Blake, William, 1757-1827
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Article Text:

William Blake , poet and artist, was born on 28 November 1757 to James Blake, a hosier, and Catherine Hermitage, daughter of a hosier, at 28 Broad Street in Golden Square, London. According to one of his earliest biographers, Tatham, James did not send the young William to school because 'he despised restraints and rules'. Nonetheless, the 12-year-old boy was eventually sent to what was arguably the best drawing school of the time, Pars, where he was apprenticed to James Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries. His tutelage under liberal-minded Basire was a formative experience which helped him to shape his original style but also made his art less accessible to a public accustomed to the softer touch of Bartolozzi. Basire also encouraged his young pupil to draw monuments in Westminster Abbey and other old churches and to sketch scenes from English history, training which may have contributed to the unique perception of history in many of Blake's works, from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) to *Jerusalem* (1804).

Blake's visionary and poetical talents also blossomed early. When returning home from the hills round Dulwich, he saw a tree filled with angels and was barely saved by his mother from a flogging when his father assumed he was lying. At the age of 12, he began to write original verse, some of which came to be included in his *Poetical Sketches*, notably the well-known lyric 'How sweet I roam'd from field to field'.

After his apprenticeship, Blake studied at the Royal Academy and began to support himself by engraving for booksellers and magazines. His acquaintance with Thomas Stothard was eventually to lead to an introduction to the most famous sculptor in Europe, John Flaxman, who became Blake's staunchest friend. Flaxman's coterie were strong supporters of political reform, Flaxman and the artist George Cumberland being members of the Society for Constitutional Information. Blake himself participated briefly in the Gordon Riots of 1780 when he was supposedly 'forced to go in the very front rank and witness the destruction of Newgate [prison].'

Two years later, he married Catherine Boucher, the daughter of a market-gardener at Battersea, and set up lodgings at Leicester Fields. Blake taught her to read and write, and she helped him produce his books. It is tempting to view the couple throughout their long marriage as a model for his characters Los and Enitharmon: 'And first he drew a line upon the walls of shining heaven / And Enitharmon tincturd it with beams of blushing love.' They opened a printseller's shop in 1784, and were joined by William's brother, Robert, who worked there until his death in 1787. When his brother died, Blake records how he beheld his spirit ascending and 'clapping its hands for joy'. Thereafter, Blake claimed to hold contact with his spirit 'daily and hourly'; he heard 'his advice and even now write from his Dictate.'

Indeed, Blake was to attribute his new method of illuminated painting/relief etching to this

spiritual dictate when he could not find a publisher for *the Songs of Innocence*. The verse was written with the designs outlined on copper with impervious acid-resistant fluid after which the remainder of the plate was treated with acid so that the letters and outlines were left prominent as in stereotype to be printed in any tint. Each page was individually detailed and coloured. His wife assisted him in tinting them as well as in removing the impressions and placing the pages on boards. Not surprisingly, this invention would affect Blake's conceptualisation of his designs, allowing him to integrate text, illustrations, and designs on a much greater scale than previously encountered in the works of others or in his own. His two earlier illustrated works, *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion* (1788), for instance, had relatively small plates displaying little fluidity between text and design.

The first work to exhibit this new freedom was *Songs of Innocence* (1789), which was expanded as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* five years later. The innocence-experience opposition, however, should not be taken too categorically. The songs redefine or question established doctrines and attitudes, or subtly point out uncomfortable truths. Though the image of the lamb as a symbol of Christ is not novel in itself, what is new in a poem like 'The Lamb' is the strong emphasis upon humanness, rather than on awesome divinity; already there is an anticipation of the God in Jerusalem who tells the disturbed sleeper: 'I am in you and you in me, mutual love divine [...] I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and a friend.' Contemporary complacency is challenged in 'The Little Black Boy', where the reader is led to question slavery almost unawares, during a period when the abolition of slavery was only beginning to be raised. If 'we are put on earth [...] That we may learn to bear the beams of love' and God will call out so that they will 'like lambs rejoice', the implication is of course that man, like God, should learn to consider the little black boy as a brother. At the same time, however, this simplicity is undercut in the last stanza when the little black boy desires to 'shade him [little English boy] from the heat till he can bear, / To lean in joy upon our fathers knee ... And be like him and he will then love me'; even this desired mutuality cannot be left to God but must depend upon the white boy's approval. Another pressing social issue is raised in 'The Chimney Sweeper', which calls attention to the poor working conditions endured by young sweepers. The optimism at the end of the last stanza rings false and almost sinister as the AABB rhyme scheme of the previous five stanzas ends in deceptive rhymes: 'dark/work' and 'warm/harm.' Finally, even the apparently simple poem 'Nurse's Song' is interesting in the way it subverts authority, albeit playfully: if the nurse bids the children to go home, the children 'defy' her by protesting 'No no let us play, for it is yet day' so that she must acquiesce with 'Well well go and play till the light fades away.' All told, innocence is not ignorance, but rather a state of idealism which Blake either celebrates or whose unfulfilment he laments. This stands in strong contrast to the Songs of Experience which lash out against the realities of 1790s Britain and its 'marks of woe': poverty, tyrannical fathers, kings, and priests.

