songs of Innocence", and then "The Book of Thel."

illuminated missals of song in which every page is a window open in Heaven, but 'open not as in the days of Noah for the outpouring of the flood "of time and space," but that we may look into "the golden age" and "the imagination that liveth for ever," and talk with those who dwell there by "Poetry, Painting, and Music, the three powers in man of conversing with Paradise which the flood did not sweep away." Alas, the poems when printed in plain black and white, wonderful though they be, and full of exultant peace and joyous simplicity, give but a faint shadow of themselves as they are in Blake's own books, where interwoven designs companion them, and gold and yellow tints diffuse themselves over the page like summer clouds. The poems themselves are the morning song of his genius. The thought of the world's sorrow, and that indignation which he has called "the voice of God", soon began to make hoarse the sweetness, if also to deepen the music of his song. The third book that came from his press, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", dated 1790, has the fierce note which never after wholly died out of his work. It was followed in 1793 by "The Visions of the Daughters of Albion", "America", "Europe", "Gates of Paradise", and "The Book of Urizen"; in 1794 by "The Songs of Experience"; in 1795 by "The Song of Los", "Ahania", and in 1804 by "Jerusalem

and "Milton." He wrote also a very long poem called "Vala" somewhere between 1797 and 1804 or 1805, but did not publish it, probably because he shrank from the labour and expense. It is the most splendid, as well as the longest, of his mystical works, and was published by Mr. E. J. Ellis and myself, for the first time, in "The Works of William Blake." A conception of its luxuriant beauty can be got from the passages quoted in this volume. There is record too of a "Bible of Hell", and of this the title-page remains; of an unfinished poem called "The French Revolution", which was printed in the ordinary way, by a certain Johnston of St. Paul's Churchyard; of "The Gates of Hell, for Children", and of an engraved book called "Othoon." The earlier of the books which have come down to us show the influence of Jacob Boehme and of the kabalistic symbolism, and it is probable that the reading of "The Morning Redness", "Mysterium Magnum", and stray fragments of mediæval magical philosophy, such as the works of Cornelius Agrippa, then not uncommon in translation, delivered his intellect from the spectral and formal intellect of Swedenborg, and taught him to think about the meaning of his own visions. He may also have met mystics and even students of magic, for there was then an important secret body working in London under three brothers named Falk

The miniature painter Cosway, too, may have come across him, and Cosway kept a house specially for the invocation of spirits. His own illumination probably reached its height between his twentieth and his twenty-seventh year, between the close of his purely literary activity, and the shutting out of the light of the spirit "as by a door and window shutters." The six silent years may well have been silent, because the truth was coming upon him, in Boehme's beautiful phrase, "like a bursting shower." However this may be, his illumination was before all else a deliverance from Swedenborg. "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is certainly a reply to the latter's "Heaven and Hell", then recently translated, and probably very audible in the talk of his Swedenborgian friend Flaxman, and of his no less Swedenborgian brother James. "A new heaven is begun," he writes on one of the first pages, "and it is now thirty-three years since its advent. The eternal hell revives, and lo, Swedenborg is the angel sitting at the tomb; his writings are the linen clothes folded up." The creative imagination of William Blake—the Christ in him—had arisen from the tomb in the thirty-third year of his age, the year at which Christ had arisen, and with it had revived hell its activity and heaven its passivity, and the garments of theologic faith which had so long disguised it were thrown away.

The fierce invective of a later page about Swedenborg having written no new truth, but all the old falsehoods, combined as it is with a glorification of the older mystics, Boehme and Paracelsus, makes us recognize the wrath of a man against something which had long warped and thwarted him. As years went on he returned again to some extent to the old admiration, though never to the old subjection, until Swedenborg became in "Milton" "strongest of men", "Samson shorn by the churches", and in "The Descriptive Catalogue" a "visionary" whose "works" "are well worth the study of painters and poets", being the "foundation of grand things." But it must never be forgotten that whatever Blake borrowed from Swedenborg or Boehme, from mystic or kabalist, he turned to his own purposes, and transferred into a new system, growing like a flower from its own roots, supplementing in many ways, though not controverting in any main matters, the systems of his great predecessors, and that he stands among the mystics of Europe beside Jacob Boehme and the makers of the Kabala, as original as they are and as profound. He is one of those great artificers of God who uttered mysterious truths to a little clan. The others spoke to theologians and magicians, and he speaks to poets and artists. The others drew their symbols from theology and alchemy, and he from the flowers of spring

and the leaves of summer ; but the message is the same, and the truth uttered is the truth God spake to the red clay at the beginning of the world.

