William Blake. By HUBERT J. NORMAN, M.B., Ch.B., D.P.H.Edin., Assistant Medical Officer, Camberwell House, S.E.

I.

THE association between the artistic temperament and eccentricity has frequently been noted, and in the lives of Turner, Vandyck, Michael Angelo, Benvenuto Cellini, Morland, Romney, Maclise, Landseer, Haydon, Cosway, and many others there is much to support Nisbet's contention that "nerve-disorder is a fundamental element of genius in relation to colour and form." To the list already given, the name of William Blake may fittingly be added, for, just as some of those named at times passed the boundary which separates sanity from insanity, so most certainly did Blake also cross the borderland.

It does not, of course, follow that because those attributes which are usually associated with the term genius are so frequently found in conjunction with unsound mental action that they, therefore, arise from the nerve-disorder; rather is it that they both proceed from a nervous system in a condition of unstable equilibrium, which may either exhibit complex reactions in the production of some work of high intellectual grade, or tend at other times to display those irregular functionings which are termed eccentric or insane.

That conduct of an eccentric or even of an insane nature has been observed in many artists is undoubted; indeed, so frequently has such conduct been noted that some writers have inferred that eccentricity is an invariable concomitant of the artistic temperament. The tendency to caricature is, however, very widespread; that which is a prominent trait in such writers as Dickens, Swift, Cervantes, or Heine, or of such artists as Hogarth, Jan Steen, Cruickshank, or Teniers, is no less noticeable a feature of all but a few—a very few—people. The usual conception of a madman as one who rages furiously about, seeking, like the Devil, those whom he may assault or destroy; or as, alternatively, one who sits gloomily apart, morose, sullen, misanthropic, and, like Job, curses the day of his birth; or the popular notion of asylums based upon the reading of the modern homologues of *Hard Cash* and *Valentine Vox* as places where sane people are incarcerated by designing relatives, and

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WILLIAM BLAKE.

FROM A PAINTING (1807) by THOMAS PHILLIPS, R.A.

Original in the National Portrait Gallery.

To illustrate Dr. HUBERT J. NORMAN'S paper.

Photograph by Emery Walker.

Adlard & Son Imp.

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Those who choose to play the game, so beloved of certain metaphysicians, of "emptying" the term insane of its "contents" may do so, and solace themselves thereafter with a euphemism to fill its place. There is little pleasure or credit in logomachy. Lest, however, any injustice should be done to those whose views are quoted, their actual words will be given. This method, while extending perhaps unduly the length of the following essay, gives to those who read it an opportunity of judging for themselves whether any unfair inferences have been drawn by the writer.

The literature in connection with such a subject is, of course, immense, and the number of commentators, we may almost say, is legion. An attempt has, however, been made to embody herein the observations of the more prominent of those who have discussed the question of Blake's sanity. A more ambitious scheme would have necessitated a volume rather than an essay. It is hoped, however, that sufficient evidence has been incorporated to elucidate the question at issue; further citation and comment, whilst adding to a bulk which is already rather prodigious, would not increase—except from a bibliographical point of view—whatever value may pertain to this study of Blake.

II.

William Blake was born in London in the month of November, 1757. His father was a hosier by trade; regarding him there is, however, little information that is accurate. By some writers he is said to have been of Irish descent, but the evidence in regard to this appears to be unsatisfactory (1). Nor does there seem to be any reason to believe that he was related to Admiral Robert Blake, although this also is asserted. It is interesting to note that Blake's father is described as being a Swedenborgian, for the influence of Swedenborg's writings upon certain of those of William Blake is obvious. Blake appears to have retained little affection for his father later in life; sundry thrashings which that parent found necessary to administer to his son appear to have rankled in his memory. "He long disliked the very word *father*. It is often a term of reproach in his poems," says one of his biographers (2). It is recorded that some of these

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castigations resulted from his giving descriptions of his "visions"; his parents, not recognising at first the child's unusual character, looked upon his statements as the result of waywardness or of untruthfulness. Even at an early age, Blake was subject to the outbursts of furious anger which were noticeable in his later life; in this connection we read "Blake's fit of fury at being struck was so violent and appalling that it resulted in the decision that he was not to go to school" (3). When he was sixteen years old, and whilst he was working on a scaffolding in Westminster Abbey, it is recorded that he threw therefrom a boy who had annoyed him. "Occasional outbursts of fury remained always noticeable in Blake," says Mr. Ellis. Although it is agreed by most of his biographers that he was essentially a peaceable man and of mild disposition, yet they all allow that he was subject at times to excessive irritability. At these times, the blow followed quickly on the word, and, on one occasion at least, Blake was involved in serious trouble as a result. His lack of control was exhibited in other and milder forms than that of assault, as it will be pointed out in dealing with his later life.

Of Blake's mother as little is known as of his father. In view of Blake's curious mental history, it is regrettable that so few details have come to light regarding his heredity, for there must almost of a certainty have been some morbid strain. Yet that so little is known is not surprising, for the Blakes were quite an obscure family, and even at the time of his death William Blake's writings and his artistic works were known to comparatively few people. Consequently, little trouble was taken by anyone to put on record facts concerning his family history. As there were disagreements with his father, so also Blake appears to have become estranged from his mother; and, indeed, he appears to have had no great fondness for the other members of the family, except in the case of a brother, Robert, of whom later he spoke and wrote in terms of affection.

Blake's elder brother James is described as "having a saving, somniferous mind," by one biographer; and from another writer we gather that although he was "for the most part an humble, matter-of-fact man," yet that he "had his spiritual and visionary side too, would at times talk Swedenborg, talk of seeing Abraham and Moses, and to outsiders seem like his gifted brother 'a bit mad'—a mild madman instead of a wild and

stormy" (4). James Blake carried on his father's business, and died about three years before his brother William. With him lived the only sister, of whom little is known; she is said to have outlived the rest of the family, and to have died in extreme penury.

Another brother, John, is stated to have been "a dissolute, disreputable youth. . . . He lived a few reckless days, enlisted as a soldier, and died" (5). Blake described him as "My brother John, the evil one." The exact age at which this brother died is not known, but it is agreed that it was whilst he was quite a young man.

The youngest brother, Robert, the favourite of William, died at the age of twenty-four "of consumption." Again, there is little to be recorded concerning this member of the Blake family. He, too, had artistic tendencies, but his early death did not allow of anything more than a slight development of these. Robert Blake died in 1787, and his brother William, with whom he was then residing, "watched continuously day and night for a fortnight by his bedside," or, at least, so says Gilchrist. The same biographer describes the effect of this upon the overwrought watcher: "At the last solemn moment the visionary eyes beheld the released spirit ascend heavenwards through the matter-of-fact ceiling, clapping its hands for joy" (6).

With this generation the family came to an end; Blake left no children of his own, nor had he any nephews or nieces. It may be noted incidentally, and without desiring to lay too much stress upon this aspect of the family history, that a tendency to sterility has been noted in degenerating families—as, for instance, by Morel and Maudsley, and, in regard to those to whom the character of "genius" may be applied, particularly by Lombroso (7).

Nervous instability showed itself even at an early age in Blake and by other signs than that of undue irascibility. We are told that when he was four years old "he saw God in a vision put his forehead to the window" (8); and three or four years later he returned home one day from Peckham Rye asserting that whilst he was there he had seen "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars," while on another occasion he said that he saw "the haymakers at work, and amid them angelic figures walking" (9). In 1772, when he was some fifteen years old, and when he, having

refused to follow his father's trade, was apprenticed to Basire the engraver, he had "a vision of Christ and His apostles" (10).

Whilst he was still in his teens, Blake began the writing of poetry; indeed, according to Gilchrist, "between the ages of eleven and twelve, if not before, Blake had begun to write original irregular verse" (11). These early poems were published in 1783 under the title of *Poetical Sketches*. In 1789 and in 1794 respectively, there appeared his *Songs of Innocence*, and *Songs of Experience:* it is by these earlier poems that Blake's reputation as a poet has been made, and it is by these also that he is likely to be judged. His later efforts in versification—however much they may appeal to those who revel in mystical writings—are too rhapsodical, obscure, and, at times, unintelligible to gain for him many readers. It was, therefore, before he was thirty-seven years old that his chief poetical work was done.

In 1782, Blake married, and went to live in Leicester Fields. The marriage was an important event in his life. His wife, Catherine, was according to all accounts, a most admirable woman; she was patient and long-suffering, and, although her husband's wayward and variable disposition must at times have been a sore trial to her patience, she watched sedulously over him during the remainder of his life. But for such a worthy and attentive helpmate, Blake's career might have ended very differently; just as, for instance, the poet Cowper owed so much to the fostering care of Mrs. Unwin.

Blake continued steadily to work at his engraving and painting during the period immediately subsequent to his marriage; poetry, too, engaged a good deal of his attention. In 1784 he started his partnership with one called Parker, as a print-seller and engraver. There is apparently nothing definitely recorded as to his mental state about this time, but there is little doubt that he experienced the marked fluctuations which were characteristic of the whole of his intellectual life. There has recently been published (12) what Symons describes as "a light-hearted and incoherent satire," entitled *The Island in the Moon*, which is ascribed to this period. It is an amazing production, and it may be safely asserted that such a piece of work is not consistent with sanity on the part of the author. It is for the most part a mixture of coarse buffoonery, of non-

sensical nomenclature, and of scraps of doggerel ; yet here and there are interspersed some of those delightful lyrics which were afterwards printed in *Songs of Innocence.* The association of these charming poems with the fatuous nonsense and the utter vulgarity of the remainder of this fantastic performance is sufficient evidence of the chaotic mental state in which Blake was at this period. There is a marked lack of cohesion, and such an irregular sequence of ideas as are characteristic of pronounced states of excitement ; while the lack of the sense of proportion which allows of the juxtaposition of refined and delicate poetic utterances and indecent and ribald expressions is almost as suggestive of a morbid brain state. It is certain, therefore, that at the time when Blake wrote this curious medley he must have been in an abnormal mental condition. Consequently, we are quite prepared for the suggestion that " he was now about to become altogether a myth-maker " (13). History makes it sufficiently clear that some such period of unstable equilibrium usually precedes the onset of the visionary and prophetic states : witness, for instance, the incident of St. Paul's sudden conversion on the road to Damascus, and Swedenborg's acute breakdown prior to his persistent delusional condition. It is interesting to note that about this time Blake was, to a considerable extent, influenced by Swedenborg. This is obvious in certain of Blake's writings, particularly in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* which appeared in 1790. The very title suggests at once Swedenborg's *Vision of Heaven and Hell.* There is, too, in the British Museum, a copy of Swedenborg's *Angelic Wisdom concerning the Divine Love,* which was published in English in 1787, and which contains numerous marginal notes in Blake's handwriting. It was likely that anyone with the mental tendencies which were characteristic of Blake would be influenced by the mystical theories of the visionary Swedenborg. With the impatience which was so marked in Blake throughout his life, and which led him so frequently to jump to conclusions before he had troubled to arrive at an adequate comprehension of facts, he soon disagreed with Swedenborg, and even in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* his attitude is at times antagonistic. Swedenborg's theological writings are, however, clearness itself compared with what Gilchrist describes as the " incoherent rhapsodies " of Blake's later years.

