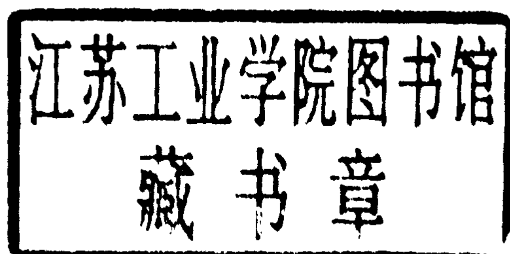
William Blake's Poetry

Jonathan Roberts

WILLIAM BLAKE'S POETRY

A Reader's Guide

JONATHAN ROBERTS



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NOTES ON SOURCES

This book relies on five reference works for the facts about Blake's life, work, book-making methods, and reception. These are:

Bentley, G. E. Jr, *The Stranger from Paradise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)
Bentley, G. E. Jr, *Blake Records*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)
Dorfman, Deborah, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969)
Erdman, David, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly revised edition (Anchor Books, 1988)
Viscomi, Joseph, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)

I have drawn extensively on Bentley's *The Stranger from Paradise* for biography; Bentley's *Blake Records* for other material pertaining to Blake's life; Dorfman's *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* for the reception of Blake in the Victorian period; Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose* as the standard edition of the writings; and Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book* for Blake's production methods. All references to *Bentley* are to *The Stranger from Paradise*, unless stated as *Blake Records*.

References to Blake works follow page numbers in Erdman, as, for example, *E*49. Where available, I have also included page or plate numbers (corresponding to the format in which Blake printed his works) in case the reader is using a different edition. The Erdman references have the advantage that they can be followed up online, as

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both the text itself, and an electronic concordance of the edition are available at http://www.english.uga.edu/wblake. In addition, Blake's illuminated books along with a host of other materials can be viewed online at www.blakearchive.org.

Blake uses idiosyncratic punctuation and spelling which can sometimes make his meaning difficult to grasp. For the sake of clarity in this introductory work, I have occasionally amended Blake's punctuation and spelling in order to make the quotations more immediately accessible. Although these are minor changes, they constitute an act of interpretation, and all quotations therefore need to be read against the original texts.

References to websites are contained in endnotes. All references to other printed works are in the form of (author, page number) after the relevant quotation; further details can then be found in Works Cited. All biblical quotations are from the NIV (New International Version). Parts of Chapter 3 appeared previously in an article entitled 'St Paul's Gift to Blake's Aesthetic', published in *The Glass*, 15 (2003).

This book is in six parts. Chapter 1 gives an account of Blake's life along with basic introductions to the political, social, intellectual and religious movements that influenced his works. Chapter 2 gives a similar introductory account to the aesthetic, poetic and artistic movements that shaped the form of his art. The third chapter gives an account of the major themes and philosophical ideas of Blake's work in conjunction with reference to a wide range of his poems. The fourth chapter describes critical responses to Blake from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, and this account is broadened in the fifth chapter into a description of Blake's impact on later artists and his cultural adoption by, for example, proponents of psychoactive drugs. Chapter 6, the final chapter, offers a thematically organized guide to further reading.

The first two chapters present a large amount of information pertaining to Blake's life and contexts with limited discussion of his actual ideas and work. It is Chapter 3, 'Reading Blake', that offers close and sustained engagement with these matters. Each chapter is followed by a few study questions which are designed to connect the discussion back to Blake's most commonly read works, *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

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CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTS

BLAKE AS A ROMANTIC

Blake was considerably older than the other traditional 'Romantics': 13 years older than Wordsworth, 15 years than Coleridge, 31 years than Byron, and 38 years than Keats. Compared to the lives of these contemporaries – Byron, Shelley, or even the young Wordsworth – Blake's life was mundane. He was born in London on 28 November 1757, and, with the exception of three years living on the south coast of England (1800–3), stayed there until his death in 1827. He suffered no early bereavements, never joined the army, never left England, never went to university, never went on the Grand Tour, did not have a string of failed relationships or lovers, didn't take opium, wasn't in France during the Revolution, fathered no children, never became famous during his own lifetime, worked steadily at his profession to support himself and his wife, and died peacefully in (what at the time was considered) old age. His art is made from whatever came to hand, not only contemporary social and political events, but domestic matters including his acquaintances, his home life, his own engraving procedures, and so on. From the dark fusion of his mind, these phenomena re-emerge as terrible gods, visions of the dead, spirits of joy, the suffering and dispossessed calling forth judgement on the powers that be. His art cannot be explained by these contexts, but knowledge of them can make his work more accessible. It is these contexts that the first two chapters describe before looking at the operation of his art more closely in Chapter 3.

