

William Blake: A Madman in London

From about the time of the French Revolution to the birth of modern Switzerland, 1780–1850, a number of writers, painters and musicians in Europe are conventionally called the Romantics. The most famous English writers of that group are Coleridge, Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Blake. Visionary, isolated, mad, ingenious, poor, ignored, both poet and painter, William Blake (1757–1827) is probably the most archetypally romantic and definitely the most modern, and in the long term also the most influential writer of them all.

by Lorenz Becher

A Spiritual Life

Blake's youth and what he himself called his 'corporeal life' were as simple, limited and uneventful as his 'spiritual life' was wild, intense, dramatic, free and varied. William Blake lived in his mind, his poetry and his painting, in which storms of anger and creation swept away worlds, gods, tigers, lambs, tyrants, victims and universes by immense waves of energy. His father was a haberdasher (sells underwear) and William attended a drawing school as a boy of 10. At 14 he began a seven-year apprenticeship with an engraver. In his adolescence he read widely and wrote poetry. At 24 he married Catherine Boucher, daughter of a market gardener. She was completely illiterate and Blake taught her how to read and write. The parallels between Shaw's romantic play *Pygmalion* (on which the famous Westside Story is based), featuring Higgins the linguist teaching Eliza the flower girl how to read, write and speak properly are striking. For some early biographers Catherine embodied the ideal and understanding wife for the unorthodox and impecunious genius. But the truth is likely to be a bit more complex. A lot of evidence suggests that Blake often perceived her as a possessive, nagging and jealous wife. The couple remained childless. They enjoyed some moderate prosperity for a certain period with Blake giving drawing lessons, illustrating books and engraving for other artists under the patronage of William Hayley. But Blake wasn't made for this type of life. The caged eagle soon rebelled and about Hayley he wrote that he 'is the enemy of my spiritual life while he pretends to be the friend of my corporeal life.'

Work and Trouble

In 1803 Blake got in trouble with an English soldier who had trespassed into his garden and wouldn't leave, whereupon Blake pushed him off his premises and into the nearest pub. The soldier took him to court saying Blake had uttered seditious statements about king and country. In a time of war between England and France, sedition was a hanging offense. Blake got lucky and acquitted. But ever since he saw bad and ominous forces at work in his contemporary world, which he worked into his visionary, political, religious and philosophical texts, making them even more complex, pessimistic and gloomy. His attitude earned him the reputation of being at least slightly paranoid. This reputation of being a madman was increased by his poetic fits and seizures during which he conceived and wrote down his poetry. After the incident with the soldier he decided to concentrate on his 'divine vision', even though it meant a life in isolation, poverty and misunderstanding. In 1809 he organized a one man show of his works, which turned out a complete failure, whereupon he withdrew completely. Only at sixty did he finally attract some public interest. A group of Pre-Raphaelite artists admired him as one of their precursors, took him seriously and listened to his words. In his sixties Blake gave up poetry and devoted himself to pictorial art. In the course of his life he produced hundreds of paintings and engravings, many of them illustrations for the works of other poets like Chaucer or Dante. Blake's old age was serene, self-confident and joyous, largely without the bursts of irascibility with which he had earlier responded to the shallowness and blindness of the English public.

Some Quotations from *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man as it is, infinite.
Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; ...
In seed time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.
Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead.
The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.
Dip him in the river who loves water.
A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.
He whose face gives no light, shall never become a star.
The busy bee has no time for sorrow.
If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.
Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion.
The nakedness of woman is the work of god.
The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.
Expect poison from the standing water.
You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.

Blake's Art and Influence

Since 1920 Blake has finally been recognized, both in poetry and painting, as one of the most dedicated, intellectually challenging and astonishingly original artist. His art is distributed all over the world now, in big museums and private collections, and the prices for his works have rocketed sky high. Large numbers of books have been written about his poetry, which continues to fascinate and mystify. Aldous Huxley called his famous study on drug experiments *The Doors of Perception. Heaven and Hell.* and the New Age Movement and the Beat poets of the fifties and sixties were enormously influenced by Blake's style. The sixties cult band The Doors plundered Blake for their words and so did Bob Dylan or Allen Ginsberg. Blake had seen himself as a bard, a voice, a visionary in direct line from Homer, the bible, Spenser and Milton and the power of his words has never failed to produce new imitators. Despite his roots in tradition Blake worked hard to find new forms and techniques. He illustrated his own works with an engraving and printing technique he had invented and developed himself and he fought poetic tradition with a vengeance. "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." Blake loved to provoke and shock his literal minded contemporaries with irony and mystification. In *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* he presents a series of poems on the contrary states of the human soul in a complex, symbolic, compressed and metaphoric style offering a great multiplicity of references. Like the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* this work is full of highly modern statements about racism, radical religious positions, abuse of power, deeply psychological phenomena, conventionality, growth, development and universal man. *The Marriage* is an outrageous, at times comic and provocative onslaught against the timidly conventional and self-righteous members of society, as well as many of the stock opinions of orthodox Christian piety and morality. And above all it is one of many attempts of Blake's at stating his vision of man's fall, not from god, but from universal wholeness. The modern problem, Blake says, is man's alienation from himself as well as his psychic disintegration and fragmentation. We must become one and complete again he says, we must be more than machines or tools in the hands of a economic systems fulfilling just one function there at the expense of numerous spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual sides of wo/man.