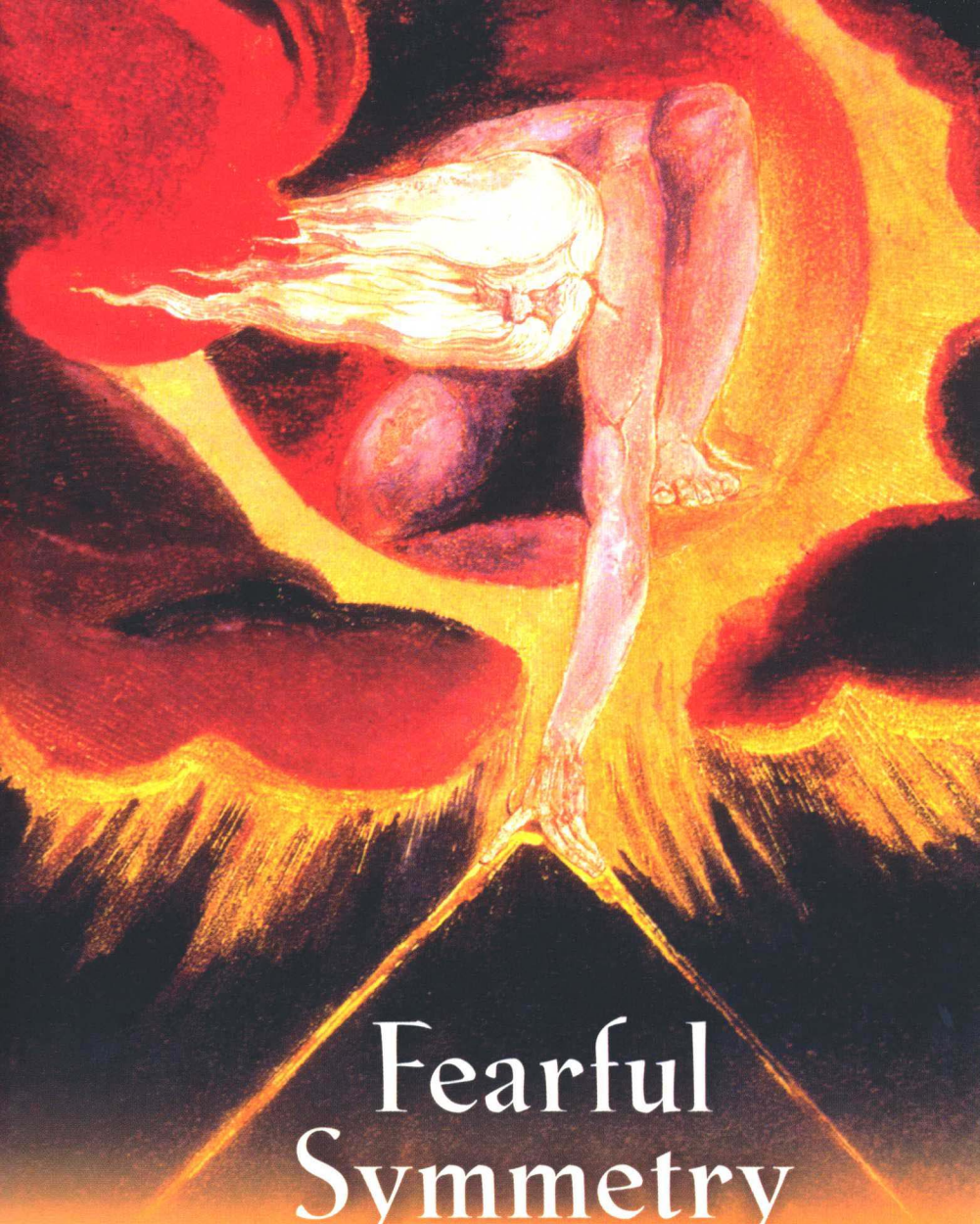

Fearful Symmetry

A Study of William Blake

NORTHROP FRYE

FEARFUL SYMMETRY

A STUDY OF
WILLIAM BLAKE

BY NORTHROP FRYE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 47-30296

ISBN 0-691-01291-1 (paperback edn.)
ISBN 0-691-06165-3 (hardcover edn.)