Blake disagreed with Parker in 1787, and the partnership was dissolved; he left the house in Broad Street, and went to live in Poland Street. Whilst there "he received from a dream or vision of his dead brother Robert the invention of the kind of printing in which he published all his autograph books" (14). In 1789 appeared the *Book of Thel*, one of the earliest of the "prophetic" books, and in the following year the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was published. It is, as Gilchrist says, "still more mystical" than its predecessor, and it is apparently a record of visions and hallucinations. Here again are noticeable the irrelevance and disconnectedness which characterised so markedly *The Island in the Moon*. Blake informs us that the "Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with him and that he questioned them, asking them 'how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them'"; and he mentions also a visit which he made to a "printing-house in hell," wherein were dragons, a viper, lions, etc.—unusual sights in most well-regulated printing establishments. The presses were presided over, we may presume, by printer's devils! For anyone with the markedly exegetical disposition of the numerous interpreters of the mythology of Blake, and endowed also with a sense of humour, there would be found much material for a satirical exposition of the hidden meaning of this curious work.

The *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is terminated by a note, which runs as follows: "This angel, who is now become a devil, is my particular friend. We often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well. I have also the Bible of hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no."

One law for the Lion and the Ox is Oppression. It is this book which Swinburne designates as exhibiting "the high-water mark of his (Blake's) intellect." In his turgid phraseology —"Every sentence bristles with some paradox, every page seethes with the blind foam and surf of stormy doctrine; the humour is of that fierce, grave sort, whose cool insanity of manner is more horrible and more obscure to the Philistine than any sharp edge of burlesque or glitter of irony; it is huge, swift, inexplicable, hardly laughable through its enormity of laughter, hardly significant through its condensation of meaning." It may be said that Swinburne's essay is more

valuable as a revelation of Swinburne than as a criticism of Blake. Had Blake lived to read it he might well have prayed to be defended from his friends!

Other books of a similar character were written by Blake about this time; more "dreamy books of prophecy," to use Gilchrist's phrase. One, entitled *The French Revolution*, was inspired by the dramatic events which were taking place in France, for Blake was an ardent republican, and walked the streets adorned with the *bonnet-rouge*. Another, which he called the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, appeared in 1793. In this book a number of shadowy characters with ill-sounding names, such as Theotormon, Bromion, Oothoon, and Urizen, conduct themselves in such a mysterious manner as to be still a puzzle to the industrious commentators.

In 1793, Blake left Poland Street, where he had resided for five years, and went to live in Lambeth at Hercules Buildings. In 1794 appeared his *Songs of Experience*, in which he returned to the poetical style of the *Songs of Innocence*. A comparison of this book with the dreamy, mystical, often incoherent writings which preceded it, and with similar ones which succeeded it, gives rise to a feeling of keen regret that his mental state did not permit him to continue along the lines of lyrical versification. As a lyric poet, and especially where simplicity and directness are in question, he has seldom been equalled. There is, however, a curious trait in Blake's character as a poet, and one that is noticeable even in the *Songs of Experience*; it is the manner in which he would allow the most obvious doggerel and imperfect scansion to remain in his poetry, either because he did not notice it, or because he composed and wrote too hastily and would not trouble to revise. Mr. Ellis says that he did not correct his poems because he could not; the mood of conception had not its needful prolongation into a mood of judgment. "This deficiency in Blake, this critical blindness, was almost always absolute and unconscious like colour-blindness or tone-deafness to others." The same writer goes on to say that this "misfortune cost him friend after friend" (17); Blake resented the criticism from others which he was unable to supply himself, and he consequently broke off friendly relationships with those who dared to criticise his productions. It is difficult to conceive how anyone could leave such a verse as the following one unaltered unless he suffered

from mental defect in the direction of critical ability. It occurs in the *Songs of Experience.*

> "When the voices of children are heard on the green,
> And whisperings are in the dale,
> The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
> My face turns green and pale."

Other passages might be quoted illustrative of the same defect, but this one will suffice to show how Blake, even in what Gilchrist describes as the "more lucid writing" of the *Songs of Experience*, could fail to realise poetical faults, and could allow such a bathetic line as that of the "green and pale" face to remain.

As it was with his poetry, so it was with his drawings and painting. Though he was capable in these directions also of remarkable and strikingly beautiful results, yet here, too, his work suffered from his lack of artistic training, and also from his tendency to exaggeration. Only too frequently the beings whom he depicted are disproportioned, and some of his figures, if they are judged dispassionately, and not with the enthusiastic fervour of devotees who consider everything he did worthy of admiration, and all things that he wrote credible, appear as if they were the handiwork of a tyro in the art of drawing. His colouring, though often delicate and obviously the work of an exceptionally talented artist, was at times crude, amateurish, and evidently done in haste. Ellis describes him as "an inharmonious colourist, spotty, feeble, and incoherent." Another critic remarks: "It must be confessed that Blake's work suffers from the obsession of certain ill-formed types of humanity, with the cone-shaped heads, the strongly lined brows, the bull necks, the exaggerated and often incorrect undulation of muscle . . . His was a genius where human expression was lamed by an unnatural vividness of spiritual vision, and a ray of real truth is continually followed by the mutterings of the incomprehensible" (17A).

Blake was not at this time in a mood to depreciate his own wares. In 1794, he issued a leaflet in which the following passage occurs: "Mr. Blake's power of invention very early engaged the attention of many persons of eminence and fortune, by whose means he has been regularly enabled to bring before the public works (he is not afraid to say) of equal magnitude

and consequence with the productions of any age or country" (18). Such statements certainly point to a condition of mental exaltation, and Nordau would assuredly designate it by his favourite expression, megalomania. This is not a solitary instance of Blake's self-appreciation; other examples will be given later of a similar character.

In 1794, still more prophetical writings were published with the titles, *Europe* and *Urizen*. The latter is described by Gilchrist, who was an ardent opponent of those who maintained the mental unsoundness of Blake, as "shapeless, unfathomable," and of the *Song of Los*, which appeared in 1795, he remarks that "in it we seem to catch a thread of connected meaning." There are enthusiasts, however, who do not agree with Gilchrist, and who find meanings and an understandable mythus in the prophetic books; but many, in Blake's own words, "avoid the petrific, abominable chaos" (19). In *Urizen*, and indeed in other prophetical books, one gets the feeling of being involved in a horrid nightmare, as if one were in the grip of an incubus —"in a horrible, dreamful slumber," as Blake so aptly expresses it. As there are probably few who venture so far in their reading of Blake as the prophetic books, some excerpts from this particular one may be of interest:

"From the caverns of his jointed Spine
Down sunk with fright a red
Round globe, hot, burning deep,
Deep down in the Abyss;
Panting, Conglobing, Trembling,
Shooting out ten thousand branches
Around his solid bones.
. . . . . .
In ghastly torment sick,
Within his ribs bloated round,
A craving, Hungry Cavern."

The lines which follow seem like a prophecy of the "Futurist" school of painting:

"And his world teem'd vast enormities,
Fright'ning, faithless, fawning,
Portions of life, similitudes
Of a foot, or a hand, or a head,
Or a heart, or an eye, they swam mischievous,
Dead terrors, delighting in blood" (20).

The term "vast enormities" is, however, not inapplicable to some of Blake's own efforts. In the *Book of Ahania*, which was published in 1795, there are equally horrific passages;

> "The clouds of disease hover'd wide
> Around the Immortal in torment,
> Perching around the hurtling bones,
> Disease on disease, shape on shape,
> Winged, screaming in blood and torment.
> . . . . . .
> The shapes, screaming, flutter'd vain.
> Some combin'd into muscles and glands,
> Some organs for craving and lust;
> Most remained in the tormented void;
> Urizen's army of horrors" (21).

Blake has mustered a not inconsiderable "army of horrors" himself, and anyone may be forgiven for hoping that his rest may not be broken by the onrush of the poet's ephialtic squadrons.

It was during the period of Blake's residence at Hercules Buildings that the curious episode relating to the poet's realistic interpretation of his readings in Milton occurred. Gilchrist gives the story on the authority of Mr. Butts, who bought largely of Blake's artistic productions, and who knew him intimately. 'At the end of the little garden in Hercules Buildings there was a summer-house. Mr. Butts, calling one day, found Mr. and Mrs. Blake sitting in this summer-house freed from 'these troublesome disguises' which have prevailed since the Fall. '*Come in!*' cried Blake, '*it's only Adam and Eve, you know!*' Husband and wife had been reciting passages from *Paradise Lost* in character, and the garden of Hercules Buildings had to represent the Garden of Eden, a little to the scandal of wondering neighbours on more than one occasion." Gilchrist admits that if others "were on a sudden to wander in so bizarre a fashion from the prescriptive proprieties of life, it would be time for our friends to call in a doctor, or apply for a commission *de lunatico*"; but he excuses such vagaries in Blake because he "lived in a world of ideas; ideas to him were more real than the actual external world" (22). It is a dangerous excuse, and one which might be made on behalf of many of the insane. They, too, dwell in a world of ideas; in the usual

terminology the subjective aspect of their mental life is predominant. The person with hallucinations will, more often than not, refuse to believe the statements made to him by others when they contradict the evidence of his "voices" or of his "visions," or when they are in opposition to the monitions of his Socratic "Demon" or "Genius." Thus we find Blake writing in 1799: "I find more and more that my style of designing is a species by itself, and in this which I send you have been compelled by my Genius or Angel to follow where he led" (23).

His dead brother, Robert, who, according to Blake, revealed to him the method of etching which he employed in the illuminated books, acted to some extent as his invisible monitor. In this same year, he wrote to Hayley: "I know our deceased friends are more really with us than when they were apparent to our mortal part. Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, and see him in my remembrance, in the regions of my imagination. I hear his advice, and even now write from his dictate" (24).

