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## Chapter 3: The Reception of William Blake in France: Literature and the Visual Arts

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► **To cite this version:**

Gilles Soubigou, Yann Tholoniât. Chapter 3: The Reception of William Blake in France: Literature and the Visual Arts. Sybille Erle; Morton Paley. The Reception of William Blake in Europe, 1, Bloomsbury, 49-84 + bibliography: 323-331, 2019. hal-02897478

**HAL Id: hal-02897478**

**<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-02897478v1>**

Submitted on 12 Jul 2020

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# THE RECEPTION OF WILLIAM BLAKE IN EUROPE

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VOLUME 1

*Edited by Sibylle Erle and Morton D. Paley*

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2019

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Cover design: Eleanor Rose

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3500-9763-6

Series: The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk  
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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## CHAPTER 3

### THE RECEPTION OF BLAKE IN FRANCE: LITERATURE AND THE VISUAL ARTS

*Gilles Soubigou and Yann Tholoniât*

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In 2009, the Musée du Petit Palais, in Paris, organized an important retrospective of Blake's art, the first one since the 1940s, entitled *William Blake: Le Génie visionnaire du romantisme anglais* (William Blake: The visionary genius of English romanticism). The idea for this exhibition, as stated in the catalogue (Phillips 2009), came from the poet and writer Yves Bonnefoy (1923–2016), an admirer of Blake's work, and from the British scholar Michael Phillips (14). In the 'Foreword', the curators Gilles Chazal and Daniel Marchesseau recorded an allegedly slow and late French reception of Blake:

William Blake, the most famous of the British poets, painters and engravers from the end of the Enlightenment and from the beginning of nineteenth century, has a place in the Pantheon of Romantic and European geniuses. However, he had to wait for almost half a century after his death to be fully recognized by his fellow countrymen and for about a century for this to occur on the other side of the Channel.<sup>1</sup>

The final essays of the catalogue broach the subject of Blake's reception in French literature and art. Céline Mansanti wrote a text entitled 'La réception de l'œuvre de Blake en France, de 1868 à 1947' (The reception of Blake's work in France, from 1868 to 1947, 190–91); David Steel the text 'William Blake and André Gide' (195–95); Peter France an essay entitled 'Le poète William Blake traduit en français' (William Blake the poet translated into French, 200–02); and Daniel Marchesseau an analysis of three contemporary artworks after Blake, ('La pérennité de Blake chez trois artistes du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle') including one by a French artist, Jean Cortot, (205–07). These texts were the first attempt to give a general overview of the reception of Blake in France, with the notable exceptions of sections of Denis Saurat's *Blake and Modern Thought* (1929), Anna Balakian's article on 'The Literary Fortune of William Blake in France' (1956), which covers the 1900–55 period, and some information given in G. E. Bentley Jr's *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* (1975).

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<sup>1</sup>William Blake, le plus célèbre des poètes, peintres et graveurs anglais de la fin du siècle des Lumières et du début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, figure au panthéon des génies romantiques et européens. Il fallut toutefois attendre près d'un demi-siècle après sa mort pour qu'il soit pleinement reconnu par ses compatriotes – et un siècle environ outre-Manche' (Phillips 2009, 13).

## The Reception of William Blake in Europe

As a consequence, the topic of the literary and artistic reception of Blake in France, particularly, before 1868, is still novel in a country where, it is important to remember from the outset, there is no complete translation of Blake's works into French. The best attempt at a complete series of publications was begun in 1974 by Pierre Leyris and ended when he died in 2001. Four volumes were published by Aubier between 1974 and 1983 (Blake 1974, 1977, 1980 and 1983). The French publisher José Corti also published separate translations by Leyris of *Milton* and *Last Prophetic Writings*, a selection of letters (Blake 1999 and 2000), and Jacques Blondel's translation of *Vala* (*Four Zoas*).

For a long time Blake was known in France only by scholars, writers and translators, people who read Blake professionally and admired him greatly. This admiration is expressed in a number of ways: in 1986, when the novelist Jean-Louis Curtis (born Louis Laffitte, 1917–1995) was elected a member of the French Academy (*Académie française*),



**Figure 3.1** Mellerio dits Meller jewellery house Jean-Louis Curtis's Academician sword hilt, reproducing the design of Blake's 'Tyger' (1986–87), Orthez, Médiathèque Jean-Louis Curtis.

he chose, for the cross-guard of his Academician sword,<sup>2</sup> to reproduce the design of a plate of Blake's 'The Tyger'.

Curtis greatly enjoyed British literature, and as such was an admirer of Blake's poetry, which he discovered through Aldous Huxley (Curtis 1985, 76–81; Le Clézio 1986). Choosing Blake's 'Tyger' was probably a way to evoke his own most famous novel, which won the Goncourt Prize in 1947, entitled, as a homage to Blake, *Les Forêts de la nuit* (Forests of the night, Curtis 1947).

Over the twentieth century, Blake moved slowly from the culture of the elite to popular culture, as we shall see. Blake is nowadays popular in France; not to the same extent as in Great Britain or in the USA, but popular nonetheless. This change in perception occurred in various phases and it is necessary to differentiate these phases in order to understand the reception of Blake's literary and artistic work in France. First, in the early nineteenth century, the reception of Blake began; he was envisaged primarily as a painter and an engraver. Then, from 1900 onwards, the first translations of his poetry appeared. From the 1920s until World War II, Blake attracted the attention of intellectuals of the avant-garde. Immediately after the war, the great retrospective of 1947, which deserves to be studied as a turning-point, established Blake as a major author and artist. In the ensuing decades, it provoked a new spate of translations, a progressive emergence of Blake in the academic field, and a prelude to his adoption into pop culture from the 1970s onwards.

As we shall demonstrate, in these phases literature and art history are closely interwoven. Blake was often perceived in France either as a poet, or as an artist, seldom as both, but always as an original, a maverick, who drew the attention of the most original writers and the most innovative researchers.

### From the death of Blake to the late 1890s: A progressive emergence

William Blake died in London on 12 August 1827. There is no trace of his death being mentioned in contemporary French newspapers, unlike the numerous articles which brought news of the death of Lord Byron in 1824,<sup>3</sup> or of Sir Walter Scott in 1832.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, during his lifetime, William Blake was completely unknown in France, despite his personal sympathy for the French Revolution (Phillips 1994; Racz 2007), and the name of Blake does not appear, for instance, within the pages of the anonymous English-language anthology of *The Living Poets of England* (1827), published in Paris. However, some of his engravings are recorded as having been reproduced in France as early as 1798. Blake made his thirteen prints based on the British-Dutch officer John Gabriel Stedman's drawings for his *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana*, published in London in 1792–94 and soon translated into

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<sup>2</sup>Now held at the Orthez public library.

<sup>3</sup>On the French reception of Lord Byron, see Wilkes (2005, 1: 11–31).

<sup>4</sup>See Richard Maxwell (2006, 11–30).

## The Reception of William Blake in Europe

several languages, including French, in 1798.<sup>5</sup> The French copies of his book were illustrated with forty-four intaglio prints by Tardieu l'ainé (Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Tardieu, 1746–1816), who re-engraved Blake's prints. This work is interesting as it simultaneously demonstrates Blake's activity as a printmaker, and his political and philosophical commitment in favour of abolitionism at the time (Myrone 2007, 59–63). But in the end, even if it were possible for French readers to hold copies of Blake's prints in their hands as early as 1798, they could not identify them as his own work. Indeed, Blake's name was not mentioned, nor was the name of the other engraver working on the original British edition, Francesco Bartolozzi.

The first actual mention of Blake's name by a Frenchman appears in the *Gazette littéraire* (Literary gazette) in March 1830 (Pichot 1830). Amédée Pichot (1795–1877), a writer and translator of many major British authors, such as Byron,<sup>6</sup> Walter Scott, Godwin, Dickens,<sup>7</sup> Macaulay and Thackeray, published a long article on Blake in the gazette, in response to the publication of the first volume of Allan Cunningham's *Life of the Most Eminent British Painters* (1830–33), which included a 'Life of William Blake'. Pichot, largely drawing on Cunningham's conclusions, describes Blake mainly as an artist and an engraver, but he also notices that he was a poet, and his commentaries on his poetry suggest that he probably read some of Blake's poems. François-Joseph Grille (1782–1853), when he was the director of sciences and art in the Ministry of the Interior, responded to the article in a text that was published posthumously, in 1861, in Paul Lacroix's *Revue universelle des arts* (Universal review of the arts). Lacroix deemed that Blake was little known in France, and that he belonged to that type of 'incomplete, but powerful men, who have, it is true, developed in an irregular manner, but not without some benefit for the arts and truth'.<sup>8</sup> Cunningham's book was also reviewed, in April–June of 1830, by Anglo-French writer and translator Louise Swanton-Belloc (1796–1881), the grandmother of English poet Hilaire Belloc. Her article was published in the *Revue encyclopédique* (Encyclopedic review, Swanton-Belloc 1830). Amongst the various artists depicted by Cunningham, Blake was, according to Swanton-Belloc, 'the most odd and the most appealing' ('le plus curieux et le plus attrayant', 666) and his compositions are 'of the strangest oddity, often unintelligible and yet full of poetry' ('de la plus étrange bizarrerie, souvent inintelligibles, et cependant empreintes de poésie', 667).

In 1833, Pichot again published anonymously a second and longer article, 'Artiste, poète et fou (la vie de Blake)' (Artist, poet and madman, the life of Blake) in the *Revue de*

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<sup>5</sup>None of the plates in these European volumes were engraved by Blake.

<sup>6</sup>About Pichot's translations of Byron, see Cochran (2005, 1: 32–70).

<sup>7</sup>About Pichot's translations of Dickens and his role in his reception in France, see Vanfasse (2013, 1: 123–41, particularly 138 and 140).

<sup>8</sup>'Parfois seulement il s'est rencontré des hommes incomplets, mais puissants, qui se sont développés irrégulièrement, il est vrai, mais non sans quelque profit pour l'art et la vérité.' He goes on 'it is only long after, when the path they have opened has been travelled, when time, on which nothing is lost, has taken stock of their originality, that posterity will acknowledge them. Until then, their genius will remain problematic, and their reputation will vary drastically' ('ce n'est que longtemps après, lorsque la route qu'ils ont ouverte aura été parcourue, lorsque le temps, pour qui rien n'est perdu, aura sanctionné leurs écarts, que la postérité leur en tiendra compte. Jusque-là leur génie demeurera problématique, et la fortune de leur nom très diverse' (Grille 1861, 372).



*Paris* (Paris review), still based on Cunningham's biography (Pichot 1833). In this text, Pichot described the twofold nature of Blake's art. He considered him both as an artist and as a poet, which is not to be found in any other French article or essay of the time. He also gave several translations of short poems and excerpts from longer works. Ultimately, in 1843, Pichot became the editor of the *Revue britannique* (British review), and in 1862 he published in this review his third and last article on Blake. 'Le visionnaire Blake' (Blake the visionary), as it was entitled, was written at the same time as the English School Pavilion of the 1862 International Exhibition in London was presenting some works by Blake. Although it is difficult to know whether he actually attended the exhibition – it is equally difficult to state whether he had previously seen any work by Blake during his various trips to Great Britain – Pichot, in his article, explained how difficult it was for him to find new information about Blake, and that is why he chose to reproduce much of the content of his 1833 article. Pichot's endeavours to make Blake better known were not immediately successful. Strikingly enough, Blake was absent from the first French attempts at publishing critical studies on British literature. Charles-Augustin Coquerel, a Protestant and nephew of British writer Helen Maria Williams who settled in France during the Revolution, did not mention him in his *Histoire abrégée de la littérature anglaise* (Abridged history of English literature, Coquerel 1828). Still absent from various attempts to discuss British literature as a whole (Mézières 1834; Chateaubriand 1836), Blake was also unknown to the famous historian Hippolyte Taine, not being mentioned in his four-volume *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (History of English literature, Taine 1863–64). It is really Blake the artist, and more precisely Blake the engraver, who draws the attention of French authors in that period. He is mentioned and analysed as an artist of some importance – even if an unclassifiable one – in a few French publications. It is important to make it clear from the start that the first dissemination of his engraved works were in the form, not of his own illustrated poems, but of his drawings as engraved by Schiavonetti for the 1808 and 1813 editions of Blair's *Grave* (1743). At the time, Blair was better known in France than Blake, as was the Italian-born engraver Luigi Schiavonetti, who was one of the engravers who worked for John Boydell on his Shakespeare Gallery project. This is why one of the first mentions of Blake as an artist in a French publication – a French and English one, to be precise – is in 1831, when two of his compositions for Blair's *Grave* were reproduced in George Hamilton's four-volume *Ecole anglaise* (English school, Hamilton 1831–32). For the purpose of this publication, 'Death's Door' and 'Death of the Strong Wicked Man' were engraved by French engraver Louis-Marie Normand, whose preparatory drawings are now kept in the Louvre museum, misclassified under the name of his father, Charles. Blake was seen as 'an artist whose productions, though often disfigured by conceit and extravagance, and sometimes unintelligible, occasionally present much grace, beauty and originality'.<sup>9</sup> In July 1833, the *Revue britannique* published a translation of an article that had appeared in the British press, probably the *Monthly Magazine* of March 1833, according to Bo

<sup>9</sup>'un artiste dont les productions sont souvent dénaturées par l'extravagance de la pensée quelquefois inintelligible, offre cependant ici un style gracieux, noble et original' (Hamilton 1831–32, 3: 181).

