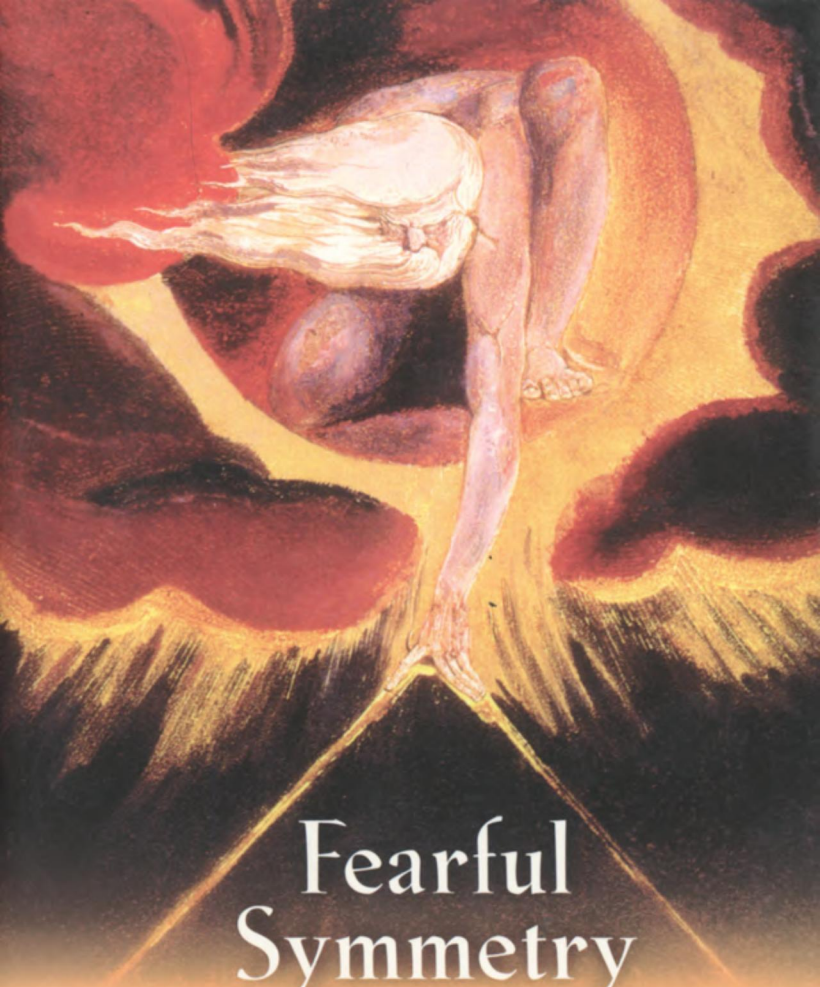

Fearful Symmetry

A Study of William Blake

NORTHROP FRYE

FEARFUL SYMMETRY

A STUDY OF WILLIAM BLAKE

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PART ONE

THE ARGUMENT

GON. How lush and lusty the grass looks!
how green!
ANT. The ground indeed is tawny.
SEB. With an eye of green in 't.
ANT. He misses not much.
SEB. No; he doth but mistake the truth
totally.—THE TEMPEST, ACT II, SCENE I.

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:

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.

· 6 ·

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

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.

· 8 ·

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.

2 THE RISING GOD

SAMUEL JOHNSON attempted to refute Berkeley by kicking a stone: in doing so he merely transferred his perception of the stone to another sense, but his feeling that the stone existed independently of his foot would possibly have survived even a mention of that fact. Berkeley's argument was that there is a reality about things apart from our perception of them, and, as all reality is mental, this reality must be an idea in the mind of God. Now God and man are different things to Berkeley, and this sudden switch from one to the other leaves a gap in the middle of his thought. Blake, by postulating a world of imagination higher than that of sense, indicates a way of closing the gap which is completed by identifying God with human imagination:

> Man is All Imagination. God is Man & exists in us & we in him.
>
> The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination, that is, God himself. . . . It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision).[1]

Man in his creative acts and perceptions is God, and God is Man. God is the eternal Self, and the worship of God is self-development. This disentangles the idea raised in the preceding chapter of the two worlds of perception. This world is one of perceiver and perceived, of subject and objects; the world of imagination is one of creators and creatures. In his creative activity the artist expresses the creative activity of God; and as all men are contained in Man or God, so all creators are contained in the Creator.

