

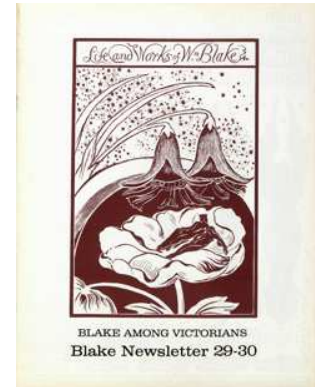
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A R T I C L E

**John Todhunter: A Forgotten Debt to Blake**

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# John Todhunter: A Forgotten

## Debt to Blake BY MICHAEL J. TOLLEY

John Todhunter, the Anglo-Irish poet (1839-1916) is known to Yeats scholars, being mentioned several times in *Autobiographies* and associated with Yeats in several dramatic and literary ventures. He is remembered chiefly for some of his later work and for his interest in Shelley. His early debt to Blake, perceived in the nineteenth century, is now forgotten.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this debt is less pervasive in the later work (which I do not know), if Yeats' interesting assessment is accurate: "If he had liked anything strongly he might have been a famous man . . . but with him every book was a new planting, and not a new bud on an old bough" (*Autobiographies* [London, 1955], p. 117). Certainly in the early poetry (which is sometimes impressive), he ranges widely in style and subject.

Todhunter figures in Evelyn Noble Armitage's *The Quaker Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1896), though by that time he was, we are told, no longer in membership of the Society of Friends. Introducing the short selection of Todhunter's poems, Armitage writes that "He is a strong poet; full of vigour and imagination, and yet with a delicate beauty of workmanship and touch, which render his poems delightful to read and remember, apart from their essential truth of thought and imagery." She goes on to note that "In the two poems 'Lost' and 'Found,' he has caught the very spirit of Blake, and the strange mystical charms of that singer of dreams and visions" (pp. 266-67). The poems in question are reprinted from Todhunter's first book, *Laurella and Other Poems* (London, 1876), pp. 274-75. They are a kind of pastiche of Blake's loose octosyllabic quatrains, borrowing rhythm, diction and imagery from (at least, I think) "A Dream," "William Bond," "The Crystal Cabinet," "Mary," "The Mental Traveller," "A Little Boy Lost" and other "lost" and "found" poems, as well as (I suspect) the poem "To My Dear Friend, Mrs Anna Flaxman" in Mrs. Blake's letter of 14 September 1800 and also the letter of Blake's to Flaxman of 21 September 1800.

### Lost

I WANDERED from my mother's side  
In the fragrant paths of morn;  
Naked, weary, and forlorn,  
I fainted in the hot noon-tide.

For I had met a maiden wild,  
Singing of love and love's delight;  
And with her song she me beguiled,  
And her soft arms and bosom white.

I followed fast, I followed far,  
And ever her song flowed blithe and free;  
'Where Love's own flowery meadows are,  
There shall our golden dwelling be!'

I followed far, I followed fast,  
And oft she paused, and cried, 'O here!'  
But where I came no flower would last,  
And Joy lay cold upon his bier.

I wandered on, I wandered wide,  
Alas! she fled with the morn;  
Weary, weeping, and forlorn,  
She left me in the fierce noontide.

### Found

NAKED, bleeding, and forlorn,  
I wandered on the mountain  
To hide my wounds from shame and scorn,  
I made a garment of my pride.

Till there came a tyrant grey,  
He stript and chained me with disgrace,  
He led me by the public way,  
And sold me in the market-place.

To many masters was I bound,  
And many a grievous load I bore;  
But in the toil my flesh grew sound,  
And from my limbs the chains I tore.

<sup>1</sup> See, however, Ian Fletcher's recent article in *The Book Collector*, 21 (Spring 1972), pp. 72-94, "The Ellis-Blake-Yeats Manuscript Cluster," which has a short section on Todhunter and Blake.

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I ran to seek my mother's cot,  
 And I found Love singing there,  
 And round it many a pleasant plot,  
 And shadowy streams and gardens fair.

Like virgin gold the thatch I see,  
 Like virgin gold the doorway sweet;  
 And in the blissful noon each tree  
 A ladder for the angel's feet.

