

thread of man's life, the introspective figure of Night draws her veil over Sleep and Death in a simple and affecting gesture. Perhaps Carstens was aroused by the uncertainties of the times or even by his own approaching death. In any case, he seems to have taken to heart the passage where Schiller calls on the artist to be the 'child of his age' without being its ' minion'. For this artist of Schiller's, after having 'come to maturity under a distant Grecian sky', should 'return, a stranger, to his own country; not, however, to gladden it by his appearance, but rather, terrible like Agamemnon's son, to cleanse and purify it'.

Such high-flown idealism may seem to us overstated. Yet there were many at the time who were seeking for an art that could equal the extremes that they had experienced, and these people had a special sympathy for the heroic. When Stendhal came to see the Sistine Chapel, after serving under Napoleon on the Russian campaign, he recognized a 'daring power' which recalled his most awesome moments:

'When, during our wretched retreat from Russia, we were suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by a burst of cannon fire which seemed to be coming closer all the time, all our strength appeared to flow into our hearts; we were in the presence of destiny, and, indifferent to matters of vulgar interest, were prepared to measure our lives against fate. The sight of Michelangelo's pictures re-awakened in me this almost forgotten sensation. Great souls are sufficient unto themselves; others become frightened and go mad.'

The prophet

Jesus and his Apostles and Disciples were all artists.'

There is no mistaking the voice of William Blake (1757-1827). This painter-poet, the most impenitent of visionaries, has always been a paradox. Even today opinion divides between regarding him as a curious eccentric and as the most profound spirit of his age. It is more difficult to take a middle ground. One cannot play the connoisseur with him; either one believes in Blake or one does not.

Like Schiller's artist (*see above*), Blake gives the illusion of being formed apart from his age. Yet his vision was forged in the language of his contemporaries. He was not the only prophet to emerge in the wake of revolution. Quite apart from faith healers and spiritualists like Mesmer and Louthenbourg, there were such millenarians as Joanna Southcott (1750-1814), the religious fanatic who claimed the gift of tongues, pronounced herself the woman in Revelation 12 and thought herself to be pregnant with the second Messiah, 'Shiloh', shortly before her death of dropsy. More generally there was a yearning for the spiritual that had first



46 *Blake: Elohim Creating Adam 1795*

been expressed in the writings of the Swedish divine Emanuel Swedenborg and now led to the revival of Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry.

There is much to connect Blake with such movements. His paintings and writings were part of a visionary message, often issued in the form of illuminated prophetic books in which he evolved a personal mythology. Yet he offered no patent cures or formulae for salvation. All he offered was the revelation of an artist's insight. His assertion that Christ was an artist was a recognition that an artist's vision, like that of a religious prophet, was synthetic rather than analytic. More than any of his contemporaries he appreciated that creativity had nothing to do with the rational. Unlike Swedenborg, he did not attempt to align mysticism with the Enlightenment. 'Talent thinks, genius sees,' he declared.

It was quite in keeping with this viewpoint that Blake laid little importance on Christ's miracles. For him the Saviour's real message lay in his challenge to authority, his acting 'from impulse, not from rules'. Blake reached right back to the subversive spirit of primitive Christianity, before

the faith had become an established religion. In doing so he was drawing inspiration from the same source as a long tradition of radical millenarians; for him, however, the spirit had been preserved through art. He envisaged Joseph of Arimathea, the 'secret apostle' who was supposed to have brought Christianity to England, as 'one of the Gothic Artists who built the Cathedrals in what we call the dark ages'.

It was the making real of this vision that was the artist's task:

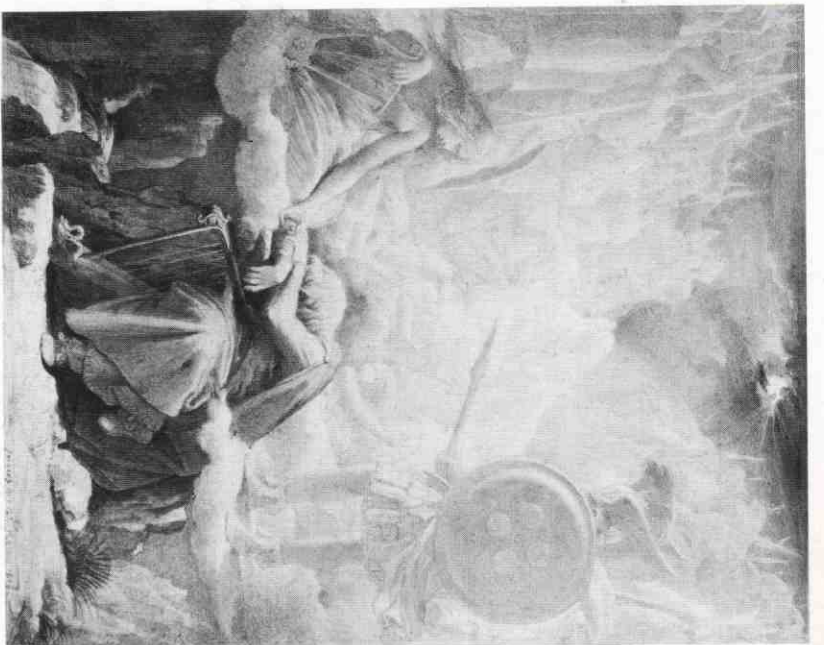
*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
and a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
and eternity in an hour.*