The essentials of the teaching of "The Prophetic Books" can be best explained by extracts mainly from the "prose writings", for the language of the books themselves is exceedingly technical. "God is in the lowest effects as well as in the highest causes," he wrote on the margin of a copy of Lavater's "Aphorisms." "For let it be remembered that creation is God descending according to the weakness of man. Our Lord is the word of God, and everything on earth is the word of God, and in its essence is God." That portion of creation, however, which we can touch and see with our bodily senses is "infected" with the power of Satan, one of whose names is "Opacity" ; whereas that other portion which we can touch and see with the spiritual senses, and which we call "imagination", is truly, "the body of God", and the only reality ; but we must struggle to really mount towards that imaginative world, and not allow ourselves to be deceived by "memory" disguising itself as imagination. We thus mount by poetry, music, and art, which seek for ever "to cast off all that is not inspiration", and "the rotten rags of memory," and to become, "the divine members." For this reason he says that Christ's apostles were all artists, and

that "Christianity is art", and the whole business of man is the arts," that "Israel delivered from Egypt is art delivered from nature and imitation"; and that we should all engage "before the world in some mental pursuit." We must take some portion of the kingdom of darkness, of the void in which we live, and by "circumcising away the indefinite" with a "firm and determinate outline", make of that portion a "tent of God", for we must always remember that God lives alone, "in minute particulars" in life made beautiful and graceful and vital by imaginative significance, and that all worthy things, all worthy deeds, all worthy thoughts, are works of art or of imagination. In so far as we do such works we drive the mortality, the infection out of the things we touch and see, and make them exist for our spiritual senses—"the enlarged and numerous senses"; and beholding beauty and truth we see no more "accident and chance", and the indefinite void "and a last judgment "passes over us, and the world is consumed," for things are "burnt up" "when you cease to behold them."

"Reason", or argument from the memory and from the sensations of the body, binds us to Satan and opacity, and is the only enemy of God. Sin awakens imagination because it is from emotion, and is therefore dearer to God than reason, which is wholly dead. Sin, however, must be

avoided, because we are prisoners, and should keep the rules of our prison house, for "you cannot have liberty in this world without what you call moral virtue, and you cannot have moral virtue without the subjection of that half of the human race who hate what you call moral virtue." But let us recognize that these laws are but "the laws of prudence", and do not let us call them "the laws of God", for nothing is pleasing to God except the glad invention of beautiful and exalted things. He holds it better indeed for us to break all the commandments than to sink into a dead compliance. Better any form of imaginative evil—any lust or any hate—rather than an unimaginative virtue, for "the human imagination alone" is "the divine vision and fruition" "in which man liveth eternally." "It is the human existence itself." "I care not whether a man is good or bad," he makes Los, the "eternal mind", say in Jerusalem; "all that I care is whether he is a wise man or a fool. Go, put off holiness and put on intellect." By intellect he means imagination. He who recognizes imagination for his God need trouble no more about the law, for he will do naught to injure his brother, for we love all which enters truly into our imagination, and by imagination must all life become one, for a man liveth not but in his brother's face and by those "loves and tears of

brothers, sisters, sons, fathers, and friends, which if man ceases to behold he ceases to exist."

