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William Blake was born in the middle of London eighteen years before the American Revolution. Precociously imaginative and an omnivorous reader, he was sent to no school but a school of drawing, at ten. At fourteen he was apprenticed as an engraver. He had already begun writing the exquisite lyrics of *Poetical Sketches* (privately printed in 1783), and it is evident that he had filled his mind and his mind's eye with the poetry and art of the Renaissance. Collecting prints of the famous painters of the Continent, he was happy later to say that "from Earliest Childhood" he had dwelt among the great spiritual artists: "I Saw & Knew immediately the difference between Rafael and Rubens."

In his reading also he quickly distinguished his true friends. "Milton lov'd me in childhood & shew'd me his face"; the Old Testament prophet "Ezrah came with Isaiah." On the outskirts of London he recognized angels walking among the hay-makers. Later, he said, Shakespeare "gave me his hand." And there "appear'd" to him the bombastic sixteenth-century magician and alchemical philosopher Paracelsus, and also the seventeenth-century shoemaker and mystic Jacob Boehme (Behmen). Thus was his life filled with "Mental wealth," seen in and through statues and engravings and books (and probably the serious and burlesque drama of theaters in his neighborhood), before "the American War began," a landmark in his intellectual existence.

By the time Blake was eighteen he had been an engraver's apprentice for three years and had been assigned by his master, James Basire, to assist in illustrating an antiquarian book of *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*. Basire sent Blake into churches and churchyards but especially among the tombs in Westminster Abbey to draw careful copies of the brazen effigies of kings and queens, warriors and bishops. From the drawings line engravings were made under the supervision of and doubtless with finishing touches by Basire, who signed them. Blake's longing to make his own original inventions (designs) and to have entire charge of their etching and engraving was very strong when it emerged in his adult years. For as an engraver of other people's designs he proved too original to please the employing booksellers, and when others were employed to engrave his designs he felt robbed in purse and spirit. Late in life his engraved *Illustrations of the Book of Job* and his designs for Dante's *Divine Comedy* constituted a triumph of original genius within a tradition that went back to his beloved Dürer.

That Blake's imagination, while he was making those carefully stiff engravings of early rulers, was busy reconstructing their active lives and warfare, we know from the historical paintings he made during and after the American War and from his unfinished history play of "King Edward the Third." In the context of his own times, when most inhabitants of London sympathized with the American rebels against George the Third, Blake recognized the kings and nobles of Old England as enemies of life and art, as "villains" whose pretense of righteous moral virtue led them to justify wars of conquest and to accuse queens or

rivals' mistresses of adultery, for purposes of property or power. Blake came to regard the accusation of sin as the most wicked sin against humanity. In his great prophetic epics, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, and in his lyric ballad "The Everlasting Gospel," it is accusation of sin that brings death into the world, while life is redeemed by mutual forgiveness--not by atonement but by love's embrace (at-one-ment) alternating with the "fierce contentions" of intellect.

In *Milton*, the epic selected here, it is fascinating to see as the still center or stage furniture of the action, which includes lightning journeys through the universe by three of the principal characters, Milton, his Emanation, and his Spectre, Satan, a setting such as that in which Basire's apprentice had spent his working days: sepulchers of the dead with sculptured effigies resting upon them as if sleeping upon eternal couches. The fourth and crucial character, "A Giant form of perfect beauty outstretched on the rock" of ages, is Albion, Blake's English version of Adam, who *ought* to be making a journey but stays asleep on his "Couch of Death." Milton, becoming aware of Albion's sleep, discovers his obligation to leave Heaven to go "down to the sepulcher," and the thunder and lightning of his descent do stir Albion, if only momentarily. Meanwhile Milton's "real and immortal Self" remains all the time in Heaven, "as One sleeping on a couch of gold." Even Satan sits "sleeping upon his Couch" of stone, until Milton confronts him; and Milton's act is represented as the labor of a sculptor forming an image that comes to life. To do this, we are told, Milton has entered the body of William Blake; thus the sculptor (a term also meaning engraver) is Milton-Blake and the poet of the text is Blake-Milton. And finally, at the culmination of the moment of active vision we learn that Blake himself has been lying "outstretched upon the path," not in his eternal but in his "Vegetable" body (a parody of the brass effigies), while his soul has been busy filling the moment with the poet-artist's work.

