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BY A. M. ATKINS

As Detlef W. Dörrbecker points out in "Fuseli, the Swiss, and the British: Some Recent Publications," the 1973 Zurich edition of Fuseli's poems, although not entirely complete, is nevertheless a valuable addition to the expanding fund of knowledge concerning the poetic output of the celebrated painter.¹ Unfortunately, except for occasionally quoted passages, the poems have not been translated and have received relatively little critical attention. To convey something of the flavor of these poems, I have attempted to translate a few representative samples, appended below.

Modern critical evaluations of the poems, made largely by German or Swiss commentators, are rather negative; usually, "the other side of his art, the literary, is judged with a certain hesitancy" and considered "time-bound, manneristic classicism."² Eudo Mason, the scholar most instrumental in the mid-twentieth-century Fuseli revival, reminds us, however, that Fuseli "can never be fully understood, unless his writings are also taken into account" and acknowledges Fuseli's talents as translator, aphorist, and critic while being somewhat less than enthusiastic over his poems.³ Yet although critical strictures seem justified, the poems are nevertheless of interest to the historian as well as to the comparatist, especially the latter, inasmuch as they permit insight into the mind of a man who, like Faust, is of a divided soul, imbued by "the passion for everything grand and cutting contempt for everything mean,"⁴ a man "in whose daemonic personality exaltation was forever at war with an almost cynical shrewdness,"⁵ a man who was wrestling with two languages and two artistic media.

To attempt an explanation of why Fuseli largely abandoned poetry in favor of the visual arts must, of course, ultimately remain a matter of speculation. Yet certain events in his life and in the culture of his time, as well as a consideration of his personality, may serve to shed some light, at least, on why he chose to concentrate on the representative arts. All signs in Fuseli's early life pointed to his becoming a man of letters. As a youngster, he was bred to the ministry and seems to have shown promise as a teacher of considerable rhetorical power. Indeed, "he regarded poetry as his true vocation"⁶ and, having attained considerable proficiency in several languages, devoured not only the ancient classics but also Shakespeare, Milton, and certain eighteenth-century Eng-

lish poets. It was Fuseli's good fortune to grow up in Zurich, then one of the fortresses in the Germanic revolt against French neoclassicism. Johann Bodmer—poet, translator of Milton, and one of the leaders of the movement—introduced young Fuseli to the English poets considered such admirable models in the fight against convention. Among contemporary German poets, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, the "German Milton," was young Fuseli's favorite. He tried his hand at a Shakespearean tragedy, *The Death of Saul* (now lost),⁷ and, when barely twenty, created a sensation with his, at first anonymously circulated, odes in the manner of Klopstock. Indeed, it was thought that these odes were actually Klopstock's; among those who knew better, Johann Georg Zimmermann went so far as to claim that "compared to Fuseli's odes, many of Klopstock's are like 'water.'"⁸ And Johann Kaspar Lavater, one of Fuseli's best friends, ranks him equal to Goethe.⁹

If such praise nowadays seems exaggerated, even stranger is the fact that it is based on a mere handful of poems. According to Martin Bircher, of the 46 poems in the 1973 Zurich edition, only 11 were published during Fuseli's lifetime. And although Fuseli never seems entirely to have given up writing or at least revising his poetry, the bulk, 28 poems, was written prior to 1780, with the decade from 1760 to 1770 being the most productive. Only 14 of Fuseli's poems can be assumed to have been written after 1800, and only one after 1812.¹⁰ Thus, after 1770 Fuseli turned his back on poetry, except for a brief resurgence in late 1779 and early 1780, occasioned by an abortive love affair.¹¹

In terms of events, the years between 1762 and 1779 are the stormiest in Fuseli's life and artistically no doubt the most critical. Having denounced a powerful Zurich official, Fuseli fled in 1763 from his native land, spent some time in Germany, and in 1764 settled in England. There he was initially very active in literary matters but also painted a great deal. In 1768 Sir Joshua Reynolds advised Fuseli to go to Italy and concentrate on painting. Fuseli stayed in Italy from 1770 to 1778 and, after a brief visit to Switzerland, returned to England in 1778, settling into a "golden exile"¹²—golden certainly as far as painting was concerned but not so propitious, it seems, for his poetry.