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Ossian Lindberg (1970, 141). In this rather fanciful article, entitled ‘Statistique – Hôpital des fous à Londres’ (Statistic – lunatic asylum in London), dedicated to Bedlam Hospital, Blake was depicted as an incarcerated madman. The article states that Blake, described as an artist, was called ‘the Seer’ (‘le Voyant’) and insists that he was convinced of the material reality of the visions he drew. The French article contributed to the spreading of the anecdote into Germany, contributing greatly to the myth of ‘mad Blake’ in Europe.<sup>10</sup> In 1835, another French author dedicated a developed study to Blake. He signed ‘P-ot’ and, although G. E. Bentley Jr has identified him as Louis Péricaud (1975, 240), he is most certainly Valentin Parisot (1800–1861), a professor of foreign literature at the University of Douai and a versatile writer. Apparently basing his material on Blake’s obituary in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* of 1827 (Parisot 1835), Parisot inserted the first French biographical article on ‘Guillaume Blake’ in the most famous contemporary French biographical dictionary (*Biographie universelle*), edited by Louis-Gabriel Michaud. He presented Blake only as an ‘English engraver’ (‘graveur anglais’), and his activities as a poet and artist are simply ignored. During the following years, studies again focused on Blake as artist. In 1841, in the *Encyclopédie catholique* (Catholic encyclopedia), Victor-Honoré-Nicolas Brillard de Nouvion wrote a biographical entry on William Blake, ‘engraver, painter and English poet, whose name, although very popular in England, is hardly known this side of the Channel’,<sup>11</sup> and whose works ‘are not part of our public collections yet’ (‘ne figurent pas encore dans nos collections publiques’, 648). Blake was seen as an artist who, through practising three art forms, loses his way, all the more so as he is gifted with ‘an eccentric originality which puzzles his superiors and draws no sympathy, which astonishes but moves not.’<sup>12</sup> The interaction between text and image is underlined by means of *Songs*, but only in a negative way: ‘The poems were written in verse first, then reproduced in a painting. But one would be at a loss to find a link or a coherent goal for all these topics.’ He concludes: ‘His works, which are so serious and so interesting at first glance, degenerate by degrees into enigmas, into buffoonery almost.’<sup>13</sup> In the same year, 1841, Blake’s name is mentioned among other British modern artists in Count Athanase Raczyński’s study *Histoire de l’Art moderne en Allemagne* (History of modern art in Germany, 1841, 493), as a ‘history painter’ (‘peintre historique’). It is also mentioned in the Belgian poet and historian Adolphe Siret’s (1818–1888) famous *Dictionnaire des peintres* (Dictionary of painters), well known and well used in France at the time (Siret 1848, 486), and in the *Guide théorique et pratique de l’amateur de tableaux* (Theoretical and practical guide for the amateur of paintings) by the painter and painting curator Théodore Lejeune (c. 1817–1868), who introduced Blake as a history painter

<sup>10</sup>See Susanne Schmid’s Chapter 9.

<sup>11</sup>‘graveur, peintre et poète anglais, dont le nom qui jouit en Angleterre d’une très grande popularité est à peine connu au-delà de la Manche’ (Nouvion 1841, 648).

<sup>12</sup>‘doué d’une de ces originalités excentriques qui excitent la supériorité et ne s’attirent aucune sympathie, qui étonnent et n’émeuvent pas’ (Nouvion 1841, 649).

<sup>13</sup>‘C’étaient autant de poèmes écrits en vers d’abord, puis reproduits dans un tableau. Mais on se perdrait vainement à chercher un lien, un but d’ensemble à tous ces sujets [...] Ses œuvres si sérieuses et si intéressantes d’abord [...] dégénèrent par degrés jusqu’à l’énigme et presque jusqu’à la bouffonnerie’ (Nouvion 1841, 649).

with a peculiar statement displaying his ignorance of his subject's art: 'Without being a talent of the first order, he is liked by amateurs thanks to the wisdom of his composition and the fairness of his complexions.'<sup>14</sup>

From the 1850s onwards, the French authors who shared a vision of Blake's 'wisdom of composition' are few and far between: by and large, they did not understand an art that was deemed incomprehensible. Critics could sometimes be very harsh. On 9 October 1885, an unsigned article of the *Courrier de l'Art* (Art post) compared Blake with Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), calling him 'a helpless daydreamer that nowadays some try to pass off as a man of genius, and who is not even the caricature of it'.<sup>15</sup> More surprisingly, British critics were not necessarily more flattering when they wrote in the French press: the 1893 review of the Old Masters exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, by English art historian Sir Claude Phillips (1846–1924) in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (Fine arts gazette) was hardly more nuanced when he judged the twenty-nine Blake watercolours that were shown. He talked of 'this dreamer of apocalyptic dreams, this poet and painter who was in both of these two artforms but a most imperfect practitioner, but who knew, however, how to redeem his imperfections and his ridiculous views by flashes of genius'.<sup>16</sup> The British playwright, poet and critic Joseph William Comyns Carr (1849–1916) was more nuanced, as he was a supporter of the Pre-Raphaelite movement at the time, and a Blake specialist, in his article dedicated to Blake's drawings published in French in the review *L'Art*, in 1875. He referred directly to Swinburne's *William Blake* (1868).

However, a number of French writers voiced a sincere admiration for Blake's art. A major French art critic, Théophile Thoré (1807–1869), published in 1863 an article on Blake the artist. Thoré, a committed Republican, discredited as a result of an anti-government manifestation in June 1849, lived in exile in Switzerland, in Belgium and in England between 1849 and 1859. At that time, he started to write articles about British art under the penname of 'W. Bürger'. His biographical essay on Blake, illustrated by engravings – including a portrait of Blake after that made by Thomas Phillips in 1807 (National Portrait Gallery, London) – was published in the *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles* (History of painters from all schools), by Renouard, and the third volume, edited by Charles Blanc, was dedicated to the English school. Thoré's opinion was that the English school 'does not yet exist in the art history of the continent' ('n'existe pas encore dans l'histoire de l'art sur le continent', 1857, 369), and the significance of his initiative lay in his interest in artists as difficult as Blake, whom he introduced as 'indeed the most eccentric of all the artists of the English school, which nevertheless includes

<sup>14</sup>'Sans être de premier ordre, son talent plaît assez aux amateurs, par la sagesse de sa composition et la fraîcheur de ses carnations' (Lejeune 1864, 599).

<sup>15</sup>'ce rêveur impuissant qu'on essaie aujourd'hui de nous donner pour un homme de génie, et qui n'en fut pas même la charge' (Anon. 1885, 5–41: 496).

<sup>16</sup>'ce rêveur de rêves apocalyptiques, ce poète et peintre qui ne fut ni dans l'un ni dans l'autre de ces deux arts qu'un praticien bien imparfait, mais qui sut néanmoins racheter ses imperfections et ses ridicules par des éclairs de génie' (Phillips 1893, 236).

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original men such as Turner, Barry, Morland, Fuseli and many others.<sup>17</sup> Thoré explained that Blake had created engravings and ‘stanzas with their own melodies’ (‘strophes avec leur mélodie’, 1863, 2), as he enlarged upon the lost musical dimension of Blake’s work. His engravings were described as full of ‘originality’ and ‘naïve beauty’ (‘beauté naïve’), but also of ‘savagery and madness’ (‘de sauvagerie et de démence’), of an ‘impenetrable obscurity’ (‘obscurité impénétrable’), whereas his poetic work was merely described as ‘stanzas stemming from a very poetic feeling’ (‘strophes d’un sentiment très-poétique’). He concluded ‘Yes, this is a man of genius, but an extravagant one. Does not genius almost always imply some sort of eccentricity?’<sup>18</sup> This comprehensive judgement on Blake, characteristic of a Romantic vision of genius – Thoré was close to Delacroix – is also to be found in the work of the art historian Ernest Chesneau (1833–1890), author of an invaluable work published in 1882, *La Peinture anglaise* (English painting). A member of the Romantic, and above all, of the Pre-Raphaelite circles, which he helped to popularize in France, he mentions Blake as a watercolourist twice, first in the first part (‘The Old School’), then in his second part (‘The Modern School’). He starts with a general statement similar to Thoré’s: with the exception of Gainsborough, Constable and Reynolds, ‘all the English artists until 1850, even Turner, are tainted by a peculiar vice, the love of oddity.’<sup>19</sup> Blake is evoked as ‘this visionary painter [...] originating from the great Teutonic movement which, under the terror inspired by Napoleon and our armies, gathered together all the fractions of the great Scandinavian and Germanic stock.’<sup>20</sup> Chesneau acknowledges Blake’s value as a poet, but he distinguishes between his earlier and later works:

As a poet, he is worthy of admiration in his first innocent conceptions. When his vision gets hold of him and as he grows older, he surrenders himself to it, he is stifled by it. His inner fantasy becomes thick, overpowering, dark, and he is the victim of his own creation. His last poems, illustrated by drypoint engravings achieved by new devices, are unintelligible.<sup>21</sup>

Blake is seen as a mystic, and it is from such a perspective that his work is interpreted: ‘All the value of his works comes from the power of a penetrating imagination, an

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<sup>17</sup>‘assurément le plus excentrique de tous les artistes de l’école anglaise, qui compte pourtant des originaux comme Turner, Barry, Morland, Fuseli et bien d’autres’ (Thoré 1863, 1).

<sup>18</sup>‘Oui, c’est un homme de génie, mais extravagant. – Le génie n’est-il pas presque toujours une certaine excentricité?’ (Thoré 1863, 4).

<sup>19</sup>‘tous les artistes anglais jusqu’en 1850, même Turner, sont entachés d’un singulier vice, l’amour de la bizarrerie’ (Chesneau 1882, 164).

<sup>20</sup>‘ce peintre visionnaire [...] issu du grand mouvement teutonique qui a rallié, sous la terreur inspirée par Napoléon et nos armes, toutes les fractions de la grande souche scandinave et germanique’ (Chesneau 1882, 164).

<sup>21</sup>‘Poète, il est admirable dans ses premières conceptions innocentes. Quand sa vision le domine et que, avançant en âge, il se livre à elle, il en est étouffé. Sa fantasmagorie intérieure devient touffue, écrasante, obscure, et il est la victime de sa création. Ses derniers poèmes, accompagnés de dessins gravés à la pointe sèche par des procédés nouveaux, sont inintelligibles’ (Chesneau 1882, 164).

extraordinary capacity for invention, vivid and curious apocalyptic forays into the life of ancient worlds or in the ecstatic mysteries of spiritual existence.<sup>22</sup> As a conclusion, the juxtaposition of the poet and the artist in Blake is seen as a source of aesthetic failure, Blake being ‘Too plastic a Genius for the pencil and too mystical for the brush’ (‘Génie trop plastique pour la plume et trop mystique pour le pinceau’, Chesneau 1882, 165).

But slowly the interest in Blake the artist began to create an interest in Blake the poet, and the lack of French translations of his poems began to be felt. A ground-breaking article was published in *La Revue moderne* (The modern review); it was written by the philosopher and literary critic Joseph Milsand (1817–1886), a specialist in the Anglo-Saxon world and a friend of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and it was published in 1868. This article was republished posthumously in a general volume entitled *Littérature anglaise et philosophie* (English literature and philosophy, Milsand 1893, 305–46). Milsand’s article paved the way for further reception of Blake in France, drawing upon Alexander Gilchrist’s *Life of Blake* (1863), published five years earlier in England. Milsand acknowledged Gilchrist’s endeavour to give Blake a prominent status as an artist, a status he had not yet attained. Based on his reading of two texts, ‘To Summer’ (from *Poetical Sketches*, 1783) and excerpts from *Thel*, Milsand saw in Blake a ‘forerunner’ (‘précurseur’, 1893, 305) of modern poetry and an ‘actual miracle’ (‘miracle réel’, 307), accompanying the ‘end of this reign of reason which, in [his] opinion, was nothing less than the end of a world’ (‘[cette] fin de ce règne de la raison qui, à [son] sens, n’était rien moins que la fin d’un monde’, 326). Milsand – who did not want to refer to Blake as a ‘prophet’ (‘un prophète’, 327) – considered him as a philosophical phenomenon, a ‘spiritual being’ (‘être spirituel’, 310), the human equivalent of a volcanic eruption on a geological scale, of a magnitude equivalent to that of figures such as Swedenborg, and for this reason Milsand stands out among the French critics of the nineteenth century. For the first time, Blake was not perceived as a madman but as a hypersensitive person revealing to mankind the ‘secrets of our nature’ (‘secrets de notre nature’, 312): a modern, inspired being (‘inspiré moderne’, 313). This article prefigured Blake’s future reception in the French academic world.

But at that time, Blake’s reputation was in the hands of Symbolist authors, whose audience was probably greater than that of the over-intellectual Milsand. In 1883 Catulle Mendès (1841–1909) published an article in the Republican newspaper *Gil Blas*; it formed part of a series significantly entitled ‘Half-genius’ (‘Les demi-génies’). Mendès’s admiration was plain to see: ‘A poet, philosopher, painter, musician; sublime, melancholy, zany; as mystical as Saint Teresa, as coarse as Rabelais, William Blake is a prodigiously complex being.’<sup>23</sup> According to Mendès, himself a Parnassian poet, Blake clearly

<sup>22</sup>‘Elles doivent toute leur valeur à la force d’une imagination pénétrante, d’une extraordinaire invention, à de vives et curieuses échappées apocalyptiques dans la vie des mondes antérieurs ou dans les mystères extatiques de l’existence spirituelle’ (Chesneau 1882, 306).

<sup>23</sup>‘Poète, philosophe, peintre, musicien, sublime, grotesque, mélancolique, bouffon, aussi mystique que sainte Thérèse, aussi grossier que Rabelais, William Blake est un esprit prodigieusement complexe’ (Mendès 1883, 1).