In 1782, the year after the British surrender at Yorktown, Blake married an uneducated but strong-minded and beautiful woman named Catherine Boucher. He taught her to read and write and to assist in his printing and coloring. In his mythical poetry she became the Eve for his Adam, the Emanation or spiritual self of Los, the bardic blacksmith of Eternity, whose daily bread-winning self was but the Spectre. William and Catherine had (we know not why) no children, but Los and Enitharmon had many sons and daughters, their works of art; and their rebellious son Orc who sprang from or above the Atlantic Ocean during the war looked like a serpent to some but like naked humanity to others. Also, within his works there are many children, all the "little-ones" of London, the "lost" boys and girls, the vagabonds and harlots and cursing soldiers in the streets, the beggars at the wintry door. One of the beggars turned out to be Blake's own lost brother John, "making his moan," coming to beg for bread after he had failed at gingerbread baking. And

it was for the poor of London that the Blakes, who were themselves poor nearly all their lives, worked busily day after day building the City of Art, a beginning toward a structure of a new Jerusalem of golden arches and green pastures and flourishing gardens. Only when life prospered would art be perfect, but art must prepare the way.

"Some People," protested Blake in his fifties, "& not a few Artists have asserted that the Painter of this Picture [a small *Vision of the Last Judgment*] would not have done so well if he had been properly Encouragd." The answer was that, though "Art is Above Either, the Argument is better for Affluence than Poverty." He might not have been a greater artist, but "he would have produced Greater works." He had in mind a titanic canvas, a "portable fresco" one hundred feet high, suitable to be placed, by a nation that encouraged art, in the interior of St. Paul's.

He never lost the ambition for greater works, but he could laugh away the wish for personal riches, as indicated by his several poems on the subject. He hoped for a national and international renaissance of the imagination, an awakened human community in which the whole business of life would be "The Arts & All Things Common." Living in a land ruled by the Urizenic George the Third and, later, George the Fourth, he insisted upon the practice of "Republican Art," and he thus described the status quo: "Art Degraded Imagination Denied War Governed the Nations."

By April, 1784 at least one famous artist, George Romney, was willing to rank Blake's historical drawings "with those of Michael Angelo." Blake was exhibiting some of them at the Royal Academy. And toward the end of the year he wrote a marvelously revealing and witty satiric sketch studded with songs, *An Island in the Moon*, in which we are shown the artist and his friends hilariously seizing the future by the forelock. At the center of a merry social gathering Blake himself appears as Quid the Cynic among fellow "philosophers" and other, more absurd friends, arguing and boasting and drinking rum and water, elated with a sense of his own "English Genius"--if also feeling that he lives in a society of humbugs and ignorant wretches and inflated egos (among them his own). This prose and verse medley is included in the present edition as a useful introduction to the complexity of Blake's views of himself and his world, and to his ironic wit--and as the matrix from which emerged, just five years later, his priceless *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

Five years later still, Blake balanced these with *Songs of Experience* (1794), defining the two (among many possible ways) as "the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." The first *Songs* and, in the same year, *The Book of Thel* were the first perfect fruits of his newly developed method of "Illuminated Printing," a method which combined poetry and pictures in relief etching; the printed pages were usually embellished with watercolors, sometimes simply, sometimes elaborately.

While Blake was etching the plates for *Songs of Innocence* and *The* the hopes (and fears) of the American Revolution (and War) "passed before his face" on their way "Across the Atlantic to France." By 1791 he had written the first and perhaps only book of an epic vision of *The French Revolution* and had it set in type, but for reasons unknown it remained unpublished. In this poem all the fears are reduced to vanishing clouds and we are invited to contemplate the human form of revolution, its forehead, eyes, shoulders, feet, voice, and to hear the poet's plea for recognizing "the infinite labyrinth of another's brain" as reason for learning "to consider all men as thy equals, Thy brethren."

