

WILLIAM BLAKE AND HIS ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE DIVINE COMEDY

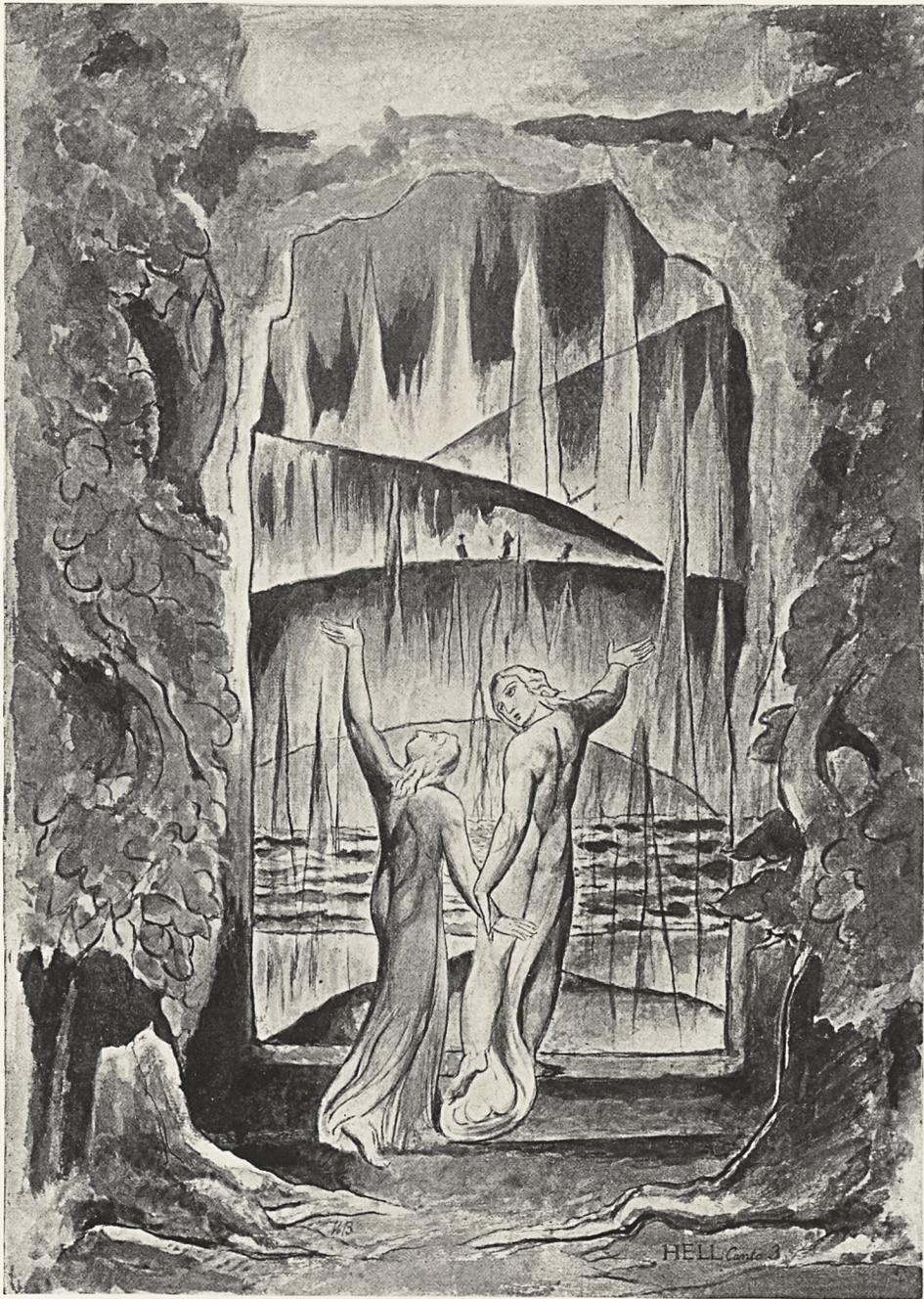
I. HIS OPINIONS UPON ART



THE recoil from scientific naturalism has created in our day the movement the French call *symboliste*, which, beginning with the memorable "Axel," by Villiers de l'Isle Adam, has added to drama a new kind of romance, at once ecstatic and picturesque, in the works of M. Maeterlinck; and beginning with certain pictures of the pre-Raphaelites, and of Mr. Watts and Mr. Burne-Jones, has brought into art a new and subtle inspiration. This movement, and in art more especially, has proved so consonant with a change in the times, in the desires of our hearts grown weary with material circumstance, that it has begun to touch even the great public; the ladies of fashion and men of the world who move so slowly; and has shown such copious signs of being a movement, perhaps the movement of the opening century, that one of the best known of French picture dealers will store none but the inventions of a passionate symbolism. It has no sufficient philosophy and criticism, unless indeed it has them hidden in the writings of M. Mallarmé, which I have not French enough to understand, but if it cared it might find enough of both philosophy and criticism in the writings of William Blake to protect it from its opponents, and what is perhaps of greater importance, from its own mistakes, for he was certainly the first great *symboliste* of modern times, and the first of any time to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great art with symbol. There had been allegorists and teachers of allegory in plenty, but the symbolic imagination, or as Blake preferred to call it, "Vision," is not allegory, being "a representation of what actually exists really and unchangeably": a symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame, while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination; the one is a revelation, the other an amusement. It is happily

no part of my purpose to expound in detail the relations he believed to exist between symbol and mind ; for in doing so I should come upon not a few doctrines which, though they have not been difficult to many simple persons, ascetics wrapped in skins, women who had cast away all common knowledge, peasants dreaming by their sheep-folds upon the hills, are full of obscurity to the man of modern culture ; but it is necessary to just touch upon these relations, because in them was the fountain of much of the practice and of all the precept of his artistic life.

If a man would enter into "Noah's rainbow," he has written, and "make a friend" of one of "the images of wonder" which dwell there, and which always entreat him "to leave mortal things," "then would he arise from the grave and meet the Lord in the air ;" and by this rainbow ; this sign of a covenant granted to him who is with Shem and Japhet, "painting, poetry and music," "the three powers in man of conversing with Paradise which the flood 'of time and space' did not sweep away" ; Blake represented the shapes of beauty haunting our moments of inspiration : shapes held by most for the frailest of ephemera, but by him for a people older than the world, citizens of eternity, appearing and reappearing in the minds of artists and of poets, creating all we touch and see by casting distorted images of themselves upon "the vegetable glass of nature" ; and because beings, none the less symbols ; blossoms, as it were, growing from invisible immortal roots ; hands, as it were, pointing the way into some divine labyrinth. If "the world of imagination" was "the world of eternity" as this doctrine implied, it was of less importance to know men and nature than to distinguish the beings and substances of imagination from those of a more perishable kind, created by the fantasy, in uninspired moments, out of memory and whim ; and this could best be done by purifying one's mind, as with a flame, in study of the works of the great masters, who were great because they had been granted by divine favour a vision of the unfallen world, from which others are kept apart by the flaming sword that turns every way ; and by flying from the painters who studied "the vegetable glass" for its own sake, and not to discover there the shadows of imperishable beings and substances, and who entered into their own minds, not to make the unfallen world a test of all they saw and heard and felt with the senses, but to cover the naked spirit with "the rotten rags of memory" of older sensations. To distinguish between these two schools, and to cleave always to the Florentine, and so to escape the fascination of those who seemed to him to offer a spirit, weary with the labours of inspiration, the sleep of nature, had been the struggle of the first half of his life ; and it was only after his return to London from Felpham



in 1804 that he finally escaped from "temptations and perturbations" which sought "to destroy the imaginative power" at "the hands of Venetian and Flemish Demons." "The spirit of Titian," and one must always remember that he had only seen poor engravings, and what his disciple, Palmer, has called "picture dealers' Titians," "was particularly active in raising doubts concerning the possibility of executing without a model; and when once he had raised the doubt it became easy for him to snatch away the vision time after time," and Blake's imagination "weakened" and "darkened" until a "memory of nature and of the pictures of various schools possessed his mind, instead of appropriate execution" flowing from the vision itself. But now he wrote, "O glory! and O delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous fiend to his station"—he had overcome the merely reasoning and sensual portion of the mind—"whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last twenty years of my life 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 suddenly, on the day after visiting the Truchsessian Gallery of pictures,"—this was a gallery containing pictures by Albert Dürer and by the great Florentines,— "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 window shutters. . . . Excuse my enthusiasm, or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver in my hand, as I used to be in my youth."

This letter may have been the expression of a moment's enthusiasm, but was more probably rooted in one of those intuitions of coming technical power which every creator feels, and learns to rely upon; for all his greatest work was done, and the principles of his art were formulated after this date. Except a word here and there, his writings hitherto had not dealt with the principles of art except remotely and by implication; but now he wrote much upon them, and not in obscure symbolic verse, but in emphatic prose, and explicit if not very poetical rhyme. In his "Descriptive Catalogue," in "The Address to the Public," in the notes on Sir Joshua Reynolds, in "The Book of Moonlight," of which some not very dignified rhymes alone remain; in beautiful detached passages in "the MS. Book," he explained spiritual art, and praised the painters of Florence and their influence, and cursed all that has come of Venice and Holland. The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature, and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind's

eye, when exalted by inspiration, were "eternal existences," symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments. To wrap them about in reflected lights was to do this, and to dwell over fondly upon any softness of hair or flesh was to dwell upon that which was least permanent and least characteristic, for "The great and golden rule of art, as of life, is this: that the more distinct, sharp, and wiry the boundary line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling." Inspiration was to see the permanent and characteristic in all forms, and if you had it not, you must needs imitate with a languid mind the things you saw or remembered, and so sink into the sleep of nature where all is soft and melting. "Great inventors in all ages knew this. Protogenes and Apelles knew each other by their line. Raphael and Michael Angelo and Albert Dürer are known by this and this alone. How do we distinguish the owl from the beast, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflections and movements? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden but the definite and determinate? What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery but the hard and wiry line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions? Leave out this line and you leave out life itself; and all is chaos again, and the line of the Almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist." He even insisted that "colouring does not depend on where the colours are put, but upon where the lights and darks are put, and all depends upon the form or outline;" meaning, I suppose, that a colour gets its brilliance or its depth from being in light or in shadow. He does not mean by outline the bounding line dividing a form from its background, as one of his commentators has thought, but the line that divides it from surrounding space, and unless you have an overmastering sense of this you cannot draw true beauty at all, but only "the beauty that is appended to folly," a beauty of mere voluptuous softness, "a lamentable accident of the mortal and perishing life," for "the beauty proper for sublime art is lineaments, or forms and features capable of being the receptacles of intellect," and "the face or limbs that alter least from youth to old age are the face and limbs of the greatest beauty and perfection." His praise of a severe art had been beyond price had his age rested a moment to listen, in the midst of its enthusiasm for Correggio and the later Renaissance, for Bartolozzi and for Stothard; and yet in his visionary realism, and in his enthusiasm for what, after all, is perhaps the greatest art, and a necessary



part of every picture that is art at all, he forgot how he who wraps the vision in lights and shadows, in iridescent or glowing colour; having in the midst of his labour many little visions of these secondary essences; until form be half lost in pattern, may compel the canvas or paper to become itself a symbol of some not indefinite because unsearchable essence: for is not the Bacchus and Ariadne of Titian a talisman as powerfully charged with intellectual virtue as though it were a jewel-studded door of the city seen on Patmos?

To cover the imperishable lineaments of beauty with shadows and reflected lights was to fall into the power of his "Vala," the indolent fascination of nature, the woman divinity who is so often described in "the prophetic" books as "sweet pestilence," and whose children weave webs to take the souls of men; but there was yet a more lamentable chance, for nature has also a "masculine portion," or "spectre," which kills instead of merely hiding and is continually at war with inspiration. To "generalize" forms and shadows, to "smooth out" spaces and lines in obedience to "laws of composition," and of painting; founded, not upon imagination, which always thirsts for variety and delights in freedom, but upon reasoning from sensation, which is always seeking to reduce everything to a lifeless and slavish uniformity; as the popular art of Blake's day had done, and as he understood Sir Joshua Reynolds to advise, was to fall into "Entuthon Benithon," or "the Lake of Udan Adan," or some other of those regions where the imagination and the flesh are alike dead, and which he names by so many resonant fantastical names. "General knowledge is remote knowledge," he wrote; "it is in particulars that wisdom consists, and happiness too. Both in art and life general masses are as much art as a paste-board man is human. Every man has eyes, nose, and mouth; this every idiot knows. But he who enters into and discriminates most minutely the manners and intentions, the characters in all their branches, is the alone wise or sensible man, and on this discrimination all art is founded. . . . As poetry admits not a letter that is insignificant, so painting admits not a grain of sand or a blade of grass insignificant, much less an insignificant blot or blur."

Against another desire of his time, derivative also from what he has called "corporeal reason," the desire for a tepid "moderation," for a lifeless "sanity" in both art and life, he had protested years before with a paradoxical violence: "The roadway of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," and we must only "bring out weight and measure in a time of dearth." This protest; carried, in the notes on Sir Joshua Reynolds, to the point of dwelling almost with pleasure on the thought that "The Lives of the Painters say that

Raphael died of dissipation," because dissipation is better than emotional penury; seemed as important to his old age as to his youth. He taught it to his disciples, and one finds it in its purely artistic shape in a diary written by Samuel Palmer, in 1824: "excess is the essential vivifying spirit, vital spark, embalming spice of the finest art. There are many mediums in the *means*—none, oh, not a jot, not a shadow of a jot, in the *end* of great art. In a picture whose merit is to be excessively brilliant, it can't be too brilliant: but individual tints may be too brilliant . . . we must not begin with medium but think always on excess and only use medium to make excess more abundantly excessive."

These three primary commands, to seek a determinate outline, to avoid a generalized treatment, and to desire always abundance and exuberance, were insisted upon with vehement anger, and their opponents called again and again "demons," and "villains," "hired" by the wealthy and the idle; but in private, Palmer has told us, he could find "sources of delight throughout the whole range of art," and was ever ready to praise excellence in any school, finding, doubtless, among friends no need for the emphasis of exaggeration. There is a beautiful passage in "Jerusalem," in which the merely mortal part of the mind, "the spectre," creates "pyramids of pride," and "pillars in the deepest hell to reach the heavenly arches," and seeks to discover wisdom in "the spaces between the stars," not "in the stars," where it is, but the immortal part makes all his labours vain, and turns his pyramids to "grains of sand," his "pillars" to "dust on the fly's wing," and makes of "his starry heavens a moth of gold and silver mocking his anxious grasp." So when man's desire to rest from spiritual labour, and his thirst to fill his art with mere sensation, and memory, seem upon the point of triumph, some miracle transforms them to a new inspiration; and here and there among the pictures born of sensation and memory is the murmuring of a new ritual, the glimmering of new talismans and symbols.

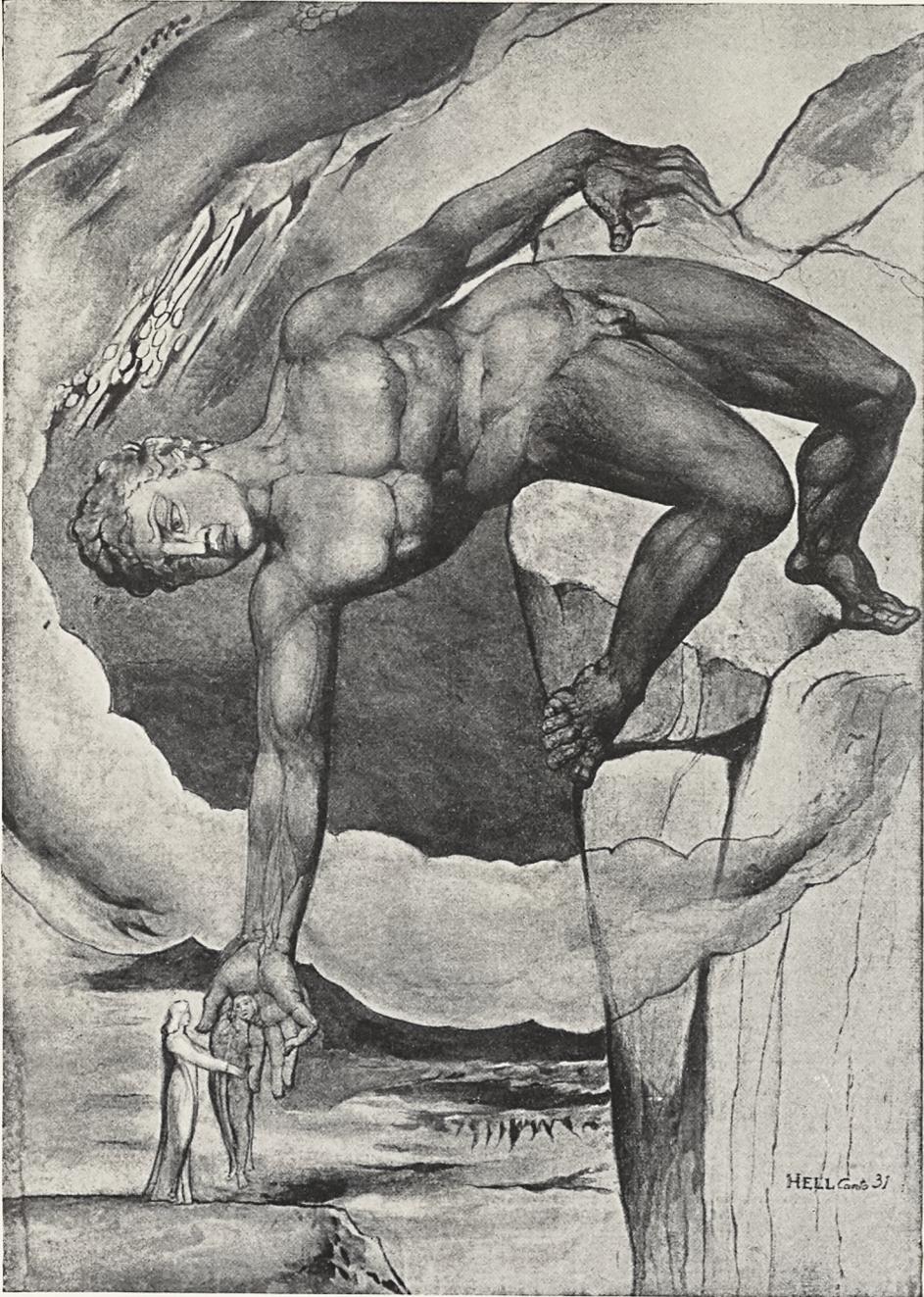
It was during and after the writing of these opinions that Blake did the various series of pictures which have brought him the bulk of his fame. He had already completed the illustrations to Young's "Night Thoughts," in which the great sprawling figures, a little wearisome even with the luminous colours of the original water-colour, become nearly intolerable in plain black and white; and almost all the illustrations to "the prophetic books," which have an energy like that of the elements, but are rather rapid sketches taken while some phantasmic procession swept over him, than elaborate compositions, and in whose shadowy adventures one finds not merely, as did



Dr. Garth Wilkinson, "the hells of the ancient people, the Anakim, the Nephalim, and the Rephaim; . . . gigantic petrifications from which the fires of lust and intense selfish passion have long dissipated what was animal and vital"; not merely the shadows cast by the powers who had closed the light from him as "with a door and window shutters," but the shadows of those who gave them battle. He did now, however, the many designs to Milton, of which I have only seen those to "Paradise Regained"; the reproductions of those to "Comus"; published, I think, by Mr. Quaritch; and the three or four to "Paradise Lost"; engraved by Bell Scott; a series of designs which one good judge considers his greatest work; the illustrations to Blair's "Grave," whose gravity and passion struggle with the mechanical softness and trivial smoothness of Schiavonetti's engraving; the illustrations to Thornton's "Virgil," whose influence is, I think, perceptible in the work of the little group of landscape painters who gathered about him in his old age and delighted to call him master. The member of the group, whom I have already so often quoted, has alone praised worthily these illustrations to the first *Eclogue*: "There is in all such a misty and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the inmost soul and gives complete and unreserved delight, unlike the gaudy daylight of this world. They are like all this wonderful artist's work, the drawing aside of the fleshly curtain, and the glimpse which all the most holy, studious saints and sages have enjoyed, of the rest which remains to the people of God." Now, too, he did the two great series, the crowning work of his life, "the illustrations to the book of Job" and the designs to "The Divine Comedy." They were commissioned from him by his patron and disciple John Linnell, who paid him a good price, the best he had yet received; but the material circumstance of their origin has been often described, and is of less importance than the influence upon his method of engraving of certain engravings of Marc Antonio, which were shown him by Mr. Linnell. Hitherto he had protested against the mechanical "dots and lozenges" and "blots and blurs" of Woollett and Strange, but had himself used both "dot and lozenge," "blot and blur," though always in subordination "to a firm and determinate outline"; but in Marc Antonio he found a style full of delicate lines, a style where all was living and energetic, strong and subtle. And almost his last words, a letter written upon his death-bed, attack the "dots and lozenges" with even more than usually quaint symbolism, and praise expressive lines. "I know that the majority of Englishmen are bound by the indefinite . . . a line is a line in its minutest particulars, straight or crooked. It is itself, not inter-measurable by anything else . . . but since the French Revolution"; since

the reign of reason began, that is ; "Englishmen are all intermeasurable with one another, certainly a happy state of agreement in which I do not agree." The Dante series occupied the last years of his life ; even when too weak to get out of bed he worked on, propped up with the great drawing book before him. He sketched a hundred designs, but left all incomplete, some very greatly so, and partly engraved seven plates, of which the Francesca and Paolo is the most finished. It is given here instead of a photographic reproduction of the water-colour, although accessible in the engraved set, to show the form the entire series would have taken had he lived. It is not, I think, inferior to any but the finest in the Job, if indeed to them, and shows in its perfection Blake's mastery over elemental things, the swirl in which the lost spirits are hurried, "a watery flame" he would have called it, the haunted waters and the huddling shapes. The luminous globe, a symbol used again in the Purgatory, is Francesca's and Paolo's dream of happiness, their "Heaven in Hell's despite." The other three drawings have never been published before, and appear here, as will those which will follow them, through the courtesy of the Linnell family. The passing of Dante and Virgil through the portico of Hell is the most unfinished and loses most in reproduction, for the flames, rising from the half-seen circles, are in the original full of intense and various colour ; while the angry spirits fighting on the waters of the Styx above the sluggish bodies of the melancholy, loses the least, its daemonic energy being in the contour of the bodies and faces. Both this and the Antaeus setting down Virgil and Dante upon the verge of Cocytus, a wonderful piece of colour in the original, resemble the illustrations to his "prophetic books" in exuberant strength and lavish motion, and are in contrast with the illustrations to the Purgatory, which are placid, marmoreal, tender, starry, rapturous.

All in this great series are in some measure powerful and moving, and not, as it is customary to say of the work of Blake, because a flaming imagination pierces through a cloudy and indecisive technique, but because they have the only excellence possible in any art, a mastery over artistic expression. The technique of Blake was imperfect, incomplete, as is the technique of wellnigh all artists who have striven to bring fires from remote summits ; but where his imagination is perfect and complete, his technique has a like perfection, a like completeness. He strove to embody more subtle raptures, more elaborate intuitions than any before him ; his imagination and technique are more broken and strained under a great burden than the imagination and technique of any other master. "I am," wrote Blake, "like others, just equal in invention and execution." And again, "No man can



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improve an original invention ; nor can an original invention exist without execution, organized, delineated, and articulated either by God or man. . . . I have heard people say, 'Give me the ideas ; it is no matter what words you put them into ;' and others say, 'Give me the design ; it is no matter for the execution.' . . . Ideas cannot be given but in their minutely appropriate words, nor can a design be made without its minutely appropriate execution." Living in a time when technique and imagination are continually perfect and complete, because they no longer strive to bring fire from heaven, we forget how imperfect and incomplete they were in even the greatest masters, in Botticelli, in Orcagna, and in Giotto. The errors in the handiwork of exalted spirits are as the more fantastical errors in their lives ; as Coleridge's opium cloud ; as Villiers de l'Isle Adam's candidature for the throne of Greece ; as Blake's anger against causes and purposes he but half understood ; as the flickering madness an Eastern scripture would allow in august dreamers ; for he who half lives in eternity endures a rending of the structures of the mind, a crucifixion of the intellectual body.

W. B. YEATS.