

For the Kit Kat Club
Dec. 21, 1982
Columbus, Ohio

WILLIAM BLAKE: POET, PROPHET, PAINTER

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One of my favorite New Yorker cartoons shows four middle-aged executive types, sitting around a desk with puzzled and fretful looks on their faces, with the boss snapping into the intercom: "Miss Dugan, will you send someone in here who can distinguish right from wrong?" The cartoon appears on a page entitled "The Humanities Crisis" (Newsweek, Oct. 13, 1980), which bewails the general lack of vitality of language, literature, philosophy, and other liberal studies in the curricula of our schools and colleges today, in which education is mainly a buyer's market and what most students want is not a philosophy of life but a saleable skill. And just a couple weeks ago in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Dec. 1, 1982), William Bennett, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, charged that humanities courses in schools and colleges have degenerated into "a jumble of indiscriminate offerings," with "no rationale and no guidance or coherence for the mind or imagination." The real purpose of the humanities, he said, citing the novelist Robertson Davies, was to enlarge the mind and to elevate the soul. Instead, teachers have become too specialized and therefore have trivialized their subjects, and they are more concerned with modish relating to students than to rigorous teaching and learning.

I agree that the real purpose of the humanities is to enlarge the mind and to elevate the soul. And I agree that too often our liberal arts curriculum in secondary and in higher education today does not meet that purpose because it is too fragmenting^{ed} and incoherent. Faced with bewildering choices of

courses to fulfill their humanities requirement -- many of them bearing snappy Broadway titles like "Dante, Hellfire, and Faulkner" -- students have been turned off, and away in great numbers. And faced with the massive vocationalism of education at all levels, too many teachers of the humanities have retreated further into specialisms or other forms of defensiveness and indifference. Therefore -- and this is a very grave worry -- we are not now attracting many of the best young minds to understand and appreciate the best that has been thought and said in the world. And for that, our whole society, its tone and spirit, will be the poorer.

But, having admitted as much -- and it is much -- I still do not believe the situation for the humanities warrants that too much abused word, crisis. Or, if it does, we should remember that the word "crisis" in its older and more precise sense means a turning point, for worse or for better. I see many signs that augur better for the humanities as we move toward the XXIst century.

First of all, the ending of the century itself, if it follows traditional patterns, means reassessment, revaluation, and generally new directions. The revaluation of the humanities in a serious way has already begun, as in the Rockefeller Foundation Report a couple of years ago, currently by various organizations including the National Endowment of the Humanities, and by many caring teachers of the humanities like myself who believe deeply that the liberal arts foster basic values, ethical and aesthetic, and cultivate in us an openmindedness that is at once a source and end of citizenship in a democratic society.

This general awareness of the worth of the humanities, not simply for a college degree but for the quality of life itself, is manifest in other ways. There is today a vitality in the arts, evident I think in the substantial support of all the arts by public and private foundations, by such major

recent commissions as that chaired by David Rockefeller, Jr. "On the Significance of the Arts in American Education," by the increasing number of people in local communities, such as ours, who create, exhibit, and have taste in art, by the renaissance of crafts of all sorts all over the country, by the brisk collection of antiques and the buying of art by the young, and by the increasing effort of American business to promote good art and design. The great attractiveness of the El Greco Exhibition or of the imaginatively produced television series Brideshead Revisited (a first-rate production of a third-rate novel) or the whole canon of Shakespeare plays on public television are other marks of our appreciation that a thing of beauty is indeed a joy forever. Surely these humanistic concerns and signs of vitality challenge -- if only that -- Alex de Tocqueville's thesis that the arts cannot flourish in a democracy.

But a particularly meaningful sign to me as a teacher of the humanities is the enormous current popularity in England and America of the great Romantic poet, painter, and prophet, William Blake, that splendid believer and achiever in the arts. For more than a decade now books and essays have poured from the presses of the English speaking countries on Blake's thought, art, and influence. Beautiful reproductions of his illuminating printing and engraving have been made widely accessible to scholars and to school children. There has been a recent stage play celebrating his life and work. A few years ago the Tate Gallery in London amassed from all over the world a stunning collection of Blake's original art, and an exhibition to rival that one is being planned in Toronto next year.

