

RAINE, Kathleen (1970): *William Blake*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1970

Kathleen Raine clearly has a great love for William Blake. In this beautifully written and illustrated book, she progressively reveals the influences and experiences in his life that colored so vividly his passionate nature and nourished so fully his visionary character.

Blake's natural gifts were encouraged by his father who, recognizing his son's natural genius, sent him to a preparatory school for artists at the age of ten. Four years later, young Will was apprenticed to James Basire, the renowned engraver to the Society of Antiquaries. From an early age, Blake came to immersed in images from the classic world.

On Basire's instruction, Blake spent much of his apprenticeship visiting and drawing the great monuments and buildings of London. He spent much time in and around Westminster Abbey. It was during this time that a deep love of the Gothic took hold of him. This was to remain with him throughout his life.

Kathleen Raine also draws us into the wider sphere of his intellectual interests. We learn of his great love of Homer, of Plato, of Plotinus, of Shakespeare, of Milton, of Paracelsus and of Boehme. We similarly learn of his loathing of Francis Bacon, of Locke and of Newton.

Although Blake received very little formal education, he was widely read and came to hold strong views regarding many of the authors that he studied. He similarly well informed about the politics of his day and was intimately familiar with the ideas of Thomas Paine and William Godwin. As a young man, he enthusiastically supported the revolutionary movements in America and France, but eventually came to repudiate the needless bloodshed that followed in the wake of each.

Blake's visionary affinities drew him away from the revolutionary movements of this world and ever more strongly towards the revolutionary ideas and realities of the transcendental world that he inhabited.

In this deeply sympathetic study, Kathleen Raine traces the parallel development of his life and his art. In a addition to sensitively portraying the deep frustration that he experienced as an artist neglected in his own day, she presents a deeply insightful portrait of William Blake the thinker, poet, artist and visionary.

VDS, March 2008

INTRODUCTION

Blake's unique greatness lies in no single achievement, but in the whole of what he was, which is more than the sum of all that he did. It belongs to a few great imaginative minds that they can create a world which seems to possess a reality, a coherence, a climate and atmosphere of its own. Shakespeare, Dante, Durer, Blake's own favourite painters Fra

Angelico, Claude and Michelangelo, seem to offer us fragments of worlds whose bounds extend beyond any of those portions their work embodied . . . Blake was such an artist; and his work, as he believed, represents “portions of eternity” seen in imaginative vision. Blake himself writes of “ever Existent Images” which may be seen “by the Imaginative Eye of Every one according to the situation he holds” - a collective archetypal world whose reality is more credible in our century than it was in his own. “To different People it appears differently, as everything else does.” Such art comes from a source deeper than the individual experience of poet or painter, and has a power of communication to that same level in the spectator.

p. 7

CHAPTER 1

Apprentice to Antiquity

“As soon as the child's hand could hold a pencil it began to scrawl rough likenesses of man or beast, and make timid copies of all the prints he came near.” In those days there was education or its want; there was no bad education, no trash. The prints Blake saw as a child were of authentic works of art. At the age of ten, he was sent to the best and most fashionable preparatory school for young artists: Henry Pars' drawing-school in the Strand. Parr's younger brother, William, accompanied the architect Revett to Athens and Ionia, to study and draw “ruined temple and mutilated statue, and to return with portfolios, a mine of wealth cribbing ‘classic’ architects - contemporary Chambers and future Soane.” Blake was later to make engravings of several of William Pars' plates for the famous Stuart and Revett portfolios of *The Antiquities of Athens and Ionia*.

pp. 11-12

Blake's father bought him a few casts: the Gladiator, the Hercules Farnese, the Venus de Medici, and wooden models of heads, hand and arm. He also gave him pocket-money with which the boy, a hunter of print-dealers' shops and action-rooms, laid the foundation of a modest collection. A collector Blake remained throughout his life, though at a time of pressing poverty he sold his fine collection of prints. . . .

Blake was, in fact, from his boyhood to the end of his life, as highly cultured, not to say learned, in the visual arts as it is possible for any artist to be who was never able to visit Europe.

p. 12

At the age of fourteen Blake was apprenticed to Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries. In this the middle-class caution of Blake's father the hosier is evident. The career of a painter was altogether too vague to appeal to his practical sense; let his son at least be assured of a living by his skill in a craft, and become a painter if he could. Perhaps this decision was a mistaken one; it may be that Blake's great imaginings were cramped somewhat by the limitations of the engraver's art, which inevitably influenced his style as a painter. But any loss to painting was to be compensated for by the enrichment of the art of engraving by Blake's unsurpassed *Illustrations of the Book of*

Job. His craftsman's training was also, almost accidentally, put into his hands the technique which enabled him to create his unique books. p. 13

As Basire's apprentice Blake found himself in an environment of Antiquity. The "ancient republics, monarchies and patriarchates of Asia" of his visions owed much to his prentice-work for Basire on such books as Bryant's *New System of Mythology*, as famous a work in its day as Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Ruthven Todd first discerned Blake's hand in several of the plates, some of which contain details later discoverable in Blake's own designs. . . .

It was to Bryant Blake owed his realization - a bold one at that time - that "the antiquities of every Nation under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing, as Jacob Bryant and all antiquaries have proved . . . All had originally one language, and one religion: this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus." The *Mythology* was a gold-mine, upon which Blake drew in the composition of his own pantheon of mythological lore; a universal language (as Bryant himself had understood) of the human imagination, with dialectical variations according to time, place and local tradition. pp. 13-15

Two years after Blake's apprenticeship, kindly Basire, to get him out of the way of two troublesome new apprentices, sent him to make drawings of monuments and buildings in the various old churches of London, and especially at Westminster Abbey. Blake was always grateful to Basire for this opportunity to study Gothic architecture and sculpture. . .

According to Gilchrist, Blake engraved some of the plates which bear the name of Basire, among them those of Edward III, Queen Philippa and Aveline of Lancaster. p.17

In 1773, when Blake was not yet sixteen, he made a drawing after Michelangelo (which he later engraved) entitled *Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion*; below he wrote: "This is One of the Gothic Artists who Built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages, Wandering about in sheep skin & goat skins, of whom the World was not worthy; such were the Christians in all Ages." Only Blake could have seen a gothic hero in Michelangelo's soldier. p. 18

More congenial to his natural bent was the vital linear character of Gothic art, whether in the human form, the foliate decoration of stone, or the pages of illuminated books. For Blake, the essence of art was the line; "firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by shadows". "The Beauty proper for sublime art is lineaments, or forms and features that are capable of being receptacles of intellect." This description fits no style so well as the Gothic; it was Blake's implicit standard of comparison with that 'chiaro oscuro' which he hated: "Such art of losing the outlines is the art of Venice and Flanders; it loses all character, and leaves what some people call expression; but this is a false notion of expression; expression cannot exist without character as its stamina; and neither character nor expression can exist without firm and determinate outline." Of colouring, he wrote that this "does not depend on where the colours are put, but where the lights and darks are

put, and all depends on Form or Outline, on where that is put; where that is wrong, the colouring never can be right; and it is always wrong in Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt." A summary dismissal, by any standard.

