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To
David Erdman

WITNESS AGAINST
THE BEAST

*William Blake and
the Moral Law*

E. P. THOMPSON



‘Christ died as an Unbeliever’

WILLIAM BLAKE



CAMBRIDGE
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Foreword to the first paperback edition

CHRISTOPHER HILL

Outside England, Edward Thompson was the best-known contemporary British historian. His world-wide influence upon students of history has been incalculable. He was not always equally appreciated by the English historical establishment: the British Academy delayed electing him to a Fellowship until 1992. What upset them was the vast success of his great book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which established the value of history from below. Like Karl Marx, Thompson was unfashionable in using literature as a source for economic and social history; his first book was on William Morris. Who but Thompson would cite Chaucer, Tristram Shandy, Wordsworth, Dickens and the eighteenth-century poets Stephen Duck and Mary Collier in an article on 'Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism'? He had no use for demographical and statistical determinism or for speciously 'neutral' terms like 'modernization' and 'industrialization' used in order to avoid the rude word 'capitalism'. Thompson's own Marxism was far removed from pre-conceived dogmas.

The starting-point for the present book, I suspect, was the suggestion – made as long ago as 1966 – by that wise historian A. L. Morton, that Blake might have read and been influenced by Abiezer Coppe and other Ranters of the 1640s and 50s. Morton did not follow up all his fertile ideas. But Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* observed that 'in Bunyan we find the slumbering radicalism which was preserved through the eighteenth century and which breaks out again in the nineteenth century' (pp. 34–5). In the present book Thompson is not so sure of the 'slumber'.

He has collected hitherto unnoticed eighteenth-century references to seventeenth-century antinomians, and has shown that many of their books were being reprinted from the mid-eighteenth

century. He rightly directs our attention to this survival of the ideas of suppressed radical groups. ‘The closer we are to 1650’, he sums up, ‘the closer we seem to be to Blake’ (p. 46 below). And not only to Blake. Eighteenth-century antinomians, he argues, were artisans or tradesmen, ‘anti-court and sometimes republican’, challenging ‘the entire superstructure of learning and of moral and doctrinal teaching as ideology’, just as seventeenth-century antinomians had done. This is a new and valuable approach to Blake.

In the 1980s Thompson abandoned history to devote himself to European Nuclear Disarmament, whose main object was to associate democratic dissidents in Eastern Europe with the peace movement in the West. Thompson claimed – rightly, I think – that END helped to end the Cold War. In consequence of his absorption in this work many of his plans for books were unrealized – only *Customs in Common* and the present book on Blake were completed. But Thompson’s appeal to ordinary people over the heads of their governments fits well with his advocacy of history from below in opposition to ‘the enormous condescension’ of the historical establishment. He was a great man as well as a great historian: he did what he thought was right.

Preface

This study has its origin in the Alexander Lectures delivered in the University of Toronto in 1978. I am very much remiss in delaying publication for so long, and I offer my apologies to the University. (The demands of the peace movement and, subsequently, illness contributed to the delay.) Although this text has greatly expanded from the Lectures, the book still carries their shape: that is, in Lecture 1 I somehow covered the themes in Part I of this book, and in Lectures 2 and 3 the themes in Part II. I must once again thank the University for its encouragement and hospitality.

I have had generous help from many persons: from Jean Barsley (formerly Mrs Noakes); from John and Susan Beattie and their family for their hospitality while I was in Toronto; from G.E. Bentley Jr, Katy Ellsworth, James Epstein, Michael Ferber, Heather Glen, P.M. Grams, J.F.C. Harrison, Christopher Hill, Peter Lincham, Günther Lottes, Iain McCalman, Hans Medick, Jon Mee, A.J. Morley, the late Philip Noakes, Morton D. Paley, Michael Phillips, Mary Thale, Sir Keith Thomas, Malcolm Thomas and John Walsh. Eveline King has transformed my untidy manuscript into accomplished typing. Dorothy Thompson, once more, has given me every kind of support.

I have dedicated the book to David Erdman, the great Blake scholar, even though the dedication may prove to be an embarrassment to him, since (as I know) he disagrees with several of my suggestions. He is the most generous and helpful scholar that I have known, and we have had rich exchanges – rich at least on his part – over the past thirty years. In 1968 we jointly taught a graduate course on Blake at New York University, and I have been warmly entertained by David and his wife, Virginia, at their house on Long Island. It has been a privilege to work alongside such a superb authority on the Romantics.