Why all this attention? Many of us of course have been struck with the profound question in one of his most famous lyrics:

Tiger! tiger! burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame they fearful symmetry?

Did, the poet asks, the same power that created the tiger, that beautiful and terrifying beast, create the innocent lamb as well, and if so, who, how, why, what is the power that dared to create that fearful symmetry, the fearful symmetry, he might have asked of our time, of the atomic mushroom cloud? Such profundity, such honesty, such originality, and such imaginative beauty characterize a great variety and quantity of Blake's poetry and painting, and therefore he claims our attention and appreciation. Above all, Blake is the prophet of man's spiritual freedom and fulfillment. And he dramatized that spiritual struggle and aspiration in great poetry and painting. That, I think, is the centrality of his appeal to our time age, and if we have eyes to see, to future ages too.

Blake's creative work flourished in the last quarter of the 18th and the first quarter of the 19th century. He was born in London, and died there in 1827, aged 70, and he is buried in Bunhill Fields cemetery but a few steps away from the grave of another great spiritual visionary of a century earlier, John Bunyan. Blake was of a tradesman family, and having shown artistic talent was apprenticed at the age of 14 to a reputable engraver in London, where he learned copperplate engraving and the artist's trade by sketching monuments in Westminster Abbey. After his apprenticeship, he was employed as an engraver for booksellers, much of which was hackwork, but by which and a few commissions for his paintings and illuminated printing he maintained himself and his wife Catherine. His own efforts to call public attention to his art failed, so that Blake worked and lived a long life in

poverty and obscurity. Only toward the end of his life did some young disciples collect about him, recognizing that in this plain looking and living Englishman lay a grand and glorious visionary gift. It was a gift that Blake himself called spiritual vision or sensation.

When he died in 1827, -- the year that Beethoven also died -- Blake had of course been a prime force in what we now call in our cultural history the Romantic Rebellion. In literature, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Byron had flourished; in painting, John Constable and J.M.W. Turner. In political theory and practice, Rousseau, Paine, Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington, and the great Revolutions whose fires they lit, brought in a new age. These poets, painters, and politicians shared a common vision: man must be renewed, his freedom of body and spirit declared, his institutions cleansed to secure his unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Man is born free, Rousseau had observed, but everywhere he is in chains.

This Blake had perceived very keenly and clearly, and these chains were of two kinds: those that others locked us in, and those we locked ourselves in. Blake's early poetry and painting emphasized the former, his later work the latter. He wrote therefore against tyrannical monarchy, English and French, praising in a poem called America (1793) our young nation for having thrown off the shackles of tyranny, of repressive laws and customs, of a dead past, (Plate 1) in order to create a new Eden-like world of peace, fulfillment, beauty, harmony. (Plate 2) He wrote against society's cruelty toward man, and was one of the most stinging critics of black slavery and the slave trade in the late 18th century, making his "Little Black Boy" sing plaintively,

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white,

and foreseeing a time when, in God's bright and revealing light, the little
black boy stands equal with the little white boy,

And round the tent of God like lambs we joy.

Blake wrote also against the societal cruelty of mismatched marriages
which bound, by unreasonable law and especially the poor, unhappy man and
wife perennially together and turned fulfilling love into consuming hate
(Plate 3, from the Visions of the Daughters of Albion). He protested against
repressive laws of all kinds, whether religious, political, or social, which
debased and diminished man into a cringing and crying son before an accusing
taskmaster of a fierce and fiery Jehovah-like-George-the-III father figure
(Plate 4, God Judging Adam). Against all these inhumanities, "mind forg'd
manacles," he called them, he wrote in a splendid lyric called "London"
(Plate 5) from The Songs of Experience (1794).

