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WILLIAM BLAKE

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GENERAL PREFACE

This study of William Blake is the fifth in a series of short introductory critical studies of the more important British authors. The aim of the series is to go straight to the authors' works; to discuss them directly with a maximum of attention to concrete detail; to say what they are and what they do, and to indicate a valuation. The general critical attitude implied in the series is set out at some length in my *Understanding Literature*. Great literature is taken to be to a large extent self-explanatory to the reader who will attend carefully enough to what it says. 'Background' study, whether biographical or historical, is not the concern of the series.

It is hoped that this approach will suit a number of kinds of reader, in particular the general reader who would like an introduction which talks about the works themselves; and the student who would like a general critical study as a starting point, intending to go on to read more specialized works later. Since 'background' is not erected as an insuperable obstacle, readers in other English-speaking countries, countries where English is a second language, or even those for whom English is a foreign language, should find the books helpful. In Britain and the Commonwealth, students and teachers in universities and in the higher forms of secondary schools will find that the authors chosen for treatment are those most often prescribed for study in public and university examinations.

The series could be described as an attempt to make available to a wide public the results of the literary criticism of the last thirty years, and especially the methods associated with Cambridge. If the result is an increase in the reading, with enjoyment and understanding, of the great works of English literature, the books will have fulfilled their wider purpose.

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INTRODUCTION

The first six chapters of this book are devoted to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and these chapters are based on a longer work by the present author: *Blake's Contrary States* (Cambridge, 1966). In chapter 7 some general observations are made on Blake's style of writing in his longer poems as well as in the shorter works, and a more detailed discussion of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is given. Chapters 8 and 9 are each devoted to a single work, the chapter on the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* being an adaptation of an article that appeared in *The Wascana Review* (Regina, Canada, Spring 1969, pp. 41ff).

Nearly all Blake's writings were printed and issued by himself. He was an engraver by trade, and etched the plates from which he reproduced his books, the text being accompanied by illustrations which are an integral part of the work and help elucidate the meaning. The text of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* used here is taken from a facsimile edition edited by Sir Geoffrey Keynes and published by Rupert Hart-Davis in 1967. The text of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is also taken from a facsimile edition, issued by Dent in 1932. The punctuation in Blake's editions is not always clear, and he seems to have been careless in making his commas, which often look like full stops. It is usual to edit the punctuation in printed texts, but this might have the effect of imposing on the poems a meaning not intended by the poet, so the punctuation is given here as it appears in the two facsimile reproductions. All other Blake quotations are taken from the Nonesuch edition of 1957, edited by Geoffrey Keynes.

Most space is given, in this work, to an examination of the *Songs*. These short poems are the most easily understood of Blake's writings, and they are essential to an understanding of the poet, as well as being the most important of his works. What these poems lack in length, they make up in quality; they are Blake's best work, and after writing them he progressively lapsed into the strained, obscure and abstract manner that makes the long poems unsatisfactory to many readers. In chapter 7, this tendency is

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examined in some detail, and the examination continued in chapters 8 and 9.

The *Songs* are difficult, despite the simplicity of their style and diction. They have been variously interpreted and, as the analysis given in the pages that follow has no warrant of general acceptance, it is only proper that, at the outset, the writer should give, in outline, his basic assumptions, distinguishing them from those made by other writers. It is assumed here that the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* were conceived by Blake as an artistic whole, and that his intention was that the two sets of songs should be read together and contrasted with each other. As Blake states on the combined title page, the poems are to be read as 'Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. The one state, presumably, may be better understood by referring to its contrary. On pp. 145–6 it is argued that though a period of five years separated the publication of the two series we have no conclusive evidence to fix the dates of composition, and there is no reason for not taking them together.

A second assumption is that the poems are composed 'dramatically' – that Blake does not speak in his own voice, or even through the mouth of an imagined character (a child for instance) in order to give his own impressions, but that he is detached in the same way that a playwright is detached from the persons in his play. It is often stated that the two series give us Blake's impressions at different periods of his life (at the ages of thirty-two and thirty-seven) and that the difference in feeling between the sets shows that the poet had undergone a change of heart. It is here assumed, on grounds which will be made clear, that Blake is examining his speakers from outside, constructing a series of character studies in order to demonstrate a range of human potentialities, but that none of these should be taken as directly representative of the poet. They may be indirectly representative of Blake for the reason that all character analysis is, to some degree, a reflection of what the writer finds latent in his own soul, but Blake's primary aim is not self-expression. The poems are psychological studies but also they are critical; Blake is not so far detached from the states he puts on show that he does not judge

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them, and we are meant to see some speakers as admirable, others as confused, selfish, and so on, but the reader must help to make the assessments. Blake's judgements are implicit in the poems, but not obvious.

A third assumption made here is that Blake's later works do not help us in the interpretation of the *Songs*. It seems wrong to take the Prophecies, which are difficult and obscure, as a key to the *Songs*, which are less difficult and fairly lucid. Critics who apply this method of interpretation, it is true, assume that the Prophecies are fully and finally understood, but such certitude, which would be dangerous enough in the face of any work of literature, is quite reckless in the case of such mysterious works as these. It is indicative of error that such critics arbitrarily apply a fixed symbolic significance, culled from the Prophecies, to the images found in the *Songs*. But Blake was an artist writing poetry, not a constructor of crossword puzzles with clues to be solved by research. His words and images come alive in the context of the poems, their significance varies from one poem to another, and it is the test of the reader that he should be sensitive to these variations. Indeed, the key to these poems is to see that the 'Contrary States' recognize the same objects and experiences differently. Quite apart from this special intention in the *Songs*, however, it is the hallmark of any good poem that it breathes its own life into the symbols it uses, and if it could be demonstrated that Blake's symbols were arbitrary and static we should be forced to conclude that his poems were of little value. As his poems are explained by those critics who make the assumption of fixed symbolic significance, it is, indeed, possible to conclude that the poet is hardly worth reading, and the same observation holds good for those critics who interpret the *Songs* in terms of a body of occult knowledge in which Blake is supposed to have been an initiate. The *Songs* are not proof of a dogmatic gift in their writer, however, but of an imaginative one, and they are valuable for the flexibility and freshness of their thought. Blake's symbolism is discussed at various points in the following work (pp. 11ff, for instance), and his use of symbols derived from occult sources is discussed in chapter 8.