The linear style is, in fact, characteristic of religious art; and always Blake insists that the 'spirits', whether of men or gods, should be 'organized', within a 'determinate and bounding form'.
pp. 20-21

One might guess that Blake's early passion for Shakespeare was a consequence of his acquaintance with sculptured lineaments of the kings and queens of historical plays. *Poetical Sketches*, his earliest work, contains fragments of historical drama in rough-hewn Shakespearian blank verse. Still more fruitful was the influence of Shakespeare's lyrics, already evident in these early poems, and soon to flower in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* - the most vitally 'linear' lyric poetry since Shakespeare himself. So it is with the 'crooked roads of Genius' - one vital interest leads to another; the royal tombs to Shakespeare, and both (ultimately) to Blake's own national myth of 'the Giant Albion', the collective Being of the English nation. Blake's historical sense was derived less from history-books (though he read Froissart, Geoffrey and Monmouth, and such writers) than immediately from the great works of earlier ages. His learning was none the less exact and extensive for being that of a draughtsman rather than a man of books. p. 22

Blake left Basire's studios at the end of his seven years' apprenticeship at the age of twenty-one, and set to work to earn his living as an engraver. . . For a time he enrolled himself as a student at the newly-founded Royal Academy, which was then (in Gilchrist's words) "in an uncomfortable chrysalis condition, having had to quit its cramped lodgings in Somerset Palace (pulled down in 1775); and awaiting the completion of the new building in which more elbow room was to be provided." But it was not the cramped physical conditions which irked him so much as the cramped imaginative environment. Besides drawing from the Antique, life-drawing was the order of the day, and this, to Blake, was anathema: "Natural Objects always did & now do weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me." So he wrote many years later in his manuscript notes on Wordsworth.
p. 24

In particular, Blake hated "that infernal machine called Chiaro Oscuro, in the hands of Flemish and Venetian Demons". Against "blotting and blurring demons" Blake waged a lifelong war; though he was forced, on his own admission, to give ground a little by "the spirit of Titian". . . Rubens, too, forced Blake's reluctant admiration: "Rubens is a most outrageous demon, and by infusing the remembrance of his Pictures and style of execution, hinders all power of individual thought: so that the man who is possessed by his demon loses all admiration for any other Artist but Rubens." The impression we gain is that it was not so much Rubens and Titian, as their academic admirers, who aroused Blake's prophetic rage.
p. 25

Among Blake's early friends were the 'wild' Fuseli, and James Barry, who executed the fine mural paintings in the Royal Society of Arts, and who shared Blake's passion for

Michelangelo. Anthony Blunt has pointed out several close parallels between Blake's early work and that of Barry, whose *King Lear*, and *Job*, in particular seem to have fired his imagination. Barry was an Irishman, a Catholic, and a visionary, and their friendship may provide a clue to Blake's sympathy (minimized by Gilchrist, his biographer) with the 'Romish Church'. The No-Popery Riots of 1780 made a deep impression on Blake, who always championed the cause of the persecuted.

Our greatest Christian artist never went to church, but "ever professed his preference of the church to any sort of sectarianism". "He used to ask how it was that we heard so much of priestcraft, and so little of soldiercraft and lawyercraft." - so Samuel Butler recollected. He had a "preference for ecclesiastical governments", among which he explicitly admired the Papacy. The *Life* of St. Teresa was among his favourite books.
pp. 25-26

CHAPTER TWO The Lost Art of the Greeks

In about 1782 Thomas Stothard, an older fellow-engraver, introduced Blake to John Flaxman, then newly married and living at 27 Wardour Street, not far from Broad Street and Golden Square. Blake came for a time to share his friend's enthusiasm for Greek art. With the same whole-heartedness he showed in his love of Gothic, we find Blake in 1799 writing to another Greek enthusiast, George Cumberland of Bristol (one of the founders of the National Gallery), that his "Genius or Angel" was guiding his inspiration to the fulfillment of the "purpose for which alone I live, which is...to renew the lost Art of the Greeks". He was later to write very hard things about "the Greek and Roman slaves of the sword", but his love for Greek art and Greek mythology remained. Blake and Flaxman shared a passion for the linear, the "clear and determinate outline", though Flaxman derived chiefly from the Greek, Blake from the Gothic.
p. 27

Blake married in 1782. His wife was the illiterate daughter of a Battersea market-gardener. . . Just as Blake's want of education has been exaggerated, so, probably, has his happiness in his marriage. That Catherine was to be no help to him socially probably did not trouble him.
pp. 27-28

The strongest Greek influence on Blake was not visual but mythological. Since it often happened that he re clothed Greek themes in modern (or Gothic) dress, the extent to which he participated in the Greek Revival has not been generally recognized. The title page of *Songs of Experience* (1794) shows the recumbent dead executed in the style of the royal tombs, but the underlying myth is the Platonic theme: that men 'die' into this world from a kingdom of immortal life, "For who knows whether to live be not to die, and to die, to live?"
pp. 37-38

"The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" (first included in *Songs of Innocence* and later transferred to *Songs of Experience*) are a retelling of the Greater and Lesser

Mysteries of Eleusis - the descent of the Kore into Hades, and the nine mystic nights of the Mother's search for her child. The poems are based upon Thomas Taylor's *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*, and also upon the figures of the Portland Vase and Erasmus Darwin's account of them. Many of Blake's themes, both mythological and philosophic, especially in his early Prophetic Books (the Lambeth Books), derive from Taylor's writings and translations. pp. 38-39

The dramatic poem *Tiriël*, written in about 1789, is a strange blend of Greek and alchemical themes with Rousseau's and Mary Wollstonecraft's new theories of education. The figure of Tiriël himself has many affinities with the Sophoclean Oedipus Coloneus; and Blake's (typically tenuous) plot suggests the conflict between aged Oedipus and the sons whom he cursed. Needless to say Blake's sympathies are entirely with the sons. The illustrations of *Tiriël* reflect Blake's Neoclassical interests: there are suggestions of Classical architecture in several plates, and the costumes - those of Hela and Tiriël in Plate VII for example - are more or less Greek in intention. p. 39

CHAPTER THREE A New Mode of Printing

Blake was never an easy man socially. "A mental Prince," he was proud, argumentative and violently opposed to current fashion, in his art and his philosophic and religious ideas alike. His only tenable role in his world was that of the venerated teacher he became, in his old age, to the group of young painters known as the "Shoreham Ancients." . . .

