



# INTERPRETING BLAKE

ESSAYS SELECTED AND EDITED BY  
MICHAEL PHILLIPS

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## PREFACE

In May 1974 a symposium on William Blake was held at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities of the University of Edinburgh. The programme was modest, though greatly enhanced by the presence of scholars and critics from North America, Australia and Great Britain. I wish to thank all of those who attended and in particular those who presented papers. The majority of the papers which were presented are included in this volume in revised form. The essays by Harald Kittel and E. P. Thompson have been added. For the occasion of the symposium E. P. Thompson delivered a lecture to the University entitled 'Blake in the 1790s'. The subject matter of his lecture is reflected in the essay which he subsequently composed for this volume. I am also particularly grateful to Professor Janet Warner for providing her video production of *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; to the Curator of Pollack House, Glasgow, for arranging a private showing of the museum's collection of Blake paintings; and to the staff of the University Library, Glasgow, for arranging a private display of the library's holdings of Blake's original illuminated books and related contemporary materials. My special thanks are due to Dr Roger Savage and to Professor William Beattie. Roger Savage's 'Conversations at Mr Quid's', a dramatization of Blake's *An Island in the Moon* and *The Book of Thel*, delighted everyone who attended, and also taught us all a great deal about Blake. William Beattie, the Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies, welcomed the idea of holding a symposium on Blake. His encouragement and support were constant, and to him this volume is dedicated with affection.

References to Blake's works are given by page number to D. V. Erdman (ed.), *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (N.Y., 1965) (cited as E) and to G. L. Keynes (ed.), *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (Oxford, 1966) (cited as K).

Michael Phillips

To  
WILLIAM BEATTIE  
Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies  
University of Edinburgh

# CONTENTS

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	page vii
	<i>Preface</i>	ix
1	Introduction MICHAEL PHILLIPS	I
2	'London' E. P. THOMPSON	5
3	Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in <i>Songs of Innocence and of Experience</i> HEATHER GLEN	32
4	Emblems of Melancholy: <i>For Children: The Gates of Paradise</i> FRANK M. PARISI	70
5	<i>The Book of Urizen and An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> HARALD A. KITTEL	III
6	<i>Milton: The Final Plates</i> PETER BUTTER	145
7	<i>Prefaces to Jerusalem</i> JAMES FERGUSON	164
8	Influence and Independence in Blake JOHN BEER	196
	<i>Index</i>	263

# ILLUSTRATIONS

	Frontispiece: 'The Man Sweeping the Interpreter's Parlour'	page ii
	Repr. by courtesy of Sir Geoffrey Keynes	
1	T. Bewick: engraving for J. H. Wynne, <i>Tales for Youth</i> , 'Tale of the Earth Worm' (1790)	75
	National Library of Scotland	
2	Design for Young's <i>Night Thoughts</i> , no. 257 (unpublished, 1795-7). Water-colour	78
	British Museum	
3	J. Sturt: engraving for R. Ware's Bible, frontispiece (Oxford, 1722)	85
	New College Library, University of Edinburgh	
4	T. Bewick: engraving for J. H. Wynne, <i>Tales for Youth</i> , 'The Benighted Traveller' (1790)	98
	National Library of Scotland	
5	T. Bewick: engraving for <i>Emblems of Mortality</i> , 'The Old Man' (1789)	101
	National Library of Scotland	
6	O. van Veen: engraving for Q. <i>Horati Flacci Emblemata</i> , no. 100 (Antwerp, 1607)	102
	National Library of Scotland	
7	<i>Jerusalem</i> , Plate 51	181
	British Museum	
8	Original pencil drawing for <i>Jerusalem</i> , Plate 51	182
	Kunsthalle, Hamburg	
9	<i>The Gates of Paradise</i> , Plate 12, 'Does thy God O Priest'	204
	British Museum	
10	Pencil sketch for illustration to Dante's <i>Inferno</i> xxxiii, 'Count Ugolino and his sons'	205
	British Museum	
11	Tempera painting, 'Ugolino and his sons in prison' (1827)	205
	Fitzwilliam Museum	

