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1

Rescuing the Human Spirit

During the late eighteenth century signs of an intellectual disturbance began to show themselves in English culture, signified at first by little more than a few tremors, experienced within what was otherwise a firmly stable edifice established by exercise of logical reasoning. The work of Isaac Newton had been seen as having set the design of the universe into a mathematically ascertainable pattern, while John Locke had endeavoured to follow this up by seeking an equivalent ordering for the human mind, built up by organizing the sense-impressions with which the external world provided it so as to match Newton's arrangement.

Within this achieved security two areas of tension and questioning had come to be recognized – even though they offered no immediately threatening challenge. The first was the need to reconcile this new world of logical and scientific reasoning with the authority of the Bible. Since the chronology of the Old Testament had not yet been seriously challenged, even if any historical record concerning humanity's origins seemed lost in the impenetrable mists of the past, it was a rational course to continue receiving the biblical narrative as a sufficiently acceptable account of the emergence of human beings and their moral nature.

Secondly, it seemed necessary to extend Locke's account of the mind by attending to the full nature of the sensibility involved. For some human beings, it seemed, the orderings of reason did not offer a sufficient account of the matter; indeed, the idea that nothing existed beyond them could well give individuals a sense of their own failings and lead to states of depression: while at one end of the behavioural spectrum this might prompt a rejection of reason and even a lapse into insanity, those less afflicted by the depressing implications of the world presented might still feel a need to supplement the world of reasoning

by invoking areas of sensibility beyond – looking particularly to modes of feeling. Hence the growing tendency to propitiate the tender affections, for example, whether through concentration on loving human relationships or through bypassing them and devoting one's interest to animals.

The kinds of problem that might arise from this settlement included those that sprang from a need to exercise the restraints demanded by religious belief. The difficulties this could raise for an intelligent writer can be seen by looking at the careers of men such as Samuel Johnson and William Cowper. Johnson always gives the sense of a man in whom reason – modified as necessary by what he could claim to be 'common sense' – acted as a constant guide. Yet having been brought up in what at the time was accepted as orthodox Christian faith, he could suffer acute anxiety at his own breaches of the moral code and fear the verdict of a Last Judgment in which his own career would be weighed and found to be wanting. For the most part he could subdue such fears beneath the demands of everyday social life, but Boswell's *Life* displays the way in which they could emerge from time to time, escaping his rational guard, as when he argued against Dr Adams that where individuals were concerned the infinite goodness of God had to be limited:

JOHNSON: ... and as I cannot be sure that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned. (looking dismally)

DR ADAMS: What do you mean by damned!

JOHNSON (passionately and loudly): Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.¹

Johnson could fear the pains of judgment while still keeping his fears, however imperfectly, under the watchful guard of his rationality; but a more sensitive person might not be able to sustain such control. In the next generation, William Cowper allowed his religious hopes to be undermined by forceful figures such as John Newton until his reason itself gave way, leaving him for the last years of his life despairing and unhinged.

Three men in particular sensed the strains now being felt: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Blake – the last-named being perhaps the most ambitious of all. Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their different ways, saw it as their task to find a new way of recreating the Miltonic achievement for their time and take the English language further towards a contemporary epic mode. One could

not proceed very far along that path, however, without discerning a greater need – formulated later by James Joyce as Stephen Dedalus's ambition to 'encounter ... the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'.² The growing requirement, in other words, was to engage with the circumstances of one's time at such a profound level as to recognize the internal contradictions of a culture in danger of becoming severed from its Christian roots. The melancholy examples of men such as Johnson and Cowper prompted young intellectuals to search for a better way of being human, while trying to safeguard the ultimate values which the traditional culture might be seen as defending.

