

William Blake

ENGRAVER: BORN 28 NOVEMBER 1757

"Nor Can Man Exist But By Brotherhood."



" The Angel that presided o'er my birth
Said, " Little creature, form'd of Joy & Mirth,
Go love without the help of any Thing on Earth."

However the works of William Blake may be assessed as " literature " or as "Art," there can be no question that he was one of the most extraordinary human beings who ever existed. A lifelong repudiator of categories and systems, he himself can be forced into none, and his thought evades any systematisation. because the terms and *personae* of his myths are always changing; in fact he is recording that process of change which is at the root of life. In all things a great original, he had to invent his own forms and methods to portray unique perceptions of his creative imagination.

His seventy years of life span a period, like our own, when the whole pattern of human living passes through a crisis of catastrophic

change : when new Energies break through old Ratios, only to form new Ratios in their turn. To Blake all systems were oppressive. He was all the time on the side of Energy. " One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression." The stress here is on the word Law. " Energy is Eternal Delight." It might be thought that such a temperament in such a time would only be at home in the wilds of an uncultivated landscape. The opposite is the case. All but three of Blake's years - and they not happy ones - were spent in the centre of the London he loved. He had to be at the heart of the human experience, the human struggle. Only there would his Imagination respond in intense vision to the reality pressing upon him.

What is unique in Blake is that he was the embodiment of the naked creative imagination. He escaped all formal education. The child's imaginative perception grew untrammelled and unclouded by the imposition of any alien pattern of ideas, and remained through the man's life the sole director and organiser of his thought. Blake *thought* in images, not just some times but all the time, and set down on paper simply what he saw with his inner eye. There is no abstract argument in his work, only assertion. You cannot argue about a perceived identity, only about an appearance or deduction.

This is not to say that he was uneducated. He was in fact very widely read, and familiar, often through personal contact, with all the speculative theories current in his time. And at different times in his life he acquired a working knowledge of Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Italian. His imaginative perception took to itself what it needed and incorporated it into his total vision of human life.

In this imaginative apprehension, past, present and future were simultaneously alive. To read, or to think of, Ezekiel or Milton was to have them present with him and to converse with them. " That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius." Similarly, Heaven is the world of abstract idea, with its Angels of pure intellect: Hell is the world of human experience, whose Devils are the impulses to action, work and creation. In " The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Blake recounts the conversion of an Angel by a Devil to his own humanistic religion :

" Note : This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend; we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well.

I have also The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no."

I imagine we have not behaved particularly well, in waiting two hundred years before admitting that Blake has a place among our greatest. But the Bible of Hell, or the history of the struggle of the human spirit for self-unity, we certainly have, in the total works of Blake surviving to us. And if we are only just beginning to drive few shafts of understanding into that glowing and mysterious mine of human wisdom, it may be because we have not yet dethroned *Urizen* in ourselves, or struck *Los* from his chains,

Randall Swingler.

' What is now proved was once only imagin'd."

"... I have compell'd what should have been of freedom -- My Just Right as an Artist & as a Man ..."

"In a work of Art it is not Fine Tints that are required, but Fine Forms; fine Tints without, are nothing. Fine Tints without Fine Forms are always subterfuge of the Blockhead."

Blake, as a practising artist, never obeyed rules made by others. He broke them all his life, with great profit to his art. This particularly applies to his prints. His unconventional use of surface printing from deeply etched *intaglio* metal plates, although known in previous centuries, was only fully exploited by him. He was not however content to revive a half-forgotten method but proceeded to invent a deep-etched plate for printing *in relief*. The rich vigour of the magnificent designs for *Jerusalem* shows the unusual technique, in which images and text, deeply etched into the plate, are harmonized. A manifestation of the imagination working as a whole.

This method, up till quite recently, baffled artists and " experts." Blake said the process was revealed to him in a dream, and when he died he left no notes to explain it. By drawing with varnish on metal and etching away the remainder of the surface, he was in effect doing what the camera and the process-engraver do to-day for an artist's original pen or chalk drawing. Also his method of " Illuminated

Printing " evolved for the dissemination of his own works, led to colour-printed drawings, made by pressing a design, brushed in with opaque colour, on another sheet. His small pastoral woodcuts are exquisite, yet free, exercises in this exacting medium.

As always he had to be original. In the " Marriage of Heaven and Hell," he explains how his technical method was a part of his whole imaginative outlook. " But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged : this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid."

Paul Hogarth.

" Now I may say to you, what perhaps I should not dare to say to anyone else: That I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London unannoy'd, & that I may converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams & prophecy & speak Parables unobserv'd & at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals; perhaps Doubts proceeding from Kindness, but Doubts are always pernicious, Especially when we Doubt our Friends. Christ is very decided on this Point: " He who is Not With Me is Against " Me." There is no Medium or Middle state; & if a Man is the Enemy of my Spiritual Life while he pretends to be the Friend of my Corporeal, he is a Real Enemy — but the Man may be the friend of my Spiritual Life while he seems the Enemy of my Corporeal, but Not Vice Versa."

William Blake to Thomas Butts, 1803.

" Reason, or the ratio of all we have already known, is not the same that it shall be when we know more."