A radical in politics, Swedenborgian in religion, with no interest whatever in making money, Blake was clearly destined for worldly failure. He was a man of tireless industry; he carried out his commissions as an engraver laboriously and conscientiously. But his thoughts were elsewhere. p. 41

The political and moral subversiveness of his early works provides one possible explanation of how Blake came to be his own publisher; but were there deeper reasons? Did he wish to produce books of an entirely new kind? Books as beautiful as some medieval psalter, the words enhanced by decoration of design and colour? p. 42

Blake first used the method of 'illuminated printing' in about 1788. Three small tractates entitled *There is no Natural Religion* seem to have been his first experiments in this art. They are crudely executed in comparison with his later work, very small (copper was expensive), and simple in design. The title-page of *Songs of Innocence* bears the date 1789, and it is likely that, satisfied with his new method, Blake in a hopeful mood began work on the title-page of his next book of poems. pp. 43-44

Blake's watercolour illumination, carried out by hand, also owed something to supernatural inspiration. According to Gilchrist, "He ground and mixed his watercolours himself on a piece of statuary marble, after a method of his own, with common

carpenter's glue diluted, which he had found out, as the early Italians had before him, to be a good binder. Joseph, the sacred carpenter, had appeared in vision and revealed *that* secret to him." Ruthven Todd thinks that 'carpenter's glue' would have been too coarse and that some more refined substance was used. "The colours he used were few and simple," Gilchrist continues, "indigo, cobalt, gamboge, vermilion, Frankfort-black freely, ultramarine rarely, chrome not at all. These he applied with a camel's hair brush, not with a sable which he disliked." . . .

The writing, engraving, printing and colouring - even the mixing of the pigments - was all Blake's work; the binding was done by Mrs Blake, who also learned to take off impressions from the plates. pp. 45-46

Mary Wollstonecraft (who worked as French editor for Blake's friend Johnson the radical bookseller) was under the influence of Rousseau, whose view of childhood as a law unto itself contrasted strongly with the pedagogic habit of mind in the Age of Reason. It must have been during his association with Mary that Blake formed the idea of making books for children, and about childhood, which should reflect the belief he shared with Rousseau that the unfolding of the imagination of every creature, in freedom, is the only true education.

In *Tiriel*, a poem illustrated with drawings but not published, Blake had already denounced the current view of childhood - deriving in great measure from Locke, that early forerunner of behaviourism and brain-washing - as a passive state to be 'formed' by 'instruction.' The poem describes with scathing indignation the consequences of 'forming' a child according to the laws of mechanistic rationalism, imposed all from outside and regardless of the mysterious formative laws of life itself. Tiriel, the blind parental tyrant, is himself the product of such an education, and dies cursing those who, by compelling him into conformity, had denied him life. p. 47

Blake was also a Platonist; he attacked Locke in his first engraved aphorisms, *There is no Natural Religion*, precisely for his refusal to accept Plato's view that there are innate ideas. "Knowledge of Ideal Beauty is Not to be Acquired. It is Born with us. Innate Ideas are in Every Man. Born with him; they are truly Himself," wrote Blake in about 1808 in the margins of Reynolds' *Discourses on Painting*. pp. 49-50

For him the mechanistic view of the universe - the popular mentality of the Enlightenment under the guise of Deism ('natural religion'), the philosophy of Bacon, Newton and Locke - was the enemy of life; life which is immeasurable, not to be captured or contained within the quantitative 'laws of nature' - a view which Bergson was later to develop in more strictly philosophic terms.

"The hours of folly are measured by the clock; but the hours of wisdom no clock can measure." As against the Newtonian universe, overwhelming man's sense of his own value by awe-inspiring vistas of space and time, Blake affirmed the holiness of life, omnipresent, no less in the tiny than in the vast:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

p. 50

In the five years between *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* Blake produced two illuminated books of outstanding beauty: *The Book of Thel* (1789) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3). *Thel* is close in spirit to the paradisaical world of *Songs of Innocence*. It consists of seven engraved plates, about six inches by four and a quarter; the larger size suggests Blake was now more confident about his technique. . . . The theme of the poem is Neoplatonic, and draws much upon Thomas Taylor's recently published paraphrased translation of Plotinus' *On the Beautiful*, and on the idea of the 'descent' of the soul into generation as described in this and other works of Taylor which appeared about this time. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* engraved about a year later reflects in its fiery forms and colours the ideas of "Hell, or Energy", no less characteristic of Blake's thought.

p. 52

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* "the new-born terror," Orc, the child who burns in the flames of his own energy, is hailed as the Messiah of the New Age whose prophet Blake believed himself to be. Of all Blake's books, this has perhaps the greatest power of word and of design. The literary form is no longer lyric, but aphorism and parable of visionary events experienced "behind the veil." "Energy is eternal delight"; and life - no less holy in the "new-born terror" of "fiery limbs, the flaming hair" than in the unhampered child on its cloud in *Songs of Innocence* - obeys the Law of its innate energies.

p. 54

No doubt this book is an expression of Blake's mood of sympathy with the forces of revolution, seen as an expression of the irrepressible energy of life. But it is, at the same time, the fruit of his profound studies of the mystical theology of Boehme, the alchemical writings of Paracelsus, Fludd and Agrippa, and his knowledge of the Western Esoteric tradition both orthodox and unorthodox. Christianity, in its popular forms at all events, has never sufficiently understood what Jung has called the ambivalence of the archetypes. No psychic energy, or mood of the soul, is merely good or merely evil; the face turned depends upon circumstances. This is a truth well understood in Mahayana Buddhism, whose deities have their peaceful and wrathful aspects; and also in Hinduism, where Kali and Shiva have their mild and terrible faces; or in the ancient Greek religion; or in the Jewish mystical tradition of the Cabbalistic Tree of the Sephiroth. Boehme, perhaps more profoundly than any other Christian mystic, had understood this truth, and Blake followed him.

p. 56

The dark face of the human city evoked in "London" is but the sum of inhumanity and of the perversion and restraint of life for which every individual is in some measure responsible:

In every cry of every Man,

*In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.*

It is these “mind-forg'd manacles” (sometimes depicted as shackling the feet of Urizen, the false god) which make thorns where there should be roses, furtive “whisperings” instead of childish laughter, “tombstones where flowers should be.” Blake indicts Church and State, parents, nurses and schoolmasters; but also, and above all, the tortuousness of “the Human Brain,” which “knits a snare” in which souls become inextricably entangled, as in a spider's web of prohibition and hypocrisy. pp. 59-60

The figures of *Experience* are entangled, burdened, listless or dead. A burning jewel in that sombre setting is “The Tyger.” In this great poem, as in “To Tirzah” (added about 1801), we again find Blake seeking to rend the veil and to bring to light the meaning and the mystery of evil. In “To Tirzah” we find, as in *Thel*, the Neoplatonic view of “mortal birth” as itself the greatest of evils. In “The Tyger” there are traces of the *Hermetica*, of the mystical theology of Boehme, of the esoteric philosophy of alchemy. But the poem ends with the question unanswered: “Did he who made the Lamb, make thee?” p. 62

CHAPTER 4 **Lovely Lambeth**

Blake and Catherine now moved to 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, on the south bank of the Thames. Gilchrist describes the house as a humble one-storeyed building; but Frederick Tatham, a friend of Blake's later years, remembers it as “a pretty, clean house of eight or ten rooms,” a typical London terrace house of the eighteenth century, with the usual strip of garden behind. . . .

