



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition

Eliot, T. S., Dickey, Frances, Formichelli, Jennifer, Schuchard, Ronald

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

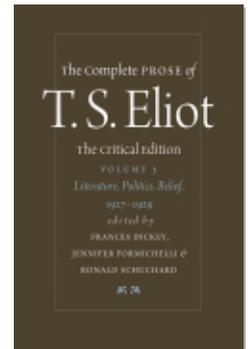
Eliot, T. S., et al.

The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/41952>

---

## The Mysticism of Blake

A review of *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*,

ed. Geoffrey Keynes

London: The Nonesuch Press, 1927. Pp. xi + 1152.

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, by William Blake

Full-colour facsimile edition, with a note by Max Plowman

London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1927. Pp. 27.

*The Life of William Blake*, by Mona Wilson

London: The Nonesuch Press, 1927. Pp. xv + 397.

*An Introduction to the Study of Blake*, by Max Plowman

London: J. M. Dent, 1927. Pp. xv + 183.

*Pencil Drawings by William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes

London: The Nonesuch Press, 1927. Pp. xvi + 82.

*The Mysticism of William Blake*, by Helen C. White

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1927. Pp. 276.

*The Nation and Athenaeum*, 41 (17 Sept 1927) 779

---

If we have not yet made up our minds about Blake, we have no longer any excuse for not doing so.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Keynes has compressed his great edition of 1925 into one volume which is not only of convenient size, but of convenient price.<sup>2</sup> The Nonesuch Press has produced it in a form both beautiful and practical; and 1,152 pages of India paper for twelve and six is extremely cheap.<sup>3</sup> Variant readings are omitted; but there is no doubt that we now have what will remain the standard text. What is more, this volume will introduce many readers to parts of Blake's work which are almost unknown. In the miscellaneous prose and the marginalia and the correspondence there is much of great interest; and there is the wholly delightful and surprising

“Peacockian” fragment, “An Island in the Moon.”<sup>4</sup> The Nonesuch Press has also made a very fine edition of Blake’s drawings, prepared by Mr. Keynes with explanatory text; and this book also is extremely cheap at thirty-five shillings. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, to which Mr. Max Plowman contributes an essay, may not seem relatively so cheap at a guinea – but it is not only fully illustrated but illuminated.<sup>5</sup> It is a book which all libraries, and all individual enthusiasts, ought to possess. For Blake was not only both poet and draughtsman, he was also the producer of his own books. Other men have both painted and written; but with Blake the two activities were almost one. You cannot say that he illustrated his writings, or that he provided texts to his drawings: he did both at once. That is one reason why Blake is so difficult a subject; the critic of Blake should be highly skilled in the technique of verse and prose and the technique of drawing and design and colour (for which reason I approach him with diffidence). *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is one of his most amazing works, a book equal in importance to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: and here we have it as nearly as possible in the form in which Blake meant it to be read.<sup>6</sup> No one who has read it and looked at it in this new edition will want to read it in any other.

The other books are of various interest and unequal value. Miss Wilson’s *Life*, also beautifully done, with a capital choice of illustrations, by the Nonesuch Press, is an impressive book.<sup>7</sup> It is the most nearly complete *Life* of Blake yet written; it is well written, and it is scholarly. We may not always agree with Miss Wilson’s criticism, but she knows what she is talking about. She has written a genuine biography, not trying to write history and criticism at once; and in consequence this is a book which will keep its value.

Mr. Plowman’s *Introduction* is a disappointing book. It might better be called, “Preface to an Introduction to an Introduction.” I turned from page to page hungrily, always hoping finally to be introduced, but the introduction never came off. It is not that Mr. Plowman does not know his subject. On the contrary, he knows it very well, and the essay at the end of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is quite interesting. Nor is it that Mr. Plowman is too enthusiastic; one cannot be too enthusiastic. But in this book the enthusiasm itself is the theme, instead of being (as it should be) a kind of steady glow illuminating the merest statement of fact. Enthusiasm should inspire statement; in Mr. Plowman’s book it takes the place of statement. Thus we get wildly sweeping assertions: “Blake freed Western art from slavish adherence to Nature” (19). Not merely English art, observe, but *Western* art. One

would expect such an affirmation to be backed up by some account of influence by Blake upon French art; but the author passes on. "When Blake took for his province the human soul he found it a world wholly unmapped and uncharted" (45). What is the difference between mapping and charting? And what had people been trying to do for a couple of thousand years? They may have mapped and charted wrong – but they had done their best. All this is regrettable; because Mr. Plowman has studied his subject enough, and is quite intelligent enough, to write a good book about Blake.