This doctrine of God further explains how a visionary can be said to be normal rather than abnormal, even though his appearance may be rare. The sane man is normal not because he is just like everyone else but because he is superior to the lunatic; the healthy man is normal because he is superior to the cripple. That is, they are most truly themselves. The visionary is supreme normality because most of his contemporaries are privative just as cripples and lunatics are. Whatever he is from their point of view, he is more of a man than they, and it is his successes that make him truly "human," not his failures or weaknesses, as they are apt to say. Hence the visionary expresses something latent in all men; and just as it is only in themselves that the latter find God, so it

is only in the visionary that they can see him found. As imagination *is* life, no one is born without any imagination except the stillborn, but those who cut their imagination down as far as they can, deny, as far as they can, their own manhood and their divinity which is that manhood. They will therefore turn their backs on the genius who greatly acts and greatly perceives; but they retain the power to enter into kinship with him:

> The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best: those who envy or calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God.[2]

The identity of God and man is qualified by the presence in man of the tendency to deny God by self-restriction. Thus, though God is the perfection of man, man is not wholly God: otherwise there would be no point in bringing in the idea of God at all. On the other hand, the infinite variety of men is no argument against the unity of God. Such ideas as "mankind" and "humanity" are only generalized; but the fact that an acorn produces only an oak indicates the fact of species or class as clearly as it indicates the fallacy of a generalized tree. Blake's word "form" always includes this unity of species: he says, for instance:

> The Oak is cut down by the Ax, the Lamb falls by the Knife,
> But their Forms Eternal Exist For-ever.[3]

Similarly, God is not only the genius but the genus of man, the "Essence" from which proceed the individuals or "Identities" mentioned in Blake's note on Swedenborg:

> Essence is not Identity, but from Essence proceeds Identity & from one Essence may proceed many Identities. . . .
>
> If the Essence was the same as the Identity, there could be but one Identity, which is false. Heaven would upon this plan be but a Clock. . . .[4]

(Blake is attacking what seems to him a tendency to pantheism in Swedenborg.) Just as the perceived object derives its reality from being not only perceived but related to a unified imagination, so the perceiver must derive his from being related to the universal perception of God. If God is the only Creator, he is the only Perceiver as well. In every creative act or perception, then, the act or perception is universal and the perceived object particular.

And we have already met the converse of this principle, that when the perception is egocentric the perceived object is general. There are thus two modes of existence. The ego plays with shadows like the men in Plato's cave; to perceive the particular and imagine the real is to perceive and imagine as part of a Divine Body. A hand or eye is individual because it is an organ of a body: separated from the body it loses all individuality beyond what is dead and useless. That is why the imagination is constructive and communicable and why the "memory" is circular and sterile. The universal perception of the particular is the "divine image" of the *Songs of Innocence*; the egocentric perception of the general is the "human abstract" of the *Songs of Experience*. This is the basis of Blake's theory of good and evil which we shall meet in the next chapter.

There are two corollaries of this. One is that we perceive *as* God: we do not perceive God. "No man hath seen God at any time," because true perception is creation, and God cannot be created. We may see the divine aspect of great men, but when we do the divine in us recognizes itself. The other is, that, as we cannot perceive anything higher than a man, nothing higher than Man can exist. The artist proves this by the fact that he can paint God only as a man, though if he is reproducing senile and epicene ideas of God he will paint an enfeebled old man out of compliment to them. But there is no form of life superior to our own; and the acceptance of Jesus as the fullness of both God and Man entails the rejection of all attributes of divinity which are not human:

> Man can have no idea of any thing greater than Man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness. But God is a man, not because he is so perceiv'd by man, but because he is the creator of man.[5]

Naturally those brought up on abstract ideas will begin by denying both of these postulates, so let us see what success they have with their theology.

