

**THE PROPHETIC BOOKS  
OF WILLIAM BLAKE;  
MILTON. [1907]**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649758791

The Prophetic Books of William Blake; Milton. [1907] by William Blake & E. R. D. Maclagan & A. G. B. Russell

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Cover @ 2017

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*UNIFORM WITH THIS BOOK*

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THE PROPHETIC BOOKS OF W. BLAKE

**JERUSALEM**

Edited by E. R. D. MACLAGAN and  
A. G. E. RUSSELL

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THE PROPHECIC BOOKS OF WILLIAM BLAKE

# MILTON

EDITED BY E. R. D. MACLAGAN AND A. G. B. RUSSELL

LONDON:  
A. H. BULLEN  
47, GREAT RUSSELL STREET  
1907

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## INTRODUCTION.

WHEN, in a letter to his friend George Cumberland, written just a year before his departure to Felpham, Blake lightly mentions that he had passed "nearly twenty years in ups and downs" since his first embarkation upon "the ocean of business," he is simply referring to the anxiety with which he had been continually harassed in regard to the means of life. He gives no hint of the terrible mental conflict with which his life was at that time darkened. It was more actually then a question of the existence of his body than of the state of his soul. It is not until several years later that he permits us to realize the full significance of this sombre period in the process of his spiritual development. The new burst of intellectual vision, accompanying his visit to the Truchsessian Picture Gallery in 1804, when all the joy and enthusiasm which had inspired the creations of his youth once more returned to him, gave him courage for the first time to face the past and to reflect upon the course of his deadly struggle with "that spectrous fiend" who had formerly waged war upon his imagination. "Suddenly," he wrote to Hayley on the 23rd October, "I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth, and which has for exactly twenty years been closed from me as by a door and by window-shutters. . . . He is become my servant who domineered over me, he is even as a brother who was my enemy." The nature of his enemy is made sufficiently clear by the continuation of this remarkable letter, where under some easily discernible symbols the whole matter is briefly and dramatically set forth. His inmost convictions as to the origin and essence of his inspiration had been unceasingly assailed by a host of those secret doubts and fears (the most insidious of all spiritual perils) with which the spectre or reasoning faculty, that "abstract objecting power" which "negatives everything" is for ever seeking to restrain and subdue man's creative energies. This spectre was the spirit of his own time. Religion and art had become empty formalities. Imagination was on the verge of extinction. The age was engrossed upon the reconstruction of society on a materialistic basis. Many of Blake's earlier "prophecies" are intimately con-

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cerned with the religious and political upheaval of his day. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, America*, as well as the lost poem entitled *The French Revolution*, are almost exclusively devoted to this subject. He was never tired of inveighing against the disastrous tyranny of those laws and moralities which had been framed by abstract philosophy and false religion for the suppression of the "interior vision," and urging the people to shake off, before it is too late, "the heavy iron chain" which is "descending link by link" to enslave them. The dominion of this malignant spectre was daily increasing, and even Blake himself, who was in so little the child of his own age, was not able to escape entirely from its pernicious influence. For every man is born with the instincts of his time, which are ineradicable from his natural state, and if these instincts are altogether corrupt and worldly, it is only in the power of a supreme imaginative intelligence to eliminate their tendency. It was a time when the emanative portion of the universal manhood had fallen into a deep sleep, and before it could be awakened and resume its place in the fourfold harmony of human existence, it was necessary that the "selfish" spectre should be compelled to resign the power which it had usurped. This earth-born antagonist, hitherto victorious in the strength of the prevailing rationalism and materialism from which it had issued, if it was to be overcome, must, Antaeus-like, be uprooted from all terrestrial contact and grappled with in the pure region of imagination. It was many years before Blake learnt this sovereign secret and many "times" of almost overwhelming despair "passed over him" before the conflict was at an end. In the same letter, which has been already quoted, he likens his state during these anxious years to that which transformed King Nebuchadnezzar into a beast of the field: using the wild insanity of the outcast monarch as a symbol of the bestial existence of man under the domination of Reason. "I was a slave," he writes, "bound in a mill among beasts and devils. These beasts and these devils are now, together with myself, become children of light and liberty, and my feet and my wife's feet are free from fetters." He had begun by attempting to face the world on its own ground. He believed that by entering the servitude of the mill he would be



able to transfigure its empty routine with the joy and exuberance of his own intellectual freedom. But the process of the mill is the annihilation of the spirit. It is the logic which abhors and condemns everything it cannot explain. It is, in art, the method pursued by those who believe that genius can be acquired by taking pains, who "turn that which is soul and life into a mill or machine."