Miss White's book is an American production.<sup>8</sup> It is rather oppressively academic; but if we must choose between the popular style of Mr. Plowman and the university style of Miss White we plump for the latter. This is an intelligent book, and the sanest and most careful statement of its subject: Blake's "mysticism." It is to be hoped that Miss White will condense it for publication in this country, as publications of Wisconsin University are not very accessible. First of all, Miss White has made a thorough study of mysticism in general. This occupies the most of two or three chapters. She was quite right to make the investigation; for it has enabled her to point out that Blake is not a mystic; but she could quite well have made a separate book of it. But anyone who does not realize the immense differences between the various types of mysticism would do well to read it.

Our chief interest in the subject, in this context, is that we want to make up our minds about the value, as poetry, of the "prophetic books."<sup>9</sup> I am not sure that there is any such thing as "mystical poetry."<sup>10</sup> Mysticism, after all, and whatever we think of it, is a whole-time job; and so is poetry. The last canto of the *Paradiso* may be genuinely "mystical poetry."<sup>11</sup> In that canto Dante is describing, with economy and felicity of words, a mystical experience. But when Wordsworth's great Ode, which is simply great poetry based on a fallacy, or Crashaw's "St. Theresa," which is simply a supreme instance of the erotic-devotional (I do not imply any censure of the erotic-devotional) is described as "mysticism," I cannot agree.<sup>12</sup> Miss White proceeds, very rightly, to discuss Blake as a *visionary*, in contrast to *mystic*, and all that she says is excellent. Blake was not even a first-rate visionary: his visions have a certain illiteracy about them, like those of Swedenborg or (without prejudice) the Rev. Mr. Vale Owen in the Sunday paper a few years ago.<sup>13</sup> Was he, then, a great philosopher? No, he did not know enough. He made a Universe; and very few people can do that. But the fact that the gift is rare does not make it necessarily valuable. It is not any one man's business to make a Universe;

and what any one man can make in this way is not, in the end, so good or so useful as the ordinary Universe which we all make together. And to do what Blake did requires two things which are not good things. All of these commentators – Miss Wilson, Mr. Plowman, and Miss White – have told us that Blake was completely alone, and that he was deficient in humility, or exceeding in pride. Now Isolation is not conducive to correct thinking; and Pride (or lack of Humility) is, we know, one of the chief theological sins. Blake is philosophically an autodidact amateur; theologically, a heretic.

But this does not mean that we can afford to ignore the Prophetical Books as poetry, and confine our interest to the Songs.<sup>14</sup> Mr. Keynes and the Nonesuch Press have made these terrible epics as readable as possible; and we ought to read them. Blake was not one man in the Songs and another in the Books: the genius and the inspiration are continuous. The Books are full of poetry, and fine poetry, too. But they show very sadly that genius and inspiration are not enough for a poet. He must have education, by which I do not mean erudition but a kind of mental and moral discipline. The great poet – even the greatest – knows his own limitations and works within them. It was Goethe who best stated this truth.<sup>15</sup> The poet also knows that it is no good, in writing poetry, to try to be anything but a poet.

T. S. ELIOT

#### NOTES

1. TSE expressed his mind about Blake in similar terms in “The Naked Man” (1920), reprinted as “William Blake” in *SW* (2.187).

2. Sir Geoffrey Keynes (1887-1982), British surgeon and literary scholar, published a bibliography of Blake’s work in 1921 and a three-volume edition of *The Writings of William Blake* (Nonesuch, 1925), followed by this single-volume edition of Blake’s writings, as well as editions of his drawings and letters, studies of plates, and other works.

3. Founded in 1922 by Francis Meynell, Vera Mendel, and David Garnett, the Nonesuch Press published affordable fine books using commercial types, including editions of Donne and Marvell, both of which TSE reviewed. India paper is a thin, tough paper made of bleached hemp and rags, popular for printing bibles and other heavy books. Twelve and six was a little more than half a pound in Britain’s old currency.