William Blake, who was born on 28 November 1757 as the son of a successful London hosier, had an instinctively questioning and potentially rebellious nature which was to make him the most challenging of the three. The London in which he grew up was still far from assuming its later size, consisting still, basically, of two areas – Westminster and the City – which had recently been drawn together, and which stood in a developing relationship to various villages that were being drawn, however gradually, into its sway. The countryside was still close at hand, with agricultural labourers working in nearby fields and farms that could be reached easily from the town. When Blake walked through the streets, similarly, the buildings that surrounded him were still usually the first that had ever stood on the spots that they occupied, reinforcing their impression of permanence. Such factors help to nourish a sense of the century as a time of elegant furniture and well-proportioned buildings in the midst of highly cultivated landscapes, of moderation and decency in the home, but also of uproarious life and broad humour in the streets: the age of Thomas Gainsborough and Alexander Pope alongside that of William Hogarth and Henry Fielding.

Mention of the last two is a reminder that there was another side to the picture, however. Poverty was rife in town and country, with little to cushion the deprived against starvation and death, while disease could strike at all levels in society, cutting down the children of the well-to-do as well as of the poor. The law took its course, often oppressively and mercilessly, creating a sense of imprisonment that was widespread in the age, and beyond. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau began his famous work with the words 'Man is born free, and is everywhere in chains', the sentiment could be greeted by a sense of liberated relief. Yet the whole culture, particularly in a large city, seemed imbued with an opposite sense. Justice was summary and brutal in its punishments: its victims might find themselves either committed to the gallows at Tyburn, where

their executions would be watched by enormous crowds, or flung into jail. Eighteenth-century prisons were notoriously grim: it was a time when even the modest reforms instigated by John Howard were only just beginning, and criminals could hope for little remission. The most notorious prison of the age, the Bastille in Paris, moved Cowper (a poet not given to very radical sentiments) to declare that there was not an Englishman who would not be delighted if it were to be torn down.

It was not only the harshness of physical incarceration that fostered this atmosphere of oppressive enclosure. Locke's view of the human mind, identified above as the dominating philosophy of the time, likened the understanding, as we shall see, to 'a closet, wholly shut from light, with only some little opening left'. The image of the mind itself was thus transformed into something dangerously resembling a prison cell. Guilt-ridden elements in the religious teaching of the time, similarly, would make any sensitive listener think of the body as a containing power, imprisoning the will, which tried to overcome its urges. Pope, a central spokesman for the contemporary intellectual view, could write:

Most Souls, 'tis true, but peep out once an age,
Dull sullen pris'ners in the body's cage ...³

Isaac Watts, the hymn-writer, similarly, could count it a blessing that

Shortly this Prison of my Clay
Must be dissolv'd and fall.⁴

Human beings could be haunted by a sense that they suffered from an imprisonment extending beyond the political and the physical. Years later, William Hazlitt, recalling the impact of Coleridge, could still say, 'my heart, shut up in the prison-house of this rude clay, has never found, nor will it ever find, a heart to speak to', going on to claim that Coleridge had at least liberated his understanding into expression.⁵ The sense of oppression reflected the popular religious conception of a God who, while favouring those who kept his commandments, would not show pity to those who resolutely disobeyed them.

For Blake reflections such as this were intensified by an imaginative power that all too easily found fuel for nightmares. He once said that he could look at a knot in a piece of wood until he felt frightened by it.⁶ Yet this capacity for fear was matched by an equally strong power of ecstatic vision that could transform the world into a place of joy and beauty.

He evidently enjoyed the power of eidetic vision, a condition in which human perception projects images so powerfully that the perceiver cannot easily tell the difference between them and images in the physical world. Although such a power is found from time to time among children, it seldom persists beyond the age of twelve; in Blake it lasted all his life. In old age he would often sketch visionary heads 'from the life', sitting at his table and looking at his subjects as if they were actually in the room.

Blake's strong visionary powers were further nurtured and chastened by his religious upbringing. Keri Davies's work on Blake's forebears has added to the richness of the picture by enquiring into the beliefs of his mother, originally Catherine Wright, and establishing that she came from Walkeringham, a small village in Nottinghamshire. Born in 1725, she married Thomas Armitage, a hosier, at the London Mayfair chapel on 14 December 1746, and with him was received into a Moravian congregation in Fetter Lane in London. They had a child, also named Thomas, who died in infancy. After her husband died of consumption in 1751 she left the congregation and six years later married James Blake, William's father, again in the Mayfair chapel. If James was not a fellow Moravian, the effect of the new marriage was to join her with someone of a different persuasion – though not necessarily a different denomination: the Moravians, as episcopal, were in communion with the Church of England, while not discouraged from regarding themselves as dissenters. Nancy Bogen's suggestion some years ago that the Blakes might have attended the Fetter Lane chapel while not ceasing to be Anglicans is thus fortified: 'It was possible to be at the time both of and not of the Anglican Church.'⁷

