BLAKE

OF THE SHORTER POEMS

By HAZARD ADAMS

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To

Mary Thurness Adams

who first read me "The Tyger"

. . . for Los compell'd the invisible Spectre
To labours mighty with vast strength, with his mighty chains,
In pulsations of time, & extensions of space like Urns of Beulah,
With great labour upon his anvils, & in his ladles the Ore
He lifted, pouring it into the clay ground prepar'd with art,
Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems,
That whenever any Spectre began to devour the Dead,
He might feel the pain as if a man gnaw'd his own tender nerves.

—JERUSALEM I

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Preface

THE RAPID growth of interest in William Blake during the last twenty or thirty years has produced several remarkable scholarly and critical studies of his poetry and pictorial art. But during this period there has been little detailed criticism of his shorter poetry. The only book devoting itself to Blake's *Poetical Sketches* is Margaret Lowery's *Windows of the Morning* (1940). Until very recently Joseph Wicksteed's *Blake's Innocence and Experience* (1928) was the only book devoted exclusively to the famous *Songs.* Both of these studies appeared before the more ambitious work of M. O. Percival, Mark Schorer, Northrop Frye, and David V. Erdman led readers to a much fuller understanding of Blake's total symbolism and historical allegory.

Recently two books have dealt with the lyric poems. The first, Stanley Gardner's short study, *Infinity on the Anvil* (1954), makes a serious effort to interpret many of the *Songs,* but the author's apparent assumption that Blake's later prophecies are failures and hardly worth the effort of serious study often makes his specific analyses vague or incomplete. The second book, Robert F. Gleckner's *The Piper and the Bard* (1959), on the other hand, exhibits a greater understanding of Blake's symbolism and is the first book on Blake in which fairly exhaustive symbolic readings of the *Songs* occur. Neither Gleckner's book nor

Gardner's, however, examines critically the important group of shorter poems appearing in the so-called Pickering MS. These poems, never published by Blake, are of the greatest interest, not only in themselves but because they act as a link between the early lyrics and the long prophetic poems *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, which embody Blake's total symbolism in its most complicated form.

Blake's poetry is written, from an astonishingly early age, out of a single idea of what the nature of poetry is. Very early in his career, he elaborated a symbolism implied inevitably by this conception; but unlike W. B. Yeats or Robert Graves he wrote no "grammar" of his symbolism. His later prophecies are not a grammar, they are an encyclopedic poem; and the poems of the Pickering MS are lyric microcosms of the later prophecies. Blake's readers are in the odd position of discovering that his later long poems often throw light upon earlier poems, for they are presentations of a symbolic world, phases and fragments of which are described in the lyrics. Organization of Parts Two and Three of this book is roughly, then, the reverse of the usual chronological treatment of a writer's career. It moves from the Pickering MS, with help from the prophecies, to the earlier *Songs*. The purpose is to elucidate in some detail that group of poems not yet discussed at any length in previous studies and to use these poems as a practical link between Blake's most ambitious work, with its relation to symbolic conventions in poetry, and the earlier lyrics.

The interpretation of Blake's lyrics presents peculiar problems, and Part One attempts in three chapters to define them. Chapter I discusses various failures and successes in interpreting Blake in the past and establishes the necessity of understanding what to Blake was a traditional, archetypal symbolism. Chapter II presents this symbolism by describing the interweaving of three biblical and Blakean archetypes in his work. Chapter III presents a rationale for using Blake's later works to interpret the earlier, and it attempts to demonstrate the efficacy of such a method in dealing with his famous poem "The Tyger." Part Two is devoted to the Pickering poems, a few of the last poems written by Blake in the Rossetti MS ("My Spectre around me . . . ," for example), two poems from Blake's letters, and "The Everlasting Gospel." Part Three deals with Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.* Many of these poems have been examined at length by Robert F. Gleckner in *The Piper and the Bard.* I have found it useful and indeed necessary to repeat at times points he has made.

On the other hand I have tried to emphasize where possible poems that he has passed over with a minimum of comment.