The great contest of imagination with reason is described throughout "The Prophetic Books" under many symbols, but chiefly under the symbolic conflict of Los, the divine formative principle which comes midway between absolute existence and corporeal life, with Urizen, "the God of this world" and maker of dead law and blind negation. Blake considered this doctrine to be of the utmost importance, and claimed to have written it under the dictation of spiritual presences. "I have written this poem from immediate dictation," he wrote, of "Jerusalem", "twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without premeditation, and even against my will. The time it has taken in writing was thus rendered non-existent, and an immense poem exists which seems the labour of a long life, all produced without labour or study." It is not possible in a short essay like the present to do more than record these things, for to discuss and to consider what these presences were would need many pages. Whatsoever they were, presences or mere imaginings, the words they dictated remain for our wonder and delight. There is not one among these words which is other than significant and precise to the laborious

student, and many passages of simple poetry and the marvel of the pictures remain for all who cannot or will not give the needed labour. Merlin's book lies open before us, and if we cannot decipher its mysterious symbols, then we may dream over the melody of evocations that are not for our conjuring, and over the strange colours and woven forms of the spread pages.

In 1793 Blake removed to Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, and besides the illustrating of "The Prophetic Books" did there much artistic work, notably "Nebuchadnezzar", a huge water-colour, and "The Lazar House", and "The Elohim creating Adam", and a series of designs to Young's "Night thoughts", of which a few were printed with the poem in 1797. The remainder are with Mr. Bain, of the Haymarket, who very kindly shows them to Blake's students. The printed designs are, of course, in plain black and white, but the rest are faint luminous sketches in water colour.

At Lambeth, too, he saw the one ghost of his life. "When he was talking on the subject of ghosts," writes Gilchrist, "he was wont to say they did not appear much to imaginative men, but only to common minds who did not see the finer spirits. A ghost was a thing seen by the gross bodily eye, a vision by the mental. "Did you ever see a ghost?" asked a friend. "Never but once," was the reply.

And it befell thus: Standing one evening at his garden door in Lambeth, and chancing to look up, he saw a horrible grim figure, "scaly-speckled, very awful", stalking downstairs towards him. More frightened than ever before or after, he took to his heels and ran out of the house."

In 1800 he left London for the first time. Flaxman had introduced him to a certain Hayley, a popular poet of the day, who poured out long streams of verse, always lucid, always rational, always uninspired. He wrote prose too, and was now busy in his turreted country house putting together a life of Cowper. Blake was invited to engrave the illustrations, and to set up house in the neighbourhood. At first all went well. The village of Felpham seemed an entirely beautiful place, beloved of God and of the spirits. Blake met all manner of kings and poets and prophets walking in shadowy multitudes on the edge of the sea, "majestic shadows, grey but luminous, and superior to the common height of man." Other and more gentle beings appeared likewise. "Did you ever see a fairy's funeral?" said Blake to a lady who sat next him at some gathering at Hayley's or elsewhere. "Never, sir," was the answer. "I have," he replied; "but not before last night. I was writing alone in my garden; there was great stillness among the branches and flowers, and more than

common sweetness in the air; I heard a low and pleasant sound, and I knew not whence it came. At last I saw the broad leaf of a flower move, and underneath I saw a procession of creatures of the size and colour of green and grey grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose leaf, which they buried with songs and disappeared." He has elsewhere described the fairies as "the rulers of the vegetable world", and "vegetable" was with him a technical term meaning "bodily" and sensuous. Jacob Boehme is also said to have had a vision of the fairies.

After a while patronage became more than he could bear, and kind worldly Hayley a burden more insistent and persistent than the grasshopper of old. Not only did Hayley himself give the prophet, who was his guest, little but mechanical work, but he sought out excellent ladies, kindly and worldly like himself, who wanted miniatures and painted fire-screens. Before long Blake began to hurl at his head petulant epigram, though there were times now and afterwards when the worldliness disappeared, and the kindliness remained alone visible to him, and then he would say that Hayley had kept him safe by his good will through spiritual terror and contests "not known to men on earth", but which had else made the three years he spent at Felpham "the darkest years that ever mortal suffered."