EARLY LIFE: EDUCATION AND 'VISIONS'

Blake's father ran a hosiery and haberdashery shop in Westminster, London. His parents appear to have been gentle people, interested in their children (and willing to support, for example, Blake's wish to attend drawing school), and both survived well into Blake's adulthood. Blake had an elder brother, two younger brothers, and a younger sister. He was not sent to school (free public education for all children was still over a century away), but in his earlier childhood was educated at home by his mother. His life at this time was undramatic, and without obvious trauma. The only marked peculiarity was that from an early age Blake 'saw visions'. G. E. Bentley Jr, pre-eminent collector and disseminator of information on Blake's life and contexts, writes:

> From his earliest childhood Blake saw visions. When he was four years old, God put his head to the window and set the child screaming, and once "his mother beat him for running in & saying that he saw the Prophet Ezekiel under a Tree in the Fields." Later, when he was eight or ten, one day as he was walking on Peckham Rye [. . .] he saw "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." When he told this story at home, it was "only through his mother's intercession . . . [*that he escaped*] a thrashing from his honest father for telling a lie." Another time, on a summer morning he saw "the hay-makers at work, and amid them angelic figures walking".
>
> (*Bentley*, 19–20)

Most biographers have accepted these stories, and – as Bentley does here – reported them in a matter-of-fact way, describing Blake as a 'visionary' rather than, say, suffering from psychosis. It's difficult to know what to make of such narratives, but it is important to note that they invariably come from other, later sources, and not directly from Blake himself. Any judgement on these matters should also take into account the following three things. First, Blake deploys such 'visions' in a self-consciously literary way in his writing, as, for example, when he reports in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me' (pl. 12, *E*37): here Blake is giving a tongue-in-cheek account of the two untameable

Hebrew prophets sitting down to an eighteenth-century dinner party. Second, Blake often states that the act of perception involves an act of interpretation (see the end of *A Vision of The Last Judgment*, *E*564–5): what we see is influenced by who we are or, as Blake puts it, 'as a man is, So he sees' (*E*701). Third, he may have used his 'visions' playfully in the company of gullible friends such as John Varley (*Bentley*, 368ff), the astrologer for whom Blake drew 'visionary' portraits such as 'The Ghost of a Flea'. It is possible that Blake believed he had seen such things, but they may equally express a wicked sense of delight in pandering to the gullible.

The response of Blake's parents was also important to his development. In the case of the particular accounts described above, Blake's parents are shown to oppose the boy's visions, and he is depicted as a sort of junior prophet who is rejected in his own home. Generally speaking, however, Blake's parents were remarkably encouraging towards him, and when he showed an early interest in drawing, he was sent, aged ten, to Henry Pars' drawing school, which he attended until he was 14, during which time he also began writing poetry. At that point Blake's father made the significant investment in apprenticing Blake to a professional engraver, James Basire. It might have been anticipated that Blake would go into his father's business, but the apprenticeship again shows the willingness of Blake's parents to support him in following his talents. Blake's apprenticeship to Basire lasted seven years, during which time he learned the many technical skills necessary to engraving and etching, as well as making studies (as he had with Henry Pars) of prints and sculptures – including those at Westminster Abbey – that would substantially influence his later work. The apprenticeship was a full-time occupation and Blake lived with Basire, working six days a week. At the end of the training, he returned home to live with his family once more.

This account of Blake's formal education gives some indication of how he developed his artistic skills, but little explanation of the mix of radical politics and religion that suffuses his work. That requires short explanations of a different aspect of his education: his parents' religious position, and the political and social contexts within which he encountered these beliefs.