I also owe thanks to the libraries and institutions which I used during my research. These included the British Library, the Public Record Office, Westminster Library, the Bodleian, Birmingham University Library and Dr Williams's Library. Particular thanks must go to the Librarian and staff at the premises of the Swedenborg Society, who assisted me in many enquiries and who enabled me to consult Conference papers and Minutes, although they knew that I was not a receiver. My critical account of the early years of the Church is poor repayment, although accounts no less critical are endorsed in subsequent Swedenborgian scholarship. I must also thank Manchester University, whose award of a Simon Senior Fellowship in 1988–9 enabled me to catch up on my research, and to those graduate seminars (at Brown University, Dartmouth College, Queen's University, Ontario, and at Rutgers) which discussed these ideas with me and contributed their own thoughts. And my very warm thanks go to those who have, from time to time, given me material assistance to pursue my research: W.H. and Carol Terry, Mr and Mrs Kenneth F. Montgomery, James and Virginia Newmyer, and the Newby Trust.

My thanks must also go to those institutions which have given permission to me to reproduce pictures. (They are listed in the List of illustrations.) The chapter on 'London' is a slightly modified version of the same in *Interpreting Blake*, ed. Michael Phillips (Cambridge, 1978).

I use few abbreviations, and these are obvious ones. The exceptions are: in text and notes E stands for *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York, 1965), ed. David Erdman, with commentary by Harold Bloom. N refers to *The Notebook of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Oxford, 1973).

Introduction

I should explain at once what kind of a book this, and why I have been foolhardy enough to add yet one more volume to the overfull shelves of studies of William Blake. And, first of all, what this book is not. This is not another introduction to the poet and his works: excellent ones already exist. Nor is this a general interpretive study of William Blake as a whole, of his life, his writing, his art, his mythology, his thought. I will not even attempt a close engagement with the very substantial output of expert Blake studies in the past half-century. So that what I offer in this book must be, in some sense, a view from outside the world of Blake scholarship.

Can such a view be of any value? This will be for readers to judge. But I have been emboldened by a growing conviction that there are problems inside the world of Blake scholarship which might helpfully be commented upon by a historian from without. For while the scholarship advances, I am not certain that agreement about the man, or his ideas, or even about individual poems, advances in step. On the one hand, we have a multitude of individual studies, each adding some minute particulars to the sum. On the other hand, the intelligent reader, coming new to Blake, faces real difficulties in understanding what this sum may be. For there are now a great many William Blakes on offer, and while some of these are very much more convincing than others, most of them have some plausibility. Northrop Frye remarked many years ago that 'it has been said of Boehme that his books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning'. This remark, Frye continues, 'may have been intended as a sneer at Boehme, but it is an exact description of all works of literary art without exception'.

This has always seemed to me to be a wise comment; and yet it is a partial one, and one that leaves me uneasy. For there are so

many picnics going on today – each one of them licensed by some words of Blake – and in so many different places. In 1965 Harold Bloom was able to write, with his customary confidence, that Blake ‘was not an antiquarian, a mystic, an occultist or theosophist, and not much of a scholar of any writings beyond the Bible and other poetry insofar as it resembled the Bible’. I think that his judgement is more or less right, if we use the term ‘scholar’ in a modern, academic sense. And yet, both before and after that judgement, we have seen the publication of volumes, of some scholarly weight, to show Blake the neo-Platonist, the mason and illuminist, the profound initiate in hermetic learning, the proto-Marxist, the euhemerist, the Druid . . . And if more cautious scholars avoid such direct identifications, they offer us instead William Blake as a syncretic polymath – a man aware of all these positions and traditions, as well as others, moving freely through some remarkably well-stocked library, replete with ancient, Eastern, Hebrew and arcane, as well as modern, sources, and combining elements from all of these at will.

A historian has one difficulty with this. Blake’s library – which by some accounts must have been costly and immense – has never been identified. I will return to this point, since I think we may be able to surmise one or two curious libraries, as well as his own private collection, to which he had access (see pp. 41–3). But even as we ask this mundane question (which library?), we are forced to ask ulterior questions. Who was Blake? Where do we place him in the intellectual and social life of London between 1780 and 1820? What particular traditions were at work within his mind? I have written this book in the hope that a historian’s view, in this matter of placing, may prove to be helpful.