RIGHT: *Where the Morning Stars Sang Together*





Let loose the Dogs of War!

FROM ISLINGTON TO MARYBONE

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

Her Little-ones ran on the fields,
The Lamb of God among them seen,
And fair Jerusalem his Bride,
Among the little meadows green.

Pancrass & Kentish-town repose
Among her golden pillars high,
Among her golden arches which
Shine upon the starry sky.

The Jew's-harp-house & the Green Man,
The Ponds where Boys to bathe delight,
The fields of Cows by Willan's farm,
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight.

She walks upon our meadows green,
The Lamb of God walks by her side,
And every English Child is seen
Children of Jesus & his Bride.

Forgiving trespasses and sins
Lest Babylon with cruel Og
With Moral & Self-righteous Law
Should crucify in Satan's Synagogue!

What are those golden Builders doing
Near mournful ever-weeping Paddington,
Standing above that mighty Ruin
Where Satan the first victory won,

Where Albion slept beneath the Fatal Tree,
And the Druids' golden Knife
Rioted in human gore,
In Offerings of Human Life?

They groan'd aloud on London Stone,
They groan'd aloud on Tyburn's Broox,
Albion gave his deadly groan,
And all the Atlantic Mountains shook.

Albion's Spectre from his Loins
Tore forth in all the pomp of War:
-Satan his name: in flames of fire
He stretch'd his Druid Pillars far.

Jerusalem fell from Lambeth's Vale
Down thro' Poplar and Old Bow,
Thro' Maiden & across the Sea,
In War & howling, death & woe.

The Rhine was red with human blood,
The Danube roll'd a purple tide,
On the Euphrates Satan stood,
And over Asia stretch'd his pride.

He wither'd up sweet Zion's Hill
From every Nation of the Earth;
He wither'd up Jerusalem's Gates,
And in a dark Land gave her birth.

He wither'd up the Human Form
By laws of sacrifice for sin,
Till it became a Mortal Worm,
But O! translucent all within.

The Divine Vision still was seen,
 Still was the Human Form Divine,
 Weeping in weak & mortal clay,
 O Jesus, still the Form was thine.

And thine the Human Face, & thine
 The Human Hands & Feet & Breath,
 Entering thro' the Gates of Birth
 And passing thro' the Gates of Death.

And O thou Lamb of God, whom I
 Slew in my dark self-righteous pride,
 Art thou return'd to Albion's Land?
 And is Jerusalem thy Bride?

Come to my arms & never more
 Depart, but dwell for ever here:
 Create my Spirit to thy Love:
 Subdue my Spectre to thy Fear.

Spectre of Albion! warlike Fiend!
 In clouds of blood & ruin roll'd,
 I here reclaim thee as my own,
 My Selfhood! Satan! arm'd in gold

Is this thy soft Family-Love,
 Thy cruel Patriarchal pride,
 Planting thy Family alone,
 Destroying all the World beside ?

A man's worst enemies are those
 Of his own house & family;
 And he who makes his law a curse,
 By his own law surely die.

In my Exchanges every Land
 Shall walk, & mine in every Land,
 Mutual shall build Jerusalem,
 Both heart in heart & hand in hand.

" The Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence, and now seem to live in it in chains, are in truth the causes of its life & the sources of all activity; but the chains are the cunning of weak and tame minds which have power to resist energy; according to the proverb, the weak in courage is strong in cunning.

Thus one portion of being is the Prolific, the other the Devouring :

(viii)



Jerusalem

to the Devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains; but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole.

But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer, as a sea, received the excess of his delights.

Some will say : " Is not God alone the Prolific?" I answer : " God only Acts and Is, in existing beings or Men."

These two classes of men are always upon earth, & they should be enemies : whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence. Religion is an endeavour to reconcile the two."

From the " Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

How the Blakes Lived:

" Blake's two rooms on the first floor were approached by a wainscoted staircase, with handsome balustrades, such as we find in houses of Queen Anne's date, and lit by a window to the left, looking out on the well-like back yard below. Having ascended, two doors faced you, opening into the back and front rooms. That in front, with the windows looking out on Fountain Court, its panelled walls hung with frescos, temperas, and drawings of Blake's, was used as a reception room. From it a door opened into the smaller back room, the window of which (a side one) looked down a deep gap between the houses of Fountain Court and the parallel street; in this way commanding a peep of the Thames with **its** muddy banks, and of distant

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of 'America'



Surrey or Kent hills beyond. This was, at once, sleeping and living room, kitchen and studio. In one corner was the bed; in another, the fire at which Mrs. Blake cooked. On one side stood the table serving for meals, and by the window the table at which Blake always sat (facing the light) designing or engraving. There was an air of poverty as of an artisan's room; but everything was clean and neat; nothing sordid. Blake himself, with his serene, cheerful, dignified presence and manner, made all seem natural and of course. Conversing with him, you saw or felt nothing of his poverty, though he took no pains to conceal it; if he had you would have been effectually reminded of it."



Holy Thursday

"Rouse up. O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court & the University, who would, if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call. Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works, or the expensive advertizing boasts that they make of such works; believe Christ & His Apostles that there is a Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying."

From the PREFACE to Milton.

*om the
of Job*

