# WILLIAM BLAKE:
# SELECTED POETRY

*Edited by*
*W. H. Stevenson*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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William Blake was born in Broad Street in 1757, the son of a London hosier. Having attended Henry Parr's drawing school in the Strand, he was in 1772 apprenticed to Henry Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries, and later was admitted as a student to the Royal Academy, where he exhibited in 1780. He married Catherine Boucher in 1782 and in 1783 published *Poetical Sketches*. The first of his 'illuminated books' was *Songs of Innocence* (1789), which, like *The Book of Thel* (published in the same year), has as its main themes the celebration of innocence and its inviolability.

Blake sets out his ideas more fully in his chief prose work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1791), which proclaims his lifelong belief in the moral primacy of the imagination. But in *Songs of Experience* (1794) he recognizes the power of repression, and in a series of short narrative poems he looks for mankind's redemption from oppression through a resurgence of imaginative life. By 1797 he was ready for epic; *Vala* was never finished, but in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* he presents his renewed vision of reconciliation among the warring fragments of humanity. Other striking poems of his middle years are the lyrics of the Pickering Manuscript, and *The Everlasting Gospel*, but in the last years of his life he expressed himself in drawing rather than poetry.

Little of Blake's work was published in conventional form. He combined his vocations as poet and graphic artist to produce books that are visually stunning. He also designed illustrations of works by other poets and devised his own technique for producing large watercolour illustrations and colour-printed drawings. Blake died in 1827, 'an Old Man feeble & tottering but not in Spirit & Life not in the Real Man The Imagination which Liveth for Ever'.

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# INTRODUCTION

Two of the most famous poems in the language are William Blake's. Everyone has met the 'Tyger, tyger, burning bright' at one time or another. 'And did those feet . . .' is sung with great gusto in halls and at concerts all round the country. At the same time, Blake is one of the most obscure of poets; few of the singers reflect on what he meant by the 'bow of burning gold', or the 'arrows of desire'. But they feel its impetus, and that is surely what Blake would have wanted.

Blake is one of the most powerful lyric writers in English. His images may be biblical, or literary, or the stuff of dreams. His style is often deceptively conventional. But he writes with a cryptic economy that creates, in the nightmare vividness of 'The Tyger', or the fervour and drive of 'And did those feet . . .', a force rarely found in others, and never surpassed.

But it is the difficulty of Blake's poetry, rather than the vividness, that has captured the commentators. They have sought high and low in the mystical philosophies, or in the politics, of East and West for the 'key' to his work. It is true that he has a habit of allusiveness that is certainly obscure. In the famous song, for example, England is 'clouded' by spiritual blindness more than by cumuli, and the 'Satanic mills' are the shackles of the mind, of which the Industrial Revolution is only one manifestation. The difficulty is not to be solved by finding a missing key. It is something less systematic; the problem of Blake himself.

'I know I am inspired!' is the foundation of his obscurity as well as of the dynamic enthusiasm. He was ambitious for fame; he longed for, even demanded, an audience as enthusiastic as himself, to build the Jerusalem he was looking for in England's green and pleasant land. He was after all writing at a time when the Age of Reason was turning into an Age of Enthusiasm. But he had a naive, almost arrogant confidence in the power of his own inspiration. Burning with its fire, convinced that to hear him must be to applaud, he failed to realize that he must also address himself to the minds of his audience before they could hear him. He never made any concessions to them, and as a result they made none to him. He sought to project

his inner enthusiasms on to the public, but chose one method after another that ensured that his audience would regard his enthusiasms, not as inspiration, but as mere eccentricity or worse.

Blake was a touchy man. He was not a solitary; he had many friends, but seems not to have been an easy collaborator. It is significant that his 'illuminated printing' enabled him to print works without assistance. But this trait sorted badly with his ambition to be heard. At Felpham, in 1800, the complacent Hayley tried to take him in hand, and was roundly cursed for his pains. At one level, he was right to point out that Blake's obstinate concentration on higher things kept him poor, but he was incapable of understanding Blake, or he would have seen that this was essential to him.

Blake's life might seem uneventful, but his inner life was so exciting that it did not matter. His enthusiasm lifted him out of London into Jerusalem – or rather, brought Jerusalem into London and turned a rainbow over Hyde Park into a gateway to heaven. Blake's enthusiasms are not the Toad-like crazes of a perpetually unsatisfied man, but the developing insights of someone with a wide-ranging mind responding to life's rejections of his hopes, not by losing hope, but by rebuilding it. And each stage has its own artistic correlative.