The Songs of Innocence were followed in 1790 by *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in part a parody of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, whose writings consist of passages of philosophical discourse interspersed by spiritual memoirs or 'Memorable Relations' ('Memorable Fancies', in Blake's version). Although Blake was attracted by Swedenborg's anti-clerical views from roughly 1787 to 1789, going so far as to attend a five-day conference of the New Jerusalem Church at the Swedenborgian chapel in Great East Cheap on 13 April 1789, he subsequently distanced himself from the New Church and questioned whether Swedenborg had truly overturned prejudiced notions of moral virtue.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell challenges many of these prejudiced notions. Here, the

commonly accepted view that 'Good is the passive that obeys reason: Evil the active springing from energy' is contested throughout the work in carnivalesque fashion. If abiding by the energies of natural desire is preferable to abiding by a predetermined code, the devils are also more virtuous than the hypocritical angels, or, as he states in the last Memorable Fancy, 'Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules.' It is in the 'Proverbs of Hell' where we find such aphorisms as 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom'; 'He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence'; and 'Expect poison from the standing water'. The exuberant illustrations and designs of ecstatic figures soaring in flames or mothers giving birth to babies help champion energy and passion as a desirable state of being. The illustrations on the plate which informs us that 'Energy is Eternal Delight' all help to reinforce this sense of exhilaration with a radiant sun, bounding figures, and not least, minute but lively designs in the very lines of the texts: the humans, quadrupeds, birds, fish, and vegetation all signal a celebration of life. Finally, the concluding 'Song of Liberty,' which was written slightly later, ties the new notions of virtue to revolutionary politics where kings and priests will no longer have the power to govern tyrannically or to inculcate repressive codes of behaviour.

In 1791, Blake became an engraver for the radical publisher, Joseph Johnson. Although it is not known to what extent he was personally acquainted with other members of the Johnson circle -- Henry Fuseli, William Godwin , Tom Paine , Richard Price, and Joseph Priestley -- we may be fairly certain that he knew Fuseli and the latter's erstwhile admirer, Mary Wollstonecraft , since he illustrated her *Original Stories for Children* . It was also around this time that he met his most loyal patron, Thomas Butts, who continued to purchase a number of his drawing, temperas, and frescoes at moderate prices for 30 years.

During the early 1790s, Blake worked steadily, producing *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *America* in 1793, *The Songs of Experience* , *The Book of Urizen* and *Europe* in 1794, and *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los* in 1795. Although Urizen is a ubiquitous figure in Blake's works (with the exception of the *Songs*), the *Books* of Urizen, Los, and Ahania may be read as alternative histories of the creation of the world read from different perspectives with different emphases. *The Book of Urizen* , for instance, focuses upon the political, religious, and moral corruptions which follow when Urizen, the 'primeval priest', is spurned by the Eternals, attempts to establish his supremacy, falls into a state of 'stony sleep', and is woken up after being bound by Los only to establish laws and religions again. Here, the plates are designed to look like sacred scripture with the columns of verse divided into chapters and each chapter divided into numbered sections, while the actual verse recreates the impression of Hebrew sacred poetry as found in Robert Lowth's mid-eighteenth-century translation of the Bible.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the role of Urizen in Blake's poetry with any degree of exactitude, he might be read as the embodiment of the wrongs of Enlightenment reason. However mistaken Blake was on the matter of Locke's political beliefs, he identified the flaws of materialism with those of absolutism. Here, the evils which yield to what might be called materialistic Lockean philosophy are the same which yield to what might be called 'authoritarian' attitudes towards government and religion; the solitary Urizen is depicted writing 'in books formd of metals' creating moral codes and attempting to establish 'One curse, one weight, one measure / One King, one God, one Law.' Indeed, as W.J.T. Mitchell points out, the emotional atmosphere of the Urizen illustrations is one of 'absolute isolation', where single, huddled figures either occupy an entire plate or multiple figures are shown divided

from one another, 'united only by their anguish'. Towards the end of the book, Urizen's laws and his Net of Religion are seen as the causes of increasing selfishness and narrow-mindedness:

Till the shrunken eyes clouded over
Discernd not the woven hipocrisy
But the streaky slime in their heavens
Brought together by narrowing perceptions
Appeard transparent air; for their eyes
Grew small like the eyes of a man
And in reptile forms shrinking together
Of seven feet stature they remaind
Six days they shrunk from existence
And on the seventh day they rested
And they bless'd the seventh day, in sick hope:
And forgot their eternal life. *****
And their children wept, and built
Tombs in the desolate places,
And form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them
The eternal laws of God.