FIRST PRINCETON PAPERBACK EDITION, 1969

FOURTH PRINTING, 1974
TENTH PRINTING, 1990

19 18 17 16 15

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PREFACE

FEARFUL SYMMETRY was a hard book to write, not only because it was my first, and not only because of its subject. Every major poet demands from his critic a combination of direction and perspective, of intensive and extensive reading. The critic must know his poet's text to the point of possession, of having it all in his head at once, as well as knowing whatever aspect of the poet's "background" is relevant to his approach. At the same time he should be able to place his poet in a broad literary context. The doctoral thesis is useful for encouraging intensive reading, but of very little use for gaining literary perspective, which takes years to develop and cannot be hurried. The present book never went through the thesis stage, and my interest in Blake had from the beginning been of the extensive kind. Its fifth and last complete rewriting consisted largely of cutting out of it a mass of critical principles and observations, some of which found their way into my next long book, *Anatomy of Criticism*. This may explain why *Fearful Symmetry* takes the form, not of the fully documented commentary which is what I should prefer to write now, but of an extended critical essay in the Swinburne tradition. The subject of that essay is Blake in his literary context, which means, not Blake's "place in literature," but Blake as an illustration of the poetic process.

In the early stages I felt all the resistance against grappling with a specific symbolic language, which "has to be got up like so much Gothic," in Professor Douglas Bush's words, that so many other critics of Blake had felt. If Blake were unique, or even rare, in demanding this kind of preparation, I should perhaps not have finished the book. But there are so many symbolic constructs in literature, ranging from Dante's Ptolemaic universe to Yeats's spirit-dictated *Vision*, that one begins to suspect that such constructs have something to do with the way poetry is written. For readers brought up to ask only emotional reverberation or realistic detail from poetry, it comes as a disillusioning shock to learn that, as Valéry says, cosmology is a literary art. The statement of Los in *Jerusalem*: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans" has been quoted out of context by many critics, including myself on occasion. We should take it in its context, not identifying the "I" with Blake, but seeing it as defining a necessary activity of the

poetic process. One should never think of Blake as operating or manipulating a "system" of thought, nor should we be misled by his architectural metaphors to think of his symbolic language as something solidified and crustacean. Part of the context of Los's remark is this:

> 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 gnawd his own tender nerves.

Cosmology is a literary art, but there are two kinds of cosmology, the kind designed to understand the world as it is, and the kind designed to transform it into the form of human desire. Platonists and occultists deal with the former kind, which after Newton's time, according to Blake, became the accepted form of science. Cosmology of this type is speculative, which, as the etymology of that word shows, is ultimately intellectual narcism, staring into nature as the mirror of our ordinary selves. What the mirror shows us is what Blake calls "mathematic form," the automatic and mindless universe that has no beginning nor end, no up nor down. What such a universe suggests to us is resignation, acceptance of what is, approval of what is predictable, fear of whatever is unpredictable. Blake's cosmology, of which the symbol is Ezekiel's vision of the chariot of God with its "wheels within wheels," is a revolutionary vision of the universe transformed by the creative imagination into a human shape. This cosmology is not speculative but concerned, not reactionary but revolutionary, not a vision of things as they are ordered but of things as they could be ordered. Blake is often associated with speculative cosmologists, but the psychological contrast with them is more significant than any resemblances. Blake belongs with the poets, with the Milton whose Raphael advised Adam that while studying the stars was all very well, keeping his own freedom of will was even more important. Blake's poetry, like that of every poet who knows what he is doing, is mythical, for myth is the language of concern: it is cosmology in movement, a living form and not a mathematical one. "The Word is what gives movement to number," as Yeats says.