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articulated Symbolism and its fascination with the dream world: ‘Which poet has not been giddy on the verge of Dreams?’<sup>24</sup> He wrote that he felt close to Blake, but at the same time he thought it was difficult to make him crystal clear to French readers: ‘But how obscure William Blake is in his Prophetic Books, adorned with extra-terrestrial drawings, and how I fear I might, myself, get lost as I try to lead you!’<sup>25</sup> The article was full of translated excerpts, and Mendès concluded by drawing the reader’s attention to Blake’s visual work, uttering a statement frequently repeated about Blake from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards: that these were awkward, naïve and eccentric compositions. The Belgian Symbolist poet Émile Verhaeren (1855–1916) published an article on William Blake, seeing him as a ‘disconcerting painter’ (‘peintre déconcertant’), a ‘surprising and frightening visionary’ (‘un surprenant et effrayant visionnaire’), in the review *Art moderne* (1889), posthumously republished (1928, 127–30).<sup>26</sup> The French poet and dandy comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac (1855–1921) wrote a biographical article in *La revue illustrée* (The illustrated review) in 1894, later republished in *Autels Privilégiés* (Privileged altars, Montesquiou 1898, 189–98). Montesquiou, who discovered Blake’s work thanks to Edward Burne-Jones while in London in 1884, again expressed a great admiration for the ‘Fra Angelico of the uncanny and the terrible’ (‘Fra Angelico de l’étrange et du terrible’, 1989, 198): ‘And yet, if anything seems made to fascinate our *fin de siècle* infatuated with curiosity and occultism, is it not this painter-poet whose work is so fantastically clad in light and darkness?’<sup>27</sup> More importantly, he expressed the hope that, just as Baudelaire had undertaken the translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s works, a native speaker would do the same for Blake (195). Indeed, his wish was soon to come true, with the first translations of Blake’s work into French.

### The turn of the century: First translations and developed studies

In February 1876, the British poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, who was at that time collaborating on the *République des Lettres* (Republic of letters) review project, wrote the following letter to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898):

I’ve begun a little study that I’m planning to offer to the *République des lettres*, on the great painter-poet William Blake, whom I believe to be all but unknown in France. Seven years ago, I published a fairly long essay on him, and I think I could give a shortened version of his life, with some extracts from his poems that would perhaps not be without interest for the French poets. But since we’ve lost Baudelaire,

<sup>24</sup>‘Quel est le poète qui n’a pas été pris de vertige sur le bord du Rêve?’ (Mendès 1883, 2).

<sup>25</sup>‘Mais que William Blake est ténébreux dans ses “Livres Prophétiques”, ornés de dessins extra-terrestres, et combien je redoute de me perdre en essayant de vous guider!’ (Mendès 1883, 2).

<sup>26</sup>On Verhaeren, see Franca Bellarsi’s Chapter 4.

<sup>27</sup>‘Et pourtant, si quelque chose semble fait pour passionner notre fin de siècle éprise de curiosité et d’occultisme, n’est-ce pas ce peintre-poète à l’œuvre si prodigieusement vêtue de lumière et de ténèbres?’ (Montesquiou 1899, 193–94).

you are the only one who would be worthy of undertaking this glorious task, which I hardly dare assume myself, but of which I hope to send you in the near future a few samples. (Lloyd 1999, 107)

Swinburne did not choose Mallarmé at random. The author of *Hérodiade*, a Parnassian and a Symbolist, Mallarmé worked as an English teacher in a high school to earn his living. Being able to read English, he might have been able to convey Blake's tortured mind with his refined, complex and sophisticated style. In his reply, Mallarmé states that he had already read Swinburne's *William Blake*. But in the end, he never started this translation. This demonstrates, nevertheless, that Blake was known in intellectual circles, and that Swinburne's essays – and probably other contemporary British studies on Blake – reached French readers.

In the following years, the first translations began to appear in France. In 1833, Pichot had done word-for-word translations of some of Blake's poems into prose, considering this a necessary evil as he was not able to capture Blake's style and ideas. Readers could then discover in French 'The Tyger' (1833, 166), excerpts from 'King Edward III', from *Poetical Sketches* (167), 'The Chimney Sweeper', from *Songs of Innocence* (170–01) and poems accompanying prints, as Pichot put it ('Holy Thursday', from *Songs of Innocence*, and 'The Lamb', 171–02). Milsand had also already translated two poems in the *Revue moderne* of 1868 into French prose: 'To Summer' (29) and short excerpts from *Thel* separated by summaries of the storyline (32–35). In 1897, some short poems by Blake were anonymously translated in the review *Les Temps nouveaux* (New times), an anarchist newspaper founded two years before. It was common practice among anarchist papers not to sign articles; as a result, it is unfortunately not possible to know the identity of the admirer who translated 'London' (no. 29, 611), 'The Garden of Love' (no. 32, 627) and 'I Heard an Angel Singing' (from the *Notebook*, no. 38, 666). The prose translation is a mediocre, even an unfaithful one, as shown, for example, in 'London': its first line 'I wander thro' each chartered street' (*SE* 46: 1; *E* 26) is translated as 'Je rôde par les rues numérotées' ('I wander through numbered streets'). The themes of these poems were clearly intended to please the paper's readership. The translator found them in the volume dedicated to Blake in the *Canterbury Poets series*, supervised by Joseph Skipsey and issued in 1885. The very same year, Charles Grolleau (1867–1940), a literary scholar and poet, started to publish his first translation of Blake. A devout Catholic convert and a friend of Joris-Karl Huysmans, Grolleau was, for financial reasons, a prolific translator who worked on such different authors as G. K. Chesterton, Oscar Wilde, Omar Kháyyám (from the English version of Edward Heron-Allen) and Henryk Sienkiewicz. The extracts from the 'Proverbs of Hell' (from *Marriage*) that he translated for *Matines: Revue de littérature et d'art* (*Matins: Review of art and literature*, 1897, 1: 23–28) were clearly intended as a prelude to a more important work and they were probably well received. Years later, he published a complete translation of *Marriage* (Blake 1900), the first complete translation into French of one of Blake's major works, and the first of many attempts by various French writers, poets and intellectuals, including André Gide, to make the poetical work of Blake known in France. It is worth mentioning that Grolleau's

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translation included a number of black-and-white reproductions of Blake's designs from the prophetic books, and that the publishing house, founded by Lucien Chamuel, specialized in spiritualist and occultist books. According to David Steel, Grolleau's translation had little impact at the time (Steel in Phillips 2009, 194). However, in the popular *Revue Blanche* (White review), one of the most famous literary journals of the time, it is referred to as a 'precious brochure, to be recommended among spiritualist circles' ('précieuse plaquette, à mettre en bonne place parmi les spiritualistes', 1900, 23: 476).

The publication of a great many essays on Blake from 1900 onwards testifies to his growing fame, in the fields of both literary studies and art history. Among literary journals, one can highlight Frank Stokoe's essay about Blake's life and work, published in the Symbolist journal *La Plume* (The pen).<sup>28</sup> His article (Stokoe 1903) comprises a biographical summary (taken from Yeats's introduction to Blake's works published in 1893) and comments on Blake's literary style, with short French-translated excerpts, which align Blake with the French Symbolists (329, 331). In 1907, Pierre Berger (b. 1869), a *professeur agrégé* of English in a high school in Bordeaux, published his doctorate thesis entitled *William Blake – Mysticisme et poésie* (William Blake – mysticism and poetry), a ground-breaking study, which is also the first fully fledged academic essay in France. This well-informed book of more than four hundred pages had a long-lasting influence not only in France, where it was reissued (1936), but also in Great Britain, where it was translated into English (1914). The first part is a biography of Blake based on the main documents available in England in the nineteenth century. The second part analyses Blake's mystical and philosophical system by placing it in its spiritual and intellectual context. The third part is a study of Blake's poetical works in chronological order. Berger concludes that, although Blake is a difficult poet insofar as his work elicits a great variety of interpretations, an academic approach may throw some light on him. Berger's thesis consists therefore in a literary essay containing excerpts translated into French by the author himself. Berger also deals with Blake the artist but this aspect is not expanded upon. Berger was later to publish several articles and two major translations of Blake.

In the field of art history, several important essays were published in the first decade of the twentieth century. Most of them tend to see Blake as a forerunner of the Pre-Raphaelites. For instance, in his 'Rapport général du jury international de l'Exposition universelle de 1900' ('International jury general report of the 1900 universal exhibition', 1904), and, three years later, in an article about the Belgian school of painting, the art historian and curator of the Musée du Luxembourg (in Paris) Léonce Bénédicté (1859–1925) expressed his contempt for Blake, whom he described as that 'British idle dreamer, William Blake', with 'his wild and poor ranting'.<sup>29</sup> Another major French art historian, academician Louis Gillet (1876–1943), close to Charles Péguy and Romain Rolland,<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Probably Frank Woodyer Stokoe, a poet and lecturer in French at Cambridge University.

<sup>29</sup>grand songe-creux britannique, William Blake, [avec] ses sauvages et pauvres élucubrations! (Bénédicté 1907, 147).

<sup>30</sup>For Rolland and Stefan Zweig, see Chapter 11 by Sibylle Erle.



mentioned Blake in an article on Rembrandt. Quoting the opinion of the Pre-Raphaelites, and of Blake himself on Rembrandt, Gillet called him 'the lunatic so much in fashion today' ('Illuminé si fort à la mode aujourd'hui', 1907, 423). In 1908, in *La Peinture anglaise de ses origines à nos jours* (English painting from the origins to our present days), Armand Dayot (1851–1934) called Blake 'a bizarre man of genius' and a 'madman' ('génie bizarre', 'détraqué', 97), but he informed the French reader that Blake was also a poet and a musician. He concluded on a more positive note: 'Nevertheless, the figure of Blake is incontestably one of the most powerfully original figures of the English school.'<sup>31</sup> Finally, in this period the three major contributions to art history were those by François Benoît (1870–1947), Paul Nissim Alfassa (1876–1949) and Floris Delattre (1880–1950). In 1906, Benoît, a professor of art history in Lille, published an illustrated essay with a front page in colour reinterpreting Blake's snake from *Europe*, and entitled *Blake le visionnaire* (Blake the visionary). As the title shows, Benoît envisaged Blake as a mystic and a visionary, as he created an art which was impossible to pigeon-hole. As a consequence, he left the sweeping generalizations of his contemporaries aside to concentrate on Blake's drawbacks and qualities, as well as on the links with former and contemporary artists. As such, this essay was the equivalent of Berger's literary study in the artistic field. Alfassa was a curator in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris, and an enthusiastic anglophile who had translated Robert Browning. He published a long essay in two parts in the *Revue de l'art* (The art review, 1908a and 1908b). He took Benoît's book as an opportunity to publish on Blake in *La Revue*, and in doing so he endorsed most of its conclusions. The article was also generously illustrated. Finally, Floris Delattre, a poet and a translator who was ranked first in the *agrégation* of English in 1904, and a future professor of literature and culture of the British Renaissance in the Sorbonne, published in 1908 an essay entitled *L'Unité dans l'Art* (Unity in art), which was almost entirely dedicated to Blake although he hardly mentioned his name. As he explained, the essay was formerly conceived as an introduction to a more developed work he had had to abandon, the intended title of which was *Un Romantique anglais au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: William Blake, mystique, poète et graveur* (An English eighteenth-century Romantic: William Blake, mystic, poet and engraver, 1908, 7). Although its scope is limited and it lacks illustrations, this sixty-page study is still very penetrating in its view of art in general and of Blake in particular. Indeed, Blake's achievement is understood as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, functioning through associations and interweaving the arts of poetry and design in an inextricable way, a work that is perceived through the multiple perspectives of the history of art, the history of literature and the history of religion:

To endeavour to understand Blake in a partial way; to study separately the mystic, the poet and the engraver in him; to claim to build a logical system of dogmas and thoughts on multiple details which are most of the time incoherent and

<sup>31</sup>Malgré cela la figure de Blake demeure incontestablement comme une des figures les plus puissamment originales de l'École anglaise' (Gillet 1907, 97–98).

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contradictory, is to condemn oneself to the fate of incompleteness, and to lose track of [...] the essential and total truth of our author.<sup>32</sup>

Delattre sees Blake as a forerunner of the Pre-Raphaelites, whose art he labels 'supernaturalism' ('surnaturalisme', 64), an art that tries to humanize the supernatural in that it endeavours to make the souls of things visible. A less interesting article by Jeanne Doin, written in 1912, sets out to introduce Blake's 'mystical art' ('art mystique') by giving several illustrations to the readers of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, one of the most widely read artistic journals of the time (Doin 1912).

### The reception of Blake in the 1920–30s: The role of the Avant-Gardes

Around the time of World War I, two major French writers, Philippe Soupault (1897–1990) and André Gide (1869–1951), discovered Blake's poetry. They were emblematic examples of the reception of Blake's works among French intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, when Modernists and Surrealists discovered, translated and wrote essays on Blake. First, Soupault discovered William Blake's work during a stay in London in 1914, and he later confided that the true 'illumination' was for him when he visited the Tate Gallery and saw Blake's art (1980, 85).<sup>33</sup> Then, at about the same time in 1914, Gide discovered Blake's poems thanks to Elisabeth Van Rysselberghe, in circumstances examined by David Steel in the 2009 catalogue of the Petit Palais exhibition (Phillips 2009). According to him (194–95), the two French writers seemed to compete to be the first to translate Blake into French. In an article published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (New French review, or *NRF*, March 1921: 337–43), and entitled 'Billets à Angèle' (Letters to Angèle), Gide mentions Blake for the first time. He writes: 'Baudelaire, Blake, Keats, Browning, Stendhal wrote only for future generations.'<sup>34</sup> In a letter dated 6 January 1921 to Jacques Rivière, director of the *NRF*, André Gide extols Blake and deplors the fact that he was virtually unknown in France (David Steel in Phillips 2009, 194). He also suggests that some poems should be translated in the *NRF* (Mansanti 2009, 190 and David Steel in Phillips 2009, 194, quoting Gide 1998, 629). André Gide himself volunteered for this task, and he translated Blake's *Marriage*, which he discovered in January 1922, as he mentions in his diary (*Journal* 1996, 1: 1169). Gide, who was to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947, was a voracious reader of British literature, and it is through him that a number of British writers came to be known in France during the first half of the twentieth century. Apart from Blake, he was enthusiastic about Wordsworth, Coleridge, Robert Browning and Joseph Conrad. His translation first appeared in the *NRF* (1 August 1922,

<sup>32</sup>'Vouloir comprendre Blake partiellement; étudier séparément en lui le mystique, le poète et le graveur; prétendre, sur des détails multiples, incohérents souvent et contradictoires, échafauder un système logique de dogmes et de pensées, c'est se condamner à être fatalement incomplet et à perdre de vue [...] la vérité essentielle et totale de notre auteur' (Delattre 1908, 58).