CONTEMPORARY RELIGION AND STATE POWER

Blake was a non-conformist. 'Non-conformism' refers historically to religious groups that had separated from the Church of England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Church of England had its origins in the English Reformation, which was England's peculiar official conversion to Protestantism following Henry VIII's decision to separate his nation's church from that of Rome. These events foregrounded the principle of self-determination in religious worship and belief, and this characteristic would remain central to religious debate in England even after the Church of England was established in 1559 under Elizabeth I. One of the characteristics of the Reformation was that many groups and individuals, especially on the left-wing of the reformation, the so-called 'radical reformation' considered that the 'magesterial reformation' had not gone far enough. They wanted self-determination disagreeing with the theology and practices of the new state church. Such groups were called 'dissenters' or 'non-conformists', and in the years to come many of them would form religious communities of their own, including Puritans, Quakers, Baptists, Methodists and Unitarians. Because of the alliance of state power and state religion (the reigning English monarch was, and continues to be, the Supreme Governor of the Church of England), there was often a close correlation between religious dissent and political dissent: these non-conformists were people who didn't want the government telling them how to worship or what to believe or, by extension, how to live or what to think. There was, of course, a great range here: some of these groups, such as the Methodists, did not at first seek official separation from the Church of England, whereas other groups found the situation in Europe so intolerable that they emigrated to America in order to be able to practise their religious beliefs in the way that they felt necessary. The inseparability of politics and religion in Blake's England makes the seemingly forthright attacks on 'the Church' in his work more complex than they first seem, and means that they should not necessarily be identified as attacks on the Bible, Christianity, Jesus or religion, all of which signify quite different things.

There is an ongoing debate about the religious position of Blake's parents and their status as non-conformists, but it now seems very likely that his mother came from Nottinghamshire and was a

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member (before marrying Blake's father) of the Moravian Church, a protestant denomination with its origins in (what is now) the Czech Republic. Blake's parents' beliefs meant that he didn't attend church as a child. Moreover, he may have inherited a symbolic religious language which fused sexual and religious imagery. This fusion can give a first taste of the radical nature of Blake's imagination, and is evident in the shocking notebook poem 'I saw a chapel all of gold' in which a transgressive scene of penetrative sex is figured in terms of a phallic serpent bursting open the doors of a chapel, sliding up the aisle, and vomiting onto the altar. In the first stanza, 'without' means 'outside', and in the final stanza, 'I turned into a sty' means 'I went into a pig sty':

> I saw a chapel all of gold
> That none did dare to enter in
> And many weeping stood without
> Weeping mourning worshipping
>
> I saw a serpent rise between
> The white pillars of the door
> And he forced & forced & forced
> Down the golden hinges tore
>
> And along the pavement sweet
> Set with pearls & rubies bright
> All his slimy length he drew
> Till upon the altar white
>
> Vomiting his poison out
> On the bread & on the wine
> So I turned into a sty
> And laid me down among the swine (*E*466–7)

Why would Blake write such a poem? It puts its finger on the way institutional powers (religion and state) attempt to control sexuality through moral codes, and thereby inadvertently make it into a source of violence and degradation. We shall look at institutional powers further in Chapter 3.

EARLY ENCOUNTERS WITH STATE VIOLENCE

By the time Blake was beginning to write, well over two centuries had passed since the establishment of the Church of England, and more than a century since the English Civil War (1642–51). Nevertheless, tensions between religious denominations in England and their connection to politics and social unrest were still strongly evident, not least because dissent was legislated against through the Test and Corporation Acts which were not repealed until after Blake's death. Blake's first personal encounter with just how strong these tensions could be – in the form of mob violence and subsequent state intervention – is likely to have been the Gordon Riots of 1780. The riots took place in response to new legislation (the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1778) that gave Catholics fuller social rights. Lord George Gordon (President of the Protestant Association) organized a petition against the Act which led in turn to a huge demonstration at the Houses of Parliament. The situation became violent and, over the following days, there was extensive rioting and Catholic properties were attacked. The army was subsequently brought in and about 300 rioters were killed, with a further 30 or so executed thereafter. Blake was close to the centre of events (*Bentley*, 56), and saw first-hand both the power of mobs to destroy, and the power of the government to subsequently crush and punish those involved in mob action. The Gordon Riots did not, however, present an isolated incident of government oppression. They took place against a scene of international violence that had been underway for several years by this time: the American Revolution.