· 2 ·

We have quoted Blake as saying that the idea of "proportion" means nothing except in relation to a concrete thing which possesses it. The proportions of a real thing are part of its "living form." We can only detach the idea of proportion from reality through what he calls "mathematic form"; generalized symmetry without reference to perceived objects. Now this idea of "mathematic

benevolent avuncular God who explains away all suffering and injustice at the Last Judgment and proves himself to have had the best intentions all along. Nor does he agree with those who accept it negatively and feel that its "right worship is defiance."[8] He disagrees with it on the same ground that he disagrees with Locke's account of abstract ideas. Locke extends involuntary and automatic reflexes to include the passive reception of sense impressions, which to Blake should be the products of an active consciousness. Similarly, the worshiper of "immanent Will" is extending the subconscious activity of the heartbeat from sense experience to the whole universe. And he does it by exactly the same process of trying to find a least common denominator for his general principles. A man, a dog and a tree are all alive; therefore life must be inherently and really some kind of "life force" common to them which can only be identified with the lowest possible limit of life—protoplasm, perhaps. But as the boundary between living things and moving things is difficult to trace, the "immanent Will" is bound to sink below "life force" to take in all other forms of motion in a more inclusive generalization still.

It is much better, as in the previous case, to go to work the other way. A man, a dog and a tree are all alive; but the man is the most alive; and it is in man that we should look for the image, or form, of universal life. There can be no "life force" apart from things possessing it: universal life is the totality of living things, and God has intelligence, judgment, purpose and desire because we are alive and possess these things.

The Darwinian universe merely adds the tyranny of time and will to the tyranny of space and reason with which Blake was already acquainted, and suggests a generalized energy abstracted from form supplementing the generalized form abstracted from energy which we find in Locke's conception of substance. "No Omnipotence can act against order," Blake says.[9] If Blake had lived a century later he would undoubtedly have taken sides at once with Butler and Shaw and claimed that alterations in an organism are produced by the development of the organism's "imagination"; and the doctrine of environmental stimulus in time would have fitted into the same plane in his thought as Locke's doctrine of involuntary sense perception in space.

As a matter of fact Blake does use the persistence of life as an

argument that the hold of life on the world is not precarious. Lightning may kill a man, but it cannot beget him: life can come only from life, and must go straight back to the creation at least, which implies the primacy of creative over destructive energy. Worshipers of the "immanent Will" see its most striking effects in the latter, and in the irony and tragedy it suggests, but this must be subordinate to the power of incubation. We have already noticed that Blake's words "form" and "image" mean a species persisting through time: "The Oak dies as well as the Lettuce, but Its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies, but renews by its seed."[10] Further, when Blake says: "Each thing is its own cause and its own effect,"[11] he means that life is not itself caused by anything external to it, and that there is no causality which is not part of an organic process. Accidents happen, but when they do they are not part of a larger superhuman scheme; they are part of the breakdown of human schemes, and their "meaning" depends on what the human mind does with them.

Blake was familiar enough with the earlier manifestations of life-force worship in eighteenth century primitivism. That postulated a "nature" as the body of life from which man has sprung, and that too attempted to cut parts away from the human imagination by asserting that the latter was diseased and adulterated insofar as it had developed away from nature. Blake had no use for the noble savage or for the cult of the natural man; he disliked Rousseau enough to give an attack on him a prominent place in *Jerusalem*. Civilization is in more than one sense supernatural: it is something which man's superiority over nature has evolved, and the central symbol of the imagination in all Blake's work is the city. "Where man is not, nature is barren,"[12] he says. Of all animals, man is the most hopelessly maladjusted to nature: that is why he outdistances the animals, the supreme triumph of the imagination which has developed and conquered rather than survived and "fitted."