Towards the last an event occurred which awoke all his slumbering gratitude. One evening he found a soldier in his garden, and not knowing that he had been put there to dig by his own gardener, asked him with all politeness to be gone. The man refused with threats, and Blake, getting angry, caught him by the elbows, and, despite his endeavour to spar, forced him away down the road to the village tavern where he was quartered. The soldier avenged himself by swearing that Blake had cursed the King, and vowed help to Bonaparte should he come over. Blake was arrested. Hayley came forward and bailed him out, and though suffering from a fall from his horse at the time, gave at the trial evidence as to character. The case was tried at the Chichester Quarter Sessions on the 11th of June, 1804, the verdict of "not guilty" awakening tumultuous applause in court. One old man remembered long afterwards Blake's flashing eyes. The soldier, whose name was Scofield, appears in "Jerusalem" as a symbol for Adam, presumably because "honest indignation", which is "the voice of God", turned him from the garden. Blake held all "natural events" to be but symbolic messages from the unknown powers. The people of Felpham remember Hayley to this day, and tradition has wrapped him about with a kind of mythologi-

cal wonder, having a suggestiveness which looks like a survival from some wild tavern talk of Blake's. He had two wives, they say, and kept one in a wood with her leg chained to a tree-trunk. Blake would have made this mean the captivity of half his imagination in "the vegetable world", which is Satan's kingdom, and all nothing. The popular voice has in very truth done for Hayley what Blake himself did for Scofield. It has given him a place in mythology.

In 1804 he returned to London and took a house in South Molton Street, and there engraved "Jerusalem" and "Milton." These, with the exception of "The Ghost of Abel", a dramatic fragment written very early, but not appearing until 1822, were the last poems published by him. He continued until the end of his life to find occasional purchasers for these and other "Prophetic Books", but never any to read and understand. He did not, however, cease to write. "I have written more than Voltaire or Rousseau," he said, in one of the last years of his life; "six or seven epic poems as long as Homer, and twenty tragedies as long as *Macbeth*. . . . . I write when commanded by the spirits, and the moment I have written, I see the words fly about the room in all directions. It is then published, and the spirits can read."

Henceforth his published works were

to be wholly pictorial. He was now conscious that the "light" so long hid from him "as by a door and window shutters" was come again, and foresaw a great period of artistic creation; for had he not conquered "the spectrous fiend" which had marred his power and obscured his inspiration? The first works of this new and better period were done for a certain Cromeck, a publisher, who set him to illustrate Blair's "Grave." These illustrations must always remain among his greatest. They are much less illustrations of Blair than expressions of his own moods and visions. We see the body and soul rushing into each other's arms at the last day, the soul hovering over the body and exploring the recesses of the grave, and the good and bad appearing before the judgment seat of God, not as these things appeared to the orthodox eyes of Blair, but as they appeared to the mystical eyes of William Blake. The body and soul are in one aspect corporeal energy and spiritual love, and in another reason and passion, and their union is not that bodily arising from the dead, dreamed of by the orthodox, but that final peace of God wherein body and soul cry "thither" with one voice. The grave was in his eyes the sleep of reason, and the last judgment no high session of a personal law-giver, but the "casting out" of "nature" and "corporeal understanding."

Cromeck gave these designs into the hands

of Schiavonetti, an excellent engraver, but a follower of the fashionable school of "blots and blurs", of soft shadows and broken lights, and not of the unfashionable school of "firm and determinate outline" to which Blake belonged. Blake likewise had been promised the engraving, and the choice of another was a serious money loss to him. The result was a quarrel, which grew to the utmost vehemence when Cromeck added the further wrong of setting Stothard to paint for engraving a picture of "The Canterbury Pilgrims", having taken the idea from seeing Blake at work on the same subject with like intentions. Blake tried to vindicate himself by an exhibition of his paintings, "The Canterbury Pilgrims" among them. The exhibition was held at his brother James', in Golden Square, in 1809, and proved an utter failure. I give many extracts from the printed catalogue and from an address to the public, which never got beyond the MS. stage. Both catalogue and address are full of magnificent and subtle irony and of violent and petulant anger. He would not moderate his passion, for he was ever combative against a time which loved moderation, compromise, and measured phrase, because it was a time of "unbelief and fear" and of imaginative dearth. Had he not said, "bring out number, weight, and measure in a time of dearth"? and with

