William Blake: A radical visionary

William Blake: Tate Gallery, London, 9 November - 11 February 2001

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The biggest ever exhibition of the works of the British artist, poet and radical William Blake (1757-1827) is currently being held at the Tate Gallery in London. (http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/blake.htm)

Included in the display are some of his most popular works, such as the poems *Tyger Tyger burning bright*, *And did those feet in Ancient Times* and the picture *The Ancient of Days* (http://sunsite.org.uk/cgfa/blake/p-blake5.htm)

According to Tate Director Stephen Deuchar, Blake, "despite his famously radical politics and vehement rejection of much of the social establishment about him, has been affectionately adopted by a wide British public as a kind of patron saint."

I believe it is precisely because of his politics and anti-establishment views that people feel so much affection for Blake.

Following similar developments elsewhere in the Tate, the Blake exhibition is themed rather than chronological. This tends towards a separation of Blake the Gothic artist, Blake the radical and Blake the prophet. In someone like Blake, where these aspects of his life are inter-related in such a complex and rich way, I feel this has its disadvantages. It also reinforces Deuchar's idea of Blake the British patron saint, whose radicalism can be safely put to one side. I am sure Blake would turn in his grave at the thought of it. Blake himself saw these intimately linked aspects to his work when he said, "The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative; it is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients called the Golden Age".

It seems that Blake was aware of his unusual imagination from an early age. When he was thirteen he wrote the poem *Song*—about Phoebus, the sun god who catches a bird in a silver net, shuts it in a golden cage and mocks its "loss of liberty". Besides being an allegory on his loss of youth, Blake seems aware of his future life—for Phoebus is also the god of prophecy. He claimed he had his first vision when he was four.

Blake was born in 1757 to religious Dissenting parents. Dissent was a complex religious and intellectual tradition that owes its origins, in part, to the radical elements of the English Civil War such as the Levellers, who argued for greater equality. But it also encompassed the merchant and manufacturing classes in their fight against the aristocracy. It espoused ideas of the freeborn Englishman resisting the arbitrary powers of his masters and praying in his nonconformist chapel. It was expressed in books such as John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress (1678), the allegorical tale of a Christian's journey to the Celestial City. There was also a Millenarian tradition based on a literal understanding of the Book of Revelations and the establishment of a New Jerusalem. The imagery was a reflection of deep objective changes in society that also expressed the subjective strivings for a better future.

Blake's father was an industrious London tradesman, who sent him to drawing school when he was ten and apprenticed him to James Basire, a well-known engraver, five years later. The exhibition shows some of the detailed studies, believed to be by Blake, of the mediaeval Gothic tombs in Westminster Abbey. Most are simple pen and ink with a grey wash. The study of the effigy of Queen Eleanor seen from above has a remarkable three-dimensional effect. That the young Blake, raised as a religious Protestant Dissenter, should find the flowing, simplistic figures of the mediaeval Catholic period an inspiration for his art is only one of his many contradictions.

Blake was to remain an engraver for the rest of his life, subsidising his experimental work with his commercial income. Engravers were viewed as skilled workers rather than artists and, for a long time, could not be members of the Royal Academy because that was, according to its documents, "incompatible with justice and a due regard to the dignity of the Royal Academy". When Blake was finally admitted, he called them "a pack of Idle Sycophants". He reserved particular venom for Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Academy, saying, "This man has been hired to depress Art". He saw the Academy's training system, based on the copying of classical statues and paintings, as suppressing imagination. He felt the whole system was tied up with patronage and "where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but war only".

In 1780 Blake witnessed the Gordon "No Popery" Riots. What had started as a petition by the Protestant Association against the toleration of Catholicism turned into mob violence against the wealthy and the burning of Newgate prison. The manipulation of the "mob" against the monarchy and aristocracy by Whig politicians was a characteristic of the eighteenth century until the French Revolution in 1789, when the threat of working class action outside the control of these politicians increased. (The Whigs were the political representatives of the industrialists and Dissenters that later provided the core of the Liberal Party).

It was also the year of Blake's first Royal Academy exhibition. He exhibited historical paintings, not the usual vainglorious scenes of British military victories but more subtle ones. The *Death of Earl Godwin* represents divine intervention, *Lear*—forgiveness and *Magna Carta*—liberty.

Although Blake was developing his own style, as the art historian Anthony Blunt remarked, "as a painter, had he died at the age of thirty, he would hardly be remembered at all". However, the social and intellectual ferment that led to the French Revolution transformed his Art.