By the end of 1790 the collapse of the inhibiting and prohibiting powers of the king of France seemed to herald the collapse of King George's. Before Blake's birth in 1757, the Swedish sage Emmanuel Swedenborg had predicted the advent of a new heaven on earth for the year 1757; in late 1790 Blake was thirty-three, the age of Christ at the resurrection (Blake saw only death-worship in people's paying attention to the crucifixion). In a diabolically cheerful prophetic voice Blake argued that if these thirty-three years in Britain could be called a new Heaven, it was about time for the resurrection of "the eternal Hell." Contraries are "necessary to Human existence," he insisted. What "the religious call Good & Evil" needed redefining. People that worship "the Governor or Reason" oppose Energy as evil, but "Energy is the only life . . . and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight." Blake proposed a *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and presented the wisdom of Hell in an illuminated book by that title, adding to top it off, "A Song of Liberty" which celebrates the overthrow of gloomy kings and lecherous priests who "call that virginity, that wishes but acts not!" "For every thing that lives is Holy."

Swedenborg had been privileged to converse with angels and report the news of all the "Earths in the Universe" and even to write *Of Heaven and Hell and of the Wonderful Things therein*, but had neglected to interview the devils. Blake is able to report debates between devils and angels (in which the devils not only win hands down but convert the angels) and even to go "walking among the fires of hell" unharmed. For he immediately discovers that what look to angels "like torment and insanity" are the delightful "enjoyments of Genius." Blake draws pictures of himself (and Catherine perhaps, for one of the sketched figures has a wide skirt) dancing and tumbling in the fiery furnace. He suggests instead of pulling out the "sacred codes" when the revolution comes, the proper way to greet it is with outstretched arms. What he brings forth from the fires of "Infernal wisdom" is an inspired collection of "Proverbs of Hell" worth all the codes ever printed.

Blake's diabolism in this work is rhetorical; he is engaged in a redefinition of goodness, not a championing of evil; a testing of truth, not a

defense of falsity. His sometimes misconstrued proverb, "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (the sixty-seventh in the list and impossible to misunderstand *in context*), is a way of saying that the bottling up of desires for fame, for love, for "happy copulation" (see *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*) is as damaging in its psychological and social consequences as the worst kind of suppression of life imaginable, which would be the murdering of an infant. (The image of an infant in its cradle implies a new birth not yet tested, stifled before we know how wonderful it will be.) Blake is no advocate of murder, which by his definition in his notes of about the same date on Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*, is not properly an act at all: "Murder is Hindering Another; Theft is Hindering Another," and so on. "To hinder another is not an act . . . it is a restraint on action both in ourselves & in the person hindered, for he who hinders another omits his own duty, at the time." "This is Vice but all Act is Virtue."

The "marriage" of Heaven and Hell, then, is a testing of opposites. Some are both true, contrary states of the soul. Some are false, hinderings, which Blake calls Negations not Contraries. Mental daring is the great value of Blake's "Mental War": to break any manacles forged on your mind, by tyrants and priests, or by your own submission or folly. To the wise, "It does not signify what the laws of Kings & Priests have call'd Vice," we must follow out the action we believe is right. Blake was impatient with history books that explained what men and nations did by reducing heroic Action to causes and effects. "Tell me the Acts, O historian," he pleaded, "and leave me to reason upon them as I please." "Try, Try, and never mind the reason why." The wise man falleth seven times a day, but he riseth again.

In his great prophetic writings, and his paintings, Blake had the courage of the ultimate daring. To create "The Tyger" even though no one might understand it, in his lifetime. To prophesy against oppression and war, saying, "If you go on so, the result is So," even if poverty was the result. To summon to his side Milton, the greatest English prophet, to walk forward with him to the great harvest and vintage of nations. Blake built his epic prophecies as staging areas for the greater building of a new society. These works were buildings themselves, in effect, like Noah's ark, equipped to keep "the remnant" who survived the brutal wars of empire from being overwhelmed by bad government, bad science, bad art. It is our fortune that these arks remained afloat throughout the next century, hailed and described impressionistically in the 1860s and 1890s but only in our day coming firmly to land in contemporary minds. Today we are the grateful beneficiaries of Blake's courage and steady labors.