him there was no dearth ; and also that " the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom " ? His fault was not that he did not moderate his passion, but that he did not feel the error he so often warns himself against, of being angry with individuals instead of " states " of mind. The evil he denounced was really evil, but the men he denounced did not really personify that evil. The turbulent heart of the mystic could not but feel wrath against a time that knew not him or his. No wonder that he should fall, from sheer despair of making any man understand his subtle philosophy of life, into many an unsubtle unphilosophical rhapsody of hate when too angry even to hide himself in storm clouds of paradox. He had probably never seen any good painting of the Florentine and Flemish schools, but holding them to be the source of the art of his day, denounced them with violence. Had they not sacrificed the intellectual outline to indefinite lights and shadows, and renounced imaginative things for what seemed to him unimaginative copying of corporeal life and lifeless matter ? Were they not his enemies in all things, and the enemies of Raphael and Angelo and Durer ? He made, in a blind hopeless way, something of the same protest made afterwards by the pre-Raphaelites with more success. They saw nothing but an artistic issue, and were at peace ; whereas he saw

in every issue the whole contest of light and darkness, and found no peace. To him the universe seemed filled with an intense excitement at once infinitesimal and infinite, for in every grass blade, in every atom of dust, Los, the "eternal mind", warred upon dragon Urizen, "the God of this world." The "dots and lozenges", and the "indefinite" shadows of engraver or painter, took upon them portentous meanings to his visionary eyes. "I know that the great majority of Englishmen are fond of the indefinite," he writes to a correspondent, "which they measure by Newton's doctrine of the fluxions of an atom, a thing which does not exist" (that is to say, belongs to reason, not to imagination; to nature, not to mind). "These are politicians, and think that Republican art" (a system of thought or art which gives every one of the parts separate individuality and separate rights as in a Republic) "is inimical to their atom, for a line or lineament is not formed by chance. A line is a line in its minutest subdivisions, straight or crooked. It is itself, not intermeasurable by anything else. . . . . But since the French Revolution Englishmen are all intermeasurable by one another, certainly a happy state of agreement in which I for one do not agree." "The dots or lozenges", "the blots and blurs", have no individuality when taken apart, and

what is true of them is true also of the men for whom "the blots and blurs" are made; for are not all things symbolic, and is not art the greatest of symbols? In his philosophy, as expounded in "The Prophetic Books", he had a place for everything, even for "nature" and the corporeal hindrance, but he left a place for the highest only in his interpretation of the philosophy, and forgot that we must never be partisans, not even partisans of the spirit.

For a time now his purse was very empty, he and his wife, if Cromeck is to be believed, which he probably is not, living for a time on 10*s*. a week, and it might, perhaps, have kept empty to the end had not he met in 1818 John Linnell, the landscape painter, and found in him the most generous patron of his life. Now, too, he made the acquaintance of another good friend, John Varley, "the father of modern water-colour", and did for him a series of drawings of his spiritual visitants: "The Ghost of a Flea" (a symbol of the rapacious man), "The Man who built the Pryamids" (a symbol probably of the man of worldly power, for Egypt is nature or the world, and the pyramids a glory of Egypt), and many others. In 1821 he moved from Poland Street to Fountain Court, and made for Mr. Linnell the famous series of designs, to "Job", which is perhaps his masterpiece. Their austere majesty, too well known to need any description

here, contrasts with the fanciful prettiness and delicate grace of his early work. Life had touched his imagination with melancholy. He received £100 for the plates, and was to get another £100 out of the profits of publication. He got £50 of this second £100 before his death, the slow sale not making a bigger sum possible. In 1822 he painted a very fine series of water-colours illustrating "Paradise Lost" for Mr. Linnell, filling them with the peculiarities of his own illumination as usual, and in 1825 began an immense series of designs to "Dante" for the same friend, sketching them in water-colour and engraving seven. Of those he engraved, "Francesco and Paola" is the most perfect and the most moving, and must always haunt the memory with a beauty at once tender and august. Had he lived to finish the whole series, or even the hundred and odd drawings he began, it had surely been the veritable crown of his labours as an artist; but he was to pass the gate he had called "of pearl and gold", and to stand where Dante stood by Beatrice, and to enter the great white Rose before his hands had half transcribed the story of that other mystic traveller. In 1827 he fell ill of a strange complaint, a shivering and sinking, which told him he had not long to live. He wrote to a friend, "I have been very near the gates of death, and have returned very weak, and an old

man, feeble and tottering, but not in spirit and life, not in the real man, the imagination which liveth for ever. In that I grow stronger and stronger as this foolish body decays"; and then passed on to discuss matters of business, and matters of engraving and politics, but soon burst out again. "Flaxman is gone, and we must soon follow every one to his own eternal house, leaving the delusions of Goddess Nature and her laws to get into freedom from all the laws of the numbers—into the mind in which every one is king and priest in his own house. God grant it on earth as it is in heaven."

