

Blake the Visionary

by Michael Paternoster

When we had completed our 'A levels' there was still some time to the end of term, so we were taken on a variety of educational visits, one of which was to the Tate Gallery. The only thing I remember clearly, after more than fifty years, is a set of illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy* by William Blake. I have never been again, and I have no idea whether they are on permanent display or whether I chanced on a special exhibition, but I have never forgotten them; they aroused in me a fascination with Blake that has grown with the years.

At that time I had just read the *Inferno* in the Penguin translation of Dorothy Sayers, and bought second-hand for thirty shillings the two huge volumes of the Cary translation, illustrated by Gustave Doré. Doré was an accomplished artist and a conscientious illustrator, but his careful, detailed engravings lack something unique to Blake. As Caroline Spurgeon puts it, discussing Blake's imagery:

These are not, for the most part, illustrations in the ordinary sense of the term, the translation by the artist of some incident in the narrative into a visual picture; they are rather a running accompaniment to the words in another medium, symbolically emphasising or interpreting certain aspects of the thought.ⁱ

She adds that they are 'sometimes drawn with an almost unearthly beauty of form and colour.'

She was thinking particularly of the illuminated books in which Blake illustrated his own writings, words and pictures belonging together, forming a single whole: but it is equally true of his illustrations to Dante, Milton and the Bible, where in each case we can make a direct comparison with Doré, and see how utterly different – idiosyncratic even – is Blake's approach to the text.

In deciding on the title of this paper I had in mind two things. Blake was, first of all, quite literally a visionary – he saw visions. That, however, while it is in itself obviously of interest to this Fellowship, is only one aspect of his significance for us, and in a sense the less important one. For he was also a visionary in that he saw this world in the light of eternity and he was a true prophet – in his day a voice crying in the wilderness, but someone with a message for our times.

Blake was born just over 250 years ago, in 1757. His background was lower middle class and Nonconformist, so he knew thoroughly the Bible, Milton and Bunyan. He never went to school, but read voraciously: he was familiar with Swedenborg and Teresa of Avila, and the Neoplatonists – he devoured anything that fed his imagination and helped to make sense of his visions. He was apprenticed to an engraver, James Basire, who amongst other things set him to study the medieval carvings in Westminster Abbey. Thereafter, he made a precarious living as an artist. For a short time he left London and lived at Felpham in Sussex, an episode that ended when he ordered a drunken soldier out of his garden and was in consequence tried for sedition at the Chichester assizes. He was acquitted, but he had already decided that country life was not for him, and had fallen out with his current patron – something he was liable to do only too often. Apart from that short interval, he lived all his life in London, which he saw simultaneously as Bunyan's City of Destruction and as the New Jerusalem: 'I behold London: a Human awful wonder of God !'ⁱⁱ

He passed his last years living serenely with his devoted wife in two squalid rooms, visited by a few younger men who looked on him as a sage. An eyewitness reported, 'just before he died, his countenance became fair, his eyes brightened and he burst into singing of the things he saw in Heaven'.ⁱⁱⁱ

His wife once said to him, ‘You know, dear, the first time you saw God was when you were four years old, and he put his head to the window and set you a-screaming’.^{iv} He was once beaten for running in and saying he had seen Ezekiel under a tree in the fields, and on another occasion he saw a tree filled with angels on Peckham Rye, and his father threatened to beat him for telling lies. Children quite commonly see things that adults believe to be illusory, and generally either grow out of it or learn to keep quiet about such unacceptable notions. Blake, however, continued to see visions, and to talk about them, all his life. Crabb Robinson referred to ‘the constant hallucinations in which he lives’.^v When his much-loved younger brother dies, Blake said he saw his spirit rising through the ceiling, ‘clapping his hands for joy’.^{vi} Thereafter,

With his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the Spirit and see him in my remembrance, in the regions of my imagination. I hear his advice and even now write from his dictate.^{vii}

he believed that his brother had helped him solve the technical problems of producing his illuminated books, and he further claimed that much of his writing was dictated to him: ‘I am under the direction of Messengers from Heaven, daily and nightly’.^{viii}

Most of his contemporaries regarded him as a madman, but he was extremely matter-of-fact about his visions and treated them as perfectly natural and unremarkable. Who else would have said, ‘After dinner, I asked Isaiah’?^{ix} Aware, however, that not everyone took him seriously, he looked round for support and found it, to some extent, in the writings of Swedenborg and St. Teresa. For a time he belonged to the New Church and, unusually for his time and background, he was by no means hostile to Roman Catholicism.

