THE PRE-ROMANTICISM

POETRY Pre-Romantic poets in the Augustan Age

A group of poets, though living during the Augustan Age, showed in their works all the basic characteristics of the transitional PreRomantic period.

James Thomson (1700-1748) is chiefly remembered for his masterpiece The Seasons (1730), composed of four books, Winter, Summer, Spring and Autumn, published separately, respectively in 1726, 1727, 1729 and 1730. The poems, in blank verse, contain a delightful and moving description of natural phenomena, which the poet regarded as a revelation of the attributes of God, and they are completely free from the conventional artfulness of the age. In 1736 Thomson retired to a small house in Richmond where he composed his best-known work, The Castle of Indolence, an elaborate Spenserian allegory, which was published in 1748, just before his own death. He also wrote several plays, including The Tragedy of Sophonisba (1730), and collaborated with D. Mallet on the masque Alfred (1740): Thomson's words for Rule, Britannia! written as part of that masque and set to music by Thomas Arne, became one of the most well-known British patriotic songs, quite apart from the masque which is now virtually forgotten.

Edward Young (1683-1765) wrote a long religious poem, The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality (17421745), in which he rejected the vanities of life to devote himself to a lonely existence and to serious concerns. Though the work is full of solemn admonitions, it includes brilliant and isolated passages pervaded with melancholy and romantic sensibility. Young employed a highly refined and ornamental style. Night Thoughts' success was enormous: it was translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish and Magyar; in France it became a classic of the romantic school. The poem made Young famous, but he lived in almost uninterrupted retirement. If Young did not invent «melancholy and moonlight» in literature, he did much to spread the fashionable taste for them.

The Graveyard School

The «Graveyard School», 18th century school of English poets, is represented by a group of authors such as William Collins (17211759), Robert Blair (1699-1746; his work The Grave, of 1743, is one of the most famous «Graveyard poems»), the brothers Joseph (1722-1800) and Thomas Warton (1728-1790), and the greatest, Thomas Gray (1716-1771). The name «Graveyard School» refers to the peculiar character of its poetical production. It was also called the «poetry of melancholy», as the recurrent subjects were gloomy and desolate landscapes, ruins, tombs, churchyards and meditative moods on human suffering and on man's destiny. The Graveyard School contributed to impress a distinctive mark on the literary production of the second half of the century and to shift tastes towards Romanticism.

Although Gray was one of the least productive poets (his collected works published during his lifetime amount to less than one thousand lines), he is regarded as the predominant poetical figure of the middle decades of the 18th century. Classical scholar and professor of history at Cambridge University, Gray pursued a high ideal of artistic perfection. He combined traditional forms and poetic diction with new topics and modes of expression and may be considered as a forerunner of the Romantic period.

His reputation rests on Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (1751; a meditative poem presenting thoughts conjured up by the sight of a rural graveyard) which, though consisting of less than 130 lines, cost him six years of hard labour. The Elegy was recognized immediately for its beauty and skill, and the Churchyard Poets are so named because they wrote in the shadow of Gray's great poem. It contains many outstanding phrases which have entered the common English lexicon, either on their own or as referenced in other works. The Elegy, believed to have been written in the churchyard of Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, has become a lasting contribution to English literary heritage and it is still one of the most popular and most frequently quoted poems in the English language.

Gray also composed the Ode on the Spring (1742), the Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College (1742), the Hymn to Adversity (1742), the Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West (1742), The Progress of Poesy (1757), The Bard (1757), The Fatal Sisters (1761) and The Descent of Odin (1761). He also wrote light verse, such as Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes (1748), concerning Horace Walpole's (his close friend) cat.

He was an exceptional poet and wrote with sincerity, honesty and integrity. He wrote of true thoughts, feelings, inspirations, experiences, and every word reflected upon his emotions. His works were written about peacefulness, passiveness, thoughts of joy, of nostalgia and, most importantly, of innocence.