There is a broad consistency in Blake's mythology: there are some uncertain points, such as the role of Los in *Europe*, but on

the whole he meant the same things by Orc and Urizen and Enitharmon all through his poetic life. The combination of radical and evangelical sympathies—so frequent in England, so rare elsewhere—remained with him to the end. He hailed with delight the apocalyptic element in the American and French revolutions, the glimpse of eternal freedom that they gave. But he also saw growing, in France and England alike, a "Deism" or self-righteous mob rule, two mobs which most hated, not each other, but the sane voice of prophecy telling them how much of what they were doing, in war and peace alike, was futile and stupid and wrong. In his earlier work Blake thought of the essential "Mental fight" of human life as the revolt of desire and energy against repression, though even then he was careful to say that reason was the form of desire and energy, which are never amorphous except when they are repressed. Later he tended more to see this conflict as one of the genuine reason, or what he called intellect, against rationalization. "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction," but Blake thought of his own poetry as instructive, and the horses of instruction in their turn are wiser than the balky mules of hysteria.

Blake wrote during the Napoleonic Wars, in one of

> the central Cities of the Nations
> Where Human Thought is crushd beneath the iron hand of Power.

I wrote *Fearful Symmetry* during the Second World War, and hideous as that time was, it provided some parallels with Blake's time which were useful for understanding Blake's attitude to the world. Today, now that reactionary and radical forces alike are once more in the grip of the nihilistic psychosis that Blake described so powerfully in *Jerusalem*, one of the most hopeful signs is the immensely increased sense of the urgency and immediacy of what Blake had to say.

NORTHROP FRYE

Toronto, Canada
March 1969

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PART ONE

THE ARGUMENT

GON. How lush and lusty the grass looks!
how green!
ANT. The ground indeed is tawny.
SEB. With an eye of green in 't.
ANT. He misses not much.
SEB. No; he doth but mistake the truth
totally.—THE TEMPEST, ACT II, SCENE I.

1 THE CASE AGAINST LOCKE

THIS book offers an explanation of Blake's thought and a commentary on his poetry. No effort has been made to deal at all adequately with Blake's biography or with his work as painter and engraver: a study of his relation to English literature is primarily what has been attempted. The attempt is not unique, though the amount of critical writing on Blake's poetry is perhaps not as large as it is often vaguely stated to be. After deducting the obsolete, the eccentric and the merely trivial, what remains is surely no greater in volume than a poet of such importance is entitled to. It is large enough, however, to justify a statement of what is believed to be peculiar to this study.

Many students of literature or painting must have felt that Blake's relation to those arts is a somewhat quizzical one. Critics in both fields insist almost exclusively upon the angularity of his genius. Blake, they tell us, is a mystic enraptured with incommunicable visions, standing apart, a lonely and isolated figure, out of touch with his own age and without influence on the following one. He is an interruption in cultural history, a separable phenomenon. The historian of painting has to abandon all narrative continuity when the time comes to turn aside and devote a few words to Blake's unique output. The historian of poetry is not quite so badly off; but even so it is only by cutting out two-thirds of Blake's work that he will be able to wedge the rest of it in with that of the minor pre-Romantics.

For Blake is more than most poets a victim of anthologies. Countless collections of verse include a dozen or so of his lyrics, but if we wish to go further we are immediately threatened with a formidable bulk of complex symbolic poems known as "Prophecies," which make up the main body of his work. Consequently the mere familiarity of some of the lyrics is no guarantee that they will not be wrongly associated with their author. If they indicate that we must take Blake seriously as a conscious and deliberate artist, we shall have to study these prophecies, which is more than many specialists in Blake's period have done. The prophecies form what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the language, and most of the more accessible editions

of Blake omit them altogether, or print only those fragments which seem to the editor to have a vaguely purplish cast.

There is no *a priori* reason for this, apart from one or two hazy impressions which need only a passing mention. One is, that Blake wrote lyrics at the height of his creative power and that he later turned to prophecy as a sign that he had lost it. Yet his earliest book, *Poetical Sketches*, is evenly divided between lyrics and embryonic prophecies, and one of his last and most complicated prophecies contains his most famous lyric. Another is, that Blake is to be regarded as an ultrasubjective primitive whose work involuntarily reflects his immediate mood. The *Songs of Innocence* are then to be taken at their face value as the outpourings of a naïve and childlike spontaneity, and the *Songs of Experience* as the bitter disillusionment resulting from maturity—for when Blake engraved the latter he was no longer a child of thirty-two but a grown man of thirty-seven. It is logical inference from this that the prophecies can reflect only an ecstatic self-absorption on which it is unnecessary for a critic to intrude.

