



## Biografie rivisitate Il caso Yeats-Ellis

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### Abstract

After collaborating on *The Works of William Blake. Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical* (1893), William Butler Yeats and Edwin John Ellis individually published additional volumes on William Blake. These editions trace the contours of each editor's unique approach to William Blake's works, revealing a fascinating tension between mysticism and scholarship. The apparent clash of their perspectives not only influenced the selection and interpretation of Blake's poetry, but also interestingly shaped their biographies of Blake. The current essay looks at Yeats and Ellis' distinct authorial intent, taking their biographies of Blake as case studies to outline the growing controversy between the two editors. This divergence highlights the multifaceted nature of Blake's legacy and the ongoing debate on the most appropriate lens through which to view his life and work.

**Keywords:** Biographies, Editions, E.J. Ellis, W.B. Yeats, William Blake

### Premessa

Almeno tre sono stati gli studi pubblicati nel diciannovesimo secolo che, secondo William Butler Yeats e Edwin John Ellis,<sup>1</sup> hanno avuto il merito di conferire attenzione e valore al pensiero e all'opera letteraria e pittorica di William Blake.<sup>2</sup> Il primo, *Life of*

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of William Blake Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical, edited with lithographs of the illustrated 'Prophetic Books', and a memoir and interpretation by Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats*, d'ora in poi indicata con la sigla WWB.

<sup>2</sup> Tra le altre edizioni del XIX secolo vale la pena ricordare anche quella curata da Benjamin Heath Malkin, *A Father's Memoirs of his Child* (1806), che commissiona a Blake la progettazione del frontespizio di questo volume, commemorativo del proprio figlio maggiore, Thomas. L'introduzione è la prima descrizione della giovinezza di Blake e porta all'attenzione del pubblico alcune delle *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. In *The Lives of the most eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1829-33), Allan Cunningham dedica alla vita del poeta e alla pubblicazione di alcune *Songs* circa 45 pagine. Nel 1839 James

*William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus." With Selections from His Poems and Other Writings*, esce a Londra nel 1863 a cura di Alexander Gilchrist. Composto da un primo volume dedicato a una biografia del poeta e da un secondo che ne offre una rassegna delle opere in versi e in prosa, arricchito da un'appendice che raccoglie una selezione di dipinti e incisioni, questo compendio, incompleto a causa della prematura morte di Gilchrist nel 1861, viene ultimato dalla moglie Anne – come lei stessa spiega nella "Preface" –, con l'aiuto di Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "who edited the Selections in Volume II", e di William Michael Rossetti, "who compiled the catalogue *raisonnée* in the Appendix"<sup>3</sup> (una seconda edizione sarebbe uscita nel 1880). A distanza di cinque anni, nel 1868, Algernon Charles Swinburne consegna al noto bibliofilo ed editore londinese John Camden Hotten, il suo *William Blake. A Critical Essay*, opera in tre volumi ricordata in particolare per l'edizione di una parte dei *Prophetic Books*,<sup>4</sup> oltre che per una seconda *Life of Blake* e per la sezione dedicata ai *Lyrical Poems*. Nel 1874 vedono la luce i *Poetical Works of William Blake, Lyrical and Miscellaneous* (la cosiddetta Aldine Edition) di William Michael Rossetti, con una *prefatory memoir* dello stesso Rossetti, pubblicati a Londra da George Bell and Sons.<sup>5</sup>

"Mr. Swinburne, Mr. Gilchrist, and the brothers, Dante and William Rossetti, deserve well of literature for having brought Blake into the light of day and made his name known throughout the length and breadth of England": con queste parole, poste in apertura alla loro edizione congiunta delle opere di Blake, W.B. Yeats ed E.J. Ellis riconoscono inequivocabilmente il valore della produzione critica dei colleghi, non esitando tuttavia a sottolinearne le lacune, soprattutto in relazione all'omissione di alcuni materiali inediti, "including the then unpublished 'Vala' [Blake first name for 'The Four Zoas']" (1893, viii).

Publicata a Londra nel 1893, in 500 copie regolari e 150 copie in un formato più grande ed elegante,<sup>6</sup> *The Works of William Blake Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical* rappresenta in effetti

J.G. Wilkinson consegna alle stampe una nuova edizione dal titolo *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Shewing the two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. A Dante Gabriel Rossetti si deve quindi, intorno al 1850, la trascrizione e rilegatura del *Notebook* blakiano, conosciuto come Rossetti MS e, in particolare, come riporta la nota che precede la trascrizione, di "Tutto ciò che ha un qualche valore" nel *Notebook*. La trascrizione contiene una vasta selezione dei testi manoscritti di Blake, con importanti interventi da parte di Rossetti sui materiali originali. Nel 1874 escono *The Poems of William Blake. Comprising Songs of Innocence and of Experience, together with Poetical Sketches, and some copyright poems not in any other edition*, curati da Richard Herne Shepherd e pubblicati in seconda edizione nel 1887 (l'opera era presente nella Biblioteca di Yeats [cfr. O'Shea 1985] ed è stata probabilmente da lui consultata durante la stesura delle varie edizioni blakiane); e, nel 1893, le *Selections from the Writings of William Blake* con un saggio introduttivo di Lawrence Housman.

<sup>3</sup> Sulle integrazioni di William Michael Rossetti nelle edizioni 1863 e 1880 di Gilchrist, si vedano le biografie di Keynes (*A Bibliography of William Blake*, 1921), Bentley e Nurmi (*A Blake Bibliography*, 1964), e Deborah Dorfman (*Blake in the Nineteenth Century*, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Comprende: *Book of Thel, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Visions of the Daughters of Albion, America, Europe, The First Book of Urizen, The Book of Ahania, The Song of Los, Milton, Jerusalem, The Ghost of Abel*; mentre risultano assenti: *Tiriel, Book of Los, Vala or the Four Zoas*.

<sup>5</sup> W.M. Rossetti stesso ci consegna un resoconto dettagliato sulle origini della sua edizione all'interno del proprio diario "Mr. Bell, of the publishing firm, called on me at Som. Ho., & agreed to the terms set forth under 8 May 1872 regarding an edition of Blake's poems in his Aldine series. He wd. like the introductory notice to be only about 32 to 48 pp., 6 & the arrangement of the poems mainly chronological. The Prophetic Books wd. not be included: I think however an exception must be made in favour at any rate of the Marriage of Heaven & Hell, if only for the sake of making the vol. of a moderately substantial thickness ... (6 August 1873)" (MS. Diary, Angeli Papers, Special Collections, University of British Columbia, cit. tratta da Peattie 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Per l'edizione critica Yeats non riceve alcuna remunerazione, se non trenta copie dell'opera in questo secondo formato. Alla sua richiesta di poter ricevere almeno "half profits", la risposta da parte di Bernard Quaritch appare categorica: "No young man. This would be robbery. I would send you nothing for six months, and then a bill for extra expenses" (Yeats a Maud Gonnet, 6 settembre 1928; Yeats 2002, 5158).

la prima edizione che porta all'attenzione del grande pubblico il manoscritto fino ad allora inedito di *Vala or The Four Zoas*, e un'analisi del sistema simbolico blakiano, con particolare riferimento ai "Prophetic Books" (WWB I, 235-420) e ai "mystical writings" (cf. WWB 2, 3-301), tranciando così il *fil rouge* di una tradizione che, risentendo del potente influsso della critica precedente, tendeva ad ignorarne l'apparato mistico e simbolico<sup>7</sup>.

Esemplare in tale senso risulta ancora oggi il diario di William Michael Rossetti, conservato nelle Special Collections della University of British Columbia, in cui egli ricorda due visite – la prima ricevuta solo da Yeats l'11 settembre del 1890 e la seconda, il 13 aprile 1891, da Yeats e da Ellis –, probabilmente finalizzate ad un confronto sull'annosa questione del misticismo blakiano:

Yeats the young Irish Poet (to whom I was introduced some while ago at a Shelley meeting) left a card the other day noting that he wd. like to speak to me on some Blake matters, as he is now writing on that subject. I explained that we are in the confusion of moving, & suggested that he might perhaps as well call at Somer. Ho. He did so today, & we had a longish talk. He is certainly a very acute & bright-minded young man. He & one of the Ellis (Philological) family are engaged in producing a complete edition of B's Prophetic Books &c., with comment expounding his philosophical or speculative system—wh. Y. regards as being founded very mainly on Boehme. This matter was glanced at in an article by York Powell (I was reading it the other evg.), introductory to the "Book of Los" lately discovered. Tho' I have not as yet been disposed to regard B's Jerusalem &c. as capable of more than a moderate amount of reasoned explanation, I see, from what Y. says, that there is a good deal to be adduced & expounded from his point of view. What he more particulary. wanted from me was to trace out the Book of Ahania, & The French Revolution. He says they are not in the British Museum. My impression is that is where I read them (in 1862): I shall probably, as I look into the matter, be able to give Y. some little further informn. as to details. I referred Y. to that passage in my Memoir of B. in wh. I indicate the affiliation of his theology to that of Marcion: Y. seems as yet not to have fixed his attention on this passage, but he will now give some practical study to the question. (11 settembre 1890)

Yeats, & his colleague in the project of reediting Blake . . . called on me at Somers. Ho. Their undertaking has now reached an advanced stage. They showed me one of the Prophetic Books reprinted in a quasi-facsimile. I think—& told them so—that I regard this as a decided mistake. One cannot read with any comfort a book in any such sort of fancy-type: besides the cost of the edition, both to projectors and to purchasers must thus become beyond all bounds of reason. (13 aprile 1891)<sup>8</sup>

A distanza di 10 anni, in un passo inedito tratto dalla propria autobiografia (scritta tra il 1901 e il 1903), Rossetti confessa di non essersi neppure avvicinato all'edizione Quaritch, palesando la propria perplessità nei confronti non dell'opera poetica e pittorica di Blake quanto del suo apparato mistico-simbolico, da cui deriva la quasi totale assenza di riferimenti e analisi nei suoi *Poetical Works*:

I know most of what has been written about Blake, but have not investigated the elaborate study of his works by Messrs. Ellis & Yeats in their edition of a few years ago. I had a little speech with them on

<sup>7</sup> Una scelta, quella di non includere il manoscritto inedito di *Vala* nelle proprie edizioni, che denoterebbe dunque, secondo Yeats ed Ellis, una profonda incompienza del sistema simbolico di Blake e del suo stesso metodo di scrittura. Nel 1893 Yeats accompagna la pubblicazione di WWB con una definizione di Rossetti come "a man of exceptional ability and high literary standing, who happens not to be in sympathy with Blake's method of writing" (WWB I, 54-55).