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 12 | John Dixon: mezzotint after Reynolds, 'Count Ugolino and his sons' (1774)<br>Fitzwilliam Museum   | 208 |
| 13 | F. Bartolozzi: stipple engraving after Cipriani, 'Perseus having rescued<br>Andromeda . . .'<br>Fitzwilliam Museum                          | 212 |
| 14 | <i>Visions of the Daughters of Albion</i> , frontispiece. Colour print<br>Fitzwilliam Museum  | 213 |
| 15 | Detail from 'The Game of Life' (1790)   | 232 |
| 16 | <i>The Gates of Paradise</i> , Plate 13, 'Fear & Hope are – Vision'<br>British Museum   | 233 |
| 17 | <i>The Gates of Paradise</i> , Plate 14, 'The Traveller hasteth in the Evening'<br>British Museum   | 233 |
| 18 | <i>America</i> , Plate 6, copy P. Relief etching<br>Fitzwilliam Museum  | 255 |
| 19 | Emblem from Michael Maier, <i>Tripus Aureus</i> (1618), p. 67<br>Cambridge University Library   | 256 |
| 20 | Blake's 'signature': detail from pencil sketch for <i>The Book of Job</i> , 'When<br>the morning stars sang together'<br>Fitzwilliam Museum | 259 |



## INTRODUCTION

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 MICHAEL PHILLIPS

*Interpreting Blake* provides a series of close analyses of specific texts which offer respectively a distinctive critical or interpretative approach to their subject. The following factors particularly influenced the selection and organization of the essays. Where interpretation is concerned, an essential principle has been observed that it should not be imposed; on the contrary, it is those features which help us to define and place the text – subject matter and style, point of view and tone, tradition and genre, biographical and historical context – that also disclose how we should read and objectively explain its meaning. With this principle in mind, I wished to concentrate upon Blake's poetry, though not exclusively; and also to provide the reader with discussions representing his principal types of poem in the order of their creation: the lyric of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the short but intense prophetic work of the Lambeth period, and the sustained prophecies which were Blake's final and perhaps his finest poetical accomplishment. At the same time it was important to represent the problems which we are becoming increasingly aware of in our attempts to comprehend and articulate objectively the nature of Blake's artistry in its predominantly visual medium, especially in terms of his position with regard to, and his uses of, tradition.

E. P. Thompson's essay on 'London', the first in the volume, challenges us by its concentration upon the text, a concentration which evolves an interpretation and a perspective with implications for the whole of Blake. Our attention on the *Songs* is maintained by Heather Glen who selects poems from both *Innocence* and *Experience*. She addresses herself to a central issue in Blake, his moral stance, with its disturbing immediacy and continuing relevance. Here we see, most forcefully by its subtlety, how Blake imposes interpretation from *within* the poem. The more we attempt to discern the nature and moral implications of social concern, mercy, pity and love, the more we find that these questions are being addressed to

ourselves – in a manner not unlike Swift's – and embarrassing us by making us aware of our equivocations. For Blake's contemporary reader the acceptance of the moral challenge that his poems impose may be seen as the necessary catalyst in initiating those same changes which E. P. Thompson's essay suggests were a motivating force of Blake's vision. The vision of 'London' that is revealed by Thompson through the poem may also be seen to be logically extended in the prophecies of the Lambeth period, subsequently finding its spiritual harbinger in *Milton* and its realization in *Jerusalem*. Throughout the sequence the inherent moral disposition and challenge remain unwavering.

With Frank Parisi's essay on *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*, our awareness of the extent and complexity of Blake's dependence upon and use of tradition is sharpened. Interpretation is here informed and guided by seeing Blake's series of emblems in the light of the historical development of the tradition of emblem literature during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus we are better able to appreciate the subtle variation upon received images and the implications of their rich association of ideas, which together urge a reconsideration of the meaning of *The Gates of Paradise*. In exploring the literary and art history of the emblem tradition as it relates directly to Blake's series, Parisi's essay exemplifies an essential and still urgently required approach. After Sir Geoffrey Keynes, who has provided us with Blake's text and his own documentation of his life and works, it is perhaps mostly the historians of Blake's cultural awareness, and those who have led the way in relating that awareness to a greater understanding of the works themselves, who have shown Blake's significance in transforming the inheritance of the Renaissance to the purpose and bearing of the twentieth century.