<sup>33</sup>For the Blake Room and visitors to the Tate, see Martin Myrone's Chapter 26.

<sup>34</sup>'Baudelaire, Blake, Keats, Browning, Stendhal n'ont écrit que pour les générations à venir' (Gide 1999, 281).

129–47), then in a separate volume (Blake 1923). This volume is quoted several times in his essay dedicated to the poetics of Dostoevsky. When he gradually realized the significance of Blake for his own *oeuvre*, he wrote:

Meeting Blake has been a most remarkable experience for me. As the beams of a yet unperceived star to an astronomer, so was Blake's presence to me: I intuited his existence, but I did not know at the time that he was part of a constellation with Nietzsche, Browning and Dostoevsky. He is probably the most radiant star of the group, certainly he is the strangest and the most remote one.<sup>35</sup>

As he was working on Dostoevsky for a conference (the conference was delivered in the Vieux-Colombier on 24 December 1921, and it was published in the *NRF* (1922, 129–33, see Gide 1996, 1155), Gide read the Russian novelist in the light of Blake, in whom he perceived 'a great mystic poet' and a thinker prone to invert values. After the conference, Gide kept on working on Dostoevsky's novels for a more detailed study. 'Dostoevski' is eventually published in *La Revue hebdomadaire* (The weekly review) between 23 January and 17 February 1923. When quoting Blake, Gide mainly resorted to aphorisms taken from the 'Proverbs of Hell', such as 'he who desires, but acts not, breeds pestilence' (629), 'one law for the lion and ox, is oppression' (630), 'if others had not been foolish, we should be so' (649). Gide also provides a translation of Blake's entire poem. In the course of his study, Gide reiterates the association between Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Browning and Blake. It gradually appears that, for Gide, Blake embodies a poetry whose main features are energy, madness and cruelty opposed to innocence, set in a universe of contraries.

Obviously, Gide and Soupault are not alone in describing Blake. Denis Saurat traces Milton's influence on Blake (Saurat 1920). In his book *Le Style anglais* (English style, 1922), Émile Bayard (1868–1937), a French art historian and an administrator at the Ministry of Fine Arts, brackets Blake and Fuseli together as puzzling theosophists.<sup>36</sup> In 1923, as a response to the publication of Henry Crabb Robinson's *Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, etc.* (1922), Louis Gillet, an author we have already mentioned, writes 'Le Cas de William Blake' (The case of William Blake) in the *Revue des Deux-Mondes* (Review of two worlds, 1923, 196–206). Among other authors who wrote on Blake in the 1920s is a young writer of Anglo-American descent, Julian Hartridge Green, known as Julien Green (1900–1998). His family settled in Paris in 1897 and Green converted to Catholicism at the age of fifteen. He published one of his very first essays on Blake (Green 1923) in a very small review called *Feuilles critiques* (Critical pages), and under

<sup>35</sup>'La rencontre de Blake est pour moi de la plus grande importance. [...] Comme un astronome dont il ne pressentait pas encore les rayons, je pressentais Blake, mais ne me doutais pas encore qu'il formait constellation avec Nietzsche, Browning et Dostoïevski. La plus brillante étoile, peut-être, de ce groupe; assurément la plus étrange et la plus reculée' (16 January 1922, Gide 1996, 1165).

<sup>36</sup>'Quant à William Blake (1757–1827) et à J. H. Füssli (1742–1825) [...] ils sont surtout des artistes curieusement cérébraux, théosophes et spirites en leurs sujets énigmatiques et confus' (Bayard 1922, 124).

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the pen-name David Irland. Blake was an author he read extensively at the time, along with the Bible and Léon Bloy. His article was republished four years later in *Suites anglaises* (English Suites, 1927, 41–66), a collection of essays on British writers (William Blake, Samuel Johnson, Charles Lamb and Charlotte Brontë), and translated into English by Green himself for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* ('William Blake, Prophet', 1929). He insisted on the mystical, almost superhuman character of Blake: 'One would believe that he was a human being only by mistake, so different was he from the rest of mankind.'<sup>37</sup> Green was full of admiration for his subject: 'once upon a time there was a giant with terrible eyes, a voice of thunder, and his name was William Blake.'<sup>38</sup> He refuted the theory of Blake's madness, since 'Madness does not know itself and does not know where it is going, and it is an almighty reason which governs Blake's universe, but it is a mystic's reason that human reason cannot judge by its own standards.'<sup>39</sup> Green's opinion was that Blake was a poet whose 'art [...] provides a powerful comment on his written work',<sup>40</sup> and it contributed to the 'neatness of Blake's visions', a neatness characteristic of the great mystic writers.

In 1924, the second thesis dedicated to William Blake, preceded only by that of Berger, was defended in France, and published in English by Ba-Han. This is a clear sign that Blake was gradually becoming a classic, underlined by the fact that he has a whole chapter devoted to him in E. Legouis and L. Cazamian's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (History of English literature, 1924). In September of the same year, there was a special issue of the *Navire d'argent* (Silver ship) review (1925, 371–436) which was dedicated to Blake. This short-lived literary review, founded by French writer and editor Adrienne Monnier (1892–1955) in June 1925, was much read by the English and American communities in Paris, and in it were published several texts by authors from the Lost Generation. The fourth issue contained several verse translations of Blake's poems (the verse translation was a rare, probably unique, choice at the time) by Anne Hervieu and Auguste Morel (the latter translated Joyce's *Ulysses* into French),<sup>41</sup> as well as various essays, including Swinburne's, under the French title 'Génie et foi de William Blake' (Genius and faith of William Blake, trans. Robert Brugères) and Arthur Symons's 'La Place de William Blake' (William Blake's Place, trans. Georges Luciani), together with a 'Life of William Blake' by young critic and art expert Marcel Brion (1895–1984), who was at the time defining what he called 'l'art fantastique'. If Saurat wrote 'Blake et les celtomanes' (Blake and celtomaniacs, 1925), and Marcel Brion published 'Les livres prophétiques de William Blake' (1926),

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<sup>37</sup>On croirait presque qu'il n'était homme que par erreur, tant il ressemblait peu au reste de l'humanité' (Green 1929, 41).

<sup>38</sup>il était une fois un géant au regard terrible, à la voix de tonnerre, et il s'appelait Blake, William Blake' (Green 1929, 42).

<sup>39</sup>La folie ne se connaît point et ne sait pas où elle va, et c'est une toute puissante raison qui domine l'univers de Blake, mais c'est une raison de mystique que la raison humaine ne peut juger selon sa mesure' (Green 1929, 46–47).

<sup>40</sup>'l'art [...] forme le commentaire puissant de son œuvre écrite' (Green 1929, 58).

<sup>41</sup>'To the Muses', 'The Lamb', 'The Tyger', 'London', 'Auguries of Innocence', 'The Mental Traveller', 'I Rose up at the Dawn of Day' (from *Notebook*), 'The Moment of Desire! The Moment of Desire' and excerpts from *Milton* (under the titles 'La Forge de Los' and 'Construction du temps') (*Le Navire d'argent* 1925, 409–36).

showing that Blake was taken seriously, there were still writers like Symbolist poet Henri de Régnier (1864–1936) who believed that Blake’s visual art was composed of blurs and smears (1925, 493; repr. in Régnier 1926, 33).

Pierre Berger, who published *Les poètes préromantiques anglais* (English pre-romantic poets, 1925), took stock of Blake studies in France in an article published in 1926. During the celebration of Blake’s centenary in 1927, Berger published a general article in *Le Mercure de France* (The mercury of France), where he suggested that the French renewal of interest in Blake was created by the Great War trauma (6). At the same time, one could read in *La Presse* that Blake was ‘much talked about’ (‘On parle beaucoup de William Blake’, 1927, 2), at the time when Berger was translating the first prophetic books (Blake 1927a). It was soon followed by the *Seconds livres prophétiques* (Second prophetic books, Blake 1930).

Also in 1927, Soupault and his wife Marie-Louise, using the George Routledge and Sons edition (coll. ‘The Muses’s Library’), published *Chants d’innocence et d’expérience* (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1927b) republished in 1947 with some minor typographical amendments (Blake 1947a). It contained a poem by Soupault himself, entitled ‘Berceuse’ (‘A Cradle Song’, Blake 1927b, 90). This hoax was discovered only in 1996 (Vuillemin and Gurtner 1997). Encouraged by Jacques Robertfrance, a friend of the poet’s and literary editor of the Rieder press, who wanted to create a new collection about modern artists, Soupault published a major essay on Blake, with forty illustrated plates, the following year (1928a). This was soon translated into English by J. Lewis May and published in London (1928b) and New York (1928c). Soupault’s works on Blake have been comparatively overlooked because he was expelled (like Cocteau, Daumal and Salvador Dalí) from the Surrealist group by André Breton. In the same way, his translations are less known than those of Gide, but he deserves to be rediscovered. Apart from in the work of Soupault, Blake did not appear as a major influence on French Surrealism in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was not quoted by André Breton in his manifestos, and despite Mei-Ying Sung’s thorough attempt to find references to him (Sung 2012), he was not claimed as a model by most of the Parisian surrealists. The main exception to this is German artist Max Ernst, who lived in Paris between 1922 and 1940.<sup>42</sup> Ernst included Blake in a list of forty masters of art and literature in *View* magazine in 1942 (Sung 2012, 106). Ernst also used two of his illustrations for Blair’s *Grave* in his 1929 collage book *La Femme 100 têtes* (‘100’ being an aural pun on ‘cent/sans’, meaning *The woman with one-hundred Heads* and *The Woman Without Heads*, Sung, 105–06). As regards contemporary translations, let us mention Pierre Messiaen’s (1883–1957) selection of nineteen poems from *Songs of Innocence*, translated into French and introduced as ‘the first attempt at a French translation of Blake’s little masterpiece’,<sup>43</sup> although in reality it had already been translated in 1927 by Soupault.

Mansanti (2009, 191) notes several references to Blake between 1928 and 1932; she is probably referring to the first issues of the French literary review *Le Grand Jeu* (The great

<sup>42</sup>On Ernst, see also Sibylle Erle’s Chapter 11.

<sup>43</sup>‘le premier essai de traduction française de ce petit chef-d’œuvre de William Blake’ (Blake 1934).

## The Reception of William Blake in Europe

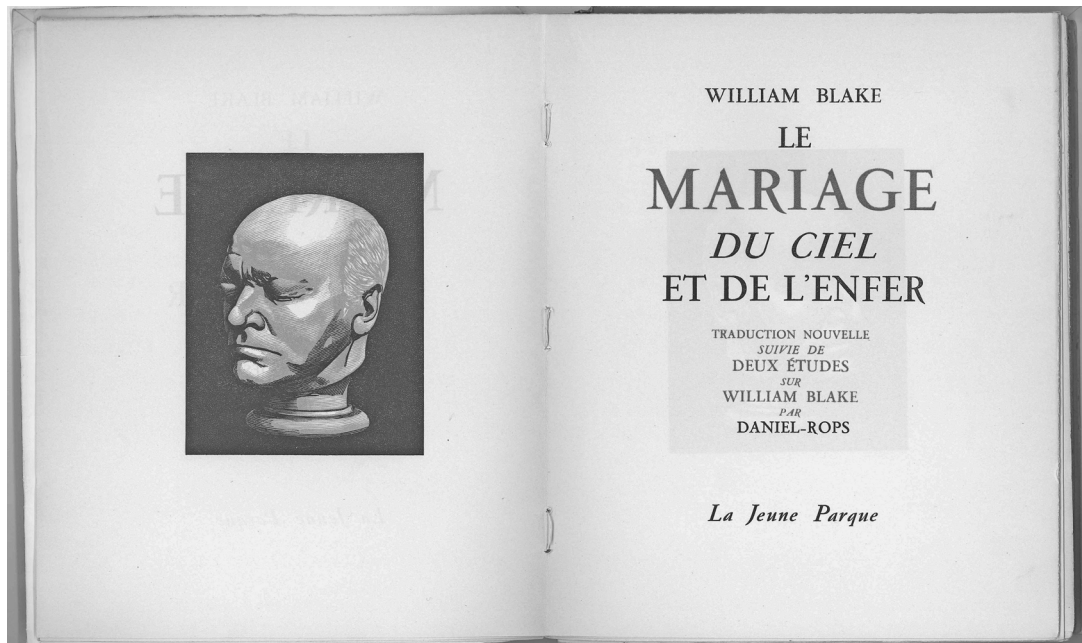
game) in 1928, and of *Transition*, a review by the Americans in Paris, directed by Eugene Jolas, who was close to the Surrealist circle, which quotes several lines from the 'Proverbs of Hell' in its 'Proclamation' (Jolas 1929, 13). Even if the name of William Blake appears only about seven times in this review between 1927 and 1935, it demonstrates his importance for the Surrealist avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s (Mansanti 2009). In the field of art history, the famous art historian and French curator Henri Focillon (1881–1943), in his *La Peinture au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Nineteenth-century painting, 1927), writes a few lines about Blake, seeing in him a forerunner of the Pre-Raphaelites who, he believed, embodied a form of English (and by and large German or Nordic) spiritualism characterized by a 'singular need for idealism' ('un singulier besoin d'idéalité', 2: 126). Finally, among the French intellectuals who had heard of Blake at the time, there was a thorough anglophile, the essayist and novelist Paul Morand (1888–1976). Morand had frequently stayed in London as a young man, and he had been an *attaché* in the French embassy in London. He mentions Blake in *Londres* (London, 1933, 1962), and notices the artist's house off the Strand, where lived that 'dizzying poet-cum-visionary artist, still largely unknown in France, despite Gide's efforts'.<sup>44</sup>