William Cowper

One of the most popular poets of his time, William Cowper (17311800) changed the direction of 18th century nature poetry by writing of everyday life and scenes of the English countryside. After the death of his mother when he was six, Cowper (born at Great Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire), the son of a clergyman, was sent to a local boarding school. He then moved to Westminster School, in London, and in 1750 began to study law. During his student days he fell in love with his cousin, Theodora, and for a while the two were engaged.

A delicate and shy boy, the impact with reality caused him to suffer from attacks of despondency. Later, having entered a solicitor's office, he was compelled to give up his legal career as the prospect of a public examination alarmed him to such an extent that he attempted to commit suicide (1763). He remained confined in a lunatic asylum for two years. After recovering he settled at Huntingdon with a retired clergyman named Morley Unwin and his wife Mary, but recurrent depressive fits and religious doubts, aggravated by the conviction that he was predestined to be damned, haunted him all his life. Cowper's tragedy is reflected only in small part in his works, as poetry was to him an escape from his troubles.

Cowper grew to be on such good terms with the Unwin family that he went to live in their house, and on Morley's death moved with Mary to Olney, where John Newton, a former slave trader who had repented and devoted his life to the gospel, was curate. The poet collaborated with Newton on a book of religious verse, eventually published as Olney Hymns (1779): it includes hymns such as Praise for the Fountain Opened, Light Shining out of Darkness, God Moves in a Mysterious Way and Oh, for a Closer Walk with God, which remain some of his most familiar verses.

In 1773 Cowper, now engaged to marry Mrs. Unwin, experienced a new attack of insanity, imagining not only that he was condemned to hell eternally, but that God was commanding him to make a sacrifice of his own life. This attack broke off the engagement, but Mary Unwin took care of him with great devotion. During a calmer period he wrote, at Mrs. Unwin's suggestion, his satires (published in 1782 under the title Poems): Table Talk, The Progress of Error, Truth, Expostulation, Hope, Charity, Conversation and Retirement.

Cowper was friendly with Lady Austen, a widow living nearby, who told him a story that he made into a ballad, The Journey of John Gilpin (1783), his best-known long poem, which was sung all over London after it was printed. In the work he related, in a humorous way, the vicissitudes of a merchant who took a day's holiday with his family.

Encouraged by Lady Austen, Cowper attempted a higher task, and devoted himself to the composition of The Task (1785), a long poem in blank verse. It begins with a mock-heroic celebration of a sofa, but the subject soon changes into a description of the small facts of everyday life, intermingled with the author's observations. The poem lacks of any formal structure, but its originality lies in the poet's sensibility which acts as a cohesive force in collecting the scattered elements together. Cowper dealt with themes previously considered too low and plain for poetry. If in his former works he had appeared still divided between the opposed trends of two ages, in The Task the poet reveals himself decisively Romantic. This poem was an immediate success on its publication.

In 1786 he moved with Mrs. Unwin to Weston Underwood, where he wrote various poems published after his death, including the unfinished Yardley-Oak, the verses On the Loss of the Royal George, To Mary and The Poplar-Field.

The Castaway composed in 1799, shortly before his death, describes the despair of a sailor swept into the sea during a storm and left to drown alone and helpless. The dramatic identification of the poet with the sailor reflects his troubled life.

He is also considered one of the best letter writers in English (published posthumously), and some of his hymns have become part of the folk heritage of Protestant England. Cowper, a champion of the oppressed, died at East Dereham, Norfolk.

The Revival of Ancient Poetry

Another characteristic feature of the Romantic Age was the «revival of ancient poetry», which was thought of as possessing those primitive and spontaneous qualities that the advent of civilization had destroyed or spoilt.