In Harald Kittel's essay on *The Book of Urizen* and Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, we engage in a form of interpretation that is again invoked by Blake himself. It is most evident in Blake's marginalia and his underlining of books that he owned and borrowed: the highly articulate contrary response.

What Bacon calls Lies is Truth itself

(E610/K397)

*This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle by which works of genius are conducted.* [Reynolds]

## INTRODUCTION

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. The Man who says that we have No Innate Ideas must be a Fool and Knave, Having No Con-Science or Innate Science. (E637/K459)

'Without contraries is no progression': that epitomizes much of Blake's thinking and organizing of his artistic response. In Kittel's essay we may see how Blake discerned and then turned in upon itself Locke's perception of the nature of mind. The approach is transferable. It is a significant aid to an appreciation of the organization of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in relation to the works of Swedenborg; or *Europe a Prophecy* in relation to Milton's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity'; or *Vala* in its response to Young – and ultimately to Pope, Milton, Chaucer and Langland and the tradition of the 'dream vision' poem; or *Milton* in terms of the received idea of Milton's sense of vocation and poetical achievement; or *Jerusalem* in its contrary response to Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

In his discussion of the final plates of *Milton*, Peter Butter poses a fundamental critical question: is poetic quality consistently present and, if it is, is it always immediately recognized? This is a question that students of Blake, when faced with the prophetic works, frequently neglect or hesitate to ask. Peter Butter asks it clearly, and knowing that in doing so there is a risk of exposing his own misunderstanding. But in defining what it is that we feel uncertain about – what appears poetically inadequate or obscure – we alert others to a specific need for clarification that will adjust our own way of reading, and consequently our valuation. We may be reminded how much progress we have made in our estimation of Blake by recalling the remarks which open Swinburne's discussion of *Jerusalem* in *A Critical Essay* (1866).

Of that terrible 'emanation', hitherto the main cornerstone of offence to all students of Blake, what can be said within any decent limit? or where shall any traveller find a rest for feet or eyes in that noisy and misty land? It were a mere frenzy of discipleship that would undertake by force of words to make straight these crooked ways or compel things incoherent to cohere.

We now share a recognition that *Jerusalem* may be Blake's supreme achievement. My qualification is significant. For many of us this recognition

is still made from afar or as a result of having travelled with difficulty this 'misty' though sublime land. The structure of the poem is not easy to comprehend nor is the quality of the poetry always apparent. James Ferguson, confronting both problems, finds in the prefaces to *Jerusalem* means of direction through the chapters themselves. The poem's structure then provides insight into how we should appreciate the poetry. Part of the enjoyment of this poem has to do with a belief that our generation is the first to begin to understand it clearly.

The final essay in the volume, by John Beer, is different in kind. Beer takes up the general question anticipated by a number of the previous essays in the volume: he discusses the nature of Blake's originality in terms of the relationship between works which served to influence his writing and design and asks, from the advantage of this perspective, what constituted their creative transformation. Beer considers various kinds of 'influence' that condition both the creation of a work of art and the nature of its 'independence' – for example, the way in which the association of ideas and images in a poem's language evokes its relationship to tradition and genre and to the work of other authors and artists. His chosen examples include some that previous essays in the volume have discussed, and his analyses sharpen our awareness of the character of Blake's originality.

We may now enter the interpreter's parlour. It remains for the reader to assess whether more dust has been raised than cleared.

## CHAPTER 2

# 'LONDON'

---

E. P. THOMPSON

'London' is among the most lucid and instantly available of the *Songs of Experience*. 'The poem', John Beer writes, 'is perhaps the least controversial of all Blake's works', and 'no knowledge of his personal vision is necessary to assist the understanding'.<sup>1</sup> I agree with this: the poem does not require an interpreter since the images are both concrete and self-sufficient within the terms of the poem's own development. Every reader can, without the help of a critic, see London simultaneously as Blake's own city, as an image of the state of English society and as an image of the human condition. So far from requiring a knowledge of Blake's personal vision, it is one of those foundation poems upon which our knowledge of that vision can be built. A close reading may confirm, but is likely to add very little to, what a responsive reader had already experienced.