To add any new insights to Dörbecker's evaluation of the poems and his succinct presentation of their critical reception by others is impossible, except that I should like to plead for a certain freshness and noble cadence in Fuseli's "Ode to His Friends Left Behind" (see below), which seems to adumbrate that of Hölderlin. Elsewhere, to be sure, Fuseli virtually never descends from the heights of rhetoric, indulging in a great deal of hyperbole and excessively metaphoric language, especially in his penchant for non-functional personification. At the time, of course, this was in perfectly good taste, and even where he is irregular and strident, Fuseli moves safely within the confines of *Sturm und Drang* language.

Ironically enough, the impressions conveyed by the original poems do not always come across in the translations. Thus I have refrained from rendering the simple, lovely "Nannas Auge," which would fall rather flat — not surprising, of course, if one considers the untranslatable quality of lyric poetry. On the other hand (but unfortunately I have no way of proving this), the odes, so bombastic in the original, may actually seem somewhat less so in English.

Beyond the formal aspects of Fuseli's poetry, its most salient characteristic, as Dörbecker points out, is the conventionality of thought.¹³ Although, as one can readily see, Fuseli often sounds dreadfully daring, revolutionary, and even irrational, such tactics were fast becoming conventional. His ideas are firmly rooted in Enlightenment philosophy, for example, the Great Chain of Being mentioned in "Patience."¹⁴ And even while he strikes a Satanic pose in "Hell," his seemingly impressive attack nevertheless validates the great system; despite being overtly "determined to be a villain," Fuseli sanctions traditional values. As with Blake, Milton's Satan is Fuseli's hero too, but, according to Gert Schiff, Fuseli's Satan is merely a convenient "carrier of humanitarian protest against the suffering of the world,"¹⁵ which at the time of the poem (after 1803) is not an overwhelmingly novel idea. Fuseli may simply have been "more inclined with Milton's hand to open the gates of Hell than the gates of Heaven"¹⁶ because he liked dramatically impressive, horrible situations¹⁷ eliciting in the reader the sensation of the sublime so fashionable at the time. Unlike Turner, a painter whose poetry suffered from the fact that "he had only an eighteenth-century diction to express a vision that had passed far beyond all eighteenth-century limitations,"¹⁸ Fuseli had in due time come to lack both the diction and the vision.

Yet although the merit of Fuseli's poetic endeavors is at best debatable, one cannot help but concede his obvious potential. If any artist thus doubly gifted abandons one form of expression for the sake of the other, what may have been his reasons? There are several possibilities. One of these may have been that Fuseli acquired a second language. While English presents no overwhelming difficulties to a native speaker of German, to attain polish and full sensitivity to the new language does require time. (Here, of course,

one is immediately reminded of exceptions, such as that of Joseph Conrad who successfully crossed a language barrier far more formidable than that between German and English.) It may be remembered that Fuseli had begun to study English at an early age, and throughout his life in England he wrote a good deal of critical prose, as well as lecturing at the Royal Academy. His English prose style has been deemed "assured, learned, lively, and economical, never betraying the fact that German and not English was his native tongue."¹⁹ On the other hand, he virtually never attempted writing English verse.²⁰ Perhaps he was too proud to engage in a pursuit in which he must have feared to come out second best or worse, a humiliation difficult to accept for one who, like Satan, had been pampered and flattered in his youth. Even such an intimate friend of Fuseli's as Mary Wollstonecraft was forced to tell him on a certain occasion "I hate to see that reptile Vanity sliming over the noble qualities of your heart";²¹ no doubt Fuseli's pride and vanity led him to drink in Reynolds' lavish praise and consequently to change vocations. In painting, of course, one does not have to wrestle with accent and other verbal obstacles to communication. But the objection that his new involvement may simply have left him neither time nor inclination for poetry can be countered easily enough by ample evidence of double talents functioning quite satisfactorily, of which Blake's is of course one of the best cases in point. And even though Fuseli rejected English poetry as a vehicle of expression, he might at least have continued to write German poetry.