In 1788 he produced his first illuminated book, *All Religions are One.* According to Blake, all religions were products of the Imagination or Poetic Genius and therefore contain the same essential truths. This idea was one strand of deism, that was a half way house between full-blown revelatory religion and secularism. In part, it was a response to the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that increasingly displaced religion. Blake wrestled with this development and what he saw as its implication—in a world that can be explained rationally, what role is there for the imagination and, ultimately, for the artist? It was

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a complaint voiced by other Romantic artists, who criticised the scientists and philosophers who seemed to make humans passive creatures without creative reason and imagination. However, it cannot be regarded simply as a reactionary movement against rational thought. It was part and parcel of the Enlightenment—the complex cultural phenomenon that addressed many of the questions in science, society and the arts that a previous generation could not begin to examine.

The home of the Enlightenment was France, where the old monarchical regime was most decadent. The middle classes were increasingly prosperous and confident, and their ideologists such as Voltaire and Diderot expressed their desires "to be something".

Artists, paralleling scientific discoveries, sought to understand the human mind, the subconscious and its contradictions. This found one expression in the cult of the hero. Napoleon, until he became Emperor, attracted many artists, as did Satan—the anti-hero and source of energy and vitality. Above all, Romanticism is associated with the concept of the "sublime". Sometimes it is the elemental power of nature—shipwrecks were a favourite theme. Sometimes it is overt horror, as in the paintings of Blake's friend Henry Fuseli (1745 - 1825). At other times it is less extreme. The portrait of William Blake by Thomas Phillips in 1807 (http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/blakeinteractive/gothic/img/life_blake.jpg) that is exhibited at the Tate perfectly captures a subtle sublime atmosphere. Blake does not look out at us, but upwards, as if in a trance. Phillips asked him to imagine he was talking to the Angels as he sat for the painting. Though otherworldly, one gets the impression of Blake, the human, deeply concerned about this world.

In his next book, *There is No Natural Religion*, Blake questions another aspect of deism, which says that one can only know God through his works (Nature). Blake argues that God is only truly knowable through revelation. The exhibition has one page of the book on display called Application. It is a rather crude etching in green ink around the single saying, "He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who only sees the Ratio [rational] only sees himself". Underneath is a cloaked and bearded figure on all fours with a pair of compasses in one hand. This is a recurring image in Blake's work derived from the mediaeval idea of God the Great Architect.

However, Blake gives this image an almost opposite meaning. God the Father, often called Urizen—the Creator—in Blake's own mythology, represents the law-giving, restrictive and unforgiving enemy of humanity. These ideas were the basis of the "primeval priest's assumed power" and lead to the repressive power of the established churches, a familiar idea in Dissent.

The following year saw more illuminated printing—the *Songs of Innocence*. Jesus, the forgiving Shepherd-God and not the vengeful God the Father, plays a central role. The pictures have a curved and flowing style, with many symbols. Trees and vines suggest fruitfulness and security. The flaming red and gold of sunset and sunrise spread across the pages. Blake intended the text and picture to complement each other and they do. The whole work achieves a subtle and warm confidence in humankind. Even when orphan children are dragged to church to sing for their benefactors, they sing their hearts out, their innocent voices soaring above the meanness below. One has the feeling that Blake has great confidence in humanity.

By 1794, Blake was selling *Songs of Innocence* combined with *Songs of Experience*, "Shewing the Two Contrary States of Man". It is a complex amalgam, with songs complementing and subverting each other. Here is *The Nurses Song* from the *Songs of Innocence*:

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still
"Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Come leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies."
"No no let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides in the sky, the little birds fly
And the hills are all covered in sheep."
"Well well go and play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed."
The little ones leaped and shouted and laugh'd
And all the hills ecchoed.
(*Blake's Poetry and Designs*, Norton Critical Editions, 1979)

Beneath the poem is a small engraving showing seven children in loose clothing, holding hands, dancing in a circle. The nurse sits reading her book under trees that form a protective enveloping canopy. (The illustrations to *Songs of Innocence* can be viewed at http://members.aa.net/~urizen/innocence/soi.html)

In contrast, here is *The Nurses Song* from the *Songs of Experience:*

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisprings are in the dale:
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.
"Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise
Your spring and your day, are wasted in play
And your winter and night in disguise"
(*ibid.*)

Beneath this much darker poem the engraving shows a single boy, smartly dressed, his nurse combing his hair. The poem itself is only two verses—severely curtailed. The voices of children are absent. (The illustrations to *Songs of Experience* can be viewed at http://members.aa.net/~urizen/experience/soe.html)

This change between the two sets of poems coincides with the development of the French Revolution. Blake already exhibited sympathy for the revolutionary struggle for liberty when he exhibited *War unchained by an angel, Fire, Pestilence and Famine Following* at the Royal Academy in 1784. In this picture, Blake shows his support for the American Revolution (1776 - 1781) and his opposition to the British war of intervention, with all its "dark horrors".