When, in the autumn of the year 1800, Blake withdrew from London into the country, he seemed to see the dawn of another life, in which he was to emerge at last from the confusion and unrest of his past existence into a state of freedom and spiritual felicity. He believed that the generosity of his new patron would for ever redeem him from that servile necessity of soul-destroying drudgery which had hitherto been imposed upon him by the fear of starvation, and that he would be able to pursue the arts of imagination, unfettered and uninterrupted. The atmosphere of Felpham appeared to his liberated perceptions to be a "more spiritual" one than that of London. "Heaven," he wrote, on arriving, to Flaxman, "opens here on all sides her golden gates; . . . voices of celestial inhabitants are more distinctly heard, and their forms more distinctly seen." He dreamed of becoming the prophet of a new era of visionary creation when men should again "converse in heaven and walk with angels," upon earth. But he was quickly to be disillusioned. It was soon clear that his patron was not at all disposed to bestow, with his benevolence, a free hand. Besides this, he was wholly out of sympathy with the visionary character of Blake's inventions, both in poetry and painting, and irritated him beyond measure by the "genteel ignorance and polite disapprobation," with which he was content to receive them. "He is as much averse," Blake bitterly complained in a letter to Butts, "to my poetry as he is to a chapter in the Bible," and "approves of my designs as little as he does of my poems." Miniature painting, engraving of a despicable sort and the decoration of Hayley's library with a frieze of poets' heads were by no means the most grievous of the tasks set; and the worst of them was far more tolerable than the habit of reading Klopstock aloud with which his patron sought to improve the brief hours of

recreation. No wonder at the expressions of unconcealed disappointment which we find in some of Blake's letters. He discovered immediately and to his cost that in the country there is no peace at all and that it is only in the midst of a great city that the artist can be truly alone with his own soul. "I do assure you," he wrote afterwards to Butts, "that, if I could have returned to London a month after my arrival here, I should have done so"; and in another letter, "I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London unannoyed, and converse with my friends in eternity, see visions, dream dreams, and prophesy and speak parables unobserved, and at liberty from the doubts of other mortals."

But in spite of the truly "Herculean labours" which, he tells us, were imposed upon him at Felpham, Blake was at the same time fully conscious of a considerable debt of gratitude. He also speaks of his "three years slumber on the banks of Ocean." "O lovely Felpham," he affectionately exclaims, writing to Hayley, "parent of immortal friendship, to thee I am eternally indebted for my three years' rest from perturbation and the strength I now enjoy." The mere fact of the entire change of environment and the respite which he obtained from all the cares and worries which his life in London had accumulated, gave him a sense of rest and freedom, and he found in "the sweet air and the voices of winds, trees and birds, and the odours of the happy ground" an influence soothing and refreshing to the brain. The three years at Felpham were in this way years of retreat, during which he was enabled to devote himself to bringing to an end the period of mental war; and the conflict was there fiercest because it had passed into the ultimate world of vision. It became possible for him to effect the clarification of his ideas both upon religion and art. "One thing of real consequence," he himself observes, in one of his letters, "I have accomplished by coming into the country, which is to me consolation enough: namely, I have recollected all my scattered thoughts on art . . . which in the confusion of London I had very much obliterated from my mind." It was a time of personal introspection and analysis, and of the final purging away from his imagination of all that was not pure vision; and, with the passing of this period of trial and probation, came the return of all his

youthful enthusiasm. "I am drunk," he wrote to Hayley from London, "with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand, even as I used to be in my youth, and as I have not been for twenty dark, but very profitable years. I thank God that I courageously pursued my course through darkness"; and again, six weeks later, "I have indeed fought through a hill of terrors and horrors (which none could know but myself) in a divided existence; now, no longer divided nor at war with myself, I shall travel on in the strength of the Lord God, as poor Pilgrim says."

The events of this final struggle at Felpham, together with its triumphant issue, are recorded by Blake in the book of *Milton*. The poet had from his earliest days made a strong appeal to his imagination. In the lines (enclosed with a letter to Flaxman dated 12th September, 1800) where he gives a brief summary of the various influences which had entered into his life, he places Milton first in the list of his spiritual instructors: "Now my lot in the heavens is this, Milton lov'd me in childhood and shew'd me his face." In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake criticizes, it is true, *Paradise Lost*, because in it the restrainer of reason, (Urizen-Jehovah) who is by Milton called Messiah, is made to cast out desire or energy (Satan), which "is the only life"; for, as he contemptuously observes, "those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained," and, as he further explains, in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, "Men are admitted into heaven, not because they have curbed and governed their passions, or have no passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of heaven are not negations of passion, but realities of intellect, from which all the passions emanate, uncurbed in their eternal glory. . . . Those who are cast out are all those who, having no passions of their own, because no intellect, have spent their lives in curbing and governing other people's by . . . cruelty of all kinds." But at the same time he points out that Milton was none the less "a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it"; for, in spite of himself, Satan became the hero of his poem and he found himself writing "in fetters when he wrote of Angels and of God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell."