

CHAPTER XVIII

BLAKE—THE FIRST ENGLISH MYSTIC

IN more ways than one Blake was the greatest poet of the eighteenth century—not, perhaps, in the whole of what he did, but certainly in the best of it. If we have to class him as a minor poet, it is chiefly because of the small quantity of his great work, not because he is at any time inferior to other poets of his age. Altogether he was one of the most extraordinary persons in the whole history of English letters. He was not only a poet, but a very great painter. Also he was a wonderful prose writer. And finally he must be remembered as the first great English mystic. England has not produced many mystical writers of the first rank, and Blake almost stands alone. To find companions for him in this relation, we must look outside of England. He belongs rather to that class of mystics represented abroad by Swedenborg and by Jacob Boehme.

But let us here first define the meaning of Mystic. It is to-day a term of very wide signification; formerly its meaning was more restricted. Originally the term was ecclesiastical; a mystic, in the language of the church, would have been a man directly inspired from heaven to write or to speak of divine things. Mysticism was then the condition of divine inspiration. Later the metaphysical philosophy held a mystic to be a person who believed that through religious faith and meditation it was possible to obtain knowledge of things which could be learned neither by reason nor through the senses. Latterly, that is to-day, we consider mysticism to be any form of belief in the possibility of holding communication with the invisible world, or of obtaining higher knowledge, by following a particular

course of religious training or meditation. Indeed, even the man who merely believes in this possibility is apt to be called a mystic. Thus, many writers in Europe to-day who believe that the highest knowledge can be obtained from the studies of Indian philosophy or Buddhist philosophy, are called mystics, just as Christian dreamers were called mystics centuries ago. The word, as you may have guessed already, is very closely connected with the idea of mystery. In the shortest possible way, we might define a mystic as one who believes that superhuman knowledge can be obtained by religious faith of any kind. Now Blake was a mystic in every sense of the word that we have been trying to define. He was a Christian mystic, a non-Christian mystic, and almost a theosophical mystic in the most modern sense of the word.

Altogether not the least strange thing about this strange man was the fact of his belonging to the eighteenth century, the most prosaic and unimaginative age of English literature. It was a period almost without real poetry, except in the matter of mere form; and in the great bare desert of its literature Blake blossoms like a strange wild flower of unfamiliar colour and yet more unfamiliar perfume. I must tell you a few facts about his life, which are very interesting, and which I think you will consider very curious.

Blake was born in 1757 in London, the son of a wine merchant. His family had been **greatly** influenced by the teaching of Swedenborg; and it is possible that the fact may have affected his character from the earliest age—I mean that he might have inherited either through his mother or through his father some predisposition to a mystical emotion. At all events he came into the world a strangely sensitive and imaginative child, always seeing ghosts and visions. Almost as soon as he was able to talk, he talked of seeing things which nobody else could see; and as soon as he learned something about Bible stories and Christian belief, he used to see patriarchs and prophets

and angels walking about, and used to talk to them. Once he said that he saw God the Father looking at him through the window. Many sensitive children see ghosts and goblins and all kinds of things up to the age of about seven years, but in the greater number of such cases the illusions soon pass away, whereas Blake remained during his whole life in the visionary state of the child. In fact, he may be said to have passed most of his existence in the company of ghosts, holding very little communication with real men and women. The world is apt to judge such people as mad, and there is no doubt that Blake was a little mad during the whole of his life. But his madness did not prevent him from becoming a great poet and a very great artist; indeed, it rather helped him.

It was considered dangerous to send him to school, because he was too delicate and too imaginative. He was taught at home only until he became old enough to learn a trade. Then his father apprenticed him to an engraver; and during his apprenticeship he gave proof of extraordinary talent. There is a queer story told about him at this time. One day his father brought him to the studio of a very successful artist called Rylands; and after he had been in the house only a few minutes, he whispered to his father, "Father, I do not like that man's face; he looks as if he were going to be hanged one of these days." Strange to say, this man Rylands was hanged a few years after for the crime of forgery.

