JAMES VILA BLAKE AS POET: BEING A BRIEF APPRECIATION OF HIS WORK WITH REPRESENTATIVE SELECTIONS FROM HIS VARIOUS BOOKS OF VERSE

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JAMES VILA BLAKE AS POET.

Sanity and breadth of philosophy is as fundamental to the highest plane of poetry as to that of prose. It will be found to be as fundamental to any art at its highest expression. Philosophy, wedded to Life, is the centrality of power which pours its light through Life's many-faced reflectors, the arts. Its quality, therefore, must determine largely the plane of individual achievement in art. It is true that the *media* of the reflection must be *Art*. The acme of beauty and truth is found where the purest light of Philosophy inwrought with Life flows through the finest art medium. Hence our first concern with any artist is with the quality of his thought.

James Vila Blake, poet, preacher, theologian, litterateur, is a master-mind in sweep of prophetic vision, in vital and forceful grasp of the large elementals of thought, and in simple, sweet, clear sanity of co-ordination of perceptions. Founding upon a basis purely natural and rational in its best sense, he has become endowed with a lucid, perfectly rounded philosophy and poise of thought which has nothing to fear from, but is companionable to, the developments of scientific law. The effect of this philosophy upon his literary work, whether in prose or poetry, is felt there like under-

pinnings of granite pillars. In the ultimate consideration of Mr. Blake as a poet a study of his full literary work is perhaps a legitimate exaction, by the same reasoning that we may hold Life to be requisite for complete interpretation of a sunset, or recognize any of the countless necessary dependencies of interwoven natural phenomena. Of his published works a list is given below.* To this must be added much uncollected work in prose and verse. In "An Anchor of the Soul" the leading tenets of his religious thought are fully, clearly and logically presented. The "Essays" and "Sermons" show the quality and range of his co-ordination of values. "Saint Solifer" and "More than Kin" are creations of a quaint and tender romantic fancy.

As to note agreement with universalities imports a finer dignity than to mark even wholly admirable dissonance with temporalities, in this critique of Mr. Blake as a poet a purely expository mode of consideration will be followed. Yet to point the difference from the prevailing fashion in verse may be helpful to a swifter comprehension of his individuality. Mr. Blake's work stands in strongly marked contrast to the literary vogue of today; (and if the literary

*Manual Training in Education, 1886.
Essays, 1887.
Poems, 1887.
Legends from Story-Land, 1888.
A Grateful Spirit; and Other Sermons, 1890.
Happiness from Thoughts; and Other Sermons, 1891.
St. Solifer, with Other Worthies and Unworthies, 1891.
Natural Religion, in Sermons, 1892.
More than Kin, 1893.
An Anchor of the Soul: A study of the nature of faith, 1894.
Sonnets, 1898.
Songs, 1902.
Discoveries, 1904.
The Months, 1907.

supply and public taste may not be included together in the term, the latter must answer to it). Wordsworth did not differ more from his contemporaries than does Mr. Blake from the accepted writers of today. Two palpable features of present-day verse may be characterized as "lusciousness," and a lack of simple responsible sincerity. As regards the first, by contrast Mr. Blake appears over-terse and clear-cut. His flavor is that of an apple as against the cloying sweetness of a persimmon. His difference from the vogue is equally marked as regards the other charge. With a pivot in a philosophy that is large, rounded, sane, ample, his work is carved from responsibility, and his "firm and cheerful tone" is invariably buoyant and absolutely sincere. Each least song-burst has its *raison d'être,* and holds a responsible relation to the findings of his philosophy. Moods and their dalliance are notably lacking, vanishing in the crucible of a mind adjusted to large and happy issues. Of "whimpering poets," *et id omne genus,* he says, "Broods I'd hem like bats in rosy fogs, nor seeing nor seen." *v.* Sonnet, p. 97. It has been charged that his work is singularly lacking in a reflection of the passionate despairs, fears, failures, of a struggling soul. Reading deeply enough one may discern the answer in the quiet bosom of the still waters of his tenets, for therein is seen the cure of fear and despair. *Sorrow* has its natural place in his feeling and expression, not as the fine frenzy of a mood, but as the reflection of a sanely sympathetic nature.