· 4 ·

THUS we find ourselves unable to conceive of anything superhuman in the direction of either design or power. The same thing happens when we try to conceive a "perfect" God. Perfection, when it means anything, means the full development of all one's

imagination. This is what Jesus meant when he said "Be ye therefore perfect." But many timid abstract thinkers feel that this is irreverent, and that perfection lies in the completeness with which a quality is abstracted from a real thing. God is thus thought to be "pure" goodness. Such a God could never have created Falstaff, to whom he would be vastly inferior. If this idea of "pure" perfection is pressed a little further it dissolves in negatives, as all abstract ideas do. God is infinite, inscrutable, incomprehensible—all negative words, and a negative communion with some undefined ineffability is its highest development. What Blake thinks of this he has put into one of his most brilliant epigrams:

> God Appears & God is Light
> To those poor Souls who dwell in Night,
> But does a Human Form Display
> To those who Dwell in Realms of day.[13]

It is an old quibble that God cannot move because to move is to alter and to alter would be to lessen his perfection. As long as this means abstract perfection, the argument is unanswerable: a negatively perfect God is not a Creator.

In the first chapter of Genesis we read of a God, or Gods, called Elohim, who can be reconciled with a philosophical First Cause. So completely is he a God of unconscious and automatic order that he created the sun, moon and stars chiefly to provide a calendar for Jewish ritual, and rested on the Sabbath to institute a ceremonial law. In the next chapter we come across a folklore God named Jehovah, a fussy, scolding, bad-tempered but kindly deity who orders his disobedient children out of his garden after making clothes for them, who drowns the world in a fit of anger and repeoples it in a fit of remorse. Such a God has much to learn, but he comes far closer to what Jesus meant by a Father than the other, and gets a correspondingly higher place in Blake's symbolism.[14]

Even when we try to think of the superhuman in terms of intelligence and imagination we run into difficulties. To be is to be perceived, and we perceive nothing higher than man. The one certain inference from this is that we cannot conceive an essentially superhuman imagination, and when we try to imagine above human nature we always imagine below it. It has been said that grasshoppers are like gods in that they are without blood or

feeling. Such gods are therefore as much inferior to man as grasshoppers are, or would be if they could exist. We can imagine men who can do things we cannot; who can fly, who perspire instead of excreting food, who converse by intuition instead of words. But these are differences in attributes, not in substance: the latter we cannot imagine. In Blake there are no characters who represent anything qualitatively superior to man in the way that a man is superior to a fish. There is no "chain of being" in Blake and no trace of any of the creatures invented by those who believe in a chain of being: no gods, no eons, no emanations (in the Gnostic sense: Blake's use of this term is different), no world-soul, no angelic intelligences bound on the spindle of necessity. If they had any intelligence they would get off it, as man got off the spindle of nature.

This is important as throwing some light on Blake's idea of inspiration. It is true that Blake often makes remarks implying an external spiritual agency. He speaks, for instance, of his poems as "dictated," and of himself as their "secretary."[15] But usually the term "angel" or "spirit" in Blake, when not used in an ironic sense, means the imagination functioning as inspiration, and the fact that inspiration often takes on a purpose of its own which appears to be independent of the will is familiar to every creative artist. Blake says, for instance: "Every man's leading propensity ought to be call'd his leading Virtue & his good Angel."[16] It is the same with the "dictation" of his poetry:

> When this Verse was first dictated to me, I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence . . . to be a necessary and indispensible part of Verse. But I soon found . . .

If the inspiration were anything external to Blake he would have had no choice in the matter. "Spirits are organized men," he says, and he would agree with Paul that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets."[17]

The spirit which is the organized man may also be, however, the imagination which has got itself disentangled from its present world through the process we call death. The imagination cannot exist except as a bodily form, but the body is only what others on the same plane of existence see of the soul or mind. Hence when the imagination changes its world it can change its bodily form

as completely as the lepidoptera which have suggested most of the images of immortality. Christianity has always insisted on the resurrection of the body, though the two facts that the risen body is spiritual and that it is a body are hard to keep both in mind at once. All belief in ghosts or shades or in any form of spirit conceived as less than bodily is superstitious: there is no *animula vagula blandula* in Blake.

