

WILLIAM BLAKE: A MENTAL PRINCE

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THE first exhibition of William Blake's paintings was held in 1809, just 148 years ago, in the house where he was born, 28 Broad Street, Golden Square. (The building can still be visited in Soho and contains a shop-sign business.) His brother James Blake, who had taken over their father's hosiers' trade, lent the first floor of the house for the exhibition which had several famous visitors. Among these was the poet Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, and the Boswell of the age, Henry Crabb Robinson. It is interesting to remember this first humble showing at a time when the great galleries of the nation are vying with one another to present William Blake bi-centenary exhibitions. To celebrate the birth of this amazing poet and painter on November 28, 1757, the Tate Gallery has arranged an especially lavish display of its Blake Treasures. The Print Room of the British Museum has shown not only its Blake collection but examples of the work of Blake's contemporaries and followers. The Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, which possesses beautiful examples of Blake's illuminated books as well as many paintings, has also been holding an exhibition. Up in Manchester the Whitworth Art Gallery has shown its Blakes together with those belonging to the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and the Victoria and Albert has arranged a special exhibition where newly acquired paintings as well as drawings and engravings which have long been housed there were shown.

What would Robert Southey have thought of all this? Probably he would not have been greatly surprised, for he left his own impressions of the original exhibition; and these reveal that though he thought Blake crazy he also observed his genius not only as a painter but as a writer too. Southey says,

'Some of the designs were hideous, especially those which he considered as most supernatural in their conception and likenesses. In others you perceived that nothing but madness had prevented him from being the sublimest painter of this or any other country.'

He refers also to 'the very curious and very rare descriptive

Catalogue of his own Pictures'. Through reading this *Descriptive Catalogue* Southey could have gained an insight into Blake's whole system which is set out there. But in fact both he and Crabb Robinson may have been influenced by the scathing remarks about Blake in the current review of the *Examiner*, where he is described as

'an unfortunate lunatic, whose personal inoffensiveness secures him from confinement, and consequently, of whom no public notice would have been taken, if he was not forced on the notice and animadversion of the *Examiner* in having been held up to the public admiration by many esteemed amateurs and professors as a genius in some respect original and legitimate.'

This simply shows how even in his own lifetime William Blake was able to inspire the extremes of admiration and dislike in which he has been held ever since.

Charles Lamb displayed a greater capacity to judge both Blake's strength and his foibles. Writing to his friend Bernard Barton, Lamb says,

'The painters in oil . . . he affirms to have been the ruin of art. . . . His pictures—one in particular, the Canterbury Pilgrims . . .—have great merit, but hard, dry, yet with grace. He has written a Catalogue of these with a most spirited criticism on Chaucer, but mystical and full of Vision.'

In the same way the German painter, Gotzenberger, back from a visit to England, later declared:

'I saw in England many men of talent, but only 3 men of Genius—Coleridge, Flaxman and Blake, and of these Blake was the greatest.'

Nevertheless both of Blake's admirers might have been a little startled if they had been able to read the draft of a 'Public Address' in his notebook which attacks even more violently than the *Descriptive Catalogue* such realist painters as Rubens, Correggio and Rembrandt:

'Rubens' Luxembourg Gallery is confessed on all hands to be the work of a Blockhead; it bears this Evidence in its face. . . . Bloated Gods, Mercury, Juno, Venus, and the rattle traps of Mythology & the lumber of an awkward French Palace are thrown together around Clumsy & Ricketty Princes & Princesses higgledy piggedly. . . . If all the Princes in Europe,

like Louis XIV & Charles the first, were to Patronize such Blockheads, I, William Blake, a Mental Prince should decollate & Hang their Souls as Guilty of Mental High Treason.'

In one respect we are more fortunate than Blake's contemporaries. His writings were only available to them in copies elaborately hand printed and illuminated by himself and not all of them had even been published in that form. They made some impression at the time—Wordsworth and Lamb were both ardent admirers of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and Disraeli's father, Isaac D'Israeli, bought a good many copies of the illuminated books—but Blake's own private comments, his explosive opinions were not usually revealed to them. Since Sir Geoffrey Keynes brought out his edition of Blake's complete works they have been at our disposal and gradually over the years a body of knowledge about Blake's ideas and sources has been built up. With the approach of the bi-centenary a crescendo of enthusiasm and effort has now been reached. In their various ways the critics' contributions all point to one fact. When he called himself 'a Mental Prince' Blake was making no idle boast. He was an astonishingly learned and brilliant man; very well read, possessing an intuitive penetration which can only be called 'prophetic' and a technical mastery as an artist which few can rival. The craftsmanship of his etching and engraving still fills the experts with admiration, while his colour printing has never been surpassed, and once he had perfected his method of tempera painting he achieved better results than any other painter using the medium since Raphael. But with his independent mind, his unusual temperament and his refusal to be influenced by fashion, he expressed opinions which are vehemently one-sided and often prejudiced. Still, as modern critics have discovered, even his prejudices are illuminating once his reasons for them have been detected.