It must be added that the book is not a reference or reader's guide to Blake's poems. The chapters are meant to be read in the order in which they appear, one building upon another. The effort is to move the reader into Blake's symbolism and build up his knowledge of Blake's own language so that in later chapters repeated elaborate explanation of terms will not be necessary.

Textual references that appear in parentheses or brackets following quotations from Blake are to Geoffrey Keynes's *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (1957). "*K*" signifies this edition. Keynes supplies his own punctuation for Blake's lyrics. Following the principle of Wicksteed and Gleckner, I have attempted to restore Blake's own punctuation on the basis of their transcriptions and with reference to facsimiles. Poems from the Rossetti MS have as the basis for their text Keynes's facsimile edition. The text of poems from the Pickering MS is based upon a collation of the manuscript by David V. Erdman, to whom I am indebted. Quotations from the prophetic books are made directly from Keynes.

Decisions on matters of Blake's punctuation are difficult to make. His commas and periods, colons and semicolons are sometimes impossible to distinguish from each other. Furthermore, there is little consistent usage of these marks. Where I am in doubt I have placed an alternate mark in brackets. Blake's spelling is also erratic and, by standards of modern usage, often incorrect. I have, however, as in the case of punctuation, attempted to duplicate the original wherever possible. When reference is made to a previous commentator on a particular lyric or shorter poem the reference may be found in the bibliographical appendix, listed alphabetically under the title of the poem to which the commentary refers. The bibliography is not an exhaustive one, but lists the most significant commentaries on each of Blake's shorter poems. It takes the place of extensive and diverting reference notes and, not being confined to references directly relevant to my own readings, has the advantage of presenting the reader with selections from the whole range of Blake scholarship.

I wish to express my appreciation to several people who offered suggestions to me while the book was being written, particularly to Professor Northrop Frye, who read the manuscript at an early stage and offered suggestions that led

ultimately to revision and considerable enlargement of my plan, and to Professors Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald Bentley, Jr., who have made many helpful suggestions. Others to whom I am indebted for having read and commented upon drafts of chapters are Professors M. H. Abrams, James B. Colvert, Bruce R. Park, and Willis W. Pratt. I wish to thank Professor Philip Graham, editor of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* for permission to republish material in Chapter III which originally appeared in somewhat different form in that journal.

A final word: The book arises out of the experience of teaching Blake to graduate and undergraduate college students. In that attempt I became convinced that a book on the shorter poetry making use of recent scholarship and criticism would provide a useful guide. My primary aim has been elucidation with clarity and without oversimplification. By this I do not mean that the book is always easy reading, but that within the bounds of its problem it is designed for the serious student.

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East Lansing, Michigan
September, 1962