It is therefore no use trying to understand Blake by means of a key. No one scheme fits all his works; each stage grows out of the one preceding it. Each enthusiasm gives a striking new turn to his legend and its imagery, but the new is always superimposed on the old. If we can understand the series of enthusiasms, we can begin to find our way through the difficulties of his works.

The product of his first enthusiasm is the foundation of all the rest; it reveals him, not as the preacher of doctrines of free innocence, or as a mystical thinker, but as that typical eighteenth-century figure, the inventor. In other hands his invention might well have succeeded: the re-creation in modern guise of the medieval illuminated book, text and design together as a unity, but using new techniques to make reproduction feasible.

Illustrated books were much in demand, but not easy to produce. Blake was writing poetry; how better to see it published than in the style of the medieval illuminated book, a hand-made, unique work of art? As poet and artist, he could create the whole work, and the result

would be as fine as an illuminated manuscript. But there was no need for the work to remain unique; as an engraver he had the skill and the means to hand to make multiple copies. He called it 'illuminated printing'. He transferred his design and text on to the plate – not in reversed script, as an engraver must normally do. After etching away the unwanted material, the plate became one large piece of type, to be inked and printed on his engraver's press. Many of the plates, especially in the *Songs*, *America* and *Europe*, fulfil his hopes and make one artistic unity, poem and design.

He must have thought his fortune was made. True, it was a clumsy process by our standards, and did not produce a very well-defined or legible text, but it satisfied Blake's needs, and he used it as long as he wrote poetry. It might well have made him a success, if he had produced works that the public wanted to see. But apart from *Songs of Innocence*, a children's poetry book which might well have found a market, he used it almost entirely for his own ideological campaign. Even this might have succeeded – Shelley found an audience – but Blake's books used an idiom that even his friends found hard to hear.

In his readiness to invent new techniques, Blake was typical of his age. And, like William Morris seventy years later, he was just as typical in his fascination with the medieval. Gothic stories and melodramas of castles, knights, monks and fair ladies were already popular enough for Jane Austen to parody in *Northanger Abbey*. Matthew Lewis's notorious soft-porn *The Monk* sold very well indeed. Scott, not Wordsworth, became the favourite poet of the age.

Blake, unfortunately, was captured, not by the clarity and humour of Chaucer, much as he admired him, but by the cloudy pseudo-medievalism of Chatterton and Ossian. This kind of writing is most suitable for escapist literature, but Blake used it for most of his work in 'illuminated printing' to convey his most urgent messages. Apart from the *Songs* (1789–94), virtually all his completed books are such gothic legends. Grandiose, superhuman figures gesticulate across his pages; and since they crowd past, not to entertain us but to evangelize, bearing names we have never heard of and associations we can only slowly grasp, it is not surprising that Blake's major poetry, far from bringing him fame, brought only ridicule. [illegible] to his myth the fumblings of antiquaries who identified [illegible] religions with ancient Britain, linked the [illegible]

with Avebury and the Druids with the biblical patriarchs, even his best friends found it almost impossible to follow his imaginative flights; and so do we.

When Blake's first great enthusiasm gripped him, the world was in the ferment of revolution. But Blake was convinced that art, the works of the imagination, not political revolution, were the key to its renovation. In the first group of legends (1789–93), from *Thel* to *America*, Blake presents his case: the indestructibility of innocence. The soul that freely follows its imaginative instincts will be innocent and virtuous; nature protects this innocence, and the only sin is to allow one's nature to be perverted by law and custom. Free love is the only true love; law destroys both love and freedom.

Freedom could not come about except through the imagination. The Bible presented a view, not of freedom, love, innocent happiness and (above all) imagination, but of law. Other myth-makers had followed suit. The world's images were all wrong. Blake would put this right with a series of narrative poems in the new medium, to illustrate – not prove – the nature of imaginative truth. Political revolution was not in itself the antidote to tyranny, but a symptom of mankind's awakening to the freedom of the spirit. In the exercise of the imagination, the purity and inviolability of innocence would reveal itself. The need for law, and tyranny itself, would not wither at the hand of war, but at the breath of the free imagination.

It did not happen, and the next books, including the *Songs of Experience* and *Urizen*, are devoted to discovering what had gone wrong. Typically, Blake did not reject his beliefs, but went on to improve them. Now he understood that it was too simple to see the world's problems as the hostility of evil minds against good, the tyrant threatening the innocent imagination. A new vision and a new enthusiasm emerges: the plan of a great epic, *Vala*, written on the back of proofs of his *Night Thoughts* designs.