<sup>8</sup> W.M. Rossetti, "William Michael Rossetti MS Diary", University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

this subject, & learned that they regarded Blake's religious or quasi-religious utterances, usually counted to be chaotic, as cosmical in essence, & in detail interpretable. I presume that this view is to some valid extent justified by their commentary; yet cannot bring myself to think that Blake was in these matters a constructive thinker or an orderly expositor. My impression continues as heretofore—that, while he was a great genius in two arts, there was also a maniacal side to his intellect. Needless to say that he was not a madman pure & simple: but he was a creative inventor whose ideas & utterances struggled beyond the limits of sanity. This view may be erroneous: it is the one to which my studies of Blake's works have led me. ("Some Reminiscences", Bodley MS. Eng. Misc. d. 331, fol. 214, cit. tratta da Peattie 1978)

Sulla scia di questa consolidata tendenza a considerare la visione mistico-religiosa di Blake come espressione di una personalità maniacale, anche "a causa dell'ardua costruzione simbolico-esoterica nella quale personaggi ed eventi mitici afferivano a una cosmogonia riflessa nella segreta trama della storia umana" (Serpieri in Antonielli 2008, 14), l'edizione Quaritch viene accolta dalla critica dell'epoca con numerose riserve. La notevole attenzione che Yeats e Ellis rivolgono ai *Libri profetici*, la limitata affidabilità delle fonti da loro consultate (espressione di una ricerca scientifica apparentemente superficiale e sommaria) e, soprattutto, le sezioni dedicate alla vita del poeta e all'analisi del simbolismo, caratterizzate da un chiaro intento di conferire un'aura di occultismo e magia molto cara a Yeats, sono soltanto alcune delle critiche rivolte a WWB, che hanno parzialmente compromesso il lungo lavoro non solo editoriale ma anche interpretativo dei due curatori.<sup>9</sup>

Il 16 febbraio del 1893, nell'articolo "A Guide to Blake", la *Westminster Gazette* decreta: "Rosicrucians, and Kabbalists, and Hermetical Brothers may have the very truth, the pearl of price....mysterious airs and allusive hints are not the way to win anyone over to anything; and if some readers should pronounce much of this book to be humbug and charlatanry, or delusion and lunacy, they would be wrong indeed, but not without excuse for their mistake" (Yeats 1986, 355, n. 2). Leggermente più indulgente la recensione apparsa su *The Speaker*, circa due mesi dopo, dal titolo evocativo "Two Mystics on Blake" (15 aprile 1893), nella quale l'anonimo autore elogia Yeats ed Ellis per il loro impegno nel rendere, come spiega John Kelly in nota alla propria edizione delle *Collected Letters*, "much of hitherto obscure poetry intelligible", e nel dimostrare che "Blake's tedious allegories are often based fundamentally on deep conceptions, [...]" (Yeats 1986, 355, n. 2). Ancora nel 1905, in *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, il curatore John Sampson parla addirittura di un "somewhat confusing arrangement of the Poems [that] may perhaps be due to the editors' scheme of interpretation" e, continua, "These editors, in expounding Blake's system, lay claim to special knowledge 'produced by the evocations of symbolic magic' (i. 288 and *passim*); and some of their remarks (e.g. ii. 299) would seem to suggest their belief that the possession of these occult powers enables them to produce a text through which Blake's mind is reflected more accurately than in the MSS. left by himself" (Blake 1905, XXVIII).

### 1. *Le biografie di Blake a cura di W.B. Yeats e di E.J. Ellis*

Tra la fine del XIX secolo e l'inizio del XX secolo, Ellis e Yeats consegnano alle stampe nuove biografie e analisi delle opere blakiane, separatamente.

Verso la metà di febbraio del 1893, subito dopo l'uscita di WWB (alla fine di gennaio), Yeats pubblica la prima delle due edizioni dei *Poems of William Blake* nella Collana "The Muses' Library", per Lawrence and Bullen, con una "nuova" vita di Blake, ovvero quella che potrebbe

<sup>9</sup> Per approfondimenti si vedano Adams 1968, 7; Antonielli 2009, 199-200.

essere stata la base per la biografia già inclusa nell'edizione Quaritch e successivamente rivista da Ellis. In questa circostanza, Yeats decide di rivolgersi ancora una volta al suo storico collega e co-curatore, chiedendogli una revisione del lavoro. Le conseguenze di tale richiesta emergono chiaramente in una lettera, nella quale Yeats non solo rimprovera Ellis per i numerosi errori interpretativi, ma anche per un approccio poco corretto, che aveva già avuto modo di osservare durante la stesura di WWB:

[W]hen I came to read for the first time your amendations to 'Edward III' I was surprised at their number. I half sympathize with Bullen. They are quite in their place in the big book for the library like our 'Works of William Blake' which being so expensive would come into no one's who had not already... some other & literal Blake. In a 5 [shilling] edition however they would lead to a feeling of unrest in the readers mind (he having probably no other Blake). In any case Bullen's objection that the reviewer would be scandalized held good. The reason I was so disgusted at your bringing them direct to him was that I had already corrected the printed version (I sent in the amended text from the big book to save time) restoring the original version & had intended... to forward your proof sheet which I was expecting every day & my own with it, About the text. I think you will see that it is fair & justifies the text in the small book without being unjust to the text in big book. (NLI 30,550; "[after 16 February 1893]", Yeats 1986, 352-53)

Gli interventi di Ellis nell'edizione indipendente di Yeats, per "The Muses' Library", descritte in questa lettera del 1893, chiariscono in parte le ragioni delle loro varie divergenze in termini di emendamenti e approcci. Come giustamente evidenzia Chapman, "The revised galley sheets of the "small book" of Blake's poems show that Yeats generally stood by the texts of Blake's Notebook ("the MS book"), which had been introduced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, with alterations and additions, to Alexander Gilchrist's *The Life of William Blake* [...] and adopted by W. M. Rossetti in *The Poetical Works of William Blake, Lyrical and Miscellaneous* (the Aldine Edition, 1890 [...])". Non solo, le aggiunte e i commenti di Yeats alle bozze evidenziano anche il suo impegno nel rimanere fedele e coerente rispetto al *magnum opus* curato con Ellis, "Yeats did, on the whole, exercise restraint in treating diplomatically his reversion to the Blake texts of 'the MS book' " (Ellis e Yeats 2014, xvii), in contrasto quindi con l'inclinazione di Ellis a emendare Blake oltre l'esempio dell'edizione Aldine.<sup>10</sup>

La seconda edizione yeatsiana dei *Poems of William Blake* edita nel giugno 1905 da George Routledge a Londra e da E.P. Dutton a New York, presenta una nuova introduzione, riveduta, ma con evidenti riferimenti alla precedente; un'edizione alla quale Ellis sembra rispondere nel 1906, con un'opera in due volumi dal titolo *The Poetical Works of William Blake* e, di nuovo, nel 1907, con *The Real Blake: A Portrait Biography*, sempre per Chatto and Windus.

Infine, nel 1910, George Routledge pubblica di nuovo la seconda edizione dei *Poems of William Blake* a cura di Yeats, in una collana diversa e con un nuovo titolo: *Mr William Butler Yeats introduces the Poetical Works of William Blake, born in 1757, died in 1827, as the Second Volume in the Series of "Books that marked Epochs" published in the year 1910 by George Routledge & Sons, Limited*.

Il percorso intrapreso separatamente da Yeats ed Ellis, con queste edizioni, denota un chiaro intento autoriale, ovvero di rivendicare l'autorevolezza delle rispettive analisi dei componimenti

<sup>10</sup> "This restoration has had to be made in the notes[,] however[,] in one or two instances owing to a certain number of pages having been posted <by mistake> before Mr Ellis copy of the MS book [?that] the editor arranged. The restorations are not always to the advantage of the poems though in some cases they certainly are. It is possible that future editors may prefer a middle text between the present literal one & Mr. Rossetti's much modified one" (NLI 30,289).



blakiani, talvolta ricorrendo anche ad elementi paratestuali come i titoli stessi. Interessante, in tale senso, è quello scelto da Ellis per *The Real Blake. A Portrait Biography*, con cui dichiara la finalità dell'opera: offrire al grande pubblico “un ritratto biografico” *autentico* di Blake, sottendendo che tutte le precedenti edizioni, compresa quella curata con Yeats, non siano riuscite a rivelare il vero volto del poeta. Su questa scia si colloca la successiva pubblicazione yeatsiana per i tipi di George Routledge, a distanza di cinque anni dalla precedente, e con un nuovo titolo che sembra volere enfatizzare la propria *funzione autoriale* di “presentatore” delle opere poetiche di Blake: *Mr William Butler Yeats introduces the Poetical Works of William Blake [...]*. La disputa assume infine toni quasi stravaganti con *The Poetical Works of William Blake* del 1906, in cui Ellis, in una nota all'interno del primo volume (“How the ‘Poetical Sketches’ Are Edited Here”), menziona i *Poems* yeatsiani omettendone deliberatamente il titolo e definendolo come “a cheap volume by Lawrence and Bullen”, con un intenzionale refuso lasciato nientemeno che nel nome stesso dell'illustre curatore:

“Fair Elenor”...and the remaining poems of this group are exactly reproduced from “Poetical Sketches” as printed in 1783, with the exception of the Edward III., in which there are a few verbal emendations—none at all in the first speeches. The incorrect text of the original edition is exactly reproduced without emendation or comment in the selections from Blake published in a cheap volume by Lawrence and Bullen, with Introduction by Mr. J. B. Yeats [*sic*]. (WBGYL 218 [YL 211], 60)<sup>11</sup>

In questa edizione del 1906, Ellis sostiene inoltre di avere superato i colleghi W.M. Rossetti e W.B. Yeats nella loro abilità di decifrare i componimenti blakiani, non mancando di giustificare le proprie modalità di emendamento rispetto a quelle yeatsiane.<sup>12</sup>

Per capire le ragioni di questa crescente controversia tra i due curatori – culminata, come già accennato e come vedremo in modo più dettagliato con le edizioni successive a WWB –, dedicheremo particolare attenzione ad alcune loro rivisitazioni della biografia di Blake che, a partire dalla versione manoscritta di WWB, ne delineano i contorni e le finalità.

## 2. Da *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic and Critical* a *The Poems of William Blake* e *The Real Blake* attraverso il Manoscritto 293

La prima versione della “Memoir”, conservata all'interno dei *folders* 2-15 del MS 293/2/2,<sup>13</sup> in cui compare con il titolo “William Blake”, consente di distinguere le parti attribuibili alla mano di Yeats, poi in parte confluite nei *Poems of Blake* yeatsiani, dalle altre che presentano invece integrazioni o eliminazioni ad opera di Ellis, nel manoscritto stesso, e dopo ammesse nella versione edita di WWB e nelle successive pubblicazioni ellisiane. Le ulteriori vite di Blake, rielaborate da Yeats nelle edizioni del 1905 e del 1910 dei *Poems*, e da Ellis, in particolare nell'edizione del 1907, gettano parzialmente luce sulle ragioni e gli argomenti di una competizione che si è parzialmente configurata in forma di rivisitazione dello stesso materiale biografico.

<sup>11</sup> *The W.B. and George Yeats Library: A Short-Title Catalog, 1986-2006* (2006), qui abbreviato in “WBGYL”.

<sup>12</sup> Nelle note a *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Ellis fa riferimento a un componimento di Blake senza titolo che lui chiama “The Chain of Deceit”: “The first two stanzas only of this have been printed by Mr. Yeats, who calls it ‘Freedom and Captivity.’ It is almost illegible. The present editor reads the difficult and obscure words somewhat differently from Mr. Yeats and from Mr. Rossetti, though even now he has no absolute certainty that the words *love inclined* in the first line of the last verse, and *cruel is when most* in the second, are really Blake’s” (1906, 97).

<sup>13</sup> Conservato presso la Biblioteca dell'Università di Reading, il MS 293 è stato pubblicato per la prima volta in edizione anastatica con trascrizione nel 2016, insieme ai manoscritti conservati presso la Biblioteca Nazionale di Dublino (NLI MS 30,289 e 30,534). Il manoscritto dell'edizione Quaritch è stato analizzato in Antonielli e Nixon (2016).

Fino dalle prime pagine della “Preface”, Yeats ed Ellis anticipano il metodo adottato nella redazione della biografia e la natura della loro collaborazione,<sup>14</sup> fornendo informazioni sui dati già noti e descrivendo l’assistenza ricevuta durante la compilazione. Per quanto attiene il materiale biografico, dichiarano che

The biographical matter has been added to considerably, the greater part of the space being given to hitherto unpublished facts, while some twenty or thirty pages are condensations of the story as told in the accounts of Blake’s life which have already been given to the world. (WWB I, x)

Il 14 novembre 1899, nella copia del volume posseduto da Lady Gregory, Yeats annota infatti che il canovaccio per la vita di Blake, utilizzato nell’edizione Quaritch, sarebbe stata una biografia da lui già scritta e successivamente inclusa nei *Poems* (1893):

I wrote a life of Blake about as long as any life of him in the Muses Library Book, an account of The Symbolic system as a whole, & a short interpretative argument of each prophetic book. Ellis expanded, or rather completely rewrote the life into its present form; he accepted with some additions & modifications the chapter on the symbolic system, & expanded the short arguments to ten times their original length; & wrote a number of the chapters [...]. (Yeats 1997, 469)

Pochi mesi più tardi, quasi a conferma della precedente postilla, troviamo il seguente commento a margine della propria copia personale:

The writing of this book is mainly Ellis’s, the thinking is as much mine as his. The biography is by him. He rewrote and trebled in size a biography of mine. The greater part of the ‘symbolic system’ is my writing; [yet] the rest of the book was written by Ellis working over short accounts of the books by me, except in the case of the [section called] ‘literary period’[,] the account of the minor poems, & the account of Blake’s art theories[,] which are all his [that is, Ellis]’ own except in so far as we discussed everything together. (WBGYL 227)

È quindi presumibile, come già accennato, che la prima versione della biografia di Blake sia stata quella scritta da Yeats per “The Muses Library”, da lui stesso riportata seppure non fedelmente nella versione manoscritta di WWB, sulla quale Ellis avrebbe lavorato, ampliandola e riscrivendola per l’Edizione Quaritch.

