CONTENTS

1 THE CASE AGAINST LOCKE

THIS book offers an explanation of Blake's thought and a commentary on his poetry. No effort has been made to deal at all adequately with Blake's biography or with his work as painter and engraver: a study of his relation to English literature is primarily what has been attempted. The attempt is not unique, though the amount of critical writing on Blake's poetry is perhaps not as large as it is often vaguely stated to be. After deducting the obsolete, the eccentric and the merely trivial, what remains is surely no greater in volume than a poet of such importance is entitled to. It is large enough, however, to justify a statement of what is believed to be peculiar to this study.

Many students of literature or painting must have felt that Blake's relation to those arts is a somewhat quizzical one. Critics in both fields insist almost exclusively upon the angularity of his genius. Blake, they tell us, is a mystic enraptured with incommunicable visions, standing apart, a lonely and isolated figure, out of touch with his own age and without influence on the following one. He is an interruption in cultural history, a separable phenomenon. The historian of painting has to abandon all narrative continuity when the time comes to turn aside and devote a few words to Blake's unique output. The historian of poetry is not quite so badly off; but even so it is only by cutting out two-thirds of Blake's work that he will be able to wedge the rest of it in with that of the minor pre-Romantics.

For Blake is more than most poets a victim of anthologies. Countless collections of verse include a dozen or so of his lyrics, but if we wish to go further we are immediately threatened with a formidable bulk of complex symbolic poems known as "Prophecies," which make up the main body of his work. Consequently the mere familiarity of some of the lyrics is no guarantee that they will not be wrongly associated with their author. If they indicate that we must take Blake seriously as a conscious and deliberate artist, we shall have to study these prophecies, which is more than many specialists in Blake's period have done. The prophecies form what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the language, and most of the more accessible editions

of Blake omit them altogether, or print only those fragments which seem to the editor to have a vaguely purplish cast.

There is no *a priori* reason for this, apart from one or two hazy impressions which need only a passing mention. One is, that Blake wrote lyrics at the height of his creative power and that he later turned to prophecy as a sign that he had lost it. Yet his earliest book, *Poetical Sketches*, is evenly divided between lyrics and embryonic prophecies, and one of his last and most complicated prophecies contains his most famous lyric. Another is, that Blake is to be regarded as an ultrasubjective primitive whose work involuntarily reflects his immediate mood. The *Songs of Innocence* are then to be taken at their face value as the outpourings of a naïve and childlike spontaneity, and the *Songs of Experience* as the bitter disillusionment resulting from maturity—for when Blake engraved the latter he was no longer a child of thirty-two but a grown man of thirty-seven. It is logical inference from this that the prophecies can reflect only an ecstatic self-absorption on which it is unnecessary for a critic to intrude.

Now of course it is quite true that Blake was a neglected and isolated figure, obeying his own genius in defiance of an indifferent and occasionally hostile society; and he himself was well aware that he was "born with a different face."[1] But he did not want to be: he did not enjoy neglect, and he had what no real artist can be without, an intense desire to communicate. "Those who have been told," he pleaded, "that my Works are but an unscientific and irregular Eccentricity, a Madman's Scrawls, I demand of them to do me the justice to examine before they decide."[2] It is pathetic to read his letters and see how buoyant is his hope of being understood in his own time, and how wistful is the feeling that he must depend on posterity for appreciation. And it was not only recognition he wanted: he had a very strong sense of his personal responsibility both to God and to society to keep on producing the kind of imaginative art he believed in. He despised obscurity, hated all kinds of mystery, and derided the idea that poets do not fully comprehend what they are writing.[3] All his poetry was written as though it were about to have the immediate social impact of a new play. Besides, if we look at some of the other poets of the second half of the eighteenth century—Smart, Cowper, Chatterton, Macpherson, Fergusson, Collins, Burns—we shall find the per-

centage of mental breakdowns and social maladjustments among them abnormally high. It is clear that the spiritual loneliness of Blake was not so much characteristic of him as of his age.

Therefore, as no one will deny that Blake is entitled to the square deal he asked for, we propose to adopt more satisfactory hypotheses and see what comes out of them. These are, first, that all of Blake's poetry, from the shortest lyric to the longest prophecy, must be taken as a unit and, *mutatis mutandis*, judged by the same standards. This means that the longer and more difficult prophecies will have to bear the weight of the commentary. They are what a great poet chose to spend most of his time on, and they are what he hoped to be remembered for, as a poet, by posterity. He may have been mistaken in this, as poets often are about their own work, but if he was the error is too consistent and gigantic to be ignored. Second, that as all other poets are judged in relation to their own time, so should Blake be placed in his historical and cultural context as a poet who, though original, was not aboriginal, and was neither a freak nor a sport.

One of the most striking things about Blake is his genius for crystallization. He is perhaps the finest gnomic artist in English literature, and his fondness for aphorism and epigram runs steadily through his work from adolescence to old age. To produce the apparent artlessness of the lyrics he was ready to do the very considerable amount of rewriting and excision that his manuscripts show. The meticulous clarity of his engraving is as evident in the great sweep of *Paolo and Francesca*, in the Dante series, as in the microscopic marginal detail on the poems. It seems difficult to imagine, then, how Blake came to find an artistic satisfaction, or even relief, in writing such confused and chaotic monologues as the prophecies are generally considered to be. I quote from an intelligent and sensitive study of his painting:

> By way of more than passing interest, it is worthy of note that in the garden of the house grew a grape-vine; but no grapes were enjoyed, for Blake held that it was wrong to prune the vine. Had Blake submitted that vine to pruning, he might have enjoyed its fruit; and had he submitted the luxuriant vine of his Prophetic Books to more diligent pruning, more people might have lived to enjoy their fruit also. It would be one of those strange chances with which Life is for ever teasing the children of men, that Blake should produce the larger

number of his books from a house from the windows of which he could see a parable from which he was not willing to learn.[4]