Of all the commentators, Eudo Mason puts his finger most precisely on what seems to have been the heart of Fuseli's poetic problem, namely, that he turned his back on literature at the very time when exciting breakthroughs were being made by German and English poets. Fuseli not only turned traitor to his own culture: "he lists, bragging a little on occasion, the names of English poets and learned men against whom the Germans fall far short"²²—this could be explained as some sort of overcompensation for culture shock, but "throughout his life, down to his old age, he seems to have clung to certain quasi-orthodox ideas about the nature of God, the relationship of God to man, and the metaphysical reality of sin, evil, and damnation." This, according to Mason, kept Fuseli from becoming a "real" romantic.²³

What happened to Fuseli is an instructive example of what Morse Peckham calls "neo-classic disintegration,"²⁴ a state perhaps less painful to the visual artist for, as E. H. Gombrich suggests, "the terms 'true' and 'false' can only be applied to statements. . . a picture is never a statement in that sense of the term."²⁵ Had Fuseli mustered the courage, even at the risk of losing face, to continue to break through Enlightenment restraints and to keep up with the romantic avant-garde, he might have developed into a poet of significance at least equal to that which he attained as a painter.

In light of these considerations, one is tempted to see in Blake's epithet "both Turk and Jew," though jocular and friendly on the conscious level, additional and even rather sinister meaning. Can Blake have sensed somehow that Fuseli was an infidel of a different sort, having refused to grow as a poet and thus having betrayed the splendid gift he demonstrated in his youth, that he stonily ignored the progress made by poets at the highest cultural level? Of course it is hardly possible that Blake was aware of the existence of Fuseli's poems, but Blake the clairvoyant was a man hard to fool. There is something Urizenic in Fuseli's pride, in his resolution to slam the door on what was truly creative in the poetry of his time. The ideas expressed in the following poems, as well as their style, would seem to lend credence to such speculations.

Ode To His Friends Left Behind [Essex, 1765]²⁶

Like the childish brook in its glistening bed
Of mossy rocks, nurtured with the fragrance
Gathered of the breathing grove, with your dew,
Spring, by the motherly Naiad;

Once more, the storms poured out by thundering 5
Summer, Autumn's never-dried tears,
The host flocking round winter—
Now they have swelled him into a manly stream:
Tearing himself from his mother's embraces
And swiftly escaping the echoing narrower urn, 10
He rolls down the cliffs,
Hastens through groves, meadows, and valleys;
Groves, meadows, and valleys he never saw before
He swiftly traverses in eagle's flight,
Now playfully winding his course, now moving 15
imprisoned,
Now lordly attracting others with his victorious
trumpet.

Yet of the blossoms his young mouth once lovingly
kissed
As he flowed down the meadows, none drifts on his
waves;
Never to see them more, he rushes toward the ocean—
Falls—dies, dissolved in it. 20

Oh country I fled from! Bonds I have broken!
Friends wept for but seldom! Did I not rush thus from
you?
May my day roar and play, lost to you;
It drives me toward the sea of eternity!

Patience [Second Version] [London, 1766]²⁷

Exalted Being, from whose countenance
Streameth eternity, queen of all those
Who strive, wandering through the labyrinth
Of His time, to find the father of all spirits;

Patience, of Providence the sadly smiling, 5
Gentle-eyed and submissive daughter, you
From whose healing hand balm trickles
Upon the wounds your mother inflicts;

At whose bosom of rising hopes the 10
Children of law subdued by power, of
Expectations betrayed, the myriads
Whom Hell pursues with iron stride,

Fling themselves, tired and parched, and drink
Instead of true promises often but new expectations
And the bliss of dreams, often deceived, seeing 15
Suns in the delusive light of midnight.