All’interno del Manoscritto 293, conservato presso la Biblioteca di Reading, la sezione dedicata alla biografia del poeta copre un totale di 62 folia conservati in 13 *folders*, dal numero 2 al numero 15. Gran parte del materiale contenuto nelle 13 cartelle corrisponde, in parte (alcuni *folia* risultano ad oggi dispersi), alle pagine della “Memoir” pubblicate nel secondo capitolo del primo volume dell’edizione Quaritch.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> “The fellow labourers have not worked hand in hand, but rather have been like sportsmen who pursue the game on different tracks and in the evening divide their spoils. Each has learned in this way that the other was indispensable. The result is not two different views of Blake, so much as one view, reached by two opposite methods of study, worked out in order to satisfy two different forms of mental enjoyment” (WWB, x).

<sup>15</sup> Come anticipato, l’edizione del 1893 dal titolo *Works of William Blake* si compone di tre volumi. Il primo, che segue la “Preface”, è costituito dai capitoli “Memoir”, “Literary Period” e “The Symbolic System”, per un totale di oltre 400 pagine. Il terzo capitolo del primo volume, “The Literary Period,” corrisponde almeno in parte ai folia 16-27 del Folder 16, mentre il quarto capitolo del primo volume di WWB, intitolato “The Symbolic System”, si trova nei Folders 18-21 del manoscritto, per un totale di ventisei folia. Il secondo volume di WWB è formato da tre capitoli. Il primo, “Interpretation and Paraphrased Commentary,” rimanda ai folders 22 e 24-35 del manoscritto. Gli ultimi due capitoli del secondo volume di WWB, “Blake the Artist” e “Some References,” non risultano invece ascrivibili ai

Con le sue 172 pagine per un totale di 20 capitoli, la “Memoir” è l’unica sezione, scrivono Yeats ed Ellis nella “Preface”, per la quale si sono avvalsi di aiuto esterno: “Except in connection with the Memoir, very little assistance was to be had from outside” (x). Il registro adottato dai due curatori per la stesura della biografia si avvicina, sia a livello formale che contenutistico, ad una rivisitazione in chiave romanzata dei principali eventi biografici del poeta inglese. Conquistati dalla tentazione di riportare episodi inediti sulla vita di Blake, di taglio talvolta sensazionalistico, Ellis e Yeats si sarebbero avvalsi di fonti non sempre attendibili, mentre soltanto 20-30 pagine della loro biografia riporterebbero fatti noti al grande pubblico:

Even from the first, however, his story is full of incident which has value in assisting the interpretation of his mystical writings. The tale has been told more than once, but the present memoir, slight as it is, contains here and there matter not hitherto published, and the whole narrative is arranged and considered for the first time with an interpretative as well as a biographical intention. (WWB I, 2)

Una storia densa di episodi il cui valore, a detta di Yeats ed Ellis,<sup>16</sup> sarebbe dunque fondamentale ai fini dell’interpretazione del misticismo blakiano, palesando un intento non soltanto di ricostruzione letteraria della sua vita ma anche, proprio a partire da quest’ultima, interpretativo, sebbene, aggiungano i due curatori, “A satisfactory and complete narrative has yet to be written, if all that is now known be set forth at its natural length. But this may well wait. Fresh material comes in from time to time, and now that readers are relieved of their discouraging inability to prove that they are not studying the life or works of a madman, it is probable that much will be done in the near future” (WWB I, x-xi).

La “Memoir” (WWB I) compare con il titolo “Life of Blake” nella prima versione manoscritta dell’indice dell’intero volume (conservata nel Folder 1 del MS 293/2/2 di Reading) e semplicemente “William Blake” (Folder 2, folio 1) all’interno del testo manoscritto, quale risultato di tre emendamenti a partire dal titolo originario “The Events of the Life of William Blake”, barrato e sostituito con “A critical Memoir of William Blake,” fino ad arrivare all’ultima versione di cui sopra.

Scritte con la calligrafia grande e irregolare, quasi sprecisa, di Yeats, le prime pagine della “Memoir” corrispondono quasi specularmente ai primi due *folia* del MS 293/2/2, ma richiamano anche le prime pagine dei *Poems* (1893), sebbene gli argomenti trattati seguano talvolta un ordine diverso.

La biografia compilata da Yeats nella prima edizione dei *Poems*, all’interno della “Introduction”, tratta il tema delle influenze swedenborgiane, rintracciabili nel pensiero dei membri della famiglia del poeta già a partire dalla seconda pagina. Nella versione manoscritta e in quella pubblicata in WWB, i curatori manifestano fin dall’inizio della loro narrazione un particolare interesse per l’anno di nascita di Blake, poiché è l’anno in cui Emmanuel Swe-

due corpora manoscritti rinvenuti a Reading e a Dublino. Analogamente, non vi sono tracce né all’interno del MS 293 né dei NLI MS 30,289 e 30,534, del terzo volume di WWB dal titolo “The books”, che presenta l’edizione dei *Poetical Sketches*, delle *Songs*, dei *Gates of Paradise*, le poesie ricavate dal *Pickering MS*, il *Notebook*, le note alle prime poesie, *Tiriel*, *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, le *Lambeth Prophecies*, il *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Theb*, *Jerusalem*, e *Milton*.

<sup>16</sup> Anche G.E. Bentley Jr., nella sua edizione delle opere blakiane, sottolinea come le loro eccentricità siano comunque surclassate da importanti risultati. In riferimento al primo volume, scrive: “a good deal of new information and interpretation, particularly in the “Memoir” (1-172), and “The Symbolic System” (235-420) was far more ambitious than had ever been attempted before. The “Interpretation and Paraphrased Commentary” in Volume II (3-301) attempted to deal with Blake’s works comprehensively and systematically, as had not previously been thought possible or feasible, and the section on “Blake the Artist” (vol. II, 305-403) deals with an often neglected side of his work” (Bentley 1979, 8).



denborg (1688-1772)<sup>17</sup> avrebbe predetto l'inizio di una nuova era che si sarebbe compiuta con la fine della Chiesa cristiana ("the old theologies", *Poems*; "The old theological Christian Church", MS 293; "The Christian Church, WWB) e l'avvento di una "nuova" Chiesa ("the new Jerusalem", *Poems*; "the true religion of | identity & imagination", MS 293; "A new church", WWB). La famiglia di Blake è presentata nei *Poems* come "rifugio" delle teorie di Swedenborg essendo, queste ultime, un *leit motif* delle serate trascorse tra le mura domestiche. Le tre versioni convergono quindi verso un argomento comune, introdotto linguisticamente dai termini "profezia" e "illuminazione", sebbene soltanto il MS 293 e WWB riportino le parole esatte della profezia swedenborgiana: "A new heaven is begun, [...], and it is now thirty-three years since its advent" (WWB I, 2):

### THE POEMS 1893, xvi

This family grew up among ideas less conventional than might be looked for in the house of a small shopkeeper. Swedenborgianism was then creeping into England, and the hosier's shop was one of the places where it had found shelter. The prophecies and visions of the new illumination were doubtless a very common subject of talk about the tea-table at night, and must have found ready welcome from William Blake. One prophecy certainly did sink into his mind. Swedenborg had said that the old world ended, and the new began, in the year 1757. Swedenborg had said that the old world ended, and the new began, in the year 1757. From that day forward the old theologies were rolled up like a scroll, and the new Jerusalem come upon the earth. How often this prophecy concerning the year of his birth may have rung in the ears of William Blake we know not; but certainly it could hardly have done other than ring there, when his strange gift began to develop and fill the darkness with shadowy faces and the green meadows with phantom footsteps.

### MS 293/2/2, F. 2, ff. 1-2

In the year 1757 according | to the illumination of Emanuel | Swedenborg a new age of the | world began. The old theological | Christian Church ^ was from that year | out was to be on the wane, & a new | dispensation wherein "externals" & | "internals", outer observance & interior | impulse , were [?were] ^ should be one, hence forth | crescent ^ was to grow in its place. Dogmatic Christiani[?ty] | as I read & as ^ if Blake read this ^ Swedenborg [s] | Apocalypse unveiled ^ correctly was to give | place to the true religion of | identity & imagination. The | old heavens were already, in the | spiritual world, rolled away like | a scroll & a new heaven & a | new earth ^ had come into being. In time || they would the new state ^ of things | was to would spread also to the world of | men, for revolutions of thought | like marriages are made in | heaven. The prophesy has | not been left unfulfilled. | Religious ^ feeling has become a | portion of ^ general culture instead | of a sectarian instinct & the | old law of ^ hard mechanical | restraints of law ^ of the old are already partly superseded ^ giving place | in the best minds [th?] by the | more | merge gentle, if really more | exacting rule ^ demands of the high ideal belonging to habits of refinement | & imagination

<sup>17</sup> Per eventuali approfondimenti sull'influenza del pensiero swedenborgiano sull'opera di William Blake e W.B. Yeats, si vedano D. Erdman, "Blake's Early Swedenborgianism: A Twentieth-Century Legend" (1953, 247-257); C. Garret, "Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England" (1984, 67-81); H.F. Bellin, Darrell Ruhl, eds. *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition Is True Friendship* (1985); M.K. Schuchard, "The Secret Masonic History of Blake's Swedenborg Society" (1992, 40-50); "Yeats and the Unknown Superiors: Swedenborg, Falk, and Cagliostro," (1995, 114-68); "Why Mrs. Blake cried: Blake, Swedenborg, and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision" (2000, 45-93); *Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Stuart Culture* (2002); J.S. Rose, S. Shortwell and M.L. Bertucci, eds, *Scribe of Heaven: Swedenborg's Life, Work and Impact*, (2005); F. Tatham, *The Letters of William Blake* (2007). Per le trascrizioni delle annotazioni swedenborgiane di Blake, a opera di Ellis e Yeats, si veda il capitolo 12 ("The Notes to Swedenborg") di *The Real Blake: A Portrait Biography* (Ellis 1907).

Blake | ~~held~~ <sup>believed</sup> himself <sup>to be</sup> as set apart | by nature & <sup>marked out</sup> by his birth in | the year 1757 as <sup>before all things the</sup> poet of | this new rule. “A new heaven,” | <sup>he writes in 1790</sup> | <sup>ha[?s]</sup> “is begun, & it is now thirty | three years [?since] since its advent” | he is to write in 1790 in “The Marriage | of Heaven & Hell”

## WWB I, 1-2

In the year 1757, according to Emanuel Swedenborg, a new age of the world began. The divine description of the kingdom of heaven as “within you” was to become more true than before by reason of a greater influx of spiritual light. The Christian Church as known and constituted externally was to begin to pass away. A new church was to take its place, and at last the exclamation of Moses, “Would that all the Lord’s children were prophets!” was to become a prayer fulfilled. Swedenborg’s prediction has undoubtedly received, and is still receiving, something of actuality from the general growth of that influence of mind over personality and conduct which is characteristic of the present century. William Blake, born in the year 1757, and brought up under the influence of Swedenborgian ideas, looked on himself as before all things the poet of the age that was to begin in that year. He saw in himself the chosen teacher of the Rule of the Free Imagination. “A new heaven is begun,” he writes in 1790, “and it is now thirty-three years since its advent”.