The members were notable for strong outpourings of emotion: John Wesley, an important adherent before he became one of the founders of Methodism, dated his conversion to an evening of 24 May 1738, when at a meeting among them in Aldersgate Street he felt his heart 'strangely warmed'. Such manifestations no doubt had some effect on William Blake also: the issue of a possible resemblance between Moravian hymns and some of Blake's early poetry was in fact raised some years ago.^{8*} The indications are, however, that while his mother aligned herself with her first husband she found total commitment difficult. A letter from her to the brethren is extant (presumably following the example of Thomas, who had written similarly), in which she recorded that the Saviour had been pleased to make her 'Suck his wounds and hug the Cross more then Ever'. Her letter was equally open and honest, however ('I have very littell to say of my self for I am a pore

crature and full of wants') and she confessed, 'I do not Love our Dear Saviour half enough' – trusting nevertheless that it would be his will to bring her 'among his happy flock in closer connection'.⁹ Her description of herself as a 'pore crature' is particularly interesting in view of her son's use of the similar locution in *An Island in the Moon*: 'to be sure, we are all poor creatures'.¹⁰

Her letter also bears witness to the strong part played by feeling in the Moravian hymns, as in their extravagant devotion to the detail of Christ's sufferings. It is hard to imagine that her son enjoyed their more mawkish expressions or that he took over much more than their general tone of humane feeling and philosophy of love: a devotion to Christ's blood and wounds is notably absent from his own work. Imagery in Moravian hymnody such as that of lion and lamb looks forward to his more sophisticated use of such child-like imagery in the *Songs of Innocence*, but his comments on phrases such as the 'lambkins and chickens of Christ' might well have been scathing.

It is hard to judge further the religious leanings of the Blake family in which William grew up, since we cannot even be sure of James Blake's attitude to Moravianism.^{11*} There is some evidence that he joined the Baptists, at least for a time,^{12*} while the children, including William, were for the most part baptized in the Grinling Gibbons font at the Anglican St. James's church in Piccadilly – in line again, perhaps, with the Moravian position that made it possible for their followers to be at one and the same time Anglican and 'dissenting'; but, as Bentley argues, the best way of describing Blake's own religious position as he grew up would probably be to speak rather of 'Enthusiasm', a term to be associated less with a particular religious persuasion than with a widely ranging religious attitude, and by no means untrue to a Moravianism which, as Davies points out, was less a sect than a spirituality. One advantage of considering him in this context is that 'enthusiasts' of the time could well feel themselves justified in cultivating extremes which might lead others to label them as mad – a category which they felt they could accept with equanimity. In a letter of 26 November 1800, Blake wrote of himself as an 'Enthusiastic, hope-fostered visionary',¹³ and shortly before this William Hayley said that he could not even write the word without recalling him.¹⁴ A few years later he would write to a correspondent, 'Dear Sir, excuse my enthusiasm or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand, even as I used to be in my youth.'¹⁵ To use the word of him avoids the need to identify his beliefs too narrowly.

His own early 'enthusiasms', meanwhile, were even more devoted to literature and philosophy than to art, his memory of them being summarized in a letter to Flaxman of 1800:

Now my lot in the Heavens is this; Milton lov'd me in childhood &
shew'd me his face
Ezra came with Isaiah the Prophet, but Shakespeare in riper years
gave me his hand
Paracelsus & Behmen appear'd to me. terrors appear'd in the
Heavens above.¹⁶