Oh come, Consoling One! me, too, approach me,
A son of grief! Yet when you come,
Leave behind all vain consolation
That but gleams to be extinguished. 20

If the tear of despondency moistens my gloomy eye,
Oh, to dry it do not call her who
Regards inexorably the purple of rulers, too,
Surrounded by kneeling slaves.

Do not call her who mixes loathing 25
With the wine of joy's sparkling cup;
Do not rend asunder the amaranth bowers
Of Eden because flowers also give shelter to snakes;

Nor let me dream of beauty's lily-breasts,
Of lips' love-dew whispered 'round with kisses, 30
Of cheeks rosily dawning, of the eye's
Soul, of voluptuousness' secret treasures

And of what wafts from Sappho's side—
If the Father gave it me, he took it back,
Gave it to others—but not to turn the sublime
arrow 35

Into a source of whining lament.*
Deem gold more than dung, and laurel-wreathed
fame

More than cymbals to the deaf; do not merely say
To Knowledge: "You are vain—wander on Saturn
Or creep with the lowly hyssop." 40

From life's sunlit heights
Do not exile me to its night-valleys, where
Misery rests its leaden frame
Against the crumbling hut of poverty;

Where sickness, its daggers heavy, embraces with
ailing arm 45
Job on the pallet withered by agony
And teaches him with pain-winged lip
To curse the day he was born!

Grief and loathing stifle my harp—
Shall pale hatred of men with its dagger eye 50
Give me consolation mixed with envy? Oh, if so,
Traitor, thrust first my dehumanized heart

Into some savage's tiger-breast, to whom fetters sing
of repose,

To whom a prison rattles music because the
suffering of strangers
Howls at him, who for the destruction of Lisbon 55
(Did not even this break his chains?) gives blasphemous thanks unto God!

But let the vertigo of midnight's despair
With its drooping eye,
Shrouded melancholy, your phantom, Brutus, 60
Teach me to embrace

Before I beg consolation from base comparisons
And rend the unending social ties
Wrought by Nature
And find it [consolation] through you in creation!

No! Child of Providence, if you do bring consolation, 65
Do not come with such, but let the hand of peace
From the light-encircled throne of the Father,
Religion, your Sister, bring it with you.

(Not the Roman Fury, whose bloodspattered head,
Licked by Hell all around, swells to heaven, not 70
She who taught Luther to quarrel, Calvin's
Hectic Theosophy, do not mistake her!)

She, my goddess, when possibility gave birth to
Stars without number, as grains of sand,
Left your place, angels, near to God, 75
For men's lowlier circle—Thus the High One speaks:

"Ancient tribes of Genesis! He Who created, created
you

For eternity, and only one thing
Shall be immortal—whether it bathe, a Seraphim,
In oceans of light or grope in the dust; 80

"Host of brethren without number! Diverse but in
age, illumination,

And order, yet all alike in essence—
God holds the chain. Can the first of its links
Be closer to Him than the last?

"Hasten then, content, cheerful, and steady, 85
With brotherly hands entwined, hasten
To the grand destiny of all spirits,
To the sun-portal of perfection:

"Finite being [i.e., finiteness], 'tis true, will often
surround you
With clouds, often with darkness; yet behold her 90
Who leads you through to the light"—thus she spoke,
And you appeared at her side,

Patience, of Providence the sadly smiling,
Gentle-eyed and submissive daughter, you
From whose healing hand balm trickles 95
Upon the wounds your mother inflicts.

*MS difficult to decipher and incomprehensible.

[God's Gifts] [1766 or 1767]²⁸

The King of kings gave unto monarchs pride
And herds of slaves around a fearsome throne—
[Yet] denied them wisdom: why would they deem
Men mere beasts to be strangled and slaughtered?