In *The Real Blake*, Ellis si allontana dalla prospettiva profetica adottata nell’edizione Quaritch e nei *Poems* yeatsiani, presentando la figura del mistico svedese soltanto a p. 11 della biografia, ma non in riferimento a William Blake, bensì a suo padre, James: “One account of Mr. Blake the hosier tells us that he was a dissenter. [...] he was one of a much smaller minority than any group of Evangelists or Methodists: he was a Swedenborgian”, per poi aggiungere: “Swedenborg, of course, was a visionary, a man to whom angels appeared”. È interessante notare come la narrazione di Ellis si concentri principalmente sulla figura del padre e sulla sua disapprovazione per alcune inclinazioni del giovane William; inclinazioni che appaiono ai suoi occhi come evidenti emulazioni delle visioni swedenborgiane, senza alcun riferimento alla profezia: “A father may accept Swedenborgianism, however, without being in the least inclined to admit that, because Swedenborg’ angels told him divine truth from vision, a little boy may start up in his own family and claim to do the same thing” (11).

A differenza del MS 293 e di WWB, l’introduzione di Yeats ai *Poems* si apre con alcuni paragrafi dedicati alle ipotetiche origini irlandesi di Blake. Questo tema è particolarmente caro a Yeats e lo ritroviamo sia nel manoscritto 293, a partire dal terzo folio,<sup>18</sup> che alle pagine 2-3 di WWB. La storia viene descritta da Yeats in modo sostanzialmente analogo nei tre documenti, con alcune minime ma interessanti variazioni. Nei *Poems*, il resoconto della vita di Blake segue un ordine cronologico e si dipana a partire dalla figura di “un certo” John O’Neil, l’ipotetico nonno di William Blake di origini celtiche, per arrivare al padre, James, e, infine, al luogo e alla data di nascita del poeta. Nel MS 293 e in WWB, lo sviluppo della narrazione è invece invertito: i curatori muovono dal luogo di nascita di William Blake per ritornare alle sue presunte origini irlandesi:

<sup>18</sup> Ho optato per una trascrizione diplomatica dei folia utili ai fini della presente analisi, evidenziando le integrazioni e/o interpolazioni a lapis di Yeats o di Ellis con il carattere corsivo.

### THE POEMS 1893, XV

Early in the eighteenth century a certain John O'Neil got into debt and difficulties, these latter apparently political to some extent; and escaped both by marrying a woman named Ellen Blake, who kept a shebeen at Rathmines, Dublin, and taking her name. He had a son James by a previous wife or mistress, and this son took also the name of Blake, and in due course married, settled in London as a hosier, and became the father of five children, one of whom was the subject of this memoir. [...] James Blake was living over his shop at 28, Broad Street, Golden Square, when, in the year 1757, his son William Blake was born.

### MS 293/2/2, Folder 2, f. 3

The house where Blake was born | – no 28 Broad St. Golden Square – | still stands. It is now a shabby  
 | <sup>enough in appearance. A butchers shop occupies the ground</sup> | [?bust] butchers, & the street it stands | in among the most – ^ floor, and  
 the entire street is as woebegone ^ as any in the [?dingy] of its shabby neighbourhood. – on | all hands rays & dirty  
 children. | In Blakes time ^ <sup>this was stood in</sup> it was a fairly | well to do district, with houses | of the nobility at no  
 great | distance His father one James | Blake a-^ | <sup>James Blake, the father of the poet</sup> hosier, was, as I re[?d] | learn from-^  
 according to D<sup>r</sup> Carter Blake, of | Irish extraction ^ <sup>His father</sup> a certain | John O'Neil, had got deep | into debt &  
 difficulties – ^ & these | <sup>latter to some extent</sup> ^ <sup>Partly on account of these troubles, [?&] partly for</sup> political reasons | and to avoid  
 worse troubles for- [?sond] ^ <sup>[?sonnd]</sup> | reasons he thought well to change | his name ^ <sup>he decided to take his wife's name</sup> on  
 his marriage with | an Ellen Blake keeper of a | shebeen house at Rathmines | Dublin. James Blake the

### WWB I, 2-3

The house where Blake was born, No. 28, Broad Street, Golden Square, still stands. It is now somewhat shabby in appearance. A butcher's shop occupies the ground floor, and the entire street is as depressing as any in its woebegone neighbourhood. In Blake's time this was a fairly well-to-do district, in the near neighbourhood of fashionable life. James Blake, or, as he was called in childhood, James O'Neil, the father of the poet, was of Irish extraction. A certain John O'Neil, James's father, had got into debt and difficulties in his own country. He married Ellen Blake, keeper of a *shebeen* house, at Rathmines, Dublin, and took her name.

In *The Real Blake*, Ellis segue una prospettiva per lo più analoga. Da una panoramica sulla famiglia di Blake, sul lavoro del padre e sulla loro dimora londinese, egli cattura l'attenzione del lettore sottolineando come “he [James] was not an ordinary shopman”, poiché “his name was not really Blake, but O'Neil. [...] His grandfather was an O'Neil in Ireland when his father was born”. Prosegue quindi: “This O'Neil married a woman named Ellen Blake, who had some money that came through whisky, and she gave him not only her dowry but her name, for he was in trouble that tradition says was political”. Ellis si sofferma inoltre sull'assenza di fonti relative all'identità della vera madre di James e sui problemi di John che erano, secondo “la tradizione”, di natura politica (5).

In una lettera indirizzata a John O'Leary del 7 maggio 1889, Yeats afferma: “I have evidence by the way to show that he [William Blake] was of Irish extraction – his grandfather was an O'Neil who changed his name for political reasons” (Yeats 1986, 163-64); ribadendo, in una seconda lettera a Douglas Hyde del 23 agosto 1889: “Did I ever tell you my good fortune in finding out that William Blake – on whose Mystic System myself and a friend are [...] making a big book [...] was an O'Neil. His grandfather was a Cornelius O'Neil who changed his name to Blake. Ireland makes much noise on his Mystic System & always holds a high ideal place” (183). Di nuovo, nel settembre 1889, ripete “Blake's grandfather I have found out by chance was a Cornelius O'Neil who took the name of Blake to dodge his creditors” (136).

È infatti nel MS 293 che Yeats ed Ellis rivelano la notizia sulle origini celtiche di Blake; un'informazione ricevuta da uno dei discendenti di John O'Neil ed Ellen Blake, un certo Dott. Carter Blake.<sup>19</sup> Quest'ultimo avrebbe raccontato come suo padre e nonno del poeta, John Blake (all'epoca O'Neil), avrebbe cambiato il proprio cognome sposandosi con una certa Ellen Blake. James Blake/O'Neil, figlio di John e padre di William – avuto durante una precedente relazione e dunque fratellastro del Dott. Carter Blake –, avrebbe assunto lo stesso cognome e si sarebbe stabilito a Londra. La fonte di Yeats ed Ellis, Carter Blake, non è menzionata esplicitamente con nome e cognome né nell'edizione Quaritch, né nella prima edizione dei *Poems* o in quella successiva del 1905. Sebbene, in quest'ultima, Yeats aggiunga "I am told": "He had a son James, I am told, by a previous wife or mistress" (xv).

Ritroviamo questa fonte in varie annotazioni scritte di pugno da Yeats, non solo su differenti copie di WWB e successivamente nell'edizione del 1910 dei *Poetical Works of William Blake* ("and from one of this family, Dr Carter Blake, I have the story"), ma anche all'interno del Folder 21 del MS 293. Una cartella interessante, in quanto contiene la copia personale di Yeats di alcuni capitoli tratti dalla versione edita della "Memoir" e del "Symbolic System".<sup>20</sup> Qui, le annotazioni yeatsiane sono principalmente intese a giustificare, supportare o correggere certe affermazioni sue e di Ellis. Già a partire dalla prima pagina del Folder, corrispondente alla p. 2 della "Memoir", Yeats sottolinea a matita i termini "Irish extraction" e difende la sua ipotesi sulle origini irlandesi di Blake aggiungendo a margine, sempre a matita, "My authority for Blakes Irish extraction was D' Carter | Blake who claims to be descended from a bran branch | of the family that settled at Malaga & entered | the wine trade there. || WBY". Affermazione quest'ultima che, come abbiamo già visto, era contenuta nella versione manoscritta, ma che probabilmente Ellis non aveva voluto che venisse pubblicata in WWB e la cui autorevolezza sarebbe stata successivamente messa in discussione dallo stesso Yeats.

Sul margine destro della seconda pagina (corrispondente alla p. 3 della "Memoir"), Yeats sottolinea i lemmi "enthusiasm of his grandfather" nella frase "political enthusiasm of his grandfather" e aggiunge con una penna ad inchiostro la fonte di tale informazione: "This is rather | too definite. I | gathered this | from Carter Blakes | words, but ^ he [?strath] ^?was | for some reason | or other was | keeping something | back I thought. || WBY". Alcune righe dopo evidenzia i termini "worldly imprudence" e commenta, per poi barrare, "This is Ellis's | deduction from | some rather | [?] [?] [?]"<sup>21</sup> Troviamo una nuova annotazione di Yeats a p. 146: "Does

<sup>19</sup> Dai *Collected Works of Arthur Symonds*, vol. IV, *William Blake*: "There are two theories as to the origin of Blake's family; but neither of them has yet been confirmed by the slightest documentary evidence. Both of these theories were put forth in the same year, 1893, one by Mr. Alfred T. Story in his *William Blake*, the other by Messrs. Ellis and Yeats in their *Works of William Blake*. According to Mr. Story, Blake's family was connected with the Somerset family of the Admiral, through a Wiltshire family of Blakes; but for this theory he gives merely the report of 'two ladies, daughters of William John Blake, of Southampton, who claim to be second cousins of William Blake,' and in a private letter he tells me that he has not been able to procure any documentary evidence of the statement. According to Messrs. Ellis and Yeats, Blake's father was Irish, and was originally called O'Neil. His father, John O'Neil, is supposed to have changed his name, on marrying Ellen Blake, from O'Neil to Blake, and James O'Neil, his son by a previous union, to have taken the same name, and to have settled in London, while a younger son, the actual son of Ellen Blake, went to Malaga. This statement rests entirely on the assertion of Dr. Carter Blake, who claimed descent from the latter; and it has never been supported by documentary evidence. In answer to my inquiry, Mr. Martin J. Blake, the compiler of two volumes of *Blake Family Records* (first series, 1300-1600; second series, 1600-1700), writes: 'Although I have made a special study of the genealogies of the Blakes of Ireland, I have not come across any Ellen Blake who married John O'Neil who afterwards (as is said by Messrs. Ellis and Yeats) adopted the surname of Blake' " (1924, 14).

<sup>20</sup> Si veda NLI 40,567/4/1-3; 20, 29. La copia di Yeats rilegata in pergamena è descritta in L 1955, 218.

<sup>21</sup> Altre parole sono sottolineate alle pagine 137-139, 143-145, 148, 161. Si veda Ellis e Yeats 2014, 34.

this | allude to the | unfinished ‘Milton?’”, mentre a p. 147, sul margine destro, un’ulteriore nota a matita: “quote if | printed,” che è probabilmente collegata a quanto scrive a testo: “The ‘above’ mention of Blake is not printed by Mr. Robinson in his Reminiscences, and therefore cannot be quoted here”.

In *The Real Blake*, Ellis conclude la sua prima anticipazione sulle origini celtiche di Blake riconoscendo il Dr. Carter come fonte di W.B. Yeats, al quale si deve dunque la scoperta: “[...] there would have been an end of the story had not Ellen Blake borne to John O’Neil children of her own and if Dr. Carter Blake, who was descended from one of these, had not told the whole story to Mr. W.B. Yeats, on whose authority it is given here” (6).

Come si è accennato, l’informazione relativa alla fonte viene sostituita, in WWB, da una nota circa “The rebellious political enthusiasm of his grandfather”, John O’Neil, che avrebbe contraddistinto anche il padre del poeta, James Blake, avuto da una relazione con un’altra donna, e naturalmente William stesso, noto per l’abitudine filo-repubblicana di girare per la Londra dell’epoca con un berretto rosso. Non sorprende quindi la decisione di Yeats di non citare il Dr. Carter Blake neppure nei *Poems*:

### THE POEMS 1893, XV

John O’Neil had also a son by his wife Ellen; and this son, settling in Malaga, in Spain, entered the wine trade, and became the founder of a family who proudly remember the tradition of their relationship to the mystic and seer.

