

# Blake at AGO: A terrible beauty

ROB KELLY

It is not an easy thing to be an artist in any age; for all the rhetoric that is expounded on the joy of creation, it is inevitably a one-sided love affair. William Blake could (and in fact did) deliver a sermon or two on the subject. Art is supposed to speak for itself and a picture being worth a thousand words, Blake is giving a most impressive post-mortem lecture in the AGO until Feb. 6.

Blake has been the subject of many and various theses, analyses, and hindsighted revelations for over a century. This is the art community's way of apologizing for the initial snubbing he received when he was alive and could have appreciated such interest. Be that as it may, the artist is now getting his due in the most extensive exhibition of his work to date. The AGO show encompasses the most significant passages in Blake's career including his early etchings of other artists' work (most notably Gray's "The Grave") and his own ambitious pairing of poetry and visual art. The latter work is a dramatic, oft-times overwhelming chronicle of the imaginative life of an artist. As such, it is both easily ridiculed and with a century or so of cushioning, easily praised as "classic". These descriptions do little justice to what is most compelling in these pictures: the abandonment of what is "reasonable" for that which is beautiful. Even if it is a terrifying beauty.

Blake lived in an age when reason was considered man's most important attribute; this negated the fanciful meanderings of art and, while still mindful of God, did not take any great notice of Him nor the spiritual life. Needless to say, it was a rather inopportune era for a man like William Blake whose work, and indeed whose very existence, gloried in imagination and spiritual, often religious renderings. Now he is called "visionary"; then he was called "pathetic". Fortunately, such opinions did not deter him and what came of his determination is the subject of the extremely well-conceived exhibit.

The layout of the show is logical and thoughtful in terms of artist and audience. The majority of early etchings comes first with a brief history. Then one is immediately confronted with the drama and awe-inspiring (no other word for it) etchings from America: A Prophecy and the books of Urizen and Ahania. These combine poetry and visual art with incredible results. The poetry is written in a flourishing script and punctuated with illustrations both as a visual rendering of what is written and the extension of what is implied. It is the embodiment of the phrase Blake prefaces in the "Vision of the Daughters of Albion": the eye sees more than the heart knows. In passing through this one room the price of admission has already been repaid.

The main gallery houses Blake's larger works and as such, it is worth hanging out here for a while. The use of colour and the expressive anatomy of the human form Blake employed are most evident here. The most pointed example of this has to be the painting of Newton; there are two in fact, and the transformation from one to the other is amazing. At first, Newton is seen as a deeply contemplative figure, his face a serene mask absorbed in a geometrical drawing, the figure perched on a rock wash with gentle colours and subtle hues. In the second, the setting is identical but now the face has acquired a malevolent involvement with his thought and the watercolours are harder, darker and foreboding. The two pieces are in themselves an essay on the effective use of watercolour

which is primarily associated with more sublime expressions. It is also an example of Blake's involvement with his art and his conception of the world. Here we have the foremost thinker of that or any age seen as both angelic and satanic. This no doubt springs from Blake's admiration of Newton's imagination and his rejection of the preoccupation with reason that thrived in his time. In Blake's words, the scientific analysis led to "the same dull round, even of a universe." His own inquiries into the nature of the universe were grounded not in physics but in myth.

The persistence of myth in Blake's art, aside from technical

considerations, is its most notorious aspect. He was ridiculed for so indulging his fancy and yet the result is brilliant. The drawings for Dante's "Inferno" lend a substance to the text which is more than merely physical; it is mystical. The artist's own mythical constructions in the books of Urizen and Ahania or the story of Albion are formidable visions of man's falling from grace with God - whether you embrace the deity or not. The mere fact that Blake conceived, wrote and executed these works alone, without any ovation from an audience is in itself legendary.

The only possible complaint concerns the lighting. To be sure, it

was contrived to lend a subdued effect to the show and to protect the work. But really, no serious damage is going to occur in the few weeks of display and it makes it difficult to consume that eloquent, elegant script which infuses the work.

With that said, the show is excellent in content and design, an experience of art-as-vision by an imagination obsessed by its ability to give life to myth in a peculiarly human way. You may not be awed by William Blake's work, but you won't be coddled by it either. It has only been a century or so since Blake last put pen to page and still we cannot fully realize what a terrible beauty was born.

## York Society for Eighteenth Century Studies

### Blake to rouse man from his slumber

DAVID SPIRO

Tuesday last, a group of fifty people was treated to an enlightening discussion and slide-show on the art of William Blake. The seminar, entitled "Introducing Blake's Designs," was presented by Glendon's Janet Warner on behalf of the newly formed York Society for Eighteenth Century Studies in conjunction with the Blake exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

In her presentation, Warner emphasized that William Blake (1757-1827) was "both an artist and a poet of great talent in each." He was a seminal poet, but is perhaps best known for his dramatic temperas, coloured engravings and book illustrations.

Since Blake thought landscapes were irrelevant, his works do not include them. He painted with "an almost complete concern with the human form", which, to him was "more than the body alone. It is the visible part of the soul. Humanity, for Blake, is equal to the divine."

He believed that man could possess four sorts of vision, or states of mind. In order of most desirable to least desirable, the categories are fourfold vision, threefold vision, twofold vision, and single vision or Newton's sleep.

In Blake's opinion, Sir Isaac Newton was "a heroic and

important figure", but was also "an emblem of single vision" symbolizing "a fearful vision of the world." Newton's mechanistic world view "removed the centre of the universe from the individual" and had been the cause of the "bad dream from which mankind must awaken". Blake felt it was his task to rouse man from his slumber.

The antithesis of single vision is fourfold vision where "all men would be prophets and have the capacity to see the results of their actions". In this state time disappears and eternity replaces the constraints of mortality.

Another desirable state of mind is called threefold vision or Beulah. This particular type of vision is characterized by "a state of rest or paradise where innocence prevails." One would be free of guilt or shame in such a state, a notion which, according to Warner, anticipates many of Freud's ideas about neurosis and the unconscious. A child lives in this state all the time, in a world without guilt, full of love and forgiveness. However, we all must grow up, and we can either become slaves of single vision or we can become creative beings and

possessors of fourfold vision - a state of mind where all have the capacity to become artists.

The voluntary organizing committee of the York Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies is headed by the mischievously irreverent Brian Hepworth whose major interest is the middle part of the Eighteenth Century when Classicism gave way to Romanticism in England. The aim of the Society, says Hepworth, is not so "a bunch of professors can get together and read papers to each other" but rather to appreciate the era in an enjoyable manner through an examination of its literature, philosophy, art, music, history and dance. To make his point, Hepworth quotes Samuel Johnson - "Where there is no pleasure, there is no instruction."

The next YSECS event is a talk by Professor Jack Davis on "Barclay on Immediate Perception" to be held January 25 in the Glendon Senior Common Room at 8:15.

The price of an annual membership in YSECS is five dollars for students and ten dollars for faculty. For more information about YSECS, contact Janet Warner or Eric Rump at 487-6195.

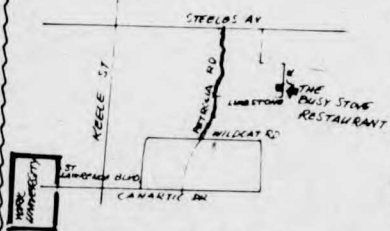
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