But since the poem is found in draft in Blake's notebook we are unusually well placed to examine it not only as product but in its process of creation. Here is the finished poem:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
Every blackning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

<sup>1</sup> John Beer, *Blake's Humanism* (Manchester, 1968), p. 75.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse (E26-7/K216)

In Blake's draft the first verse was originally thus:

I wander thro each dirty street  
Near where the dirty Thames does flow  
And see in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness marks of woe<sup>2</sup>

The first important change is from 'dirty' to 'charter'd'. Another fragment in the notebook helps to define this alteration:

Why should I care for the men of thames  
Or the cheating waves of charter'd streams  
Or shrink at the little blasts of fear  
That the hireling blows into my ear  
  
Tho born on the cheating banks of Thames  
Tho his waters bathed my infant limbs  
I spurd his waters away from me  
I was born a slave but I long to be free<sup>3</sup>

Thus 'charter'd' arose in Blake's mind in association with 'cheating' and with the 'little blasts of fear' of the 'hireling'. The second association is an obvious political allusion. To reformers the corrupt political system was a refuge for hirelings: indeed, Dr Johnson had defined in his dictionary a 'pension' as 'In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.' David Erdman is undoubtedly right that the 'little blasts of fear' suggest the proclamations, the Paine-burnings, and the political repressions of the State and of Reeves's Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers

<sup>2</sup> *The Notebook of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Oxford, 1973), p. 109; hereafter cited as *N*. See also V. Doyné, 'Blake's Revision of "London"', *Essays on Criticism*, xxii: 1 (January 1972), 58-60, which, however, seems to me more helpful on technical points than on matters of substantial interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> *N* 113. The obliterated title of this fragment has been recovered by David Erdman as 'Thames'. Blake altered the final two lines to:

The Ohio shall wash his stains from me  
I was born a slave but I go to be free

which dominated the year in which these poems were written.<sup>4</sup> In the revised version of 'Thames' Blake introduces the paradox which was continually to be in the mouths of radicals and factory reformers in the next fifty years: the slavery of the English poor. And he points also ('I was born a slave but I go to be free') to the first wave of emigration of reformers from the attention of Church-and-King mobs or hirelings.

But 'charter'd' is more particularly associated with 'cheating'. It is clearly a word to be associated with commerce: one might think of the Chartered Companies which, increasingly drained of function, were bastions of privilege within the government of the city. Or, again, one might think of the monopolistic privileges of the East India Company, whose ships were so prominent in the commerce of the Thames, which applied in 1793 for twenty-years' renewal of its charter, and which was under bitter attack in the reformers' press.<sup>5</sup>

But 'charter'd' is, for Blake, a stronger and more complex word than that, which he endows with more generalized symbolic power. It has the feel of a word which Blake has recently discovered, as, years later, he was to 'discover' the word 'golden' (which, nevertheless, he had been using for years). He is savouring it, weighing its poetic possibilities in his hand.

<sup>4</sup> See David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, revised edn (New York, 1969) which fully argues these points on pp. 272-9. These poems were 'forged in the heat of the Year One of Equality (September 1792 to 1793) and tempered in the "grey-brow'd snows" of Antijacobin alarms and proclamations'. See also A. Mitchell, 'The Association Movement of 1792-3', *Historical Journal*, iv: 1 (1961), 56-77; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 115-26; D. E. Ginter, 'The Loyalist Association Movement, 1792-3', *Historical Journal*, iv: 2 (1966), 179-90.

<sup>5</sup> 'The cheating waves of charter'd streams' and 'the cheating banks of Thames' should prompt one to think carefully of this as the source which first gave to Blake this use of 'charter'd'. The fullest attack from a Painite source on the East India Company did not appear until 1794: see the editorial articles in four successive numbers of Daniel Isaac Eaton's *Politics for the People*, II: 8-11: 'The East India Charter Considered'. These constituted a full-blooded attack on the Company's commercial and military imperialism ('If it be deemed expedient to *murder* half the inhabitants of India, and *rob* the remainder, surely it is not requisite to call it *governing* them?') which carried to their furthest point criticisms of the Company to be found in the reforming and Foxite press of 1792-3. No social historian can be surprised to find the banks of the Thames described as 'cheating' in the eighteenth century: every kind of fraud and racket, big, small and indifferent, flourished around the docks. The association of the banks of Thames with commerce was already traditional when Samuel Johnson renewed it in his 'London' (1738), esp. lines 20-30. Johnson's attitude is already ambiguous: 'Britannia's glories' ('The guard of commerce, and the dread of Spain') are invoked retrospectively, in conventional terms: but on Thames-side already 'all are slaves to gold, /Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold'. Erdman argues that the 'golden London' and 'silver Thames' of Blake's 'King Edward the Third' have already assimilated this conventional contrast in the form of irony: see Erdman, *Prophet against Empire*, pp. 80-1.