As an artist, his style was unique. As Robert Frost in a poem makes Eve say, ‘It’s God. I’d know him from Blake’s picture anywhere’.^x And Nikolaus Pevsner remarked, ‘No-one can fail to recognise a Blake’.^{xi} Blake’s problem as an artist was that he lacked what Kathleen Raine described as ‘the immense advantage of an inherited traditional language’.^{xii} He had a remarkable visual memory, and absorbed some extraordinarily diverse influences. As Raine points out, ‘the sinuous flowing lines of his drapery, the elongation of his figures, derive from the Decorated or Flamboyant Gothic architecture which he knew in Westminster Abbey’.^{xiii} Unlike most of his contemporaries, he had considerable respect for the Middle Ages: he might have been a precursor of the Gothic Revival, only he had no followers, and when it came it did not, as he had done, learn from the past and make of what it had learned something entirely new, but produced for the most part only pastiche and imitation.

We have to remember that Gothic art was the only art of the past he knew at first hand. he knew Greek art only through Flaxman and Wedgwood; he idolised Raphael and Michelangelo, but as he had never been abroad he knew their work only from prints. Obviously, no good colour reproductions of Old Masters then existed.

His attitude to his art was very like that of the painters of icons, who approach their work with prayer and fasting.

Blake turned to his wife and said, ‘It is just so with us, is it not, for weeks together when the visions forsake us. What do we do then, Kate?’ ‘We kneel down and pray, Mr. Blake’.^{xiv}

Blake’s tragedy was that he was a solitary genius, attempting to express in his writing and painting ideas and visions which few of his contemporaries could understand. With no living tradition to guide him, he had to find his own way, and he founded no school. Samuel Palmer, who revered him and used to kiss the threshold of his poverty-stricken dwelling when he visited him, was equally a visionary, but his paintings owe little or nothing to Blake. There is very little scenery in Blake’s pictures: he concentrates on what he called ‘the human form divine’. Palmer, by contrast, paints landscapes of haunting beauty. Blake was a Londoner,

never very happy away from the city: Palmer found in Shoreham something not far short of the earthly paradise.

Turning now from Blake the visionary artist to Blake the visionary writer, I have to confess that I find the greater part of his prophetic books disjointed and obscure, making it not unlikely that he did indeed practise automatic writing with no conscious critical control over what he set down. I am comforted to discover that the editor of *The Oxford Companion to William Blake* refers to his ‘fundamental unreadability’. The late Sam Goldwyn coined a lovely phrase: ‘On the surface profound, but deep down superficial’. That to me is true of much of Blake’s private mythology. In the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and embedded here and there is his long and turgid prose poems, there are lyrics of utter simplicity of form and language but great depth of meaning, and there are also many ‘one-liners’ – proverbs and gnomic utterances that stick in the mind and make one see things in a new light.

It has, however, to be admitted that he has not succeeded in providing a ‘mythology for Britain’. he fails to communicate largely because, unlike Tolkien or Pullman, he lacks narrative skill. The clearest exposition I know of his thought and its place in the history of English mythological writing is to be found in Geoffrey Ashe’s *Camelot and the Vision of Albion* (1971).

Kathleen Raine believed that Blake was deeply read in the Western Esoteric Tradition; T.S. Eliot, on the other hand, regarded him as a philosophical Robinson Crusoe, using whatever came to hand to provide for himself what he needed. The materialist Jacob Bronowski saw in his mystical writings a coded reference to the social ills of his time which it was too dangerous to refer to openly. Of these, Bronowski’s view seems the least plausible: Blake never lacked courage and never minded being out of step, and there are very open references to the injustices he saw about him, but as Raine says:

Blake seeks to discover the source of social and private ills within man. Only a change of heart and mind of the nation can create a new society and new cities less hideous than those created by an atheist and mechanistic rationalism. Blake gradually renounced politics for something more radical. Politics and religion alike came to seem to him an evasion of the ‘one thing needful’. He saw history from within: in the succession to the prophets of Israel, he addressed the English nation at the level of spiritual causes, not of day-to-day policy.^{xv}