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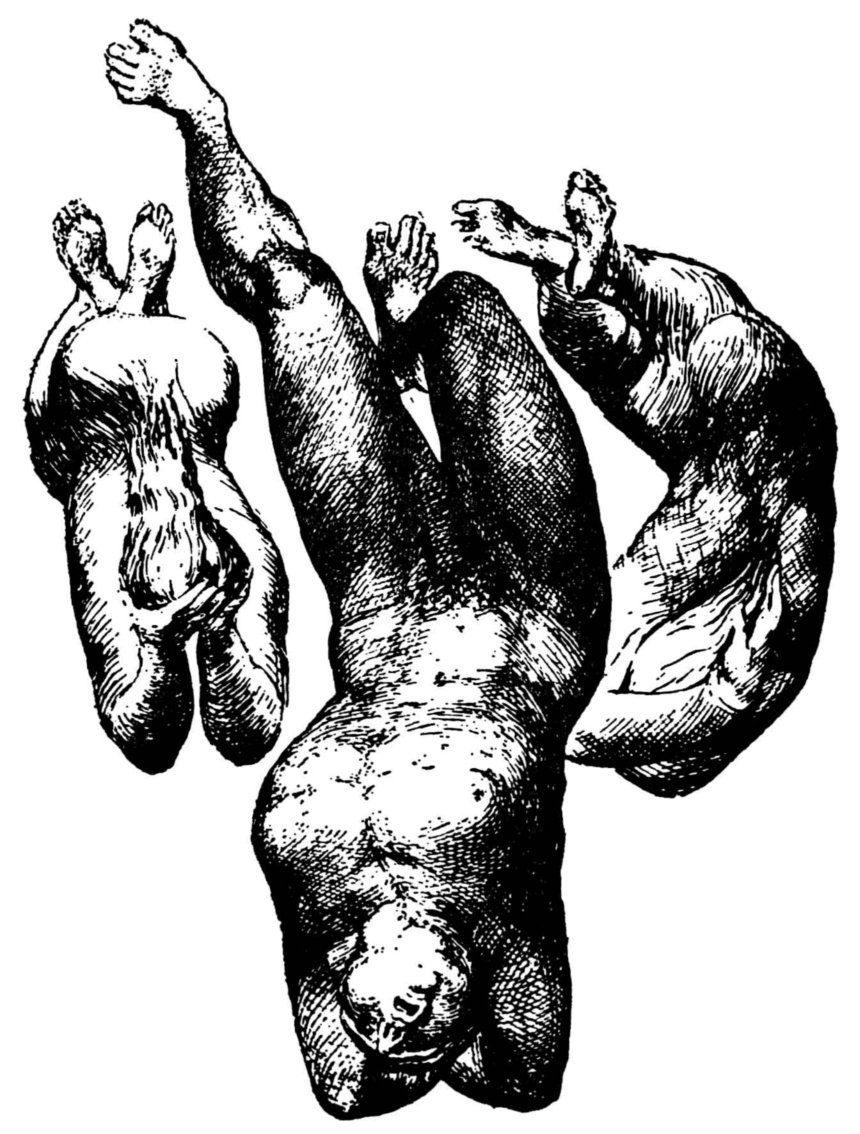

PART ONE

The Problem

CHAPTER

I

The Interpretation of Blake's Poetry

I

. . . you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act. [*K*793]

IN THE letter from which the quotation above is taken William Blake replies to his correspondent's suggestion that his art needs an interpreter. He replies, in substance, that if his art is interpreted by the imaginative faculties rather than by the "understanding or Reason" alone, its meaning will reveal itself directly. He observes with pleasure that children in particular have been attracted to his work. Nevertheless, Blake remains a difficult poet; and his work has raised problems which recent criticism with its particular interests and emphases has apparently found difficult to solve.[1] Blake was far too optimistic about the ability of modern readers to elucidate visionary poetry,

[1] In *The English Romantic Poets and Essayists: A Review of Research and Criticism* (ed. Carolyn and Lawrence Houtchens [New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1957], p. 23), Northrop Frye puts this in a somewhat different way: "The rhetorical or 'new' critics have not been much attracted by Blake." I suspect that the attraction has been dissipated by limitation of method.

and he was probably, like most poets, suspicious of interpreters.[2] Most poets eschew the explicator as Blake eschews the explicit, because they see the explicator standing between the work of art and the perceiver—translating it, making it explicit if not to the idiot at least to the discursive intellect—and passing to the perceiver only a fragment of its meaning.

It is only natural that a critic should choose to interpret those poems that his method most obviously and effectively works upon, or feed poems through his critical machinery and reshape them in the image of his model. If the critic is confronted by a poem that rejects his terminology (has none of the devices for which he has names or hides familiar devices from him), his impulse is probably to do one of the following things: decide that the poem is deficient in necessary poetic qualities; forcibly "read into" the poem those qualities he admires, whether they are there or not; attempt to create new terms for new qualities; or choose to ignore the poem entirely. The first method may be provisionally impressive, but only until the tide of fashion turns. The last method has often been adopted in the case of Blake's lyrics, especially the lyrics of *Songs of Innocence,* in spite of almost unanimous agreement that these poems along with *Songs of Experience* are the best work of a major English poet. Much has been said about their "lyric purity" and their "beauty," but until the recent publication of Gleckner's *The Piper and the Bard,*[3] very little more. In reading many of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* the critic faces a deceptive simplicity. For example, how much that does not seem trivial or obvious can be said about the following poem?