Having become a journey-man engraver—that is, one who has finished his apprenticeship, and is able to command the highest price paid—Blake remained but for a short time in the employ of others. His ambition was to become independent. And indeed independence was necessary for him. He was one of those men who never can be induced to submit to regulations which they do not like; and he could never do exactly what he was wanted to do. Meantime, after a severe disappointment in love, he married a girl who made him an excellent wife, sharing his peculiar ideas and

beliefs as perhaps no other woman would have done. Luckily they had no children; for Blake was destined to live in poverty for the rest of his existence. He did establish an office of his own, but in that office he gave all his time to the publishing and illustrating of his own books. At one time he was helped by his brother Robert; but Robert died young. Afterwards Blake said that the ghost of Robert had come to him and taught him a new mechanical process of engraving on copper plates. Whether this was imagination or not, certain it is that Blake invented a new system of printing; and he believed that he learned it from the spirit of his dead brother. This process is still in use, but has been very much improved. In order to print his poems by this method Blake was obliged to engrave the whole of the text backwards upon the copper plates. He printed his pictures only in black and white; but afterwards he and his wife used to colour the pictures by hand. They were very wonderful pictures; and Blake was able to attract the attention of great artists and great poets by this work. Friends subscribed enough money to keep him alive, but not enough money to enable him to do all that he wished to do, for his method of printing was very expensive, and he could not sell many copies of his extraordinary books. After many years of this patient solitary work, he died in 1827. He left behind him one hundred volumes of illustrated poetry and prose, which he said he had been inspired to write and to illustrate by angels and other holy spirits.

His wife survived him for only a short time. When she was about to die she gave all this great mass of precious manuscripts and priceless drawings to a clergyman named Tatham, who had been a great friend of Blake. Tatham belonged to a curious Christian sect, called the "Irvingites," who were mystics. Tatham, after the death of Mrs. Blake, looked at the books and made up his mind that the work had been inspired by the Devil. Therefore, without asking anybody's advice, he burned the books and pictures. There were so many books and so many pictures that it took two

days to burn them all. This was certainly one of the greatest crimes ever committed against literature and art. What little of Blake's work is left to-day chiefly belongs to the British Museum, and is considered beyond price. You must go to the British Museum to see it. As an artist Blake has had a great deal of influence upon the modern painters; and almost every modern painter of note goes to the British Museum to study the work of Blake.

But we are here concerned chiefly with Blake's poetry. This poetry naturally divides itself into three parts. The first division represents what Blake wrote when quite a young man and while under the influence of Elizabethan poets. The second division comprises what he wrote after he had found his own way, and before he came to believe that everything that he wrote was the work of ghosts and spirits. The third division represents that later period of his life when he lived altogether in a state of hallucination, and believed that all he wrote was dictated to him by heavenly powers. At this period he had ceased to believe in Swedenborg; he had invented a mysticism of his own. He died singing a mystic song, and declared that his room was full of spirits. When Blake could not be satisfied with Swedenborg, you may be sure that his mysticism was of a very original kind. I may mention here that Emanuel Swedenborg (1688—1772) founded a most extraordinary form of modern Christian mysticism—teaching that the Bible had two meanings, a hidden meaning and an apparent meaning; and that he himself had a revelation of the hidden meaning. So his church, which now calls itself the New Jerusalem Church, even counts its years from the date of Swedenborg's revelation. But Blake, in the latter part of his life, thought that he knew more than Swedenborg, and that he had a revelation of his own.

As might be expected from these facts, it is chiefly the poetry of Blake's youth and middle age that has enduring value. The poetry of his last years—at least so much of it as was not burned by Tatham—is scarcely comprehensible.

There are fine passages in it, but much of it seems to be madness. Curiously enough, the only other poet of the eighteenth century who could be compared for originality with Blake was also mad—the poet Christopher Smart.

I shall also speak very briefly of Blake's poetical prose. He wrote a great deal of mystical fancy and story in a kind of prose that looks at first sight very much like the poetry of Walt Whitman. But it is very much finer than most of Whitman's work, and it was inspired chiefly by the reading of the Bible and the reading of Ossian. There is no question that Blake's work in this direction influenced Coleridge. Perhaps you know Coleridge wrote one wonderful piece of prose-poetry called "The Wanderings of Cain." Coleridge got his inspiration from Blake, and passed it on to Bulwer-Lytton, who again passed it on to Poe. Thus we may say that Blake's influence indirectly affected most of our nineteenth century literature of imagination; for there is scarcely any writer of the nineteenth century that has not been a little influenced by Poe.