In 1760 a young Edinburgh schoolmaster named James Macpherson (1736-1796) published a translation of ancient Scottish verse titled Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language. Prompted by the enthusiastic response this work received, Macpherson next translated two longer epic poems, Fingal (1762) and Temora (1763), both supposedly composed by a 3rd century bard named Ossian. In 1773 «a carefully corrected and greatly improved edition» was published as The Poems of Ossian, which were instant, international successes and propelled Macpherson to fame and riches. 18th century readers found that the simple, melancholy virtues of the heroic characters in the poems provided an appealing contrast to the complexity and deceit of the modern world. In addition, the discovery of an ancient literature older than any England could boast gave a boost to Scottish cultural nationalism. But there were some who doubted the authenticity of the poems, notably Samuel Johnson, who branded them a fraud. None of these good critics knew any Gaelic of course, which may well have been a handicap in their literary judgments.

After Macpherson's death, a committee of the Highland Society of Scotland made a thorough investigation of the whole case. Their report concluded that «poems existed which could be called Ossianic, and that Macpherson had liberally added passages of his own to create the epics». In other words, the poems were principally written by Macpherson himself, not by a 3rd century Gaelic poet. He often injected a good deal of Romantic mood into the original, sometimes closely followed them, and other times did not. Although Macpherson is now mainly remembered as a fraud, he did help to draw attention to the ancient and disappearing oral tradition of Scottish balladry, which was real.

Thomas Percy (1729-1811) was Bishop of Dromore and is remembered as editor of «The Tatler», «The Guardian» and «The Spectator». His greatest contribution to the world is considered to be his Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765; it seems that he snatched it from the hands of a friend who was about to use it to light a fire), the first of the great ballad collections, which was the one work most responsible for the ballad revival in English poetry that was a significant part of the Romantic movement.

Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) is generally regarded as the first Romantic poet in English. As a young boy growing up in Bristol, he spent a great deal of time with his uncle, the sexton of the St. Mary Redcliffe Church. A sensitive, artistic child, Chatterton began to imagine what the life of the monks who had lived in the church during the 15th century must have been like. He even invented in his mind the character of a 15th century priest named Thomas Rowley. Chatterton's medieval fantasy world materialized into solid, tangible form when he claimed to find poetry tucked away in a back room of the church that had been written by his imaginary priest. He showed Rowley Poems to the law partner of his employer, a Bristol attorney, who believed it to be authentic 15th century material and bought it from him. Emboldened by this success, Chatterton began «finding» more of Rowley's poetry. He also produced poems using his own name, but found that anything by Chatterton was ignored, whereas work by Rowley was eagerly sought after. In 1770 he went to London, determined to make it on his own merits as a writer; but within four months the poet committed suicide by arsenic, apparently reduced to despair through poverty. He was only seventeen years old. An original genius as well as an adept imitator, Chatterton used 15th century vocabulary, but his rhythms and his approach to poetry were quite modern. The Rowley Poems (first published in 1777) – in which he employs a variety of verse form – were soon recognized as modern adaptations written in a 15th century style, but the vigour and medieval beauty of such poems as Mynstrelles Songe, Bristowe Tragedie and An Excelente Balade of Charitie revealed Chatterton's poetic genius. His life, work and tragic death had a powerful effect on the Romantic imagination: Wordsworth, for instance, referred to him as «the marvelous boy», and Keats dedicated Endymion to his memory.

PROSE

The Gothic Tale

The «Gothic Tale» took shape mostly in England from 1765 to 1830 and falls within the category of Romantic literature. It acts, however, as a reaction against the rigidity and formality of other forms of Romantic literature. The Gothic is far from limited to this set time period, as it takes its roots from former terrorizing writing that dates back to the Middle Ages, and can still be found written today by writers such as Stephen King. But during this time period, many of the highly regarded «Gothic novelists» published their writing and much of the novel's form was defined. The Gothic Novel expressed the emotional trends of the period; it was closely connected with the idea of the «sublime» and aimed at stirring strong effects and wonder in the reader. The name «Gothic» attributed to this kind of novel derived from the contemporary revival of the Gothic Architecture and the increasing interest in barbarous ages. In these novels the rational and well ordered world of the Classic Age disappears to be replaced by a fantastic and mysterious sensational atmosphere. The subject-matters are the improbable adventures of strange and extraordinary characters, culminating in treasons, murders and in other cruel and appalling events. They are set in desolate landscapes, in old abbeys and in gloomy castles equipped with subterranean passages, dark battlements, hidden panels and trapdoors; supernatural events such as the apparition of ghosts and other sensational ingredients were largely used. The Gothic Tale did not reach artistic achievements, but it had a remarkable influence on fiction. The vogue was initiated in England by Walpole's immensely successful The Castle of Otranto (1765).