The American Revolution (1775–83) had been instigated by American colonists who wanted to gain independence from British rule, principally in response to high levels of taxation and lack of political representation. Moreover, some of these colonists came from families who had left Europe in the first place in order to escape its intolerance of their religious practices. The Revolution instigated the War of American Independence, and Blake – who was in his early twenties at the time – was very conscious of these events: the conscripts and discharged soldiers in London provided images that would subsequently inform poems such as 'London' (*E*25) where 'the hapless Soldier's sigh | Runs in blood down Palace walls': a poetic moment in which Blake pours the blood of English soldiers

over the walls of the head of state, graphically reconnecting ideological responsibility and consequent human suffering. Likewise, the actions of George III and Washington (the leaders, respectively, of the English and American forces) would eventually be given mythical form by Blake in his work *America: A Prophecy*. Here, in the opening lines of the prophecy, Blake depicts the stand-off between the English and American leaders:

> The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent,
> Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow to America's shore:
> Piercing the souls of warlike men, who rise in silent night,
> Washington, Franklin, Paine & Warren, Gates, Hancock & Green;
> Meet on the coast glowing with blood from Albion's fiery Prince.
> (Pl. 3, *E*51)

The political leaders have here become mythological figures in a literary epic. In the early 1780s, however, these works were still a decade away, and this was a period during which Blake was beginning to establish his independence both domestically and as an artist. After serving his apprenticeship he became a student engraver at the Royal Academy, where he embarked on a programme which included lectures, drawing from sculptures, and life drawing (*Bentley*, 49). Alongside this study he was also doing professional work, engraving plates for commercial publishers.

MARRIAGE, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, BUSINESS

In 1782 Blake married Catherine Boucher, whom he would subsequently teach to read and write, and to help in the production of his illuminated books. The couple had no children, but remained together until Blake's death, and biographies of Blake have often been enlivened by stories of the couple sitting naked in their garden reading *Paradise Lost*. Sadly, there is no evidence to bear this out, but it is true that Blake wrote some surprising things about marriage, such as:

> In a wife I would desire
> What in whores is always found
> The lineaments of Gratified desire (*E*473)

Here Blake again touches on the psychological impact of society's codification of sex. Attempting to legislate human love and sexuality leads, in Blake's view, to secret, shameful and illicit forms of sexuality. As he writes in one of the 'Proverbs of Hell', 'Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion' (*E*35). For this reason, and because Blake's work is sometimes interpreted as antinomian (that is, rejecting moral law), there has been much speculation over Blake's ideas about 'free love'. Whatever their concept of marriage was, however, contemporaries saw Blake and Catherine as a happy couple, and after 20 years of marriage a contemporary wrote, 'They . . . are as fond of each other, as if their Honey Moon were still shining . . . they seem animated by one Soul, & that a soul of indefatigable Industry & Benevolence' (quoted in *Bentley*, 69–70).

Blake's social circle was expanding at this time too, and he developed an important friendship with Reverend Anthony Mathew and his wife Harriet. The Mathews had money and education, and Harriet Mathew held parties to encourage artistic and intellectual discussion, as was common at the time. She welcomed Blake to her conversation groups, in which he sang his poems to an appreciative audience (*Bentley*, 74). Yet despite the encouragement that Blake received here, he was not quite on an equal footing with his hosts. There was a fad at this time for discovering 'untutored genius' – that is, artists who were not schooled but were 'natural': there was great interest, for example, in working-class writers such as Ann Yearsley, otherwise known as 'Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton'. Blake wasn't working-class (as an artisan he was somewhere between working- and middle-class), and he certainly wasn't untutored, but for his patrons, he fitted the bill (*Bentley*, 77). Blake's admirers were sufficiently impressed to pay for a collection of his juvenilia to be printed as a volume entitled *Poetical Sketches* in 1783, and something of their attitude towards Blake can be heard in the 'Advertisement' to the volume which explains:

> The following Sketches were the production of untutored youth, commenced in his twelfth, and occasionally resumed by the author till his twentieth year [. . .] Conscious of the irregularities and defects to be found in almost every page, his friends have still believed that they possessed a poetic originality, which merited some respite from oblivion. These their opinions remain, however, to be now reproved or confirmed by a less partial public. (*E*845)

Curiously, Blake himself seems to have been quite indifferent to the volume, and in 1784 would write a narrative in his Notebook entitled *An Island in the Moon*, which was, in part, a satire of the Mathew circle. In this extract, Blake depicts a flurry of characters talking nonsense in an attempt to parade knowledge on an array of subjects:

> In the Moon as Phebus stood over his oriental Gardening "O ay come I'll sing you a song" said the Cynic. "The trumpeter shit in his hat" said the Epicurean "& clapt it on his head" said the Pythagorean. "I'll begin again" said the Cynic
>
> Little Phebus came strutting in
> With his fat belly & his round chin
> What is it you would please to have
> Ho Ho
> I won't let it go at only so & so
>
> Mrs Gimblet looked as if they meant her. Tilly Lally laught like a Cherry clapper. Aradobo asked "who was Phebus, Sir?". Obtuse Angle answerd, quickly, "He was the God of Physic, Painting, Perspective, Geometry, Geography, Astronomy, Cookery, Chymistry, Mechanics, Tactics, Pathology, Phraseology, Theology, Mythology, Astrology, Osteology, Somatology in short every art & science adorn'd him as beads round his neck." (p. 3, *E*450)

In the same year as he wrote *An Island in the Moon*, Blake set up a shop selling and making prints in partnership with James Parker, who had been a fellow apprentice with Basire. The venture, however, was short-lived, and the following year, 1785, Blake and Catherine left the shop and moved to a new home with Blake's younger brother Robert (*Bentley*, 97). The bond between the brothers was very close and, alongside Blake's ongoing commercial work, he taught Robert to engrave. There are some surviving pictures attributed to Robert, but only a few: around this time he contracted tuberculosis, and Blake nursed him up to the time of his death in 1787. Robert was 24, Blake, 29 at this time, and it was the most affecting bereavement of Blake's life.

At this point of his career, the intellectual and imagistic force of Blake's mature work had yet to appear. Although *Poetical Sketches* contains pieces discussing the tyranny of kings, it doesn't make the direct engagement with contemporary ideas which would characterize the works that followed. For in those works to come, Blake would not only tackle directly the revolutionary events of his day (as in *America: A Prophecy* or *The French Revolution*), but he would also engage with the philosophical and religious issues that were interwoven with them. As Blake recognized, intellectual, social and political histories cannot be separated out, and his poetic analysis of the revolutions that he lived through is therefore bound up with an analysis of the intellectual movement that informed those revolutions: the Enlightenment.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The term 'the Enlightenment' refers to a combination of changes in the way in which science, philosophy, politics and religion – among other things – were reconceptualized in Europe during the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular, the term signifies the rise and eventual pre-eminence of 'reason' in these different fields, grounded in a commitment to the idea that the universe is an ordered entity, and that its order could be understood through the use of reason (i.e. rational thought). This intellectual programme had significant social and political implications because one of the aspirations of Enlightenment thinkers was to use the light of reason to dispel the mystery and superstition under which, in their opinion, people had long lived and suffered. By making reason a new touchstone for understanding, Enlightenment thinkers were able to scrutinize and re-evaluate inherited attitudes towards previously unquestionable phenomena such as monarchy and religion. Thus the Enlightenment meant a new kind of scepticism, and a new willingness (and ability) to question ideas that had previously been beyond investigation.

This philosophical context provided the ideological impetus to the revolutions of the period because insofar as reason was independent of hierarchy or tradition, it could provide critical analysis of institutions that were rooted in those phenomena. Its consequent radical potential can be seen in Thomas Paine's critique of monarchy in *Common Sense* (1776). Paine (1737–1809) writes:

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