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 blackning church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh,
Runs in blood down palace walls

But most through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

This we immediately recognize as the industrialized city, the city of misery, fear, woe, irreligion, sin, and disease, of lost and wandering souls, of pitiless child labor, of the wounded soldier, of youthful harlots themselves blighted, blighting the innocence and promise of fruitful love and marriage.

But there are chains we impose upon ourselves as well, and for Blake these in many ways kept us prisoner more securely than real manacles. These were our common human passions, of jealousy, secrecy, cruelty, our capacity for terrorizing and vengeance. "Cruelty," Blake says, "has a human heart,"

And jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine,
And Secrecy the human dress.

The human dress is forged iron,
The human form a fiery forge.
The human face a furnace seal'd,
The human heart its hungry gorge.

That, with heavy sarcasm, Blake entitles the "Divine Image" we ourselves create and worship. It is a form of sensuality and brutality he imaged thus in Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (Plate 6, Nebudhadnezzar).

Or we make prisoners of ourselves by limiting ourselves to knowledge only through our senses and our reason. In this limitation Blake was attacking British empirical philosophy of the past two centuries, the philosophy of Bacon and Locke and of the greatest mind of that age, Newton, which in effect Blake believed limited man's knowledge to experiment and to perceivable and measureable things, God and matters of the spirit being therefore only an

inference. Admirable and majestic an intellect though he was, as Blake makes clear in this Michaelangelo-like conception of the heroic Newton, that great man was nevertheless the prisoner of materialism (Plate 7, Newton), symbolized here by his being under water, measuring with his compasses the scroll of prophecy, which is not measureable.

This is the human form limited to the human. What we should be worshipping is the human form remade in Christ's image, what Blake calls the human form divine, a creative spirit like this figure with fiery prophetic compasses, dominating the universe (Plate 8, The Ancient of Days). (This by the way was one of Blake's favorite prints and he is said to have been colouring a new version of it on his deathbed.) What the figure symbolises above all is imaginative energy, spiritual vision; it is the human form divine. Central to this spiritual philosophy is Blake's assertion: God, that is to say Christ, became man so that we might become as he is. To be like Christ, we must see like Christ, which is spiritual vision or sensation. For this we must see through, not with the eye. "If the doors of perception were cleansed," Blake says, "everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." Christ was the supreme symbol then of a free man, living in a spiritual world, seeing the world as infinite and holy. To see man and nature as more than matter, to see a world in a grain of sand, to see heaven in a wildflower, was in effect to live in a spiritual world. This was Blake's whole effort in poetry and painting: to get us to see better, to develop our spiritual imagination, to free ourselves from the usual clogs of mortality, to develop the innate dignity, which is to say divinity, in man.

Toward this end, great revolutionary that he was, Blake invented a new mode of printing to please and persuade his readers -- a mode of illuminated printing on copper plates. With the use of a wax ground on a copper plate, he inscribed with acid the text and illustrations, handcoloring it, upon which he then pressed a handmade paper, the result being a unique combination page by page of the sister-arts, poetry and painting. He called this mysterious process woodcutting on copper, a process he claimed that had been revealed to him by the spirit of his beloved dead brother. It is of course a powerful artistic achievement, which puts barren old mechanical type to shame, but clearly it cannot be mass produced and therefore its sale highly restricted. (Plates 9, 10).

Along with the unique power of his colors, Blake developed a style that emphasized line and energy. He had learned his love of Gothic art with its free-flowing lines and spirituality from his boyhood of copying monuments in the great English cathedrals, and that love was lifelong. (Plates 11, 11a). Power and energy he imitated from Raphael and Michaelangelo, adding to them a great symbol of energy from his own day: flaming fire, the source of steam and the factory system, the source of political revolution, and the symbol for flaming creativity (Plate 12). Energy, Blake said with great truth, is eternal delight. One other feature of line that is Blake's style is nakedness, a symbol for seeing things anew, freshly, in its essential loveliness, as in these Plates (13 - Glad Day, and 14 - Satan Exulting Over Eve). T. S. Eliot has aptly observed that Blake "was naked, and he saw men naked, and from the center of his own crystal."