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THERE is no divinity in sky, nature or thought superior to our selves. Hence there is in Blake no acceptance of the *données* of existence as such, no Leibnitzian idea of the perfection of *established* order. Nor is there any idea of finding in nature external hints or suggestions of God; all such intuitions are implanted by the mind on nature. Nature is there for us to transform; it is neither a separate creation of God nor an objective counterpart of ourselves. Blake criticized Wordsworth sharply for ascribing to nature what he should have ascribed to his own mind and for believing in the correspondence of human and natural orders:

> How exquisitely the individual Mind
> (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
> Of the whole species) to the external World
> Is fitted:—and how exquisitely, too—
> Theme this but little heard of among men—
> The external World is fitted to the Mind.

"You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted," is Blake's comment on this passage.[18]

We arrive at the emotions of acceptance and obedience only at the price of stifling part of our imaginations. In terms of man's desires, we see nothing outside man worthy of respect. Nature is miserably cruel, wasteful, purposeless, chaotic and half dead. It has no intelligence, no kindness, no love and no innocence. Man under natural law is more pitiful than Diogenes' plucked cock. In a state of nature man must surrender intelligence for ferocity and cunning, kindness and pity for a relentless fight to survive, love for the reproductive instinct, innocence for obedience to humiliating laws.

When we look up from the earth to the whizzing balls of ice and fire in the sky we see there merely an extension of nature. It is instinctive with the ignorant to worship the sun as the giver of life,

vision; he can put human imagination into them, make them intelligible and responsive. In a picture every detail is significant and relevant to the whole design. That is an image of the world the visionary wants to live in; a world so fully possessed by the human imagination that its very rocks and clouds are more alive and more responsive than the dogs in this world are. Up to a point we can talk to a dog and make him talk back; we cannot make a tree talk back, but in a higher world we could create the tree as completely as we create sons and daughters in this world. The Classical dryad represents a partial attempt to transform an object of perception into a creature:

. . . the forms of all things are derived from their Genius, which by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit & Demon.[23]

The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid record the converse process, of humanized creatures dwindling into objects of perception, which implies that they are images of the fall of man. As our imaginations expand the world takes on a growing humanity, for to see things as created by God and in God is the same as seeing things as created by Man and in Man:

. . . Each grain of Sand,
Every Stone of the Land,
Each rock & each hill,
Each fountain & rill,
Each herb & each tree,
Mountain, hill, earth & sea,
Cloud, Meteor & Star,
Are Men seen Afar.[24]

The fallen world is the world of the *Songs of Experience*: the unfallen world is the world of the *Songs of Innocence*. Naturally those who live most easily in the latter are apt to be, from the point of view of those absorbed wholly in the former, somewhat naïve and childlike. In fact most of them are actually children. Children live in a protected world which has something, in epitome, of the intelligibility of the state of innocence, and they have an imaginative recklessness which derives from that. The child who cries to have the moon as a plaything, who slaps a table for hurting him when he bumps his head, who can transform the most unpromising toy into a congenial companion, has something which

the adult can never wholly abandon without collapsing into mediocrity.

The paradisal Eden of the Bible is described in terms of a pastoral placidity which may suggest to an unsympathetic reader that Adam fell because he outgrew it: the suggestion is much stronger in *Paradise Lost.* Yet this association of innocence with naïveté is by no means adequate. An unfallen world completely vitalized by the imagination suggests human beings of gigantic strength and power inhabiting it, such as we find hinted at in the various Titanic myths. The vision of such beings would be able to penetrate all the mysteries of the world, searching into mountains or stars with equal ease, as in this description of the bound Titan Orc:

> His eyes, the lights of his large soul, contract or else expand;
> Contracted they behold the secrets of the infinite mountains,
> The veins of gold & silver & the hidden things of Vala,
> Whatever grows from its pure bud or breathes a fragrant soul;
> Expanded they behold the terrors of the Sun & Moon,
> The Elemental Planets & the Orbs of eccentric fire.[25]