The revolution in France received widespread support in Britain. The first signs of a working class movement in Britain differentiating itself from religious Dissent accompanied it. As the historian EP Thompson puts it, "one often feels the dormant seeds of political Radicalism lie within it [Dissent], ready to germinate whenever planted in a beneficial and hopeful social context." (*The making of the English Working Class*, Pelican, 1963) The French Revolution was just such a context and it was the development the government feared most. As the Blake Exhibition shows, an atmosphere of state terror was built up to suppress the widespread agitation for democracy between 1792-96. On display is a Royal Proclamation requiring magistrates to stamp out riots, provide intelligence reports and destroy "wicked and seditious Writings [that] have been printed, published and industriously dispersed".

There are also copies of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man: Being An Answer to Mr Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*, which sold 100,000 copies largely through the efforts of the London Corresponding Society. Paine attacked the monarchy and hereditary principle (though not private property and laissez-faire economics) and proposed state welfare as a right. Whereas Burke said government should be based on tradition, wisdom and experience (his "philosophy of conservatism"), Paine said each generation should decide its own rights and government. Paine was elected a deputy for the Calais region in northern France and plans were

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made for a British National Convention.

As the Convention met in Edinburgh, William Pitt's government arrested the leaders. There is an interesting print at the Tate by Richard Newton (1777- 1798) entitled *Promenade in the State Side of Newgate 1793*. It shows John Horne Tooke, who founded the Society of the Bill of Rights in 1769, as a "jail-bird" and the radical lawyer John Frost.

Frost was a delegate of the London Corresponding Society to the French National Convention and attended the trial of King Louis XVI. Joseph Gerrald, who proposed the British Convention to the London Corresponding Society, is also depicted. He was sentenced to fourteen years transportation to Australia, but only survived one year.

Across the country the government encouraged the formation of Associations for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers. "Church and King" mobs were organised that burnt effigies of Paine. Special targets of these organisations were the print shops that published "seditious Writings" and served as meeting places for radicals. In the 1780s and 1790s, Blake's main employer was Joseph Johnson. His bookshop in the City of London was a meeting place for the likes of Paine, the anarchistic William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and for whom Blake illustrated *Original Stories from Real Life*. Blake was known for wearing the red cap of the French revolutionaries and was a supporter of Paine, helping him escape into exile. Within a few yards of Blake's house the anti-Jacobin Lambeth Loyalist Association met. In this atmosphere Blake wrote, "I say I shan't live five years and if I live one it will be a Wonder. June 1793".

Despite the threat to his life from pro-Monarchist forces, the period of the Revolution was also an artistic catalyst for Blake. He saw revolution as a symbol of energy and regeneration and for a time the French Revolution as ushering in the new Utopia.

In 1789 he published *The Book of Thel*, the virgin who passes from Innocence to Experience questioning how she can have a fulfilled life. He illustrated *Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam 1791*, John Stedman's first hand account of the brutal suppression of a slave revolt in South America. In the engraving *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*, a black slave is stretched out on a wooden frame. An axe rests on the ground. A severed hand lies close by. Crouching above him another slave raises a stick. He is about to smash it down on one of the captive's legs. According to Stedman it "broke his bones to shivers till the marrow, blood and splinters flew about the field—but the sufferer never uttered a groan nor a sigh". Blake captures the fortitude of the victim and the horror on the face of his friend, forced to carry out the torture. (See http://sites.unc.edu/~tb/fall99/BB499/ov14.html)

He developed his ideas on the role of women in 1793 with *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. It is the story of the rape of Oothon, the "soft soul of America", who searches for sexual fulfilment and represents the spirit of freedom, vulnerability, and the energy of the American Revolution. She questions the value of an unloving marriage:

"Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound
In spells of law to one she loathes? And must she drag the chain
Of life in weary lust"

In 1790 Blake started the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a satire on Emmanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell From Things Heard and Seen*. Blake had attended the General Conference of the New Jerusalem Church in 1789 that had unanimously voted for Swedenborg's doctrines. However, Blake quickly came to see him as a "spiritual Predestinarian" who repeated "all the old falsehoods". Swedenborg had attacked Thomas Paine and expelled most of his anti-slavery congregation.