In this new vision of the ideal world, all beings are united in one perfect Human Form. After the Fall – which as always in Blake is a failure of the imagination – the Human is fragmented, and hostility arises between his now separated elements. None of these elements is perfectly good or evil; the creatures of the earlier myth, Orc, Urizen and Los, are now all damaged pieces of the Universal Human Form, and none will be complete without the rest. From this time on,

Urizen, the great evil of *America*, becomes less hated and more pitied. Even Vala, the female form who is at first blamed for the disintegration, is at last regenerated.

But another enthusiasm arrives, close on the heels of the Immortal Man. It is time once more for a restatement of the vision and the third development of the myth, not this time through disillusionment but because, by the time Blake went to Felpham in 1800, his images had taken on a new colouring. Markedly Christian language begins to creep into *Vala*, which eventually collapses under the strain. Even before Felpham, Blake had used the phrase, 'We who call ourselves Christians'. Now the belief grows into its own images which must be incorporated into the myth.

It is a complex development. The Druids of ancient Britain are identified with the patriarchs of the Bible, and the Giant Albion – the spirit of Britain – is identified with the Israel of the Bible. Thus Albion is the Holy Land, London is Jerusalem, and Jesus did indeed walk (in the truth of the imagination) across these hills. The solution to the disintegration of man is reconciliation through forgiveness, and the reconciliation of Christ and Albion brings about the reunion of the disintegrated Eternal Human, who appears then as Christ himself. It is not enough now, as in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, to find one's own imaginative life. The Human Form Divine will not be re-created until the whole nation, the whole of mankind, the whole of the universe, is drawn together; but this can begin in the smallest of single actions. Blake has returned to the idealistic hope of *America*, but now his thought is less simple and more mystical; yet, as the pages of *Jerusalem* show, no less radical.

Thus each new enthusiasm reshapes the legend of his poems. As Blake refines his beliefs, he refines his myth too. The function of Orc and Urizen in *America* is quite plain; one fights for freedom, the other for law. In *Urizen* it is not so simple, and by *Vala* and *Milton* they have had to be altered almost out of recognition, but they are never quite abandoned. Blake was not by instinct a narrative poet. He tended to 'improve' his longer poems by a process of accumulation rather than by following the demands of the narrative. His mind was like an untidy desk. He threw nothing away, and often used old material for new tasks. One never knows what one will find. The reader ploughing through pages full of 'dismal howling woe' comes

across an unexpected line of startling beauty which only Blake could have written.

It is easy to dismiss Blake as a 'primitive', an artist whose attraction resides in his naivety, which is lost when the work becomes heavy and charmless. This also is too simple. There is an odd contradiction at the heart of Blake's writing. He repeatedly called for art to concern itself with the 'minute particulars' of life: 'To Generalise is to be an idiot!' he scribbled in the margin of Reynolds's *Works*. On the other hand, he criticized Wordsworth for paying too much attention to the details of nature at the expense of inner realities. More important, much of his poetry disregards his own rule. Words like 'howling' and 'dismal' appear far too often. His lyrics are usually marvels of conciseness, but he chose to express his dearest beliefs, not as 'Minute Particulars', but as cloudy, generalized figures representing eternal states of humanity. Milton ceases to be a seventeenth-century poet and becomes a State of Los, the eternal spirit of the imagination. From first to last, Blake champions the imagination; but the great flaw in his works is not too much free imagination, but too much misplaced convention. At his greatest, minutiae become eternal; at his worst, the eternal becomes a scheme.

Here, if anywhere, lies the key to Blake. He was not a 'Romantic' writer, whatever that is; he was neo-classic by training and inclination. He had no time for classical myth, but that is irrelevant. His instinct was to create, not symbols out of mystical tradition, nor vivid observations of human life, but representative figures to embody both the inner nature of the subject and the artist's response to it. When he failed, he became obscure or tedious – often both. When he succeeded, he created a kind of magic of which no other English poet has been capable.

It is easy to point out that, among lyric collections, the *Songs* are unmatched for sustained power in small compass. There is scarcely a single uncertain note in *Experience*, and even *Innocence* has a strength which one slowly comes to appreciate. Blake's typical images come from the mind, not from life. The 'midnight Harlot's curse' of 'London' is an exception, and the Blossom that becomes a Sick Rose is more typical. His greatness as a lyricist lies in the vividness of the emotional force with which he imbues these abstract images.

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