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COLLEGE BOOKS

Ballad Opera—Edmond M. Gagey: *From Richardson to Pinero*, by Frederick S. Boas; *William Blake's Circle of Destiny*, by Milton O. Percival—Columbia University Press.

In these three volumes, Columbia University Press has performed three different functions in the service of letters. The first is a scientific record of the appearance and wane of a literary genre. The second preserves the random essays of a well-known professor of English literature. The third book is a much-needed interpretation and clarification of Blake's prophetic works.

Modern scientific scholarship has set forth to clear up every patch of every field in English literature. It has taken literally the injunction of Horace: *Noli negligendi minores*. And modern science itself has decreed that all phenomena, both of Man and Nature must be investigated in the spirit of totalitarian democracy. Mr. Gagey has made his contribution in what seems to be a definitive work on the ballad opera, from its inauguration in 1728, by John Gay with his "incomparable Beggar's Opera," to the decline of the ballad opera in the middle of the century. In addition to an account of each text, Mr. Gagey has, in many places, interwoven his narrative with some details of stage history. The book is a pedestrian tour through a confusing region of theatrical history, and the author guides his reader over a carefully chosen and well defined trail. But no amount of patient effort in collecting and classifying the plays of the "sing-song" tradition will yield a "theatre of ideas." These semi-librettos in every case except *The Beggar's Opera* are utterly ruthless in sacrificing sense to sound. Mr. Gagey, therefore, shows both his modesty as a man and his judgment as a scholar by omitting, at the conclusion of his exposition, any chapter of critical appraisal of his findings.

In looking over his uncollected essays which extend from Richardson to Pinero, Professor Boas is pleased to find

that all treat of innovators and idealists. Certainly some of his subjects have little else in common: "Richardson's Novels and their Influence"; "Wordsworth's Patriotic Poems and their Significance Today"; "Edmund Kean in his Heroic Parts"; "Roberts Browning's *Paracelsus*, 1835-1935"; "Tennyson and the Arthurian Legend"; "Matthew Arnold in his Lyric Verse"; and finally "Sir Arthur Pinero: Dramatist and Stage-Chronicler." Obviously, the book is a means of bringing together single essays which Professor Boas has written at different times on various figures of the last two centuries.

The clear style and graceful selectivity which mark the work of this widely known authority on English literature makes him truly "a specialist in historic delight." The collection recommends itself to the casual but discriminating reader who likes a short siesta on the higher slopes of Parnassus, and also to the more serious student of letters who wishes a pleasant review of certain portions of a familiar field.

William Blake is a prince of the mind. This "mad dreamer," whose prophetic books were formerly regarded as confused and unintelligible, is not a wild, eccentric thinker at all, but one who has a very definite and very logical system. This schematism of his is an explanation of the forces of the universe, an interpretation of the problem of evil, and a philosophy of universal history.

Professor Milton O. Percival arrives at this estimate of Blake as a thinker by collating his prophetic writings with his paintings and his drawings. Surprisingly enough, when these elements, literary and pictorial, are brought together, the result is not a collection of brilliant fragments or a phantasmagoria of a frenzied genius, but a traditional system. Blake, in his prophetic visions, is the culmination of the great tradition of heterodoxy "extending over nearly twenty-five hundred years."

Blake first became a master of the strangest of all strange lore. Into his mind went the Orphic and Pythagorean tradition, Neo-platonism, and the Hermetic, Gnostic,

and alchemical writings, and finally the doctrines of Paracelsus, Boehme, and Swedenborg. Blake applied what had become for him a unified system of thinking to the Bible. The result is a uniform cosmography, a cycle of human destiny. The past, the present, the future are not three points in a straight line. On the contrary, Existence consists of various cycles which start with the good, go into a moral decline, swing down and around to depravity, and then upward to a point where a nobler cycle of humanity may begin. History repeats itself, but the new orbit may be upward or downward according to whether or not mankind's thought is right.

This book by Professor Percival is scholarly, philosophical, and stimulating. It leaves the reader pondering over some of Blake's thoughts which seem applicable and mentally useful today:

God only acts and is in existing beings or men.

The good life must be built, by faith or experience, upon the qualities of imagination. To attempt to build it on the qualities of reason and sense is to reduce god-like man to a handful of dust.

The teacher who is working to emancipate his charges from the debasing forces of naturalistic fatalism and economic determinism—the two types of thinking which have started our cycle of civilization today on a downward and disastrous course—finds that he and this eighteenth-century prophet have a common cause:

... I rest not from my great task,
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal
Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into
Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human
Imagination.

DANE FARNSWORTH SMITH.