The seven years at Lambeth were both productive and happy; the Lambeth books include all Blake's finest illuminated books with the exception of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. p. 63

Mythological figures are already discernable in the *Songs*. Chief among them is the figure of the soul, or psyche (the *anima*, in Jung's terminology). As 'The Little Girl Lost' she clearly has an affinity with the Kore of the Eleusinian Mysteries. She reappears as the gentle Thel, reluctant to “descend” into the Underworld of Generation; and in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) she becomes Oothoon, who, more heroic than Thel, makes the 'descent' and suffers. In later works (1795-1804) she is Vala, and in the poem which originally bore her name (afterwards entitled *The Four Zoas*), she re-enacts Apuleius' legend of Cupid and Psyche. Her final form (1804-20) is as Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb. There is a deepening and development of the figure, but the story is essentially the same in all the versions. The soul “descends” into the cave, or grave, of this world; willingly in the case of Lyca (“The Little Girl Lost”), reluctantly in the case of Thel. In both these poems it is implied that the soul has a task to perform in the World of Generation. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* we see her, as Oothoon, bitterly

lamenting, like Debussy's *Melisande*, and protesting that on earth the laws are not those of the spirit. This poem is Blake's indictment of the cruelty of the sexual morality of the world. The unmarried are driven into sorrowful fantasies, and for women, indissoluble marriage is an enslavement to lust when law and not love is the bond. Blake was surely thinking of his friend Mary Wollstonecraft and her heroic protest on behalf of women, leading to her own tragedy and early death. The poem contains some magnificent passages of poetry, developing Blake's conception of every creature as a unique expression of ever-various life.

pp. 66-68

On the title-page of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* appears the figure later named Urizen: the blind tyrant, "aged ignorance," the rational law-giver, in pursuit of the soul of life. Under the tyranny of Blake's grey-bearded Prince of this World, a travesty of God the Father, whose laws are imposed upon the energies of life that is its own law. Oothoon is bound to her ravisher by the fetters of legality. Her lover, Theotormon, unable to see that the soul is in its essence incorruptible (a Plotinian rather than a Christian doctrine), "converses with shadows dire."

Blake's depiction of Urizen advancing with outspread arms and vast beard derives, as mentioned earlier, from a Roman sculpture of Jupiter Pluvius. The same figure had appeared in an engraving made by Blake in 1791 for his friend Fuseli, as an illustration for Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden*, where it represented the advancing flood of the Nile. This figure gradually developed - in *The First Book of Urizen* (1794) especially - the familiar features of Blake's unhappy, blind, self-deluded world-ruler: not God but misguided human reason. This is one among a number of such visual sources common to Blake, Flaxman, Fuseli and others of their circle.

pp. 68-69

Blake was not at any time thinking on the same plane as Paine or Godwin; like Shelley (who may possibly have seen some of Blake's Prophetic Books at Godwin's house), he saw the warfare in "heaven" - that is, the inner worlds - in whose engagement the mortal actors are mere puppets in some great drama of the collective consciousness.

For Blake, outward events and circumstances were the *expressions* of states of mind, ideologies, mentalities, and not, as for the determinist-materialist ideologies of the modern world, their causes. Blake's "dark Satanic Mills," so often invoked in the name of social reform, prove, when we read *Milton* (the poem in which these mills are most fully described) to be the mechanistic 'laws' of Bacon, Newton and Locke, of which the industrial landscape was a reflection and expression. Man has made his machines in the image of his ideology. So, always, Blake seeks to discover the source of social and private ills within man. Only a change of the heart and mind of the nation can create a new society and new cities less hideous than those created by an atheist and mechanistic rationalism.

pp. 71-74

His *Europe: A Prophecy* followed *America* a year later, in 1794. It contains seventeen quarto pages, among them some of the most beautiful Blake ever made. . . .

The title of *The First Book of Urizen*, also of 1794 (there was never a 'second' Book of Urizen), suggests on the analogy of 'first' and 'second' Books of Kings, Samuel etc. that it belonged to Blake's "Bible of Hell," promised to the world in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In this cosmological picture-book, Blake deserts politics to depict and describe his tyrant-demon Urizen. Some of the most effective plates have no text: as Gilchrist says, "the volume seems to be a carefully finished selection of compositions from his portfolio and engraved books" . . . The poem itself is a sombre satire of Milton's account of the Creation; according to Blake, the Seven Days of Creation represent seven phases of the imprisonment and "binding" of "the cavered man" within the limitations of a world experienced only through the five senses. Urizen, thus limited, becomes the self-deluded and anxious demiurge, engaged in the "enormous labours" of imposing his "ratio of the five senses" on rebellious life, whose nature he has not understood. Such, according to Blake, is "human reason," the false God of the Enlightenment, and, in France, of Rousseau and Voltaire. pp. 75-76

With *The Song of Los*, *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los* (all dated 1795) Blake seems to have exhausted the vein of his "Bible of Hell." In these later books other figures of his pantheon emerge: Los, spirit of time and of prophecy; and his consort Enitharmon (who is at once space, and the mother of those forms in which the imaginings of the artist are embodied). These figures were named (though scarcely realised, and not depicted) in *Europe* (1794). In *The First Book of Urizen* Los is the reluctant agent of the "binding" of Urizen, and is himself "rent apart" when Urizen is separated from the wholeness of humanity. Separated likewise from Enitharmon by this fall of man into division, he begets upon her the child Orc, who is (as in the archaic Greek pantheon where each succeeding generation of gods overthrows the heaven-ruler) destined to overcome Urizen. pp. 76-78

In *The Four Zoas* (1795-1804), *Milton* (1804-8) and *Jerusalem* (1804-20), Los and Enitharmon are more fully realised, and - with Blake's progressive loss of faith in revolution - Orc, spirit of revolution, recedes into the background. Urizen, still retaining the venerable features of "aged ignorance," becomes the Satan of *Milton*. He makes his last, terrible appearance as the cloven-footed false image of God, who, in the *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, torments Job with his pretence to being the supreme God. Throughout Blake's work, the true world-ruler is "Jesus, the Imagination," the "God within," whose, mystical marriage with the soul is celebrated in the last plate of *Jerusalem*. p. 78

The Four Zoas in its relatively final form represents a new beginning, incorporating portions of the earlier manuscript, which itself represents more than one attempt. There are a few striking pencil drawings - some of them so 'strange' that Tatham (to whom Mrs Blake bequeathed Blake's papers) tried to rub them out; but the poem was never engraved or made into an illuminated book. . . .

