

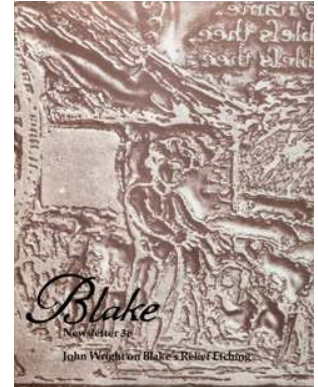
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Blake in French: An Interview with Pierre Leyris

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Widely revealed, edited, and studied in Great Britain and in the United States, the visionary English poet, William Blake (1757-1827), is but fragmentarily known in France.

Though the modern sensibility is prepared to enter into what the writer's contemporaries called his "obscurity," the French public still never has had the means to satisfy its interest in Blake. Gide translated him partially; Julien Green, Georges Bataille, and Marcel Brion wrote essays on him. Yet, the main task remained undone: a French edition of his complete works.

The first volume of Blake's "Oeuvres" has just been published by Aubier-Flammariion in a bilingual edition, with Pierre Leyris as a "maitre d'oeuvre." He has proved himself for thirty years the most accomplished translator from the English language, mostly of poets: Shakespeare, E. Brontë, T. S. Eliot, Hopkins. He is an enthusiastic discoverer, as evidenced by the catalogue of "Domaine anglais," a collection which he has been editing for ten years at Mercure de France. Pierre Leyris is above all the "introducer" of the poets he translates.

Now, his subject is Blake, whose significance he discusses in an interview granted to Françoise Wagener.

Q: How relevant is Blake today?

A: You should add: and tomorrow; for I consider Blake a poet of the future. For a start, a poet--a genuine artist--remains modern in all times. What is most striking about Blake is his solid, monolithic aspect. The citizen of London, the engraving craftsman, the creative artist, the poet, the revolutionary, the carnal man, the spiritual man, the visionary metaphysician--all those are one at any point in his life and in his work. In the days of the "Grand Jeu," Daumal wrote about Sima, the painter, as follows: "Picasso strides ahead, but only in painting. Sima advances wholly." Blake was second to none in advancing wholly. People of that kind are always needed: people who advance wholly even if it leads them to having their throats slit.

Q: Was Blake ever in danger?

A: He appeared in court for having said something like "God damn the king and the king's soldiers" as he showed an impertinent foot soldier to the door. That was but a short-lived incident. However, on account of what the police were like under George III, Blake would certainly have been deprived of his liberty in the days of the French Revolution if his writings had been printed, instead of remaining in manuscript, or instead of a few copies engraved and illuminated in his own hand. Nothing could be more violently revolutionary than his "Song of Liberty." Nothing could more strenuously advocate women's erotic liberty than his *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. He was a radical libertarian, you know. He could not accept monarchy, the army, churches, and prisons. Nor the existence of rich and poor. Nor strict monogamy and conjugal jealousy. Nor the "satanic mills" of nascent industry and the would-be sorcery of its technology. Nor even schools, for they warp and frustrate childhood.

Q: Did he remain such a radical all his life?

A: He did basically. As he saw the turn of events in France, though, he ceased believing in a revolution carried out by iron and blood, and began to aspire solely after a revolution in the human breast. There reside all deities; there cosmic forces are confronted; there the great intellectual battle is waged. Man must free himself of the "mind-forged manacles," of the delusions of the senses. He must "cast the spectre into the lake," in other words, get rid of the guilt-inducing superego--to use the contemporary jargon--and also escape, through the poetic imagination, from the embrace of matter which is but illusion, or Maya. On the one hand, every energy is good; the only evil is the coercion of others and the repression of one's own desires. On the other hand, the only reality is mental, a fact which man must understand in order to realize the deity that is within him.

Q: You used the word "Maya." Was Blake familiar with Hinduism?

Françoise Wagener's interview with Pierre Leyris, the most recent translator of Blake into French, appeared originally in *Le Monde*, 12 July 1974. It is reprinted here by permission, in a translation done for us by Simone Pignard, who teaches literature at the University of Madagascar.