The problem today is to bring all of Frye’s ‘picnic parties’ together. By all means let each of us bring our own meanings, but let us at least picnic in the same place. It is a curious consequence of the abundant Blake scholarship of the past few years that this has actually become more difficult than it used to be. Over a hundred years ago there was some consensus as to what kind of a man Blake was; the oral traditions and records resumed in Alexander Gilchrist’s first major biography (1863) gave us a confident picture of a ‘visionary’, eccentric genius of robust ‘Jacobinical’ convictions. This placing was refined, but not substantially challenged, in Mona Wilson’s *Life* of 1927; it was given a nudge to the ‘Left’

by Jacob Bronowski (*A Man without a Mask*, 1944), who perhaps over-stated the artisanal situation of Blake as an engraver; and this over-statement has been redressed by the learned studies, over a lifetime, of Sir Geoffrey Keynes, and of David Erdman, G.E. Bentley and many others, who have clearly identified Blake's familiarity with the community of London's artists.

Erdman's major study (*Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 1954, revised editions, 1965, 1969 and 1977) succeeded also in placing Blake's thought within the political and cultural context of his times. On the directly political themes I have (no doubt to the surprise of some readers) little to add. In my own placing of Blake I have learned very much from Erdman and I am greatly in his debt. All that his reconstruction of Blake lacks, in my view, is the thrust of a particular intellectual tradition: antinomianism. In brief, it is Blake's unique notation of Christian belief, and not his 'Jacobin' political sympathies, which still stands in need of examination. Despite Jon Mee's recent recovery of many possible contemporary influences upon Blake (*Dangerous Enthusiasm*, 1992) this still remains true.

This is not to say that the matter has gone unnoticed. As long ago as 1958 A.L. Morton published *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake*, and these insights were much enlarged in *The World of the Ranters* (1970) and by Christopher Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). My debt to these scholars will be evident. But while Morton showed many suggestive parallels between 'Ranter' rhetoric and imagery and those of Blake, he could not identify any vectors between the 1650s and Blake's time. I cannot say that I have found with certainty any such vectors, but I have searched somewhat further, and I have also attended more closely to antinomian beliefs and their possible situation in the eighteenth-century intellectual culture. (If any readers are uncertain as to the meanings of antinomianism I must beg them to be patient: these will be explained.)

Despite every precaution, we have a continuing difficulty in our approach to Blake, which derives from our tendency to make overly academic assumptions as to his learning and mode of thought. It takes a large effort to rid ourselves of these assumptions, because they lie at an inaccessible level within our own intellectual culture — indeed, they belong to the very institutions and disciplines with which we construct that culture. That is, we tend to find that a

man is either 'educated' or 'uneducated', or is educated to certain levels (within a relatively homogeneous hierarchy of attainments); and this education involves submission to certain institutionally defined disciplines, with their own hierarchies of accomplishment and authority.

Blake's mind was formed within a very different intellectual tradition. In the nineteenth century we sometimes call this, a little patronisingly, the tradition of the autodidact. This calls to mind the radical or Chartist journalist, lecturer or poet, attaining by his own efforts to a knowledge of 'the classics'. This is not right for Blake. For a great deal of the most notable intellectual energies of the eighteenth century lay outside of formal academic channelling. This was manifestly so in the natural sciences and in the *praxis* of the early industrial revolution; and it was equally so in important areas of theology and of political thought.

The formal, classical intellectual culture (which I will call 'the polite culture'), whose summits were attained at Oxford and Cambridge, was offered to only a small elite, and was, in theory, further limited by the need for students and fellows to conform to the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Church of England. Much of the (strongly intellectual) traditions of Dissent lay outside these doors. But alternative centres of intellectual culture can be seen not only at the level of such institutions as the Dissenting Academies. They exist also in stubborn minority traditions of many kinds.