The period of war that followed was, paradoxically, quite rich, as far as Blake's literary reception is concerned. In 1939, the first issue of the review *Messages*, edited by the poet Jean Lescure (1912–2005) and devoted to poetry, was dedicated to Blake. Lescure later wrote, in his autobiography, published in 1998, that in 1939, Blake was 'in fashion' ('à la mode') at the time (1998, 26). *Messages* was to be one of the most important reviews of the French Resistance during the war. In 1942, during the Occupation, a republication of Gide's translation of *Marriage* (Blake 1942) was reviewed by Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) in the *Journal des Débats* (Journal of debates, 1942: 3). Blanchot, a philosopher, novelist and literary critic, was at the time close to the French extreme right-wing, but he was beginning to move towards communism. Indeed, his article on a translation by Gide in which he called Blake 'the great English mystic writer' ('le grand écrivain mystique anglais') was published in a pro-Pétain newspaper, near Nazi and Vichyist propaganda. Considering the risks he ran in reviewing an author known for his homosexuality, we might take this as a sign of his evolution. He published another article on Blake in the same journal two years later (*Journal des Débats*, 1944: 2–3). In September 1943 (and not 1944 as seen on the front page), Madeleine L. Cazamian, the wife of the academic Louis Cazamian (1877–1965), published another translation of selected poems by Blake in the bilingual 'Classiques étrangers' published by Aubier (Blake 1944). For the very first time in France, this translation shows Blake's text facing its French version. Cazamian's publication neither provided an academic translation, nor cited the English edition she has used, and her choice of poems was not explained. The selection was republished in 1968 (Blake 1968).

Immediately after the war the poet Jacques Prévert (1900–1977) dedicated a poem to Blake in his book *Paroles* (Lyrics, 1946), probably his most popular book of poems. Prévert was already well known and popular as a songwriter and a dialogue-writer. In *Paroles*, he dedicates two poems to Picasso, one to Van Gogh and one, 'Noces et Banquets'

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<sup>44</sup>'lyrique vertigineux, doublé d'un dessinateur visionnaire, resté presque inconnu en France, malgré les efforts de Gide' (Morand 1962, 270).



**Figure 3.2** Title-page and frontispiece of Daniel-Rops's translation of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (*Le Mariage du Ciel et de l'Enfer*, 1946), with Blake's life mask by Jean Vital-Prost (La Jeune Parque).

(Weddings and banquets), to Blake. This poem, a homage to the mysticism of the British poet, contains, as in a collage, two quotations (given in French and in Gide's translation) from the 'Proverbs of Hell': 'De même que la chenille choisit pour y poser ses oeufs les feuilles les plus belles ainsi le prêtre pose ses malédictions sur nos plus belles joies' ('As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys', *MMH* 9:55; E 37) and 'C'est avec les pierres de la loi qu'on a bâti les prisons et avec les briques de la religion les bordels' ('Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion', *MMH* 8:22; E 36). The same year, Daniel-Rops published a new translation of *Marriage*, with an introduction and two short essays on Blake; it was illustrated by Jean-Vital Prost (1902–1988).

Henri Petiot, known as Daniel-Rops (1901–1965), a Catholic writer who was close to Gertrude Stein and other English-speaking authors, seems to have considered Blake as a prophet of the war, his poems being, as he entitled one of his essays, 'Une apocalypse pour notre temps' (An apocalypse for our time, Blake 1946, 95). *Marriage* was, in his opinion, free from the obscurity of Blake's late works, and it could be seen as a reflection on the times due to a 'mysterious kinship' ('de mystérieuses proximités', 25), as it dealt with the 'great motifs of refusal, revolt, of man's exaltation when faced with the powers of the night'.<sup>45</sup> Later in 1949, he called Blake 'a prophet for our terrors' ('Un prophète de nos terreurs', Daniel-Rops 1949, 27–34). At the same time, the poet-artist's modernity in

<sup>45</sup>les grands thèmes du refus, de la révolte, de l'exaltation de l'homme en face des puissances de la nuit' (Blake 1946, 18).

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post-war France was soon to be revealed in a major exhibition which came as the result of two decades of the assimilation of Blake by French intellectuals.

### The 1947 exhibition in Paris: A turning point<sup>46</sup>

In March 1947 in Paris, the first retrospective on French soil entirely dedicated to William Blake was opened.

Ten years earlier, the National Library of France had organized an exhibition of both Turner's watercolours and Blake's prints, with a catalogue entitled *Aquarelles de Turner – Œuvres de Blake* (Watercolours by Turner – Works by Blake, Dodgson 1937). This exhibition was organized by the French section of the French–British association 'Art et tourisme' (Art and tourism), which aimed at developing exchanges in the artistic and intellectual field. The association was founded the same year by Ivy Muriel, Lady Chamberlain (1878–1941), the wife of the British MP Sir Austen Chamberlain, and its honorary president was Marshal Philippe Pétain, a member of the Académie française from 1929 and a supporter of the association since its founding. Julien Cain (1887–1974), the administrator of the National Library, allowed 'Art et tourisme' to use a room of the Bibliothèque from 15 January to 15 February to present mainly watercolours and a small selection of drawings and paintings selected by Campbell Dodgson (1867–1948), the British Museum's Keeper of Prints and Drawings. The exhibition laid stress on Blake as a particularly interesting case of art considered in its relation to the book industry. This was underlined by Julien Cain in his foreword to the illustrated catalogue (Dodgson 1937, 11). Forming part of the critical reception, there was an article by French curator Paul Alfassa (1937), who, as we have said, had previously written an article on Blake in 1908. In his review, he reminds his readers that 'few French people know about Blake, who displays for them rather surprising peculiarities',<sup>47</sup> and he tries to enhance Blake's originality:

As, in France, we rather enjoy comparing the art of other countries with our own [...] we are happy to consider Blake as a precursor of both Symbolism and Surrealism. I do not think there is any direct link between him and these two movements; however, one cannot deny that he had, in a different form, concerns which a number of other artists also had at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>This exhibition toured from Paris to Antwerp, Zurich and London. See Franca Bellarsi's Chapter 4 (Belgium) and Angela Esterhammer's Chapter 12 (Switzerland) in this volume.

<sup>47</sup>'Peu de Français d'ailleurs connaissent Blake, qui présente pour eux quelques singularités assez étonnantes' ('By the way, few Frenchmen have heard of William Blake, who represents for them some rather striking particularities', Alfassa 1937, 665).

<sup>48</sup>'Comme on aime assez chez nous à comparer l'art des autres pays au nôtre [...] on considère volontiers Blake comme un précurseur à la fois du symbolisme et du surréalisme. Je ne pense pas qu'il y ait de lien direct entre lui et ces deux mouvements; qu'il ait eu cependant des préoccupations qu'ont eues, à leur tour, sous une forme différente certains artistes à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XX<sup>e</sup>, on ne saurait le contester' (Alfassa 1937, 674).



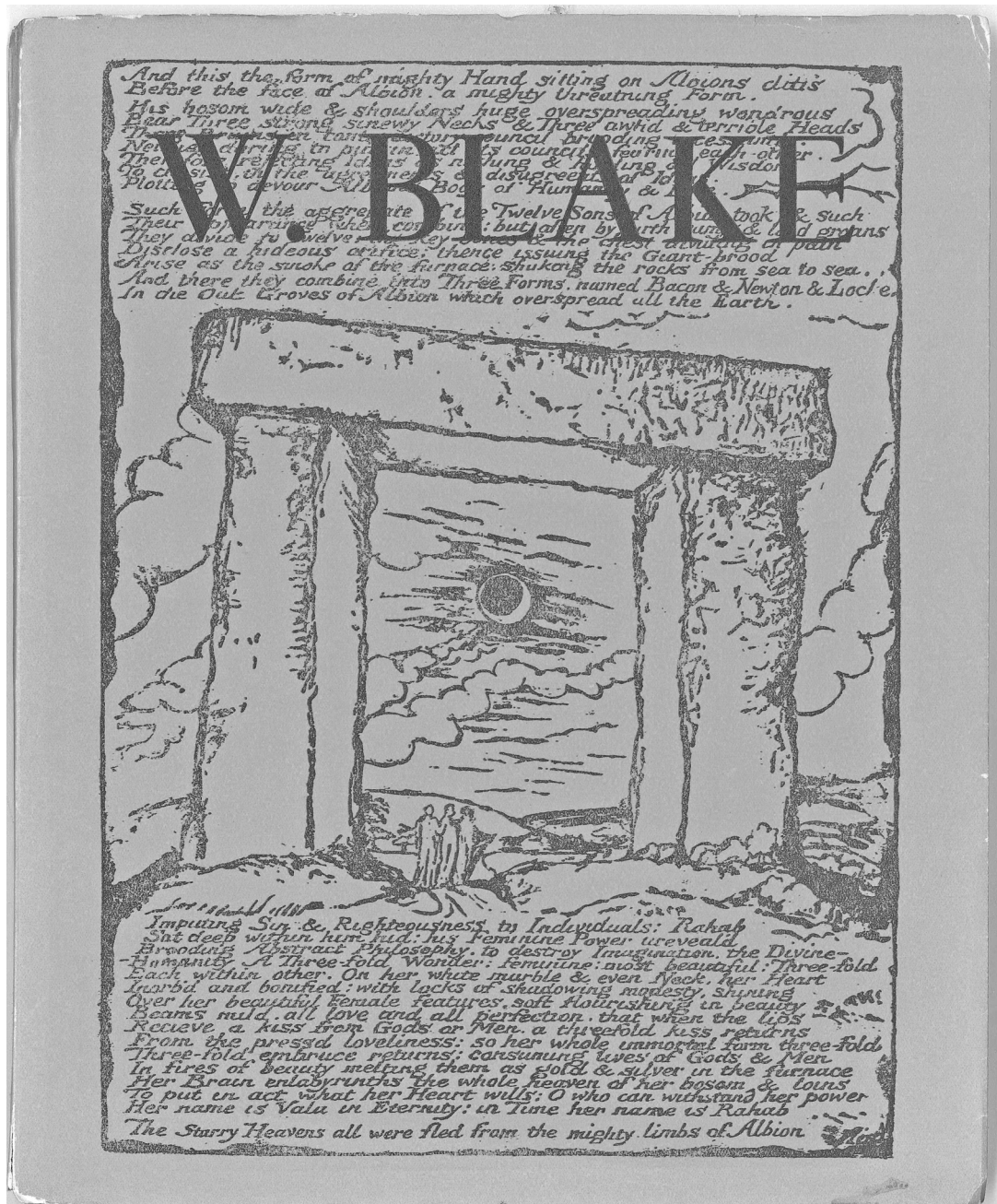


Figure 3.3 Cover-page of the 1947 Paris exhibition catalogue: William Blake 1757–1827, Paris, Galerie René Drouin (20 March–30 April 1947).

The monarchist critic André de Fouquières (1874–1959) shared this somewhat more positive opinion about Blake (Fouquières 1937), and the same went for the poet and literary critic Eugène Soubeyre (1937), but not for the writer and Catholic poet Paul Claudel (1868–1955), who visited the exhibition on 17 January and confided in his *Journal* that, compared to Turner, Blake was ‘grotesque’ (Claudel 1969, 179). Such a harsh statement was all the more surprising as Claudel had previously read Blake and had aired more positive judgements (Roberto 1977, 62). The exhibition then moved

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to Vienna, where it was shown at the Albertina museum in March and April 1937, under the title *Ausstellung von englischen Graphiken und Aquarellen W. Blake und J. M. W. Turner* (Exhibition of English Graphic Arts and Watercolours by W. Blake and J. M. W. Turner).<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, much was to be expected of the 1947 exhibition. It was hosted by Galerie René Drouin, a Parisian art gallery specializing in modern and contemporary art. This exhibition did not originate from a French initiative, but was organized by the British Council. The 'British Committee for Relations with Other Countries' was founded in the British Foreign Office in 1934, and granted a royal charter by George VI in 1940. It aimed to develop a British cultural agenda in foreign countries, by means of conferences, exhibitions and publications, and this Blake exhibition took on a special dimension when the British Council was focusing on continental Europe and engaging in the reconstruction efforts. The Blake retrospective remained in Paris in March–April 1947 and, as it was the first stage of a tour, the exhibition then moved to Antwerp, in Belgium, to the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts (11 May–7 June),<sup>50</sup> then to Switzerland, to Kunsthaus Zürich (20 July–20 August),<sup>51</sup> finally reaching London and the Tate Gallery (20 August–30 September). According to the catalogue, a reduced version went to the Fogg Museum of Art in Harvard (1 October–30 November). The original idea for it came from Great Britain, and so did the choice of art works, made by a committee including British Museum director Sir Eric MacLagan (1879–1951), British scholar Sir Geoffrey Keynes and British art historians Archibald G. B. Russell (1879–1955) and Sir John Rothenstein (1901–1992). Art works came from the Tate Gallery, but also from private collections (those of HM the King of England, Mr and Mrs Esmond Morse, Sir Edward Marsh, Graham Robertson, etc.). The originality of the exhibition was that French intellectuals greatly contributed to its success. If the exhibition was, to all intents and purposes, the same as in Antwerp and Zurich, the French catalogue, compared to those of Antwerp or London, which are similar both in size and content, really stood out (Gide and others, 1947). It was a deluxe 2000-copy book with collotype colour plates, containing the same essays as the other catalogues, written by the British organizers. But in addition to the 'Introduction' by Eric MacLagan (11), the essay 'William Blake' by Russell (25–28) and the 'Bibliography' by Keynes (39–42), all taken from the English-language catalogue and translated by Simone Boisecq (1922–2012, a sculptor and friend of Gide's) the French catalogue was enriched with essays by French intellectuals.