The truth seems to be that Blake was in reaction from a certain attitude to life. Extreme realism meant materialism to him and he foresaw the increasing materialism of an approaching scientific age. Just as he disapproved of Rubens, Titian and Sir Joshua Reynolds in Art, so he revolted from the influence on thought of Bacon, Newton and Locke. We can get some idea of Blake's reading as well as the way his mind worked from his comments on Reynolds' *Discourses*.

'Burke's Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke; on this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions in all his Discourses. I read Burke's Treatise when very Young; at the same time I read Locke on Human Understanding & Bacon's Advancement of Learning; on Every one of these Books, I wrote my Opinions, & looking them over find that my Notes on Reynolds in this Book are exactly similar. I felt the same Contempt & Abhorrence then that I do now. They mock Inspiration & Vision. Inspiration and Vision was then, & now is, & I hope will always Remain, my Eternal Dwelling place; how can I hear it Condemned without returning Scorn for Scorn?'

Here was a man indeed, as Lamb put it, 'mystical and full of Vision'.

Unfortunately, in his search for true spirituality, Blake sometimes went to the extreme of what can only be called Gnosticism. So that a critic faced with the task of assessing Blake's position has to meet a tricky problem. How have the latest writers on Blake come to terms with the difficulties any judgment on this extraordinary mind brings with it? To begin with one work which appeared earlier this year; F. W. Bateson's *Selected Poems of William Blake*: the Notes and Preface to this book are the most important part of it, for the poems chosen will be familiar to many readers. Mr Bateson opens with a flat statement:

'The total intelligibility of Blake's poetry is a modern discovery.'

This is true. It is not so long since the time when many authorities admired his lyrics, but considered his longer poems, what are usually called the 'Prophetic Books', just glorious nonsense. Others caught some inkling of the meaning but also divined that to extract it would involve much more hard work than they were prepared for. Mr Bateson is perfectly right in pointing to the sources of Blake's symbolism in

'the Jewish Cabala, the alchemical writings of Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa, and the Protestant mysticism of Boehme'. But he is a little unfair perhaps in his references to the way Blake adapted the curious ideas about the Druids which were current in the eighteenth century. This was one of the few fashionable elements in his system. But because we are now unwilling to

believe that the Greeks received the seeds of their philosophy from the British and French Druids we ought not to blame Blake because, as Mr Bateson says, he 'adopted this nonsense enthusiastically'. Edward Davies, who wrote popular books on Druidism, was given the title of 'Bard to the Prince of Wales' and not only did the royal family subscribe to his works, but so did many bishops, Eton College, the Dean and Chapter of Westminster and various Colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. These people—moved no doubt by an excess of local patriotism—were very far from considering Druids nonsense.

The unravelling of Blake's symbolism has been made easier by the classical works of Blake scholarship; Professor Foster Damon's *William Blake, his Philosophy and Symbols*, Professor Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*, and a later American work which has not been given the attention it deserves in this country: I mean Professor David Erdman's *Blake, Prophet Against Empire* which appeared in 1954. Although marred by attempts to show Blake as a good American anti-imperialist at a time when the British Empire scarcely existed, this book contains a wealth of historical information that is extremely illuminating. Professor Erdman has traced the political allusions in poems like *America* and *Europe*: brilliantly and knows enough in detail about eighteenth-century London—far more than most British scholars—to make many obscure passages clear. The following passage from *Jerusalem*, for instance, would have rather a vague meaning if one did not know that the Tyburn gallows was moved at various times to different spots between Paddington and Marble Arch, and that when a building drive, employing Irish labourers, was launched in that area, bones and remains of clothing were dug up when the ground was being cleared.

'What are those golden builders doing . . . near Tyburn's fatal

Tree? is that

Mild Zion's hill's most ancient promontory, near mournful

Ever weeping Paddington? is that Calvary and Golgotha

Becoming a building of pity and compassion? Lo!

The stones are pity and the bricks well wrought affections

Enamel'd with love & kindness, & the tiles engraven gold,

Labour of merciful hands . . .'

It is also enlightening to know that 'Tyburn's brook', which Blake frequently refers to, is really the Serpentine in Hyde Park.