During the summer of 1800, Blake experienced a period of depression. There is evidence of this in a letter which he wrote in July of that year: "I begin to emerge from a deep pit of melancholy—melancholy without any real reason—a disease which God keep you from" (25). By the time that September arrived, he was again cheerful; in a letter to Flaxman, the sculptor, he speaks of his "present happiness," and says that "the time has arrived when men shall again converse in Heaven and walk with angels." There are references in the same letter to the troubled mental phase through which he had recently passed:

"Paracelsus and Behmen appeared to me, terrors appeared in the Heavens above,
And in Hell beneath, and a mighty and awful change threatened the Earth.
The American War began. All its dark horrors passed before my face
Across the Atlantic to France. Then the French Revolution commenced in thick clouds,
And my Angels have told me that seeing such visions I could not subsist on the Earth,
But by my conjunction with Flaxman, who knows to forgive nervous fear" (26).

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Later, in the month of September, 1800, Blake and his wife left Hercules Buildings and went to reside at Felpham in Sussex. This change of residence is said to have been brought about at the suggestion of William Hayley, author of *The Triumphs of Temper*, biographer of Romney and of Milton, and essayist, who was living close to Felpham at this time. Hayley was engaged in writing a biography of his friend the poet Cowper, who died in April, 1800; and he was desirous that Blake should engrave the plates for the illustration of his work. During the early part of Blake's stay at Felpham the relations between the two men were of the most friendly character. Hayley was a kindly-natured man, and, in addition to being an author himself, was apparently anxious to play in a small way the part of Mecænas. He has been systematically abused by several of those who have written about Blake in an obviously partisan manner, because a quarrel took place between the two, or rather because, according to Blake's statements, he resented certain of Hayley's criticisms. Swinburne, in his misguided essay on Blake, is the worst offender in this respect. All these writers, although they were aware of Blake's irritability and of, at times, his morbid suspiciousness in regard to certain people, have apparently chosen to overlook these traits in his character. Here again was a marked inconsistency in Blake's character: although keenly desirous of the friendship of others, he quarrelled with many of his friends(1), and, apparently, for no adequate reason. At least his biographers for the most part do not seem to be able to give the reason, but, in default of that, they seize upon anything that might seem to justify Blake in his estrangements, even if by so doing they have to deal hardly with those with whom he quarrelled. They would have been more just to Blake and to his friends if they had been prepared to admit that these troubles arose for the most part from the inherent mental instability from which Blake suffered.

Blake wrote to Flaxman soon after his arrival in Felpham, and from that letter it may be judged that he was pleased with his new surroundings, and also that his "visions" and his "voices" had not by any means departed from him. "Felpham is a sweet place for study, because it is more spiritual than London. Heaven opens here on all sides her golden gates; her windows are not obstructed by vapours; voices of celestial inhabitants are most distinctly heard, and their forms more

distinctly seen; and my cottage is also a shadow of their houses." In the same letter there is a passage which clearly shows the exalted state which characterised him at this time: "I am more famed in Heaven for my works than I could well conceive. In my brain are studies and chambers filled with books and pictures of old, which I wrote and painted in ages of eternity before my mortal life; and those works are the delight and study of archangels" (27). Later in the year, the same elated mood is apparent in his letters: "Time flies very fast and very merrily. I sometimes try to be miserable that I may do more work, but find it is a foolish experiment"; and in May of the following year (1801) he wrote: "Mr. Hayley acts like a prince. I am at complete ease." In September, 1801, there is an interesting passage in one of his letters which gives much insight into his mental state: "I labour incessantly. I accomplish not one half of what I intend, because my abstract folly hurries me often away while I am at work, carrying me over mountains and valleys, which are not real, into a land of abstraction where spectres of the dead wander. This I endeavour to prevent; I, with all my whole might, chain my feet to the world of duty and reality. But in vain! the faster I bind, the better is the ballast; for I, so far from being bound down, take the world with me in my flights, and often it seems lighter than a ball of wool rolled by the wind. . . . But as none on earth can give mental distress, and I know all distress inflicted by Heaven is a mercy, a fig for all corporeal. Alas! wretched, happy, ineffectual labourer of Time's moments that I am! Who shall deliver me from this spirit of abstraction and improvidence?" (28) In a previous letter, he had written of his visions by the sea-shore of "Heavenly men beaming bright," who appeared as "One man," and spoke to him. But when January, 1802, arrived, his mood was one of despondency; and the close application to work, which Hayley apparently suggested, did not suit Blake's increasingly restive state. He regarded the suggestion suspiciously because of the commands which his spiritual monitors had issued to him, which were that he should busy himself in other ways than those which the practical Hayley recommended. "When I came down here," he wrote, "I was more sanguine than I am at present." He thought that Hayley would, however, be able to lift him out of difficulty, although this would be no easy matter in the case of

one such as himself, who, "having spiritual enemies of such formidable magnitude, cannot expect to want natural hidden ones." He objected to routine work; he looked upon it as his duty "to lay up treasures in Heaven" in fulfilling the behests of the voices. Their commands were issued frequently: "I am under the direction of messengers from Heaven, daily and nightly." How true the sentence is which follows: "But the nature of such things is not, as some suppose, without trouble or care." Those whose work brings them in daily association with men and women who are influenced by "voices"—auditory hallucinations—can certainly testify to the truth of such a statement. It is remarkable, too, how seldom the "voices" direct these persons to the performance of reasonable actions. In Blake's case, it is difficult to see why he should not have been instructed to direct some of his energies towards earning the means of subsistence for his wife and for himself. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that in this way also he might have laid up treasure in Heaven!

Towards the end of the year 1802, Blake was able to write more cheerfully; the dark mood had passed, and he was again experiencing exaltation. "I have been very unhappy, I am so no longer. I am again emerged into the light of day. . . . I have travelled through perils and darkness not unlike a champion. I have conquered, and shall go on conquering. Nothing can withstand the fury of my course among the stars of God and in the abysses of the accuser" (29). But he evidently was still desirous of returning to London. In a letter written in April, 1803, he asked Mr. Butts to congratulate him in the prospect of an early return thereto: "Now I may say to you . . . that I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London unannoyed, and that I may converse with my friends in eternity, see visions, dream dreams, and prophesy and speak parables unobserved." In the same letter, he speaks of a work upon which he has been engaged, a poem entitled *Milton*. In his characteristic manner he thus describes how it was conceived: "None can know the spiritual acts of my three years' slumber on the banks of ocean, unless he has seen them in the spirit, or unless he should read my long poem descriptive of those acts; for I have in these years composed an immense number of verses on one grand theme, similar to Homer's *Iliad* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*; the persons and machinery entirely new to the inhabitants of the

earth (some of the persons excepted). I have written this poem from immediate dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without premeditation, and even against my will. The time it has taken in writing was thus rendered non-existent, and an immense poem exists, which seems to be the labour of a long life, all produced without labour or study. I mention this to show you what I think the grand reason of my being brought down here." Another poem, or another portion of the same immense poem, was published later with the title of *Jerusalem*. Blake describes it as a "sublime allegory," and considers it as "the grandest poem that this world contains." If one accepts his definition of the most sublime poetry as "allegory addressed to the intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the corporeal understanding," it may be granted that he was justified in his claim to a superlative degree of merit. He did not, however, take any praise to himself for these writings: "The authors are in eternity," and he was only "the secretary" who wrote at their dictation. Even the perfervid Swinburne boggled at these poems: "Human readers, if such indeed exist beyond the singular or the dual number, will wish that the authors had put themselves through a previous course of surgical or any other training which might have cured a certain superhuman impediment of speech, very perplexing to the mundane ear; a habit of huge, breathless stuttering, as it were a Titanic stammer, intolerable to organs of flesh" (30). The evolutions of the characters in *Milton* are certainly perplexing, but what is one to expect from, for instance, the dwellers in a town named Golgonooza, or what else than dyspepsia could arise from "Bowlahoola," which is "the stomach in every individual man." Imagine Enitharmon with a pain in his Bowlahoola! It is difficult to refrain from levity when one considers the wild welter of verbiage in such a poem as this; it is so reminiscent of "Jabberwocky" that it stimulates the risible faculties—if one may be allowed the phrase. Consider the following invocation:

"Arise, O Sons, give all your strength against Eternal Death,
Lest we are vegetated, for Cathedron's Looms weave only Death,
A Web of Death, and were it not for Bowlahoola and Allamanda,
No Human Form, but only a Fibrous Vegetation,
A Polypus of soft affections without Thought or Vision
Must tremble in the Heavens and Earths thro' all the Ulro space,
Throw all the Vegetated Mortals into Bowlahoola."

The carnivorous mortals would perhaps prefer to read vegetarian for vegetated in the last line!

In another place we read of a motley gathering, chiefly of insects, which dances round "the Wine-presses of Luvah":

"The Earwig arm'd; the tender Maggot, emblem of immortality;
The Flea, Louse, Bug, the Tape-worm, all the Armies of Disease;
Visible or invisible to the slothful, vegetating man;
The slow Slug; the Grasshopper, that sings and laughs and drinks.
Winter comes: he folds his slender bones without a murmur" (32).

The Earth-worm is there also in company with the Nettle and the "indignant Thistle." It all sounds more like the vision of someone who had been dancing too near to the wine-presses.

In this poem, *Milton*, there occurs a passage which evidently refers to a seizure or fit during his stay at Felpham, or, as Ellis describes it, he was overwrought by visionary fancy.

"My bones trembled, I fell outstretch'd upon the path
A moment, and my Soul return'd into its mortal state,
So Resurrection and Judgment in the Vegetable Body,
And my sweet Shadow of Delight stood trembling by my side."(33)

It was probably also while he was at Felpham, according to Ellis, that, in a vision, Cowper came to Blake and said: "O that I were insane always! I will never rest till I am so. You retain health, and yet are as mad as any of us all—mad as a refuge from Bacon, Newton, and Locke."

In the summer of 1803, Blake was unfortunately involved in a troublesome affair which led to his being tried for sedition. A drunken soldier blundered into Blake's garden and, when requested to leave, became offensive and impertinent. Whereupon Blake incontinently took him by the elbows, marched him out, and "pushed him forward down the road about fifty yards." This drunken blusterer, in a spirit of revenge, preferred a charge against Blake of having used seditious language during the encounter, wherein he was supported by a "perjured comrade." The trial, needless to say, resulted in a verdict in Blake's favour, but this incident naturally tended to prejudice him still further against the district. With his tendency to ascribe his mischances to some persecutionary scheme, Blake looked upon this affair as being of the nature of a subtle plot;

he "used to declare the Government, or some high person, sent the soldier to entrap him." In company with Gilchrist we may "take the liberty of regarding this as a purely visionary notion" (35).