"On the day of his death," writes a friend who had his account from Mrs. Blake, "he composed songs to his Maker, so sweetly to the ear of his Catherine, that, when she stood to hear him, he, looking upon her most affectionately, said, "My beloved! they are *not mine. No!* They are *not* mine." He told her they would not be parted; he should always be about her to take care of her." Another account says, "he said he was going to that country he had all his life wished to see, and expressed himself happy, hoping for salvation through Jesus Christ. Just before he died his countenance became fair, his eyes brightened and he burst out into singing of the things he saw in heaven." "He made the rafters ring," said Tatham. "The death of a

saint," said a poor woman who had come in to help Mrs. Blake.

The wife continued to believe him always with her in the spirit, even calling out to him at times as if he were but a few yards away; but, none the less, fretted herself into the grave, surviving him only two years. No spiritual companionship could make up for the lack of daily communion in the common things of life, for are we not one half "phantoms of the earth and water?" She left his designs and unpublished manuscripts, of which there were, according to Allan Cunningham, a hundred volumes ready for the press, to Tatham, who had shown her no little friendliness. Tatham was an "angel" in the Irvingite Church, and coming to hold that the designs and poems alike were inspired by the devil, pronounced sentence upon them, and gave up two days to their burning. "I have," wrote Blake, "always found that angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning." Though Tatham, bound in by systematic theology, did him well nigh the greatest wrong one man can do another, none the less is Tatham's MS. life of Blake a long cry of admiration. He speaks of "his noble and elastic mind", of his profound and beautiful talk, and of his varied knowledge. Yet, alas, could he only have

convinced himself that it was not for him to judge whether, when Blake wrote of vision "a bad cause"—to use his own phrase, "made a bad book"—we might still have that account of Genesis, "as understood by a Christian visionary", of which a passage, when read out, seemed "striking", even to conventional Crab Robinson, and perhaps "The Book of Moonlight", a work upon art, though for this I do not greatly long, and the "Othoon", and many lyrics and designs, whereof the very names are dead. Blake himself would have felt little anger, for he had thought of burning his MS. himself, holding, perhaps as Boehme held, and Swedenborg also, that there were many great things best unuttered within earshot of the world. Boehme held himself permitted to speak of much only among his "schoolfellows"; and Blake held there were listeners in other worlds than this. He knew, despite the neglect and scorn of his time, that fame even upon the earth would be granted him, and that his work was done, for the Eternal Powers do not labour in vain.

"Re-engraved time after time,
Ever in their youthful prime;
My designs unchanged remain,
Time may rage but rage in vain.
For above Time's troubled fountains,
On the great Atlantic mountains,
In my golden house on high,
There they shine eternally."

W. B. YEATS.

I HAVE to thank Mr. E. J. Ellis for lending me his copy of "the MS. book," and for kindly reading the proofs of my introduction: Mr. Fairfax Murray for leave to reprint three lyrics from "The Island of the Moon"; and Dr. Carter Blake for information about Blake's ancestry.

FROM THE POETICAL SKETCHES.

POETICAL SKETCHES.

TO SPRING.

O THOU with dewy locks, who lookest down
Through the clear windows of the morning, turn
Thine angel eyes upon our western isle,
Which in full choir hails thy approach, O Spring!

The hills tell each other, and the listening
Valleys hear; all our longing eyes are turned
Up to thy bright pavilions: issue forth,
And let thy holy feet visit our clime!

