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Blake Echoes in Victorian Dublin

Vivian Mercier

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Minute Particulars

Blake Echoes in Victorian Dublin

by Vivian Mercier

At Morton Paley's request, I went through the file of *Kottabos* in the library of Trinity College, Dublin: it consists of three volumes in the original series and two in the new series, running from 1869 to 1895, with a pause between the series in the 1880's. Edited by the distinguished classical scholar Robert Yelverton Tyrrell, *Kottabos* normally appeared three times a year. Each issue, looking like a bound set of examination papers in spite of its pink paper cover, was dated according to the term in which it appeared--Michaelmas, Hilary, or Trinity. Apart from an occasional prose parody tucked in at the end of an issue, it consisted entirely of original verse and translations (usually verse) into and out of various classical and modern languages, but chiefly from English into Latin and Greek.

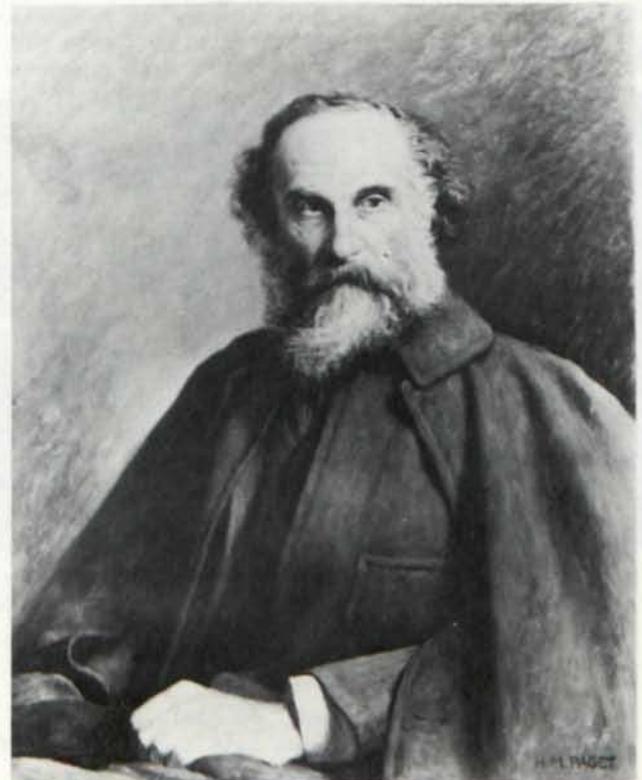
Most of the so-called original verse was extremely derivative; often the author made it perfectly clear that he was attempting only parody or pastiche. The series of "Poems Written in Discipleship" to which John Todhunter contributed his two imitations of Blake was usually accompanied by a footnote: "These poems are in no sense parodies, but intend to be affectionate studies or sketches in the manner of some of the masters of song." In other words, they are exercises in pastiche. No doubt a parallel could be found in *Songs of Innocence* or *Songs of Experience* for virtually every line of Todhunter's "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Found." The most interesting aspect of these poems "Of the School of William Blake" may well be their date, since they appeared in the issue for Michaelmas Term (i.e. Fall Quarter), 1871. Another point worth noting, though it may be the result of pure chance, is Blake's apparent high position in the batting order of the masters of song. Only Browning and Tennyson, in that order, had preceded him, both imitated by Edward Dowden, Professor of English Literature at Trinity, still remembered for his books on Shakespeare and Shelley. After Blake in the series came Longfellow (imitated by the otherwise unknown Percy S. Payne), Wordsworth (by Todhunter), "The Earlier Style of Euripides" (by R. Y. Tyrrell, in Greek), and Whitman (by Todhunter again). One might ask why Swinburne did not appear; the obvious answer is that practically all the "original" poetry showed his influence, especially that written by Oscar Wilde and his brother William. One might have expected Oscar to be aware of Blake, but his work for *Kottabos* offers no proof of this.

