

Signs of the Times* Seen in English Literature.

Blake, Poet, Enthusiast and Painter¹

Whoever would like more detailed information about this outstanding visionary of genius, will find it in the most recent piece in the unfortunately prematurely closed *Vaterländisches Museum*,² edited by Perthes in Hamburg. What people in Germany lightly attribute to the influence of a new school, comes unaffectedly in England, and in Blake fully proclaims itself as a phenomenon of the times. There too people began to look once again at the old songs and popular poetry; it can certainly not be overlooked, that critics are still in love with the polished style of the Popish school; but a few Nature poets of outstanding genius, among whom the Scottish peasant Robert Burns^{**} deserves a leading place, through their living example shook the old theory that the essence of the art of poetry was a flowing metre far more than the critics with their dead one were in a position to shore it up. From North America there recently arose the voice of a novelist with the name of Fischer Ames,^{***} who in a manly tone zealously opposed the introduction of many children's books, for example von Berquin's sentimental fables³ and the like, into education, and against it recommended a return to the old Bible-based national instruction; to a book, that for this reason

¹ The translation here is by Alan Kahan and John Koster, with occasional twitches by GEB, chiefly to bring it into conformity with the translation of *Vaterländisches Museum* in *BR* (2). Note that the starred footnotes are in *Morgenblatt*, the numbered ones are by GEB.

² [Henry Crabb Robinson], "William Blake, Künstler, Dichter und religiöser Schwärmer" [tr. Dr Nicolaus Heinrich Julius], *Vaterländisches Museum*, II (1811), 107-131 (see *BR* (2), 573-593 in German, 594-603 in English).

³ For instance, [Berquin, Arnaud] *The Blossoms of Morality Intended for the Amusement and Instruction of Young Ladies and Gentlemen by the Editor of the Looking-Glass for the Mind, with Forty-Seven Cuts, Designd and Engraved by I. Bewick* (London: E. Newbery, 1796).

too deserves to be preferred to any other, "because it is written in the best, most classical and purest English". If people rightly are astonished at this unplanned encounter of two nations and their leading writers on this one and the same ground,**** produced simply based on the demands of a great period, so will this astonishment only increase, if now one finds again in Blake (who incidentally is said to be over 50 years old,⁴ and has hardly ever been heard of or read by the modern German school), the same results as in Ludwig Tieck and others, to whom the majority of our critics have been so offensive. "The great and golden rule of art--these are Blake's own words--is, that the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding 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. Great inventors, in all ages, knew this. Protogenes and Apelles knew each other by this line. Rafael, Michel Angelo, and Albert Dürer are known by this and this alone. The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the idea of want in the artist's mind, and the pretence of the plagiary in all its branches. How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, 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 inflexions and movements? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden, but the definite and determinate?"⁵ (Character. Cf. Goethe's Collector⁶ and Falk's Treatise on

⁴ *Vaterländisches Museum* (1811) ¶2 (BR (2), 574, 594).

⁵ *Descriptive Catalogue* ¶110 is quoted from *Vaterländisches Museum* (1811) (BR (2)578 [in German] and 596 [in English]).

⁶ "Der Sammler und die Seinigen", *Propyläen* [Herausgegeben von Goethe], Vol. II, Part 2 (1799), 26-122..

Poetry and Art of 1803) in which character receives its complete due as the foundation of all art: consider also Schelling's speech at the Munich Academy⁷ which does not hesitate to propose the principle that, without the completion of that which we call character, no acts of artistic or natural creation would be possible.*) "What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions? Leave out this line and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the Almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist. Talk no more then of Correggio or Rembrandt, or any other of those plagiaries of Venice and Flanders. They were but the lame imitators of lines drawn by their predecessors."⁸

He calls Rubens a most outrageous demon,⁹ and elsewhere Blake says: "If losing and obliterating the outline constitutes a Picture, Blake will never be so foolish as to do one. There is no difference between Rafael's Pictures, except that the fresco-pictures are more finished than the cartoons."¹⁰ For Blair's Grave, a well-loved English poem, Blake produced twelve drawings in addition to an excellent head.¹¹ The famous Fuseli said of this work: "The groups and single figures on their own basis, abstracted from the general composition, and considered without attention to the plan, frequently exhibit those genuine and unaffected attitudes, those simple graces, which nature and the heart alone can

⁷ Probably *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur* (1807).

⁸ *Descriptive Catalogue* ¶110.

⁹ *Descriptive Catalogue* ¶97 somewhat approximated.

¹⁰ *Descriptive Catalogue* ¶109, where the second sentence precedes the first and has been somewhat adjusted in German.