Gide's 'Présentation' (13) is a ten-line text comparing 'l'astre Blake' (Blake the star) to Lautréamont, both seen as poets of 'evil' ('maléfique'). Soupault's three-page essay 'William Blake: Poète et graveur' (Poet and engraver, 15–17) analyses Blake as a 'poète inspiré' ('inspired poet', 15) whose life enlightens his works. In Soupault's terms, Blake's unity lies in his aspiration towards the sublime.<sup>52</sup> Blake is described as an isolated, naïve

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<sup>49</sup>See Sibylle Erle's Chapter 11.

<sup>50</sup>See Franca Bellars's Chapter 4.

<sup>51</sup>See Angela Esterhammer's Chapter 12.

<sup>52</sup>'L'unité d'esprit de Blake, qui se manifeste dans ses poèmes et dans ses gravures, se résume dans l'aspiration au sublime' (Gide and others, 1947, 16).

artist (15) whose life ends in his contempt for mankind (17). More interestingly, Soupault presents Blake studies as a work in progress.<sup>53</sup> Philosopher Jean Wahl (1888–1974), who taught in the USA during World War II, wrote ‘William Blake: Païen: Chrétien et Mystique’ (William Blake: Heathen: Christian and mystic, 19–23). Wahl is the only writer in this catalogue to quote abundantly from Blake’s poems to underline the artist’s critique of reason and science, his fascination for the infinite, his contempt for inspiration and his vision of the French Revolution. Blake is compared to Rimbaud and Nietzsche or a ‘Dante révolté’ (‘rebellious Dante’), a priest on the path towards wisdom (23).

Moreover, a French committee supported this supremely important exhibition, with prestigious members including major names in literature (Bataille, Breton, Camus, Malraux, Queneau, Sartre) and in art (Léger, Matisse, Picasso, Rouault). For the first time, Blake’s art was lionized, and, thanks to the catalogue, colour reproductions of his work circulated in France. This allowed it to be better known among a new generation of intellectuals and translators who, in the following years, were to tackle Blake’s poetry and art from innovative angles.

The 1947 exhibition superseded previous attempts at making Blake more popular in France and was a major landmark in his reception. There was a huge critical response to it, in France as well as in Great Britain, and in *L’Actualité littéraire* (Literary news), this interesting statement can be read:

William Blake can be seen [...] as a discovery of our time. He was never really forgotten, but maybe it is only now that he is beginning to be better understood. It is a curious fact that, in all likelihood, the interest shown in Blake by certain French circles helped the English to esteem him as they should.<sup>54</sup>

Significantly enough, it was also in 1947 that Jean-Louis Curtis published his previously mentioned novel, *Les Forêts de la nuit* (Forests of the night, Curtis 1947), and that Pierre-Louis Matthey made a new translation of *Songs*, published in Switzerland (Blake 1947a). The ‘Proverbs of Hell’ were again translated, this time by an anonymous author (Blake 1949). The authors of the exhibition catalogue also benefited from this keen interest in Blake. For instance, Gide’s translation was republished (Blake 1947b), and, the year after, Wahl published an essay on poetry with a chapter on Blake (Wahl 1948). Finally, French intellectuals, especially the most Anglophile among them, repeatedly showed signs of a particular interest in Blake’s personality and poetry. Such is the case with the novelist, André Maurois, whose real name was Émile Herzog (1885–1967). Maurois was one of the most famous people displaying an intellectual Anglomania

<sup>53</sup>‘Toutes les études publiées à ce jour aussi bien sur le poète que sur le graveur, et bien qu’elles soient signées des plus grands noms, bien qu’elles aient été l’œuvre d’érudits remarquables et de critique d’une finesse à toute épreuve, ne sont que des travaux d’approche’ (Gide and others, 1947, 17).

<sup>54</sup>‘William Blake peut passer, lui aussi, pour une découverte de notre époque. Il n’a jamais été vraiment oublié, mais peut-être ne commence-t-il que maintenant à être mieux compris. Il est curieux de noter que l’intérêt porté à Blake par certains milieux français a vraisemblablement aidé les Anglais à l’estimer à sa juste valeur’ (*L’Actualité littéraire* 1947, 31–35, 122).

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after the trenches of World War I, in which he had served as a sergeant and English interpreter for the French army. The author of *Études anglaises* (English studies, 1927), of *Histoire d'Angleterre* (History of England, 1937) and of major French-language biographies of several British writers such as Shelley (1923), Disraeli (1927), Byron (1930) and the Brownings (1957), he did not write a book about Blake, but the poet is indirectly present in his work. For instance, *Ariel, ou la vie de Shelley* (Ariel, or Shelley's life, 1923 [n.p.]) starts with an epigraph by Blake:

So I turn'd to the Garden of Love  
That so many sweet flowers bore.  
And I saw it was filled with graves. (SE 44: 7–9; E 26)

Again, in his *Mémoires* of 1942, he quotes Blake's 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom' (MMH 7; E 35, translated as 'La route de l'excès conduit au palais de la sagesse'), from *Marriage* (Maurois 1942, 280). In 1950, in the *Nouveaux discours du Docteur O'Grady* (Dr O'Grady's new discourses), Maurois's character Aurelle decides to write an imaginary fragment of a universal history supposedly published in 1992. In a mock-chapter about the influence of Freud upon morals in society, the reader can read the following paragraph:

An old prophet of the eighteenth century, William Blake, had already said: 'He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence . . . Qui désire, mais n'agit pas, engendre pestilence.' This pestilence takes the form of nervous diseases, madness, and above all a general feeling of *ennui*, pessimism and disquiet which was perhaps one of the true causes of the 1914 war.<sup>55</sup>

In the artistic field, the famous art historian Louis Réau (1881–1961) mentions in his 1949 book *L'Ère romantique* (The Romantic era) 'the drawings of William Blake (1757–1827), a mystical and visionary poet whose long-dismissed works are today highly desirable. His popularity is but a recent phenomenon.'<sup>56</sup> Réau was one of the first French authors to consider art history from an international perspective, although he had a monarchist, nationalist and Catholic bias. From the fifties onwards, Blake begins to be under the spotlight of academia, as can be seen, first, in the publication of Jacques Roos's PhD thesis treating the influence of Boehme and Swedenborg on various figures of Romanticism, including Blake (Roos 1951).

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<sup>55</sup>Un vieux prophète du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, William Blake, avait déjà dit: "He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence . . . Qui désire, mais n'agit pas, engendre pestilence." Cette pestilence prenait forme de maladies nerveuses, de folies, et surtout provoquait un sentiment général d'ennui, de pessimisme et d'inquiétude qui fut peut-être une des causes avérées de la guerre de 1914' (Maurois 1950, 274).

<sup>56</sup>les dessins de William Blake (1757–1827), poète mystique et visionnaire dont les œuvres, longtemps méconnues, sont aujourd'hui très recherchées. Sa popularité ne date que de nos jours' (Réau 1949, 49).

### Blake, a modern landmark in the academic field

After the 1947 exhibition, Blake's importance gathered momentum, and his work was chosen for analysis by the critic George Bataille (1897–1962) in a study of the relationship between literature and the representation of evil. In *La Littérature et le mal* (*Literature and Evil*), Bataille analyses the work of eight authors who explore the depths of evil. The chapter dedicated to Blake is the fourth one. He associates Blake with Emily Brontë and John Ford in a circle of authors concerned with what he calls 'the purity of evil' ('la pureté du mal', 1957, 59). Bataille starts by giving a short outline of Blake's life. The next part examines the relationship between poetry and religion in his work. Then, drawing from Carl Jung's theory and W. P. Wipcutt's psychological study of Blake, Bataille posits that Blake gave religion the freedom of poetry, and poetry the sovereign power of religion (64). After discussing Blake's mythology as seen from a Jungian perspective, the essay focuses on *Marriage*: emphasizing the violence of energy. Bataille praises Blake's stress on the senses and on cruelty, the two sides of his vision. The final part deals with Blake and the French Revolution, underlining once again Blake's indefatigable association with energy as an eternal delight.

In addition to some new translations (Blake 1965, trans. Stéphane Lamy and illus. Claude Weisbuch and Yves Charnay; Roche 1976, illus. Gérard Titus-Carmel; Blake 1976, trans. Anna Voggi and illus. Giovanna),<sup>57</sup> a number of essays were published in the 1960s; they all tried to make Blake better known to French readers. Rousselot's (1964) was the first of these. But the Centre du Romantisme Anglais, first in Clermont-Ferrand, then in Lyon, is the first and foremost institution in France which, single-handedly at first, contributed to make William Blake known and understood in French academia. Jacques Blondel (1910–1991), as the one-time director of the Centre, certainly prepared the way for the academic reappraisal of Blake in France. In his innovative study of 1968, he provides a pithy introduction to Blake's major themes which he explores mainly in *Songs*, *Marriage* and *Urizen*, doing so by alternating contextual information and close scrutiny of the poems. In addition to convening a number of conferences dealing with various aspects of the Romantic period in the 1960s and 1970s, he provided an annotated translation of *Four Zoas*, with an invaluable introduction (Blondel 1968). 1968 was indeed a fruitful year for France, as this is the same year in which Francis Léaud published another meaningful introduction to Blake, accessible for the French reader. In the introduction, Léaud presents the difficulty of reading Blake, as the poet creates his own system. Léaud criticizes the French sources about Blake that are available in France. He situates Blake in the English tradition, as he considers his relationship with the sublime, with art and other artists. After a biographical outline, inspired by the biographies of Gilchrist and Mona Wilson, he studies the first phase of Blake's output, which he calls 'the revolutionary poems': *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One*, *Songs*, *Marriage*, *America*, *Ahania*, *Thel*, until *Four Zoas* (1968, 61–86). Léaud identifies 1799 as

<sup>57</sup>'Giovanna' being the pseudonym used by Anna Voggi herself, as illustrator of her own translation.

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a watershed in Blake's work; it initiates the second and final phase. As he describes *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, he deals with the characters of Los and of various feminine figures. He continues with a presentation of 'The Everlasting Gospel', followed by a brief discussion of the relationship between evil and freedom in Blake. He dedicates a chapter to the symbolism of Blake, and he focuses on such subjects as the Fall, retraction, psychology and power, before assessing Blake's posterity. His presentation is followed by an anthology comprising excerpts in English of most of the poems alluded to in the first part. At the end of the volume there are eight plates, a list of symbolical terms and characters, and a bibliography of French and English books.

In the wake of these two important studies, Pierre Vitoux dedicates a few pages to introducing the main features of Blake's art in Great Britain, and he provides a large excerpt from *Marriage* as an illustration (Vitoux 1969, 111–14). Another general introduction was offered by Pierre Boutang (1916–1998), a poet and philosopher of the French extreme-right, a former disciple of Charles Maurras, a Catholic and a monarchist. His book (Boutang 1970), later republished in an amended version (Boutang 1990), takes the form of a personal translation of a number of Blake's best-known poems interspersed with his own comments. He starts by criticizing Gide's translations and interpretation of Blake, before providing close readings. Blake's religious stances are also discussed meticulously. Proceeding in chronological order, Boutang begins with *Thel*, and then studies *Songs* and *Marriage*, before dedicating the last two chapters to his analysis of *Urizen*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Boutang's thought-provoking analyses are as idiosyncratic and biased as they are sweeping and committed. But of more interest nowadays are the pages dedicated to the painting of William Blake by Jean-Jacques Mayoux (1901–1987). An all-round scholar who influenced generations of students and lecturers alike, Mayoux is still very influential and of great interest today. In a chapter about the English painters of the Romantic era, he shows the relationship of Blake's art with Henry Fuseli and John Flaxman. He also describes Blake's various techniques and visual symbols (Mayoux 1972, 210–22). Mayoux later returns to Blake, with an essay entitled 'William Blake, illuminé', a pun on 'mad' and 'illuminated' as both words are often applied to Blake. In this essay, Mayoux distinguishes two lines in Anglo-Saxon criticism: the critics who think that Blake is heir to a line of Gnostic, Kabbalistic and platonic traditions, and those who think that Blake created an idiosyncratic system. According to Mayoux, Blake is beyond this opposition: even when Blake is opposed to Swedenborg, he makes use of Swedenborg's symbolism. After *Marriage*, Mayoux studies *Europe*, *Thel* and the character of *Urizen*. Blake is a monist by instinct and by conviction, and this can be seen in the way he displays his cosmogony in his paintings and engravings (1981, 59–72). Another interesting article from the 1970s is that written by Max Duperray, who, starting with 'London' (from *Songs of Experience*), considers various facets of the English capital as represented in the poem: the city as hell, as society, as an echo, as a cancer, as an apocalypse. The character of the young prostitute evokes the similar character of De Quincey, who pictured his own vision of London in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). Duperray (1975) opposes two aspects of London: the realistic version would not exist in Blake's prophetic poem without its spiritual counterpart, endowing

the monstrous city with some sacredness. The relationship between Blake and London is expanded upon in Davreu's article (Davreu 1994).