Anyone who has glanced at the original versions of "The Tyger" or "The Fly" may perhaps wonder why the man who did the pruning of these poems should have been afraid of a grapevine. However, the story of the unpruned vine is merely one of the anecdotes that regularly go the rounds of artists' biographies, the source of this one being probably Vasari's Life of Piero di Cosimo; we are concerned here only with the theory of wanton luxuriance. Blake's poetry consists of one volume of youthful work published without his co-operation, a proof copy of another poem, a few manuscripts, and a series of poems the text of which was laboriously engraved backhanded on copper plates and accompanied by a design. And when these poems were once engraved Blake seldom altered anything more fundamental than the color-scheme:

> Re-engrav'd Time after Time,
> Ever in their youthful prime,
> My designs unchang'd remain.[5]

The inference is clear: the engraved poems were intended to form an exclusive and definitive canon. And in this canon there is much evidence, not only of pruning, but of wholesale transplanting and grafting. His longest poem, *The Four Zoas*, Blake left abandoned in a manuscript full of lively sketches and loaded with deletions and corrections. Much of its material was later used in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, which he did engrave; but, proportionately, Blake may be said to have blotted more lines than any other important poet of English literature.

Further, Blake's poems are poems, and must be studied as such. Any attempt to explain them in terms of something that is not poetry is bound to fail. Many students of Blake have been less interested in what he wrote than in what he read, and have examined the prophecies chiefly as documents illustrating some nonpoetic tradition such as mysticism or occultism. This, though it also ignores Blake's vociferous assertions that he belongs to no tradition whatever except that of the creative artists, is again a perfectly logical inference from the overemphasis on his uniqueness already mentioned. If even the lyrics are so isolated in the

history of literature, the prophecies can represent only a complete break with the literary tradition itself.

I am not speaking now of merely vulgar misunderstandings. No one who has read three lines of our straightforward and outspoken poet can imagine that he wished to be pursued by a band of superstitious dilettantes into the refuge of a specialized cult. Whatever Blake's prophecies may be, they can hardly be code messages. They may need interpretation, but not deciphering: there can be no "key" and no open-sesame formula and no patented system of translation. The amateur of cabalism who accepts obscure truisms for profound truths, and sentimental platitudes for esoteric mysteries, would do well to steer clear of Blake. No: I mean the tendency to describe Blake in terms of certain stereotypes which imply that he can be fully appreciated only by certain types of mind, and which tend to scare the ordinary reader away from him. The poet who addressed the four parts of his most complicated poem, *Jerusalem*, to the "Public," Jews, Deists and Christians—to anyone who cares to look at it—the poet who boasted of being understood by children,[6] would have resented this treatment strongly. It is true, however, that the poet who said "Exuberance is Beauty"[7] demands an energy of response. He is not writing for a tired pedant who feels merely badgered by difficulty: he is writing for enthusiasts of poetry who, like the readers of mystery stories, enjoy sitting up nights trying to find out what the mystery is.

The usual label attached to Blake's poetry is "mystical," which is a word he never uses. Yet "mysticism," when the word is not simply an elegant variant of "misty" or "mysterious," means a certain kind of religious technique difficult to reconcile with anyone's poetry. It is a form of spiritual communion with God which is by its nature incommunicable to anyone else, and which soars beyond faith into direct apprehension. But to the artist, *qua* artist, this apprehension is not an end in itself but a means to another end, the end of producing his poem. The mystical experience for him is poetic material, not poetic form, and must be subordinated to the demands of that form. From the point of view of any genuine mystic this would be somewhat inadequate, and one who was both mystic and poet, never finally deciding which was to be the adjective and which the noun, might be

rather badly off. If he decided for poetry, he would perhaps do better to use someone else's mystical experiences, as Crashaw did St. Teresa's.

I do not say that these difficulties are insurmountable, or that there are no such things as mystical poets. But they are very rare birds, and most of the poets generally called mystics might better be called visionaries, which is not quite the same thing. This *is* a word that Blake uses, and uses constantly. A visionary creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism. This is quite consistent with art, because it never relinquishes the visualization which no artist can do without. It is a perceptive rather than a contemplative attitude of mind; but most of the greatest mystics, St. John of the Cross and Plotinus for example, find the symbolism of visionary experience not only unnecessary but a positive hindrance to the highest mystical contemplation. This suggests that mysticism and art are in the long run mutually exclusive, but that the visionary and the artist are allied.

Such a distinction cannot be absolute, of course, and one type blends into the other. But Blake was so completely a visionary and an artist that I am inclined to think that most true mystics would reject his attitude as vulgar and insensitive. Porphyry speaks of his master Plotinus as having four times in his life, with great effort and relentless discipline, achieved a direct apprehension of God. Blake says:

> I am in God's presence night & day,
> And he never turns his face away.[8]

To Blake, the spiritual world was a continuous source of energy: he harnessed spiritual power as an engineer harnesses water power and used it to drive his inspiration: he was a spiritual utilitarian. He had the complete pragmatism of the artist, who, as artist, believes nothing but is looking only for what he can use. If Blake gets into the rapt circle of mystics it is only as Mercury got into the Pantheon, elbowing his way through with cheerful Cockney assurance, his pockets bulging with paper, then producing his everlasting pencil and notebook and proceeding to draw rapid

sketches of what his more reverent colleagues are no longer attempting to see.

· 2 ·

ANY attempt to explain Blake's symbolism will involve explaining his conception of symbolism. To make this clear we need Blake's own definition of poetry:

> Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding, is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry; it is also somewhat in the same manner defin'd by Plato.[9]

It has often been remarked that Blake's early lyrics recall the Elizabethans: it is not so generally realized that he reverts to them in his critical attitude as well, and especially in this doctrine that all major poetry is allegorical. The doctrine is out of fashion now, but whatever Blake may mean by the above definition, it is clear that there is a right and a wrong way of reading allegory. It is possible, then, that our modern prejudice against allegory, which extends to a contemptuous denial that Homer or Virgil or Shakespeare can be allegorical poets, may be based on the way of the "corporeal understanding."

What is the corporeal understanding? Literally, it is bodily knowledge: the data of sense perception and the ideas derived from them. From this point of view *poetry* is something to be explained, and the notion that any kind of commentary will ever explain any kind of poetry is of course vulgar. Even if there is a hidden meaning, a poem which contains no more than what an explanation of that meaning can translate should have been written in the form of the explanation in the first place. And if the literal sense of poetry is intelligible, the possibility that it may also be explained allegorically might better be left alone.