Blake counterposes his "Contraries" to Swedenborg's idea of equilibrium. "Without Contraries is no progression", says Blake. "Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence." Angels and devils fly, dance and embrace across the pages undermining the simplistic view that good is better than evil.

My favourite illustration in *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is plate 14. Blake tells us, "The ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true, as I have heard from Hell". What now appears "finite and corrupt" will become "infinite and holy" through an "improvement of sensual enjoyment", especially sexual fulfilment. But first, man's body and soul must be reunited and Blake claims he will show us how through his Art. His printing is a gift from Hell—the "infernal method of corrosives, which in Hell are salutatory and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away and displaying the infinite, which was hid". Here Blake refers to his unique method of copper plate etching, where acid is used to eat around the areas that are left standing proud to receive the ink. The result is of much rougher and broader appearance. Traditional techniques had relied on the etched-out areas holding the ink.

In the same plate Blake sees himself as "cleansing the doors of perception" for man who "has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." At the top of the page lies a naked man, perhaps Blake himself, dead or asleep. Above, a figure—all you can see is the top of its head and outstretched arms—sweeps up over the man. The rest of its body dissolved in a curtain of red and gold flames. It is a powerful and beautiful page full of allegories.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell ends with *The Song of Liberty* and its last line, "For every thing that lives is holy". (For illustrations accompanying *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* see http://members.aa.net/~urizen/mhh/mhh.html)

In 1792 the September terror took place in France, in which thousands of aristocrats were executed, including the King. These events provoked the first signs of an intellectual disenchantment in Britain. By 1799 the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was writing to William Wordsworth, "I wish you would write a poem in blank verse addressed to those who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes for the amelioration of mankind and are sinking into an almost Epicurean selfishness".

Blake seems to have been similarly affected. He started writing *The French Revolution*, but never published it, and it only deals with events up to the terror. But he still laid the blame with the English government. *The Accusers*, an etching in green ink, is subtitled *Our End Is Come*. It is a celebration of "when France receiv'd the Demon's light". Three stocky figures stand together, hysterical and scared. The centre one wears a crown representing King George; the other two guard him. The same year he produced a coloured version. The King is in black armour and red cloak; smoke and flames seem to emanate from his feet and billow up around them all.

In 1793, Blake produced *America: A Prophecy*. In it, George Washington's "strong voice" blasts across the sea to the dragon "Guardian Prince of Albion" (King George again), who spits out "flam'd red meteors", provoking the serpent Orc "lover of wild rebellion" and "Hater of Dignities". (See http://dazzle.village.virginia.edu:8888/blake/Illuminated-Book/AMERICA/america.a/@Generic__BookView) Orc defeats the Prince and spreads plague and misery across Albion, a theme developed in *Europe: A Prophecy*. The frontispiece has one of his most famous images, the "Ancient of Days", depicting again the God the Father figure restricting the world of imagination with his compasses. (See http://dazzle.village.virginia.edu:8888/blake/Illuminated-Book/EUROPE/europe.e/@Generic__BookView)

Blake created his illuminated *Book of Urizen* in 1794, which again explores his concern with Imagination. (See

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http://dazzle.village.virginia.edu:8888/blake/Illuminated-Book/URIZEN/urizen.g/@Generic__BookView) He then turned to other media, in particular bigger images without text. An important reason for the change in his work was the reactionary political atmosphere. Those who prophesised apocalyptic social change faced great risks. Richard Brothers, who won a substantial following with his predictions of an era of universal brotherhood after an imminent Apocalypse, was sent to an asylum for 11 years.

The colour print *Newton* (http://www.tate.org.uk/collection/N/N05/N05058_9.JPG) is a particularly striking painting, showing the naked scientist who successfully wakes the dead but in the process brings disease and darkness—a reference to the Book of Revelations. Sitting like a statue on a rock covered in waving coral-like creatures, Newton concentrates on a mathematical diagram, compasses in his hand. It is an ambivalent image of Newton the rationalist, but, as ever, redemption is at hand—the white sheet of mortality is about to slip off his body.