### MS 293/2/2, Folder 2, f. 4

hosier was his son, by a <sup>^</sup> but not by this marriage | There had been a previous union, – it is not certain whether | ~~previous wife or~~  
~~mistress but~~ | of a legitimate description or not. However this may *following the ex* | ~~took the name of Blake, when~~ | have been, the boy, *did*  
*[?see]* James O’Neil, father of the | ~~his father wedded the shebeen~~ | poet, took the name of Blake on his father’s marriage | ~~woman~~ <sup>^</sup> *adopted*  
*it*. A son of John | O Neil & Ellen Blake went | over to Malaga in Spain, | prospered in the wine trade,  
 married, | & had descendants ~~one of~~ <sup>^</sup> *among* whom | ~~is my informant.~~ <sup>^</sup> *Dr. Carter Blake, who vouches for these facts*. The  
 wild | ~~The O’Neil blood, not without a~~ <sup>^</sup> *family which is credited with traditions* | ~~visionary drop in it,~~ <sup>^</sup> *wherein which banshee’s*  
<sup>♣</sup> *second sight play a part.* ~~may well~~ | <sup>^</sup> *And the O’Neil blood may well* have some thing to do not – *both* | merely with the <sup>^</sup>  
*visionary form of the* mysticism of | William Blake ~~but with~~ | & the lofty extravagance of | its expressions  
 reminding ~~one~~ <sup>^</sup> *recalling* | of the *Tain Bo Cuilane* & that | <sup>^</sup> *other Irish* ~~brood of~~ epics. The lofty | station of [?†]  
 Ireland in the his | symbolic system <sup>^</sup> *of nationalities make be* ~~may well too~~ | be rooted on some remembrance <sup>the result</sup>  
*of a predilection having its origin* | & ~~pride of his forbearer~~ <sup>^</sup> *from the same root*.

### WWB I, 3

His young son, James, whose mother is unknown, but who was not the fruit of this union, began at the same time to use the name of Blake. But if the old O’Neil origin was hidden, the wild O’Neil blood showed itself strongly in the next generation. William Blake, as we call him, was, before all things, an O’Neil. His descent from a stock who had seldom lacked their attendant banshee, even when hard destiny had brought low their once high estate, and hidden it under the smoke-blackened rafters of some poor cabin, may well have had much to do with his visionary gift. The rebellious political enthusiasm of his grandfather came out in the young poet also. It was a dangerous freak then to wear a red Phrygian cap in the streets of London, but he did this openly to show his republican sympathies in the days before the Reign of Terror had belied the early promise of the French Revolution.



Le pagine 4 e 5 di WWB I, così come i folia 5-6 del secondo Folder, mostrano evidenti eliminazioni e interpolazioni di Ellis, a matita, e sono interamente dedicate alla famiglia di Blake, con una descrizione dei fratelli e alcune parole dedicate alla sorella. Pressoché analoga nei tre documenti e anche in *The Real Blake* è la narrazione riguardo ai fratelli, con particolare attenzione al prediletto, Robert, per il quale tutti i biografi riconoscono che il poeta nutrì un profondo affetto. La figura di John, “the evil one”, è introdotta nei folia 5 e 6 del MS 293, alle pagine 4 e 5 di WWB e alla p. XV dei *Poems*, dove viene definito il prediletto dai genitori pur essendo la pecora nera della famiglia (in quest’ultimo, senza le ulteriori spiegazioni presenti invece nel MS 293 e in WWB):

### POEMS 1893, XV

He had already a son John, the best beloved of father and mother, who grew up to be the black sheep of the family, and he begot afterwards James, who was to pester William with what Tatham calls ‘bread and cheese advice,’ and Robert whom William came to live like his own soul, and a daughter of whom we hear little, and among that little not even her name.

### MS 293/2/2, Folder 2, ff. 5-6

James Blake had four other children – James who was always <sup>^ The eldest, called after his father, | ^ who followed the trade of a hosier, was</sup> | a pence counting & humdrum | person despite some Swedenborgian | tendencies; ever in the phrase of | [?] Tatham’s <sup>^ in his</sup> mass memoir of Blake <sup>^ speaks of James</sup> | as “pestering “his brother with timid | sentences of bread & cheese advice”; | *The impatience which would he aroused by his* | ~~see in him the fir[?st] origin of~~ <sup>well meant councils probably accounts for some of the early</sup> | some of <sup>^ the</sup> ante Swedenborgian & | anti prudential thunder of “~~The~~ | ~~Marriage~~; <sup>^ William’s writings. [?Catherine]</sup> <sup>^ His sister</sup> Catherine who <sup>^ is remarkable</sup> | chiefly for showing that he was not the only the family strength. She | outlined Blake & nearly all | her relations ;. Robert who was | the mystics <sup>^ poet’s</sup> favourite <sup>^ brother</sup> & John who | the bad boy of the family, <sup>^ but and</sup> who | “the evil one”; William frankly calls him, but | was dearest to the father & | mother. Sometimes when John | [?] William resented the favour shown <sup>^ to John</sup> his disreputable & disolute | brother he would be told that he | would yet beg his bread at | John’s door – a prophesy that || was literally fulfilled as dreams | are <sup>^ said to be</sup> by contraries, for John | after being apprenticed to a candle | maker at an immense premium | ran away from his master & | came in very evil plight to | seek the help of William’s <sup>^ help</sup> He | finally enlisted as a soldier x | but [?spattered] out [?in] & died | in a few months <sup>^ after. Perhaps he resembled</sup> – Had he taken | after [?that] his <sup>^ the</sup> disorderly grand | grandfather ? <sup>^ John O’Neil</sup> whose Christian | name he inherited ? <sup>^ received</sup> In one | of the minor poems we hear of him | as “my brother John, the evil one | in a black cloud making his | moan”. His evil balanced the | no less unpleasant virtue of James | & may well have served helped | into being a philosophy whose [?ath] | ethics <sup>^ author</sup> ethics rejects both “good” & “evil” | as commonly understood, in the <sup>and demand,</sup> | interest of pure <sup>instead of them, life in the</sup> imagination.

### WWB I, 4-5

There were four other children—James, called after the father, who seems to have been of a mild disposition. The only reproach ever levelled at his undistinguished name is found in the manuscript of Tatham, whose view was evidently derived in later years from William himself. Tatham speaks of James having “pestered his brother with timid sentences of bread and cheese advice.” Robert was William’s favourite. With Robert’s spirit after death he believed himself to have held personal intercourse. John was the bad boy of the family. But he was the parents’ pet. When William resented this favouritism he was told that one day he would beg his bread at John’s door. The contrary of this is what actually occurred. || John was apprenticed to a candle maker at a handsome premium, but broke his articles, ran away, and came seeking help from William in very evil plight. The genius did not refuse to aid the scapegrace;

and eventually John enlisted in the army, but soon after died, it is believed, from the effects of wild living. Here is the ancestral turbulence showing itself again, with no redeeming quality of mind or heart to make it picturesque or acceptable. William did not in the least disguise from himself that there was no excuse for John. He speaks of “My brother John, the evil one, in a black cloud making his moan”; but the notion that even he was to be damned for his sins was more than could be endured. William’s rejection of the creed “that God will torment man in eternity for following his energies,” may have had its origin at this time from the double root of brotherly disapproval and brotherly tenderness such as he undoubtedly felt for John. The quaint statement in the “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” that angels are always found, on account of their “conceit,” to speak of themselves as “the only wise,” is probably due, on the other hand, to reminiscence of the respectable James of the “bread and cheese advice.”

In *The Real Blake*, Ellis descrive i fratelli concentrandosi su John (“the first son, turned out a scapegrace”) e James (“The next brother, James, took his place, passed for the eldest, and became the favourite”) che, essendo i preferiti dei genitori, avevano indirettamente offerto a William l’opportunità di godere di una maggiore autonomia, garantita appunto dal privilegio di non essere il prediletto (“He had the advantage of not being a favorite”). La sua carriera artistica era tuttavia fonte di preoccupazione, in quanto “he would one day beg his bread at John’s door”, aggiungendo subito dopo, ma senza ulteriori approfondimenti, “The contrary of this is what happened” (3-4). Come riportano il MS 293 (ff. 5-6) e WWB, “il contrario” sarebbe in effetti avvenuto quando John “apprenticed to a candle maker at a handsome premium, [...] broke his articles, ran away, and came seeking help from William in very evil plight” (I, 4-5).

Non emerge alcuna corrispondenza tra il testo manoscritto e WWB, a partire dalla seconda metà della pagina 5 fino alla prima metà di pagina 10, dedicate alla formazione di Blake, alle sue visioni mistiche di Dio e del profeta Ezechiele, e ai suoi anni come incisore presso Basire.

Le conversazioni di William Blake con il fratello Robert, proseguite anche dopo la morte di quest’ultimo, sono presenti sia nei *Poems*, nei quali Yeats riporta anche una lettera di Blake scritta all’amico Hayley (“Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, [...]”, XXX), che in WWB: “‘I know,’ writes Blake, ‘that our deceased friends are more really with us than when they were apparent to our mortal past. Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, and see him in remembrance, in the regions of my imagination’” (WWB I, 34-35). Entrambe le opere propongono anche un’interpretazione in merito alle origini della modalità di incisione adottata da Blake grazie al fratello:

#### **POEMS 1893, XXX**

One night, a form resembling his brother Robert came to him and taught him how to engrave his poems upon copper, and how to print illustrations and decorative borderings upon the same pages with the poem.

#### **WWB I, 34**

The conception came to him in a dream. Robert appeared to him and dictated the process of printing from copper-plates, by which he published and so preserved all his writings from 1787 onwards.

In *The Real Blake* Ellis descrive la scoperta da parte di Blake della propria tecnica artistica in modo molto più dettagliato rispetto a quanto aveva fatto in precedenza in WWB, e a quanto riportato nei *Poems* yeatsiani: “In the year 1788-89 Blake was not only busy with his studies of Swedenborg, he received from a dream or vision of his dead brother Robert the invention

of the kind of printing in which he published all his autograph books. Robert directed him to write and draw in a liquid varnish that would protect a copper plate in an acid bath till only the lines were left standing up. He could then roll an ordinary printing roller soaked with printing ink over the surface and print as from an ordinary block” (116).

Le pagine 10 e 11 di WWB I, dedicate all'apprendistato di Blake come incisore presso l'Abbazia di Westminster, corrispondono al Folder 3 del MS 293. Ispirato dal luogo sacro, Blake sarebbe qui riuscito a immaginare il suo intero sistema mistico (“The spires and | towers of Westminster stand as a | glyph for inspiration in more than | one of his later drawings,” MS 293/2/2, Folder 3, f. 22; WWB I, 10). Le pagine 11 (dalla riga 8), 12 e 13 (fino alla riga 5) di WWB non sono contenute nel manoscritto e non si trovano nei *Poems*, mentre ne troviamo alcuni riferimenti in *The Real Blake* (“Polly or Clara Woods”, 37; “I have not yet seen the man”, 38).

Il matrimonio di Blake con Catherine Boucher è narrato nel secondo capitolo di WWB, “The Wife” (13-17), e nel quarto Folder del MS 293. All'interno dei *Poems*, così come nella versione manoscritta e in WWB, la *liaison* di William e Catherine sembra essere avvolta da un velo di romanticismo. Tuttavia, procedendo nella lettura e nel contesto storico del loro matrimonio, assume sempre di più i contorni di un dramma familiare (cfr. *The Real Blake*, 89-92).<sup>22</sup> Il quarto Folder presenta una singola pagina, chiaramente scritta da Yeats ma con numerose cancellature e interpolazioni da parte di entrambi i curatori. Le pagine 13 e 15 di WWB, corrispondenti alla seconda metà del folio 21 del MS 293/2/2, e alla pagina XXVI dei *Poems*, riportano fatti analoghi, sebbene presentino alcune varianti formali o linguistiche: lo stile descrittivo, mai ipotattico dei *Poems* cede il passo ad un registro paratattico con frequenti sfumature poetiche nel MS 293 e in WWB. In *The Real Blake*, Ellis arricchisce il racconto con alcuni dettagli, come quelli sulla chiesa di Battersea nella quale Catherine Boucher e William Blake si sposarono il 18 agosto 1782: “[...] the church at Battersea, then newly rebuilt and decorated with painted windows to imitate real stained glass, which was not in that day so easily procurable as in our own” (40).