Come o'er the eastern hills, and let our winds
Kiss thy perfumèd garments; let us taste
Thy morn and evening breath; scatter thy pearls
Upon our lovesick land that mourns for thee.

O deck her forth with thy fair fingers; pour
Thy soft kisses on her bosom; and put
Thy golden crown upon her languished head,
Whose modest tresses were bound up for thee!

TO SUMMER.

O THOU who passest through our valleys in
Thy strength, curb thy fierce steeds, allay the heat
That flames from their large nostrils! Thou, O
Summer,

Oft pitched'st here thy golden tent, and oft
Beneath our oaks hast slept, while we beheld
With joy thy ruddy limbs and flourishing hair.

Beneath our thickest shades we oft have heard
Thy voice, when Noon upon his fervid car
Rode o'er the deep of heaven. Beside our springs
Sit down, and in our mossy valleys, on
Some bank beside a river clear, throw thy
Silk draperies off, and rush into the stream!
Our valleys love the Summer in his pride.

Our bards are famed who strike the silver wire;
Our youth are bolder than the southern swains,
Our maidens fairer in the sprightly dance.
We lack not songs, nor instruments of joy,
Nor echoes sweet, nor waters clear as heaven,
Nor laurel wreaths against the sultry heat.

TO AUTUMN.

O AUTUMN, laden with fruit, and stained
With the blood of the grape, pass not, but sit
Beneath my shady roof; there thou may'st rest,
And tune thy jolly voice to my fresh pipe.
And all the daughters of the year shall dance!
Sing now the lusty song of fruits and flowers.

"The narrow bud opens her beauties to
The sun, and love runs in her thrilling veins;
Blossoms hang round the brows of Morning, and
Flourish down the bright cheek of modest Eve,
Till clust'ring Summer breaks forth into singing,
And feathered clouds strew flowers round her head.

" The Spirits of the Air live on the smells
Of fruit ; and Joy, with pinions light, roves round
The gardens, or sits singing in the trees,"
Thus sang the jolly Autumn as he sat ;
Then rose, girded himself, and o'er the bleak
Hills fled from our sight : but left his golden load.

TO WINTER.

O WINTER ! bar thine adamantine doors :
The North is thine ; there hast thou built thy dark
Deep-founded habitation. Shake not thy roofs,
Nor bend thy pillars with thine iron car.

He hears me not, but o'er the yawning deep
Rides heavy ; his storms are unchainèd, sheathed
In ribbèd steel ; I dare not lift mine eyes ;
For he hath reared his sceptre o'er the world.

Lo ! now the direful monster, whose skin clings
To his strong bones, strides o'er the groaning rocks :
He withers all in silence, and in his hand
Unclothes the earth, and freezes up frail life.

He takes his seat upon the cliffs,—the mariner
Cries in vain. Poor little wretch, that deal'st
With storms !—till heaven smiles, and the monster
Is driv'n yelling to his caves beneath Mount Hecla.

TO THE EVENING STAR.

THOU fair-haired Angel of the Evening,
Now, whilst the sun rests on the mountains, light
Thy bright torch of love : thy radiant crown
Put on, and smile upon our evening bed !

Smile on our loves : and, while thou drawest the
Blue curtains of the sky, scatter thy silver dew
On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes
In timely sleep. Let thy west wind sleep on
The lake : speak silence with thy glimmering eyes,
And wash the dusk with silver.—Soon, full soon,
Dost thou withdraw ; then the wolf rages wide,
And then the lion glares through the dun forest.
The fleeces of our flocks are covered with
Thy sacred dew : protect them with thine influence !

TO MORNING.

O HOLY virgin, clad in purest white,
Unlock heaven's golden gates, and issue forth ;
Awake the dawn that sleeps in heaven ; let light
Rise from the chambers of the East, and bring
The honeyed dew that cometh on waking day.
O radiant Morning, salute the Sun,
Roused like a huntsman to the chase, and with
Thy buskined feet appear upon our hills.

SONG.

How sweet I roamed from field to field,
And tasted all the summer's pride,
Till I the Prince of Love beheld
Who in the sunny beams did glide.

He showed me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow ;
He led me through his gardens fair
Where all his golden pleasure grow.