The corporeal understanding, then, cannot do more than elucidate the genuine obscurities, the things requiring special knowledge to understand, like the contemporary allusions in Dante. The more it busies itself with the real meaning of the poem the more involved it gets, and Blake, like other difficult poets, has been wrapped in a Laocoön tangle of encyclopedias, concordances, indexes, charts and diagrams. The "intellectual powers" go to work rather differently: they start with the hypothesis that the

poem in front of them is an imaginative whole, and work out the implications of that hypothesis. "Every Poem must necessarily be a perfect Unity,"[10] said Blake: the identity of content and form is the axiom of all sound criticism. There is therefore nothing mysterious about the intellectual powers: on the contrary, the one thing they must include is a sense of proportion. If one wishes to make a necklace out of some beads and a string, one would be well advised to start with the string and apply the beads to it. In the opposite procedure of laying the beads down in a line and trying to stick the string through them, a comparatively simple task becomes one of incredible difficulty.

Blake's idea that the meaning and the form of a poem are the same thing comes very close to what Dante appears to have meant by "anagogy" or the fourth level of interpretation: the final impact of the work of art itself, which includes not only the superficial meaning but all the subordinate meanings which can be deduced from it.[11] It is therefore hoped that if the reader finds his ideas of Blake at all clarified by the present book, he will be led to the principle which underlies it. This is that, while there is a debased allegory against which there is a reasonable and well-founded prejudice, there is also a genuine allegory without which no art can be fully understood. It is of course confusing that the same word is used in both senses, and when Blake says in one place that his poetry is allegory addressed to the intellectual powers and in another that one of his paintings is "not Fable or Allegory, but Vision,"[12] he does little to clear up the confusion. The allegory that is addressed to the intellectual powers, however, is not a distortion of poetry any more than poetry is a distortion of prose. It is a literary language with its own idioms and its own syntactical arrangement of ideas. If a critic were to say that Homer's theme demands a rugged simplicity which is spoiled by the complicated inflections of the language he used, he would be displaying nothing except his ignorance of Greek. Similarly, if a critic is ignorant of the language of allegory, he will demonstrate nothing but that ignorance if, in dealing with any genuinely allegorical writer, Spenser for instance, or Langland, or Hawthorne, he complains of the intrusion of allegory into characterization, or descriptions of nature, or whatever else is more congenial to his prejudices. As ignorance of the methods and techniques of allegorical poetry

is still almost universal, the explicitly allegorical writers have for the most part not received in modern times much criticism which is based directly on what they were trying to do. If Blake can be consistently interpreted in terms of his own theory of poetry, however, the interpretation of Blake is only the beginning of a complete revolution in one's reading of all poetry. It is, for instance, quite impossible to understand Blake without understanding how he read the Bible, and to do this properly one must read the Bible oneself with Blake's eyes. Then comes the question of how he read some of his other essential sources, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, or the Prose Edda, and how he related their symbolism to his own. As one proceeds, one emerges from a haze of suggestive allusions into a new kind of poetic thought, and one begins to feel, as one does in learning any language, the support of an inner logical discipline. At this point hidden links in the symbolism become visible, and they lead in their turn to further associations, until the intellectual powers are able to read without translating.

If this book can explain Blake properly, it will suggest that Blake is a reliable teacher of a poetic language which most contemporary readers do not understand, or if they do, do not realize it. Blake did not invent that language, and he is not a special kind of poet; he is merely a poet who, as he says, makes a commonplace understanding of him impossible. But once he is understood and the language of allegory learned by means of him, a whole new dimension of pleasure in poetry will be opened up which will add increased depth and range, not only to the more explicitly allegorical writers, but to any poet who addresses the intellectual powers. Blake himself wrote a brilliant criticism of Chaucer, not an obviously allegorical poet, in which he provides an illustration of the method. In the depths of his labyrinthine *Jerusalem* he promises us "the end of a golden string,"[13] and that refers, as will be shown in due course, not to a technique of mystical illumination as is generally assumed, but to a lost art of reading poetry.

Of course an attempt to outline the Blakean approach to poetry is not the same thing as a study of Blake's sources or influence. One's impression of Blake is that he read little, could not read any language with comfort except his own and perhaps French,[14] and preferred marginally cursing authors he hated, like Reynolds and

Bacon, to discovering parallels in kindred spirits. Blake is the kind of writer who may show startling resemblances to someone he had not read, such as Traherne, and no resemblance at all to someone he had read attentively, such as Paine. Conversely, such a writer as Gérard de Nerval, who had presumably not read Blake, is much closer to him than Yeats, who edited him. In the study of Blake it is the analogue that is important, not the source; and even essential sources such as the Bible and Milton are of value only as sources of analogues. Blake is warning us of this when he says:

> I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's.
> I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.[15]

It is always dangerous to assume that any poet writes with one eye on his own time and the other confidentially winking at ours. Yet the impression that there is something peculiarly modern and relevant to the twentieth century about Blake is very strong. "Blake and Modern Thought" is the title of at least two studies of Blake; and his devotees are never tired of finding that contemporary ideas have been anticipated by him. We shall have to return to this subject, but there is one aspect of it which may be noticed here. A modern writer on Blake is not required to discuss his sanity, for which I am grateful: I could not do so without being haunted by one of his own epigrams: "The Man who pretends to be a modest enquirer into the truth of a self evident thing is a Knave."[16] But that Blake was often called mad in his lifetime is of course true. Wordsworth called him that, though Wordsworth had a suspicion that if the madman had bitten Scott or Southey he might have improved their undoubtedly sane poetry.[17] The point is, not that the word "mad" applied to Blake is false, but that it is untranslatable. When Samuel Johnson speaks in his diary of disorders of mind he experienced which were very near to madness, both what he meant by madness and what he implied by sanity have dropped out of our language. He thought of madness as a completely sterile, chaotic and socially useless deviation from normal behavior. Whatever art he approved of he considered sane and balanced, benefiting society and adjusted to society. In the nineteenth century a reaction against this attitude set in, and the opposition of artist and society reached a very high tension which suggested that genius

itself is a morbid secretion of society, and art a disease that cures the world homeopathically.