The poem contains some magnificent poetry; the passages spoken by Enion, the earth-mother, beginning "What is the price of Experience?" (line 397 of Night the Second), and

her speech at the end of *Night the Seventh* on resurrection of the “eternal man”, are unsurpassed in Blake's later works.

In this poem the Four Zoas and their Emanations - the pantheon of Blake's interior cosmos - take their final forms. Urizen and Orc remain, but the active agents of the soul's recovery from the 'sleep of death' are now the poetic genius (Los) and his “Emanation”, Enitharmon, who gives form to the imaginings of the “Poetic Genius”. Two new figures - Enion and Tharmas - complete the 'fourfold' pattern of the psyche by the introduction of the mutable form, and formless energy, of the physical body. pp. 78-80

CHAPTER 5 Night Thoughts

It was Blake's fate to be employed as the illustrator of poems far inferior to his own: Blair's *The Grave*, and Hayley's *Little Tom the Sailor*. Young's poem is the least bad of the best-sellers, whose readers have long gone to those graves which it was their melancholy pleasure to contemplate. For Blake, as for the Neoplatonists, the only grave of the universe was this world, the only death the spiritual death of its benighted inhabitants. p. 97

Another set of illustrations belonging to the Lambeth period, that to Gray's poems, was a labour of love and an example of Blake's 'fun.' It was natural that Blake should have liked Gray; he did so for the same reasons that Dr Johnson, pundit of Augustan taste, disliked him. For in Gray there is the first sound of a new voice, of that 'inspiration' which was to bring to an end the smooth and complacent school of versifiers who preceded the Romantic movement.

It was Gray who in his “Progress of Poesy” had invoked Shakespeare as supreme creator of:

*Such forms as glitter in the Muse's ray
With orient hues, unborrow'd of the Sun* p. 98

CHAPTER 6 Natural Friends

“I know that This World Is a World of Imagination & Vision. I see Everything I paint in This World, but Everybody does not see alike. To the Eyes of a Miser, a Guinea is far more beautiful than the Sun, & a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing which stands in the way. Some see Nature all Ridicule & Deformity, & by these I shall not regulate my proportions; & some scarce see Nature at all. But to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, So he sees. As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers. You certainly Mistake, when you say that the Visions of Fancy are not to be found in This World. To Me This

World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination, & I feel Flatter'd when I am told so. What is it that sets Homer, Virgil & Milton in so high a rank of Art? Why is the Bible more Entertaining and Instructive than any other book? Is it not because they are addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation, & but mediately to the Understanding or Reason? Such is True Painting, and such was alone valued by the Greeks & the best modern Artists.”

p. 102

Blake had one patron who never failed him; who left him free to follow his own imaginative impulse, promising only to buy from him whatever he should paint. This was Thomas Butts. . . .

“As to Myself, about whom you are so kindly Interested, I live by Miracle. I am Painting small Pictures from the Bible. For as to Engraving, in which art I cannot reproach myself with any neglect, yet I am laid in a corner as if I did not Exist, & Since my Young's Night Thoughts have been publish'd, Even Johnson & Fuseli have discarded my Graver. But as I know that He who Works & has his health cannot starve, I laugh at Fortune & Go on & on. I think I forsee better Things than I have ever seen. My Work pleases my employer, and I have an order for Fifty small Pictures at One Guinea each, which is Something better than mere copying after another artist.”

Blake's 'employer' filled his house in Fitzroy Square with his works: Butts' house was to be the chief repository of Blake's output as a painter to the end of his life. pp. 103-104

Nearly all Blake's surviving Bible illustrations, in tempera, watercolour and colour-printed drawing, come from the Butts collection. They number one hundred and thirty-seven illustrations of Old Testament subjects and thirty-eight of the New Testament. Blake was selling regularly to Butts between 1799 and 1810. He writes to him with justifiable pride: “The works I have done for You are Equal to Carrache or Rafael (and I am now seven years older than Rafael was when he died), I say they are Equal to Carrache or Rafael, or else I am Blind, Stupid, Ignorant and Incapable in two years' Study to understand those things which a Boarding School Miss can comprehend in a fortnight. Be assured, My dear Friend, that there is not one touch in these drawings and pictures but what came from my Head and Heart in Unison; That I am Proud of being their Author and Grateful to you my Employer; & that I look upon you as the Chief of my Friends, whom I would endeavour to please, because you, among all men, have enabled me to produce these things.”

p. 105

It was through no wish of his own that Blake worked in seclusion. In his *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809 he lamented that the painters of England were not engaged on public works. Four of the Bible series, his magnificent *Jacob's Ladder*, *The Body of Abel found by Adam and Eve*, *Soldiers casting Lots for Christ's Garments* and *Angels Hovering* were designed as frescoes to adorn the altars of churches. These frescoes were to be removable, for “If the Frescoes of *Apelles*, of *Protogenes*, of *Raphael* or *Michael Angelo* could have been removed, we might, perhaps, have them now in England. I could divide

Westminster Hall, or the walls of any other great Building, into compartments and ornament them with Frescoes, which would be removable at pleasure.”

So wrote Blake on “The Invention of a Portable Fresco” in the advertisement for his one public exhibition, his last vain attempt to persuade the visionless patrons of contemporary English art to allow him to adorn our public buildings and churches. p. 106

CHAPTER 7 The Line of the Almighty

It is certain that Blake saw line as energy, as the signature of life.

“The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this,” he wrote. “That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling. Great inventors, in all ages, knew this: Protogenes and Apelles knew each other by this line. Rafael and Michael Angelo and Albert Durer are known by this and this alone. The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist's mind, and the pretence of the plagiarist in all its branches.” pp. 109-110

For Blake, volume and weight belonged to the mechanistic concept of a natural world subject to the “quantitative ‘laws of nature’ as these operate in time and space; the universe of Bacon, Newton and Locke,” of the “Satanic mills” of natural causality - to all, in fact, which he himself opposed with all the energy of his prophetic mission. Against the mechanistic view of nature, product of the rational mind of Urizen, Blake proclaimed life. Life is non-spatial and non-temporal; gravity does not weigh it down, nor bulk contain it. There are, for Blake's human figures, essentially two conditions - the unconfined freedom of unimpeded energy; and the constricted, fettered, weighted and cramped state of the prisoners of Urizen's universe of mechanized nature. Michelangelo's prisoners, struggling from their rocky confinement, would have signified, for Blake, life freeing itself from the oppression of matter, like the figure of Earth in his own *Gates of Paradise*. p. 111