Horace Walpole (1717-1797) was born in London, the youngest son of British Prime Minister Robert Walpole, and was educated at Eton College and King's College, Cambridge. His homosexuality revealed itself early, and he is believed to have had affairs with the poet Thomas Gray (→ Poetry). Gray accompanied Walpole on a Grand Tour of France and Italy, but they quarrelled and separated. They were later reconciled and Walpole remained throughout his life an enthusiastic admirer of Gray's poetry. On his return to England in 1741, Walpole entered Parliament. He was never politically ambitious, but remained a member of Parliament even after the death of his father. The most absorbing interests of Walpole's life were his friendships and a small villa that he bought at Twickenham in 1747 and transformed into a pseudo-Gothic showplace, known as

«Strawberry Hill», which began a new architectural trend. He remained unmarried and died in London.

Walpole's literary output was extremely varied. The Castle of Otranto is considered the first Gothic Novel in the English language: its supernatural happenings, terror, pathos, thinly veiled sexuality and mysterious ambience were widely emulated in the genre. In Walpole's mind his novel is an attempt to blend the natural and the romantic. The work succeeded in restoring elements of free invention to contemporary fiction.

He also wrote The Mysterious Mother (1768), a tragedy with the theme of incest; historical speculations such as Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third (1768); and a genuine contribution to art history, Anecdotes of Painting in England (1762-1771).

Walpole is remembered today as perhaps the most assiduous letter writer in the English language: his private correspondence constitutes a survey of the history, manners and tastes of his age.

His most respectable follower was Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), born Ann Ward, a quite shy woman and a very talented writer. Not much is known about her life, except that she was born in London, the daughter of a tradesman, and that at the age of twenty-two she married William Radcliffe, a lawyer and journalist; the couple had no children. To amuse herself, Ann began to write fiction, which her husband encouraged. She wrote her weird and mysterious tales beside a blazing fire in a quiet room to enliven her long, solitary winter evenings. Ann Radcliffe died in London from respiratory problems probably caused by pneumonia.

Mrs. Radcliffe published her first novel, The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne, in 1789. It set the tone for the majority of her work, which tended to involve innocent, but heroic young women who find themselves in gloomy, mysterious castles ruled by even more mysterious barons with dark pasts. It was followed by A Sicilian Romance (1790), which weaves poetic vision and historical detail of Sicilian sensibilities. She achieved fame with her third work, The Romance of the Forest (1791), a tale of 17th century France. In the novel Adeline, having fled Paris and taken refuge in a desolate abbey, encounters sinister relics and endures a desperate struggle to escape its owners calculating grip to imprison her. With her next work, The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), Ann Radcliffe raised the Gothic romance to a new level and inspired a long line of imitators. Portraying her heroine's inner life, creating a thick atmosphere of fear and providing a gripping plot that continues to thrill readers today, the novel is the story of orphan Emily St. Aubert, who finds herself separated from the man she loves and confined within the medieval castle of her aunt's new husband, Montoni. Inside the solitary Castle of Udolpho, set high in the dark and majestic Apennines, she must cope with an unwanted suitor, Montoni's threats, and the wild imaginings and terrors that threaten to overwhelm her. With The Italian (1797), Mrs. Radcliffe realized her full stature as a writer. It shows not only improved dialogue and plot construction, but its villain, Schedoni, a monk of massive physique and sinister disposition, is treated with a psychological insight unusual in her work.