Not only political and economic history can be seen as 'the propaganda of the victors': this is true also of intellectual history. Looking back from the nineteenth century, the victors appeared to be rationalism, political economy, utilitarianism, science, liberalism. And tracing the ancestry of these victors, it was possible to see eighteenth-century thought as the progression of 'enlightenment', sometimes working its way out through the churches, as rational Dissent passed through unitarianism to deism. It is only recently that historians have attended more closely to very vigorous alternative – and sometimes explicitly *counter*-enlightenment – impulses: the Rosicrucians, Philadelphians, Behmenists: or the elaborate theological and scientific theories of the Hutchinsonians, who were polemically anti-Newtonian, and who had both academic exponents and a more humble visionary following. In London in the 1780s – and, indeed, in Western Europe very generally – there was something like an explosion of anti-rationalism, taking the forms

of illuminism, masonic rituals, animal magnetism, millenarian speculation, astrology (and even a small revival in alchemy), and of mystic and Swedenborgian circles.

Alternative intellectual traditions existed also – and especially in London – at the level of family traditions, and obscure intellectual currents surfacing, submerging and then surfacing again in little periodicals, or in chapels which fractured into several petty chapels, which invited new ministers or gathered around new voices, which knit up ideas and unravelled them and knit them up again throughout the eighteenth century. And we have to learn to see the minds of these men and women, formed in these kinds of collisions and voluntary associations, with more humility than patronage. Out of such an ‘education’, of informal traditions and collisions, came many original minds: Franklin, Paine, Wollstonecraft, Bewick, Cobbett, Thomas Spence, Robert Owen. And it is in this kind of tradition that we must place Blake.

In this tradition experience is laid directly alongside learning, and the two test each other. There is nothing of our present academic specialisation: thought may be borrowed, like imagery, from any source available. There is, in this tradition, a strong, and sometimes an excessive, self-confidence. And there is an insistent impulse towards individual system-building: the authority of the Church, demystified in the seventeenth century, had not yet been replaced by the authority of an academic hierarchy or of public ‘experts’. In Blake’s dissenting London of the 1780s and 1790s this impulse was at its height. Men and women did not only join the groups on offer, the Church of the New Jerusalem, the Universalists, the Muggletonians, the followers of William Huntington and of Richard Brothers (the self-proclaimed ‘nephew’ of the Almighty), they argued amidst these groups, they fractured them, took a point from one and a point from another, conceived their own heresies, and all the time struggled to define their own sense of system.

Of course, this has been recognised, and for a long time, by Blake scholars. I do not mean to read a lesson to those many scholars who have already done so much to place Blake’s work in context. But historians have not yet done as much as might be done to help them, by recovering the obscure traditions of London Dissent, and in the absence of this work there is an ever-present tendency for criticism to slide into a de-contextual history of ideas.

And for this there might seem to be a licence afforded by Frederick Tatham, a friend of William and Catherine Blake in their last years, and an early biographer. Writing in 1832, Tatham said: 'His mental acquirements were incredible, he had read almost every thing in whatsoever language, which language he always taught himself.' And more than thirty years later he repeated this claim: Blake 'had a most consummate knowledge of all the great writers in all languages . . . I have possessed books well thumbed and dirtied by his graving hands, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Italian, besides a large collection of works of the mystical writers, Jacob Behmen, Swedenborg, and others.'

But if we set out to read 'almost everything in whatsoever language' we may end up, not with Blake, but with an academic exercise. And from 'all the great writers in all languages' we are at liberty to make our own selective construction of Blake's 'tradition', a construction which will actually distract us from William Blake. If I must name names, then let me name Miss Kathleen Raine, although her work (*Blake and Tradition*, 1968) is only one of the most formidable of other works which offer to place Blake in relation to Behmenist, hermetic, neo-Platonist and Kabbalistic thought. In Raine's notion of 'the tradition' we are pointed towards Porphyry or Proclus or Thomas Taylor (the neo-Platonist contemporary of Blake), and often suggestions are made which are helpful and sometimes probable. But although Raine stands at an obtuse angle to the reigning academicism, her notion of 'tradition' remains academic to the core. Why is this so?

It is partly because we have become habituated to reading in an academic way. Our books are not 'thumbed by graving hands'. We learn of an influence, we are directed to a book or to a 'reputable' intellectual tradition, we set this book beside that book, we compare and cross-refer. But Blake had a different way of reading. He would look into a book with a directness which we might find to be naïve or unbearable, challenging each one of its arguments against his own experience and his own 'system'. This is at once apparent from his surviving annotations – to Lavater, Swedenborg, Berkeley, Bacon, Bishop Watson or Thornton.