The spirit is already free; and “the spiritual body or angel” is the true man, released from its “excrementitious husk and covering.” Here Blake is close to Swedenborg, whose disembodied spirits are fully human but liberated from the restrictions of a material body. Swedenborg taught that the resurrection of the Dead is the freeing of the spiritual body from its earthly envelope, the “rotten rags” of mortality. Like Swedenborg Blake had himself seen spirits of another plane of existence: his brother Robert, “clapping his hands for joy” as he rose through the ceiling, and other spiritual visitants, real or imagined, throughout his life. The physical body was beautiful to Blake in so far as it reflected the lineaments of an informing soul or spirit, the “celestial body” of a famous passage from St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, which Blake invokes in his emblem

accompanying the poem "To Tirzah" (c. 1801): *It is raised a spiritual body*. Blake's human figures are already such. pp. 111-112

Like Plato, Blake uses the symbol of the Cave. For him the Cave is the body, lit by the five windows of the senses. "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." p. 113

"This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite & Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite & Temporal. There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature. All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, the Human Imagination, who appear'd to Me as Coming to Judgment among his Saints & throwing off the Temporal that the Eternal might be Establish'd; round him were seen the Images of Existences according to a certain order Suited to my Imaginative Eye."

There follows a detailed account of the various groups of figures. . . .

The Last Judgment is the nearest Blake came to a visual depiction of his spiritual cosmos; but long passages in both *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem* describe the 'fourfold' interior city. pp. 127-130

CHAPTER 8

Spiritual Enemies

Blake's Angels had known what they were about when they sent him to his "three years' slumber beside the ocean" at Felpham. He had never before lived in the country. He and Catherine had loved to go on country rambles on the south side of the Thames, where, about Peckham Rye and neighbouring Kent villages, there were lanes, elms and harvest-fields. Now both sea and country lanes were at their door. We see Mrs Blake "courting the embraces of Neptune"; and for Blake his six-roomed cottage was for a time - until growing irritation with his employer made his position intolerable - paradise. p. 137

Blake, like Turner, supremely admired the paintings of Claude. He later communicated this admiration to Samuel Palmer, pointing out to his young disciple "that in these, when minutely examined, there were, upon the focal lights of the foliage, small specks of pure white which made them appear to be glittering with dew which the morning sun had not yet dried up. . . . His description of the genuine Claudes, I shall never forget. He warmed with his subject, and continued through an evening walk. The sun was set; but Blake's Claudes made sunshine in that shady place."

Blake admired Constable too. Examining some of his work, he exclaimed “Why, this is vision”; to which the more prosaic Constable replied that he “took it to be painting”.

p. 140

In the summer of 1803 Blake found in the garden of his cottage a soldier, called in by the gardener, it seems, to cut the grass. Blake did not like soldiers; he was against war as such, and against the war of English intervention in France in particular. He ordered the intruder out, and when he protested, threw him out by main force. Ill-advised words followed, reported as “Damn the King, and damn all his soldiers, they are all slaves”; and some remarks about Napoleon more fitted to the mouth of a French than of an English poet. On this occasion Hayley came to Blake's defence in fine style, and he was acquitted. No doubt he was innocent. Yet the words imputed to him were such as he might well have spoken in anger, and his Felpham neighbours would have been aware of his political views. He was not the man to conceal them.

p. 142

Blake had also been working for other 'masters': “But none can know the Spiritual Acts of my three years' slumber on the banks of the Ocean, unless he has seen them in the Spirit, or unless he should have read My long Poem descriptive of those Acts; for I have in these three years composed an immense number of verses in One Grand Theme, Similar to Homer's Iliad or Milton's Paradise Lost, the Persons & Machinery entirely new to the Inhabitants of the Earth (some of the Persons Excepted). I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without Premeditation & sometimes even against my Will; the Time it has taken in writing was thus render'd Non Existent, & an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life, all produc'd without Labour or Study. I mention this to show what I think the Grand Reason of my being brought down here.”

The Poem *Milton* was, of course, the labour of a long life: Blake's own. His immense reading, his impassioned thought on the poetic and moral issues of which he treats, his continuous observation of man and nature, bore fruit. He himself was the Mental Traveller in land of the imagination, where:

. . . *the Babe is born in joy
That was begotten in dire woe;
Just as we Reap in Joy the fruit
Which we in bitter tears did sow.*

As with Coleridge (whose *Kubla Khan* no opium could have evoked, had his mind and imagination been less richly stored with his readings in philosophy, poetry and unnumbered books), Blake's effortless composition of his great poem was the reward of year-long labours.

The theme of *Milton* is poetic inspiration as a way of redemption from the tyrannous law of “Satan, the Selfhood”, framer of “natural religion”, the maker of moral laws. p. 144

Blake's relationship to Milton - lifelong and intimate - was at once one of admiration of the poet who was for him type and exemplar of the "inspired man", and disagreement with the Puritan theologian. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3) Blake had already defended the ground of his disagreement: Milton had allowed the demon Reason to curb the energy of his Desire: "Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling. . . . The history of this is written in *Paradise Lost*, & the Governor or Reason is call'd Messiah." But "this history has been adopted by both parties. It indeed appeared to Reason as if Desire was cast out; but the Devil's account is, that the Messiah fell & and form'd a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss."

This usurpation, and the building of the Hell of the "ration of the five senses" is the theme of *Milton*. By exposing the deceiver, the poet Blake undertook to release the poet Milton (type of the 'inspired man') from the bondage of rationalism; the mind of the human ego, of 'selfhood' as Blake termed it. Long after, in 1825, he told the diarist Crabb Robinson: "I saw Milton in imagination, and he told me to beware of being misled by his *Paradise Lost*. In particular he wished me to shew the falsehood of his doctrine that the pleasure of sex arose from the Fall. The Fall could not produce any pleasure." pp. 147-148

The sacrifice of his integrity as an artist for profit was for Blake an impossibility. During the years with Hayley he tried to silence his conscience in obedience to the good advice of his "natural friends". To begin with he had endeavored "with my whole might" to "chain my feet to the world of Duty and Reality; but in vain! The faster I bind, the better is the Ballast, and I, so far from being bound down, take the world with me in my flights & often it seems lighter than a Ball of wool rolled by the wind. . . . Alas! Wretched, happy, ineffectual labourer of time's moments that I am! Who shall deliver me from this spirit of Abstraction & Improvidence?"

But Blake knew at heart that the voice that urged him to obey "Duty and Reality" in order to make money was the voice of the Devil. Six months after his arrival in Felpham, in January 1802, he was confiding to Butts that the Inspirers would not let him escape from them: "I am under the direction of Messengers from Heaven, Daily & Nightly; but the nature of such things is not, as some suppose, without trouble or care. Temptations are on the right hand & left; behind, the sea of time & space follows swiftly; he who keeps not right onwards is lost, & if our footsteps slide in clay, how can we do otherwise than fear & tremble. . . . But if we fear to do the dictates of our Angels, & tremble at the tasks set before us; if we refuse to do Spiritual Acts because of Natural Fears or Natural Desires! Who can describe the dismal torments of such a state!" pp. 152-154

CHAPTER 9 Visions of Albion

Blake returned to London from Felpham at the age of forty-five, and in the years that followed was to turn material defeat into spiritual victory. . . .