Following *The French Revolution*, Blake described the acts of the American Revolution, in *America a Prophecy* (1793). In *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) he brought the account up to 1792, expressing the prophetic hope that Empire, by fully exposing its spirit of Negation in counterrevolutionary war and,

in England, domestic repression, would collapse from people's minds as self-evidently false and death-oriented and, once seen, as easy to sweep away as dusty spiderwebs. In 1795 he published *The Song of Los*, quickly adding the spider kings of Asia to the dust heap. Meanwhile, in a work as satiric as *An Island in the Moon* but not so mirthful, *The Book of Urizen*, he began the "Bible of Hell" promised in *The Marriage* with a parodic Genesis-Exodus.

In the text of *Urizen*, and in the pictures, the characters are all mythological giants, embodied faculties of the minds of rulers, priests, and slaves: Urizen, the irrational reason; Los, the frustrated artist-blacksmith; Enitharmon, the natural world seen as shadow of self; Orc, the infant rebel. The pictures are grotesques, cosmic acrobats, monsters of fantasy--with only three exceptions. In Plate 2 a naked baby and an elegantly dressed mother, though floating in clouds, belong in contemporary London. In Plate 21 we see an Oedipal family trio whose facial and postural expressions seem true to domestic life if also to the tragic stage. And in Plate 26, if only there, the scene itself is a London street doorway, with a youthful beggar and his wolfish dog, "the dog at the wintry door." This is Blake's doorway from the world of myth to the London street location of most of the *Songs of Experience*, published at the same time. It reminds us that Blake's visions were of things in this world, where "Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime" ("A Little Girl Lost"), yet where "Children of the future Age" could be expected to have recovered their imaginative freedom.

Blake's vision of Jerusalem was, essentially, of his own London, transformed and humanized. He saw and heard the street cries of his neighborhood as trumpets of revelation. Being himself a worker in soot--he used it to blacken the surface of a copper plate while he worked on it with etching or engraving tool--Blake felt a particular affinity for the soot-covered chimney sweepers and for the black boy exiled among English school boys who could not see through the "black cloud" of his skin. Blake felt that the black boy could see through the "white cloud" of theirs. He believed that to see through, not merely with, the eyes was the secret of true vision. While his hands (fiery sons of Los) worked on the "black rock" cutting "furrows" in it with his plowing graver, his imagination could "Contract or Expand Space at will" and thus one moment listen to the weeping "little-ones" and the next rise upon "the chariots of the morning."

In his visionary epic *Milton*, Blake joins John Milton in the bold journey of "Self-annihilation" (compare the Angel and Blake who leap into the void in the fourth Memorable Fancy in *The Marriage*). Their purpose is to find and give shape to and destroy all the "not human" in themselves and in the world, to see through and to take off all the limiting "garments," including those of the sexes. The idea is terrifying to one of the listeners, who protests that annihilation may destroy the little-ones (infants in their cradles, and other buds of promise). It is a poor argument against taking action against falsehood, by definition the not

human. But Blake is willing to answer it either way. On the one hand, he will annihilate only what can be annihilated, the false. On the other, by giving human form to error or Satan--using the devil's name now in a traditional sense, not the jesting inverted sense of *The Marriage*, the sculptor gives Satan all the benefit of any doubts he chooses to make trial of, doubts being Satan's stock in trade. If there is a mistake, and Satan is hiding some recoverable human within, then he has been given life. Otherwise, it is only by "giving a body to falsehood" that it can be "cast off for ever" (*Jerusalem* 12:13).

In *Milton*, Blake combines this theme with another, the proper combination of anger and sympathy, Wrath and Pity. Perhaps at times he has in mind the combination of pity and terror in Aristotle's definition of tragedy. The "Bard's Song" which opens the poem instructs Milton with an allusive (and elusive) parable about the relations of two brothers, the wrathful Rintrah and the sympathetic Palamabron, and an illusory brother, Satan. The three are pictured in Plate 10 as three handsome naked young men--except that one is open-mouthed in agony, is on fire from toes to head, and is standing on a marble platform. He is the statue or effigy of Satan or Selfhood--and if the two brothers could see him truly they would let his annihilation proceed. But Wrath (Rintrah) hesitates and wrings his hands at the conflagration of so handsome an image. And Pity (Palamabron) attempts to affirm human sympathy, putting one foot beside Satan's on the platform, yet really terrified and turning his arms and body to run away. As we discover later, Satan once seen as a fraud goes up in smoke. But the important thing here is the failure of true brotherly cooperation between Pity and Wrath, who stand close to each other yet fail to communicate, let alone embrace. Pity, almost angry, is out of character; Wrath ineffectually expresses pity; both are on the dangerous road to self-pity. A true brother would risk the flames to save a life.