Come si può intuire dall'ultima parola del f. 21, “abruptly”, che lascia supporre una prosecuzione della narrazione, Yeats aveva probabilmente già abbozzato altre parti dedicate al matrimonio di William e Catherine nella propria copia manoscritta, corrispondenti forse alle restanti pagine di WWB, “The Wife” (15-16):

<sup>22</sup> In *Life of William Blake*, Alexander Gilchrist è stato il primo a dichiarare: “Such harmony there really was; but ... it had not always been unruffled. There *had* been stormy times in years long past, when both were young; discord by no means trifling while it lasted. But with the cause (jealousy on her side, not wholly unprovoked), the strife had ceased also” (1942, 314-15), mentre A.C. Swinburne commenta nel 1868 (1906, 14): “Over the stormy or slippery passages in their earlier life Mr. Gilchrist has passed perhaps too lightly. No doubt Blake's aberrations were mainly matters of speech or writing; it is however said, truly or falsely, that once in a patriarchal mood he did propose to add a second wife to their small and shifting household, and was much perplexed at meeting on one hand with tears and on all hands with remonstrances”. In WWB, Ellis e Yeats aggiungono: “It is said that Blake wished to add a concubine to his establishment in the Old Testament manner, but gave up the project because it made Mrs. Blake cry” (WWB I, 42). E ancora in *The Collected Works of Arthur Symonds*, vol. IV, *William Blake*: “Another legend of the period, which has at least more significance, whether true or not, is referred to by both Swinburne and Mr. W. M. Rossetti, on what authority I cannot discover, and is thus stated by Messrs. Ellis and Yeats: ‘It is said that Blake wished to add a concubine to his establishment in the Old Testament manner, but gave up the project because it made Mrs. Blake cry.’ ‘The element of fable,’ they add, ‘lies in the implication that the woman who was to have wrecked this household had a bodily existence. ... There is a possibility that he entertained mentally some polygamous project, and justified it on some patriarchal theory. A project and theory are one thing, however, and a woman is another; and though there is abundant suggestion of the project and theory, there is no evidence at all of the woman.’” (1924, 47).

**POEMS 1893, XXVI**

In the day she would often take long walks with him, thirty miles at a stretch being no unusual distance, and having dined at a wayside inn, return under the light of the stars; and often at night, when the presences bade him get up from his bed and write, she would sit beside him, holding his hand.

**MS 293/2/2, Folder 4, f. 21**

When some fiery imagination | filled him and made him rise | in the middle of the night to set |  
down the wonder that he saw, she | would rise too & sit beside him holding.

**WWB I, 15**

When the fury of his imagination roused him in the night to labour for hours, trembling with the fever of his mind, and pouring forth, line after line, of the great myth that is even now just beginning to yield up its secret and prove its worth, she rose with him at his bidding and sat silent and still by his side, holding her hand on his.

Anche Ellis si sofferma sulle lunghe passeggiate con le quali i coniugi erano soliti intrattenersi: “The long walks in which they used to delight were begun again extending sometimes twenty and thirty miles out” (184).

Il terzo capitolo di WWB, intitolato “Clerical Friends”, menziona i sei “unproductive years” (22) vissuti dal poeta tra la stesura dei *Poetical Sketches* (1783) e quella dei *Songs* (1789). Scritti di pugno da Ellis, ad eccezione dei folia 48-52 e della prima parte del folio 53, i folia 39-61 del quinto Folder corrispondono pressoché integralmente alla versione edita. Nel MS 293, il capitolo è introdotto da tre titoli, “A New Life . Beginning Literary Life.”, successivamente cancellati, probabilmente dallo stesso Ellis, a favore della versione “Clerical New friends”, che rimane infine “Clerical friends”. L’obiettivo di Ellis in queste pagine sembra essere quello di dimostrare come Blake sia stato condizionato dai suoi “clerical friends” a trascorrere i suddetti “unproductive years” e addirittura condotto a una sorta di sterilità artistica, poiché “He was <sup>^</sup> He was going through a period of mental change, ceasing to be a poet who enjoyed mysticism & | becoming a mystic who employed poetry” (f. 46; WWB I, 22). Ellis prosegue quindi la propria analisi indirizzandola verso la ricerca dei riferimenti al simbolismo mistico di Swedenborg, Boehme, Paracelso, Milton, Dante e Shakespeare (f. 46; WWB I, 23) già a partire dalle *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

Interessante l’integrazione yeatsiana ai folia 48-50, nei quali sottolinea come in quegli stessi anni il poeta potrebbe aver acquisito i primi rudimenti delle dottrine cabalistiche<sup>23</sup> e rosacru-ciane, ed essere addirittura entrato a far parte di un ordine esoterico che ricorda, già nel nome, l’ordine ermetico della Golden Dawn, di cui Yeats divenne membro nel 1890.<sup>24</sup> Non avendo

<sup>23</sup> Sull’influenza della dottrina cabalistica su Blake si vedano Sheila Spector, “Wonders Divine”: *The Development of Blake’s Kabbalistic Myth and “Glorious Incomprehensible”: The Development of Blake’s Kabbalistic Language* (2001); Ted Holt, “Blake’s ‘Elohim’ and the Hutchinsonian Fire: Anti-Newtonianism and Christian Hebraism in the Work of William Blake” (2003, 20-36).

<sup>24</sup> Sull’esperienza yeatsiana in seno alla Golden Dawn si rimanda a Harper 1974; Raine 1976. In *Yeats and the Language of Symbolism*, Frye sottolinea come Yeats e Ellis “approached Blake [...] from the wrong side of Blavatsky: that is, they had already acquired a smattering of occultism, and they expected to find in Blake an occult system or secret doctrine instead of a poetic language” (1947, 12).

alcuna evidenza di tale iniziazione, Yeats aggiunge che anche se fosse avvenuta, Blake non ne avrebbe mai dato notizia, poiché “the “students in question do not name themselves, or each other”. L’interpolazione con il nome della società esoterica, “The Hermetic Students of the G D” compare soltanto nel MS 293 e in WWB, mentre non è presente nell’edizione dei *Poems*, in cui Yeats accenna soltanto alla possibilità che Blake abbia conosciuto mistici e studenti di magia in quegli stessi anni:

### POEMS 1893, XXXIII

He may also have met mystics and even students of magic, for there was then an important secret body working in London under three brothers named Falk. The miniature painter Cosway, too, may have come across him, and Cosway kept a house specially for the invocation of spirits. His own illumination probably reached its height between his twentieth and twenty-seventh year [...].

### MS 293, F. 5, ff. 48-50;

It | is possible that he received initiation | into an order of Christian Kabalists <sup>^ then established in London</sup> and | known as “The Hermetic Students of | the G D”. Of course this conjecture || is not susceptible of proof. He would | have said nothing about such | initiation even if he <sup>^ had</sup> received it. | ~~The~~ <sup>^ The</sup> “students” [in question do not name | themselves, or each other, and the | object of their study is nothing | less than universal magic. Without | being a magician however Blake | was naturally subject to some of | the experience of trance, and may if | we accept the mystical position | have obtained thereby a knowledge | of certain <sup>^ intricate</sup> details of symbolism which | one of the most distinguished Kabalists | of our time ~~asserts denies can~~ believes | to be absent from all published books | <sup>^ of his day</sup> and to be exclusively belonging to the | “unwritten Kabala”. Vision or waking | dream with its almost illimitable | extent of mental territory, on which || the <sup>^ unspoken</sup> thought of persons expert in the | use of trance <sup>^ enables them</sup> meet each other <sup>^ on purely mental territory</sup>, [...] | may according to their theory, | have supplied all that Blake knew. | He himself claimed first such a | faculty. ~~He may~~ <sup>^ perhaps</sup> ~~have picked up~~ <sup>^ other and more ordinary sources</sup> | ~~much from friends.~~ <sup>^ of mystical information were open to him. It is not known whether</sup> It is certain | that his contemporary, the miniature painter | Cosway, kept a ~~house~~ house for the | study and practice of magic, & left | behind him at his death a considerable | bundle of magical formulae. Several | terms of the writing of the Gnostics are | to be found in the ~~Poetic~~ <sup>^ Blake’s</sup> Books & there | are indications ~~to~~ that seem to show | acquaintance with Cornelius Arippa [*sic*] ~~whose~~ | a translation of whose works ~~were~~ <sup>^ was</sup> not uncommonly in the ~~eighteenth~~ to be met with | In ~~Blakes~~ <sup>^ his</sup> day.

### WWB I, 24

It is possible that he received initiation into an order of Christian Kabalists then established in London, and known as “The Hermetic Students of the G D.” Of course this conjecture is not susceptible of proof. He would have said nothing about such initiation even if he had received it. The “students” in question do not name themselves, or each other, and the subject of their study is nothing less than universal magic. Without being a magician, however, Blake was naturally liable to some of the experiences of trance, and may, if we accept the mystical position, have obtained thereby a knowledge of certain intricate details of symbolism which one of the most distinguished Kabalists of our time believes to be absent from all published books of his day, and to exclusively belong to the “unwritten Kabala”. Vision or waking dream, with its almost illimitable extent of mental territory, on which the unspoken thought of persons expert in the use of trance enables them to meet each other on purely mental territory, [...] may according to this theory, | have supplied all that Blake knew. He himself claimed such a faculty. Other and more ordinary sources of mystical information were open to him. It is not known whether he was able to avail himself of them, but it is certain that his contemporary, the miniature painter, Cosway, kept a house for the study and practice of magic, and left behind him at his death a considerable bundle of magical formulae. Several



terms of the writings of the Gnostics are to be found in Blake's books, and there are indications that seem to show acquaintance with Cornelius Agrippa, a translation of whose works was not uncommonly to be met with in his day.

In *The Real Blake* non sono presenti riferimenti diretti all'ordine ermetico, ma si trovano alcune occorrenze del termine "occultismo". La prima si riferisce a Cosway "a friend given to occultism, [who] must have been preaching magic to his credulous and Hibernian mind" (267). La seconda viene invece utilizzata da Ellis per caratterizzare lo stesso Blake: "His theory of a permanent mental substance into which he could dip his own mind [...] is now, of course, easily recognised as one that hardly differs from what is being scientifically proved to be as near to an account of the truth as any other which tries to describe etheric movements and changes in terms of more subtle and more unusual experiences than those that come to us every day through our five senses. These terms have hitherto belonged, in this, as in all sciences not yet scientific, to magicians and occultists. There is one thing of which we need continually to remind ourselves. Myth is the natural language of occultism in the mouth of primitive nature" (396).

Scritte da Yeats, con eliminazioni e interpolazioni sia di Yeats che di Ellis, le cinque pagine incluse nel Folder 6 corrispondono approssimativamente alle pp. 24-25 del primo volume di WWB. Esse continuano l'indagine condotta dai due curatori sugli studi che Blake avrebbe effettuato sulle dottrine di Paracelso e Boehme,<sup>25</sup> sulla sua conoscenza della cabala e del rosacrocianesimo (f. 26) e, ancora, sulla sua presunta affiliazione all'ordine G.D.:

order of Christian Kabalists known | as 'The Hermetic Students of the | G.D.' who existed <sup>^</sup> in London at the end | of the last century & beginning | of this ~~under those & thereby~~ and | devoted themselves to the study | & practice of Theurgy Kaballistic | & other of universal magic

affiliazione che, aggiunge Yeats in un'annotazione verticale a margine, poi cancellata, "would have always been a more or less obligatory | secret with him" (F. 6, f. 27). Una nota di Ellis, scritta a matita al di sotto della precedente annotazione di Yeats, conferma i dubbi sull'ingresso di Blake in un ordine occulto, considerando tuttavia la segretezza di tale appartenenza: "the entrance into occult, or secret philosophy would have itself been | a matter of reserve. Thus while his writings point to some such event, the absence of | all mention in biography & letters does not make it less probable" (*ibidem*). Un'ipotesi che sembra essere inoltre supportata dal movimento di rotazione degli zoa all'interno dei libri profetici che, sempre secondo Ellis, potrebbe essere pensato come "the result of studies prosecuted after initiation in such an order" (f. 27).