Blake made, not for Lambeth, but for his native district, and took a lease on the first floor at No. 17 South Molton Street. This was to be his home for nearly seventeen years. Not a house, this time, or even a six-roomed cottage. He had come down in the world; but his wants were few, and his childlessness, in the circumstances, was fortunate for his art and for his visions. And in a spirit of renewed hope he engraved the magnificent title-page of a new poem: *Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804). p. 155

It is impossible to know if Blake had already begun the poem at Felpham, and, if so, how much was written there. But as surely as *Milton* breathes the atmosphere of the paradisaal cottage, *Jerusalem* reflects the sombre grandeur of London:

*In Felpham I heard and saw the Visions of Albion
I write in South Molton Street what I both see and hear
In regions of Humanity, in London's opening streets.*

This great poem, with its superbly engraved pages, was to be Blake's companion over many years. It seems likely that he designed the title-page while very little of the poem existed in visible form. Southey is said to have seen part of it in 1811: "a perfectly mad poem called Jerusalem". None of the five copies printed by Blake is on paper watermarked earlier than 1818, and Keynes believes that Blake continued to add to the poem until 1820. He illuminated only one copy. This is probably the one to which he refers in a letter written to George Cumberland written in 1827: "The Last Work I produced is a Poem entitled Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion, but I find that to Print it will Cost my time the amount of Twenty Guineas. One I have finish'd. It contains 100 Plates but it is not likely that I shall get a Customer for it."

He did not. This glorious book passed into the hands of Frederick Tatham after Catherine Blake's death. pp. 155-156

As a poem, it is not so much a work of that "hammered gold and gold enameling" in which Blake's greatest disciple Yeats tempered his style, as a gold-mine. Blake's 'visions' do not belong to time, but to the timeless; they are related as parts to a whole, but as parts of the surface of a sphere, all equidistant from the centre, rather than in the time sequence to which in this world we are normally confined. Like dreams, they came to him in single symbolic episodes, or images; there is some attempt at chronology, but the material does not lend itself to this order, any more than would a series of vivid dreams, all relating, perhaps, to an unfolding situation, but not forming a consecutive narrative. Blake added to *Jerusalem* over many years, inserting passages which may be fine in themselves but which further destroyed the continuity. p. 158

The pages of *Jerusalem* are Blake at his most Blakean. The figures are executed in his fully evolved and simplified linear style, that outline without volume which Roger Fry disliked but which is perfectly adapted to the novel technique Blake had invented. The

linear decoration is itself calligraphic, merging harmoniously with the script. Grand, grotesque or lovely forms depict, as in some visual Divine comedy, inner states of soul.

Blake can be horrific, but he is never, like his friend Fuseli, obscene; he never incites to evil by presenting it as alluring, but describes it, in the spirit of Dante, with prophetic purity.

In *Jerusalem* the reduction of Michelangelesque forms to linear terms is complete. It is the style of Blake's creation, fully realised in its own terms. p. 163

In 1805, two years after Blake's return to London, an engraver turned publisher named Cromeck commissioned him to make a series of designs for Blair's *Grave*, on the understanding that Blake should also be the engraver. A list of subscribers was opened, the reputation of Blake being the main attraction. Fuseli, always a faithful friend, wrote the forward. The list of subscribers was long and contained many names distinguished in the art world of the day. But the designs once in his hands, Cromeck gave them to the engraver Schiavonetti, a pupil of the "smooth" (to use Blake's word for him) Bartolozzi. Blake was doubly enraged: at the spoiling of his work, and at the financial loss. Gilchrist calculated that Cromeck made 1,800 pounds from sales of the book, of which 500 pounds went to Schiavonetti and only 20 pounds to Blake.

Still worse, seeing Blake at work on his composition of *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, Cromeck went to Blake's old acquaintance Stothard and proposed the subject to him as an original idea of his own, without mentioning that Blake was working on it. Cromeck in due course published an engraving from Stothard's painting, at great profit to himself. Blake's long friendship with Stothard was broken with much indignation on both sides, and again he was cheated of hope of financial reward for his work. p. 169

The bitterest irony in the story of Blake's failures and humiliations is that he was never unknown; on the contrary, he was in the heart of London's art world, and knew all the most famous artists and engravers of his day. And yet he failed where they succeeded, ousted by men of inferior talents and passed over by lifelong friends. pp. 170-171

CHAPTER 10

The Interpreter

From the summer of 1818 a new circle of friends began to gather about him. George Cumberland, though he lived in Bristol, did not forget Blake, and sent him a young artist, John Linnell, who was to become the friend and supporter of his declining years. Even as a young man, Linnell had that capacity to cope with the affairs of this world that Blake so notably lacked. At the time he met Blake he was working mainly as a portrait-painter, and asked Blake's help in the engraving of a portrait. Through Linnell, Blake later (1824) met Samuel Palmer (then aged nineteen), who more than any other was the inheritor of something of Blake's vision. Palmer was the moving spirit of a group of young painters of his own generation known as the Shoreham Ancients, so named because Samuel

Palmer and his father lived at Shoreham, and because they were in total revolt against the aesthetics of 'the moderns' of their day, desiring, like Blake himself, a return to the "Everlasting Gospel" of art, the Platonic and Plotinian philosophy of ideal form and ideal beauty. . . . Linnell was a little older than these young enthusiasts (and not strictly one of the Shoreham group), but had earlier befriended Palmer, who later became his son-in-law. pp. 175-176

In this happier phase of his life Blake moved (in 1821) from South Molton Street to No. 3 Fountain Court, off the Strand, a house belonging to a brother-in-law. It was a "quiet court" when Blake lived there, with a glimpse of the Thames. It seemed a squalid place to Crabb-Robinson: "He was at work, engraving, in a small bedroom - light, and looking out on a mean yard - everything in the room squalid and indicating poverty, except himself. . . . There was but one chair in the room, besides that on which he sat. On my putting my hand to it, I found that it would have fallen to pieces if I had lifted it. So, as if I had been a Sybarite, I said, with a smile, "Will you let me indulge myself?" and sat on the bed near him. During my short stay there was nothing in him that betrayed that he was aware of what to other persons might have been even offensive - not in his person, but in all about him."

