It is well known that Joyce Cary’s *The Horse’s Mouth* is possibly the most Blakean literary work in the language, at least on a straightforward definition, outside those of Blake himself. In any case, that is one way of describing a novel in which most of the thoughts of the central character – Gulley Jimson, a painter – are buttressed by quotations from the master, many of them of some length. It is not surprising to find that Blake was a formative influence, read, studied and admired long before Cary had meditated the composition of this novel or indeed had written any published novels. As he said, later in life, in a letter to the Blake Society when sickness prevented his attending one of their meetings, ‘I still possess the two volumes of the Ellis edition which I used at College, heavily annotated. He is for me the only philosopher, the only great poet, who had a real understanding of the nature of the world as seen by an artist.’ It is interesting to note that he refers to the ‘two volumes of the Ellis edition’, for this must mean the three-volume edition by Edwin Ellis and Cary’s fellow Anglo-Irishman, W. B. Yeats. This means that Cary was familiar with a reading of Blake informed by esoteric traditions such as were bread and butter to these editors, fellow members of the Golden Dawn. And this was not even the only edition which Cary annotated: he did the same thing to Max Plowman’s Everyman edition of 1927. It is also significant that he refers to Blake as a philosopher: the comparison and contrast of Blake with academic philosophy was an abiding preoccupation. This comes across very strongly in *The Horse’s Mouth* and is confirmed in a manuscript memoir on ‘My own religious history’ quoted by Alan Bishop in his biography. He contrasts Blake with the philosophers he read at Oxford and remarks that ‘Blake, whom I read and
studied at the time, had more effect on my idea of the world, for he introduced me into a highly complex universe where what is called the material is entirely dissolved into imaginative construction and states of feeling, where matter, mind and emotion, become simply different aspects of the one reality.' Obviously, this contrast bears on the conception of the artist in *The Horse’s Mouth* and is also quite precisely evoked in passages such as the one where Spinoza is unfavourably compared to Blake.

But before we turn to the implications of this contrast, there is another point to be made about Cary’s understanding of Blake’s ideas and intellectual provenance. For he is one of those commentators on Blake (Shaw, as we have seen, is another) who, in a period when a somewhat ahistorical, esoteric version of Blake was prevalent, and which often valued Blake in those terms, nevertheless was strongly aware of the dissenting Protestant context of Blake’s thought.

Plantie, one of the eccentric autodidact intellectuals of the ‘Greenbank’ area of London, is a cobbler by trade, and a part-time preacher. The combination of humble craftsman, dissenting Protestant and self-taught intellectual is itself redolent of Blake’s own ambience. It is Plantie who pays part of Gulley’s subscription to the Blake Society. Establishing the context in which Plantie moves, Cary notes that ‘There’s a lot of religion about Greenbank; I mean real old English religion’, and goes on to claim that, if you hear hymns, ‘it may be Bunyan’s great-great-great-grand-daughter teaching a class of young walruses to sing the International or a dustman starting a revival among the Unitarian Prebaptists branch of the Rechabite nudists’ (*HM*, 46). As he moves his narration towards Plantie’s part-payment of the Blake Society subscription, Cary describes how ‘All the London prophets have strong followings round Greenbank; that is Bunyan, Wesley, Richard Owen, Proudhon, Herbert Spencer, W. G. Grace, W. E. Gladstone, Marx and Ruskin’ (*HM*, 46). Although the intellectual bearings of such a diverse group of thinkers range far more widely than what could be learnt from Blake – not to mention the fact that most of them lived after him – the working-class, Protestant affiliation of their Greenbank enthusiasts situate Blake within a continuing tradition of dissent. Combining this sense with a knowledge of Blake’s esoteric sources, Cary is effectively as knowledgeable about Blake as any commentator in the period.

Not all Protestant dissent is equally laudable in Cary’s eyes, however. It could be said that, in his opinion, Blake transcends the limitations