From what has been stated it will be obvious that Blake's mental condition during the period of his stay at Felpham was one of marked instability. Even those who resent the ascription to him of the term "insane" admit this. "By the sounding shore," says Gilchrist, "visionary conversations were held with many a majestic shadow from the past—Moses and the Prophets, Homer, Dante, Milton." Swinburne says "that too much of Blake's written work while at Felpham is wanting in executive quality, and even in decent coherence of verbal dress, is undeniable"; and adds that "everything now written in the fitful impatient intervals of the day's work bears the stamp of an over-heated brain, and of nerves too intensely strung." Swinburne has, however, his own method of accounting for this. It was due to the "sudden country life, the taste and savour of the sea," which "touch sharply and irritate deliciously the more susceptible and intricate organs of mind and nature. How far such passive capacity of excitement differs from insanity; how in effect a temperament so sensuous, so receptive, and so passionate, is further off from any risk of turning unsound than hardier natures carrying heavier weight and tougher in the nerves, need scarcely be indicated" (36). What does scarcely need to be indicated, after reading such passages as these, is that Swinburne was little competent to give a reasoned opinion on the matter of Blake's mental unsoundness. Only prejudice could have allowed him to draw such a conclusion from the evidence which he himself gives. The last part of the passage quoted is perilously like nonsense.

Flaxman, who also resented any imputation of insanity to Blake, states, in a letter to Hayley in 1804, that "Blake's irritability, as well as the association and arrangement of his ideas, do not seem likely to be soothed or more advantageously disposed by any power inferior to That by which man is originally endowed with his faculties" (37). Mr. Ellis speaks of the "deplorable and hasty state of the drawings towards the close of *Milton*"; and he adds that "they betray worn-out patience, jarred nerves, and a distracted mind" (38). Gilchrist,

another ardent advocate of Blake's sanity, comments as follows on *Jerusalem*: "Dark oracles, words empty of meaning to all but him who uttered them," and again he describes it as "Such a chaos of words, names, and images, that, as the eye wanders, hopeless and dispirited, up and down the large, closely written pages, the mind cannot but busy itself with the question, how a man of Blake's high gifts ever came to produce such; nay, to consider this, as he really did, his greatest work." In regard to the *Milton* his comment is: "As this work has no perceptible affinity with its title, so the designs it contains seem unconnected with the text" (39). In such a way will prejudice—or ignorance of the inferences as to disordered brain function which may be drawn from certain symptoms—blind critics, and prevent them from giving a verdict in accordance with the evidence.

Blake returned to London in the autumn of 1803; he took lodgings in South Molton Street, and there he continued to reside until 1821. The exaltation and fervour seemed for a short time to have abated. Then in October, 1804, he writes to Hayley a letter in which the following passages occur: "For now! O Glory! and O Delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous fiend to his station, whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last passed twenty years of my life. He is the enemy of conjugal love, and is the Jupiter of the Greeks, an iron-hearted tyrant, the ruiner of ancient Greece. I speak with perfect confidence and certainty of the fact which has passed upon me. Nebuchadnezzar had seven times passed over him; I have had twenty. Thank God I was not altogether a beast as he was, but I was a slave 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. O lovely Felpham, parent of immortal friendship, to thee I am eternally indebted for my three years' rest from perturbation and the strength I now enjoy. Suddenly . . . 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 goes on to speak of having received "spiritual aid" from Romney, and continues: "He is become my servant who domineered over me, he is even as a brother who was my enemy. Dear Sir, excuse my enthusiasm or rather madness, for I am really

drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand . . . I am now satisfied and proud of my work" (40).

In December, 1805, Blake writes to Hayley much in the same strain: "You, dear Sir, are one who has my particular gratitude, having conducted me through three that would have been the darkest years that ever mortal suffered, which were rendered through your means a mild and pleasant slumber. I speak of spiritual things, not of natural, of things known only to myself and to spirits good and evil, but not known to men on earth. It is the passage through these three years that has brought me into my present state, and I *know* that if I had not been with you I must have perished" (41). Yet within a very short time and for no adequate reason Blake broke with Hayley; the feeling of acute suspiciousness in regard to the motives of others recurred. And in the same way he came to regard Flaxman as one who was working against him. "Blake, with a burst of fury, decided," says Mr. Ellis, "that they were not friends at all, since they had been, while pretending to patronise him, quietly conspiring to reduce his prices" (42). Why they should have so conspired it is difficult to understand, and, indeed, there does not seem to be any reason to believe that there was any adequate basis for such an idea other than in Blake's morbid imaginings. In much the same way Blake's friendship with Stothard came to an end in 1808. Blake had made a drawing of Chaucer's *Canterbury Pilgrims*, and this drawing was apparently left about in his room at South Molton Street. There it was seen by a visitor who was acquainted with Stothard; this visitor, whose name was Cromek, had been an engraver, a pupil of Bartolozzi, but had given up engraving to become a publisher. It was Cromek who had bought from Blake the designs to Blair's *Grave*. There was apparently an understanding—on Blake's part, at any rate—that in addition to designing these drawings, the artist should also engrave them. Cromek, however, gave this part of the work to Schiavonetti—an exceedingly able engraver—and Blake was furiously angry with him for so doing. He wrote him an "insulting letter,' and demanded more money; "Blake," says Mr. Ellis, "when not affectionately polite, was ferociously offensive." Another inconsistency showed itself in Blake during this incident; although he posed as a money hater, he began to "wrangle

abusively for more pay" (43). Accordingly he quarrelled with Cromek, and much abuse has been levelled at Cromek by Gilchrist, Swinburne, and others. Cromek, then, having seen Blake's sketch of the *Canterbury Pilgrims*, called upon Stothard and may have spoken to him about it, or it is possible that Blake may have mentioned it to Stothard himself. However it may have been, we know that Stothard painted the well-known picture with the same title which is now in the National Gallery. According to Mr. Ellis, Blake had called on Stothard whilst the latter was engaged in painting this picture, "saw him at work," and politely praised "anything that he could praise in the work." Yet when Stothard's picture did actually appear Blake again felt that he had been betrayed and injured; he became incensed with Stothard, and this friendship, too, came to an end. He even developed persecutionary ideas in regard to Stothard. Blake had hung his original design of the *Canterbury Pilgrims* over a door in his sitting-room, "where, for a year perhaps, it remained." When, on the appearance of Stothard's picture, he went to take down his drawing, he found it nearly effaced, "the result of some malignant spell of Stothard's, he would, in telling the story, assure his friends." Whereupon Flaxman is stated to have expostulated with him, pointing out that if a pencil drawing were left exposed so long to air and dust, he could hardly expect any other result.

Gilchrist states that the quarrel with Cromek and with Stothard left Blake "more tetchy than ever; more disposed to wilful exaggeration of individualities already too prominent, more prone to unmeasured violence of expression," and he goes on to say that "the extremes he again gave way to in his design and writings—mere ravings to such as had no key to them—did him no good with that part of the public the illustrated *Blair* had introduced him to." Then, evidently feeling that such statements might give rise to a suspicion that all was not well with Blake's mental state, he goes on to say that, though there was "now established for him the damaging reputation, 'mad,' by which the world has since agreed to recognise William Blake," he maintains that he was certainly not so, preferring apparently that Blake should be held responsible for his waywardness, irritability, and quarrelsomeness.

There is, however, other evidence of Blake's disordered mental state about this time. There is, for instance, a quotation from

a note-book of Blake's which is suggestive. It apparently refers to Stothard, who, we are told, had a long nose. It is as follows: "I always thought Christ was a snubby, or I should not have worshipped him, if I had thought he had been one of those long spindle-nosed rascals." With his irritability there was again a progressive exaltation, and it is interesting to note that prior to this there had been a period of profound dejection. In his note-book, under the date "Tuesday, Jan. 7, 1807," there is an entry—"Between two and seven in the evening: Despair," and Mr. Ellis states that "Blake had lately been reduced to one of his fits of deep melancholy at this time" (45). Now the feeling of elation had returned to him again. In 1809, he held an exhibition of some of his pictures, and in the "descriptive catalogue" which he drew up the following statements occur: "These pictures . . . were the result of temptations and perturbations, seeking to destroy imaginative power, by means of that infernal machine called Chiaro Oscuro, in the hands of Venetian and Flemish Demons, whose enmity to the Painter himself, and to all Artists who study the Florentine and Roman schools, may be removed by an exhibition and exposure of their vile tricks"; and, again, of certain of his drawings he says that he wishes they were "in Fresco on an enlarged scale to ornament the altars and churches, and to make England, like Italy, respected by respectable men of other countries on account of Art. It is not want of Genius that can hereafter be laid to our charge." Of another picture he remarks: "Hence Rubens, Titian, Correggio, and all of that class are like leather and chalk. Their men are like leather and their women are like chalk, for the disposition of their forms will not admit of grand colouring. In Mr. B.'s Britons the blood is seen to circulate in their limbs; he defies competition in colouring." There is another distinct reference in the same catalogue to his "persecutors"; describing another of his pictures, he says that "Fortunately, or rather, providentially, he left it unblotted and unblurred, although molested continually by blotting and blurring demons." In regard to the catalogue itself, he proclaims that "All these things are written in Eden. The artist is an inhabitant of that happy country, and if everything goes on as it has begun, the world of vegetation and generation may expect to be opened again to Heaven, through Eden, as it was in the beginning" (46). From these extracts, it is obvious that Blake's mental condition was one of marked

exaltation; in addition to the megalomaniacal fervour there is quite definite evidence of influence by persecutionary ideas. That the artist's opinion of the pictures in his exhibition was not shared by one at least of the critics of the time an extract from the *Examiner* at that time makes quite clear. This paper was well known for its outspokenness, and it may be remembered that Leigh Hunt, who edited it, was imprisoned for having in its columns described the Prince Regent as "a fat Adonis of fifty." The writer describes Blake as "an unfortunate lunatic, whose personal inoffensiveness secures him from confinement," and he goes on to say: "The poor man fancies himself a great master, and has painted a few wretched pictures, some of which are unintelligible allegory, others an attempt at sober character by caricature representation, and the whole 'blotted and blurred' and very badly drawn. These he calls an Exhibition, of which he has published a Catalogue, or rather a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibleness, and egregious vanity, the wild effusions of a distempered brain" (47).