Now of course it is quite true that Blake was a neglected and isolated figure, obeying his own genius in defiance of an indifferent and occasionally hostile society; and he himself was well aware that he was "born with a different face."[1] But he did not want to be: he did not enjoy neglect, and he had what no real artist can be without, an intense desire to communicate. "Those who have been told," he pleaded, "that my Works are but an unscientific and irregular Eccentricity, a Madman's Scrawls, I demand of them to do me the justice to examine before they decide."[2] It is pathetic to read his letters and see how buoyant is his hope of being understood in his own time, and how wistful is the feeling that he must depend on posterity for appreciation. And it was not only recognition he wanted: he had a very strong sense of his personal responsibility both to God and to society to keep on producing the kind of imaginative art he believed in. He despised obscurity, hated all kinds of mystery, and derided the idea that poets do not fully comprehend what they are writing.[3] All his poetry was written as though it were about to have the immediate social impact of a new play. Besides, if we look at some of the other poets of the second half of the eighteenth century—Smart, Cowper, Chatterton, Macpherson, Fergusson, Collins, Burns—we shall find the per-

centage of mental breakdowns and social maladjustments among them abnormally high. It is clear that the spiritual loneliness of Blake was not so much characteristic of him as of his age.

Therefore, as no one will deny that Blake is entitled to the square deal he asked for, we propose to adopt more satisfactory hypotheses and see what comes out of them. These are, first, that all of Blake's poetry, from the shortest lyric to the longest prophecy, must be taken as a unit and, *mutatis mutandis*, judged by the same standards. This means that the longer and more difficult prophecies will have to bear the weight of the commentary. They are what a great poet chose to spend most of his time on, and they are what he hoped to be remembered for, as a poet, by posterity. He may have been mistaken in this, as poets often are about their own work, but if he was the error is too consistent and gigantic to be ignored. Second, that as all other poets are judged in relation to their own time, so should Blake be placed in his historical and cultural context as a poet who, though original, was not aboriginal, and was neither a freak nor a sport.

One of the most striking things about Blake is his genius for crystallization. He is perhaps the finest gnomic artist in English literature, and his fondness for aphorism and epigram runs steadily through his work from adolescence to old age. To produce the apparent artlessness of the lyrics he was ready to do the very considerable amount of rewriting and excision that his manuscripts show. The meticulous clarity of his engraving is as evident in the great sweep of *Paolo and Francesca*, in the Dante series, as in the microscopic marginal detail on the poems. It seems difficult to imagine, then, how Blake came to find an artistic satisfaction, or even relief, in writing such confused and chaotic monologues as the prophecies are generally considered to be. I quote from an intelligent and sensitive study of his painting:

> By way of more than passing interest, it is worthy of note that in the garden of the house grew a grape-vine; but no grapes were enjoyed, for Blake held that it was wrong to prune the vine. Had Blake submitted that vine to pruning, he might have enjoyed its fruit; and had he submitted the luxuriant vine of his Prophetic Books to more diligent pruning, more people might have lived to enjoy their fruit also. It would be one of those strange chances with which Life is for ever teasing the children of men, that Blake should produce the larger

number of his books from a house from the windows of which he could see a parable from which he was not willing to learn.[4]

Anyone who has glanced at the original versions of "The Tyger" or "The Fly" may perhaps wonder why the man who did the pruning of these poems should have been afraid of a grapevine. However, the story of the unpruned vine is merely one of the anecdotes that regularly go the rounds of artists' biographies, the source of this one being probably Vasari's Life of Piero di Cosimo; we are concerned here only with the theory of wanton luxuriance. Blake's poetry consists of one volume of youthful work published without his co-operation, a proof copy of another poem, a few manuscripts, and a series of poems the text of which was laboriously engraved backhanded on copper plates and accompanied by a design. And when these poems were once engraved Blake seldom altered anything more fundamental than the color-scheme:

> Re-engrav'd Time after Time,
> Ever in their youthful prime,
> My designs unchang'd remain.[5]

The inference is clear: the engraved poems were intended to form an exclusive and definitive canon. And in this canon there is much evidence, not only of pruning, but of wholesale transplanting and grafting. His longest poem, *The Four Zoas*, Blake left abandoned in a manuscript full of lively sketches and loaded with deletions and corrections. Much of its material was later used in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, which he did engrave; but, proportionately, Blake may be said to have blotted more lines than any other important poet of English literature.