He gave the idle dream of groping for truth 5
Where no mortal has ever caught her,
To the philosophers' blind herd,
Armed with telescopes and spectacles;

To the desecrated order of priests He gave
The illusion of teaching religion and love— 10
Of human duties the most exalted—
By way of everything but virtue:

Gifts of wrath all. Among kings, did any ever
Base royal law and majesty
On God-like benevolence, which raises 15
The sons of dust to angelic nobility?

Gone astray among stars, into oceans sunk,
Hardly a one of the myriads brooding over wisdom
Gets to know the Good and Evil in his own house
Before he is stretched on his bier. 20

The teacher of priests gave living testimony
Of what his lips asked in sparing words;
Where is the priest whose outpouring of words
Is marked by the seal of good conduct and example?

To me, He gave creative power and a flaming heart. 25
Why ask for anything higher? Should I ask for love,
Heaven's prerogative? Oh, then I also ought to plead
For virtue, which not to men . . .

Which He to angels gave; here, only its shadow passes. . . .

[Second Ode on Art] [between 1772 and 1775]²⁹

Among the mob that every northern wind
Blows into your palaces, oh Rome,
The mob of Germans, Britons, French,
The mob of Polish and of Muscovites,

The vermin of art—thus I spent a day 5
Wandering with trembling foot among your temples,
And cursed in furor insensate
The academies of London and of France.

Contempt, disgust, hope with nocturnal
Despair wrestling—these drove me into solitude, 10
To stretch out on my couch rumped by
Tossings of agony, and painfully wringing my hands

I exclaimed: "Is this the way to immortality?
Did you create, Prime Mover, this, my exalted spirit,
The sympathies of this, my soul, 15
But to count muscles and to mix pigments?"

⁸ Letter to Herder, 13 April 1775, in Heinrich Düntzer and Ferdinand Gottfried von Herder, eds., *Aus Herders Nachlass*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt, 1857), p. 348; here quoted from *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 108.

⁹ Letter to Herder, 4 February 1774, in *Aus Herders Nachlass*, p. 89; here quoted from *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 103.

¹⁰ Significantly, this is the English "Petrarca Fragment," *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 100.

¹¹ Dörrbecker, p. 53, summarizes critical opinion on "Nannas Auge" ("Nanna's Eye").

¹² *Gedichte*, p. 106.

¹³ Dörrbecker, p. 54.

¹⁴ Ursula Ditchburn-Bosch, *Johann Heinrich Füsslis Kunstlehre und ihre Auswirkung auf seine Shakespeare-Interpretation* (Zürich, 1968). Her entire essay concerns itself with the conventionality of Fuseli's ideas.

¹⁵ Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füsslis Milton-Galerie* (Zürich, 1963), p. 6.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Grigson, "Painters of the Abyss," *Architectural Review*, 108 (1950), 217.

¹⁷ Ernst Wirz, *Die literarische Tätigkeit des Malers Johann Heinrich Füssli* (Basel, 1922), p. 83.

¹⁸ Jack Lindsay, ed., *The Sunset Ship: The Poems of J. M. W. Turner* (London, 1966), p. 13.

¹⁹ Marcia Allentuck, "Henry Fuseli's 'Queen Katherine' and Macklin's Poets' Gallery: A New Critique," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 39 (1976), 267.

²⁰ "Dunciad of Painting—Four Fragments" and the "Petrarca Fragment," *Gedichte*, pp. 80-81, p. 100 and "The Kings of Earth," Mason, pp. 117-18.

²¹ John Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, Esq. M. A. R. A.* (London, 1831), vol. I, p. 363.

²² Muschg, p. 30.

²³ Mason, pp. 14-17.

²⁴ Morse Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism: Collected Essays* (Columbia, S. C., 1970), p. 24n.

²⁵ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York, 1961), pp. 67-68.

²⁶ *Gedichte*, p. 44.

²⁷ *Gedichte*, pp. 49-51.

²⁸ *Gedichte*, p. 54.

²⁹ *Gedichte*, pp. 67-68.

³⁰ *Gedichte*, pp. 93-94.