It was not only in this catologue that Blake made manifest the morbid exaltation which characterised him during this period. Subsequent to it there is ascribed to him what Mr. Ellis describes as "a misguided prose document," entitled a *Public Address*. Those who can say that it is not the product of a "distempered brain," and who will, therefore, be unable to pity the state of the unfortunate man, are left with the unpleasant alternative of ascribing it to "egregious vanity." Such passages as the following occur in this curious production: "Mr. Blake's inventive powers and his scientific knowledge of drawing are on all hands acknowledged."—"I do not shrink from comparison in either relief or strength of colour with Rembrandt or Rubens; on the contrary, I court the comparison and fear not the results."—"If all the princes of Europe, like Louis XIV and Charles I, were to patronise such blockheads, I, William Blake, mental prince, would decollate and hang their souls as guilty of mental high treason."—"I do pretend to paint finer than Rubens, or Rembrandt, or Titian, or Coreggio." There is a passage in this address which appears to show that Blake was aware of the opinion which many held in regard to his mental state. "It is very true," he says, "what you have said for these thirty years; I am mad, or else you are" (48).

This was about the year 1810, and of the following six years

there does not appear to be any definite record. According to Gilchrist he was still living in South Molton Street, "in his accustomed poverty, and, if possible, more than accustomed neglect." Apparently he continued his work during this time: "Scores of MSS. were produced," says Gilchrist, "which never got beyond MS., and have since been scattered, most of them destroyed or lost." Gilchrist adds the significant comment—"He could find no publisher here for writing or design." It is greatly to be regretted that the information is lacking which would throw light upon this period; it may be that the exaltation already noted may have been succeeded again for a time by depression. A passage in Gilchrist seems to bear this out. According to the biographer Blake kept very much to his own house; and for "two years together [he] never went out at all, except to the corner of the Court to fetch his porter" (49).

In 1818, Blake became acquainted with Linnell the artist; and the latter thus speaks of Blake as he found him at this time: "I soon encountered Blake's peculiarities, and, somewhat taken aback by the boldness of some of his assertions, I never saw anything the least like madness, for I never opposed him spitefully, as many did, but being really anxious to fathom, if possible, the amount of truth which might be in his most startling assertions, generally met with a sufficiently rational explanation in the most really friendly and conciliatory tone" (50). From which we may see that, even with all his anxiety, Linnell was not always able to fathom the "startling assertions" of his friend; nor does he state that he was able to obtain more than a "sufficiently rational" explanation of them. However, it may suffice to note here that even such a champion as Linnell, of the opinion that Blake showed no sign of madness, was quick to perceive his "peculiarities." Linnell introduced Blake to an artist friend, John Varley, whom Gilchrist describes as a "remarkable man, of very pronounced character and eccentricities." He was, in addition to being a landscape-painter, a "professional astrologer"; and he was, moreover, "superstitious and credulous." It was the credulous Varley, who, placing "implicit and literal credence" in Blake's stories of his intercourse with the spirit world, encouraged him to make the sketches of his "visitants" which are known as the "Visionary Heads." Allan Cunningham, who had his account from Varley, thus describes their production: "The most propitious

time for those 'angel visits' was from nine at night till five in the morning; and so docile were his spiritual sitters that they appeared at the wish of his friends. Sometimes, however, the shape with which he tried to draw was long in appearing, and he sat with his pencil and paper ready, and his eyes idly roaming in vacancy; all at once the vision came upon him, and he began to work like one possessed" (51). As might be expected, Blake produced a varied assortment of portraits; among them one of the best known is that which has been called the *Ghost of a Flea*. It is a fearsome object and worthy of a place in the most lurid nightmare. During the time occupied in completing the drawing, the flea told Blake, according to the credulous Varley, "that all fleas were inhabited by the souls of such men as were by nature blood-thirsty to excess, and were, therefore, providentially confined to the size and form of insects; otherwise, were he himself, for instance, the size of a horse, he would depopulate a great portion of the country" (52).

Other visions appeared to Blake at this time, and among them was one of Satan. "For many years," said Blake, "I longed to see Satan. . . . At last I saw him. I was going upstairs in the dark, when suddenly a light came streaming amongst my feet; I turned round, and there he was looking fiercely at me through the iron grating of my staircase window." Blake, undaunted by the gruesome spectre, got a piece of paper and sketched it. "Its eyes were large and like live coals, its teeth as long as those of a harrow," says Cunningham, "and the claws seemed such as might appear in the distempered dream of a clerk in the Herald's office" (53). In addition to a deal of fantastic work such as this Blake did, however, continue to produce other pictures of a very different character, notably his illustrations of the Book of Job. These were executed for his staunch supporter, Mr. Butts. Even this patron, however, seems to have found Blake's ways somewhat trying. "Even his old friend, Mr. Butts, a friend of more than thirty years' standing, the possessor of his best *temperas* and water-colour drawings, and of copies of all of his engraved books, grew cool," says Gilchrist. "The patron had often found it a hard matter *not* to offend the independent, wilful painter . . . The patron had himself begun to take offence at Blake's quick resentment of well meant, if blunt,

advice and at the unmeasured violence of his speech when provoked by opposition" (54).

Much interesting information in regard to these later years of Blake's life is to be found in the Diary of Henry Crabb Robinson. In one of the earliest of the entries relating to Blake, and under the date 1810, he says: "I amused myself this spring by writing an account of the insane poet, painter, and engraver, Blake" (55). Again, in 1811, he refers to meeting Southey and says: "Southey had been with Blake and admired both his designs and his poetic talents. At the same time he held him to be a decided madman. Blake, he said, spoke of his visions with the diffidence which is usual with such people, and he did not seem to expect that he should be believed. He showed Southey a perfectly mad poem called *Jerusalem*. Oxford Street is in Jerusalem." In 1815, the diarist records a remark made by Blake to Flaxman to the effect that "he had had a violent dispute with the angels on some subject, and had driven them away" (56). In 1825, Crabb Robinson met Blake, and from that period there are numerous references to him in the diary. In December of that year, the diarist records a conversation with Blake: "Shall I call Blake artist, genius, mystic, or madman? Probably he is all . . . He spoke of his paintings as being what he had seen in his visions. And when he said 'my visions' it was in the ordinary unemphatic tone in which we speak of every-day matters. In the same tone he said repeatedly, 'The Spirit told me.' I took occasion to say, 'You express yourself as Socrates used to do. What resemblance do you suppose there is between your spirit and his?' 'The same as between our countenances.' He paused and added, 'I was Socrates,' and then, as if correcting himself, said, 'a sort of brother. I must have had conversations with him. So I had with Jesus Christ. I have an obscure recollection of having been with both of them.' Later Blake remarked: 'I have conversed with the spiritual Sun. I saw him on Primrose Hill. He said, 'Do you take me for the Greek Apollo?' 'No,' I said, 'that (pointing to the sky) is the Greek Apollo. He is Satan'" (57). Later in the same month, Robinson makes note of visits made by him to Blake, who was then living at Fountain Court, Strand. The artist's circumstances were very straitened, and, says Robinson,

"nothing could exceed the squalid air both of the apartment and his dress." On one of these occasions, Blake spoke of Milton appearing to him, and he stated also that he had had his faculty of vision "from his early infancy." In February, 1826, of another visit to Blake it is noted that the artist spoke of having had much conversation with Voltaire, and when his interlocutor asked him why he did not draw the forms of his visitants he replied, "It is not worth while. There are so many, the labour would be too great." On the same occasion Blake remarked, "I write when commanded by the spirits, and the moment I have written I see the words fly about the room in all directions" (58). In a letter to Wordsworth's sister, written in February, 1826, Crabb Robinson mentions Blake. "I gave your brother," he says, "some poems in MS. by him, and they interested him, as well they might, for there is an affinity between them, as there is between the regulated imagination of a wise poet and the incoherent outpourings of a dreamer. He (Blake) has lived in obscurity and poverty, to which the constant hallucinations in which he lives have doomed him . . . He is not so much a disciple of Jacob Böhme and Swedenborg as a fellow-visionary. He lives as they did, in a world of his own, enjoying constant intercourse with the world of spirits. He receives visits from Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Voltaire, etc., and has given me repeatedly their very words in their conversations. His paintings are copies of what he sees in his visions. His books . . . are dictations from the spirits" (59). In June of the same year, the following entry occurs: "Called early on Blake. He was as wild as ever, with no great novelty. He talked, as usual, of the spirits, asserted that he had committed many murders."

Blake had continued to work during these latter years of his life with the same industry that had ever characterised him. Crabb Robinson mentions a large number of MSS., but many of these appear to have been destroyed, and, during this period, he produced—amongst other artistic works—the illustrations of Dante. But, in 1826, his health was failing; there was abdominal trouble, the nature of which—as far as can be judged from the accounts which remain—was probably cancerous. In his letters from 1826 onwards, Blake makes references to such symptoms as acute pain, and "that sickness to which

there is no name," and, at another time, he refers to his jaundiced state. Writing to Linnell, who had suggested that he should migrate to Hampstead, he says: "I have thought and thought of the removal. I cannot get my mind out of a state of terrible fear at such a step. The more I think, the more I feel terror at what I wished at first, and thought a thing of benefit and good hope. You will attribute it to its right cause—intellectual peculiarity, that must be myself alone shut up in myself, or reduced to nothing. I could tell you of visions and dreams upon the subject." This was in February, 1827; he became gradually weaker and died in August of the same year.*

* There appears to be some confusion in regard to the question as to whether Blake was at one time an inmate of Bethlem Hospital. Brierre de Boismont's account of a patient whom he describes as Blake *the Seer* appears almost obviously to refer to William Blake, except that towards the end of it he speaks of him as "a tall man." William Blake was, however, short; according to Gilchrist he was "low in stature, not quite five feet and a half." Timbs, in his *English Eccentrics*, accepts de Boismont's statements as to Blake's residence in Bethlem; and the same writer says that Blake's mind, about the period of his residence at Felpham, "was confirmed in that extraordinary state which many suppose to have been a state of chronic insanity." Dr. Charles Elam, in *A Physician's Problems*, has a description which he applies to this same Blake *the Seer*, and he adduces the evidence of Dr. Wigan, who, however, speaks of the artist as having been "thirty years in an asylum," and as being a portrait painter. Mr. Ellis mentions the fact that William Blake "of the Prophetic Poems" has been identified with this other Blake, but he speaks of it as an error. Mr. E. G. O'Donoghue, the author of an admirable history of Bethlem Hospital, informs me that he has been unable to ascertain that Blake was at any time a patient there. There is no mention of Blake having been a patient in that hospital by Gilchrist, Symons, Wilkinson, Tatham, or by any of the other biographers as far as can be ascertained. Brierre de Boismont refers to an article in the *Revue Britannique* dated July, 1823 (this must be a mistake for 1825, as the *Revue* did not commence until then). The copy of the *Revue* in the British Museum has the June and August numbers, but not the one for July, so that it has not been possible in the meantime to ascertain from what source the *Revue* obtained its information. In Bryan's *Dictionary of Painters and Engravers* there is, however, a reference to a B. Blake, who was a painter of still life, birds, fish, etc., and who copied works of the Dutch painters. "Little of his history is known," the account given of him there states: he was apparently rather dissipated and a spendthrift. He is said to have died "about the year 1830." Curiously enough there is no mention of this Blake in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Bryan also mentions a Nicholas Blake, an engraver, who illustrated Hanway's *Travels in Russia*, and published an edition of Pope's poems in 1753. This Blake is stated to have lived many years in Paris and to have died about the end of the eighteenth century. Altogether the evidence is against the supposition that Blake was a patient in Bethlem. Mr. O'Donoghue is making further researches into the matter, and it will certainly be interesting to learn whether anyone called Blake, who was an artist and an engraver, resided there during the first quarter of the nineteenth century—or late in the eighteenth century.