In the scholarly world of the time--and to a large extent in the literary world, too--*Kottabos* owed its reputation primarily to its contributors' felicity in turning English poetry into Latin and Greek verse, a Renaissance accomplishment still highly prized among the Victorians. Shakespeare

naturally offered the greatest challenge and was probably the most frequently translated author: classicists could not resist trying to turn Hamlet's soliloquies into the rhetoric of the Greek tragedians. Milton and Pope, steeped as they were in the classics, went easily enough into Latin, though Dryden, perhaps because of his Catholicism, was neglected by the staunch Protestants of Trinity (Pope of course was Catholic, too; it was Dryden's well publicized *conversion* to Catholicism in the reign of James II that caused Protestant resentment). Swinburne, as the author of *Atlanta in Calydon*, provoked attempts to translate him into Greek as well as Latin. On the other hand, those who cared more for grammar and meter than for *belles lettres* often turned to translating humorous stage-Irish ballads or mediocre album verse. R. Y. Tyrrell, over a number of years, hammered out a complete Latin version of Thomas Hood's "The Bridge of Sighs" in the meter of the original--itself derived from medieval Latin verse. Given the above facts, you can imagine my surprise and delight at finding a Latin rendering of a Blake poem in the issue for Trinity Term, 1876. Blake's "The Fly" is translated into eleven lines of Catullan hendecasyllabics under the hackneyed but appropriate title "Carpe Diem." The Latin is signed "W. G. T."--the initials of William Gerald Tyrrell, as we learn elsewhere in the issue. No doubt he was a relative of the editor.

It was shrewd of the translator to see how neatly Blake's poem would fit into a classical sub-genre. Too often we glibly categorize Blake as Romantic and ignore the "Augustan" element in his earlier work. By the way, Catullus, whom W. G.

Portrait of Dr. John Todhunter, by H. M. Paget (posthumous portrait from Elliott & Fry, photographed 1899).



POEMS WRITTEN IN DISCIPLESHIP.*

III. OF THE SCHOOL OF WILLIAM BLAKE.

Paradise Lost.

IN the woodlands wild
I was once a child,
Singing, free from care,
Wandering everywhere.

Angels went and came,
Like spires of blissful flame—
All among the flowers,
Fed with virgin showers,
Angels went and came,
Call'd me by my name.

But a Serpent crept
On me as I slept,
Stung me on the eyes,
Woke with sick surprise.

And a Demon came
With a face of shame,
Spoke my sudden doom,
Naked in the gloom.

Then a dreadful sound
Pealed through heaven's profound;
All my lonesome places
Were fill'd with dreadful faces;
Everywhere a face
Full of my disgrace.

* These poems are in no sense parodies, but intend to be affectionate studies or sketches in the manner of some of the masters of song.

Then raising her voice to a strain
The sweetest that ear ever heard,
She sung of the slave's broken chain
Wherever her glory appeared.
Some clouds, which had over us hung,
Fled, chased by her melody clear,
And methought while she liberty sung,
'Twas liberty only to hear.

COWPER.

The Fly.

LITTLE fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brush'd away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance,
And drink, and sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life,
And strength, and breath,
And the want
Of thought is death,

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

BLAKE.

Paradise Found.

Naked, in despair,
Ashes on my hair,
Menace everywhere,
I fled from pallid Care:

Weak as lamb new year'd,
Follow'd by the Fiend,
With his whip of wires
Red with my desires.

Soon a Sage drew near,
Clad my stripes in fear,
Bade me weep and wait,
At a temple gate.

But a Maiden came
With tender hands of flame,
And by secret ways
She led me, many days.

In the woodlands wild,
Now no more a child;
Among seraphs bright
I clothe my limbs in light.

Where the children sleep,
Like a snake I creep;
Kiss them on the face
For their greater grace.

J. T.

Tum liquida teneros intenuit voce canores
Queis equidem excepi dulcius aure nihil;
Vincula enim cecinit servis casura soluta
Vndique qua, visu splendida, ferret iter.
Nubila, quae cymbae rara imminuere per auras,
Fugerunt magicis exsuperata modis;
Et rebar mecum, dum iura aequanda canebat,
Audiat haec quisquis carmina, liber erit.

L. W. K.

Carpe Diem.

AH nuper volitans, misella musca,
Per solem, temeraria peristi
Nostra rapta manu, nec hoc putavi
Nostrum vivere more te modoque,
Me vestri simul impedire fatum.
Sic convivia cum choris frequento,
Donec caeca manus recidat alas.
At si mens anima est vigorque vivi,
Hae autem pereunte deperimus,
Carpam quod spatium supersit aevi,
Mortemque impavidus morabor atram.

W. G. T.

Tyrrell seems to be imitating, was not himself an Augustan in the Roman sense: he died nearly thirty years before Octavian took the title of Augustus. Tyrrell's version is surprisingly faithful to Blake, if we allow for the vast difference in philosophic and stylistic assumptions between Rome of the first century B.C. and late eighteenth-century England. After being in contact with so much translation and imitation, I could not resist giving my own line-by-line version of Tyrrell's Latin: it is much more literal than it may appear at first sight.

