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MINUTE PARTICULARS

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Among Blake's admirers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of the most enthusiastic and well-known in his own right was George Bernard Shaw. Throughout the prefaces to his plays, Shaw mentions Blake in the company of other Shavian heroes such as Voltaire, Gibbon, Butler, Nietzsche and Wilde. It is not surprising, then, though nonetheless intriguing, that Blake's name should find its way into a letter from Shaw to one of his living heroes, Leo Tolstoy. Responding to Shaw's gift of a copy of *Man and Superman*, Tolstoy had taken issue with the apparent flippancy of Shaw's religious attitudes; in February 1910, Shaw sent Tolstoy a copy of his new play, *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet*, along with a letter in which he answers Tolstoy's rebuke, using a famous line from Blake's most famous poem to illustrate his own views: "... we are compelled by the theory of God's already achieved perfection to make Him a devil as well as a god, because of the existence of evil. The god of love, if omnipotent and omniscient, must be the god of cancer and epilepsy as well. The great English poet William Blake concludes his poem 'The Tiger' with the question: Did he who made the lamb make thee?"¹ In a comment obviously related to his interest in "The Tyger," Shaw concludes his letter by asking, "Suppose the world were only one of God's jokes, would you work any the less to make it a good joke instead of a bad one?" (*Letters*, p. 902).

Archly thanking Shaw for his "witty letter," Tolstoy, who read and wrote English well, indicated that he was neither amused nor impressed by Shaw's argument. Regarding the point Shaw makes with the quotation from Blake, Tolstoy writes: "I cannot agree with what you call your theology. You enter into controversy with that in which no thinking person of our time believes or can believe—with a God-creator; and yet you seem yourself to recognize a God who has got definite aims comprehensible to you" (*Letters*, p. 902). No direct comment by Tolstoy on Blake is contained in his reply to Shaw, or in the diary entry (15 April) where Tolstoy mentions receipt of Shaw's play and letter. On the envelope in which the Shaw material arrived, Tolstoy simply scrawled, "Intelligent stupidities from Shaw" (*Letters*, p. 902).

We do not know whether Tolstoy had heard of Blake before receiving Shaw's letter. As G. E. Bentley, Jr. has pointed out, Blake was the subject of a Russian journal article as early as 1834;² however, the references to Blake in nineteenth-century Russia, as throughout the rest of Europe, were few and far between. It is possible, though, that Konstantin Bal'mont, the symbolist poet who first translated Blake's verse into Russian, may have mentioned the English poet on one of his visits to Tolstoy's estate at Yasnaya Polyana. If he had, then Tolstoy would have been exposed to a Blake significantly sentimentalized and distorted along Russian symbolist-decadent lines. This is the Blake who appears in the Bal'mont translations and in one of Bal'mont's own belletristic books, as well as in an article by Z. A. Vengerova, "William Blake: The Forefather of English Symbolism," that was published first in a well-known literary journal and later as a chapter in Vengerova's book on English poetry.³

Given Blake's miniscule reputation outside England at this time, it is worth noting that a writer like Tolstoy would have even heard of Blake, albeit at third hand. Still, Blake's name for Tolstoy, during the last months of his life, doubtless remained a mere footnote to Shaw's letter, the name of yet another dupe, along with Shaw himself, in the God-creator controversy.

Leo Tolstoy died in 1910, only a few months after exchanging letters with Shaw. Yet had he miraculously lived another half-century, Tolstoy could have observed the curious development of Blake's image in Russian criticism, from a quasi-symbolist eccentric to a bourgeois mystic to a great revolutionary spokesman for the struggling proletariat of eighteenth-century England. Earlier Soviet treatments of Blake, based mostly on Ellis and Yeats and Gilchrist, describe him as an original but "petty bourgeois" writer of small gifts, capable of being appreciated only by a similar "mystically oriented bourgeois" like Swinburne (*Literaturnaya Entsiklopediya [Literary Encyclopedia]*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Kommunisticheskoi Akademii, 1929, vol. 1, p. 521). This attitude persisted as late as the 1950 edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, where the brief entry on Blake states that "Blake's work is marked by an inconsistency peculiar to this petty-bourgeois poet" (*Velikaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya*, Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Nauchnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1950, vol. 5, pp. 292-93). As early as 1945, however, M. N. Gutner, apparently the first Soviet critic to recognize the distance between Blake's thought and a bourgeois mentality, petty or not, had emphasized the political radicalism of Blake's work.⁴ Yet it was not until 1957, when a spate of articles and notices appeared commemorating the bicentenary of Blake's birth, that the general Soviet view of Blake changed. Partly as a result of Gutner's work, but more because of the serious attention given Blake in the late 50s and early 60s by E. A. Nekrasova and Anna Elistratova,⁵ Blake began to take on

his present status in Soviet criticism as a proto-Hegelian, proto-Marxian, proto-Leninist revolutionary hero-artist.