Blake is in a sense a precursor of the New Age; his time has perhaps come. Everybody knows his reference to ‘dark Satanic mills’ desecrating ‘England’s green and pleasant land’ and if I may refer to Doré, his engravings of the nineteenth century industrial landscape bring home to us just how dark and Satanic the mills were. Or read Engels’s account of the slums of Manchester, and one can understand the passion in many of the *Songs of Experience*: ‘Holy Thursday’, for instance:

Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song!
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor,
It is a land of poverty.^{xvi}

Or ‘London’:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning church appalls;
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.

But most, thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.^{xvii}

Note the phrase, 'The mind-forged manacles'. For Blake the origin of the ills he denounced lay in the prevalent attitude of mind on the part of those who controlled society, an attitude he traced back to Francis Bacon, whom he regarded as the man who had ruined England. Bacon is usually seen as the pioneer and theorist of scientific method; but he quite explicitly wanted to understand nature in order to exploit and control it. We should remember that when he speaks of 'putting nature to the question' he was using the standard Tudor euphemism for torture. Many scientific experiments have indeed involved unspeakable torture to lower forms of life, with the supposed justification that what we learn thereby may be to our advantage. Science is all too often exploitive rather than contemplative.

One of Blake's invented mythological figures is Urizen, whom Ashe describes as 'the self-willed despotic mind ... cutting human beings down to fit systems. Documented history shows Urizen at his best in Plato, at his worst, perhaps, in Stalin'.^{xviii} He adds:

Blake is looking ahead to the coming generations' disenchantment with science. Unless practised in the right spirit, science is not a release but another Urizenic trap. Again and again he names Bacon, Newton and Locke as the falsest of false prophets. They have brought back Urizen, the demon of closed systems, in another guise. Theirs is a science of uniformity, abstract law, calculation. Their kind of science is a dissection in which everything that matters escapes, leaving Man dwarfed and helpless.^{xix}

Again,

In effect, the scientific thinker defines the rules of proof in advance so as to exclude whatever he wants to exclude.^{xx}

One thinks of Professor Dawkins saying that he would willingly believe in telepathy only there is no evidence for it. Saruman, in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is described as having 'a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment'.^{xxi} That is precisely the attitude of mind that Blake denounces: 'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way'.^{xxii} It is this materialistic, mechanistic, commercial and exploitive attitude that has brought us to our present dire straits; and there is little sign yet of the change of heart Blake hoped for. What was then still in its infancy now threatens our survival. Blake saw it clearly, even if he expressed himself obscurely.

Allied in Blake's mind to mechanistic and exploitive science was the organised religion of the day, which he saw as moralistic and repressive. Take, for instance, his poem 'The Garden of Love', from *Songs of Experience*:

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen.
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut
And "Thou shalt not" writ over the door;
So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.^{xxiii}

Blake rejected both the vengeful moralism of Calvinism and 18th century Deism, but he saw in the Roman Catholic Church 'the only one which taught forgiveness of sins'.^{xxiv} For him, forgiveness is Christ's essential message:

Throughout all eternity
I forgive you, you forgive me.
As our dear Redeemer said
This the Wine and this the Bread.^{xxv}

Though he produced a magnificent series of illustrations for the Bible, Milton and Dante, Blake put his own idiosyncratic interpretation on the texts he illustrated. As Ashe says, 'he is intensely religious, steeped in the Bible, but he supplies meanings of his own, which sometimes invert the orthodox meanings.'^{xxvi} For him, Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament, is to be identified with Satan, 'the prince of this world.'