He took each author (even the Old Testament prophets) as his equal, or as something less. And he acknowledged as between them, no received judgements as to their worth, no hierarchy of accepted 'reputability'. For Blake, a neighbour, or a fellow-reader

of a periodical, or his friend and patron, Thomas Butts, were quite as likely to hold opinions of central importance as was any man of recognised learning. Certainly, his reading was extensive; nothing should astonish us; and whatever libraries he used, he entered some odd and unfamiliar corners.

My own answer to the problem of what guided his reading will become apparent in this book. But, in brief, I suppose that his learning was both more eccentric and more eclectic – even, at times, more shallow – than is sometimes suggested. It was eccentric, in the sense that he did have some access to an almost-underground tradition of mystic and antinomian tracts, some of these derived from the seventeenth century. Eclectic (and sometimes casual or shallow), in the sense that, whereas some scholars have found in him a profound student of comparative religion and myth, I think it possible that Blake's imagination was sufficiently supplied with images of ancient and alien religious rites and beliefs from readily available secondary sources, such as William Hurd's popular compendium, *A New Universal History of the Religious Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs of the Whole World* (1788) – a work which employed a number of his fellow-engravers. And even when we enter firmer territory, such as the acknowledged Swedenborgian influence upon Blake, I will attempt to show that certain of Blake's ideas owed less to a reading of Swedenborg's writings than to an obscure little magazine published from a barber's shop in Hoxton, or to his reactions to some execrable hymns written by a zealous Swedenborgian minister, Joseph Proud. Or, when he wrestled with deist thought, I will suggest that he was less influenced by acknowledged thinkers of the Enlightenment than by Volney's *Ruins of Empire*, which the cognoscenti of the London Corresponding Society – master craftsmen, shopkeepers, engravers, hosiers, printers – carried around with them in their pockets. And, finally, when he denounced the Tree of Mystery, he certainly operated within a wide field of intellectual reference; but he was also stung to fury by a certain Robert Hindmarsh, who was introducing ceremonial forms and priestly ordinances into the nascent Church of the New Jerusalem.

Ideas happen in this kind of way. But they happen most of all in this kind of way within the tradition which Blake inhabited and extended. We must confront Miss Raine's notion of 'the tradition' and ask *which* tradition? The answer should not come to rest in a

simple either/or, as in Robert Redfield's notion of a 'great' (or polite) and a 'little' (or popular) tradition of culture. Blake inhabited both of these at will. But he took with him, into both of them, a mind and sensibility formed within a different, and a particular, tradition again: a particular current within bourgeois (and, often, artisan) Dissent. Much of Raine's 'tradition' appears, at first sight, to say some of the things that Blake is saying, but it is saying them in a different way. It is genteel, other-worldly, elusive, whereas Blake – whether in poetic or in visual image – has a certain literalness of expression, robustness and concreteness. Again, Raine's 'tradition', except where it draws upon Boehme, lacks altogether the radical edge or bite of Blake's expression. And (Boehme again excepted) it lacks the conscious posture of hostility to the polite learning of the Schools, *including* the polite neo-Platonist or hermetic speculations of gentry and professional men.

This is a point of importance. I will not delay to document it now. Any reader of Blake knows that it is so, and this book will keep an eye upon that point. Blake's hostility to academicism is often expressed with superb vigour, and very often within the field – the visual arts – to which he might be said, in a contemporary sense, to have submitted to an orthodox training: turn, for example, to his annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds. At times this hostility to academicism and to polite learning assumes the tones of class war:

Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects! . . . believe Christ & his Apostles that there is a Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying. We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever; in Jesus our Lord. (E94)

This is not only a war of the Imagination against the artifice and fashion of the polite culture; it is also a war of faith against a class of destroyers, and of the patronised practitioners of the creative arts against the hirelings of camp, court and university who are their patrons. This conscious posture of hostility to the polite culture, this radical stance, is not some quaint but inessential extra, added on to his tradition. It *is* his tradition, it defines his stance, it directs and colours his judgement. At times in his later years (as

in passages of his 'Descriptive Catalogue' (1809) or in his unpublished 'Public Address' on his painting of the Canterbury Pilgrims (c.1810), this stance becomes wilful and plainly cantankerous.