Stylistically, Ann Radcliffe was noted for her vivid descriptions of exotic locations, though in reality the author had rarely or never visited the actual places. Extraordinary fascinating stories flowed from her pen which, with all their faults, unmistakably bear the stamp of genius. She stands apart in her ability to infuse scenes of terror and suspense with an aura of romantic sensibility. Mrs. Radcliffe was the most popular writer of her day and almost universally admired: contemporary critics called her «the mighty enchantress» and «the Shakespeare of romance-writers»; her popularity continued through the 19th century.

A more sensational type of Gothic romance exploiting horror and violence flourished in Germany and was introduced to England by Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818). He was often called «Monk Lewis», from the title of his extravagant and successful novel, The Monk (1796). The work concerns a saintly Capuchin monk who, led into a life of depravity by a fiend-inspired woman, subsequently becomes a rapist and murderer. Of his melodramatic plays the most famous is The Castle Spectre (1798).

Other landmarks of Gothic fiction are William Beckford's (17591844) Oriental romance Vathek (1786; in his work Beckford added to the Gothic Novel the suggestion of an exotic background), and Charles Robert Maturin's story of an Irish Faust, Melmoth the Wanderer (1820). The classic horror stories Frankenstein (1818), by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and Dracula (1897), by Bram Stoker, are in the Gothic tradition, but without the specifically Gothic trappings.

The Sentimental Novel and the Novel of Manners

Alongside the Gothic Tale two other genres of novel developed: the Sentimental Novel and the Novel of Manners.

The former arose partly in reaction to the austerity and rationalism of the Neoclassic period. It exalted feeling above reason and raised the analysis of emotion to a fine art. The assumptions underlying the Sentimental Novel were Rousseau's doctrine of the natural goodness of man and his belief that moral development was fostered by experiencing powerful sympathies. In England, Samuel Richardson's sentimental novel Pamela was recommended by clergymen as a means of educating the heart.

In the 1760s the Sentimental Novel developed into the Novel of Sensibility, which presented characters possessing a pronounced susceptibility to delicate sensation. Such characters were not only deeply moved by sympathy for their fellow man, but also reacted emotionally to the beauty inherent in natural settings and works of art or music. The prototype was Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy. The literature of Romanticism adopted many elements of the Novel of Sensibility, including responsiveness to nature and belief in the wisdom of the heart and in the power of sympathy.

The most remarkable writer is Henry Mackenzie (1745-1831), Scottish novelist, playwright, poet and editor, whose famous novel The Man of Feeling (1771) established him as a major literary figure in Scotland. It is a sentimental story: its hero, Hartley,

possesses an ideal sensitivity, displayed as feelings of virtue, pity, sympathy and benevolence. As innocence and weakness are deceived and exploited, the hero's response, and the intended response in the reader, is copious shedding of tears of sympathy and charity. The work was an immediate success and the title came to be attached to the author himself. Mackenzie published two other novels in the same sentimental vein: The Man of the World (1773), portraying a villainous hero, and Julia de Roubigné (1777), imitating Richardson's Clarissa.

The Novel of Manners describes in detail the customs, behaviours, habits and expectations of a certain social group at a specific time and place. Usually these conventions shape the behaviour of the main characters, and sometimes even stifle or repress them. Often the Novel of Manners is satiric, and it is always realistic in depiction. Examples include Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice and William Makepeace Thackeray's Vanity Fair.

Frances or Fanny Burney (1752-1840), later Madame D'Arblay, novelist and letter writer, daughter of the musician Charles Burney, is considered the creator of the Novel of Domestic Life, based on the observation of the simple facts of everyday life and the delineation of common characters. Although Fanny received no formal education, she read prodigiously and had the benefit of conversation with her father's famous friends, including David Garrick, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Crisp (a disappointed author living in retirement). Her habit of observing and recording society led to Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance Into the World (1778), Burney's first and best-known book, a landmark in the evolution of the Novel of Manners. It is an epistolary novel and concerns the development of a young girl, unsure of herself in society and subject to errors of manners and judgement. Published anonymously, Evelina took London by storm; no one guessed it was by shy Fanny Burney. The book pointed the way to Jane Austen's novel.