[Brierre de Boismont, *On Hallucinations*, p. 83, Eng. trans, London, 1859. Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 45. Gilchrist, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 315. Elam, Charles, *A Physician's Problems*, pp. 299 and 336, London, 1869. Wigan, A. L., *The Duality of the Mind*, pp. 125, 169, London, 1844. Timbs, John, *English Eccentrics and Eccentricities*, p. 345, new ed., London, 1877. Wilkinson, Dr. J. J. Garth, Preface to *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, London, 1839. Bryan, Michael, *Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*, articles: "Blake," London, 1849; new ed., 1904.]

III.

From the evidence which has been adduced it would seem that no injustice is done when the statement is made that Blake exhibited symptoms indicating marked mental instability. Yet there are many who resent the application of the term "insane" to him. It appears, however, to be rather a matter of phraseology, for, while most of them admit the presence of morbid mental symptoms, they do not wish to accept the logical conclusion which such an admission leads to, namely, that the person who does display such symptoms is of unsound mind. The recognition of such disordered mental states when they lead to some infraction of the legal code is admitted by all to be a matter of importance, and the plea of *non compos* is readily urged. Insanity has, however, usually to exhibit itself in some outrageous or extravagant manner before it is admitted as such by most laymen. Unless the conduct of the insane person is annoying or detrimental to his neighbours, the latter will not seek to restrain him; but should the one "disordered in his wits" become troublesome, the aid of the alienist and the assistance of the law will be speedily invoked. We can most of us contemplate with a fair amount of equanimity the worries and irritations to which others are subjected, but we soon resent such troubles when they come our way. "*Nous avons tous*," says La Rochefoucauld, "*assez de force pour supporter les maux d'autrui.*"

The recognition of the fact that such symptoms as those exhibited by Blake are evidential of mental derangement is not a matter of purely academic interest; nor is the assertion that he was at times so greatly the victim of his unstable nervous organisation as to merit the statement that he was definitely of unsound mind made heedlessly or merely in a spirit of contradiction. A great principle is at stake when we are asked to admit that the hallucinations and delusions of any man—however eminent—are not such, but that they are clear evidence of the objective reality of what he sees and hears, and that therefore the beliefs which he arrives at are rational and credible. It has taken centuries even to initiate what we believe to be a scientific conception as to the origin of such disorderly mental processes, namely, that they are the outcome of deranged

cerebral functioning. Primitive animistic beliefs in regard to the malign influence of hostile spirits, which were held by our early ancestors, and which still dominate the conduct of many savage tribes, have slowly faded out of our scheme of causation. Demoniacal possession, and its correlated horrors in regard to the treatment of the insane, have been fought and driven out inch by inch by the advancing forces of rational thought. Yet still there are those who would cast all these gains away and return to the halcyon days of those golden ages when human blood had to be shed in order to propitiate the angry deities who then ruled the minds of men, or to the times when men and women had to be scourged and beaten until their suffering frames should prove uncomfortable resting-places for the demons who inhabited them. It is idle to say that this is an exaggerated picture, and that there is no logical sequence between those beliefs and the ones which are held by modern spiritualists, and by those who maintain the veridical nature of Blake's "visions" and "voices." The continuance of such beliefs is too obvious to need demonstration, and the recrudescence of certain popular delusionary ideas is so marked as almost to make one fear that there may be in the future a reversion to the belief in witches, warlocks, and demons. Tylor, in his masterly survey of primitive custom and belief, has noted this tendency to recrudescence; speaking of witchcraft, and "the persecution necessarily ensuing upon such belief," he says that "any one who fancies from their present disappearance that they have necessarily disappeared for ever must read history to little purpose, and has yet to learn that 'revival in culture' is something more than an empty pedantic phrase. Our own time has revived a group of beliefs and practices which have their roots deep in the very stratum of early philosophy where witchcraft makes its first appearance. This group of beliefs and practices constitutes what is commonly known as Spiritualism" (60).

It has been noted above that the conflict of opinion in regard to the question of Blake's sanity is greatly a matter of phraseology. Those who maintain that he was of sound mind ascribe to him symptoms and modes of conduct which are not usually associated with the sane state. To some extent this has already been made clear. It may not be uninteresting to exemplify still further the descriptions given by such writers as Gilchrist, Swinburne, and others who uphold the contention that Blake

was sane, and to add also the testimony of those who take up an opposite point of view.

Gilchrist, writing of the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, remarks that there could not "well be a harder task than the endeavour to trace out any kind of system, any coherent or consistent philosophy, in this or in any other of Blake's writings"; while of the *America* he says: "It is verse hard to fathom, with far too little nature behind it or backbone, a redundance of mere invention—the fault of all this class of Blake's writings; too much wild tossing about of ideas and words." And, further, Gilchrist states that "to men of the world, his was a mind which, whether judged by his writings or his talk, inevitably seemed scarcely a sane, still less a trustworthy one" (61).

Swinburne, full of sound and fury, lays about him so vigorously that a good many of his blows fall upon him whom he is defending. "Blake had," says Swinburne, "a devil, and its name was faith." For Swinburne the "vagaries and erratic indulgence in the most lax or bombastic habits of speech become hopelessly inexplicable" after the excellence displayed by Blake in some of his poems. He comments scathingly on the "chatter" about Blake's madness, but previously he has spoken of his "fitfully audacious and fancifully delirious deliverance" and of his "eccentric and fitful intelligence." By regarding Blake rather as "a Celt than as an Englishman" he thinks it is not difficult to understand from whence he derived his "amazing capacity for such illimitable emptiness of mock-mystical babble as we find in his bad imitations of so bad a model as the Apocalypse." Again, of the prophetic books, *Europe* and *America*, he says that there is "more of the divine babble which sometimes takes the place of earthly speech or sense, more vague emotion with less of reducible and amenable quality than in almost any of these poems." He speaks of the "insane cosmogony, blatant mythology, and sonorous aberrations of thoughts and theories." "Sickness or sleep never formed such savage abstractions, such fierce vanities of vision as these; office and speech they seem to have none; but to strike or clutch at the void of air with feeble fingers, to babble with vast lax lips a dialect barren of all but noise, loud and loose as the wind." However, though Blake was "violent and eccentric at times," Swinburne seemed to be able to derive comfort from the conclusion that his "aberrations were mainly matters of speech and writing" (62). If the case for

Blake's sanity had only Swinburne as its advocate, it would indeed be in a parlous state.

Another defender of Blake against the imputation of insanity, Dr. Greville Macdonald, is evidently of the opinion that he has suffered almost as much at the hands of those who wish to exculpate him from such an accusation as from those who hold the opposite opinion. "Blake was undoubtedly mad," he said, "if we are to believe all that his apologists wrote to prove the contrary." He opposes the views of Ellis and Yeats in regard to the interpretation which they have attempted to give of the involved prophetic books: they "invite us to substitute an absolutely unintelligible mysticism for some of the grandest symbolic writing the world has ever produced." In another place he says: "I am not sure that consistency is not the finest test of sanity, just as incoherence is the final proof of aberration" (63). Without pausing to discuss the utility or the validity of such a test, it will be interesting to record the criticism by another apologist, Mr. Arthur Symons, of Blake's *The Four Zoas*. "It is," he says, "without apparent cohesion or consistency"; whilst the *America* is "the most vehement, wild, and whirling of all Blake's prophecies" (64). But Dr. Macdonald's descriptions of some of Blake's writings are sufficiently suggestive that —even in his opinion—all was not well. The *Jerusalem* is "indeed a strange medley of passionate poetry and catalogued bathos. We have pages and pages of stuff that were not worth reading, but for the shining gems hidden among the rubbish." And again he remarks: "If the apparent purposelessness of our prophet's vast weediness seems often to justify the verdict of madness, we are again and again, while striving to find passage through the jungle, driven to exclaim that Blake's so-called madness is infinitely greater than our sanity." Under the circumstances it is not surprising that Dr. Macdonald feels constrained to admit that "Blake's small power of criticising his own work implies some lack of mental balance" (65).

Mr. Symons has to confess that he also finds much of what Blake has written quite unintelligble: "Of the myth itself," he says, "it must be said that, whether from defects inherent in it or from the fragmentary state in which it comes to us, it can never mean anything wholly definite or satisfying, even to those minds best prepared to receive mystical doctrine." If a certain passage by the same writer is truly descriptive of Blake it

reveals in him a characteristic symptom of many forms of insanity when they have proceeded to the length of obviously diminished self-control: "With Blake," he says, "belief and action were simultaneous." However, in another place Mr. Symons says that "with Blake, as with all wise men, a mental decision in the abstract had no necessary influence on conduct" (66). Obviously—unless in Mr. Symons' pyschological scheme "belief" is not a "mental decision in the abstract"—the passages just quoted contradict one another.

Mr. Joseph Wicksteed, who surmises that "the crude charge of insanity which used to be levelled against Blake is surely almost dead," admits that "there remains a too well-founded charge of waywardness and extravagance, such as cannot be attributed to normal processes of mind, even in the blast furnace of genius." "Blake's undoubted abnormal mentality was controlled by a not less remarkable faculty for artistic, and even philosophic, unity and coherence. In one sense he was further removed from the lunatic than those who have less cerebral peculiarity. And even if there were real lapses of control, these were rather literary than practical. His actual life seems to have been conspicuous for its sanity"; and Mr. Wicksteed, too, finds that Blake is "often abysmally unintelligible." We may apparently say that a person's mental processes are not normal, that he has some "cerebral peculiarity," and that in his conduct he exhibits "lapses of control," but we must not use the accursed word "insanity" to describe his "abnormal mentality"!