Now let us turn to the poetry. Blake does not get his strong grasp of simplicity at first. At first he resembles the Elizabethan poets so much that he has been called the last of the Elizabethans. He imitates Spenser and the lyrists of Shakespeare's day. But even in this first period, he tells us how dissatisfied he feels with the artificial poetry of his time—with the schools of Dryden and of Pope; and this dissatisfaction he expresses in very beautiful verses, which have become immortal—

TO THE MUSES

Whether on Ida's shady brow,
Or in the chambers of the East,
The chambers of the Sun, that now
From ancient melody have ceased;

Whether in heaven ye wander fair,
Or the green corners of the earth,

Or the blue regions of the air
Where the melodious winds have birth;

Whether on crystal rocks ye rove,
Beneath the bosom of the sea,
Wandering in many a coral grove;
Fair Nine, forsaking Poetry;

How have you left the ancient love
That bards of old enjoyed in you!
The languid strings do scarcely move,
The sound is forced, the notes are few!

The want of the emotional element, the want of the deeper sense of truth and beauty in eighteenth century poetry, is well stated here. The time of Pope was indeed a time at which the Nine Muses seem to have fled away from England. By the term "bards of old," Blake certainly means the writers of the age of Elizabeth, who did not often write verse so correct in form as the verse of Pope, but who were incomparably greater poets than Pope in the true meaning of poetry. Poetry is something that should stir our emotions, or make us think new thoughts; whatever can do neither the one nor the other may be very good verse, but it is not poetry. Here Blake is right. How well he could imitate the "bards of old" is shown in the little song which the greatest living English critic pronounces "ineffable melody"*

Memory, hither come,
And tune your merry notes:
And, while upon the wind
Your music floats,
I'll pore upon the stream
Where sighing lovers dream,
And fish for fancies as they pass
Within the watery glass.

* George Saintsbury, *A History of Nineteenth Century Literature*, P. 11.

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I'll drink of the clear stream,
And hear the linnet's song,
And there I'll lie and dream
The day along :
And when night comes, I'll go
To places fit for woe,
Walking along the darkened valley
With silent Melancholy.

Both of these compositions prove to us at once that we are in the presence of a nature lover like Herrick, or like the singers of Shakespeare's day. The school of Pope could not have uttered anything like this. A very pretty idea is that about "fishing for fancies" in the river ; we all do the thing, while we watch the flowing of a clear river, but how many of us could have thought of expressing what we do in words like these?

It is rather in the "Songs of Innocence" and the "Songs of Experience" that we find the first utterance of Blake's true note, the mystical note, allied with almost childish simplicity of expression. Let me speak about the meanings of these titles. The "Songs of Innocence" are supposed to represent conditions of mind in happy childhood, or in that time of life before we learn to understand what the suffering of this world really is. On the other hand, the "Songs of Experience" are supposed to reflect our thoughts after the painful facts of life have been comprehended. To the first class of songs belong several which have passed into nearly all English anthologies—such as "The Lamb," "Spring," "Infant Joy." All children now learn these by heart ; I do not think that I need quote any of them to you. But the "Songs of Experience" are not so well known — if known as to form, not so well understood as to meaning. There are very curious and very terrible things here, expressed in the softest and quietest way imaginable. What, for example, do you think of this?

A POISON TREE

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears
Night and morning with my tears,
And I sunned it with smiles
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright,
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,—

And into my garden stole
When the night had veiled the pole;
In the morning, glad, I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

You can make a great number of different meanings out of such a poem as this. It strongly suggests, among other things, certain eastern ideas, about the unseen influence of revengeful thoughts. But without attempting to carry the application of the comparison too far, suffice it to say that the verse excellently depicts the dangerous quality of concealed resentment as compared with outspoken anger. Nevertheless the more often that you read the poem, the more often will you make new discoveries in it.

This simplicity of Blake's is of a very deceiving kind; what appear to be baby-songs, for example, often turn out to have a meaning deep enough to make a philosopher think twice. Probably you know that little poem by Blake about the girl who was lost far away in the forest, and was taken care of by lions. It is very pretty, and children learn it by heart. But it was certainly inspired by the curious belief of the Middle Ages that tigers and other wild beasts could not harm a virgin, and the deeper meaning of the

poem is the strength of innocence in its charm. Or take the poem about a fly—such a little trifle! Yet how much it can give one to think about!