If his style in painting is that of Gothic art, Blake's chief subject matter all his life was the Bible. It was for him the sublime work of all the ages, the Great Code of Art, he called it. The Bible of course begins with

man in paradise and innocence, his fall into sin and death, his spiritual struggles to rise above mere flesh and idolatry, and ends with the promise of redemption and higher innocence. Blake's early poetry and painting stressed a pastoral age of childlike innocence from which man fell into the chains of society and selfhood; his later poetry dealt mainly with man's spiritual struggle, like the Book of Job, or like Dante's Divine Comedy, to realize higher innocence. Like Milton, like John Bunyan, and of course the prophets of old, Blake saw himself as inspired and destined to rewrite and reinterpret the Bible for his own age. In a letter to one of his patrons, he writes:

"The thing I have most at heart -- more than life, or all that seems to make life comfortable without -- is the interest of true religion and science.... I am not ashamed or averse to tell you what ought to be told -- that I am under the direction of messengers from heaven, daily and nightly."

He goes on to say, -

"Naked we came here -- naked of natural things -- and naked we shall return; but while clothed with the Divine mercy, we are richly clothed in spiritual, and suffer all the rest gladly."

These convictions and his artistic embodiment of them got Blake into trouble with the practical, pay-as-you-go world. One of the most moving passages in his letters is his defense of spiritual vision. He had been paid by one Dr. Trusler, an Anglican minister, to do some engravings of moral texts in 1799, but when Dr. Trusler received Blake's drawings, he complained that they were extraordinary, visionary, eccentric, maybe even mad. Blake answered:

I am really sorry you are fallen out with the spiritual world. If I am wrong I am wrong in good company. You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas. But you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be made explicit to an idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the ancients considered what is not too explicit as fittest for instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Esop, Homer, Plato.

He goes on to explain:

And I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. To the eyes of a miser a guinea is more beautiful than the sun.... The tree which moves some to joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way.... But to the eyes of the man of the Imagination, nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers. You certainly mistake, when you say that the visions of fancy are not to be found in this world. To me this world is all one continued vision of fancy or imagination, and I feel flattered when I am told so. What is it sets Homer, Virgil, and Milton in so high a rank of art? Why is the Bible more entertaining and instructive than any other Book? Is it not because they are addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual sensation...? Such is true painting....

But I am happy to find a great majority of fellow mortals who can elucidate my visions, and particularly they have been elucidated

by children, who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my pictures than I even hoped. Neither youth nor childhood is folly or incapacity. Some children are fools and so are some old men. But there is a vast majority on the side of imagination or spiritual sensation.

The vision that Blake saw and represented in poetry and painting for the last 25 years of his life he called "Jerusalem", It begins with a search, endures the pains of our flesh, and ends in illumination (Plates, 15, 16, 17, 18). This was the ideal state of spiritual sensation, of the human form divine. What Camelot was to the Arthurian age, what the heavenly city of God was to St. Augustine, Jerusalem was to Blake. It was a city -- London redeemed -- it was a woman -- love personified and purified; it was a state of the human soul -- a sensitive, fulfilled human soul, seeing as Christ saw. Jerusalem was the city and the woman was the bride of Christ, and Jerusalem once -- like Camelot -- existed in England.

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 and his Bride.

The poem is an obscure, sometimes perverse, but grandly sublime epic of the fallen human soul rising to the state of the human form divine, to a state of Jerusalem, to a state of spiritual vision like that described in St. John's Revelations. "Bring me my bow of burning gold," Blake had implored his messengers of poetic inspiration:

Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire.

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

The very last years of his life Blake spent in illuminating his interpretation of the Book of Job and of Dante, both of which tell of the trials of the human spirit from the greatest suffering to a state of redemption (Plates 19, 20, 21). But lest in these grand spiritual visions we forget that Blake was a man of flesh and blood, it is worthwhile commenting on his sense of humor. He did live in the real world and he wrote what he called Proverbs of Hell. Here are a few.