Her next work, Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress (1782), incorporated didactic themes along with the social satire of Evelina into a more complex plot. Though lacking the freshness and spontaneity of her first work, this novel was equally well received.

Fanny spent five unhappy years (1786-1791) as a member of Queen Charlotte's household. In 1793 she married General d'Arblay, a penniless French émigré living in England; the couple had one son. In 1796 Fanny Burney wrote a potboiler, Camilla: or a Picture of Youth, and in 1814 The Wanderer. The theme of her novels is always the same: the entry into society of a virtuous but inexperienced young girl, her mistakes and her gradual coming of age. Her voluminous journals and letters give an excellent account of English culture and society from 1768 to 1840.

GREAT WRITERS

William Blake (1757-1827) Life

William Blake was born in 1757 in London to James and Catherine Blake, the second of five children (two of his siblings died in infancy); his father was a prosperous hosier. The poet grew up in London and was a strange, imaginative child, who fell very early under the influence of the Swedish mystic and seer Emanuel Swedenborg: this philosopher, claiming to have visions and devoting his life to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, inflamed the boy's imagination and had a remarkable part in the development of his conception of the artist as a prophet. William later described the visionary experiences he had as a child in the countryside, when he saw God, angels, ghostly monks, the angel Gabriel, the Virgin Mary and various historical figures: «majestic shadows, grey but luminous» the artist defined them. Blake could not follow a regular course of studies and was essentially a self-taught man. At the age of ten, he expressed a wish to become a painter, so his parents sent him to Henry Pars' drawing school. He educated himself through varied reading and the study of engravings from paintings by the great Renaissance masters. In 1769, twelve years old, Blake began writing poetry. In 1772 he was apprenticed to James Basire (because art school proved too costly), an engraver of some note, in order to begin a career in engraving, a difficult and complex skill which was to provide him with such limited financial security as Blake was ever able to obtain for the rest of his life. Gothic art and architecture influenced Blake deeply: from Gothic styles he would draw inspiration throughout his career. During the years of his apprenticeship he wrote his first important poems. In 1779 Blake became an engraving student at the Royal Academy, but he rebelled against the school's stifling atmosphere. He began to receive engraving commissions from booksellers on his own behalf, including some from the well-known radical Joseph Johnson. In 1782 the poet married a poor, illiterate girl, Catherine Boucher, the daughter of a market gardener, whom he taught to read, write and draw; the couple had no children. She became his inseparable companion, assisting him in nearly all his work. In 1783 Blake published his first volume, Poetical Sketches: it was the only one published conventionally during his lifetime. The author engraved and published all his other major poetry himself, for which he originated a method of engraving text and illustration on the same plate, without having recourse to a printer; a method Blake claimed he received in a dream. Neither Blake's artwork nor his poetry enjoyed commercial or critical success until long after his death. In 1784 he opened, with his wife and younger brother Robert, a print shop, but the venture failed after the death of Robert.

Blake's important cultural and social contacts included Henry Fuseli and Thomas Stothard (painters), Reverend Mathew and his wife, Tom Paine and William Godwin (writers), and John Flaxman (a sculptor and draftsman). The first books in which the artist made use of his new printing method were two little tracts, There is No Natural Religion and All Religions are One (both engraved about 1788): they contain the seeds of all the subsequent development of his thought. Immediately following these tracts came Blake's first masterpieces: Songs of Innocence, The Book of Thel, The French Revolution, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Visions of the Daughters of Albion and Songs of Experience. The production of these works coincided with the outbreak of the French Revolution: he sympathized with the actions of the revolutionaries but the Reign of Terror sickened him. All his works of the revolutionary period were produced at a house in Soho (London), where he and his wife went to live after Robert's death. In 1793 they moved to Lambeth, south of the Thames, the location which we probably now regard as the most evocative of the archLondoner Blake. His poetry of these years appears in the so-called «Prophetic books». In 1800 the artist moved to the seacoast town of Felpham (Sussex), where he worked under the patronage of William Hayley, who commissioned him to illustrate his Life of Cowper, and to create busts of famous poets for his house. Blake taught himself Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Italian, so that he could read classical works in their original language. In Felpham he experienced profound spiritual insights that prepared him for his mature work, the great visionary epics written and etched between about 1804 and 1820: Vala, rewritten under the title of The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem. Blake's final years were cheered by the admiring friendship of a group of younger artists who appreciated his originality and the visionary qualities of his poetry. In 1818 the poet met John Linnell, a young artist who helped him financially and also helped to create new interest in his work. Linnell commissioned him to design illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy, the cycle of drawings that Blake worked on until his death. Toward the end of his life Blake still coloured copies of his books while resting in bed, and that is how he died in his seventieth year. Extremely poor (his poverty was largely due to his inability to compete in the highly competitive field of engraving and his expensive invention, that enabled him to design illustrations and print words at the same time) but independent throughout his life, he left no debts at his death. The poet was buried in an unmarked grave at the public cemetery of Bunhill Fields, London.