In considering the poetry of Mr. Blake analytically, we

may direct our attention first to its substance or matter, then to its form or manner. It is work that is characterized by a marked individuality. One critic has said of it, with partial insight, "Mr. Blake has made an island for himself, and the result is something very strange and very beautiful." If such work mean indeed an island, it is at least one which Withers, Herbert, Vaughn, even such unlike singers as Longfellow, Bryant, and Emerson, and all simply-sincere poet-souls would feel to be *not* strange and unfamiliar. But it is work from no model. In style Mr. Blake has been swayed away by no one and he has copied no one. *Echoes* of other poets there are of course,—that is as inevitable to any reader and lover of poets as are sound-echoes to hill-sides—and it is here we detect Mr. Blake's special love for the older poets. His own individuality is shaped by the cast of his thought and by his artistic taste. The mold of thought is not of the past, though with large tenderness for and due valuation of the past; it is not of the present, though with a sympathetic understanding of the present in its valid thought-simplicities in religion, in politics, in trade, in sociology; it is not a forecast of the idealities of the future merely, though it is indeed strongly prophetic and consonant with the future. It is not of an age, but tents on the wide plains under the constant stars of time. Therefore his work contains few traces of the ephemeral in choice or development of theme. A new truth or an old truth may have equal value to him, but for both the line of vision is always his own, freshly adjusted and far re-

moved from any shade of triteness. The remarkable scope and variety of the seed-thoughts in his verse is one of the most strongly marked traits of his work. In the 150 Sonnets of his book of "Sonnets" are nearly double the number of distinct thoughts, *i. e.*, separate independent ideas apart from mere images or figures or fancies, to be found in Shakespeare's 154 Sonnets. His artistic taste is toward the tenderly reverential, but logical, clearly-cut and sanely simple in poetic utterance. The remarkable conciseness of his style does not preclude a surprising fullness and richness of imagery, a richness that makes no demands on artificial aids for its enhancement. Often a single verse will startle by its sudden galaxy of lights. His exactions upon the thought of his reader together with his concise style are opposed to an "easy" reading, and usually accord him a slowly acquired but steadily augmenting valuation. It may be questioned whether his extremely compressed and compact expression does not result sometimes in a certain clarity of outline that lacks atmospheric toning. Yet the clear dry view is a legitimate nature-effect, and to a lover of that kind of sight the blue rondure of the whole poetic nature is ever present. Questions of "poetic mist" or of "the seer seeing further than he thinks; the singer singing more than he knows,"* etc., etc., have their delusions and their snares for poet and poet-lover. The unresolved, lost-in-a-fog type of poetry has no more place with Mr. Blake than has the "luscious," or the merely ornate.

*See Skipsey's "Poems of William Blake."

A criticism in detail of the form in Mr. Blake's poetry is not in the province of this article, the aim of which is to be, if happily it may, merely a guide or aid to the swifter perception of the leading characteristics of his work. But it is difficult to set limits to the consideration here. With Mr. Blake poetic form has been a passionate study, and pondered deeply both in its principles and in its practice by poets. He is wont to say that *in literature it is the thought that makes anything worthy to live and the form that makes it able to live.* Poetic lawlessness of all sorts, from "free song" to "barbaric yawp," commands little respect from him. Yet within the bounds of form he might be termed a radical, for law and liberty are equally dear to him. To a deep reverence for well-founded law and for poetic traditions he adds a courageous spirit for resourceful and careful development. In verbal choice, in freedom of style, and in constructive genius his dictum is similar to Lowell's "be bold, and again be bold, but not too bold." Balance, proportion, and integrity of construction have a great and special charm for him, and he holds they are determined with certainty by the nature of the thought. His own range in form is through the Ode, Hymn, Lyric, Sonnet, Blank verse, Spencerian stanza, Ballad, Rondel, and minor forms, including two charming bits of his own invention, the "Cameo" and the "Lectel," for examples of which see pp. 72-75 and pp. 68-70.

The selections taken as a whole will be found to be an excellent comment on his wide variety of stanzaic form.