Blake has sometimes been depicted as being anti-science, but his attitude, as I explained earlier, is that rationalism should be balanced by imagination. He was well read in the sciences and realised their creative nature, calling Newton "a mighty Spirit". The "Mental Fight" he espoused in *Jerusalem* included the intellectual development of science, as well as art. He designed several plates for Erasmus Darwin's Botanic Garden and produced a portrait of David Hartley, whose *Observations on Man* tackled the relationship between the physiological and psychological.

In 1797, English sailors mutinied at Spithead and Nore, blockading the Thames and threatening to sail to France the same year that the Bishop of Llandaff launched an attack on Paine. Blake still defended Paine, saying he had "extinguished superstition" and expressed his "Energetic Genius". To Blake, although the Bible was important for its sentiments and examples, it was also part of a "State Trick". Priests were "Dishonest, Designing Knaves who in the hope of a good living adopt the State Religion".

In 1800, Blake left London for Felpham on England's south coast, writing, "In joy Beams over the Sea, a bright light over France, but the Web and the Veil I have left behind me at London". There he was put on trial: A soldier had accused him of sedition after Blake had forced him out of his garden. He was acquitted and moved back to London. He called those years "the Darkest Years that ever a Mortal suffer'd".

In 1804, Napoleon was crowned Emperor. Most intellectuals and artists regarded it as the final blow to revolutionary sentiment, but it seems to have spurred Blake on to greater exploration of the reasons for this development. He started on a new grand poem *Milton.* John Milton had been an official in Cromwell's revolutionary government after the English Civil War and was the country's most famous poet. Blake admired his opposition to tyranny and defence of a free press. However, he thought Milton had lost his revolutionary energy after the restoration of the monarchy. Milton had become too rational and believed in a fiery jealous God rather than the forgiving Holy Spirit. He was infected by the "silly Greek and Latin slaves of the Sword", who would "depress Mental and prolong Corporeal War". Hence, Blake's hymn to "Mental Fight" in "And did those feet in ancient time Walk upon England's mountain green" that appears at the beginning of the book.

In *Milton,* Blake again addresses how it is possible to keep the prophetic spirit alive. But for him, the solution would only occur when all classes of society accepted Jesus the revolutionary thus allowing forgiveness and reconciliation to follow. (See http://dazzle.village.virginia.edu:8888/blake/Illuminated-Book/MILTON/milton.c/@Generic__BookView)

The title page for *Jerusalem,* Blake's longest illuminated book, was also dated 1804—but none were printed before 1820. Its 100 plates elaborate earlier themes about the Biblical Fall of Man, the need for forgiveness rather than accusation, freedom of Art and the problems with rationalism. In it, Blake wanted to reunite England with Jerusalem on a truly revolutionary and early Christian religious basis.

In the few years before he died, other artists finally came to appreciate Blake. John Linnell commissioned Blake to paint watercolours of *Dante's Divine Comedy*. They are an unfinished series that show Blake had lost none of his artistic powers. I think they are his most expressive, showing Dante's ideas in images without the need of text. Such is the case with the swirling patterns of *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car* (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/WorkImage?id=791). But Blake also softens Dante's mediaeval harshness, saying, "Dante saw devils where I see none—I see only good". He warns us about Dante's reconciliation at the end of the Divine Comedy with the dogmatic Roman Catholic Church.

By the end of his life, Blake had carried out his promise to "Create a System or be enslv'd by another Man's". In his mythology, he had created a "sublime allegory address'd to the intellectual powers". He saw himself as successor to the revolutionary Milton, as Los the blacksmith that "rouzes the faculties to act" and re-forges the imagination of the slumbering giant Albion of Ancient England. The appeal to ancient British folklore was common currency. Joseph Gerrald, after all, had proposed the Convention, likening it to the folk moot (meeting) of Saxon England.

In 1827, the last year of his life, Blake wrote to a friend about those Englishmen who despised "Republican Art" and who, after the French Revolution, thought they were in a "happy state of agreement to which I for One do not agree". It is amazing that he appears to have retained his radicalism and confidence in humanity. He wrote in *The Everlasting Gospel*:

"Thou art a Man, God is no more
Thy own humanity learn to adore"

The Tate exhibition is well worth visiting. It is unlikely such a comprehensive collection will be on display again. Do not be put off by the publicity about a mad, misogynist Blake. The images are beautiful and if you take time to understand their allegorical nature—as Blake would have wished—you will see he was firmly rooted in the popular tradition and a unique artist concerned with the problems of his day. And that he gives inspiration for today.

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The following sites contain useful material and links about William Blake

http://www.betatesters.com/penn/blake.htm
http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/blake/
http://members.aa.net/~urizen/blake2.html

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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