Works

Early poetry. Blake's first collection, Poetical Sketches, was published around 1783: a preface provides the information that the verses were written between the ages of twelve and twenty. It is a collection of apprentice verse, mostly imitating classical models or reflecting the influence of poets such as Collins, Gray and Chatterton (→ Poetry). This is a remarkable volume, containing much crude and incoherent works, but also a few lyrics of striking originality. The poems protest against war, tyranny and King George III's treatment of the American colonies.

In the 1780s Blake was one of a group of progressive-minded people that met at the house of his employer, Johnson. In about 1787 he wrote the fragment of a prose satire, An Island in the Moon, in which members of this group are satirized. As literature, the work has little value, but it contains extravagant dialogue and humorous as well as poignant songs and poems.

Visual art. At the age of thirty-one, Blake began to experiment with relief etching, a method he would use to produce all his major works. The process is also referred to as «illuminated printing», and final products as «illuminated books or prints». It involved writing the text of the poems on copper plates with pens and brushes, using an acid-resistant medium. Illustrations could appear alongside words in the manner of earlier «illuminated manuscripts». He then etched the plates in acid in order to dissolve away the untreated copper and leave the design standing in «relief». The pages printed from these plates then had to be hand-colored in water colors and stitched together to make-up a volume. His paintings and engravings are painstakingly realistic in their representation of human anatomy and other natural forms. They are also very imaginative, often depicting fanciful creatures in exacting detail. Blake's books, engraved and published in this way, reached a limited public during the 19th century, but today they are among the world's art treasures: the illustrations for Young's Night Thoughts, for Gray's Poems and for Dante's Divine Comedy show the peculiarity of his mind quite as clearly as his poems.

Lyrical poetry. Blake's originality is shown in his collection of poems Songs of Innocence 1789) and Songs of Experience (1794), in which the world is seen from a child's point of view, directly and simply but without sentimentality. In Blake's own words in the subtitle, the collections show «the two contrary state of the human soul»: the states are «innocence» and «experience». In the former group he expressed his belief in the goodness of nature; it includes such poems as Little Boy

Lost, Little Boy Found, Infant Joy and Laughing Songs, but the symbol of this happier stage of human life is The Lamb. The latter group, which includes The Tyger (his most famous poem), Infant Sorrow, The Sick Rose and London, represents a counterpart to his earlier work: here the «lamb», key symbol of «innocence», is replaced by the «tiger», the corresponding image in «experience», a beautiful beast, but at the same time a cause of terror, an evidence that not all creation is good. Men are inevitably bound to lose their innocence and to open their eyes to the evils and vices of the world. Though painful, it is a decisive stage in human life: only passing through all the distortions of experience, facing with the morality, law, repression, men can reach a deeper knowledge and wisdom. As parables of adult life the Songs are rich in meaning and implication.

Typical for Blake's poems were long, flowing lines and violent energy, combined with aphoristic clarity and moments of lyrical tenderness. He was not blinded by conventions, but approached his subjects sincerely with a mind unclouded by current opinions. Blake expressed his concepts in very simple words and through fresh and charming images; the drawings which accompanied his verses contributed in impressing wider meanings and in making them much more suggestive and effective.