Now one interesting thing about Blake is that he combines the attitude of Johnson with the nineteenth century position. He felt the whole force of the social opposition to his kind of art, but he never allowed its propaganda to influence him even negatively. He was called mad so often that towards the end of his life he even became interested in insanity, struggled through part of a once famous book on the subject and made drawings of lunatic heads.[18] But he never believed that there was much of creative value in morbidity, disease or insanity in themselves. The sources of art are enthusiasm and inspiration: if society mocks and derides these, it is society that is mad, not the artist, no matter what excesses the latter may commit:

> I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right & left side? he answer'd, "the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite."[19]

What Blake demonstrates is the sanity of genius and the madness of the commonplace mind, and it is here that he has something very apposite to say to the twentieth century, with its interest in the arts of neurosis and the politics of paranoia.

· 3 ·

Blake distinguishes between opinions and principles, saying that everyone changes the former and that no one, not even a hypocrite, can change the latter.[20] But even in matters of opinion Blake shows little variation, though there would certainly have been much more had he received his fair share of sympathetic criticism. His principles he held with bulldog tenacity all his life. The lyrics of his adolescence, the prophecies of his middle period, the comments which blister the margins of books he read on a sickbed at seventy, are almost identical in outlook. He himself says that his notes on Reynolds, written at fifty, are "exactly Similar" to those on Locke and Bacon, written when he was "very Young."[21] Even phrases and lines of verse will reappear as much as forty years later. Obstinacy in maintaining what he believed to be true was itself one of his leading principles, and he notes with sardonic amusement its success with those who opposed him: "as if genius and assurance were

the same thing!"[22] Consistency, then, foolish or otherwise, is one of Blake's chief preoccupations, just as "self-contradiction" is always one of his most contemptuous comments.

Therefore, if the engraved poems of Blake form a canon, as we have suggested, anything admitted to that canon, whatever its date, not only belongs in a unified scheme but is in accord with a permanent structure of ideas. Omission may be deliberate or accidental—we can seldom be sure which—but admission is a seal of approval extending to more than poetic merit. This does not mean that Blake's poetry is the vehicle of a "message," but that he is in a somewhat restricted sense of the term a "metaphysical" poet. The structure of ideas common to his poems, then, is what we must first examine.

His engraving process was perfected about 1788, and the first products of it were three series of aphorisms, two called *There Is No Natural Religion* and the third *All Religions Are One*. These aphorisms are evidently intended to be a summarized statement of the doctrines in the engraved canon, and as they are largely concerned with Blake's theory of knowledge, it will be following Blake's own order to start from there. Our supporting quotations will be drawn as far as possible from writings outside the more difficult prophecies, in order to avoid their technical vocabulary.

· 4 ·

THAT an eighteenth century English poet should be interested in contemporary theories of knowledge is hardly surprising. Blake had carefully read and annotated Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding* in his youth, though his copy has not turned up. But as Locke, along with Bacon and Newton, is constantly in Blake's poetry a symbol of every kind of evil, superstition and tyranny, whatever influence he had on Blake was clearly a negative one. The chief attack on Locke in the eighteenth century came from the idealist Berkeley, and as idealism is a doctrine congenial to poets, we should expect Blake's attitude to have some points in common with Berkeley's, particularly on the subject of the mental nature of reality, expressed by Berkeley in the phrase *esse est percipi*: "to be is to be perceived":

Mental Things are alone Real; what is call'd Corporeal, Nobody Knows of its Dwelling Place: it is in Fallacy, & its Existence an Impos-

ture. Where is the Existence Out of Mind or Thought? Where is it but in the Mind of a Fool?[23]

The unit of this mental existence Blake calls indifferently a "form" or an "image." If there is such a thing as a key to Blake's thought, it is the fact that these two words mean the same thing to him. He makes no consistent use of the term "idea." Forms or images, then, exist only in perception. Locke's philosophy distinguishes sensation from reflection: the former is concerned with perception, the latter with the classification of sensations and the development of them into abstract ideas. These latter afford inclusive principles or generalizations by which we may build up the vast unselected mass of sense data into some kind of comprehensible pattern. The eighteenth century's respect for generalization comes out in Samuel Johnson, who dwells frequently on the "grandeur of generality," saying that "great thoughts are always general," and that "nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature."[24] Blake, evidently, thinks differently:

> What is General Nature? is there Such a Thing? what is General Knowledge? is there such a thing? Strictly Speaking All Knowledge is Particular.
>
> To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess.[25]

Blake is discussing Reynolds' theories of painting, but as one of his main points against Reynolds is the Lockian basis of his aesthetics, it is quite safe to use these quotations here. The second remark, though of course itself a generalization, means that the image or form of perception is the content of knowledge. Reflection on sensation is concerned only with the mere memory of the sensation, and Blake always refers to Locke's reflection as "memory." Memory of an image must always be less than the perception of the image. Just as it is impossible to do a portrait from memory as well as from life, so it is impossible for an abstract idea to be anything more than a subtracted idea, a vague and hazy afterimage. In fact, it is far less real than an afterimage. Sensation is always in the plural: when we see a tree we see a multitude of particular facts about the tree, and the more intently we look the more there are to see. If we look at it very long and hard, and possess a phe-

nomenal visual memory, we may, having gone away from the tree, remember nearly everything about it. That is far less satisfying to the mind than to keep on seeing the tree, but, though we no longer have a real tree, we have at least a memory of its reality. But the abstract idea of "tree" ranks far below this. We have now sunk to the mental level of the dull-witted Philistine who in the first place saw "just a tree," without noticing whether it was an oak or a poplar.