THE FLY

Little Fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brushed away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance,
And drink, and sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life
And strength and breath,
And the want
Of thought is death;

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

It looks like a nonsense-rhyme, but it is not. The poet has killed a fly unintentionally, and the sudden death of the little creature has set him to thinking about the great mystery of life. He asks what is the difference, in the eternal order of things, between the life of a man and the life of a fly. Do not men live much like flies, after all, thinking only of pleasure, never or seldom of death? What is life? If what we call mind is real life, then indeed death makes no difference, for there can be no real death. But the ques-

tion is not answered. It is only put, and you must think out the answer for yourself. Try to do that; and you will discover that the verses are not simple at all.

But let us take something less metaphysical.

A LITTLE BOY LOST

'Nought loves another as itself,
Nor venerates another so,
Nor is it possible to Thought
A greater than itself to know.

'And, Father, how can I love you
Or any of my brothers more?
I love you like the little bird
That picks up crumbs around the door.'

The Priest sat by and heard the child;
In trembling zeal he seized his hair,
He led him by his little coat,
And all admired the priestly care.

And standing on the altar high,
'Lo! what a fiend is here!' said he:
'One who sets reason up for judge
Of our most holy mystery.'

The weeping child could not be heard,
The weeping parents wept in vain:
They stripped him to his little shirt,
And bound him in an iron chain,

And burned him in a holy place
Where many had been burned before;
The weeping parents wept in vain.
Are such things done on Albion's shore?

The whole story of the Inquisition is related in this little poem. But you will perhaps not catch the meaning at the first reading, unless you are familiar with certain expressions having reference to Christian doctrine. Understand, first of

all, the Christian is ordered to love his neighbour as himself and to love God more than himself. A child is supposed to be arguing the question with the Heavenly Father. He says that it is impossible for anybody to love another person in the same way as one loves one's self, and it is impossible for the simple mind to imagine anything of mind greater than itself—statements which are from the child's standpoint quite true. The child asks, "How can I love you or my brother any more than I do love you? I love you just as a little bird loves a person who gives it food." For this he is burned alive. What makes the poem seem emotionally horrible to us is the introduction of this little innocent child as the victim; for, as a matter of fact, the religious persecutors seldom burned children under sixteen years of age, except when there was a general massacre of heretics. But the poet uses the figure of the child quite properly for his didactic purpose. In reality, he means that in the sight of the eternal power, in the sight of the Supreme Wisdom, we are all like little foolish children, and that we are especially foolish in being cruel to each other. After telling the story he asks, "Are such things done in England?" The answer is that they were done, hundreds of times, not only by Catholics, but sometimes also by Protestants, who occasionally showed a bigotry and a cruelty quite worthy of the Dark Ages. It is great art to express a terrible truth in the form of an innocent little story; and Blake has shown this art admirably in the little poem which we have just read.

Let us now take a little cradle song. You know that a cradle song is a song sung by a mother to make her child fall asleep. This baby song, however, is not for babies; only those who have thought a great deal about the sorrow and mystery of life can really understand it. Yet I do not think that you will readily guess the meaning of it before you read the very last line.

A CRADLE SONG

Sleep, sleep, beauty bright,
Dreaming in the joys of night;
Sleep, sleep; in thy sleep
Little sorrows sit and weep.

Sweet Babe, in thy face
Soft desires I can trace,
Secret joys and secret smiles,
Little pretty infant wiles.

As thy softest limbs I feel,
Smiles as of the morning steal
O'er thy cheek, and o'er thy breast
Where thy little heart doth rest.

O! the cunning wiles that creep
In thy little heart asleep!
*When thy little heart doth wake,
Then the dreadful light shall break.*

I have put the last two lines in italics, because they are the key to the whole meaning. These are the thoughts of a father, watching his own child asleep. Sometimes the child's dreams are happy; then the little face smiles. Sometimes the dreams are bad; then the little fellow sobs in his sleep. The father thinks somewhat as follows: "Pain and Pleasure—they come even to the sleeping baby. How many wonderful possibilities are locked up in that little brain and in that little heart, possibilities of future and larger pleasure and pain. These are only the sorrows and joys of a child's dreams. But are we not, all of us, like children dreaming? At all events the whole of childhood is a dream. Manhood or womanhood is the awakening; then come the greater pains, because of the greater knowledge. When a little boy has grown up to be a man, how terrible will be the pain that he must suffer when he learns to know what life really is!"