That Blake should have been drawn to Milton and Isaiah is hardly surprising, given the strong visionary element in the writings of both, but the prominence of Ezra at so early a point is more puzzling – until one recalls the stress in his writings on the return from captivity in Babylon and his efforts to set in motion the building of the Temple. Ezra's visions of the glory of the Lord and the building of the Heavenly City were destined to bear fruit in Blake's later work. From the first, however, such dreams – like those of the Old Testament prophets – alternated with others of fear and destruction. Indeed, the letter just quoted continues with an account of the major terrors that visited his youth:

... a mighty & awful change threatend the Earth.
The American War began. All its dark horrors passed before
my face
Across the Atlantic to France. Then the French Revolution
commenc'd in thick clouds,
And My Angels have told me that seeing such visions I could not
subsist on the Earth,
But by my conjunction with Flaxman who knows to forgive
Nervous Fear.¹⁷

Other imaginative terrors could beset such a sensitive child, If while attending dissenting chapel services he found himself confronted by the hymns and writings of Isaac Watts,¹⁸ the impression left on him would seem to have been deep. It has already been observed by scholars that some of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* read like satirical versions of, or answers to, verses in Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, such as one that portrays the smugness of a child walking among poor people and invited to give thanks for his own superior condition.¹⁹ What has been less noticed is the degree to which the God whom Watts paints in his hymns is a recognizable version of the 'Cruel Being' whom Blake

grew to dislike. This was the God who had penetrated to a deep substratum of fear in men such as Johnson and Cowper. The fact that Watts was not a very subtle poet should not blind us to the impact that the descriptions of divine justice which he felt to be authorized by the orthodoxy of his time would have had on an imagination so vivid as Blake's. It is easy to picture him as a child turning Watts's pages and finding himself terrified by the moral universe conveyed there, a universe in which men who are misguided enough to pursue their pleasures heedlessly find themselves awaited by a day of judgment. One of the hymns begins:

Adore and tremble, for our GOD
Is a Consuming Fire.
His jealous Eyes his Wrath inflame
And raise his Vengeance higher.²⁰

This figure, which takes literally the words of the Bible by assigning to him the human quality of jealousy, is a prototype of the figure of 'starry jealousy' that Blake was to depict as his controlling deity Urizen. Another of Watts's portraits comes even closer to the cold power stored in Blake's figure:

God has a Thousand Terrors in his Name,
A thousand Armies at Command,
Waiting the signal of his Hand,
And Magazines of Frost, and Magazines of Flame.
Dress thee in Steel to meet his Wrath,
His sharp Artillery of the North
Shall pierce thee to the Soul, and shake thy mortal Frame.²¹

Imagery such as this, along with that of a God with 'Stores of Lightning', seems to have stayed in Blake's mind when he later depicted Urizen in *The Four Zoas* as basing himself in the north, or in *America* described how

... his jealous wings wav'd over the deep;
Weeping in dismal howling woe he dark descended howling
Around the smitten bands, clothed in tears & trembling
shudd'ring cold.
His stored snows he poured forth, and his icy magazines
He open'd on the deep, and on the Atlantic sea white shiv'ring
Leprous his limbs, all over white, and hoary was his visage.²²

In Blake's writing Urizen would be a cold deity, working through snow, ice and cold plagues. Fire and lightning, on the other hand, would be

reserved for his opponent Orc, the uprising spirit of an energy that was not being allowed to find humanized form. There are other places in which Watts's images look forward to Blake's writings, particularly when he is betraying his horror at the workings of such a God:

Long e'er the lofty Skies were spread,
Jehovah fill'd his Throne;
Or Adam form'd, or Angels made,
The Maker liv'd alone²³

Watts also painted a vivid picture of God making the human body, heart, brains, and lungs, in turn, and writing out his promise of redemption for men:

... His Hand has writ the sacred Word
With an immortal Pen.
Engrav'd as in eternal Brass
The mighty Promise shines ...²⁴

Translating this language into its visual imagery, Blake could have gained strong hints towards his depiction of Urizen as one who turned aside from the light, colour and harmony of Eternity to brood in solitude, 'A self-contemplating shadow, | In enormous labours occupied,' and who wrote out his laws with an 'iron pen'. When he is eventually made to report on his activities, it is in the words:

Lo! I unfold my darkness, and on
This rock place with strong band the Book
Of eternal brass, written in my solitude.²⁵