Further, Blake's poems are poems, and must be studied as such. Any attempt to explain them in terms of something that is not poetry is bound to fail. Many students of Blake have been less interested in what he wrote than in what he read, and have examined the prophecies chiefly as documents illustrating some nonpoetic tradition such as mysticism or occultism. This, though it also ignores Blake's vociferous assertions that he belongs to no tradition whatever except that of the creative artists, is again a perfectly logical inference from the overemphasis on his uniqueness already mentioned. If even the lyrics are so isolated in the

history of literature, the prophecies can represent only a complete break with the literary tradition itself.

I am not speaking now of merely vulgar misunderstandings. No one who has read three lines of our straightforward and outspoken poet can imagine that he wished to be pursued by a band of superstitious dilettantes into the refuge of a specialized cult. Whatever Blake's prophecies may be, they can hardly be code messages. They may need interpretation, but not deciphering: there can be no "key" and no open-sesame formula and no patented system of translation. The amateur of cabalism who accepts obscure truisms for profound truths, and sentimental platitudes for esoteric mysteries, would do well to steer clear of Blake. No: I mean the tendency to describe Blake in terms of certain stereotypes which imply that he can be fully appreciated only by certain types of mind, and which tend to scare the ordinary reader away from him. The poet who addressed the four parts of his most complicated poem, *Jerusalem*, to the "Public," Jews, Deists and Christians—to anyone who cares to look at it—the poet who boasted of being understood by children,[6] would have resented this treatment strongly. It is true, however, that the poet who said "Exuberance is Beauty"[7] demands an energy of response. He is not writing for a tired pedant who feels merely badgered by difficulty: he is writing for enthusiasts of poetry who, like the readers of mystery stories, enjoy sitting up nights trying to find out what the mystery is.

The usual label attached to Blake's poetry is "mystical," which is a word he never uses. Yet "mysticism," when the word is not simply an elegant variant of "misty" or "mysterious," means a certain kind of religious technique difficult to reconcile with anyone's poetry. It is a form of spiritual communion with God which is by its nature incommunicable to anyone else, and which soars beyond faith into direct apprehension. But to the artist, *qua* artist, this apprehension is not an end in itself but a means to another end, the end of producing his poem. The mystical experience for him is poetic material, not poetic form, and must be subordinated to the demands of that form. From the point of view of any genuine mystic this would be somewhat inadequate, and one who was both mystic and poet, never finally deciding which was to be the adjective and which the noun, might be

rather badly off. If he decided for poetry, he would perhaps do better to use someone else's mystical experiences, as Crashaw did St. Teresa's.

I do not say that these difficulties are insurmountable, or that there are no such things as mystical poets. But they are very rare birds, and most of the poets generally called mystics might better be called visionaries, which is not quite the same thing. This *is* a word that Blake uses, and uses constantly. A visionary creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism. This is quite consistent with art, because it never relinquishes the visualization which no artist can do without. It is a perceptive rather than a contemplative attitude of mind; but most of the greatest mystics, St. John of the Cross and Plotinus for example, find the symbolism of visionary experience not only unnecessary but a positive hindrance to the highest mystical contemplation. This suggests that mysticism and art are in the long run mutually exclusive, but that the visionary and the artist are allied.

