

Julian Cope's opening speech at the exhibition

BLAKE'S SHADOW

William Blake and his Artistic Legacy

The Whitworth Art Gallery 26 January-20 April 2008

Introduction

Tonight we are gathered here in Manchester, to honour the 250th birthday of these islands' greatest visionary artist, the Londoner William Blake, a man whose art gained him precious little commercial success in his own lifetime, but whose steadfast inner resolve, patience, loving wife and acceptance of his lonely and alienated situation has ensured that his life's work, nay, his life itself has - with each passing year - come to make more and more sense to we Moderns, for whom alienation is a fact of life. It is, nowadays, fairly easy to forget the true nature of Blake the Man, obscured as it has been by the success and notoriety of his great hit, 'Jerusalem', sung at rugby matches and the Last Night of the Proms, and proposed in certain quarters as a valid alternative national anthem to 'God Save The Queen'. But if 'Jerusalem' is to remain the public face of William Blake, then so be it. For that song is an excellent and most useful smokescreen behind which each one of us who is gathered here can study this most unorthodox of men in peace, safe in the knowledge that any passer-by who carelessly (and dutifully) asks: "What is that you're reading?" will, on receiving the answer 'William Blake', immediately conjure up spectacular images of lusty Union Jack-wavers, and hurry onwards needing no further explanation. The truth of William Blake, however, is spectacularly different. And tonight - in this great temple of Art - we must celebrate Blake on his own terms, sifting through the evidence of those who knew the man and getting to the heart of that which drove him. For despite Blake's utter lack of commercial success during his own lifetime, his art still caught the eye of many of his more successful contemporaries, and there remain enough first hand accounts of the man for us to build up a reasonably accurate picture of him. So, who was this William Blake? And why does his art - now mostly over two centuries old - seem to resonate more and more with us with each passing day?

The Visionary

Firstly, William Blake was both a Visionary and a city dweller, a Londoner who - save for three years in Sussex - never left the city of his birth through lack of funds. And so this young Visionary, who had first glimpsed God at an upstairs window in the Blake family house, at the tender age of four, was forced to endure the savagery, filth and riots of late 18th century London. Such a situation would undoubtedly have corralled and beaten down all but the free-est of minds. But not so William Blake. If anything, his being forced to exist in such a tightly contained space only served to turn London into his own heavenly city,

and his visions – far from dwindling then ceasing altogether – continued at such a pace that the street names of England’s capital city became, both in Blake’s mind and in Blake’s poetry, mythologically fused together with all that is most exotic and legendary to the Englishman and English woman:

Malah’s on Blackheath; Rahab and Noah dwell on Windsor’s heights,
Where once the cherubs of Jerusalem spread to Lambeth’s Vale,
Milcah’s Pillars shine from Harrow to Hampstead, where Hoglah,
On Highgate’s heights magnificent Weaves over trembling Thames.

For some, this juxtaposition is too much, far too much, so much as to cause embarrassment to certain readers. But Blake was without shame, for he knew that he was, in his own words ‘a sent man’; sent to re-name the landscapes of London and sent to re-invigorate all that Londoners had for too long taken for granted. In short, William Blake was London’s prophet. Unlike Moses, the high-ranking Egyptian priest who – in Freud’s estimation – had been forced to continue his worship of the One God through the Israelites, and unlike Jesus Christ, whose revelation had been soundly rejected by his fellow Jews, William Blake was a prophet of his own people. Londoners. And in that, he is most like Mohammed, Martin Luther and The Odin, all three of whom were – in my estimation – the Truest of Prophets in that they chose only to speak to their own. To his friend, the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson, Blake once commented: “Those who are sent sometimes go further than they ought.” William Blake, however, did not go further than the sent man should go. Moreover, for myself, William Blake was the greatest of all the prophets thus far ‘sent’. For, although like Zoroaster and those prophets already mentioned, William Blake at first attempted to make do with the organized religion of his own culture, then, having failed to reconcile his beliefs with those of his church, struck out reluctantly on his own, even attempting re-writes of Genesis and introducing his own Book of Hell, what makes him greater than all of the aforementioned is that his revelation was a slow burning Truth, one that increases slowly and over time. And his message?

“Thine own humanity learn to adore.”

The prophet Blake left his mark just enough to cause interest, but not enough to create so much of a personality cult around him - while he was still alive - that it might get in the way of the healthy and rich artistic life that the true Sent Man should live. Better still, in his poetry, painting, books and songs, Blake left quite enough evidence that his Work and his Word had been true.