INFANT JOY

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name.—
Sweet joy befall thee!

[2] He proceeds, of course, to interpret Chaucer and, briefly, Milton. But his disgust with reasoning historians (*K*579) indicates impatience with interpreters.

[3] Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1959.

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old.
Sweet joy I call thee:
Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.
[*K*118]

Donald Stauffer's comment may help to explain why modern criticism has not often confronted such poems:

No one speaks with a more individual voice than Blake; yet out of their context his words are conventional, generalized, and far from arresting. Blake is a living argument, therefore, that the use of vague words, which he manages magnificently, must not be confused with the vague use of words.[4]

Blake's ability with vague words is apparently the most difficult of poetic abilities to explain.

In an age of so-called formalist criticism it is surprising how little objective stylistic analysis has been made of the poetry of Blake's age. Of course the poetry of his age is not the sort that recent criticism with its interest in brilliant verbal effects has generally admired. Probably the most useful departure in the direction of such analysis has been made in Josephine Miles's *Eras and Modes in English Poetry.*[5] In her chapter "The Sublimity of William Blake," she points out that Blake employed the "well-worn and apparently valued materials of language" current in the eighteenth century (p. 79). This language was "physical, descriptive, onomatopoetic, invocative, and declarative, fond of participles" (p. 85). It was a language in the line of Sylvester, Milton, Gray, Collins, Thomson, the Wartons, with ballad variations, making use of the physical to suggest cosmic symbolism (p. 82). Miss Miles proceeds from this analysis of conventions to argue that Blake's great addition to the language of his time was diminutive, the vocabulary of child and parent. And this language is employed within a structure conditioned by the attitude of childhood:

The child in Blake . . . is an oppressed Biblical child, in contrast to the freer neoclassi-

[4] In *The Nature of Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1946), p. 54.
[5] Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957.

cal *youth.* He observes, and his observations are either magnified, as by the eighteenth-century sublime, or only partly suggested and understood, as by nineteenth-century symbol. His sentence structures are simple and phrasal, his terms concrete and sensory [p. 97].

This is an admirable analysis of Blake's language. I would add that Blake's adoption of the attitude of childhood is only one ironic focus by which he comments on both the civic and cosmic worlds.

Blake is a subtle manipulator of point of view. If it is not surprising that his eighteenth-century diction is unattractive to recent criticism, surely his use of a shifting perspective to obtain ironic reflections should be attractive in the extreme. Of course the criticism of fiction, more than that of poetry, has been interested in "point of view" and "focus of narration." In their well-known textbook *Understanding Fiction,* Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren have defined point of view as "the basic attitude or idea of the author."[6] Focus of narration they have defined as "the mind through which the material of the story is presented." In fiction, irony is often created by making manifest some divorce between the author's point of view and the focus of narration or perspective of various characters in the story. Blake's ironies are almost always achieved by this method, and he is capable of delicate variations of the distance between author and speaker. Perhaps the initial questions to be asked about "Infant Joy," are: who are the speakers, what are their perspectives, and what is Blake's point of view toward the action as a whole? Blake critics have most often asked these questions about poems in which the diction itself is brilliant —poems such as "London" and "The Tyger."

I think, then, that the methods of recent criticism can reveal more about Blake's lyrics than they already have. In the chapters that follow I have paid particular attention to the elements, or devices, of perspective, point of view, and personification—elements of basic importance in Blake's work. Nevertheless, an examination of Blake's devices within each poem without reference to conventions of symbolism and to the whole corpus of Blake's work, within which the poem is contained, does not always seem adequate. This is another way of saying that recent emphasis on what M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and*

[6] New York: F. S. Crofts and Company, 1943, p. 607.

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