Love, of course, is the bond they need. As Blake's Emanation says to his Spectre in one of the lyrics, "The Woman that does not love your Frowns Will never embrace your smiles." In *Milton*, the lovers who need to learn the proper science of frowns and smiles are Milton and his Sixfold Emanation, Ololon--his three wives and three daughters. In Blake's world of 1800-1804 (the "moment" of his personal life covered by the poem) the problem occurred on two levels, viewed from different angles. The Blakes were living at Felpham "on the banks of the Ocean" during most of this period, at the invitation of William Hayley, who meant well and seemed full of good advice that would establish Blake as a prosperous painter--except that it involved (in the terms of the bard's parable) a change from plowing his own field to laboring at Satan's mill as a slave to money. Both men soon discovered, perhaps when Blake showed Hayley some pages of his *Milton* manuscript, that they were spiritual enemies. But Hayley's problem was that he lacked "the Science of Wrath" and kept up a "soft dissimulation of friendship!" (*Milton* 8:35). Blake's problem was that he got so angry he couldn't

practice the science of Pity. In a broader view, however, the problem of 1803-4 was that Britain (Albion) was throwing away the possibilities of humane and cultural friendship with France and, giving up the armistice called the Peace of Amiens, resuming war more fiercely than ever. Blake's Milton--who sees at once that "the Nations still Follow after the detestable Gods" who inspire such blood combat as the Trojan War, and are still caught up in the false "pomp Of warlike selfhood"--joins Blake to step up the effort to turn war to peace. On that plane the science needed is that of Pity, or rather of Mercy. For what Milton-Blake as Los must do in this national, nay universal, crisis is replace the false god Satan (one of the gods of Trojan Priam) with the "Human Lineaments" which Jesus revealed when he rent the temple curtains (41:24-27). Perhaps the final message is that neither Pity nor Wrath will save Albion. Pity might bring the warrior home, but what Blake suggests about Mercy is that it represents not simply a finer kind of pity--pity by itself "divides the soul"--but a bonding of Wrath and Pity by Love. The poem ends with Jesus coming in the clouds of Ololon (here representing all historical humanity vis à vis the poet) and the imminent embracing of Ololon-Jesus and Milton.

There was, it is true, a bitter and jealous, even envious side to Blake's pen, but he confined its output to the margins of a few books--most of his marginalia, though, are warm, wise, not bitter--and to his private Notebook. He entertained no illusion that there was anything to be proud of about the state of nerves in which he could "almost spew" at his "dear Christian Friends" or yield to

the temptation to give as good as he got to "the Virtuous" whom he saw grinning, spitting, and showing their backsides. Indeed one suspects that what he could least resist, of the impulses that filled the crannies between drawings or serious lyrics and essays in his Notebook with satiric slashings and epigrams, was their wit and wordplay. "Was I angry with Hayley who usd me so ill Or can I be angry with Felphams old Mill?" he would ask. He was and he could be, but he knew that "Back-biting, Undermining . . . & whatever is Negative is Vice," and he corrected himself. Good clean anger was what friends should be shown, when they deserved it; toward enemies the proper mental sword to employ was pity--in the form of laughter.

At a Friends Errors Anger shew
Mirth at the Errors of a Foe.

Blake dared, nevertheless, to sing of Experience as well as of Innocence, while taking care that a reader who possessed a copy of *Songs of Experience* should have a copy of *Songs of Innocence* to keep beside it. Blake dared to search for humanity even within the "dark horrors" of war, and he managed to keep "the Divine Vision in time of trouble." True, he did not easily control his own temper (he keeps telling us); he also felt that he expressed his enthusiasm too nakedly; today I suppose we would call these contraries pessimism and optimism. But he went on bravely because he never lost his faith in the imagination, which turns mental death into fourfold life. That ancient pessimist King Solomon had said, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Blake simply replied: "And what can be foolisher than this?"