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N O T E

A Yiddish Poem on Blake

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NOTES

1. A Yiddish Poem on Blake

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The frequency with which one encounters references to Blake in the poetry and prose fiction of the twentieth century attests to the popularity and influence that Blake has enjoyed not only among contemporary readers but contemporary writers as well. D. H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Joyce Cary, Saul Bellow, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsberg, Henry Miller, Irving Layton--these are only a few in a much larger circle of writers who have invoked Blake in their own works. I should like to broaden that circle here, if only a bit, by calling attention to a generally unknown poem on Blake by an American Yiddish poet, Reuben Iceland (Iceland, 1884-1953).

Iceland was one of "Di Yunge," a loose organization of poets, playwrights, and novelists that flourished in America in the years between 1907 and 1925 or so. The group has been characterized by Ruth Whitman, who recently translated into English a number of their poems (see her Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry, 1966), as being "young in years, wildly energetic, fearlessly imaginative. One can imagine the appeal to such writers of someone like Blake, and it is not surprising to find him taken up enthusiastically by at least one of them, namely Reuben Iceland.

Iceland's poem, a brief but high-spirited apostrophe entitled simply "William Balke," was included in Fun Mein Zumer ("From My Summer"), a collection of the poet's work that appeared in 1922. The poem is offered below, in transliteration and English translation.

William Blake

Teyriël! teyriël! beyzer krieger un farachter.
Du, farehrter un farlachter,
Nichterer in shikrus, heyliger in zind,
Du, eybig kind,
Mit oigen fun a zeher,
Negel fun a kats un fligel fun an adler.

Dear one! dear one! mad fighter and renegade.
You, honored and ridiculed,
Sober in drunkenness, a saint in sin,
You, eternal child,
With the eyes of a seer,
Nails of a cat and wings of an eagle.