In an article which deals specifically with the question of Blake's mental state, and which he entitles "The so-called 'Madness' of William Blake," Mr. Wicksteed does not seem to improve the case for the defence. In it he informs us that with Blake "expression was a refuge from obsession"; and further he states that "Blake's peculiar position is that he takes us through the abnormal and morbid in the *subjective* world. He is almost alone in having entered the fiery caverns of the maniac and *not* been mad" (67). It is difficult to comment upon such expressions as Mr. Wicksteed uses here. He appears to be discussing a species of "psychology," which, however useful for literary purposes it may be, is much too weird and wonderful for plain and practical people who have to do what they can to understand the workings of disordered brains, and

to suggest appropriate treatment for the condition. Of course, it is almost an insult to mention the word cerebrum or brain to any devotee of these strange systems of transcendental psychology. By some "occult" or "mystic" methods the workings of the "immaterial substance" which hovers like an aureole—or like a mephitic vapour—around the skull, or around the brain, or which settles on the pineal gland of the Cartesian, can be much more easily understood than by the study of the vulgar and commonplace processes of cerebral physiology, or of nervous metabolism!

Mr. G. K. Chesterton's attitude in regard to the question of Blake's sanity or insanity is rather difficult to define, as the following extracts show. "If we ask," says Mr. Chesterton, "whether there was not some madness about him, whether his naturally just mind was not subject to some kind of disturbing influence which was not essential to itself, then we ask a very different question, and require, unless I am mistaken, a very different answer. When all Philistine mistakes are set aside, when all mystical ideas are appreciated, there is a real sense in which Blake was mad." The same writer notes that while Blake was at Felpham his "eccentricity broke out on another side. A quality that can frankly be called indecency appeared in his pictures, his opinions, and to some extent in his conduct" (68). It is a little difficult, however, to follow the flights of fancy of certain of these amateur alienists. Mr. Chesterton, for instance, goes on to say that it was "an idealistic indecency." As it was evinced in Blake's pictures, opinions, and conduct, one would have thought that it might certainly have been described as being, on the contrary, decidedly realistic. It was Hobbes who made the remark about words being wise men's counters; and the saying concludes with a statement as to the value they possess to those who are not quite so wise.

Having said that Blake was mad, Mr. Chesterton later comes to the conclusion that "in other words, Blake was not mad; for such part of him as was mad was not Blake." It was "an alien influence" that brought about the mental change in him. Then back we go again to a statement that Blake was mad. "If Blake had always written badly he might be sane. But a man who could write so well and did write so badly must be mad." . . . "I firmly believe that what did hurt Blake's brain was the reality of his spiritual communica-

tions . . . I say he was mad because his visions were true." And yet once again, in referring to Blake's reason : " It had been broken (or cracked) by something ; but what there was of it was reasonable " (69). No further comment will be made regarding these statements, except to quote another passage from Mr. Chesterton's essay, which, with merely a verbal alteration, is singularly applicable in the present instance. The truth is," he says, " that beyond their scientific ideas they have not the absence of ideas but the presence of the most vulgar and sentimental ideas that happen to be common to their social clique " (70). If herein we read " pseudo-scientific " the description is sufficiently appropriate.

Still another commentator, Mr. Alfred T. Story, has given his " explanation " of the psychological puzzle—for such it has certainly been to most of the apologists—of Blake's mental processes. Mr. Story protests against the assertion that Blake was insane, but the phrasing of his verdict in the matter might well be accepted as evidence of mental unsoundness. " There was," he says, " a want of balance betwixt the spiritual or visionary faculty and the power of expression . . . The brain becomes heated under the fervour of vision . . . . With the continued rush of blood to the brain the whirl of thought becomes terrific, the visions hustle one upon another, the demons 'howl'; there is a chaos of sound and fury. The frenzied prophet, however, faithful to his trust, still labours with the weak mortal instrument at his command to set down the revelation. What wonder if he be at times incoherent, incomprehensible ? The marvel would be if he were not." It is a fairly comprehensive list : howling demons, hustling visions, chaos of sound and fury, terrific whirling thoughts, incoherence, incomprehensibility—but no insanity ! " Such, in brief," continues this writer, " is all that Blake's alleged insanity amounted to." The candid critic will admit that, on Mr. Story's own showing, it appears to amount to a good deal. Yet it was not insanity, it was " lack of mental balance arising from a preponderance of the spiritual or imaginative faculty " (71).

In France, the work of Blake has aroused much interest. There, too, certain writers have felt impelled to take up the cudgels on his behalf to defend him against the imputation of mental disorder. For instance, M. P. Berger, in an extensive study of Blake's *Mysticisme et Poésie*, says that " Sans doute

l'accusation de folie ne sera plus sur nos lèvres," but he is constrained to add "Nous avons conscience de la masse de son édifice qui est restée dans l'obscurité, des parties nombreuses dont tout art est absent, parce que le symbolisme l'en a chassé." M. Berger notes, too, the decadence in Blake's poetical powers; he expresses gracefully and in poetical terms the truth that Blake's energies were sapped by a morbid mental process. This inference is not an unfair one, as M. Berger's words show: "Nous l'avons trouvé infini dans ses idéals, limité dans ses moyens par son mysticisme même, germe morbide qui lui a donné son charme indéfinissable mais qui l'a tué à la fin comme le ver rongeur tuait sa rose malade, après lui avoir donné la mélancolie gracieuse de sa courbe retombante" (72).

M. F. Benoît (73), who also protests vehemently against the suggestion of insanity, admits the curious mental vicissitudes, the visions, and the voices, and notes the sudden changes of mood from placidity, tolerance, indifference, almost from meekness: then "l'instant d'après, le même homme nous apparait le plus entier, le plus irritable, les plus brutal des disputeurs. Le moindre objection le met en fureur; la seule apparence du doute l'exaspère; il contredit pour contredire, jusqu'à s'entêter dans l'absurde, jusqu'à dénaturer sa pensée par les plus folles extravagances." M. Benoît thinks, however, that Blake is an exceptional case; a conclusion to which he would not have come if he had had only a moderately extended acquaintance with the symptoms displayed by those suffering from mental disorder. M. Benoît is perhaps a little unkind to us when he remarks: "Si étranges que soient ses singularités mentales, elles ne font exception ni dans son siècle ni dans son pays!" Nor does he strengthen his case for Blake when he goes on to say that he was contemporary with Swedenborg, Mesmer, Cagliostro, and Cosway, for in their records we see clearly insanity or imposture. M. Benoît thinks that neurologists and alienists cannot bring the case of Blake into the category "des infirmes d'esprit de corps qui forment la clientèle ordinaire de leurs laboratoires." Wherein one may humbly opine that M. Benoît is in error. Whilst agreeing with him that those mentioned should accord Blake a careful and earnest study, the present writer is doubtful whether his essay in that direction will be found "fécond en conclusions curieuses et suggestives"!

IV.

It is apparently the opinion of many admirers of Blake that no one who, after a critical examination of his life and works, comes to the conclusion that he undoubtedly suffered from mental derangement, can possibly still have affection for him as a man, or admiration for him as an artist or as a poet. If such a belief is held, then this much is certain—that it is based upon as incomplete a knowledge of facts as a goodly number of other beliefs are. The statement that a person is insane may—and often does—militate against his credibility as a witness, but it does not detract from the æsthetic value of his poetical or artistic productions. If we knew that the sculptor of the Venus of Milo suffered from delusional insanity we should not abate a whit our admiration for that superb work of art; if, however, he had asserted that the goddess herself had sat to him as a model, we should ask to be allowed to posit our distinct doubts as to the truth of his statement. In the same way with Blake, we do not attempt to deny the excellence of much of his work, but when we are required to believe that supernatural agencies exerted their influence over him in vision and by audition, we have to remark that certain gratuitous assumptions are involved in the statement. In the first place, it is assumed that these agencies exist, and this—despite the assertions of numerous credulous spiritualists—is far from being accepted by those who have given the matter serious study; and secondly, even granting the hypothesis that he was so influenced, we are asked to believe that these supernatural agencies exerted themselves to produce a deteriorative effect upon his productions, for, as his history proves, the more he was influenced by them the more disorderly and incoherent did his work become; in much the same way as the results obtained by the spiritualistic medium are frequently seen to be chaotic designs or puerile babble. If the automatism were to take the form of that which is associated with the epileptic state and were to be accompanied by homicidal or other noxious acts, the devotees would soon flee from the presence of the very unhappy medium or they would seek to restrain, *vi et armis*, any further exhibitions of his supernatural powers.

It will, perhaps, be of interest to cite the opinions of some of those who, while realising the artistic and poetic powers of

Blake, have not been in that condition where passion and sentiment overwhelm critical ability, and who have consequently admitted the presence of mental disorder in Blake. Tatham (74), who knew Blake, tells us that he was "a subject of much mental temptation and mental suffering, and required sometimes much soothing"; he speaks of his "eccentric and elastic mind," and of his poetry he says that it was "mostly unintelligible." As to Blake's visions and voices he remarks: "He said that he was the companion of spirits who taught, rebuked, argued, and advised with all the familiarity of personal intercourse. What appears more odd still was the power he contended he had of calling up any personage of past days, to delineate their forms and features, and to converse upon the topic most incidental to the days of their own existence." Tatham's comment upon this is: "How far this is probable must be a question left either to the credulity or the faith of each person"! (75). It is not possible to leave the matter there. The credulous believer has been so often the victim of the schemer and the dupe of the charlatan that it is necessary to examine with whatever powers of exact scientific investigation we have attained to in the process of our evolution, any claims to the control of supernatural agencies, and in the same spirit must we deal with the asseverations of "brain-sick" visionaries.

Dr. Malkin who, too, knew Blake, writing in 1806, says that he possesses "merit, which ought to be more conspicuous, and which must have become so long since, but for opinions and habits of an eccentric kind"; and further, of Blake's blank verse: "The unrestrained measure, however, which should warn the poet to restrain himself, has not unfrequently betrayed him into so wild a pursuit of fancy as to leave harmony disregarded, and to pass the line prescribed by criticism to the career of imagination," while, in another place, he speaks of Blake's "singularity," of his "enthusiastic and high-flown notions on the subject of religion," and of the "hue and cry of madness" which have pursued him (76).

Charles Lamb, writing to Bernard Barton in 1824, speaks of Blake's "wild designs" to Young's *Night Thoughts*: "He paints in water-colours marvellous, strange pictures, visions of his brain, which he asserts that he has seen. They have great merit." After commending certain of Blake's poems, Lamb adds: "The man is flown, whither I know not, to Hades or a

mad-house" (77). As we have already noted, Southey described Blake to Crabb Robinson as a "decided madman." (2) That was in 1811, after Southey had paid a visit to Blake. In *The Doctor*, written more than twenty years later, Southey speaks of him as "that painter of great, but insane genius," and again as "this insane and erratic genius" (78). Wordsworth describes certain of his poems as "undoubtedly the production of insane genius," and he was not an unappreciative critic, for he adds: "There is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott" (79). John Thomas Smith, Keeper of the prints and drawings in the British Museum, in a biographical sketch of Blake included in *Nollekens and his Times*, published in 1828, speaks of him as bearing a "stigma of eccentricity," and says that he was "supereminently endowed with the power of disuniting all other thoughts from his mind, whenever he wished to indulge in thinking of any particular subject, and so firmly did he believe, by this abstracting power, that the objects of his compositions were before him in his mind's eye, that he frequently believed them to be speaking to him" (80).

Dr. Richard Garnett says of Blake that "in ancient times, and perhaps in some countries at the present day, he would have been accepted as a seer; in his own age and country the question was rather whether he should be classed with visionaries or with lunatics. A visionary he certainly was, and few will believe either that his visions had any objective reality, or that he himself intended them to be received merely as symbols . . . He confused fancy with fact; unquestionably, therefore, he laboured under delusions." Dr. Garnett does not appear, however, to think that Blake's condition could be described as one of insanity; but his interpretation of the term "insane" differs from that given to it by the judicial authorities and by alienists. Few of either of these would agree with Dr. Garnett when he goes on to say that, for example, "Prince Polignac brought the monarchy of the Restoration to ruin in deference to imaginary revelations from the Virgin Mary, yet no court of law would ever have placed him under restraint" (81). Dr. Garnett, however, notes the gradual dwindling of the poetic faculty in Blake as the artistic grew: "There is less of metrical beauty, and thought

and expression grow continually more and more amorphous," in the later poems. The *Auguries of Innocence* seem "little remote from nonsense," while of the *Descriptive Catalogue* he says that it is "crammed with statements far more significant than Blake's visions of a condition of mental disorder" (82). On the whole, it would perhaps have been more fitting to place Dr. Garnett among the "philosophic doubters." However, he has been classified by some as an opponent of the view that Blake was sane, so that his testimony may be allowed to remain in the position allocated to it.

Mr. de Selincourt discusses at some length the dispute in regard to Blake's sanity. "Was Blake mad? The question is," he says, "unpopular, yet all the vociferation of Blake's admirers has not been able to silence it. Those who defend Blake's sanity with the greatest fervour are often more compromising in their statements than his direct opponents." As to Blake's assertions of his visionary powers, Mr. de Selincourt mentions the names of Isaiah and of Ezekiel and says: "Blake's visions can never come to be recognised as based upon the same order of spiritual insight as theirs"—[It is, indeed, difficult to see why such an arbitrary distinction should be made between one set of visions and another!]—"but if they cannot, while yet to Blake himself it is a matter of triumphant conviction that they can, and if this false conviction is a ruling conviction of his life, I do not see that his admirers have any serious right to complain if the charge of madness is brought against him." The "entire mystical mechanism of the Prophetic Books, with its gigantic *dramatis personæ*, its geography that violates the laws of space, its history that neglects the passage of time, its unexampled fusion of violence and vagueness in almost every department of thought, is a mere fungus of mind." "With every allowance for the unintelligibility of the language, its unrelieved intensity is a sufficient test; the normal mind cannot assimilate more than two pages of Blake's prophecy without sensations approaching nausea." Mr. de Selincourt maintains that Blake was guilty of "self-deception so convincing that it transmits itself to many of his readers. It was a mental obsession by which his whole life . . . was coloured. It was a kind of madness" (83). It is hardly justifiable, however, to use the term self-deception in this connection, at least, if it is to be associated with any sense of guilt or wilfulness. It would be more fitting to say

that there was misinterpretation. Blake was the victim of his tyrannous organisation: his consciousness was not able to interpret correctly the vague stirrings of his subconsciousness. Just as an error of refraction gives rise to faulty vision, so disorder in certain cerebral cell-areas leads to incomplete or uncorrected action in others, for example, in hallucinations and delusions such as Blake experienced. That many of Blake's readers have taken him at his own valuation, and have consequently been deceived into believing that his hallucinations and delusions were real visions and well-founded beliefs is undoubtedly true. In practice it is convenient to draw a distinction between the hallucinations which are consistent with sanity—where the person has insight into his condition, and realises that the hallucinations are subjective, that they are "shadows, not substantial things"—and those which are associated with insanity. But this distinction does not imply any difference in causation; it is really quite arbitrary. Yet certain writers have adopted the same attitude as Mr. de Selincourt in regard to this question—notably Brierre de Boismont—but the differentiation is at bottom sentimental rather than scientific.

Mr. Sturge Moore has noted the diminution of Blake's poetical ability: "His stock of images steadily perished, losing in fineness and vividness as the subtler shades of all that in youth he had been so eagerly enchanted by wore out in his vision-laboured mind." As to Blake's Myth and his Prophetic Books, Mr. Moore says that the "psychology is confused and ugly," while "the language he employs grows more and more monotonous and exasperating, since all æsthetic control over it is abandoned, even when he does not write subconsciously at the dictation of visions endowed with only part of the faculties of their amanuensis. Tedious repetitions of every kind abound." The Prophetic Books are, the same writer remarks, "very poor literature," and "though a man possessed by great themes insecurely grasped may write confusedly, no man not mad, having definite and important ideas to convey, would so impenetrably have wrapped them up." To Blake's "hopeful editors" Mr. Moore puts the query: "Is it really conceivable that thoughts should be clear in a mind that could choose to express them in words so far wrested from their common use, or in such a code of symbols as Blake's?" (84).

Ireland comments on the similarity between Blake and

Swedenborg. "Both," he says, "had a sublime opinion of their own merits. Both were deeply religious; both were mystics who sought for new light in the inner sense of the Scripture, and believed that they conversed with the spirits of the departed." He points out that the necessity of working for his daily bread no doubt prevented Blake from giving himself up entirely to the ideal as Swedenborg did; and he adds: "As it was, his conduct was eccentric and imprudent, sometimes extravagant to the very verge of insanity, if not beyond it" (85).

Maudsley, discussing hallucinations and illusions, states that "mental representations so intense as to become mental presentation is a faculty of mind apt especially to be met with among certain artists." In this connection he mentions Blake. "It was very remarkable," he says, "in that strange and eccentric genius, William Blake; he used habitually to see his conceptions as actual images or visions" (86).

It is difficult to realise how any unprejudiced person who considers the evidence in Blake's case can arrive at any other conclusion than that he exhibited mental disorder. There is no gainsaying the statements made by one writer who summed up the evidence and gave his verdict in the following terms: "On an analysis of an estimate arrived at by these critics it will be discovered that, while one defines him as an eccentric, another as a visionary, a third as an enthusiast, a fourth as a superstitious ghost-seer, all feel it expedient to mollify or to apologise for modes of action inconsistent with the habits of other healthy men; it may be safely affirmed that if he was not insane in conduct, Blake betrayed undoubted symptoms of his mental malady in painting" (87). Even Blake's conduct, however, was influenced by the imaginary voices and the morbid delusions from which he suffered; indeed, it is unduly to limit the definition of the term conduct if we exclude from it such acts as those of writing and of painting.

Though the prevailing state with Blake was one of exaltation and belief in his own capabilities, there were also periods of extreme depression, and the condition may, with little doubt, be classified as one of maniacal-depressive insanity. The fluctuations in his mental condition were so marked as to be in themselves sufficient evidence of marked nervous instability, and these alternations were so pronounced as to be inconsistent

with the normal periodicity which is to be noticed in those whose sanity is not impugned. When, too, we find that in addition to these alternations there is evidence of diminished control—as shown in undue excitability and impulsive violence, of hallucinations of sight and hearing, and of delusions of persecution—there is no doubt that the boundary which separates sanity from insanity has been crossed. Those who protest against this plain statement do not seem to realise that they do Blake less than justice. They would hold him responsible for all his vagaries rather than allow a verdict of *non compos*. Chiefly this is so in order that the vague, mystical element in his work may be imputed to some vague supra- or extra-natural power instead of to the disorderly functioning of unstable nerve-tissue, or to misunderstood organic reflexes. These nervous disorders are obscure enough even when they are considered apart from the veiling mystery in which so many love to hide them ; it is not, therefore, necessary to invoke occult powers, and by so doing to render the subject nebulous and impenetrable. Still less is it wise to place behind the disease of insanity a Mumbo-Jumbo, which has to be invoked, or a Raw-head and Bloody-bones, which has to be exorcised.

" Great is truth, and mighty above all things," and we may add the words of Francis Bacon wherein he says that " it shall prevail." That Blake was endowed with great abilities it has herein been frankly admitted, but that such an admission entails a blind and uncritical adherence to the view that everywhere and at all times he exhibited the attributes of genius in his works is as frankly denied. With the opinion of one who, while admitting Blake's " gift of imaginative intensity," yet realised that he " fell short of completeness," we may fittingly conclude : " There is small profit in that overpraise, even of the dead, to which a proverb that has sheltered many a knave invites us. Blake, at any rate, is great enough to bear *nil nisi verum* for his epitaph " (88).

(1) Blake thus elegantly expressed his sentiments :

" The only man I ever knew
Who did not almost make me spue
Was Fuseli."

(2) *Vide supra*, p. 224.

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The Luetin Test in Parasyphilis.

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DURING the spring of this year, my friend Lieutenant Crocket, R.A.M.C., obtained, through the kindness of Dr. Noguchi, a small supply of luetin, and with this he carried out a series of tests, to which he was anxious to add some observations on its use in mental cases. By permission of Dr. G. M. Robertson he was able to examine a series of cases in Morningside Asylum, and I was fortunate in being asked to co-operate with him. Owing to our small supply of luetin, the number of tests done was necessarily limited, and we intended carrying our observations further when Crocket was called away to duty. Only a short time ago the sad news of his death in action was received, and it is largely on this account that I venture to place on record so small a number of observations.

In 1911, Noguchi reported, in the *Journal of Experimental Medicine*, that he had succeeded in growing the *Treponema pallida in vitreo*, and, a few months later, he published his first article on the luetin test in the same journal. This test for syphilis is analogous to the intra-dermal tuberculin test of Mantoux and Moussu, and the technique is the same. Luetin consists of a sterile emulsion made from cultures of the