In her first book devoted to Blake (the second goes over much the same ground), Nekrasova detects an indirect connection between Blake and communism: Blake was attracted to Godwin's philosophy, and Godwin's philosophy, says Nekrasova, quoting a letter from Engels to Marx, "borders on communism" (p. 71). Nekrasova accuses western critics of covering up Blake's radical sympathies by depicting him as a "harmless mystic" (p. 6), praises Blake for anticipating Hegel's dialectic in his own concept of contraries (p. 12), and claims that the view of Blake as a battler for revolutionary causes, "long ago expressed among us [presumably by Gutner] has begun to be shared by the more progressively inclined foreign scholars of Blake's work—Bronowski, Schorer, Erdman and several others" (p. 15).

In a more broadly based book than Nekrasova's, one that deals with the English Romantic period as a whole, Anna Elistratova echoes the condemnation of western critics for ignoring or playing down the political aspects of Blake's poetry. Speaking not only of Blake but of Byron and Shelley as well, Elistratova writes that the works and lives of these poets, dedicated to "the people's struggle for liberation," have been falsified by much western criticism, "most often by Freudian 'psychoanalysis' or other quasi-scholarly devices" (pp. 11-12). S. Foster Damon, Milton O. Percival and Northrop Frye are among those criticized for obscuring the essence of Blake's message by overemphasizing his religious as opposed to political leanings (pp. 53-67), while such critics as Bronowski, Schorer, Erdman and A. L. Morton receive commendation for their treatment of the revolutionary element in Blake (p. 69).

Among English-speaking authors, as opposed to critics, Elistratova gives special praise to Bernard Shaw for his early appreciation of Blake. Yet while admittedly drawing on Irving Fiske's article on Blake and Shaw,⁶ Elistratova upbraids Fiske for concentrating on the philosophical and religious rather than political ties between these two writers (p. 47ff.). In light of such views, it is ironic that for all of the Soviet political adulation given over the past twenty-five years to Blake, Shaw and also to Tolstoy, the only document linking these three figures is Shaw's letter to Tolstoy, which centers on a distinctly religious issue. Elistratova, incidentally, mentions many of Shaw's references to Blake, but does not cite the letter to Tolstoy.

A jab at western Blakeans similar to those contained in the books of Nekrasova and Elistratova appears in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* of 1950: "Contemporary bourgeois art criticism in the west, extolling Blake's anti-realistic graphics, has declared him to be the forerunner of formalist-decadent art" (vol. 5, p. 203); even the 1962 edition of the *Concise Literary Encyclopedia*, which

praises Blake's work itself, informs us that "Contemporary bourgeois criticism attempts to present Blake as a visionary, a mystic and almost as a precursor of decadence. Progressive English criticism and Soviet and literary scholarship examine the freedom-loving and democratic elements in Blake's work" (*Kratkaya Literaturnaya Entsiklopediya*, Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Nauchnoe Izdatel'stvo "Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya," 1962, vol. 1, p. 640). In all fairness it must be pointed out that more recent Soviet references to western Blake criticism lack the strident tone of some earlier statements; the 1970 edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, for example, does not mention western critics negatively, though it goes further than previous editions in stressing Blake's revolutionary sympathies (see the entry on Blake, vol. 3, p. 416). In its bibliography, however, this entry lists Erdman and A.L. Morton but omits any reference to Frye or Damon!

Apart from the issue of western criticism, one of the most significant signs of Blake's own literary and political respectability in the Soviet Union came in 1965, when the distinguished journal *Novyi Mir* published some of S.I. Marshak's translations of Blake (far superior to the Bal'mont versions), accompanied by an intelligent general preface by one of Soviet Russia's most important critics and literary theorists, Victor Zhirmunski, who had long ago been loosely associated with Russian Formalist circles.⁷ (It was some two-and-a-half years earlier, in November of 1962, that *Novyi Mir* made literary history with the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.) Zhirmunski's preface contains no new information for the Blake scholar, but its restraint in dealing with Blake's politics and its overall balance are notable among Soviet accounts of Blake.

While Soviet Blake criticism seems to be largely introductory and derivative, there are points of value in the work of Gutner, Nekrasova, Elistratova and others. And it is, of course, gratifying to see Blake's reputation improving and at least one aspect of his work, the political, receiving close attention. But one still contemplates with sadness the obvious pressure on Soviet scholars to explain all great pre-revolutionary writers as forerunners of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. Certainly Blake's Soviet reputation has been defined almost entirely in terms of that doctrine—first when he was dismissed as a bourgeois mystical crank (partly a reaction to the symbolist admiration of Blake before 1917), and now when he is glorified as a heroic proletarian writer and artist. Considering the odd history of Blake's image from his own time to the present, it will be interesting to see what further turns it takes, not only in the West but also back in the U.S.S.R.

¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1898-1910*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972), p. 901 (referred to as *Letters* in the text).

² G. E. Bentley, Jr., "The Vicissitudes of Vision, the First Account of William Blake in Russian (1834)," *Blake Newsletter*, 4 (1977), 112-14; see also Bentley, "Blake Among the Slavs: A

Checklist," *Blake Newsletter*, 11 (1977), 50-54. Both of these articles have been very helpful to my study of Blake's Russian reputation. (In the present article, all translations are my own.)