4. “An Island in the Moon” is the name given to Blake’s incomplete manuscript of a fictional narrative satirizing middle-class London social and intellectual life, written around 1784-85. In her *Life of William Blake*, Mona Wilson remarks about “An Island in the Moon” that “Blake, as a satirist, has been compared with Peacock,” referring to the satirical novels of Thomas Love Peacock, in which characters discuss contemporary philosophical opinions (20).

5. Blake’s multigenre work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) satirizes the dualistic theology of Emmanuel Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* (1758) and attacks conventional

morality. Max [Mark] Plowman (1883-1941), British author, editor and pacifist, collaborated with Geoffrey Keynes on this edition of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the *Poems and Prophecies*, and his *Introduction*. The title page of this full-color edition of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* announces: "Reproduced in facsimile from an original copy of the work printed and illuminated by the authors." A guinea in the old British currency was equal to one pound and one shilling.

6. Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* [*Thus Spake Zarathustra*], 1883-85, expresses his ideas of "eternal recurrence," the death of God, the will to power, and the coming of the *Übermensch* or superman. TSE compared Blake to Nietzsche in "William Blake" (1921): "Confusion of thought, emotion, and vision is what we find in such a work as *Also sprach Zarathustra*" (2.191).

7. Mona Wilson (1872-1954), British civil servant, critic, editor, and biographer of Blake, Sidney, and Queen Elizabeth. In a letter to Wilson on 30 Aug 1927, TSE congratulated her on her book and apologized for the brevity of his notice (*L3* 673).

8. Helen C. White (1896-1967), American author and literary scholar, received her doctorate from the University of Wisconsin and taught there from 1925 to 1967, writing on Blake and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century devotional literature.

9. Blake's "prophetic books," composed over three decades beginning in 1793, include *The Four Zoas*, *The Book of Thel*, *America: A Prophecy*, and others in the Continental Prophecy cycle, *The Book of Urizen*, *Milton: A Poem*, and *Jerusalem*.

10. Uncomfortable with the term "mystical" – "mystical may be almost anything," he wrote in "The New Elizabethans and the Old" (1919) (2.13) – TSE continued to use it in the Clark Lectures while rejecting the label as "facile" (2.617). In "The Silurist" (1927), he offered a definition of "mystical poetry": "Poetry is mystical when it intends to convey . . . the statement of a perfectly definite experience which we call the mystical experience. And if it is real poetry it will convey this experience in some degree to every reader who genuinely feels it as poetry" (3.190).

11. In his Clark lecture "On the Definition of Metaphysical Poetry," quoting Canto XXXIII, lines 91-96, TSE remarks: "Dante always finds the sensuous equivalent, the physical embodiment, for the realisation of the most tenuous and refined intensity . . . of experience" (2.618). In "The Silurist," he writes: "A genuine mystical *statement* is to be found in the last canto of the *Paradiso*" (3.191); and in "Dante" (1929), TSE calls the same passage (lines 85-96) "a masterly use of that imagery of *light* which is the form of certain types of mystical experience" (3.725).

12. In "The Silurist" (1927), TSE similarly commented on Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1804) in comparison with Henry Vaughan's "The Retreat": "Wordsworth's Ode is a superb piece of verbiage, and Vaughan's poem is a simple and sincere statement of feeling" (3.191). In "Crashaw," TSE discussed two poems by Crashaw on St. Theresa: "A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Sainte Teresa" (1646, 1648) and "The Flaming Heart: Upon the Book and Picture of the Seraphical Saint Teresa" (1652), referring to the latter as the "ultimate literary expression of the religious feeling of that strange period of sensual religious intensity" (2.716).

13. Blake was influenced by Emmanuel Swedenborg's theological works, particularly his *Heaven and Hell* (1758), which describes an afterlife materially quite similar to the real world. Later becoming disillusioned with Swedenborg, Blake satirized his ideas in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). George Vale Owen (1869-1931), British clergyman and spiritualist, purported to receive messages from the spirit world, which he published serially in the *Weekly*

*Dispatch* in 1920 and collected in his five-volume *Life beyond the Veil*, a work promoted by fellow spiritualist Arthur Conan Doyle.

14. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789-94).

15. TSE may refer to "The discerning man who acknowledges his limitations is not far off perfection" (*The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, trans. Bailey Saunders [NY: Macmillan, 1906], 201, maxim 578).