

arts

William Blake: Prints of Darkness

by Geoff Ineson

Now, until the 25th of October the Dalhousie Art Gallery, 6101 University Avenue, will carry the exhibition entitled **William Blake and His Contemporaries**. The eighteenth century works have been selected from the Permanent Collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

Blake, as poet, is perhaps best known for his early 1790 piece entitled *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In it, he holds that the Bible is at the center of the imaginative universe. As visual artist, hereto he blends the two extreme visions into one print, or, one artistic experience. This creates what is called an 'artistic tension.' This usual motif for Blake can be seen in the plate entitled *Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee*. This plate has God pointing down from the heavens to a fallen or lower world in which man is symbolized as a half-beast and standing directly between an even lower world (symbolized by the Leviathan) and the higher world (one symbolized by God).

I think to fully appreciate the genius of Blake, one should visit the gallery with a walkman playing Handel's *Messiah*, volume at about three (it is a gallery you know), that this may produce the optimum aesthetic experience. Another thing that might be considered is a re-reading of the Book of Job... well, at least up until God begins to babble on about the mountains. Blake uses the existential Job theme in a fascinating manner through his prints. At once, he is illustrating divine celebration; at once, he is illustrating a state of religious dissention. I think that this is accredited to Blake's view of the Bible as being at the center of the imaginative universe.

The Book of Job prints are deeply meditative in story alone. Though I found that upon close inspection, the work inscribed in the borders was deeply rooted in mythological narrative as well. For example, plate 6 entitled *The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away*, has an Egyptian rod, a locust, two spiders, a creature-like

head, and weeds, in through its borders - all of which are mythological allusions. The plate itself depicts God in the Devil's appearance standing atop of a boil-smitten Job while the plate reads "Blessed be the name of the Lord." Here we see an artistic and even theological tension, that a loving, caring God would not let these things happen to the "Just Upright Man."

Important too on an interpretation of his work is that Blake the artist not to be identified as a 'madman.' Certainly 'madmen' or even 'madpersons' are those who reject the world that would so label them as mad, and find themselves walking the streets talking to Elvis or Allah or

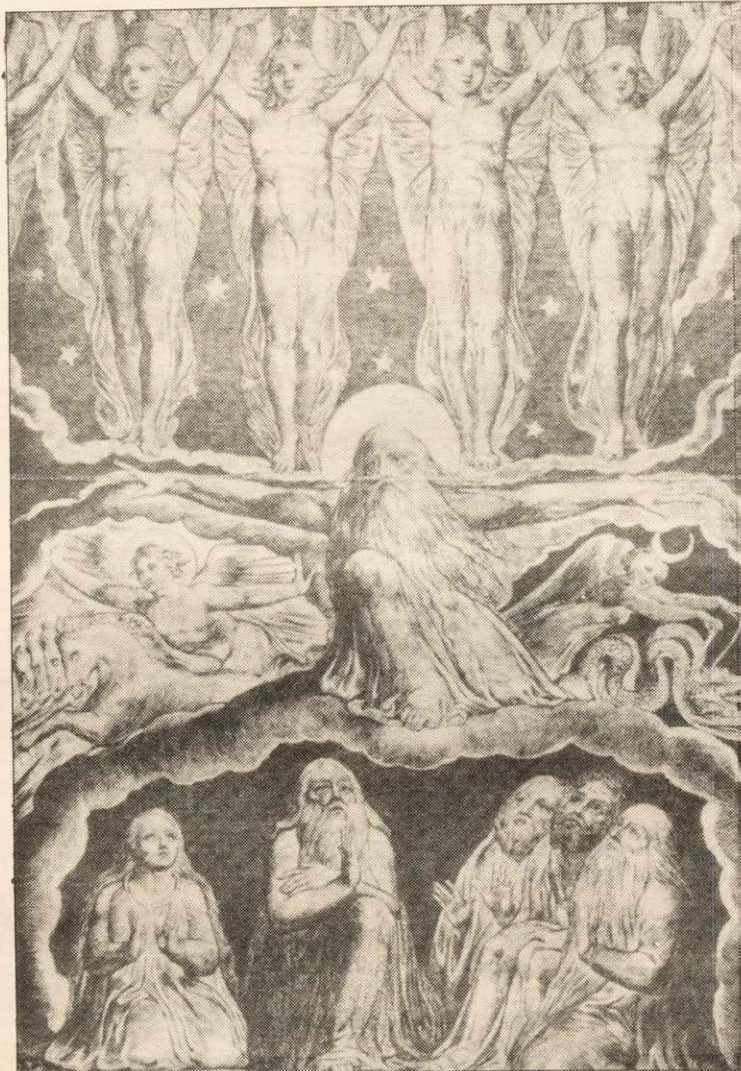
whomever. Madmen are not the romantic poets and painters whose lives, like Blake's, were spent steeped in their respective creative energies.

It would help us to understand the 'visionary quality' of Blake's work if we see that Blake is returning to a mythological language, or a primary language, in purely an imaginative aspect. As Northrop Frye had written in *The Great Code*, "... what the Bible gives us is not so much a cosmology as a vision of upward metamorphosis, of the alienated relation of man to nature transformed into a spontaneous and effortless life - not effortless in the sense of being lazy or passive, but in the sense of being energy without alienation." It is this

direction that the artist Blake takes us in returning to the mythological language that may throw the majority of spectators.

Also at the Gallery are two other feature exhibitions: John Woolford

and the Earl Dalhousie in Nova Scotia and Sylvie Stevenson: *The Milarepa Cycle*. Admission is free. Gallery hours: Tuesday to Friday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., Closed on Mondays.



When the Morning Stars Sang Together, and all the Sons of God Shouted for Joy- William Blake, 1825

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