The Gnostic

And what a body of work Blake left us. Scattered to the four winds though it was, gradually the disparate pieces of the body have re-constituted over time, coming together and finding each other like the parts of the mechanical giant in Ted Hughes’ Iron Man. At long last, astonished scholars have been able to study almost the whole of Blake’s oeuvre. For myself, it is this physicality of process in Blake’s work that is most inspiring. For he invented the whole printing process himself, and nursed each stage along, adding new

elements at every stage until the work was at long last completed. As a Gnostic singer, author and musician myself, and one who writes only about that which he has visited, I believe that Blake's arduous process was nothing short of heroic. Indeed, I'm astonished that a Visionary such as Blake was could have achieved half his output and still held down his daily job as an engraver. From December 1989, I was assaulted with powerful visions for several years that would have incapacitated me, had it not been for the strength and fortitude of my wife Dorian. Instead, with her help, I lived a highly rich and productive artistic life that, after eight years of research and travel, resulted in my book **THE MODERN ANTIQUARIAN**. Ah, but there's the answer... the wife that Blake loved so, and who loved him so. For Catherine Blake was so devoted to her husband's Great Vision that she facilitated him and sat with him through his most excruciating visions and let him live that rich artistic life so thoroughly that, when the Blakes once were entirely without funds, Mr Blake only discovered the fact when Catherine placed an empty plate in front of him at dinner.

On Fences & Bondage

Unfortunately, for Blake's admirers and for the artist himself, these lack of funds inevitably restricted his work in later years, and Blake became forced to re-cycle his visions and experiences just as he re-cycled those many scraps of his work for which none of his contemporaries had any use. Blake became instead 'The Mental Traveller', journeying through Britain by travelling inside himself with the help of such great and powerful tomes as William Stukeley's **ABURY** and **STONEHENGE**, huge visionary works which dared to suggest that these vast megalithic temples had been works of the pre-Roman times. Of course, through excavations and radio carbon dating, we 'Moderns' have long since known that Stukeley's assertions were entirely correct and that the most ancient of humanity's monuments were indeed first raised up here on the Western Atlantic seaboard. But to artists of 18th century England, whose culture had for so long been in thrall to Rome, Egypt and Ancient Greece, this news was the greatest revelation. Moreover, Stukeley's books were filled to the brim with engravings of the author and his friends at these monuments less than one hundred miles from London, allowing Blake the Engraver to fill his head with these sights and sink once more into the 'sea of possibilities', as Patti Smith would have it.

In stark contrast to Stukeley's idyllic scenes of tricorn-hatted antiquaries engaged in the measuring of great monoliths while surrounded by sheep and cattle, Blake's restrictive London life as an engraver must often have been agony for his great and too expansive mind to bear. Indeed, the evidence of his feelings of bondage rear up throughout his poetry, most infamously in his poem 'London', in whose earliest form he refers to the 'filthy Thames', but later changed it to the 'charter'd Thames' to hit out at those selfish landowners who'd tied up the riverbank with fences. Elsewhere in that same poem, he talks of wandering through 'each charter'd street', observing the 'mind-forged manacles' that religion has brought to bear. In another poem, Blake addresses our great invisible Sky God as 'Nobodaddy', accuses the God of hiding in clouds and being 'Father of Jealousy'. And again, he accuses God of forging 'fetters for the mind' of his people. And yet, had Blake

only been able to step outside London more often, he would soon have observed that similar fences, hedges and walls bisected the entire countryside of the late 18th century. Indeed, even William Stukeley's beloved Un-Roofed temple at Abury had been so built upon, so fenced, so hedged, so 'charted' that it had lain unrecognized since Saxon times until the celebrated antiquary John Aubrey had stumbled upon it at the end of the English Civil War.

It's a selfish thought, I'll admit, but a part of me is glad that William Blake led so restricted a life. For, even in those severe restrictions, he saw 'heaven in a wild flower' and showed us how to extract the kernel of truth from even the smallest nut. "I look through the eye, not with it", he once wrote. And in that comment reconciled the Metaphysical Poets of the 17th century - John Donne, Andrew Marvell - with the great Psychedelically-informed poets of the 1960s: Jim Morrison, Syd Barrett. But was William Blake far ahead of his time, or simply out of time? I'll be greedy and plump for both. I view the cultural changes of post-war Western Civilisation as a great Fantasia-style storm pounding across the landscape driven by a Walt Disney cartoon of the Nordic God Thor. But viewed in such terms, William Blake was like a single cloud running ten miles ahead, throwing down rain and hail before the storm's main body had even broken the horizon. In 1996CE, I received a letter from my artist friend, the late John Balance. He concluded - as I shall now conclude:

"Why be bleak when you could be Blake?"