It is in no sense a 'new' word, but he has found a way to use it with a new ironic inversion. For the word is standing at an intellectual and political cross-roads. On the one hand it was a stale counter of the customary libertarian rhetoric of the polite culture. Blake himself had used it in much this way in his early 'King Edward the Third':

Let Liberty, the charter'd right of Englishmen,  
 Won by our fathers in many a glorious field,  
 Enerve my soldiers; let Liberty  
 Blaze in each countenance, and fire the battle.  
 The enemy fight in chains, invisible chains, but heavy;  
 Their minds are fetter'd; then how can they be free?<sup>6</sup>

It would be only boring to accumulate endless examples from eighteenth-century constitutional rhetoric or poetry of the use of chartered rights, chartered liberties, magna carta: the word is at the centre of Whig ideology.

There is, however, an obvious point to be made about this tedious usage of 'charter'. A charter of liberty is, simultaneously, a denial of these liberties to others. A charter is something given or ceded; it is bestowed upon some group by some authority; it is not claimed as of right. And the liberties (or privileges) granted to this guild, company, corporation or even nation *exclude* others from the enjoyment of these liberties. A charter is, in its nature, exclusive.

We are at a cross-roads because it is exactly this exclusive and granted quality of liberties which was under challenge; and it was under challenge from the claim to universal rights. The point becomes clear when we contrast Burke's *Reflections* and Paine's *Rights of Man*. Although Burke was every inch a rhetorician he had no taste for stale rhetoric, and he used the word 'charter' lightly in the *Reflections*. 'Our oldest reformation', he wrote, 'is that of Magna Charta':

From Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity . . . We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons

<sup>6</sup> E415/K18: If we take the intention of this fragment to be ironic, then Blake was already regarding the word as suspect rhetoric.



and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors.

Burke was concerned explicitly to define this chartered, heritable set of liberties and privileges (exclusive in the sense that it is ‘an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom’) as against any general uncircumscribed notion of ‘the rights of man’. It is in vain, he wrote, to talk to these democratists:

of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country . . . They have wrought underground a mine that will blow up, at one grand explosion, all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of parliament. They have ‘the rights of men’. Against these there can be no prescription . . .

Liberty, for Burke, must have its ‘gallery of portraits, its monumental inscriptions, its records, evidences, and titles’. The imagery, as so often, is that of the great house of the landed gentry, with its walks and statuary, its galleries and muniments’ room.

For Burke, then, ‘charter’ and ‘charter’d’, while not over-laboured, remain among the best of good words. But not for Paine: ‘I am contending for the rights of the *living*, and against their being willed away, and controuled and contracted for, by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead.’ A charter implied not a freedom but monopoly: ‘Every chartered town is an aristocratical monopoly in itself, and the qualification of electors proceeds out of those chartered monopolies. Is this freedom? Is this what Mr. Burke means by a constitution?’ It was in the incorporated towns, with their charters, that the Test and Corporation Acts against Dissenters operated with most effect. Hence (Paine argued – and economic historians have often agreed with him) the vitality of the commerce of un-incorporated towns like Manchester, Birmingham, and Sheffield. The Dissenters (he wrote), ‘withdrew from the persecution of the chartered towns, where test laws more particularly operate, and established a sort of asylum for themselves in those places . . . But the case is now changing. France and America bid all comers welcome, and initiate them into all the rights of citizenship.’

This is (for Paine) the first offence of ‘chartered’: it implies exclusion and limitation. Its second offence was in its imputation that anyone had the right to *grant* freedoms or privileges to other men: ‘If we begin with