Pluck the Day

Unlucky little fly, just lately fluttering
brashly in the sun, you perished
caught in my hand, and I never thought of this till
now:

you and I have the same life style
and are involved in each other's fate.
I too dance and sing often at parties
till a blind hand clip my wings.
But if mind be the soul and strength of the living
creature

and when it's dead we're gone for good,
then I'm going to enjoy the rest of life
and wait for gloomy death without a qualm.

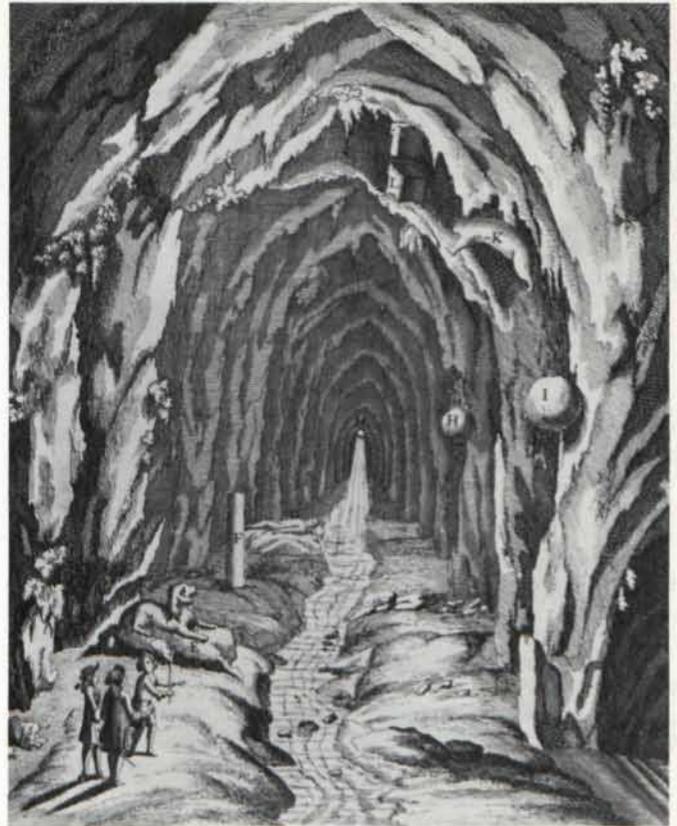
Note: The Todhunter imitations are in *Kottabos*, 1 (1869-73), 228-29. "The Fly" and "Carpe Diem" appear on facing pages: *Kottabos*, 2(1873-77), 266-67.

Blake's Derbyshire: A Visionary Locale in Jerusalem

by David Worrall

In the design to *Jerusalem* 23 where Albion utters "his last words, relapsing! / Hoarse from his rocks, from caverns of Derbyshire & Wales / And Scotland" (*J* 23:26-28, E 167), Blake shows a series of separate, enclosed human forms who are apparently the inhabitants of these caverns. If Blake is making a specific reference here it is probably to the Devil's Arse cavern in Derbyshire (see Damon, *Blake Dictionary*) which was inhabited by the poor during Blake's lifetime.¹ Charles Leigh's *The Natural History Of Lancashire, Cheshire, And The Peak, in Derbyshire*, Oxford, 1700, has a large, unsigned engraving of the Devil's Arse showing "the Area where the Persons and the Houses are, where a great many of the poor Inhabitants live" (Bk. 1, p. 192). Blake's knowledge is accurate then, but what of the "fables" of the "caverns in Cornwall, Wales, Derbyshire, and Scotland" which had been the subject of his "visionary contemplations" in *A Descriptive Catalogue* (40; E 533)?

The absorption of the Peak, East Moor and the caverns and mines of Derbyshire (see *Blake Concordance*) into Blake's myth in *Jerusalem* may stem from his imaginative reading or recollection of another of Leigh's plates which illustrated the interior of Pooles Hole in the same county. This plate shows a guide and a pair of tourists undergoing



Illus. 1, "The Devil's Arse," from Charles Leigh's *The Natural History of Lancashire, Cheshire, And The Peak, in Derbyshire*, Oxford, 1700.

Illus. 2, "Poole's Hole," from Leigh.