Even in those moments when most "we feel that we are greater than we know," this feeling is not so much one of individuality as of integration into a higher unit or body of life. This body, of course, is ultimately God, the totality of all imagination. But even men who cannot reach the idea of God believe in the reality of larger human bodies, such as nations, cities or races, and even speak of them as fathers or mothers. It takes a genuine faith to see a nation or race as a larger human being, or form of human existence, and a good deal of such faith is undoubtedly idolatry. Still, there is a partial idea of God in it, and in a Utopia or millennium it would become direct knowledge or vision, such as Milton suggests when he says that "a Commonwealth ought to be but as one huge Christian personage, one mighty growth, and stature of an honest man."[26] Hence these gigantic forms which inhabit the unfallen world are, on nearer view, human aggregates of the kind which inspire loyalty even in this world:

> . . . these various States I have seen in my Imagination; when distant they appear as One Man, but as you approach they appear multitudes of Nations.[27]

This exactly fits what we have just said, that the fall of man involved a fall in part but not all of the divine nature. The particu-

lar "Giant form" or "Eternal" to which we belong has fallen, the aggregate of spirits we call mankind or humanity and Blake calls Albion (Adam in Blake has his regular place as the symbol of the physical body or the natural man). When Albion or mankind fell, the unity of man fell too, and although our imagination tells us we belong to some larger organism even if we cannot see it as God, in the meantime we are locked up in separated opaque scattered bodies. If the whole of mankind were once more integrated in a single spiritual body the universe as we see it would burst.

Theology distinguishes between "natural" and "revealed" religion, the former being the vision of God which man develops with his fallen reason and the latter the vision communicated to him by inspired prophets. To Blake "There Is No Natural Religion." The only reason that people believe in it is that they are unwilling to believe in the identity of God and Man. If there is evil in nature, it must be our fault and not God's; therefore God created the world good, the extent to which man's fall altered that goodness being a disputed point. But if we stop trying to rescue the credit of an abstract and pure goodness, we can easily see that all religion is revealed. The Greek word for revelation is "apocalypse," and the climax of Christian teaching is in the "Revelation" or Apocalypse at the end of the Bible which tells us that there is an end to time as well as a beginning and a middle, a resurrection as well as a birth and a death; and that in this final revelation of the unfallen world all mystery will vanish: John's symbol is the burning of the Great Whore who is called Mystery. Such a revelation involves the destruction of the present world, when the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood and the stars will fall from heaven like ripe figs. It moves on to a new heaven and earth (*i.e.*, an earth renewed or revealed in the form of heaven), in which the chaos of nature becomes our own garden, as in Paradise, a world no longer continuously perceived but continually created:

> In futurity
> I prophetic see
> That the earth from sleep
> (Grave the sentence deep)
> Shall arise and seek
> For her maker meek;

And the desart wild
Become a garden mild.[28]

Now when something is revealed to us we see it, and the response to this revelation is not faith in the unseen or hope in divine promises but vision, seeing face to face after we have been seeing through a glass darkly. Vision is the end of religion, and the destruction of the physical universe is the clearing of our own eyesight. Art, because it affords a systematic training in this kind of vision, is the medium through which religion is revealed. The Bible is the vehicle of revealed religion because it is a unified vision of human life and therefore, as Blake says, "the Great Code of Art."[29] And if all art is visionary, it must be apocalyptic and revelatory too: the artist does not wait to die before he lives in the spiritual world into which John was caught up. To quote Wordsworth again in a passage which explains why Blake admired as well as criticized him:

. . . The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity.[30]

According to Wordsworth the perceived forms of the eternal world are those which are constantly perceived in this one, and it is not in the grandiose or exceptional experience that "the types and symbols of Eternity" are to be found. Blake is merely extending this principle when he says in "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.[31]

Such perception, as the title of the poem makes clear, is an "augury" of the paradisal unfallen state. The last two lines bring us to the next step in the argument.

Those who, like Locke, attempt to separate existence from perception are also separating time from space, as we exist in time and perceive in space. Those who, like the artists, accept the mental nature of reality, know that we perceive a thing at a definite