A: He quotes the Bhagavad-Gita then recently translated, but his ideas do not stem from there. Besides the Bible and Milton, his direct sources were Swedenborg, Jacob Boehme, Plato and the Neo-Platonists who, moreover, pervaded the Pre-Romantic atmosphere owing to Taylor's brand-new translations. Yet, all this is swept up and transformed in the vortex of his own thought. For everything in his work is in motion. In a beautiful book, *1789 and the Emblems of Reason*, Starobinski quotes something Goethe said concerning symbols, a sentence which perfectly describes Blake's creative process: "Symbols turn an appearance into an idea, the idea into an image, but in such a manner that the idea in the image remains active and out of reach." That is why the great mythical figures that are constantly moving and becoming in the Prophetic Books cannot be contained in static concepts.

Q: Do you intend to publish them too?

A: This edition--a bilingual one--is launched with the ambitious aim of being nearly complete someday. I did not have "Complete Works" inscribed on the first volume to allow for the omission of adolescent, minor works, and of epigrams originating in outbursts of temper that the French translation would divest of their documentary interest. With the exception of those utterly negligible scraps, however, I hope to bring out everything, even the marginalia Blake wrote down while reading, and the letters which are so revealing. There the poet, the visionary, expresses himself in a remarkably natural way. Read the ones I published in "Ephémère" no. 12; it is one of the best ways to approach Blake.

Q: What will the next volumes include?

A: Apart from the fragmentary, burlesque prose, "An Island in the Moon," the first one includes the youthful *Poetical Sketches*, and, chiefly, the peerless, little dialectical pair, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The second volume will comprise the rest of the lyrical work, in contrast to the Prophetic Books which will appear afterwards. That distinction, in fact, is a merely formal and convenient one. Those are poems that Blake never engraved, nor of course printed, but they sometimes are of major consequence. They are mostly derived from his "Note-Book," now at the British Museum. It is a notebook Blake had kept as a relic all his life, as he received it from his younger brother who died in his arms at the age of 20. Erdman has lately worked out an extraordinary facsimile of it, revealing in particular almost invisible sketches, by means of infrared. Incidentally, let us acknowledge the tremendous work the English have done since the beginning of our century to provide insight into Blake's symbolic imagery, and to reconstruct precisely the socio-historical background to which the poems often allude. A large part of the poet's work would have otherwise remained a "selva oscura."

Q: Is Blake's reputation for obscurity well-founded then?

A: Aren't there enigmas in Dante's work, since I just quoted him? And, closer to us, in Rimbaud's, and in Mallarmé's? Blake's obscurity is partly due to the transmuting dynamism of the visions which present themselves to his inner eye. He does not strive to summon them abstractly. They are present, personified, and as unpredictable as . . . Dionysus, for instance. There is another source of obscurity, an important one for excessively rational readers: it is never clear whether Blake speaks of England as he knew it, or of the seventh heaven. Do you know what the Hasidim said about Enoch, the patriarch who passed for a former cobbler? "Not only did his awl link the leather above with that underneath, but also all that was above with all that was underneath."

Q: Those obscurities must be dreadful obstacles to the translator?

A: The greatest difficulties are to be found elsewhere: in the transparency of the *Songs of Innocence*, in the use of words so simple that they do not admit of any transposition whatsoever. One must, accordingly, refrain from producing, at the expense of faithfulness, a poem that is too regular, too accomplished. One must be honest and keep to an allusive imperfection.

Q: How would you define faithfulness with respect to the translation of poetry?

A: It would take a whole book to answer you. I was chiefly thinking of faithfulness to concepts and images, as faithfulness to the rhythm is a matter of course. To be faithful to a text means that, to begin with, you permeate yourself with it, with its values properly perceived; then, you let it circulate through you--as if involuntarily--during the passage from one language to another. In translation naturalness is obtained suddenly, like a dispensation of grace, after patient efforts. You cannot imagine the degree to which a text can be grasped once you have long battled with it. You even think you have found out the secret of its genesis. For instance, I am sure that it did not take very long for Shakespeare to write a scene, once he had greatly pondered over it. His thought can be seen leaping, by associations of ideas, from image to image, without regard to the syntax, or to the ambiguities that are scattered along, in a flight of genius. This flight is what you must arrive at, in Blake's work as in Shakespeare's, yet without passing the relays--sometimes secret--where the poet changed horses.

Q: What is it, in your opinion, that sustains this flight?

A: Imagination, of course; which brings us back to the core of Blake's thought. For him, the Poetic Imagination, which he boldly identifies with the body of Christ, is what constitutes man's divinity. Spiritual visions are what "exist eternally, really and unchangeably," in opposition to the transitory world.