Alla p. 25 di WWB, che corrisponde al folio 52 del Folder 5 e al folio 30 del Folder 6, Yeats insiste sulle frequentazioni di Blake durante il periodo di composizione dei *Poetical Sketches* (1783), che non sembrano tuttavia riconducibili ai "Brothers of the Rose", bensì ad una "well known [?] eighteenth century | ~~natured~~ cotterie [*sic*]. Blake met | ~~them~~ <sup>^</sup> by Blake from time to time at | the house of a Mrs Johnston Mathews" (F. 6, f. 30), al numero 28 di Rathbone Place. I folia 48-50 del Folder 5 rimandano da un punto di vista contenutistico ai

<sup>25</sup> Relativamente all'influenza di Paracelso e Boehme su William Blake, si vedano: M.K. Nurmi, *Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Critical Study* (1954, 30-37); J. Adlard, "A 'Triumphing Joyfulness': Blake, Boehme, and the Tradition" (1969, 109-122); S.F. Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (1965, 322); K. Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (1969, 360); K. Fischer, *Converse in the Spirit: William Blake, Jacob Boehme, and the Creative Spirit* (2004).

folia 27-30 del Folder 6, continuando la ricerca sui riferimenti esoterici nella vita di Blake. Una ricerca che potrebbe essere stata sollecitata dallo stesso Ellis, dal momento che nell'edizione del 1893 dei *Poems* Yeats non accenna a notizie riguardo a una probabile affiliazione di Blake ad associazioni esoteriche dell'epoca.

Il settimo Folder, scritto da Ellis, è composto da 5 folia contenenti una prima bozza della *Memoir*, che si distanzia dalla versione edita in WWB. A differenza delle altre parti scritte da Ellis, i folia 61-65 sono caratterizzati da varie interpolazioni e depennamenti di entrambi i curatori. Le revisioni di Yeats si trovano in particolare nel folio 62, in cui egli cancella un intero paragrafo scritto da Ellis definendolo "Too obscure for this place", per poi barrare la sua stessa annotazione. L'unica corrispondenza tra il manoscritto e l'edizione Quaritch si ha tra il folio 61 e la p. 33, in cui Ellis, ritornando sulla figura di Catherine, insiste sulla sua totale mancanza di ambizioni e possibilità immaginative, aggiungendo: "[she] was in love with her husband | though he was not in love with her" (Folder 7, f. 61; WWB I, 33). Non vi sono correlazioni con i *Poems*. In *The Real Blake* i riferimenti a Catherine sono molteplici, ma in questa nuova versione Ellis sembra concentrarsi maggiormente sulle richieste coniugali di Blake e sui problemi da esse derivanti ("In bitter misery of heart she lost the power to find her whole world in her husband's arms, in the divine fever of married love. His confident demands of rapture revolted her. She lost sympathy and unity with him. They saw themselves suddenly as two strangers", 89).

I capitoli 4 ("The true career begun") e 5 ("The early prophetic books") di WWB sono vagamente anticipati nei Folders 8, 9 e 10, in cui la narrazione si sposta sull'entusiasmo blakiano per la rivoluzione francese (F. 8, ff. 34-35; WWB I, 38) e sul suo soggiorno presso Lambeth (F. 9, f. 38; WWB I, 38), a partire dal 1793, quando stampa le *Visions of the Daughters of Albion, America, Europe, Urizen*, e i *Gates of Paradise, Song of Los* e *Ahania* nel 1795 (Folder 9, f. 39; WWB I, 46; *Poems*, xxxix). In *The Real Blake* troviamo soltanto un riferimento, a p. 178, agli anni 1793-1794 e alle opere prodotte in questo periodo.

Il capitolo 6, "New Experience and New Vision," corrisponde quasi interamente al Folder 10 e tratta del soggiorno di Blake e della moglie presso la residenza del "dilettante poet" (F. 10, f. 91; WWB I, 50), William Hayley, a Felpham (*Poems*, xl-xli), fino alla rottura definitiva della loro amicizia nel 1807, quando "Blake suddenly discovered that Flaxman and Hayley, whom he had supposed to be his best friends and supporters, were arranging matters behind his back so that he might lose employment" (WWB I, 73). Gli eventi di Felpham non sono riportati integralmente nel manoscritto ed è probabile che alcune pagine dedicate all'argomento siano andate perdute. Il f. 96 si chiude con "a singular quarrel with a soldier", alludendo all'incidente in cui Blake avrebbe scacciato un soldato dal suo giardino, come è chiaramente riportato in WWB: "The soldier revenged himself by swearing that Blake cursed the king, and vowed that he would help Bonaparte should he come over. Blake was arrested" (WWB I, 55; in *Poems* 1893, xlii-xliii, con minime variazioni linguistiche). Riportando i fatti accaduti a Felpham, Ellis aggiunge che Blake avrebbe voluto tornare a Londra il mese immediatamente successivo al suo arrivo e come i tre anni trascorsi nella dimora di Hayley sarebbero stati un periodo di grande dolore e lavoro per il poeta: "but for a drunken soldier, who came, like the 'god out of the machine,' at the end and set things right again between Blake and Hayley, the Felpham period would have ended, as other periods of Blake's life had, in quarrel and estrangement. It came to this a little later; and the quarrel, when it at last arrived, was all the more bitter for delay, and the estrangement more contemptuous" (192).

I Folder 8, 9 e 10, rispettivamente numerati da Yeats e corretti da Ellis, sono per lo più scritti da Yeats con cancellazioni e interpolazioni di entrambi i curatori. Il Folder 11, com-

posto da Ellis, offre ulteriori scorci sulla relazione tra Blake e Hayley, e propone un breve resoconto sul processo subito da Blake nel 1804 e sulla sua assoluzione, grazie all'intervento di Hayley ("1804. The verdict of <sup>^</sup> 'Not Guilty' being received with "applause | in court," F. 11, f. 95; WWB I, 55; *Poems* 1893, xliii). Il Folder 12, di nuovo stilato da Yeats, riporta i versi incompleti che Blake dedica alla propria amicizia con Hayley: "That is the very thing he'll set you too. | If you break not your neck, 'tis not his fault. | But pecks of poison are not pecks of salt. | And when he could not act upon my wife, | Hired a villain to bereave my life" (MS 293, F. 12, f. 106; WWB I, 56).

Nel folio 106 del MS 293, Yeats non include alcun commento sulle accuse mosse da Blake contro Hayley (come emerge invece alle pp. 56-59 di WWB), ma pone attenzione ai già citati estratti del componimento blakiano: "If you break not your neck", "pecks of poison" e "to bereave my life", aggiungendo che "The word italicised explain one another". In WWB troviamo la spiegazione di questi versi e, in particolare, un'analisi dell'ultimo verso, "[which] refers to the affair of the soldier, Scholfield, who accused Blake of using seditious words, and thereby subjected him to a trial on a criminal (not in reality a capital) charge" (WWB I, 57). Nei *Poems*, Yeats riduce l'intero episodio relativo al soldato, qui denominato Scofield, a una mezza pagina, sottolineando soltanto come Blake lo avesse mitologizzato in *Jerusalem*, divenendo simbolo di Adamo. In *The Real Blake* (cap. XXI) scopriamo come W.M. Rossetti avrebbe tratto "l'affair" Scholfield dalla *Life* di Gilchrist, "where we are told that Blake used to suspect the Government, not Hayley, of having sent the soldier to entrap him in revenge for his having helped Tom Paine to escape from arrest a dozen years before" (296).

La p. 65 e le prime quattro righe di p. 66 di WWB riproducono il contenuto del Folder 13, scritto da Ellis, soffermandosi sulle affermazioni di Blake in merito alla disapprovazione mostrata da Hayley per la sua arte: "But of this work I take care to say little to W. H. | since he is as much averse to my poetry as to | a chapter in the Bible. x x x x But W. H. | approves of my designs as little as he does of my | poems, ..." (F. 13, f. 120; WWB I, 65; *the Real Blake*, 223). Il f. 121 si interrompe con "Till we meet I beg of God our Saviour to," a cui avrebbe dovuto seguire: "be with you and me, *and yours and mine*" (WWB I, 66) e risulta assente sia in *The Real Blake* sia nei *Poems*.

I folia corrispondenti alle pp. 66-85 del primo capitolo di WWB, ancora dedicati alla controversia con Hayley, sono andati perduti, e sembra esserci una lacuna di circa 44 folia tra il Folder 13 e il Folder 14, corrispondenti ai capitoli: 8. "Mental Position," (86-97); 9. "1804.-A Memorable Year" (98-108); 10. "1805. Blair's "Grave,"" (109-113); 11. "1805 to 1809.-Blake's Exhibition" (114-118); 12. "1810 to 1817" (119-121); 13. "After 1818.-The Lord's Prayer." (122-128); 14. "The Designs to the Book of Job" (129-136) della "Memoir". Il capitolo 15 della "Memoir" (WWB I, 137-140), proviene dal Folder 14, che presenta alcune annotazioni di Ellis. La prima pagina è intitolata "note to first scheme of Dante" (*The Real Blake*, 402), mentre la seconda mostra un disegno a matita di Ellis che riproduce i cerchi e i sette pianeti danteschi. I due folia del Folder 15, a cura di Yeats con una cancellazione e interpolazione di Ellis, chiudono la biografia di Blake nel MS 293. Essi sono riconducibili alla p. 162 della "Memoir," in cui Yeats cita la lettera di Blake a George Cumberland (12 aprile 1827; *Poems* 1893, l), poi ripubblicata di nuovo da Ellis a p. 433 di *The Real Blake*:

I have been | very near the Gates of Death, & have returned very weak | and an Old Man feeble | & tottering, but not in spirit | and life, not in the real | man, the Imagination which | liveth for ever. In that | I am stronger & stronger as this Foolish Body decays. | I thank you for the pains | you have taken with poor | Job. I know too well that | a great majority of Englishmen | are fond of the Indefinite | which

they Measure by Newton's | Doctrine of the Fluxions of an | Atom. A thing that does not | exist. There are Politicians | who think that Republican | Art is [?] Inimical to their | Atom for a line or lineament | is not formed by chance. A | line is a line in its | minutest subdivisions | straight or crooked It is | itself & not Intermeasurable | by any thing else such | is Job. But since the | French Revolution Englishmen | are all Intermeasurable one by | [?] another. Certainly | a happy state of agreement | to which I for one do not | agree God keep me from | the delusion of Yes & No too." (ff. [112], 113).

### *Conclusioni*

La storia della composizione di WWB nasce da un tentativo di analisi da parte di Ellis del componimento "To the Jews" di Blake<sup>26</sup> (da *Jerusalem*; Blake 1966, 649), che aveva catturato l'attenzione di Yeats (1955a, 161):

He had a passion for Blake, picked up in Pre-Raphaelite studios, and early in our acquaintance put into my hands a scrap of note paper on which he had written some years before an interpretation of the poem that begins

The fields from Islington to Marylebone  
To Primrose Hill and St. John's Wood  
Were builded over with pillars of gold  
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

The four quarters of London represented Blake's four great mythological personages, the Zoas, and also the four elements. These few sentences were the foundation of all study of the philosophy of William Blake, that requires an exact knowledge for its pursuit and that traces the connection between his system and that of Swedenborg or of Boehme. I recognized certain attributions, from what is sometimes called the Christian Cabala, of which Ellis had never heard, and with this proof that his interpretation was more than phantasy he and I began our four years' work [...]. (Yeats 1955a, 161)

Ellis ne dà conferma in *The Real Blake; a Portrait Biography* (1907), dove esprime la propria gratitudine ad Alexander Gilchrist per avere pubblicato il componimento blakiano, sfidando ogni lettore ad interpretarlo:

In the first edition of [Gilchrist's] the *Life of Blake* the poem *To the Jews* is given at full length, with a challenge at the top to whoever can do so to interpret it. The present writer has to thank Gilchrist for this challenge. It was what set him to work in 1870, and caused him to find that clue to the four regions, four points of the compass, four quarters of London and of the world, or the four ungenerated sons of Los, and four Zoas, with their relationships and their order of habitual arrangement, which had escaped the elder critics. [...]. The clue slept while its discoverer was travelling and living in Italy until, in 1890, Mr. Yeats asking for it, some rough hints were dragged out of a little notebook. Mr. Yeats took fire from the slender gleam and offered the collaboration which was entered on at once, and resulted in a crop of discoveries made now by one, now by the other, often by both at once, of which as many as could be got into any sort of order were thrust into the Quaritch edition [...]. The challenge that began it all is quietly suppressed in the second edition of Gilchrist, but all the old depressing mistakes are repeated.