In *Laurella* itself, "Lost" and "Found" are but two of several lyrics in the Blakean manner: indeed, two similar poems, "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Found," are stated in a fictional preface to be the work of Blake himself! These and other Blakean poems are in a section of *Laurella* entitled "The Mystic," the fictional author of the section, who is "a crazy Atheist" named "M----." The lengthy preface to the section records the Mystic's opinions and character in a manner heavily reminiscent of passages in Gilchrist's *Life* where, as it were, the enthusiasm of a Samuel Palmer is combined with Crabb Robinson's memory for dialogue. While there are other influences on poems in "The Mystic," for instance Goethe and Shelley, the section suggests strongly that it is the response of an enthusiastic convert to Blake, presumably after a perusal of Gilchrist's *Life* (1863).

It is possible that these Blakean poems were written a long time before the publication of *Laurella* in 1876. Evelyn Armitage, who may have known the author, states that most of the pieces in *Laurella* "had been written many years before." Todhunter himself, in his general preface to *Laurella*, writes: "Most of the poems in this volume were written many years ago, and several have already appeared in Magazines and in *Kottabos* -- a periodical published each term in connection with Dublin University." Todhunter was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin (B.A. 1865, M.B. and M.Ch. 1866), but, according to Armitage, he then left Dublin to walk "the hospitals of Vienna and Paris," before returning to Dublin to be Professor of English Literature at Alexandra College (1870-74) and also Assistant Physician to Cork St. Fever Hospital. He received his M.D. in 1871. These dates, then, suggest the periods within which a search may be made of the University magazines for an earlier publication of the Blake poems in *Laurella*. The Preface to "The Mystic" smacks strongly of undergraduate hoaxing and 1865 is thus a likely date. Unfortunately, I have been unable to pursue a search for the poems at this stage, owing to the limited library resources here.

This interesting post-Romantic poet would well repay further study, and I would be interested to hear if any one is, in fact, working on Todhunter.

### Preface to "The Mystic" [Excerpt]

It is now many years since I first met the strange person who was the Author of the following Poems. I made his acquaintance at a soiree at the house

of the late Dr. A. B----, whose passion for collecting '*characters*' rivalled in intensity the china-mania of the present day. He was not the lion of the evening, having been collected some time previously; but I at once felt that he was no ordinary *eccentric*. His dress was shabby, and, without being sordid, had a pleasant student-like slovenliness about it, like the well-worn binding of some precious old volume; to which his sensitive face, with its delicate curves of suffering and wrinkles of thought, formed a fitting title-page. The whole man had, indeed, a Faust-like look of antiquity--an aging older than his years, which had grizzled his hair and beard somewhat before their time; and, as he stood a little apart, sometimes turning over the pages of a book, sometimes letting his dreamy grey eyes wander absently around the room, I gazed at him with a strange fascination,--

'Like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken.'

I felt that I was in the presence of what Goethe would have called a '*Nature*.'

His views about the Bible were peculiar and paradoxical. 'To fools only is it an ordinary book. It is more even than the literature of an inspired nation. It contains a real revelation as no other book does.' Yet he was no Bibliolater, and gave full play to his critical faculties in his reading of it. 'It is not a perfect mirror reflecting the face of God. It is full of flaws; but the best we have as yet. As a final authority the Bible abrogates itself. It is not that light of which it bears witness--the Logos indwelling in our hearts. A church built upon its infallibility is a house built on the sand; an ark ready to go to pieces when the wind of change blows roughly. Then the passengers must make shift to escape, 'some on boards and some on broken pieces of the ship'--as the Protestants are doing now. But it is the breath of God that raises the storm. Does not the wind of a new Pentecost begin to blow over this world that faints for a new revelation?'

He frequently expressed himself in rather Antinomian language: 'What is this nonsense about the Moral Law? God is not a moral being at all. The universe exists for beauty, not for good and evil.' Yet, like most theoretic Antinomians, he acknowledged the practical necessity of morality in the finite world; and his life was, so far as my observation reaches, singularly pure.

For Blake, as some of his poems prove, he had a profound admiration. "'Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Found" are his, not mine,' he declared. 'He sang them to me one night. I wrote them down on the spot.' 'As a painter Blake would have been much greater, if Raffaele had not clung round him like a serpent, breathing academic poison. What had he to do with Raffaele? When his drawing is wrong, it is wrong from academic vanity and bad taste rather than ignorance and weakness. In his instinctive impulses he is greater than Michael Angelo--much greater than every one else.'