Thinking as I do that the Creator of this world is a very Cruel Being, and being a
Worshipper of Christ, I cannot help saying, The Son, O how unlike the Father !
First God Almighty comes with a Thump on the Head, and then Jesus Christ
comes with balm to heal it.^{xxvii}

Unconsciously, perhaps, Blake adopted one of the earliest Christian heresies, that of Marcion. Certainly, if one believed, as nearly everyone did then, that all the cruel and vengeful elements in the Old Testament were directly intended by God, it would be difficult to dispute Blake's view. It is not always realised that his series of illustrations to the Book of Job, which inspired Vaughan Williams's 'Masque for Dancing', incorporates his understanding that the God who tortures Job is really Satan. His attitude to Milton was ambivalent: he admired him as a poet, but totally rejected his Puritan theology. Indeed, he held that Milton was 'of the devil's party without knowing it'.^{xxviii}

Philip Pullman, who draws on Milton and Blake for the mythological background to his trilogy *His Dark Materials*, speculates that Milton disliked God without being able to admit it, even to himself. But Pullman goes further than Blake, dismissing Christianity as 'a very powerful and convincing mistake.'^{xxix} Blake would not agree with that, for however unorthodox a believer, he was very definitely a follower of Jesus: not so much the Jesus of history as the cosmic Christ, the light that enlightens everyone everywhere. He had as an

apprentice worked on some of the plates for Bryant's *New System of Mythology* and his retentive visual memory reproduced details from them in his own later work. More importantly, although Bryant's archaeological assumptions seem absurd in the light of present-day knowledge, it was from him that Blake discovered in mythology a universal language of the human imagination. He also held, rather questionably, that:

The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven is no less sacred than that of the Jews All had originally one language, and one religion: this was the religion of Jesus, the Everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus.^{xxx}

Blake's theology is that of a self-taught man reacting against a dead and deadening form of religion. We may well regret his errors, but we need to ask ourselves how far the churches to which we belong justify his criticisms. It has been said that if a church is not part of the answer to a community's problems, it is part of the problem.

In what has become Blake's most famous poem, that we now call 'Jerusalem' (it is the opening lines of *Milton*), he speaks of the task of building Jerusalem 'in England's green and pleasant land'. What he had in mind is hardly what the respectable members of the Women's Institute, singing his words with fervour, have in mind. Reacting against its use as a hymn, the Dean of Southwark seems to have missed the point altogether. Blake is a revolutionary, but without faith in political revolutions. After all, he could see for himself the French Revolution, welcomed at first by Wordsworth as the dawn of a new era, leading via the Terror to Napoleon, and the fall of Napoleon leading to the Holy Alliance. As Ashe puts it,

We might say of Blake, as of some others who have united the religious and radical temper, that the key to his revolution is *living differently*: not only in the inward sense of personal conversion, but in the outward sense of active and constructive dissent from a sick society. If enough people undertake it, a new, alternative society will grow up with the old, and, in the fullness of time, transfigure it.^{xxxii}

Three years ago, on the 250th anniversary of his birth, this Fellowship took from a saying of Blake's the theme for its annual conference:

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.^{xxxii}

There is an obvious echo here of Plato's famous allegory of the cave, which pictures the majority of the human race as prisoners, whose only knowledge of the reality outside their prison is provided by the shadows cast on the walls of the cave. In a recent book, *Plato's Children*, the philosopher Anthony O'Hear explores the many ways in which modern man is kept enthralled by virtual reality- Blake's 'mind-forged manacles'.

On one level, then, Blake is obviously right and disturbingly prophetic; on another level he is obviously wrong. We are normally capable of receiving and decoding only a certain range of signals from the outside world – 'Mankind cannot bear too much reality'. Blake believed in the Fall, and knew nothing of evolution. Our sense-perceptions have evolved to enable us to survive. We could not in this life cope with seeing 'everything as it is, infinite'. Mystics perhaps come nearest to doing so. Elizabeth Goudge, in *The Dean's Watch*, puts it like this:

The human brain was an organ of limitation. It restricted a grown man's consciousness of the external world to what was practically useful to him. It was like prison walls. Without them, possibly he could not concentrate sufficiently on the task he had to do. But in childhood and old age, the prison walls were of cloudy stuff and there were occasional rents in them.^{xxxiii}

Of Blake it has been said recently:

He was a man who lived on two planes simultaneously. seeing heaven was not simply a reaction to earthly lack of success, a calculated move into another universe to avoid the realities of this one. Blake believed absolutely in his visions ... Life in the here and now for Blake had that added dimension, that other sphere of consciousness, and he struggled throughout his life to convey it.^{xxxiv}

He was a man who almost effortlessly managed

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.^{xxxv}

In a mission address in Oxford, Bishop John Taylor told the story of a young man who had taken his family to the seaside. He had at one point to take his little boy across the road to the public conveniences.