But even the idea "tree" retains some connection, however remote, with real trees. It is when we start inferring qualities from things and trying to give them an independent existence that the absurdities of abstract reasoning really become obvious. We do this as a kind of mental shorthand to cover up the deficiencies of our memories. Blake says, in a note on Berkeley's *Siris*:

> Harmony and Proportion are Qualities & not Things. The Harmony and Proportion of a Horse are not the same with those of a Bull. Every Thing has its own Harmony & Proportion, Two Inferior Qualities in it. For its Reality is its Imaginative Form.[26]

This implies, for one thing, that "proportion" means nothing except in direct relation to real things which possess it; and for another, that the differences between the proportions of a bull and a horse are infinitely more significant than the mere fact that both of them have proportion. In short, things are real to the extent that they are sharply, clearly, particularly perceived by themselves and discriminated from one another. We have said that the idea "tree" represents a dull and vague perception of the forms of trees; but such a word as "proportion," taken by itself, represents a flight from reality that even a dense fog or a pitch-black night could be no more than a mere suggestion of. The first point in Blake to get clear, then, is the infinite superiority of the distinct perception of things to the attempt of the memory to classify them into general principles:

> Deduct from a rose its redness, from a lilly its whiteness, from a diamond its hardness, from a spunge its softness, from an oak its heighth, from a daisy its lowness, & rectify everything in Nature as the Philosophers do, & then we shall return to Chaos, & God will be compell'd to be Eccentric if he Creates, O happy Philosopher.[27]

The acceptance of the *esse-est-percipi* principle unites the sub-

ject and the object. By introducing the idea of "reflection" we separate them again. The abstract philosophers say that things do not cease to exist when we stop looking at them, and therefore there must be some kind of nonmental reality behind our perception of them. Thus Locke attempts to distinguish the "secondary qualities" of perception from "primary qualities" which he assigns to a "substratum" of substance. A still cruder form of the same theory is atomism, the belief in a nonmental and unperceived unit of the object-world. "An atom," Blake said, is "a thing which does not exist"[28]—as of course it does not, in the sense in which he meant the word. Democritus had expounded this theory in Classical times: it had been developed by Epicurean philosophers, and Bacon, who "is only Epicurus over again," and whose "philosophy has ruined England," had been enthusiastic about Democritus.[29] Newton's corpuscular theory of light belongs to the same method of thought.[30] Atomism is another attempt to annihilate the perceived differences in forms by the assertion that they have all been constructed out of units of "matter." If we try to visualize a world of tiny particles all alike, we again summon up the image of a dense fog or a sandstorm which is the inevitable symbol of generalization. How could forms have been developed out of such a chaos? There is no "matter": there is a material world, but that is literally the "material" of experience, and has no reality apart from the forms in which it subsists, except as an abstract idea on the same plane as that of "proportion."

If to be is something else than to be perceived, our perceptions do not acquaint us with reality and we consequently cannot trust them. We are then forced back on altering the method of perception in the hope that something more real will turn up. Bacon, whose "first principle is Unbelief,"[31] started a program of conducting experiments for this purpose. Blake is quite ready to admit that "the true method of knowledge is experiment"[32]; but he insists that everything depends on the mental attitude of the experimenter. If you cannot accept what you see as real, the fact that you see it in a microscope or a test tube makes no difference. Anyone who, like Descartes, begins by doubting everything except his own doubts, will never end in certainties, as Bacon promises. Where is the certainty to come from? Blake is never tired of ridiculing Locke's

Two Horn'd Reasoning, Cloven Fiction,
In Doubt, which is Self contradiction.[33]

and he asks ironically what would happen if the object took the point of view of the subject:

He who Doubts from what he sees
Will ne'er Believe, do what you Please.
If the Sun & Moon should doubt,
They'd immediately Go out.[34]

This last remark has a double edge. The attempt to separate the object from the subject gets us no further than a mere hypothesis of the "substratum" or "atom" type. But, if the mountain will not go away from Mohammed, Mohammed can always go away from the mountain. Locke's "reflection" is designed to withdraw the subject from the object, to replace real things with the shadowy memories of them which are called "spectres" in Blake's symbolism. But all that can be produced from this must be spun out of the philosopher's own bowels like a spider's web, a fantastic and egocentric daydream. Hence, while the Epicurean atomist and the solipsist or navel-gazer are superficially opposed to one another, the attempt to separate the subject and the object is common to them both, and consequently they differ only in emphasis. We shall meet with extensions of this principle later on.

· 5 ·

BERKELEY draws a distinction, though his treatment of it is not as thorough as it might be, between the ideas we have of the existence of other things and the "notion" we have of our own existence. We know that we are a reality beyond others' perceptions of us, and that if *esse est percipi*, then *esse est percipere* as well.

Now insofar as a man is perceived by others (or, in fact, by himself), he is a form or image, and his reality consists in the perceived thing which we call a "body." "Body" in Blake means the whole man as an object of perception. We need another word to describe the man as a perceiver, and that word must also describe the whole man. "Soul" is possible, though it has theological overtones suggesting an invisible vapor locked up in the body and released at death. Blake will use this word only with a caution:

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses.[35]

At the time that he wrote the aphorisms referred to above he used the rather cumbersome term "Poetic Genius," for reasons that will presently appear: "the Poetic Genius is the true Man," he says, and "the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius."[36] The commonest word, however, is "mind," and Blake frequently employs it. We use five senses in perception, but if we used fifteen we should still have only a single mind. The eye does not see: the eye is a lens for the mind to look through. Perception, then, is not something we do with our senses; it is a mental act. Yet it is equally true that the legs do not walk, but that the mind walks the legs. There can be therefore no distinction between mental and bodily acts: in fact it is confusing to speak of bodily acts at all if by "body" we mean man as a perceived form. The only objection to calling digestion or sexual intercourse mental activities is a hazy association between the mind and the brain, which latter is only one organ of the mind, if mind means the acting man. It is perhaps better to use some other word. If man perceived is a form or image, man perceiving is a former or imaginer, so that "imagination" is the regular term used by Blake to denote man as an acting and perceiving being. That is, a man's imagination is his life. "Mental" and "intellectual," however, are exact synonyms of "imaginative" everywhere in Blake's work. "Fancy" also means the imagination: "fantasy," on the other hand, relates to the memory and its "spectres."