The man who grew up from such a haunted imaginative childhood was one who might have found some difficulty in fitting into any human society, but whose nature rebelled particularly against the one that surrounded him. His unusually strong imaginative powers rendered the darker side of eighteenth-century life more oppressive to him than to most of his fellows. When he was only four years old, he told his wife, God 'put his head to the window' and set him screaming. All his life he was beset by images of prisons. Depictions of human beings in gloomy, confined places appear throughout his designs, and he several times illustrated Dante's account of Count Ugolino and his sons in the Tower

of Hunger.²⁶ At least one direct experience of a contemporary prison, as we shall see, was afforded him by the 1780 the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots; in his later life, also, he was himself to run the risk of imprisonment when he fell under suspicion of treason. Yet he was also aware that imprisonment did not stop with buildings: the men and women he saw as he walked the streets of London had to him the air of captives, held by invisible bonds. Rousseau's vivid account of man as being 'born free' but as 'everywhere in chains' only deepened the mystery. Could it be that the chains envisaged by Rousseau were manufactured not by 'society' but by human beings themselves?

In considering the blend of nightmare and potential ecstatic vision in his mind it becomes evident that he must also have been touched at a profound level in childhood by visionary writing such as that of Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Although it would not be until within a decade of his death that he would produce a series of designs devoted to it, he had already named the writing in the book as one of his criteria for imaginative vision.²⁷ When as a child he saw a tree full of angels, spangling every bough, or on another occasion saw angelic figures walking among haymakers working in the nearby fields, one suspects that this was a boy whose reading had included Bunyan's accounts of 'the Shining Ones'. When, similarly, he broke in on an account by a traveller describing the splendours of a foreign city with the words 'Do you call that splendid? I should call a city splendid in which the houses were of gold, the pavement of silver, the gates ornamented with precious stones', he was surely bearing witness to an idea of the heavenly city in Revelation that had been further nourished by Bunyan's description of the Celestial City which 'shone like the sun; the streets also were paved with gold'.²⁸ On the first of these occasions he just escaped a thrashing from his father for telling a lie, being saved only by intercession from his mother, who was evidently more sympathetic to the power of eidetic vision. In his father's demand for adherence to literal truthfulness and impatience with fantasy the spirit of the age declared itself once again.

The London in which he was growing up was dominated, meanwhile, by the concept of expansion, caught as it was in transition between the mercantile city that it had been in the past and the industrialized metropolis that it was shortly to become: buildings of one kind and another were increasingly advancing across the countryside, swallowing villages into continuous suburbs. Blake evidently spent a good deal of time walking, but left few clues concerning his favourite routes. His vision among the haymakers²⁹ was said to have taken place at Peckham Rye: his biographer Gilchrist pictured him crossing Westminster Bridge

to pass Blackheath, or Dulwich and the Norwood hills, and on 'through the antique rustic town of Croydon, type once of the compact, clean, cheerful Surrey towns of old days, to the fertile verdant meads of Walton-upon-Thames; much of the way by lane and footpath'.³⁰ What authority Gilchrist had for this route is not clear, though he goes on to claim that these scenes 'stored his mind with lifelong pastoral images'. In his lyrics for *Jerusalem*, on the other hand, the London landscape evoked lay in a different direction, looking north:

The fields from Islington to Marybone
To Primrose Hill and Saint Johns Wood
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalems 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 Jews-harp-house & the Green Man;
The Ponds where Boys to bathe delight:
The fields of Cows by Willans farm
Shine in Jerusalems pleasant sight.³¹