The expedition lasted all of half an hour, he told me, because every pebble, every bit of shell, every dry twig on the surface of that road, was an object of such wonder that they had to squat and examine and exclaim.

The bishop commented:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy, and even a visit to the loo can be the golden journey to Samarkand. Where did it go, that intensity of response ? How comes it that most of us lose the gift of seeing the ordinary as extraordinary.^{xxxvi}

Blake was one man who never lost the gift.

'What,' it will be Questioned, 'when the sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea ?' O no no I see an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying 'Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'^{xxxvii}

In his eccentric, idiosyncratic way, Blake can if we take him seriously, help us to see as he saw and live as he lived:

I give you the end of a golden string
Only wind it into a ball:
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate,
Built in Jerusalem's wall.^{xxxviii}

Notes

ⁱ Caroline Spurgeon, 'Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare's Tragedies', in Anne Ridler, ed., *Shakespearean Criticism 1919-1935*. OUP, 1936, p. 18.

ⁱⁱ *Jerusalem*. See G. Bentley (Ed.), *William Blake's Writings*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978, Vol. 1, p. 497.

ⁱⁱⁱ Geoffrey Keynes (Ed), *The Letters of William Blake with related documents*. Third edition. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 171. George Richmond to Samuel Palmer, 15 August 1827.

^{iv} Quoted in Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence*. Selected and edited

-
- by Thomas Sadler. Macmillan, 1869, Vol. 2, p.383.
- ^v *ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 323.
- ^{vi} Mona Wilson, *Life of William Blake*. Hart-Davis, 1948 2nd ed. p. 22.
- ^{vii} Keynes, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Blake to William Hayley, 6 May 1800.
- ^{viii} *ibid.* p. 48. Blake to Thomas Butts, 10 January 1803.
- ^{ix} A.C. Swinburne, *William Blake, a Critical Essay*. Hotten, 1868, p. 215.
- ^x Robert Frost, *A Masque of Reason*. New York, Henry Holt, 1945, p. 2.
- ^{xi} Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*. Architectural Press, 1956, p. 149.
- ^{xii} Kathleen Raine, *William Blake*. Thames & Hudson, 1970, p. 124.
- ^{xiii} *ibid.* p. 19.
- ^{xiv} Quoted in J.G. Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1948, p. 76.
- ^{xv} Raine, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- ^{xvi} *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 178.
- ^{xvii} *ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 191.
- ^{xviii} Geoffrey Ashe, *Camelot and the Vision of Albion*. Heinemann, 1971. p. 162
- ^{xix} *ibid.*, p. 163.
- ^{xx} *ibid.*, p. 165.
- ^{xxi} J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*. Second edition. Allen & Unwin, 1966 p. 76.
- ^{xxii} Keynes, *op. cit.*, p. 9. Blake to Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799.
- ^{xxiii} *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 188.
- ^{xxiv} Raine, *op. cit.*, p. 198, quoting Alexander Gilchrist, Blake's first biographer.
- ^{xxv} From a poem in Blake's Notebook that begins, 'My Spectre around me'. See *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 924.
- ^{xxvi} Ashe, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- ^{xxvii} Quoted in Raine, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- ^{xxviii} *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. See *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 80.
- ^{xxix} Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*. Point, 2001 [paperback edn.], p. 464.
- ^{xxx} *A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures*. 1809, p. 43. See *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 851.
- ^{xxxi} Ashe, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
- ^{xxxii} *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. See *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 88.
- ^{xxxiii} Elizabeth Goudge, *The Dean's Watch*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1964, p. 297.
- ^{xxxiv} Peter Stanford, *Heaven: A Traveller's Guide to the Undiscovered Country*. HarperCollins, 2003, pp. 250, 247.
- ^{xxxv} *Auguries of Innocence*. See *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 1312.
- ^{xxxvi} John V. Taylor, *A Matter of Life and Death*. SCM, 1986, p. 26.
- ^{xxxvii} *Vision of the Last Judgment*. See *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 1027.
- ^{xxxviii} *Jerusalem*. See *William Blake's Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 587.

[4,373 words]