Introduction

The text of this book, given as the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 1962, is an abridgment from a longer work, *Blake and Tradition* (Bollingen Series XXXV:11, 2 vols.). Nothing in the text has been altered, and the plates are taken from *Blake and Tradition.*

These lectures contain the essential theme of the larger book —a thesis more acceptable in 1977 than fifteen years ago, when I sought to establish, in detail which may now seem over-elaborate, Blake's indebtedness to Neo-Platonic and other sources within what may be called the canon of the Western esoteric tradition.

With few exceptions, earlier attempts to understand Blake had discounted this tradition—not unnaturally, since it comprises what may be called the excluded knowledge of the current contemporary scientific humanism. The best scholarship had at that time been devoted to the historical and social background of Blake's work and thought, and to his visual sources. But the view was too long current that Blake's ideas, symbols, and mythology were of his own invention; he was the great "original," the uneducated visionary who owed nothing to tradition. This in practice very often meant that the interpretation of his symbolic themes was a guessing game, or a projection of some favorite system (Freudian, Jungian, Marxist, or purely personal) upon his writings. At bottom the difficulty lay in the impossibility of making sense of Blake in terms of current presuppositions. Naturally, critics tried to fit his work into existing critical categories, applicable enough to writers who shared, more or less, the same cultural tradition as themselves. Because he did not do so, it was tempting to assume that Blake was outside tradition altogether.

I began my own studies by attempting to read every work and every author referred to by Blake. Having done so (more or less) I discovered, as others who have done the same (and I think especially of George Mills Harper, whose findings coincided with mine in so many respects, although at that time we had worked independently), that Blake was drawing upon a tradition rich in literature, age-old, continuous, coherent, whose members were as reputable as Plato and Plotinus. This great body of excluded knowledge has long been unacceptable, not on account of its inaccessibility, still less its paucity, but because its premises run counter to those of a materialist civilization.

But Blake was the prophet of a "New Age," a new age now upon us as the "Age of Aquarius" in its anti-materialist birth-throes. And a new age, if it means anything, means a change of premises, of the first principles upon which a civilization is built. Blake's greatest disciple and the first commentator upon his esoteric "system," W. B. Yeats, announcing the end of a cycle and the advent of the "rough beast," was but following Blake. "The rise of soul against intellect, now beginning in the world," announced by Yeats, has brought with it a return to the excluded knowledge—Neo-Platonism, alchemy, astrology, Cabbala —besides the more recent studies of Indian metaphysics, comparative mythology, psychical research, and the psychology of the unconscious. All these and other related fields of knowledge, once dismissed piecemeal, are now seen to belong to a coherent way of understanding and exploring what we choose to call "reality." Blake was familiar with most of the literature available in English —the only language he knew well—relating to the esoteric tradition.

It is difficult to understand why, unless because his doctrine was deeply unwelcome, the name of Thomas Taylor the Platonist, "the English pagan," was not earlier associated with that of Blake. The first translator of Plato and Plotinus into English was certainly a central figure in the Romantic revival. Besides Blake,

Taylor's sphere of influence drew in Coleridge, Shelley, Samuel Palmer, perhaps even Keats. When these lectures were first published many Blake scholars were still determined to not know about Taylor; but times have changed. What I then labored to establish by accumulated detail is now increasingly taken for granted. Nor is it any longer possible to dismiss Thomas Taylor from the scene; it is now known that Blake and Taylor were on intimate terms, at least for a time. Scholarship has come to the aid of common sense, and James King has given us, from the Meredith papers, a lifelike picture of the two sages: the Platonist, characteristically demonstrating to Blake step by step some Euclidian theorem, and our visionary exclaiming, "Ah, never mind that—what's the use of going to prove it. Why, I see with my eyes that it is so, and do not require any proof to make it clearer."

I am only too happy that so much that at the time of writing seemed suspect or incredible now seems, on the contrary, axiomatic. I hope nevertheless that some of the "minute particulars" which gave me such delight in the discovery will communicate something of the same delight to a younger generation of Blake lovers. Of course the details given in such a book as this from the wealth of source-material are only the tip of a submerged continent of knowledge—a country with which Blake was familiar—and I can only report, from my own explorations, that this Lost Atlantis is a land of treasures and marvels. Blake's "golden string" leads not only through his own labyrinth, but is the clue leading to so much more. Neo-Platonism, with its mythology and symbolism, is indeed the local European idiom (as Coomaraswamy would say) of a universal and unanimous tradition. Those sources from which Blake drew his knowledge—and in our own century, Jung, Yeats, and increasing numbers of their followers—are learning of the imagination itself. The excluded knowledge of the last two or three centuries seems likely to become the sacred scriptures of a New Age for which spirit, not matter, is again the primary reality.

I would like to thank once again the Bollingen Foundation for the generous Fellowship, twice renewed, which enabled me to undertake and to complete my work on Blake; and also Girton College, Cambridge, where these lectures and much of the larger book, *Blake and Tradition*, were written.

London, February 1977 KATHLEEN RAINE