Now we have another queer little poem, which forms a

companion piece to "A Little Boy Lost." It is called "A Little Girl Lost," — just like the very pretty poem in the "Songs of Innocence" describing how the lions took care of a baby girl that had lost her way. But this second poem with the same title is not a song of innocence, but a song of experience, and the lions do not in this case come to take care of the wandering maiden.

A LITTLE GIRL LOST

*Children of the future age,
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time,
Love, sweet love, was thought a crime !*

In the Age of Gold,
Free from winter's cold,
Youth and maiden bright
To the holy light,
Naked in the sunny beams delight.

Once a youthful pair,
Filled with softest care,
Met in garden bright
Where the holy light
Had just removed the curtains of the night.

There, in rising day,
On the grass they play ;
Parents were afar,
Strangers came not near,
And the maiden soon forgot her fear.

Tired with kisses sweet,
They agree to meet
When the silent sleep
Waves o'er heaven's deep,
And the weary tired wanderers weep.

To her father white
Came the maiden bright ;

But his loving look,
Like the holy book,
All her tender limbs with terror shook.

'Ona, pale and weak!
To thy father speak:
O! the trembling fear.
O! the dismal care,
That shakes the blossoms of my hoary hair!'

What does this strange thing mean? Well, it is the old story of the Garden of Eden, told over again, with a modern application. Blake pretends to talk about the Age of Gold, the age of perpetual summer and native innocence, but he is really talking about modern English life. The innocent girl who has not been taught how to take care of herself, as a girl should be taught, might be compared with some Eve of the Golden Age. It is very easy to take advantage of her, for she really believes what is told her, and if her seducer promises to marry her, she is quite satisfied. She does not think that real love can be very bad; her first discovery of how bad it may be, comes when her parents discover that she has been deceived by some unscrupulous man. Nothing more terrible could happen to a human being than is likely to happen to a girl in England known to have been seduced. Not only is the family disgraced; the girl is in every possible way ruined, destroyed, practically murdered. For there is no cruelty compared to the cruelty of English society to the girl who has made a mistake. She cannot stay at home, she cannot be protected even by her own parents in many cases. She cannot possibly obtain employment in any family. She cannot even obtain employment in a factory, or in any place where her history is known. There is a pressure upon her, like the weight of the whole world, to force her into the career of a prostitute. Yet the man is not blamed who has done her this immeasurable wrong. And in many cases, the girl has been fooled through affection, through trust, through the good-

ness and the pureness of her heart. The purpose of this poem is to make English readers ask themselves, "Is it really right to judge the mistakes of affection as cruelly as the world has been judging them?" But like the great teachers of the *Zen* sect, Blake suggests questions without giving answers; you must think of the answers for yourself. In the artistic arrangement of the book, the first of the little girls lost is protected even by lions, because she is innocent; while the second of the little girls lost is condemned even by her own father, because she has ceased to be innocent. That is the contrast which the poet wants you to feel. Whether it is right or wrong that such things be, he does not argue; he only tells you that such things are.

Strong contrast of thought this poet is very fond of; and I can give you quite as remarkable an example of another kind. In the "Songs of Innocence" there is a little poem called "The Divine Image." In this poem the unselfish virtues are spoken of as divine, and the man who practises them is said to become, by their practice, an image of God. I shall quote a few of the verses.

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
All pray in their distress,
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
Is God our Father dear;
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is man, His child and care.

But in the collection of poems called "Ideas of Good and Evil," the same subject is treated in a different and very startling manner.

I heard an angel singing,
When the day was springing:
'Mercy, pity, peace
Are the world's release.'

Thus he sang all day
Over the new-mown hay,
Till the sun went down,
And haycocks lookèd brown.

I heard a devil curse
Over the heath and the furze :
'Mercy could be no more
If there was nobody poor,

And pity no more could be
If all were happy as ye :
And mutual fear brings peace.
Misery's increase
Are mercy, pity, peace.'

At his curse the sun went down,
And the heavens gave a frown.

Perhaps you know that philosophical theory about the impossibility of such emotions as mercy, pity, self-sacrifice in an absolutely perfect world. Such virtues exist where they are needed; but in a state of society where they would not be needed, they would not exist. However, what the demon here wishes to suggest is that the more compassion we have in the world, the more the world is miserable; and, as for peace, the best guarantee of peace is being afraid of each other. Peace may not at all be proved by good will, but only by signs of terror. The statements both of the angel and of the devil are quite true; much as they seem to contradict each other, you must try to believe them both, for if you think only of what the devil said, then the world will become dark for you.