Drawing on the landscape implied in these lines, Peter Ackroyd has mapped a walk Blake might have taken in his youth, striking up Tottenham Court Road and towards Hampstead and taking in the view from Islington to Marylebone as he did so. Willan's Farm, along with others, was in the area now occupied by Regent's Park. On the way, Ackroyd points out, he would have passed through decrepit and run-down areas, 'fetid ditches and piles of stinking refuse, smoking brick kilns and hog pens, ugly pipes belonging to the New River Company that were propped up at the height of some six or seven feet and beneath which grew abundant water-cress'.³² Considering similar evidence, Stanley Gardner warned against reading the *Jerusalem* lines as representing a nostalgic portrait drawn from Blake's youth. The indications are, however, that in both his youth and old age there were still enough green landscapes in the region to justify his picture. Gardner is

no doubt correct to draw from the subsequent question

What are those golden Builders doing
Near mournful ever-weeping Paddington
Standing above that mighty Ruin
Where Satan the first victory won

and the following references to 'Tyburn' and 'London Stone' some reference to John Nash and the terraces that were being constructed in Blake's lifetime, culminating in Regent Street (near which Tyburn formerly stood). But it has to be assumed (as Gardner also seems to have done) that this is a form of romantic irony, the projection of the building of Blake's Jerusalem being a sublime visionary counterpart to the material constructions which Nash was undertaking. Blake's tirade against high places north of the Thames should not be forgotten ('When I was young, Hampstead, Highgate, Hornsea, Muswell Hill & even Islington & all places North of London always laid me up the day after & sometimes two or three days').^{33*} And in support of Gilchrist's concentration on his having been mostly aware of South London, it may be pointed out that places in Surrey figure particularly in the later Prophetic Books in pastoral contexts – whether it is the 'wild thyme from Wimbledons green & impurpled Hills'³⁴ or his invocation of the scene

From the Hills of Camberwell & Wimbledon: from the Valleys
Of Walton & Esher: from Stone-henge & from Maldens Cove ...³⁵

Together, these suggest – at least marginally – a more sensuous immediacy, while his marshalling of the London northern heights – as when

Hampstead Highgate Finchley Hendon Muswell Hill rage loud³⁶

– is more often made in terms of the sublime. There is no firm distinction, however; he is quite capable, for instance, of writing lines describing how Los's emanation

Like a faint rainbow waved before him in the awful gloom
Of London City on the Thames from Surrey Hills to Highgate ...³⁷

– thus reordering the polarity of his London map.

Within the streets of this London there was much to appeal to someone of an inquiring mind. While the Established Church maintained its

ascendancy, the century-old existence of toleration kept alive many strains of independent thought, including those of religious sects. The Moravians themselves, through the work of John Wesley, helped spawn the Methodist movement as a vehicle of renewal for the Church of England which would eventually assume a character of its own. The line of dissent extended to cover many other forms of independent thinking, ranging from the Non-juring group in the Church of England to the protests of Quakerism and taking in groups as diverse as the Freemasons, the Sandemanians, the Muggletonians and the Hutchinsonians, climaxing, as the century drew to a close, with the rise of various Apocalyptic prophets such as Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcote. The arrival of Swedenborgianism in the 1780s promised a new assimilation of scientific thinking to religious beliefs, complementing the strong rationalism of many that had led to acceptance of 'Natural Religion' by the incorporation of a visionary and prophetic element.

So far as English culture more generally was concerned, the effect of imprisonment seemed to be emphasized by the impoverished state of the arts – in comparison with their flourishing condition in a period such as, say, the Elizabethan. At the same time there were signs of change. A new kind of poetry had begun to be heard from writers such as James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton. In both cases their practice had been deeply compromised by suspicion of their claims to have discovered ancient works, which apparently masked a facility in forgery: for practitioners of the old school this was enough to discredit them. Followers of the new nationalisms, on the other hand, were anxious to believe in the genuineness of what was being offered, while younger writers, less stirred by the passions of the two sides, might simply be excited by the irregularity of the forms used and by the thought that they could be seen as springing from the direct expression of human emotions rather than the following of worn-out rules. Blake, whose early versification was strongly affected, retained throughout his career a belief in the Ossian presented by Macpherson.³⁸ He was also aware of other stirrings that might challenge the stranglehold of pure reason. A notable symptom was the cultivation of popular religious feeling encouraged by the Methodists: the later reference to 'Whitefield & Westley',³⁹ which signals his approval, suggests a tribute to the force of their enthusiasm rather than assent to their theology.