Two other American authors have recently made valuable contributions to an understanding of Blake's work: Laura De Witt James and Margaret Rudd. Mrs James's study is concerned exclusively with the influence of the Cabala on Blake's thought and she points out many correspondences between this Jewish tradition and Blake's system which have so far remained unnoticed.¹ Her approach is a little conditioned, perhaps, by an attitude to the tradition which is later in date than Blake's own. Her outlook is similar to that of the late McGregor Mathers, A. E. Waite and some modern Rosicrucians. And she sometimes accepts ideas as compatible in the Christian orthodoxy which cannot possibly be harmonized with it. But her brief book obviously results from years of careful work and repays attention. Miss Rudd's is limited to a close observation of the theme of Sex Warfare in Blake's three major prophecies.² It carries further the discussion on Blake's relations with his wife which formed part of Middleton Murry's brilliant book on Blake. Miss Rudd's approach is daring, provocative and stimulating and it is impossible to quarrel with her conclusions while she sticks to her main theme. Obviously, however, she is no longer very much interested in other aspects of Blake's thought and his excursions into such mental regions are regarded as boring digressions. In her commentary on *Jerusalem*, for instance, she dismisses whole tracts of the poem with the words,

'Only after many careless and unnecessary pages is the connection made between Jerusalem's lovely song urging Albion to awake and the lifeless figure of Albion himself as he lies stretched out in the sleep of death. . . .'

As serious criticism this simply will not do.

Returning to the British contributions to Blake scholarship, it is worth drawing attention to the second edition of Dr J. Bronowski's *William Blake* in Pelican Books. This has been available since 1954 and is very helpful in giving the reader a clear picture of the historical situation within which Blake played his part. Dr Bronowski is now rather more drawn to Blake's philosophic and mystical speculation as opposed to his social conscience than was the case when he first wrote the book. Another work appearing in the same year is Stanley Gardner's

¹ Laura De Witt James: *William Blake: The Finger on the Furnace*. (New York, 1956.)

² Margaret Rudd: *Organiz'd Innocence*. (London, 1956.)

Infinity On The Anvil. Unfortunately this 'Critical Study of Blake's Poetry' reveals its author's limitations rather more clearly than Blake's. He appreciates the lyrics but is repelled by the prophetic poems, taking them as examples of the disintegration of Blake's talent as a writer. Speaking of *The Songs of Experience* Mr Gardner says,

. . . 'Experience becomes a poetic reality in the fierce conflict of the symbolism. Hereafter Blake can only wander from this reality towards an impossible Jerusalem; a Jerusalem that never can be, because Experience is.'

If this were so why do we pray,

'Thy kingdom come

On earth as it is in heaven.'

And what business has the author of the Apocalypse to make such play with the 'New Jerusalem'?

A more balanced and indeed highly commendable book by William Gaunt appeared in 1956, *Arrows of Desire*, 'A Study of William Blake and his Romantic World'. This has a photograph of Blake's birthplace as a frontispiece, showing the house, 74 Broadwick Street as it now is, with its window displaying all manner of shop-signs. It deals with Blake mainly as an artist and reproduces an impressive portrait of him by Thomas Phillips as well as pictures by Blake's followers showing the influence of his style. Not many people realize that the most valuable elements in English nineteenth-century art which survived on into the Victorian age, owe their freshness and integrity precisely to that influence. Blake's mastery as an artist in his later years has seldom been better described than by Mr Gaunt. His work can be compared with the great American study, Albert Roe's *Blake's Illustrations to Dante*, published at Princeton in 1953. Mr Gaunt does not show Blake, as has been the fashion, to be an inspired simpleton living all his life in obscurity. Rather he portrays the man who reigned from his plain rooms at Fountain Court, off the Strand, like a king. He attracted the attention of Sir Thomas Lawrence; he appears at the same dinner table as Lady Caroline Lamb. It was at this time that he had an encounter with Coleridge and was continually dogged by Crabb Robinson, who amused himself by taking down his conversations and retailing them to the Wordsworths. He was often to be found at the house of Charles Aders, the cultivated German merchant who kept there

the best collection of German and Flemish paintings in England. His own portrait was sketched by George Richmond and though he was still very poor and completely without social pretensions he commanded the enthusiastic support of John Linnell, a fashionable portrait painter, and the devoted reverence of such younger artists as Samuel Palmer and Edward Calvert. Another artist, Seymour Kirkup, who had been among the visitors to Blake's exhibition and who thought most beautiful exactly those pictures Robert Southey declared hideous, relates that Blake's widow was sent the gift of £100 by the Princess Sophia. She returned it, feeling that there were others who needed it more. *Arrows of Desire* conveys not only the atmosphere of those days and their aftermath but the earlier influences, both literary and artistic, which formed Blake's own taste.

In honour of the bi-centenary a collection of essays has been assembled under the title *The Divine Vision* by Professor V. de Sola Pinto to pay tribute to his memory, and the Blake Trust is bringing out a magnificent volume, *William Blake's Illustrations to the Bible*, this month. But however magnificent our present-day homage may be, it is difficult to better Samuel Palmer's eulogy of his dead master. Palmer, who had High Church leanings, was aware that Blake's anti-materialism went to extremes which are revealed not only in the symbolism of his poems but in his paintings as well. He also knew him as one to whom 'St Teresa was a continual delight' and he did not exaggerate when he said of Blake,

'He was one of the few . . . who are not in some way or other "double-minded" . . . Moving apart in a sphere above the attraction of worldly honours, he did not accept greatness, but confer it.'