¹¹ The portrait of Blake is by Thomas Phillips.

dictate, and only an eye inspired by both, discover. Every class of artists, in every stage of their progress or attainments, from the student to the finished master, and from the contriver of ornament to the painter of history, will find here materials of art and hints of improvement."¹² This is the first work that brought attention to Blake in London. ["]Even as a boy, he passionately admired Gothic architecture, and passed whole days in drawing the monuments in Westminster Abbey.["]¹³ ["]The newer fashions in drawing and engraving (the points) he straightforwardly declares to be sins against art; and so he has preferred, in his phrase, to be a martyr for his religion, i.e., his art, to debasing his talents by a weak submission to the prevailing fashion of art."¹⁴ Chiaroscuro he simply calls a hellish tool in the hands of Venetian and Flemish demons. ["]Like Swedenborg, Blake finds himself among a community of angels. He told someone, from whose mouth we have the story, that once when he was carrying home a picture which he had done for a lady of rank and was wanting to rest in an inn, the angel Gabriel touched him on the shoulder and said: 'Blake, why are you tarrying here? Walk on, thou shouldst not be tired!' He arose and went on unwearied.["]¹⁵

Blake's fiery poetic talent may be seen in the following truly sublime little lyrical piece, which carries the title "The Tyger" and which we follow with a free German imitation.

¹² Fuseli's puff (Nov 1805) for *The Grave* with Blake's 15 designs and engravings (*BR* (2) 211) is quoted from *Vaterländisches Museum* (1811).

¹³ Paraphrased from *Vaterländisches Museum* (1811) (*BR*(2) 574, 595).

¹⁴ Slightly adapted from *Vaterländisches Museum* (1811) (*BR* (2) , 574-575, 595).

¹⁵ The anecdote of the angel Gabriel comes entirely from *Vaterländisches Museum* (1811) (*BR* (2) 583-4 [in German], 599 [in English]).

The Tyger.

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<p>Tiger, Tiger, Flammenpracht, In des Waldes dunkler Nacht, Wo die tühne Meisterhand, Die sich dieses unterstaub?</p> <p>Dass die Gimt sie angefasst, Die du in den Augen hast; Ward aus Himmel, oder hell' Ausgeschöpftihr Feuer quell?</p> <p>Alles, wie aus einem Guss! Welche Hand und welch ein Fuss! Aller Wesen lesster Tag, Tiger, ist dein herzen schlag.</p> <p>Wo die Esse, die so stolz Dieses Hirn aus Erzdirmschmolz? Was du aufass'st -- das is troth: Was du augefasst -- ist todt!</p> <p>Pfeileschoss das Sternenbeer;</p>	<p>[Version in <i>Vaterländisches Museum</i></p> <p>Tiger, Tiger, Flammenpracht, In den Wäldern düstrer Nacht! Sprich, wes Gottes Aug und Hand, Dich so furchtbar schön verband?</p> <p>Stammt von Himmel, aus der Hüll', Dir der Augen Feuerquell? Welche Flügel trägt du kühn? Wer wagt wohl zu nah'n dem Glühn?</p> <p>Welche Stärke, welche Kunst, Wob so sinnreich Herzens brunst? Als dein Herz den Puls empfand, Welch ein Fuss? und welche Hand?</p> <p>Was ist Hammer? Ketten klirrn? Welche Esse schmolz dein Hirn? Was ist Amboss? Welcher Held Muth in deinem Arm behält?</p> <p>Aus den Sternen flog der Speer,</p>
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¹⁶ Transcriptions of "The Tyger" in English, ignoring variants in punctuation.

	Blake	<i>Vaterländisches Museum</i>	<i>Morgenblatt</i>
l. 8	dare sieze the	dares seize the	dares seize de
l. 9	& what art	and what art	and what art
l. 12	& what dread feet	and what dread feet	and what dread feet
l. 16	its	it's	it's
l. 20	Lamb	lamb	lamb
l. 24	dare	could	[ll. 21-24 omitted]

Engel zitterten umber;
Tiger, wild und fächerlich,
Der 'das kammschuf -- schufer
dich?

Thränendwarb der Himmel Meer:
Schaut' erlächelnd da auf dich?
Der das Lammschuf, schufer dich?

[ll. 21-24 omitted]

Tiger, Tiger, Flammenpracht
In den Wäldern düstrer Nacht!
Sprich, wess Gottes Aug und Hand,
Dich so furchtbar schönverband?]

* We see this essay itself as a sign of the times, and offer it as such; but remain behind the times. Editor

** The Works of Robert Burns with an account of his life etc. in 4 volumes, 4. Edition. London 1803.

*** Works of Fisher Ames. Boston, 1809.

**** One compares this North American statement to the following view, expressed by Goethe in the second part of his theory of colours, that the historical contains, sometimes with fewer, but extremely meaningful words, has laid down, and which we here append to this essay. "Whoever knows the human heart", it says there on p. 138 "the way individuals are formed, will agree that an excellent man could be brought up and competently educated without recourse to any other book besides, say, Tschudi's *Schweizer Chronik* [*Chronicon Helveticum*] or Aventinus' *Baverische Chronik*. How much better then must the Bible lend itself to this purpose, since it was the model of those first-named books: and since the people, as whose chronicle it presents itself, have exercised and indeed still do exercise, so great an influence on world events." After expressing some wishes for concise historical supplements to this book, Goethe continues on page 139: if this were to happen, "this work would deserve to be restored straight away to its former status, not only as a universal book but also as part foundation, part pedagogical tool, for the use, of course, not of charlatans, but of the truly wise."