If others had not been foolish, we should be so.

You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.

The most sublime act is to set another before you.

The nakedness of woman is the work of God.

He whose face gives no light will never become a star.

And speaking of men and women and marriage, he observed:

When a man gets married, he finds out whether,
His knees and elbows are only glued together.

And what is sexual happiness?

What is it men in women do require?
The lineaments of satisfied desire.

What is it women do in men require
The lineaments of satisfied desire.

Like many artists before him, and since, Blake's genius was sometimes seen as madness -- mainly by people of course who themselves had no imagination. And on occasion Blake apparently liked to put them on. One of his guests had heard that Blake had strange visions of insects -- the ghost of flea, for instance -- and asked him to demonstrate. Here's the account by this guest: "As I was anxious to make the most correct investigation in my power of the truth of these visions, on hearing that spiritual apparition of a flea, I asked him if he could draw for me the resemblance of what he saw. He instantly said, 'I see him now before me.' I therefore gave him paper and pencil with which he drew this portrait... (plate 22, Ghost of a Flea). Blake must have amused himself hugely by his imposition on his guest's credulity with this hilarious ghost.

Blake died in his bed, painting, his illuminated books virtually unknown, his painting fairly well known but admired by only a few. Yet he knew he was a supreme visionary artist and he was confident that he had left "monuments of unaging intellect" -- to use a phrase of William Butler Yeats, who was a disciple of Blake's. Blake's many-sided genius in poetry, painting, and prophecy is very hard to characterize adequately, and I have here but sketched some aspects of his splendid creativity. But I hope I have tempted some of you into his vision. To use Blake's lines himself:

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.

Heaven's Gate, built in Jerusalem's Wall, was for Blake, then, our spirit's end and aim, our home, but in this very life we live, not in some after life of palmy south or golden underground or heavenly city of sapphire and pearl. In this Blake was a radical humanist, believing with Jefferson and other revolutionaries of the time that man has the right and ought to be free in his fullest capacity as a man, composed as he was of body and spirit. Life was a demanding spiritual struggle to realize our best selves, in which humility, sacrifice, forgiveness, living in creative harmony with ourselves and society were imperative, and for this we needed spiritual sensation or vision. God became man, the God-man Christ, so that we might become as he is. This was to see the lilies of the field and the little children and the forgiven fallen woman as infinite, holy. It was to live in the spiritual state of Jerusalem. This Blake's poetry and painting --

grounded as they are in that pre-eminent record of spiritual struggle, the Old and New Testaments -- sought to do; and in this he is a great humanist and humanizer.

At the beginning of my talk I said that the purpose of the humanities was to enlarge the mind and elevate the spirit. I believe Blake does that for us. And just as in his own time he believed the arts could help free men from their "mind-forged manacles," so Blake and the great visionaries of the spirit can help us to seek a higher humanity. There is today a lively philosophical debate about the human mind in relation to the machine, as computer technology and robotics begin to persuade some that electronic machines can not only out-produce man but also out-think the mind of man, suggesting that 1984 and beyond will indeed usher in a new age of Frankenstein. That fear may be only another variety of science fiction in our time, but I think the humanities must be central to the debate. And I think it is the burden of teachers to make the liberal arts coherent and meaningful, aesthetically and ethically, and therefore truly liberating to the mind and spirit.

Over a hundred years ago John Stuart Mill, a very keen student of thought and feeling, addressed the students at St. Andrews University in Scotland, reminding them of the insignificance of our human life if it be spent only in making things comfortable for ourselves and our kin. He stressed the need to develop our nobler selves, our feelings, our imagination so as to elevate mind and spirit. Now, he said, of this elevated tone of mind the great source of inspiration is literature and all the arts "which keep alive and in activity the feelings they express."

Blake went further. He said, "The whole business of Man is the Arts, and all things common." "Art is the Tree of Life."