To be perceived, therefore, means to be imagined, to be related to an individual's pattern of experience, to become a part of his character. There is no "general nature," therefore nothing is real beyond the imaginative patterns men make of reality, and hence there are exactly as many kinds of reality as there are men. "Every man's wisdom is peculiar to his own individuality,"[37] and there is no other kind of wisdom: reality is as much in the eye of the beholder as beauty is said to be. Scattered all through Blake's work are epigrams indicating this relativity of existence to perception:

> Every Eye sees differently. As the Eye, Such the Object.
>
> Every thing possible to be believed is an image of truth.
>
> The Sun's Light when he unfolds it
> Depends on the Organ that beholds it.[38]

Blake does not deny the unity of the material world: a farmer and a painter, looking at the same landscape, will undoubtedly see the same landscape:

> . . . All of us on earth are united in thought, for it is impossible to think without images of somewhat on earth.[39]

This fact has its importance in Blake's thought; but the reality of the landscape even so consists in its relation to the imaginative pattern of the farmer's mind, or of the painter's mind. To get at an "inherent" reality in the landscape by isolating the common factors, that is, by eliminating the agricultural qualities from the farmer's perception and the artistic ones from the painter's, is not possible, and would not be worth doing if it were. Add more people, and this least common denominator of perception steadily decreases. Add an idiot, and it vanishes.

The abstract reasoner attempts to give independent reality to the qualities of the things he sees, and in the same way he tries to abstract the quality of his perception. It is to him that we owe the association of mind and brain. The intellect to him is a special department concerned with reasoning, and other departments should not meddle with it. Emotion is another department, formerly ascribed to the heart, and still retaining a fossilized association with it. As for the sexual impulse, that is "bodily"; that is, it belongs to a third department called "body" by a euphemism. Thought being largely reflection, it is an "inward" activity: those who specialize in "outward" activity are not thinkers, but the practical people who do things. Scientists should be trained to see the sun as a fact; artists to see it emotionally as beautiful. That is, the artist's imagination is not concerned with seeing things, but with seeing an abstraction called the "beauty" in things; the scientist does not see anything either, but merely the "truth" in it. Thus we get Philistines saying that if we add any enthusiasm about beauty to our perception of things it will blur the clarity with which we see them; while the sentimental assert that the warm-blooded mammalian emotional perception which tenderly suckles its images is superior to the reptilian intellectual who lays cold abstract eggs. This last is a point of view with which Blake's is often confused.

All this pigeonholing of activity is nonsense to Blake. Thought

is act, he says.[40] An inactive thinker is a dreamer; an unthinking doer is an animal. No one can begin to think straight unless he has a passionate desire to think and an intense joy in thinking. The sex act without the play of intellect and emotion is mere rutting; and virility is as important to the artist as it is to the father. The more a man puts all he has into everything he does the more alive he is. Consequently there is not only infinite variety of imaginations, but differences of degree as well. It is not only true that "every eye sees differently," but that "a fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees," and that "the clearer the organ the more distinct the object."[41] Hence if existence is in perception the tree is *more* real to the wise man than it is to the fool. Similarly it is more real to the man who throws his entire imagination behind his perception than to the man who cautiously tries to prune away different characteristics from that imagination and isolate one. The more unified the perception, the more real the existence. Blake says:

> "What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty."[42]

The Hallelujah-Chorus perception of the sun makes it a far more real sun than the guinea-sun, because more imagination has gone into perceiving it. Why, then, should intelligent men reject its reality? Because they hope that in the guinea-sun they will find their least common denominator and arrive at a common agreement which will point the way to a reality about the sun independent of their perception of it. The guinea-sun is a sensation assimilated to a general, impersonal, abstract idea. Blake can see it if he wants to, but when he sees the angels, he is not seeing more "in" the sun but more of it. He does not see it "emotionally": there is a greater emotional intensity in his perception, but it is not an emotional perception: such a thing is impossible, and to the extent that it is possible it would produce only a confused and maudlin blur—which is exactly what the guinea-sun of "common sense" is. He sees all that he can see of all that he wants to see; the perceivers of the guinea-sun see all that they want to see of all that they can see.

In Blake the criterion or standard of reality is the genius; in

Locke it is the mediocrity. If Locke can get a majority vote on the sun, a consensus of normal minds based on the lower limit of normality, he can eliminate the idiot who goes below this and the visionary who rises above it as equally irrelevant. This leaves him with a communal perception of the sun in which the individual units are identical, all reassuring one another that they see the same thing; that their minds are uniform and their eyes interchangeable. The individual mind thus becomes an indivisible but invariable unit: that is, it is the subjective equivalent of the "atom." Blake calls the sum of experiences common to normal minds the "ratio," and whenever the word "reason" appears in an unfavorable context in Blake, it always means "ratiocination," or reflection on the ratio.

There are two forms of such ratiocination. There is deductive reasoning, or drawing conclusions from a certain number of facts which we already possess, a process in which every new fact upsets the pattern of what has already been established: "Reason, or the ratio of all we have already known, is not the same that it shall be when we know more."[43] Then there is inductive reasoning, which is equally circular because it traces the circumference of the universe as it appears to a mediocre and lazy mind:

> The bounded is loathed by its possessor. The same dull round, even of a universe, would soon become a mill with complicated wheels.[44]

We distinguish between voluntary and involuntary activities, between conscious and unconscious planes of the mind, and it is from this that Blake's idea of degrees of imagination is derived. "My legs feel like a walk" is recognized to be a half-humorous figure of speech; but "my heart beats" is accepted as literal. It is not altogether so: the imagination beats the heart; but still the automatic nature of the heartbeat is not in question. Blake's objection to Locke is that he extends the involuntary action into the higher regions of the imagination and tries to make perceptive activity subconscious. Locke does not think of sight as the mind directing itself through the eye to the object. He thinks of it as an involuntary and haphazard image imprinted on the mind through the eye by the object. In this process the mind remains passive and receives impressions automatically. We see the guinea-sun automatically: seeing the Hallelujah-Chorus sun demands a voluntary

and conscious imaginative effort; or rather, it demands an exuberantly active mind which will not be a quiescent blank slate. The imaginative mind, therefore, is the one which has realized its own freedom and understood that perception is self-development. The unimaginative is paralyzed by its own doubt, its desire to cut parts of the mind off from perception and parts of perception out of the mind, and by the dread of going beyond the least common denominator of the "normal." This opposition of the freedom of the acting mind and the inertia of the response to an external impression will also meet us again.