A like strange idea is to be found in one of the "Songs of Experience," called "The Human Abstract." This is a very ugly poem. It represents, in a mystical way, the difficulty of trying to be good in this world, and suggests that all life is ruled by selfishness. Perhaps we might call it an abstract history of the human intellect from a pessimistic point of view.

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor ;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.

And mutual fear brings Peace,
Till the selfish loves increase ;
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,
And waters the ground with tears ;
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head ;
And the caterpillar and fly
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat ;
And the raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

The Gods of the earth and sea
Sought through Nature to find this tree ;
But their search was all in vain :
There grows one in the human brain.

This is a little hard to understand at first reading, but an outline of explanation will make it clear enough. The poet means that in the brain of almost every man there is contained something of the whole history of the human race, with all its faults as well as its virtues. He describes this history as an evolution—like the growth of a tree. The vices of man have been caused by his past necessities. When the distinction between rich and poor became established, then the rich and powerful became cruel and oppressive. After the period of oppression by armed force came the period of oppression by superior cunning and deceit.

Probably the poet refers to what we would call to-day the industrial oppression. By "mystery" the poet means the old religions, and by "caterpillar and fly," he means the ancient priesthood living by religion, but using their influence in favour of the strong against the weak. So that at last this condition of things created hypocrisy, "the fruit of deceit" as the poet calls it, and we are now obliged to live, everybody on guard against his fellowmen, and unable to explain his thoughts of affection without great precaution. We were not so, he thinks, long ago, but we have been made so by past cruelties.

The way in which he sometimes utters a very deep thought is quite startling. It is an old question whether love is selfish or unselfish—I mean sexual love. The philosopher has no doubt about the matter; but the poetic imagination always tries to insist upon the unselfishness of the passion. Yet he makes a clod—that is, a lump of clay,—talk with a pebble on the subject, and expresses rather a dark view of the question.

‘Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair.’

So sung a little Clod of Clay,
Trodden with the cattle’s feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:

‘Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another’s loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite.’

Why the poet should make use of the clod and of the pebble as personages, I do not think anybody knows; we may imagine that the soft clay expresses the gentler side of human nature (which, you know, is often spoken of as

human clay), and that the pebble means the hard side of humanity. But this is only guessing. The fact is not expressed in itself. But the verses are interesting, because you will find that both of the contradictory statements are quite true in a certain sense. What appears to be a contradiction is not really so. It is only a presentation of opposites.

I am going to give only one more example of this queer poetry, entitled "The Smile."

There is a smile of love,
And there is a smile of deceit,
And there is a smile of smiles
In which these two smiles meet.

And there is a frown of hate,
And there is a frown of disdain,
And there is a frown of frowns
Which you strive to forget in vain,

For it sticks in the heart's deep core
And it sticks in the deep backbone—
And no smile that ever was smiled,
But only one smile alone,

That betwixt the cradle and grave
It only once smiled can be;
And when it once is smiled,
There's an end to all misery.

The smile which contains both love and deceit might be a good smile, and might be a bad one; we sometimes deceive kindly, for a good purpose. The second and third stanzas, especially the third, contain some difficulties. The "frown of frowns" certainly relates to death, but what is the smile mentioned in connection with it? The poem has puzzled several commentators, but I think that Blake means the laugh of death, the grin of the skull, which indeed is "only once smiled," and never changes, and thereafter there is indeed an end of misery. The four stanzas will serve

another purpose in this connection. They will show you how fantastic and difficult to understand Blake sometimes is. Various poems which he wrote in the latter part of his life contain similar oddities and obscurities, but they usually contain also something that makes you think—and think so much that you are willing to forgive the faults of the poet for the sake of the good things which he offers you.

I have said enough about Blake to make you understand the nature of his influence, which has been and still continues to be very considerable. There were other English mystics; but there was no other mystical poet before Blake who thought of expressing himself in similar language, the language of a child. You will observe that almost any of the poems which I have quoted for you are in child language, and might be read by little boys and girls who would never guess the depth of meaning behind the verses. In our own day every poet of importance makes a serious study of Blake; there is perhaps no poet of the Victorian age that has not learned a great deal from him. This is his chief glory.