<sup>26</sup> Come osserva Ian Fletcher, "At some time during or after 1875 Ellis left for Italy, postponing any serious attempt at editing or interpretation of Blake. When the Yeats family returned to Bedford Park in the late spring of 1888, W.B. Yeats was soon in touch with Ellis who was living just over half an hour's walk away at 40 Milson Road, West Kensington" (1972, 89-90).

The arrangement of the quarters of London and the chief towns of England and the continents of the world under the four Zoas is, although it was the clue to all Blake, a matter that itself is as difficult to sort up as anything that he contains. (356-357)

Colpito dalle annotazioni di Ellis, presenti nel taccuino da quest'ultimo redatto alcuni anni prima, nel 1890 Yeats si rende conto che le interpretazioni del collega, prodotte per "To the Jews", non sono semplice frutto della fantasia, e decide così di intraprendere con Ellis lo studio che li avrebbe portati alla realizzazione dell'edizione Quaritch.

In numerose lettere e *marginalia*, Yeats torna a rivendicare la paternità di Ellis, in quanto responsabile della parte più consistente di WWB e, in particolare, della biografia ("The writing of this book is mainly Ellis's. The thinking is as much mine as his. The biography is by him. He rewrote and trebled in size a biography of mine", 3 May 1900, WBGYL, 227; in Adams 1968, 47-48 e Wade 1968, 224).<sup>27</sup> La biografia a cui Yeats si riferisce ("He rewrote and trebled in size a biography of mine"), come si è detto, è quella da lui pubblicata successivamente come introduzione all'edizione della "Muses' Library" dei *Poems of William Blake* (1893). Fletcher torna ancora a precisare che "Ellis, it seems, completely rewrote the life, accepted with some additions and modifications the chapters on *The Symbolic System*, enlarged the short accounts to ten times their original length and wrote a number of extra chapters. [...]" (1972, 73).

Nella "Preface" all'edizione Quaritch, i due curatori evidenziano la natura della loro collaborazione:

The fellow labourers have not worked hand in hand, but rather have been like sportsmen who pursue the game on different tracks and in the evening divide their spoils. Each has learned in this way that the other was indispensable. The result is not two different views of Blake, so much as one view, reached by two opposite methods of study, worked out in order to satisfy two different forms of mental enjoyment. (WWB I, x)

Eppure, le annotazioni e le lettere di Yeats costituiscono una fonte di primaria importanza che ci consente di cogliere la sua crescente apprensione per eventuali incoerenze presenti in WWB, che sembrano provenire da prospettive divergenti rispetto a quelle del proprio cocuratore, così come dalle abitudini di quest'ultimo di oltrepassare i propri confini andando a riscrivere parti di testo non di sua competenza. Nel commentare, ad esempio, il secondo volume di WWB, Yeats esprime la necessità di confrontare le rispettive versioni al fine di evitare analisi contraddittorie:

The careless reviewer would seize with delight upon so good a joke as that two editors had worked for a year & a half on Blake & found he meant contradictory things. As it is many will believe we have read our meanings into him. Let us work separately by all means...but afterwards we must compare & bring our work into agreement. It is a mere matter of saying more or less often that we see the same truth from different sides. (NLI 30,550)

Ancora il 21 gennaio 1891, in una lettera indirizzata a John O'Leary, Yeats manifesta chiaramente la propria inquietudine, causata dalla fretta di Ellis di chiudere il volume: "The

<sup>27</sup> Nella stessa annotazione riportata sul risvolto della sua copia rilegata in pergamena, Yeats aggiunge: "The greater part of the 'symbolic system' is my writing; the rest of the book was written by Ellis working over short accounts of the books by me, except in the case of the 'literary period,' the account of the minor poems, and the account of Blake's art theories which are all his own except in so far as we discussed everything together". Yeats possedeva l'edizione del 1890 dei *Poetical Works of William Blake* curata da William Michael Rossetti, che probabilmente utilizzò come punto di partenza per le biografie.



reason why I am afraid of leaving Blake for a time is that Ellis is in a hurry & if I leave it may do some of my chapters himself & do them awry”; e aggiunge, “The boundary mark between his & mine being a not over well defined bourne. I had to put up a notice against trespassers a couple of weeks ago. Ellis is magnificent within his limits but threatens to overthrow them, and beyond them he is useless through lack of mystical knowledge” (Yeats 1986, 241-42). La competizione tra i due curatori si fa ancora più accesa nel momento in cui Ellis, rivedendo le bozze, inizia a riscrivere anche quei testi che Yeats aveva fornito per essere integrati nella versione definitiva.

Nonostante l’iniziale apprezzamento per l’edizione prodotta,<sup>28</sup> già a partire dal 1899 – ovvero subito dopo la pubblicazione – si fanno sempre più frequenti gli *obiter dicta* yeatsiani che muovono verso una riconsiderazione della stessa, in particolare nei confronti dei numerosi rimaneggiamenti del cocuratore.<sup>29</sup> Il 14 novembre 1899, Yeats personalizza il primo volume della copia donata a Lady Gregory di *The Works of William Blake* – adesso conservata presso la Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection della New York Public Library (Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; Yeats 1997, 468-69) –, con la seguente annotazione autografa:

This book gives me no particular pleasure, at least my part does not. It is substantially correct in its interpretations, but it is full of misprints for which I am not responsible as I saw only a few of the proofs; & its description of the doctrine of more ancient mystics than Blake are inadequate, & in one or two cases mistaken” aggiungendo la propria firma e la data: “W. B. Y. May 3. 1900.” (CL2 468-469),

e ancora:

“His [Ellis’] mind was far more minute than mine, but less synthetic & had a tendency to make generalization on imperfect foundations, & was to remain content with discoveries. (Yeats 1997, 469)

L’anno successivo, all’interno della propria copia, evidenzia in modo critico alcune delle sue interpretazioni, sottolineando che sarebbe stato più appropriato presentarle come ipotesi da esplorare ulteriormente:

P.S. The Book is full of misprints. There is a good deal here & there in the biography etc. with which I am not in agreement. I think that some of my own constructive symbolism is put with too much confidence. It is mainly right but parts should be used rather as an interpretative hypothesis than as a certainty. The circulation of the Zoas, which seems to me unlike anything in traditional symbolism, is a chief cause of uncertainty, but most that I have written on the subject is at least part of Blake’s plan. There is also uncertainty about the personages who are mentioned by him too seldom to make one know them perfectly; & here and there elsewhere. | W.B.Y. May. 1900.” (WBGYL 227; cit. in Wade 218, 224)

Numerosi sarebbero anche gli errori imputabili proprio all’editore, “Old Quaritch” (WBGYL 227 [YL 220]); imprecisioni e refusi di vario genere che anche Ellis, alcuni anni prima,

<sup>28</sup> “The book must rouse a good deal of interest among literar[y] people & what will please me better influence for good the mystical societies through out Europe. You will like his system of thought it is profoundly Christian — though wrapped up in a queer dress — & certainly amazingly poetical — It has done my own mind a great deal of good — in liberating me from formulas & theories of several kinds. You will find it a difficult book — this Blake interpretation — but one that will open up for you I think as it has for me new kinds of poetic feeling & thought” (Yeats 1986, 218).

<sup>29</sup> La natura della collaborazione tra Yeats ed Ellis e la loro valutazione di WWB sono state oggetto di numerosi studi (Fletcher 1972; Masterson e O’Shea 1985; Antonielli e Nixon 2015; 2016).

aveva individuato nella propria copia, commentando a p. 41 del secondo volume: “this note belongs to the close of the previous chapter & is placed here by error. It refers to the poem ‘The Mental Traveller’. E. J. E. [Edwin John Ellis]”.

Nonostante la presenza di alcune “mystic truths” ottenute grazie ad una “supernatural assistance”,<sup>30</sup> la collaborazione dei due curatori sembra inoltre variamente frustrata da eventi e ragioni tutt’altro che spirituali, come Yeats rileva quando parla di “merciful stupidity of the body” (1955a, 164), riferendosi probabilmente alle mal celate gelosie nei suoi confronti da parte della moglie “straniera” di Ellis,<sup>31</sup> così come della loro discutibile metodologia di combinare “philosophical discussion... with improvised stories” (162).

Yeats esprime il suo giudizio nettamente negativo sulla sua edizione in tre volumi, nel 1928, con parole incisive annotate a matita nella copia appartenente a Maud Gonnet:

Keep the book out of my sight. Ellis was a wild man & I a most ignorant boy & I long to correct every page. We did however persuade people that Blake knew what he was talking about if we did not. (6 settembre 1928; Yeats 2002, 5158)

Con questi presupposti inizia il lungo processo di rielaborazione delle biografie di Blake, avviato dai due curatori attraverso le rispettive pubblicazioni. Un processo che ha ulteriormente incrementato i dubbi, tra gli studiosi, riguardo all’attribuzione dei capitoli di WWB a Yeats o a Ellis. “The difficulty”, osserva Deborah Dorfman, “is to know where Yeats leaves off and Ellis begins adding” (1969, 198). Eppure, sebbene il manoscritto 293/2/2, incluso nei “Papers of Edwin John Ellis”, non copra l’intera opera pubblicata e si discosti in parte dall’edizione finale, ciò che emerge da una sua analisi è che la maggior parte dei folia sono stati scritti da Yeats, con interpolazioni e revisioni di Ellis poi confluite in WWB.

Yeats avrebbe dunque avuto un ruolo tutt’altro che secondario nella composizione di questo materiale<sup>32</sup>, nella scelta delle fonti, nella narrazione di fatti ed eventi improbabili nella vita di una figura che era per lui un genio, un modello da seguire. Il rispetto per Blake lo spinge a studiarlo ed emularlo, cercando anche di legarlo a sé stesso, alla sua storia, come dimostrano le parti sulla presunta ascendenza irlandese di Blake o sulla sua affiliazione alle società esoteriche dell’epoca, riferimenti solo in parte eliminati nelle edizioni successive. Yeats ed Ellis rinnegano l’edizione Quaritch, definendola un lavoro giovanile, dettato dall’entusiasmo; eppure, le biografie successive non esprimono tale rifiuto, piuttosto rivisitano il vecchio materiale, lo rimodulano levigando certe asprezze, e finendo in definitiva per confermare, con le parole di Warwick Gould, che “the Ellis and Yeats edition of Blake was ‘collaboration in the deepest sense’ ” (Gould in Antonielli e Nixon 2016, xii).

<sup>30</sup> “We believed that he [Ellis] felt supernatural assistance, and he himself passed through curious states and exultations” (Yeats 1973, 30).

<sup>31</sup> Il lavoro dei due curatori venne pesantemente influenzato dalla presenza costante della moglie di Ellis, definita “[the] half-mad foreign wife” (*Mem*, 28), che sarebbe giunta al punto di cacciare Yeats dalla loro casa per settimane intere. Questo li avrebbe costretti a passeggiare per la strada senza la sua compagnia, ma restando nel suo campo visivo, per evitarne gli scatti di rabbia (Yeats 1973, 28).

<sup>32</sup> In particolare, come abbiamo visto, il manoscritto corrisponde a due capitoli parziali del Volume I, “The Memoir” e “The Symbolic System” e a un capitolo incompleto del Volume II, intitolato “The Symbolic Structure of the Mystical Writings”.

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