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Such freedom is extravagant only if there is no inner unity to the character of the perceiver. Perceptions form part of a logically unfolding organic unit, and just as an acorn will develop only into an oak, and not just any oak but the particular oak implicit in it, so the human being starts at birth to perceive in a characteristic and consistent way, relating his perception to his unique imaginative pattern. This is what Blake means when he explodes against the denial of innate ideas with which Locke's book opens:

> Reynolds Thinks that Man Learns all that he knows. I say on the Contrary that Man Brings All that he has or can have Into the World with him. Man is Born Like a Garden ready Planted & Sown. This World is too poor to produce one Seed.
>
> Innate Ideas are in Every Man, Born with him; they are truly Himself. The Man who says that we have No Innate Ideas must be a Fool & Knave, Having No Con-Science or Innate Science.[45]

It perhaps should be pointed out that Locke is denying what from Blake's point of view would be innate generalizations, and Blake does not believe in them any more than Locke does. Blake is protesting against the implication that man is material to be formed by an external world and not the former or imaginer of the material world. We are not passively stimulated into maturity: we grow into it, and our environment does not alter our nature, though it may condition it. Blake is thus insisting on the importance of the distinction between wisdom and knowledge. Wisdom is the central form which gives meaning and position to all the facts which are acquired by knowledge, the digestion and as-

similation of whatever in the material world the man comes in contact with.

Sense experience in itself is a chaos, and must be employed either actively by the imagination or passively by the memory. The former is a deliberate and the latter a haphazard method of creating a mental form out of sense experience. The wise man will choose what he wants to do with his perceptions just as he will choose the books he wants to read, and his perceptions will thus be charged with an intelligible and coherent meaning. Meaning for him, that is, pointing to his own mind and not to, for instance, nature. It thus becomes obvious that the product of the imaginative life is most clearly seen in the work of art, which is a unified mental vision of experience.

For the work of art is produced by the entire imagination. The dull mind is always thinking in terms of general antitheses, and it is instructive to see how foolish these antitheses look when they are applied to art. We cannot say that painting a picture is either an intellectual or an emotional act: it is obviously both at once. We cannot say that it is either a reflective or an active process: it is obviously both at once. We cannot say that it is "mental" or "bodily": no distinction between brainwork and handwork is relevant to it. We cannot say that the picture is a product of internal choice or external compulsion, for what the painter wants to do is what he has to do. Art is based on sense experience, yet it is an imaginative ordering of sense experience: it therefore belongs neither to the "inside" nor the "outside" of the Lockian universe, but to both at once.

The artist is bound to find the formless and unselected linear series of sense data very different from what he wishes to form, and the difficulties inherent in this never disappear for him. The composition of music is an imaginative ordering of the sense experience of sound, yet so different from random sense experience of sounds that the latter for most composers is a nuisance to their composing and must be shut out of their ears. The painter is even worse off, for though Beethoven's deafness did not destroy the hearing of his imagination, the painter cannot shut his eyes. For Blake the acquiring of the power to visualize independently of sense experience was a painful and laborious effort, to be achieved only by relentless discipline. But at the same time the senses are

the basis of all art. No painter ever painted an abstract idea; he paints only what he can visualize, and art owes its vividness and directness of impact, as compared with reasoning, to the fact that the concrete is more real than the general.

It is, then, through art that we understand why perception is superior to abstraction, why perception is meaningless without an imaginative ordering of it, why the validity of such ordering depends on the normality of the perceiving mind, why that normality must be associated with genius rather than mediocrity, and why genius must be associated with the creative power of the artist. This last, which is what Blake means by "vision," is the goal of all freedom, energy and wisdom.

But surely it is absurd to connect this with the *esse-est-percipi* doctrine. To be is to be perceived; therefore the object is real in proportion as the perceiver is a genius; therefore a tree is more real to a painter than to anyone else. This sounds dubious enough, and more so when we raise the question: what is the reality of a painted tree? If it is painted from life, it is an imitation of life, and must therefore be less real; if it is visualized independently of sense experience, does it not come out of the memory just as abstract ideas do? And if the whole work of art in which it occurs is an imaginative ordering of experience, then similarly the work of art is an imitation or a memory of experience. According to Plato the bed of sense experience, itself an imitation of the form or idea of the bed, is imitated by the painter. And while it is not surprising that Blake should be fond of pointing out that the Muses Plato worshiped were daughters of memory rather than imagination, there is still Plato's argument to meet.

Now it is true that we derive from sense experience the power to visualize, just as Beethoven derived from his hearing the power to "visualize" sounds after he had lost it. It may even be true that we do not visualize independently of sense without the help of memory. But what we see appearing before us on canvas is not a reproduction of memory or sense experience but a new and independent creation. The "visionary" is the man who has passed through sight into vision, never the man who has avoided seeing, who has not trained himself to see clearly, or who generalizes among his stock of visual memories. If there is a reality beyond our perception we must increase the power and coherence of our

perception, for we shall never reach reality in any other way. If the reality turns out to be infinite, perception must be infinite too. To visualize, therefore, is to realize. The artist is *par excellence* the man who struggles to develop his perception into creation, his sight into vision; and art is a technique of realizing, through an ordering of sense experience by the mind, a higher reality than linear unselected experience or a second-hand evocation of it can give.

