



Vision & Vesture: A Study of William Blake in Modern Thought

Charles Gardner

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From the PREFACE.

THIS book was written for the most part before the war. Mindful how the war has affected the mental outlook of us all, I turned anxiously to its pages to see whether I might not feel obliged to re-write some of the chapters. But I found nothing I wanted to alter: the only difference the war made was to defer the publication for a few months, and these have enabled me to stand far enough from my work to view it objectively. I see, again, that its subtitle suggests many volumes; for viewed quantitatively there was no reason why there should not be ten, fifteen, twenty volumes, and my imagination fainted at such a dreary prospect. But my instinct leads all the other way; and when I asked myself the question, how short my work might be, the small volume was the only answer. Knowing that one's instincts are to be trusted, that is sufficient apology for my brevity, but to those who feel happier when a recognised authority can be quoted I will add, that August Strindberg has shown how much can be said in a small volume. Strindberg's self-revelation is not only complete but one can never forget it. Hardly can one say as such for Rousseau. When one lays down the bulky volume of his *Confessions* one has a vivid remembrance of lurid passages, and a distressing consciousness that much of what one has read has slipped away. I might point to a greater than Strindberg, for are we not all coming to think that the greatest book of the eighteenth century was also one of its smallest — Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*?

In dealing with modern thought I have preferred not to treat it in the lump. By tracing thoughts back to the thinkers the heavy lump dissolves into the fine essence of men's minds, and gathers colour and spirit from the individual thinker. And, therefore, I have dealt with persons — Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Shaw, Yeats. The one difficulty has been that of selection, so many names have started to mind. Here, too, I have followed my instinct, alighting on just those men and women who appeared to me to supply the necessary link in the chain of modern thought. Some may think that place might have been given to Browning, Tennyson, Morris, Maeterlinck. I must say that I do not think that they would have served my purpose. The only possible regret I might have is that I did not give a chapter to Samuel Butler; but even of this I will not repent, for I judged deliberately at the time that Butler had again in Shaw, and in treating Shaw with some fulness Butler's value was not really overlooked.

Some six years ago I undertook to lecture on Blake in South Kensington. To equip myself I hastened to the British Museum to read through the Blake literature. It was a far greater undertaking than I had imagined, but I persevered and read about forty volumes. From this strenuous reading I discovered among other things, that most of those who have written on Blake have been men of letters approaching their subject from the literary point of view. While recognising the importance of their work, I think there is another side which is of exactly equal importance. Blake refers so often in his prophetic books to Wesley and Whitefield as to make it obvious that they entered into his mental life there to stay. Following up this hint, and happening at the time to be lecturing on eighteenth century evangelicalism, I saw suddenly that there were remarkable lines of convergence and divergence between Blake and his religious contemporaries, and that these points seized would prove valuable and illuminating. That is my sufficient reason for bringing Wesley and Whitefield forward to elucidate Blake, all the more as they are almost always ignored by men who hold a merely literary creed. At the same time it accentuates the religious side of Blake's nature, and that is of immense importance

to the present generation....

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