Early narrative poetry. At this time, Blake was experimenting in narrative as well as lyrical poetry. The Book of Thel (1789), his first long narrative poem, with lovely and flowing designs, was followed by the fragment The French Revolution (1791), an attempt to represent the events of the Revolution in terms of the developing «mythological» structure, within which he was to continue to interpret the human history.

A first coherent system of his principles can be found in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1793), a book of paradoxical aphorisms and his principal prose work. It expressed Blake's revolt against the established values of his time: «Hell» is conceived as the symbol of freedom in opposition to the existing institutions, accepted values and dogmas. He satirized oppressive authority in Church and State, as well as the works of Swedenborg, whose ideas once attracted his interest. Poetry, philosophy, humour and prophecy are extraordinarily mingled in this volume.

Another work finished around this time was Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793): it has much to say about Blake's general view of oppression and empire in terms of both gender and slavery.

Prophetic books. Blake moved south of the Thames to Lambeth in 1790. During this time he began to work on his «Prophetic books», where he elaborated, with some false starts, a personal invented mythology, largely Biblical in inspiration. Blake expressed his lifelong concern with the struggle of the soul to free its natural energies from reason and organized religion. They combine poetry, vision, prophecy, exhortation and form the complex whole of Blake's conceptions and beliefs, but their meanings are often obscured by the symbols and references to a high cosmology. Most of his prophetic works, composed in blank verses without rhyme, appear as a kind of rhythmical prose. Here and there we see flashes of the same poetic beauty that marks his short poems.

They include America, A Prophecy (1793; it extends The French Revolution's scheme back to 1776 and gives a visionary interpretation of the American Revolution as the uprising of Orc, representing the spirit of rebellion); Europe, A Prophecy (1794; it shows the coming of Christ and the French Revolution as part of the same manifestation of the spirit of rebellion); The Book of Urizen (1794; it is Blake's parody of the biblical Book of Genesis and its subject is theological tyranny); The Book of Ahania (1795; a kind of Exodus following the genesis of The Book of Urizen); The Book of Los (1795; it tells essentially the same story of Urizen from the viewpoint of the mythical character Los) and The Song of Los (1795; made up of two sections, Africa and Asia, it is one of Blake's most startling indictments of tyranny).

The «Minor Prophetic books», as they are now known, were followed by his mature books: Vala, or The Four Zoas (1797; rewritten after 1800), Milton (1804-1808) and Jerusalem (1804-1820). Dictated to him, he declared, by supernatural beings, even against his own will, they have neither traditional plot, characters, nor meter. The poet exalted love, pure liberty, and abhorred the reductive, rationalist philosophy that served to justify the political and economic inequities attendant upon the Industrial Revolution.

Blake's thought. Blake was an enthusiastic supporter of the ideals of both American and French Revolutions. He attacked all forms of oppression in the existing institutions and every kind of exploitation and social discrimination as causes of the evils affecting society; but his attacks against oppression were not limited to politics, he also condemned the moral slavery imposed by the established Church. To repressive and backward ideas Blake opposed the moral freedom and the force of instinct. He believed in the sanctity of human passions, and considered the distinction of Christian moralists between soul and body as arbitrary: according to Blake the body contains the energy which is the primary source of life, as it stirs men to act, and it is the vital force which is at the base of any human progress.

His poetry was not well known by the general public, but he was determined not to sacrifice his vision in order to become popular. The most amazing thing about him is the perfectly sane and cheerful way in which he moved through poverty and obscurity without ever losing his kindness and acute spirit of observation.

Blake's reputation. Neglected by his contemporaries, or considered to be a little mad because of his visions, Blake's genius was not understood during his lifetime; it was left to later generations to recognize his importance. It was only in the days of the PreRaphaelites that Blake's art was discovered by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, himself an artist and poet. In the 20th century, his poetry has been greatly appreciated by the same admirers of John Donne and Metaphysical poets.