I have tried to explain the intention, and also the limitations, of this book. This is not, I repeat, an introduction to William Blake, nor a general interpretive study. Nor is it, in the sense of adding 'background' or social and political context, a sketch of the 'historical' Blake. It is an intervention of a different kind. I am pursuing an enquiry into the structure of Blake's thought and the character of his sensibility.

My object is to identify, once again, Blake's tradition, his particular situation within it, and the repeated evidences, motifs and nodal points of conflict, which indicate his stance and the way his mind meets the world. To do this involves some historical recovery, and attention to sources external to Blake – sources which, very often, he may not have been aware of himself. For it is necessary to define, first of all, an obscure antinomian tradition; and then to define Blake's very unusual, and probably unique, position within it. And we cannot understand, or shuffle around, Blake's ideas until we have defined these in relation to contrary or adjacent ideas. For example, we will be in no position to judge, with Donald Davie in *A Gathered Church*, whether Blake's religious insights were or were not 'beneath contempt' unless we have understood something of the doctrines of justification by faith, imputed righteousness and atonement, as they were understood by certain of his contemporaries, and as they were revised, or rejected, by him.

Very certainly, Blake's ideas undergo important changes, but even so he returns to certain elementary affirmations and constant preoccupations. I have indicated these places, from every part of his work, as evidence of the continuity of this structure but not in order to suggest consistency in his conclusions. My central study is more strictly limited, and falls chiefly within the years 1788 and 1794. This enables me to approach three themes. First, the antinomian tradition, the possible ways in which it could have been received by Blake, and his own unique notations. This is the theme of Part I. Second, the moment of the founding of the Church of the New Jerusalem, and Blake's situation within the controversies surrounding this. Third, the moment of confluence of antinomian and of 'Jacobinical' and deist influences, and the continuing

argument to which this confluence gave rise in Blake's mind and art. These are the themes of Part II.

These three moments, in my view, give us an understanding of Blake: they show us who he was. By 1794 the structure of his ideas has been laid down, and we have in our hand the clues which lead forward to the later writings. But if I succeed in identifying this structure, I by no means wish to reduce all that Blake wrote or thought to this structure. From this antinomian/deist argument there is a radiation, an exploration outwards, some of which is ambivalent, much of which I do not understand, and none of which I wish to enclose or to bring back to these primary elements.

Finally, a word of encouragement to any readers who have been attracted to Blake but who feel themselves to be beginners. They are welcome on board and I hope that they will enjoy the voyage. I have tried to explain myself as I go along: indeed, readers already learned in Blake studies (whom I welcome aboard with more trepidation) may be impatient at the care with which I explain antinomianism or Jacob Boehme. But I cannot overcome all difficulties and I must assume at times a greater familiarity with Blake's writings than beginners may have. They are urged to have an edition of Blake's complete poems beside them and to explore it as an antidote to me. For the rest Part I of this book is concerned in the main with the transmission of certain highly unorthodox or heretical Christian ideas from the mid-seventeenth century to Blake's time, and it is not closely concerned with Blake himself, although an eye is kept upon possible parallels in his own thought, tropes and visual images. It is necessary only to know that Blake was born in 1757 into a hosier's family with (it is probable) a strong radical anti-Court tradition, served his apprenticeship as an engraver, studied (and exhibited) at the Royal Academy, published his first collection, *Poetical Sketches*, in 1783, formed friendships with several notable artists, including John Flaxman and Henry Fuseli, but left little other evidence of his vigorous interior life or beliefs until 1788, on the eve of the French Revolution. His exciting output then, in his early thirties, between 1788 and 1794, which included the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, entitles him in the view of one historian (A.L. Morton) to be known as England's last and greatest antinomian. That is the place which I started from and in 1968 I gave an early lecture on Blake at Columbia University (in New York City), at a time of excite-

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ment when some sort of campus revolution against the Moral Law was going on, and I startled the audience by acclaiming William Blake as ‘the founder of the obscure sect to which I myself belong, the Muggletonian Marxists’. Instantly I found that many fellow-sectaries were in the room. As the years have gone by I have become less certain of both parts of the combination. But that is still the general area in which this book falls. In a brief introduction to Part II I try to explain myself further.