It is no use saying to Blake that the company of angels he sees surrounding the sun are not "there." Not where? Not in a gaseous blast furnace across ninety million miles of nothing, perhaps; but the guinea-sun is not "there" either. To prove that he sees them Blake will not point to the sky but to, say, the fourteenth plate of the Job series illustrating the text: "When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." *That* is where the angels appear, in a world formed and created by Blake's imagination and entered into by everyone who looks at the picture. It appears, then, that there are not only two worlds, but three: the world of vision, the world of sight and the world of memory: the world we create, the world we live in and the world we run away to. The world of memory is an unreal world of reflection and abstract ideas; the world of sight is a potentially real world of subjects and objects; the world of vision is a world of creators and creatures. In the world of memory we see nothing; in the world of sight we see what we have to see; in the world of vision we see what we want to see. These are not three different worlds, as in the religions which speak of a heaven and hell in addition to ordinary life; they are the egocentric, the ordinary and the visionary ways of looking at the same world.

The fact that in the world of vision or art we see what we want to see implies that it is a world of fulfilled desire and unbounded freedom. The rejection of art from Plato's *Republic* is an essential part of a vision of the human soul which puts desire in bondage to reason, a vision of a universe turning on a spindle of necessity, and an assumption that a form is an idea rather than an image. Works of art are more concentrated and unified than sense experience, and that proves that there is nothing chaotic about the unlimited use of the imagination. Hence an antithesis of energy and order, desire and reason, is as fallacious as all the other antitheses with

which timid mediocrity attempts to split the world. Imagination is energy incorporated in form:

> Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.[46]

Blake's poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* ends in an apotheosis of desire; *Jerusalem* in one of intellect. Those who have succeeded in mentally separating the inside from the outside, the top from the bottom, the convex from the concave, will call these poems hopelessly inconsistent with each other. But a thinker who has no desire to think cannot think, and thus all thought, like all sexual intercourse, is a fulfillment of desire. And one who desires but cannot imagine what it is he wants is not getting very far with his desire, which, if it were real, would attempt to achieve an intelligible form.

Nearly all of us have felt, at least in childhood, that if we imagine that a thing is so, it therefore either is so or can be made to become so. All of us have to learn that this almost never happens, or happens only in very limited ways; but the visionary, like the child, continues to believe that it always ought to happen. We are so possessed with the idea of the duty of acceptance that we are inclined to forget our mental birthright, and prudent and sensible people encourage us in this. That is why Blake is so full of aphorisms like "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise."[47] Such wisdom is based on the fact that imagination creates reality, and as desire is a part of imagination, the world we desire is more real than the world we passively accept.

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Now of course the arts are only a few of many social phenomena which are summed up in such words as "culture" or "civilization." These words in fact give a much clearer idea of what Blake means by "art." The religious, philosophical and scientific presentations of reality are branches of art, and should be judged by their relationship to the principles and methods of the creative imagination of the artist. If they are consistent with the latter, they fulfill a necessary function in culture: if they are not, they are pernicious mental diseases.

We have said that the artist uses ideas, but *qua* artist is not

otherwise concerned with their truth. This exactly corresponds to the doctrine that reality is in the individual mental pattern. As compared with religion, for instance, art keeps the pragmatic individual synthesis, whereas religion as generally understood is both dogmatic and communal. The religious synthesis, therefore, in trying to fulfill the needs of a group, freezes the symbols both of its theology and ritual into invariable generalities. Religion is thus a social form of art, and as such both its origin in art and the fact that its principles of interpretation are those of art should be kept in mind:

> The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation's different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy.[48]

"All Religions are One" means that the material world provides a universal language of images and that each man's imagination speaks that language with his own accent. Religions are grammars of this language. Seeing is believing, and belief is vision: the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen.

A metaphysical system, again, is a system; that is, an art-form, to be judged in terms of its inner coherence. "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth," which means a form of truth, and if Plato's or Locke's philosophy makes sense in itself, it is as truly a form or image of reality as a picture, and an image of the same kind. To try to verify a philosophical or religious system in relation to an objective nonmental "truth" is to dissolve an imaginative form back into the chaos of the material world, and this kind of verification will destroy whatever truth it has. Even in science there is no use looking beyond the human mind for reassurance. As a matter of fact in stressing the concrete and the primacy of sense experience Blake is much closer to the inductive scientist than to the "reasoner," and his unfavorable comments on science always relate to certain metaphysical assumptions underlying the science of his day laid down by Bacon and Locke. As long as science means knowledge organized by a commonplace mind it will be part of the penalty man pays for being stupid; the value of science depends on the mental attitude toward it, and the mental attitude of Bacon and Locke is wrong. As for history, that, even when it has overcome the difficulty of having to deal with docu-

ments which are invariably a pack of lies, is a linear record of facts like our daily sense experience, and has like it to be ordered by the imagination. "Reasons and opinions concerning acts are not history," says Blake: "Acts themselves alone are history"[49]—history is imaginative material to be synthesized into form, not memory to be reflected upon.

Blake is not simply rationalizing his own job to the limit: his defense of the supremacy of art is a well-established one in literary criticism, and he has no wish to curtail the variety of culture. He does not say that science is wrong; he says that a commonplace mind can make a wrong use of it. He does not say that philosophy is quibbling; he says it would be if philosophers had no imagination. And still less has his teaching to do with that of most of those who tell us that we should make our lives a work of art and live beautifully. The cultivators of "stained-glass attitudes" do not usually mean by beauty the explosion of energy that produces the visions of the dung-eating madman Ezekiel.

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WHATEVER may be thought of Blake's doctrine of the imagination, one thing should at least be abundantly clear by now. Any portrayal of Blake as a mystical snail who retreated from the hard world of reality into the refuge of his own mind, and evolved his obscurely beautiful visions there in contemplative loneliness, can hardly be very close to Blake. That identifies his "imagination" with his interpretation of Locke's "reflection," which is unnecessarily ironic. It is true that we often confuse the imaginary with the imaginative in ordinary speech, and often mean, when we say that something is "all imagination," that it does not exist; but such modes of speech and thought, however intelligible in themselves, cannot be used in interpreting Blake.

Though Blake is an interesting eighteenth century phenomenon even in philosophy, Locke's reputation can perhaps be left to take care of itself. To meet the difficulties in his theory of imagination we must in any case proceed to his religious ideas, and leave the epistemology of Locke and Berkeley for the more rarefied atmosphere of Swedenborg.

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Works cited, except Blake's own, will be found under the author's name.