Even Crabb-Robinson seems to have sensed the special atmosphere of the "House of the Interpreter", as the Shoreham Ancients called that poor room (the reference is to Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*). Samuel Palmer used to kiss the threshold when he visited him. Palmer recalls Blake as "one of the very few who cannot be depressed by neglect, and to whose name, rank and station could add no lustre. Moving apart, in a sphere above the attraction of worldly honours, he did not accept greatness but confer it. He ennobled poverty, and by his conversation and the influence of his genius, made two small rooms in Fountain Court more attractive than the threshold of princes." pp. 180-182

CHAPTER 11 King and Priest in his own Household

The commission for the twenty two *Illustrations of the Book of Job* came from Linnell, in 1821, when Blake was sixty five. Linnell had seen the series of watercolour drawings Blake had made for Butts, and he commissioned a second series for himself. He paid Blake 5 pounds per plate which enabled him to work on the engravings. These illustrations, and the later, unfinished, *Dante* series, are Blake's enduring master-works; as familiar to us as Bach's *B-minor Mass* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and equal in conception to these, or to any of those Florentine paintings he so ardently admired. They are supreme masterpieces of the engraver's art. p. 185

Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* are more than an illustration of the Bible; they are in themselves a prophetic vision, a spiritual revelation, at once a personal testimony and replete with Blake's knowledge of Christian Cabbala, Neoplatonism, and the mystical theology of the Western Esoteric tradition as a whole. They are a complete statement of Blake's vision of man's spiritual drama. . . .

Job's three friends are clearly based on his own Zoas: Tharmas (the sensual man), Luvah (the man of feeling), and Urizen (the reasoner). The beautiful figure of Elihu, who, in Plate 12, ushering the first light of dawn among the fading stars, causes Job to look up in hope, is evidently Los, the poetic imagination, who "kept the divine vision in time of trouble".

The series begins and ends with a symbolic expression of Blake's belief that Christianity is "the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination, Imagination the real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow. . . . Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage himself openly & publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the building up of Jerusalem".
pp. 186-188

One would like to know why, and for whom, Blake, in 1821, painted his fine illustration of a Neoplatonic mythological treatise - Porphyry's *De Antro Nympharum* - which he had read with delight (in Thomas Taylor's translation) years before, and whose influence is evident in the Lambeth books. . . .

The work is a fine example of Blake's late style. As in the Job series, there is the suggestion of an interpenetration of worlds or modes of consciousness. Porphyry interprets the Homeric "cave of the nymphs", scene of Odysseus' return to Ithaca, as sacred to the mysteries of generation. The incarnating souls "descend" from a radiant world, and on the looms of the nymphs are woven into earthly bodies. The principle figures in the painting are Odysseus and the goddess Athene, the divine wisdom: a figure not unlike the Dante series Blake painted soon afterwards. The sleeping figure in the sun-chariot suggests the drowsy "God within" of *Job 5*; the Platonic 'cave' of generation in which the nymphs with urns on their heads are standing suggests the cave' of *Job 2* and *14*. In both cases that 'cave' symbolises, as for Plato, this world.

It seems likely that the tempera was painted shortly before the *Job* series. It also looks forward to the last series of designs Blake was to create, before his tireless industry and delight in his work diminished as his body failed him: the illustrations to Dante. He was at work on these literally on his death-bed. He made over one hundred drawings - many of them mere sketches - and seven engravings, possibly none of them completed, but nonetheless among his greatest works. "What you call finished is not even begun," he had exclaimed to Moser, defender of the "high finish" of "paltry blots and blurs". pp. 193-194

Like Milton, Dante was, for Blake, a friend and peer in "great eternity" in whom he nevertheless (as with Milton) found many grave faults. "Dante saw devils where I saw none," he told Crabb Robinson. He saw in Dante "a mere politician and atheist, busied about this world's affairs. . . . Yet he afterwards spoke of Dante of being then with God."

. . . . Milton, Blake criticised for his Puritanical sexual morality; Dante, for his cruelty. Both were worshippers of the moral god, Urizen. His depiction of Hell Gate makes it

clear that Blake understood Dante's Hell to be this world, where Satan-Urizen is censured by a worshipping iron-crowned ecclesiastic who kneels before him. p. 196

Dante's hells are the states of souls under the unforgiving tyranny of the unforgiving "God of this world", "The Accuser": "These states exist now. Man Passes on, but States remain for Ever; he passes thro' them like a traveller who may as well suppose that the places he has passed thro' exist no more, as a Man may suppose that the states he has pass'd thro' Exist no more." In this, though in no other sense, Hell is eternal. p. 200

Dante is the Traveller who explores the "States"; progressing, as all Mental Travellers must, from the cave or grave of the hells of this world (where spiritual journeys begin) through the circles of purgatory (in which suffering is rendered tolerable by a realisation that it is not without use in the purification of souls), to the world of spiritual light. In Blake's terms, he traverses "the Circle of Destiny", which embraces every possible human experience: "Distinguish therefore States from Individuals in these States. States change, but Individual Identities never change nor cease, You cannot go to Eternal Death in that which can never Die." p. 201

Blake's *Last Judgment* is his own expression of the "Circle of Destiny"; of the "States" of the heavens and the hells and the purgatories. The first version of this great theme was painted in 1808 for the Countess of Egremont – a commission obtained for Blake by Ozias Humphrey the miniaturist. Blake wrote two descriptions of the picture: one for Ozias Humphrey to present to the countess; another in his Notebook for the year 1810. He had long ago reached a realization beyond the Christian doctrine of an eternity of hell for the damned, and of bliss for the righteous; and indeed he criticized (in *Milton*) Swedenborg himself (whose conception of the Grand Man underlies Blake's vision of the universal collective human kingdom), because he was "a Samson shorn by the churches", and subscribed to this barbaric doctrine.

He had reached the profounder perspectives of the Indian philosophies, of the Buddhist 'wheel', on which all states are illusory, good and evil alike: "I do not consider either the Just or the Wicked to be in a Supreme State, but to be every one of them States of the Sleep which the soul may fall into in its deadly dreams of Good & Evil when it leaves Paradise following the Serpent." pp. 205-206

During his last months, Blake was "too much attached to Dante to think much of anything else". . . .

His young friend Frederick Tatham had commissioned a coloured impression of *The Ancient of Days*, Blake's own singular favourite among all his works. Blake finished it to the utmost point of perfection, making it as beautiful in colour as already grand in design, patiently working on it till within a few days of his death. After he "had frequently touched upon it, and had frequently held it at a distance, he threw it from him, and with an air of exulting triumph exclaimed, 'There! That will do! I cannot mend it.'"

As he said these words – so the story continues – “his glance fell on his loving Kate, no longer young or beautiful, but who had lived with him in these and like humble rooms, in hourly companionship, ever ready helpfulness, and reverent sympathy, for now forty five years. . . . “Stay!” he cried, “Keep as you are! *You* have ever been an angel to me: I will draw you!” And a portrait was struck off by a hand which approaching death – few days distant now – had not weakened nor benumbed.” The last work to come from Blake’s hand was this hasty pencil drawing (now lost) of the faithful companion of his life’s hard journey. He died singing his own songs of praise and joy in the vision which illuminated his death, as it had sustained and inspired his life.”

p. 207