In addition to Mayoux's book, the 1980s gave rise to a number of articles on Blake. First, Armand Himy studied a mytheme in Blake's great cosmology of creation, the 'sparagmos' or the act of tearing a body apart. Blake, inspired more prophetically than literally by various episodes in the Bible, saw the body as a microcosmic metonymy of the universe. The bodies of a number of characters, mainly in *Urizen* and *Four Zoas*, are anatomized against the background of a number of more ancient myths, such as those of Dionysus and Osiris (Himy 1983). The same year, Michel Baridon discussed the interpretative consequences of Blake's disagreement with Reynolds's conception of memory and creation (Baridon 1983). Surprisingly, the master of deconstruction Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) mentioned Blake in passing in an analysis of the German-speaking poet Paul Celan. Derrida dedicated one page to *Jerusalem* (calling it 'ce grand poème de la circoncision', 'that great poem about circumcision', 1986, 105) which displays, according to him, three types of revolutions: circumcision, circumscription and circumference. He quotes from plate 98 to support his case (1986, 105). Blake has decidedly become a fully fledged member of the academic syllabus in the English departments of France. He is part of the chapter covering the Romantic era in Françoise Grellet's ubiquitous textbook (1986). Two poems are given: 'The Little Black Boy' and 'The Chimney Sweeper' (from *Songs of Experience*), and they are put into perspective by a quotation from the 1804 preface of *Jerusalem* and several extracts from Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* (1947). In 1986 as well, in Jean Raimond's *La littérature anglaise* (English literature, 1986), part of the collection 'Que sais-je?' (What do I know?) published by the Presses Universitaires de France, the two-page section on Blake (at the very end of the chapter on pre-Romanticism, 60–61) insists on the revolutionary character of Blake's works, and on 'the metaphysical anxiety of man confronted with the existence of evil',<sup>58</sup> before concluding with these words: 'all in all, Blake is not so much the last pre-Romantic poet as the first great face of Romanticism.'<sup>59</sup> Danièle Chauvin's 'mythanalysis' of Blake's work (1992) is a mythocritical monograph in the line of critic Gilbert Durand's *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (The anthropological structures of the imaginary, 1960). Gilbert Durand writes a preface to the book in which he fully acknowledges his legacy. Chauvin studies the influence of the Book of Revelation (its images, its structure and its message) on Blake. This final book of the Bible invites the reader to ponder upon what reading means beyond appearances, and how meaning is gained through the process of reading not with but 'thro the eye' (from 'Auguries of Innocence'). The period also sees the rise of two major Blake specialists: Patrick Menneteau and François Piquet. Menneteau's articles situate Blake in relation to various thinkers or trends of thoughts of the eighteenth century (1985, 1990, 1992a and 1992b). Piquet concentrates on Blake's notions of the imagination (1971), on 'The Mental Traveller' (1980), the sacred (1982),

<sup>58</sup>L'angoisse métaphysique de l'homme confronté à l'existence du mal' (Raimond 1986, 61).

<sup>59</sup>'tout bien considéré, Blake est moins le dernier poète préromantique que la première grande figure du romantisme' (Raimond 1986, 61).

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and the intertext of *Jerusalem* (Piquet 1985). In the 1980s too, Henri Lemaître, a high school teacher in French literature and a translator, writes an essay entitled *William Blake: Vision et poésie* (William Blake: Vision and poetry, 1985) published by the José Corti press, a publishing house that supported the Surrealist writers and that had already published a few Blake translations, paving the way for a rediscovery of the early Romantics. Lemaître writes a 'spiritual biography' ('biographie spirituelle') of Blake and analyses the part played by vision in his poetic art. The translations that he provides are his own, using Geoffrey Keynes's 1960 edition of the complete poems. Outside of the academic world, Breton writer and philosopher Michel Le Bris (b. 1944) published a *Journal du Romantisme* (Journal of romanticism) in 1981, in which he devoted a chapter to 'Blake ou la Jérusalem intérieure' (Blake or the inner Jerusalem, 2002, 125–30), in stark contrast to the previous chapter dealing with ideal beauty in Winckelmann. As a token of its success, the journal was translated into five languages and republished with numerous enhancements in 2002 under the title *Le Défi romantique* (The romantic challenge). Le Bris envisages Romanticism (especially German Romanticism) as a locus where one can find a transcendence for the twenty-first century. As his quest is done without taking into account contemporary French academic research, his perspective is similar to questionings that could be found in the works of early twentieth-century authors. What can Blake teach the contemporary world? Le Bris is adamant: Blake was not a madman, only 'petty minds like Southey or Leigh Hunt' could make such a claim ('des petits esprits comme Southey ou Leigh Hunt', 2002, 130).<sup>60</sup> Blake was accurate in his poems as well as in his artistic work; he did not lose himself in a dream world; he was a visionary who was freed by his visions.

But an even greater period in Blake's reception in France was the second half of the 1990s. In France, there is a highly competitive exam to select future teachers, the *agrégation*, which students can sit after their MA. For the 1996 exam, the syllabus included *Songs of Innocence*, *Marriage*, *Urizen*, together with other classics of Anglophone literature, such as Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, to cite but three of the ten works. This gave rise to a great number of publications aimed at academics and students alike. The major reference book, or general introduction, to Blake's three books is François Piquet's *W. Blake: Songs of Innocence, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The Book of Urizen* (1995).

Piquet's book is a personal presentation of Blake's universe by one of the foremost French specialists on the subject. Providing a bibliography and a glossary, it offers in-depth analyses of Blake's myths and convictions. The first part, entitled 'Blake et la dynamique de l'esprit' (Blake and the dynamic of spirit), deals with the relationship between religion and creation. Piquet shows how Blake, starting from the Puritan tradition, departs from his background in order to invent his own religious figures. His idiosyncratic universe, as depicted in particular in *Marriage*, is based on contraries and evolves beyond good and evil. Following the lead of Canadian literary critic Northrop

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<sup>60</sup>Le Bris confuses apparently Robert Hunt, the author of the 1808 review of Blake's prints for Blair's *Grave* in the *Examiner*, with his brother Leigh.



Frye, he calls *Marriage* a Menippean satire in which energy, in the form of ‘Mental Fight’ (M I: 13; E 95), organizes innocence and experience. Piquet then offers close readings of poems taken from *Songs*, paying attention to Christian pastoral and quietist hymnology. He emphasizes that Blake never alludes to original sin (42), and that he hardly indulges in psychology as far as his personae are concerned. A particular significance is given to ‘A Poison Tree’ and its axiological consequences. Taken as a paradigm, the poem goes to show the demystifying function of most of the *Songs of Experience*. In the process, polysemous meanings resist being reduced to any final, specific allegory. The second part is entitled ‘Avatars et tribulations de l’énergie’ (Avatars and tribulations of energy, 67). It begins by exploring the motif of a lost Eden (the paradigm being Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and before that, the Book of Job) in *Songs*, *Marriage* and *Urizen*. It underlines Blake’s irony towards the Devil of *Marriage*, but also towards the reader; and the general fascinating power exerted by Satan over Blake (71). Piquet then studies the transmogrifications of Orc and his anger, compared to Urizen’s brazen attitude: Orc’s fettered energy breeds destructive violence. The following section traces the presence of the Book of Genesis in *Urizen*. Urizen’s achievement is creative and anti-creative at the same time, hovering between the sublime and the grotesque (84). The sublime is then felt in ‘The Tyger’: the poem contains a crisis of transcendence and the sublime (91), when the reader compares and contrasts the speaker and the image. The third part deals with various themes such as ‘Generation and Incarnation’ (97), ‘The prolific and the devourer’ (103), ‘The Father jealous of the Son’ (108), and ‘Los, the limit and apocalypse’ (110). The book ends with a glossary of the main figures of Blake’s universe. Soon after this very precise introduction to the main themes of Blake’s poetry, Piquet published in 1996 a rewriting of his doctoral thesis defended in 1981, *Blake et le sacré* (Blake and the sacred), and an essay on the Romantic poets (1997). The latter, organized thematically, aspires to be the French equivalent of Harold Bloom’s *The Visionary Company* (1961).

Another important volume for the *agrégation* is *William Blake: Des Chants d’innocence au Livre d’Urizen* (William Blake: From the Songs of Innocence to the book of Urizen, La Cassagnère 1996). The introduction, by Christian La Cassagnère (3–8), describes the twofold perspective followed by the volume: on the one hand, Blake’s ambiguous meaning-building process, on the other, the constant re-embodiment of energy under various guises and its entanglement with the sublime. Studying the elaboration of meaning in *Songs*, Danièle Chauvin (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Fearful or deceitful symmetry?*, 9–22) maps the network of echoes and ironies in the volume. Jean-Marie Fournier, in the chapter ‘Le sens en question: quelques lectures de “The Little Black Boy”’ (The meaning in question: some readings of ‘The Little Black Boy’, 23–36), shows the contradictory readings of one poem that may occur; whereas Marie-Jeanne Ortemann’s ‘La pastorale selon Blake’ (The pastoral according to Blake, 37–52), follows, through the affiliation of some of the *Songs* to the pastoral genre, the negotiation, and its transgression, of the pact with the reader. Following the second axis, Denis Bonnacase in ‘Énergie, prophétie, mises en scène de l’écriture dans *Marriage*’ (Energy, prophecy, and dramatizations of writing in *Marriage*, 53–82) studies the twofold dimension of energy in the poem: apocalypse and powerful display, on the one hand; on the other, creation in

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the making and inspiration springing from the hidden infernal sources of energy. Piquet in 'Blake et le corps' (Blake and the body, 1996, 83–104), offers an anatomy of Blake's energy as it takes place in the body, with a particular focus on the artist's hand. Energy in the body suffers many creative contradictions. La Cassagnère, 'William Blake, la force et la forme' (William Blake, strength and form, 1996, 105–21), reads *Urizen* as a myth of the speaking subject whose speech is caught between alienation (embodied in the figure of Urizen) and creation (embodied in the figure of Los). In this poem, energy is inscribed in time and space with finite and infinite dimensions at the same time.

The *agrégation* stimulated a number of articles. Marc Porée tackled the 'Proverbs of Hell'. His article considered the interplay of sounds and numbers in the phrasing of the proverbs, their assertive and figurative qualities, so as to show, in Shakespeare's words, that 'brevity is the soul of wit' ([see *Hamlet* II: 2] 1995, 48.4: 395–406). Jennifer Keith focused on the polysemous aspect of 'feet' in *Milton* (Keith 1995). Michael Phillips studied the relation between Blake and the society of the Loyal Britons (1997). Patrick Menneteau is a leading French academic who has dedicated his life to researching Blake and has published a wealth of material. Among it, let us mention *La Folie dans la poésie de William Blake: Reflets des enjeux gnoséologiques de la critique littéraire* (Madness in William Blake's poetry: Aspects of gnoséological questions in literary criticism, 1999b). Menneteau's dense study of madness in the Blake corpus argues that a great thematic coherence emerges from his work. After demonstrating the extent to which Blake's views may provide a criticism of the Age of Enlightenment, Menneteau suggests that the poet offers original ways to perceive the contemporary world. His various articles range from the detailed study of a specific poem ('Infant Sorrow', 1996b) to a Jungian analysis of Blake's perception of Christ as the Comforter (2007). They also include the use of allegory in a quest for truth (1995c), a Blakean definition of knowledge (1996), the interconnectedness of the concepts of life, form and light (1999c), a reflection on Blake's use of various genres as a stimulus against any type of routine thinking, and a study of Blake's prophetic voice (2000). As a final consequence of this Big Bang in Blake studies in France, let us mention the work of Hélène Ibata. Ibata tackles the aesthetic dimension of Blake's work, with articles on his relationship with other artists such as Reynolds (1995) and Fuseli (1997). She has also studied the composition of Blake's illuminated books (1999) and has written further articles on Blake's relationship with the sublime (2010, 2011, 2015).

The catalogue of the SUDOC, or University System of Documentation,<sup>61</sup> indicates that, at the turn of the century, Blake was the focus of a number of doctoral dissertations. Annick Johnson defended her thesis entitled 'Kathleen Raine: poésie et transcendance' (Kathleen Raine: Poetry and transcendence) in 1992. It was followed by Ibata's 'William Blake: l'invention d'une esthétique' (William Blake: The invention of an aesthetic) in 1998, Joseph Denize's 'L'imagination créatrice chez William Blake et James Joyce' (Creative imagination in William Blake and James Joyce) in 2001 and Claire Bouchet's 'Les métaphores dans la poésie de William Blake: enjeux de traduction' (Translating

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<sup>61</sup>See <<http://www.sudoc.abes.fr/>> [accessed 18 November 2017].

metaphors in William Blake's poetry) in 2004. Blake is also studied outside English departments: in the art and archeology section, he was one of the subjects of Pierre Wat's thesis, 'Un jeu sérieux: La théorie de l'imitation dans les écrits des artistes romantiques allemands et anglais' (A serious game: The theory of imitation in the writings of German and English romantic artists, 1996). Wat's thesis was initially published in 1998 and then expanded and republished in 2013. Within a study dedicated to the theoretical sources of German and British Romanticism, Blake is perceived as one of the leading actors in an impossible-to-define 'Romantic' art, which is characterized by its refusals and its subversions. For the first time in French reflections on art history, Blake is seen not as the subversive actor in a positive phenomenon, but as the positive actor in a subversive phenomenon. For Wat, the visual creations of Blake are inseparable from his poetry and his work must be studied as a whole. All of Blake's work is a theoretical and intellectual construction which contributes to the very definition of Romanticism in Great Britain and Germany, together with Goethe's, Carl Gustav Carus's or Caspar David Friedrich's writings, produced over the same years (Wat 2013, 28–29). Blake also forms part of Gabrielle de Lassus's PhD thesis in art history, 'La figure mariale dans les arts en Angleterre au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle' (The figure of Mary in nineteenth-century arts in England, 2013) while further Blake-related doctorates are currently being written in France.