Blake's attempt in the late 1790s to encompass the Fall in detail with his Gothic-novel-like 'Four Zoas' was never fully realised.

In 1800, Flaxman introduced him to the poet and patron of poets, William Hayley . Hayley was impressed enough to have Blake engrave illustrations for a biography of the poet William Cowper while providing him with a cottage by the sea for three years. Towards the end, however, Blake grew increasingly frustrated by his lack of artistic independence and decided to leave. This decision was complicated by an incident which took place in his garden as Blake pushed off a drunken soldier when the latter refused to leave. Consequently, Blake was charged with sedition and tried before the Chichester courts. Although he was acquitted, he continued to believe (rather unfairly) that Hayley was behind the whole episode.

It was during this time that he worked on Milton , a poem that was intended to correct the conceptual errors of John Milton 's *Paradise Lost* : among them, the over-valuation of reason and the belief that the pleasure of sex arose after the Fall. Milton may best be summarised as a quasi-autobiographical study of personal, intellectual, and artistic growth, or as Blake himself styled it, 'a Sublime Allegory' and a 'Poem concerning my Three years' Herculean Labours at Felpham.' With little false modesty, he considered it 'the Grandest Poem that this World contains.' Here, Milton descends to 'Self-annihilation' to retrace his errors before entering into Blake. Milton subsequently confronts his shadow, the Covering Cherub (i.e., the spirit of the 27 churches of Christianity) and his spectre or Satan, denouncing him for the errors of natural religion. What is perhaps most intriguing -- and confusing -- apart from the barrage of Biblical, British and mythical names and places is the conception of time, where all of the events related take place simultaneously. But within this complex piece, it is not difficult to pick out one or more details of Blake's life. Here, the confrontation between Palambron and Satan, as the latter attempts to take control of the former's mills, has long been thought to represent Blake's idea of his conflict with Hayley: 'You know Satans mildness and his self-imposition / Seeming a brother, being a tyrant [...]'

More difficulties were to follow upon Blake's return to London, as he settled at 17 South Molton Street. Although his subsequent employer, Robert Cromek, purchased his designs to Blair 's The Grave , Blake was ultimately not permitted to engrave them; his designs were handed to Louis Schiavonetti, whose style Cromek believed to be more accessible. Blake, of course, resented the breach of contract and loss of copyright and refused to enter into another arrangement with Cromek when the latter endeavoured to negotiate for the publication of his design for the Canterbury Pilgrimage. Cromek then suggested the subject to Stothard who accepted, ignorant that Blake was already engaged in it. This was to cause a permanent breach between the former friends and collaborators.

In 1808, Blake was to exhibit at the Royal Academy for the last time. He grew increasingly isolated until 1818 when he met John Linnell, another impoverished artist, who nonetheless commissioned him to engrave what some regard as Blake's greatest visual work, the Inventions to the Book of Job . Linnell was also to introduce new friends and disciples, including John Varley, George Richmond, Samuel Palmer, and Oliver Finch.

Blake died peacefully on 12 August 1827. His wife, Catherine, of whom he drew a portrait while saying 'You have ever been an angel to me', claimed to hold daily conversations with his spirit afterwards.

For over a century, Blake's reputation as a poet was eclipsed by his art. This is perhaps not surprising considering that few of his works were published in the conventional way. It was not until 1905 that the first collected edition of his poetry appeared.

How should we interpret Blake, the poet who believed that 'All things exist in the Human Imagination'? Blake is often classed with other Romantic poets like Wordsworth , Coleridge , Shelley , Keats and Byron , with whom his work has varying affinities. Challenging the earlier view of Blake as an idiosyncratic visionary, recent scholars such as David Erdman, E.P. Thompson and Jon Mee have emphasised his engagement with contemporary history and politics. It is now clear too that many of Blake's characteristic themes -- the tyrannical father, the ambitious ruler (e.g., Urizen), the cast-off woman, and the threat of the 'Female Will' -- were also themes common to writers of the 1780s and 90s like Matthew Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, and Charlotte Smith . Blake's timeless perception of history, where the past is always present, as well as his labyrinthine interpolated narratives, colloquies, and prophecies, are not far from the Gothic awareness of past evils lingering into the present: whereas Lewis and Radcliffe resort to the scenes of sixteenth-century France, Italy, and Spain, Blake plays with ancient and modern landscapes alike. Like the novelists of his time, Blake may be said to be crafting a subgenre out of contemporary ills and ideals by challenging platitudes, hierarchies, and received codes of behaviour. It is only when we place Blake in the context of the history and literature of his time that we can begin to grasp the full extent of his great originality.

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