His ardent delight in all the arts was shown not only by his progress in drawing and engraving but in the writing of poems also, which he accompanied on the harp to airs of his own composing. So impressed was the company at the home of the Reverend Anthony Mathew, where he sometimes performed, that he was encouraged to publish a collection

of his poems, which had evidently having won favour for their note of inspiration:

Much about this time, Blake wrote many ... songs, to which he also composed tunes. these he would occasionally sing to his friends; and though, according to his confession, he was entirely unacquainted with the science of music, his ear was so good, that his tunes were sometimes most singularly beautiful, and were noted down by musical professors.⁴⁰

Yet there was also a side to his nature that resisted adulation, particularly when it might impinge on his independence. He did not take easily to patronage at any time of his life; at the Mathews' he was after a time discouraged from continuing his attendance because, it was said, of his 'unbending deportment'.⁴¹

The available evidence suggests that the latter trait included a strain not only of independence but also of a notable reserve. As far as popular culture is concerned, there is little sense that he entered sympathetically into the raucous life of the streets – even if he did not quite experience it, either, as the scene of unmanageable confusion that impressed the young Wordsworth at the time of Bartholomew Fair, when

All moveables of wonder, from all parts,
 Are here – albinos, painted Indians, dwarfs,
 The horse of knowledge, and the learned pig,
 The stone-eater, the man that swallows fire,
 Giants, ventriloquists, the invisible girl,
 The bust that speaks and moves its goggling eyes,
 The wax-work, clock-work, all the marvellous craft
 Of modern Merlins, wild beasts, puppet-shows,
 All out-of-the-way, far-fetched, perverted things
 All freaks of Nature, all Promethean thoughts
 Of man, his dullness, madness, and their feats
 All jumbled up together to compose
 This parliament of monsters. Tents and booths
 Meanwhile – as if the whole were one vast mill –
 Are vomiting, receiving, on all sides,
 Men, women, three-years' children, babes in arms ...

For Wordsworth this London created a 'blank confusion' which was a 'true epitome' of the City herself.⁴² Not everyone was so bewildered. It was

also the London which, according to Johnson, contained 'all that life can afford'⁴³ and where Charles Lamb claimed that he would 'often shed tears in the motley Strand from fullness of joy at so much Life'.⁴⁴ Blake's vision of the place, meanwhile, was more penetrating, prompting him, while he rejoiced in its inherent sense of life, to be admonished by awareness of the fear to which such a vulnerable community was open. With little in the way of an efficient police force, the response to violence was likely to be both peremptory and implacable. With efficient communications not available, 'risings' of the London mob, constructed as they might be from causes consisting of little but rumour, could be unpredictable and alarming. In such a case the only resource that the Lord Mayor would find available was to call out the militia, who might in turn feel themselves licensed to use extreme force – as was the case in 1780 after the horrific outburst of violence in the Gordon Riots. On this occasion, as Gilchrist describes, Blake at one point found himself carried along helplessly by the mob:

In this outburst of anarchy, Blake long remembered an involuntary participation of his own. On the third day, Tuesday, 6th of June, 'the Mass-houses' having already been demolished – one, in Blake's near neighbourhood, Warwick Street, Golden Square and various private houses also, the rioters, flushed with gin and victory, were turning their attention to grander schemes of devastation. That evening, the artist happened to be walking in a route chosen by one of the mobs at large, whose course lay from Justice Hyde's house near Leicester Fields, for the destruction of which less than an hour had sufficed, through Long Acre, past the quiet house of Blake's old master, engraver Basire, in Great Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, and down Holborn, bound for Newgate. Suddenly, he encountered the advancing wave of triumphant Blackguardism, and was forced (for from such a great surging mob there is no disentanglement) to go along in the very front rank, and witness the storm and burning of the fortress-like prison, and release of its three hundred inmates.⁴⁵

In some cases the soldiers refused to fire on people whom they regarded as fellow citizens. This did not stop the aftermath and response from being equally violent, however: large numbers of the rioters, some of them no more than boys, were subsequently hanged at Tyburn. Remembering such events, it is not surprising that Blake carried for the rest of his life a hatred of mob violence, which would reach a climax in times of war.

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