Another indication of Blake's presence in French culture is the inclusion of a selection of his poems in the prestigious Pléiade collection, *Anthologie bilingue de la poésie anglaise* (A bilingual anthology of English poetry, Bensimon, Brugière, Piquet and Rémy 2005). This shows that at the beginning of the twenty-first century Blake is considered a central figure of British poetry. The poems chosen for this bilingual anthology are the following ones: 'Mad Song' (from *Poetical Sketches*); 'Introduction', 'Holy Thursday' (from *Songs of Innocence*); 'Introduction', 'Earth's Answer', 'The Clod and the Pebble', 'A Poison Tree', 'London', 'The Tyger', 'The Human Abstract', 'The Sick Rose', 'Infant Sorrow', 'To Tirzah' (from *Songs of Experience*) and 'Proverbs of Hell'. Each poem is given in English and faces Leyris's French translation of it. A few notes are added to explain topical references or less apparent meanings. The 'Notice' (on p. 1774) by Piquet offers a pithy overview of Blake's life and work: going beyond the volumes from which the selection is taken, Piquet puts Blake's entire work into perspective. The 'Notice' is followed by a very brief bibliography containing two editions of Blake's work, the translation of Leyris and five analytical books, including Léaud and Piquet's own *Blake et le sacré*.

The academician and professor at the prestigious Collège de France Michael Edwards (b. 1938) discusses several aspects of Blake in his 2006 essay on the genius of English poetry, the topic of his lectures in the Paris institute. He focuses on the hymn-like quality of some of the poems in *Songs* and on the Blakean imagination, insisting on the poet's eccentricity and sense of the moment while offering a number of close readings. In the 2000s, Menneteau gave radio lectures on Blake and madness (2001), Blake as a mystical poet (2003) and Blake's cosmology (2010), as well as a general introduction for the French public (2006). Still present in popular French textbooks, Blake's *Songs* are presented by Tholoniai (2008).

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But at the apex of the decade is undoubtedly the 2009 Blake exhibition in the Petit Palais in Paris. The exhibition, which took place between 2 April and 28 June, was accompanied by a catalogue (Phillips 2009). It offered three groups of chapters, which on the whole were quite short (seldom more than three pages, with the notable exceptions of those by Bonnefoy and Phillips), and which alternated with many reproductions of Blake's paintings and etchings. The first group was concerned with various patterns or motifs found in Blake's work. The second group dealt with the context of Blake's creation: the historical context, Blake's family and his social circle. The third group traced the posthumous fortunes and reception of Blake's work. Accompanying this, a conference was organized by a member of the Centre du Romantisme Anglais, Professor Jean-Marie Fournier, the founder of the SERA (Société d'Étude du Romantisme Anglais, the Society for English Romantic studies). Entitled 'Blake Intempestif/Unruly Blake', it gave birth to a volume bearing the same title in 2010. The essays tackled the visual and poetic aspects of Blake's work, dealing with the poems of *Songs* and with Blake's graphic techniques (Fournier and Gérard 2010). Another offshoot of the exhibition was the collection of essays edited by Bonnefoy (2013). It contains essays tracing the influences on Blake's painting from the Middle Ages onwards.

Recently, together with Menneteau and Ibata's articles, La Cassagnère ('The Voice of the Child: Language and Desire in Blake's *Songs* and *The Book of Urizen*', 2010) deals with the 'Giant forms' in *Urizen*. Written from a Lacanian perspective, it addresses the problem of the gap between language and the reality of desire, starting with the figure of the child as it evolves from *Songs of Innocence* into *Songs of Experience*. The Blakean myth is thus constructed in the very 'place in the north', that paradoxical locus exemplified by the 'Book' itself, where signifying forms can turn into inscriptions of unsignifiable desire. Sophie Laniel-Musitelli (2015) puts Blake into perspective in her study of the representation of genesis.

As far as biographies are concerned, French readers have been able to access some limited information since the 1960s thanks to Léaud (1968), but recently two new biographies have been published. Relying mainly but not solely on Léaud, Bataille and Peter Ackroyd, Christine Jordis (2014) provides a biographical essay in which she argues the case for the modernity of Blake. This book is a general introduction to the life and ideas of Blake, but of more interest and breadth is the biography by Armand Himy (2008). This is intended as 'the analysis of the poet's work' ('l'analyse du travail du poète', 19), and it provides a wealth of quotations, close readings and interpretations of Blake's most difficult poems.

Finally, in the recent years, new translations have appeared on a regular basis, continuing Pierre Leyris's *oeuvre*. The most interesting one is bilingual, and is the achievement of poet Alain Suied (1951–2008), who translated *Songs of Innocence* (Blake 1992), *Songs of Experience* (Blake 2002) and *Marriage* (Blake 2004). An untimely death put an end to his work. The format of these translations enables them to reach a wider audience than the hefty volumes of the Leyris edition. The idea of 'mad Blake' also made its way into French popular culture through the success of American films such as *Dead Man* (1995), *Red Dragon* (2002), the TV series *The Mentalist* (2008–15), where 'The Tyger' plays an important part, or Dan Brown's last thriller novel, *Origin* (2017).

## Blake, art, music and pop culture in France

From the 1970s onwards, Blake's presence has spread into French culture. He has become a familiar reference for intellectuals and poets. Indeed, when poet Jean-Paul Michel (b. 1948) founded his own publishing house in the field of poetry and aesthetic studies in 1975, he called it 'William Blake & Co.'. In 1984, the Brazilian artist Marcelo Lima (b. 1952) published three lithographs entitled *Hommage à William Blake* (A Homage to William Blake) in the Aux Enfants de la Balle press in France. In 1988, Jean Cortot (b. 1925), painter, illustrator and member of the French Institut des Beaux-Arts, began working on a 32-panel work entitled *Eloge de William Blake* (In praise of William Blake, 1988–89; Phillips 2009, 206). Blake has even entered French pop culture. In 1973, a song called 'Blake' was written by Etienne Roda-Gil (1941–2004) for Mort Schuman's album *Voilà comment* (That's how). The song was at the time banned from the radio, as its theme of brothels, together with the translation of one of Blake's aphorisms from *Marriage*: 'Prisons are built with stones of law, Brothels with bricks of religion' (*MHH* 8: 21; E 36), was judged provocative and anarchistic:

Je sors de ces endroits avec l'âme chagrine  
 Comme un vieux suicidé qui remonte juste à flot  
 La mine triste et terne des demeures marines  
 Le bronzage moisi du vieux soleil de l'or  
 Ce sont des artifices de langage  
 Pour dire lentement de façon compliquée ce qu'en une seule phrase  
 Le vieux Blake disait  
 Les pierres de la loi font les murs des prisons  
 Les bordels sont bâtis des briques de la religion.<sup>62</sup>

Esteve (his real name) Roda-Gil was a French dialogue-writer and songwriter. He was the son of a Spanish Republican, and had left-wing convictions which made him welcome Blake's poetry, as many intellectuals in the 1970s did, travelling the path opened by the Surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s.

Three years later, in 1976, the French film *Le Corps de mon ennemi* (My foe's body) by Henri Verneuil (born Achod Malakian, 1920–2002), an adaptation of a novel by Félicien Marceau, quotes Blake at the very end when we see the body of Jean-Baptiste Beaumont-Liégeard (played by Bernard Blier) murdered on Di Massa's (François Perrot) order. The quotation, in French, is taken from Pierre Leyris's translation of 'A Poison Tree': 'In the morning glad I see; / My foe outstretched beneath the tree'

<sup>62</sup>I leave these places with a sorrowful soul / As an old drowned man just coming back up to the surface. / The sad and dull appearance of the marine abode, / The mouldy tan of the old sun of gold, / These are skills of language, / To slowly state, in a complicated way, what in a single sentence / Old Blake said: / Prisons are built with stones of law, / Brothels with bricks of religion.' Our translation. Blake's lines are rendered in an original verse translation by Roda-Gil (our transcript).

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(‘au matin je vis avec joie mon ennemi gisant sous l’arbre’, *SE* 28: 15–16; *E* 28). Perhaps the life of Verneuil, whose family escaped death in the Armenian genocide, endows this quotation with a more personal meaning. More recently, readings of Blake’s poems, in French translation, together with musical arrangements, have been organized, for example in 2010 by the Compagnie HorriPeaux. A new translation of *TheL* by Marion Magat was read in a café-théâtre in Brioude (Haute-Loire), with ‘sound illustrations’ (‘illustrations sonores’) by Francis Grallon. Resulting from her translation, a book with a CD was published the same year, with illustrations by an anonymous artist using the alias ‘Chokko I<sup>er</sup>’.<sup>63</sup> Another company, Commissaire Juve, has performed readings of poems by Blake, accompanied by music (bass and guitar). In music, French rock singer Rodolphe Burger (b. 1957) sings Blake’s poem *Little Vagabond* (in English) in his 1998 album *Meteor Show*, and French translations and adaptations of Blake’s poems were performed in 2012 by Anglo-French singer Emily Loizeau (b. 1975). Loizeau, who is the granddaughter of British actress Peggy Ashcroft (*A Passage to India*), discovered Blake as a child thanks to her grandmother. Five songs out of fifteen in her album *Mothers & Tygers* are taken from Blake’s *Songs of Experience*.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that Blake became known in France as an artist from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, but only two retrospectives of Blake’s works have ever been organized in Paris, one in 1947, the other in 2009. This suggests that if his work as a graphic artist is well known, his paintings and drawings are not, except by art historians, and by writers or artists who have visited the British collections. One must realize that there is only one original watercolour by Blake in a French public collection, as in 2006 the Louvre purchased for 1.5 million dollars ‘Death of the Strong Wicked Man’, one of Blake’s nineteen designs for Blair’s *Grave*.<sup>64</sup> No other watercolour or drawing by Blake is kept in a French museum. But it is also clear that a general acquaintance with Blake’s poetic and visual productions has increased greatly since the 1920s. His best-known works (*Marriage* and *Songs*) have been repeatedly translated since the 1920s, mainly by French writers and poets (including Gide, Soupault and Daniel-Rops),<sup>65</sup> who have all tried to claim him for their own: *fin de siècle*, Surrealism, Catholicism, Modernism. Surprisingly enough, Blake the revolutionary was particularly famous among Catholic, monarchist and Maurassien writers and thinkers, who felt a fascination for the mystic and visionary intensity of his work – indeed, French

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<sup>63</sup>*Le Livre de TheL*, coll. ‘Tremulante’, 2010 (52 pp. and 1 CD).

<sup>64</sup>In 1805, publisher Robert H. Cromek asked Blake for forty watercolours to illustrate Blair’s *Grave*. Twelve were engraved by Luigi Schiavonetti. A set of nineteen watercolours was rediscovered in 2001, and sold. The Louvre purchased one.

<sup>65</sup>With a few exceptions, such as Pierre Berger, an academic, or Pierre Messiaen, a high school teacher and professional translator (he translated Shakespeare’s plays), the great majority of those who translated Blake into French have been poets and men of letters.

commentators (mostly outside university circles) tend to favour 'Blake the mystic' over 'Blake the revolutionary'.

In the academic field, he is now extensively studied, and the vision of his work has been renewed since 1925 when Pierre Berger published this anthology of British pre-Romantic writers. At the time, the publisher's advertising banner stated:

Read this book, and you'll know all about:  
YOUNG, the poet of melancholy;  
OSSIAN, dear to the Romantics,  
BURNS, the funny and humane Scotsman,  
BLAKE, the odd visionary,  
GRAY, the enthusiastic and moving lyricist  
In their most original and most difficult to find works.

Indeed, it is striking that Blake offers for French readers a radically different view of Romanticism, very different from that of Hugo or Delacroix. In French historiography he has been associated with a dark, Gothic conception of Romanticism, more characteristic of Germany and Great Britain, and not at all reminiscent of David's neoclassicism or French art. Such a conception evolves today as original artists ('French Blakes', almost) are being reappraised. Among them, let us mention in literature Antonin Artaud, and in the artistic field the 'bearded men' ('Barbus') in David's workshop (Soubigou 2013), Victor Hugo's spiritually inspired drawings, Odilon Redon (1840–1916) and above all Théophile Bra (1797–1863), a sculptor and author of an esoteric diary illustrated by many drawings (Marchesseau 2007).

Finally, Blake is now part of French pop culture. At the end of this chapter, we would like to quote Loizeau's adaptation of Blake's 'The Garden of Love', recalling at the same time what Verhaeren wrote in 1889 about Blake, in the French review *Art moderne*: 'On the whole, [he was] a strange, original, powerful artist, whose disappearance and oblivion we cannot understand.'<sup>66</sup> Today, if Blake is not familiar to everyone in France, he has certainly not 'disappeared', nor is he 'forgotten': he is truly part of the cultural background of everyone who is interested both in poetry and the graphic arts.

I went to the Garden of Love.  
And saw what I never had seen:  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.<sup>67</sup>  
Oh my garden!

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<sup>66</sup>'Somme toute, artiste curieux, original, puissant, dont on ne s'explique pas l'effacement et l'oubli' (Verhaeren 1889, 198).

<sup>67</sup>See *SE* 44: 1–4; E 26.

## The Reception of William Blake in Europe

J'ai flâné sous les pommiers,  
J'y ai vu une chose inconnue:  
Une chapelle levée là où je jouais,  
Dans le pré, avec toi à chat perché.  
J'ai frappé sur les portes closes  
Mais personne ne m'a jamais répondu.  
Une tombe avait pris la place d'un pommier  
Juste là, près de la haie de rosiers.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Emily Loizeau (2012) 'The Garden of Love', in *Mothers and Tygers*, Polydor-Universal, track 2 (our transcript). The final verses, in French, may be translated as follows: 'I strolled along under the apple trees, / There, I saw something unknown: / A chapel built there, where I used to play tag, / With you, in the meadow. / I knocked on closed doors / But nobody ever answered me. / A grave took the place of an apple tree / Right there, near the rosebushes.'



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