³ Konstantin Bal'mont, "Vil'yam Bleik: Praotets Sovremennykh Simvolistov" ["William Blake: Forefather of Contemporary Symbolists"], in his *Gornye Vershiny* [Mountain Peaks] (Moscow: Griff, 1904), pp. 43-48; Z. A. Vengerova, "Vil'yam Bleik: Rodonachal'nik Angliiskogo Simvolizma" ["William Blake: Forefather of English Symbolism"], *Sievernii Vestnik*, IX (1896), 81-99, reprinted in Vengerova's *Angliiskie Pisateli XIX Veka* [English Writers of the 19th Century] (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1913), n. pag.

⁴ M. N. Gutner, "Blake," in *Istoriya Angliiskoi Literatury* [A History of English Literature], 2nd ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1945), vol. 1, 613-22.

⁵ Anna Elistratova, *Naslediye Angliiskogo Romantizma i Sovremennost'* [The Legacy of English Romanticism and the Present] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1960); E. A. Nekrasova, *William Blake* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1960), and *Tvorchestvo Uil'yama Bleika* [The Work of William Blake] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1962).

⁶ Irving Fiske, "Bernard Shaw's Debt to William Blake," *Shavian Tract*, 2 (1951).

⁷ "William Blake v Perevodakh S. Marshaka" ["William Blake in the Translations of S. Marshak"], *Novyi Mir*, 6 (1965), 157-67.

A Note on William Blake and the Druids of Primrose Hill

Dena Taylor

On the second of January, 1810, Charles Lamb wrote to Thomas Manning that "The Persian ambassador is the principal thing talked of now. I sent some people to see him worship the sun on Primrose Hill at half past six in the morning, 28th November; but he did not come, which makes me think the old fire-worshippers are a sect almost extinct in Persia."¹ Lamb was of course merely being mischievous in pretending that the dignified Moslem ambassador was likely to indulge in ancient Zoroastrian rites on—as it happens—the morning of Blake's forty-second birthday. The rather curious thing about Lamb's bit of humor, however, is the fact that he expected the rites to be performed specifically on Primrose Hill, without giving any explanation as to why that particular site was appropriate. The curiosity of the specification becomes greater in light of the fact that Blake too made reference to Primrose Hill as being in some way sacred to the sun. Blake told Crabb Robinson that

"[I] have conversed with the—Spiritual Sun—I saw him on Primrose-hill[.] He said 'Do you take me for the Greek Apollo[?]' [.] No[.] I said 'that (and Bl pointed to the sky) that is the Greek Apollo—He is Satan [.]'"²

The sun-worshipping Druid religion as "revived" by Stukeley, Henry Rowlands and other eighteenth-century antiquarians was of widespread and active interest in the latter part of that century. In fact, on the wall of the King's Arms Tavern, very close to where Blake lived in Poland Street, there is a plaque inscribed: "In this Old King's Arms Tavern the ANCIENT ORDER OF DRUIDS was revived 28th November 1781." Something about this day seems to have been very attractive to the Druids—some prophetic insight perhaps—for this date was Blake's twenty-fourth birthday.

Primrose Hill is apparently the highest spot in London, and, in addition to the rather dubious distinction of being the spot on which Judge Jeffries of the Popish Plot was found murdered, it was also the site of a Druid procession in 1792, and every year thereafter. The Welsh poet and lexicographer Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg, 1747-1826) was convinced that the bardic traditions of his native Glamorgan had preserved the true esoteric lore of the Druids. He accordingly devised a ritual called the Gorsedd of Bards, which involved the ceremonious sheathing of a naked sword inside a magic circle of stones. With a small group of fellow Welshmen that included Blake's friend William Owen, he performed this rite on Primrose Hill at the Autumn Equinox of 1792. There are a couple of contemporary references to the meeting. A lengthy account, giving details of the ritual, was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 62 (October, 1792), 956:

Saturday, Sept. 22.

This being the day on which the autumnal equinox occurred, some Welsh Bards, resident in London, assembled in congress on Primrose Hill, according to ancient usage, which requires that it should be in the eye of public observation, in the open air, in a conspicuous place, and whilst the sun is above the horizon. The wonted ceremonies were observed. . . . On this occasion the Bards appeared in the insignia of their various orders. The presiding Bards were David Samwell, of the primitive, and claimant of the ovation order; William Owen, of the ovation and primitive orders; Edward Jones, of the ovation, and claimant of the primitive order; and Edward Williams, of the primitive and druidic orders. The Bardic traditions, and several odes, were recited. . . .

Williams himself described the meeting in *The Monthly Register*, 3 (January, 1793), 16-19. In this article of "Biographical Anecdotes of Mr. David Thomas, an eminent Welch Bard," age 26, Williams included a poem, "The Banks of the Menai. An Ode. Inscribed to the Druidical Society of Anglesey. Recited at the Meeting of the Welch Bards on Primrose Hill, September 22d, 1792." Williams also says that "It is not a little remarkable that the order, or hierarchy of the *ancient British Bards* has been continued in regular succession from remotest antiquity down to the present day, without any interruption; for some time, indeed, it has been in a languishing state, but is now recovering apace. . . ." (p. 19). Williams was so successful in aiding the recovery of ailing Druidism that his ritual is performed to this day as