Such a distinction cannot be absolute, of course, and one type blends into the other. But Blake was so completely a visionary and an artist that I am inclined to think that most true mystics would reject his attitude as vulgar and insensitive. Porphyry speaks of his master Plotinus as having four times in his life, with great effort and relentless discipline, achieved a direct apprehension of God. Blake says:

> I am in God's presence night & day,
> And he never turns his face away.[8]

To Blake, the spiritual world was a continuous source of energy: he harnessed spiritual power as an engineer harnesses water power and used it to drive his inspiration: he was a spiritual utilitarian. He had the complete pragmatism of the artist, who, as artist, believes nothing but is looking only for what he can use. If Blake gets into the rapt circle of mystics it is only as Mercury got into the Pantheon, elbowing his way through with cheerful Cockney assurance, his pockets bulging with paper, then producing his everlasting pencil and notebook and proceeding to draw rapid

sketches of what his more reverent colleagues are no longer attempting to see.

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ANY attempt to explain Blake's symbolism will involve explaining his conception of symbolism. To make this clear we need Blake's own definition of poetry:

> Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding, is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry; it is also somewhat in the same manner defin'd by Plato.[9]

It has often been remarked that Blake's early lyrics recall the Elizabethans: it is not so generally realized that he reverts to them in his critical attitude as well, and especially in this doctrine that all major poetry is allegorical. The doctrine is out of fashion now, but whatever Blake may mean by the above definition, it is clear that there is a right and a wrong way of reading allegory. It is possible, then, that our modern prejudice against allegory, which extends to a contemptuous denial that Homer or Virgil or Shakespeare can be allegorical poets, may be based on the way of the "corporeal understanding."

What is the corporeal understanding? Literally, it is bodily knowledge: the data of sense perception and the ideas derived from them. From this point of view *poetry* is something to be explained, and the notion that any kind of commentary will ever explain any kind of poetry is of course vulgar. Even if there is a hidden meaning, a poem which contains no more than what an explanation of that meaning can translate should have been written in the form of the explanation in the first place. And if the literal sense of poetry is intelligible, the possibility that it may also be explained allegorically might better be left alone.

The corporeal understanding, then, cannot do more than elucidate the genuine obscurities, the things requiring special knowledge to understand, like the contemporary allusions in Dante. The more it busies itself with the real meaning of the poem the more involved it gets, and Blake, like other difficult poets, has been wrapped in a Laocoön tangle of encyclopedias, concordances, indexes, charts and diagrams. The "intellectual powers" go to work rather differently: they start with the hypothesis that the

poem in front of them is an imaginative whole, and work out the implications of that hypothesis. "Every Poem must necessarily be a perfect Unity,"[10] said Blake: the identity of content and form is the axiom of all sound criticism. There is therefore nothing mysterious about the intellectual powers: on the contrary, the one thing they must include is a sense of proportion. If one wishes to make a necklace out of some beads and a string, one would be well advised to start with the string and apply the beads to it. In the opposite procedure of laying the beads down in a line and trying to stick the string through them, a comparatively simple task becomes one of incredible difficulty.

Blake's idea that the meaning and the form of a poem are the same thing comes very close to what Dante appears to have meant by "anagogy" or the fourth level of interpretation: the final impact of the work of art itself, which includes not only the superficial meaning but all the subordinate meanings which can be deduced from it.[11] It is therefore hoped that if the reader finds his ideas of Blake at all clarified by the present book, he will be led to the principle which underlies it. This is that, while there is a debased allegory against which there is a reasonable and well-founded prejudice, there is also a genuine allegory without which no art can be fully understood. It is of course confusing that the same word is used in both senses, and when Blake says in one place that his poetry is allegory addressed to the intellectual powers and in another that one of his paintings is "not Fable or Allegory, but Vision,"[12] he does little to clear up the confusion. The allegory that is addressed to the intellectual powers, however, is not a distortion of poetry any more than poetry is a distortion of prose. It is a literary language with its own idioms and its own syntactical arrangement of ideas. If a critic were to say that Homer's theme demands a rugged simplicity which is spoiled by the complicated inflections of the language he used, he would be displaying nothing except his ignorance of Greek. Similarly, if a critic is ignorant of the language of allegory, he will demonstrate nothing but that ignorance if, in dealing with any genuinely allegorical writer, Spenser for instance, or Langland, or Hawthorne, he complains of the intrusion of allegory into characterization, or descriptions of nature, or whatever else is more congenial to his prejudices. As ignorance of the methods and techniques of allegorical poetry