The experience must come through seeing and holding, the action of the senses, 'the chief inlets of the soul'. Blake rejected the intellectual separation of mind and body. The visible must be recognized, in a Neo-platonic sense, as one manifestation of a greater entity. All his prophetic books involve contemporary situations. His most ecstatic, *Jerusalem*, is full of references to London, the city that was Blake's earthly reality. And it was through the



47 BLAKE
Joseph of Arimathea 1773

48 INCHES *Dream of Ossian*
1809



recognition of this continuum that he hoped to reveal the Kingdom of God on Earth.

In his writings and in his paintings, Blake's method could be described as naïve. Nor would he have taken exception to this, for he found archaic man and the child to be nearest to the Divine. His approach was archetypal. In a way more generally familiar since Jung, he studied ancient myths to discover primal meanings.

Blake's point of departure was the growing admiration for 'primitive' poetry that had led to the reevaluation of Homer and Hesiod as the bards who had preserved the legends of Greece before they could be debased by civilization. This concern for rediscovering original purity had also turned Western Europeans back to their own early history; to the epics of Dante and the legends of the German *Nibelungenlied*. It had even led to the discovery of a Homer of their own, the fictive Gaelic bard Ossian, whose sagas (almost complete fabrications) were published by James Macpherson in 1762-63.

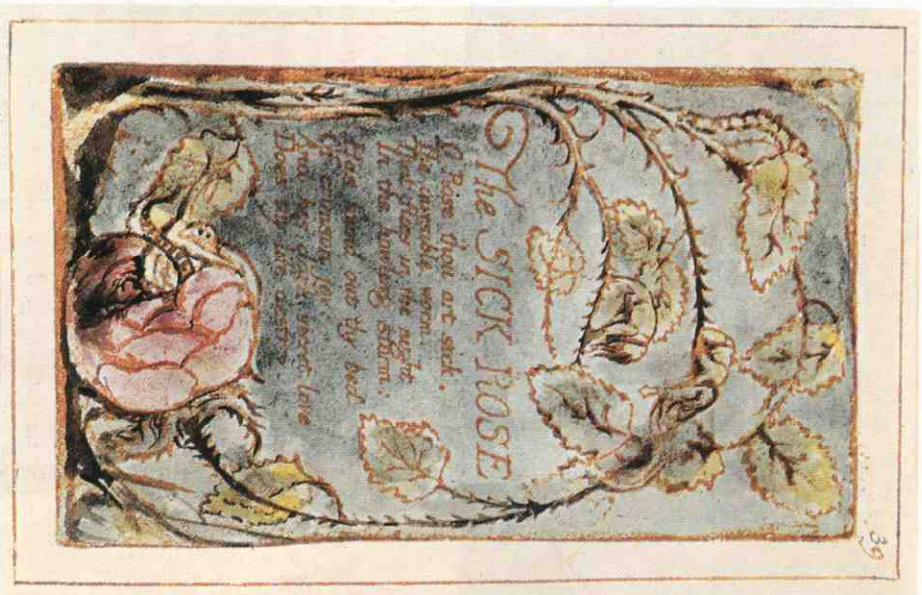
Ossian fulfilled the eighteenth century's highest expectations of the primitive. His heroes were both courageous and courteous; far better behaved, in fact, than the squabbling protagonists of the *Iliad*. Their religion, too, was more 'natural', being based directly on elemental spirits. By the 1770s Ossian was famous throughout Europe. The hero of Goethe's *Werther* (1774) preferred him to Homer, and so did the Primitifs in David's studio. Napoleon's house at Malmaison was decorated with scenes which combined his own legend with that of the bard, such as Girodet's *Ossian Receiving Napoleon's Generals*. Ingres emphasized the inspirational side of Ossian in his *Dream of Ossian*, a preliminary design for a ceiling in the palace Napoleon was to have occupied in Rome.

The Ossianic sagas provided a format and a metre which Blake adapted for his own prophetic books. Although he did not borrow any of the stories, he copied the primitive flavour of the names.

In keeping with the primitive and naive aspects of his poetry, Blake also limited his painting techniques. The explicitness of outline was preferred to effects of colour, and the illusionism of oil painting was rejected in favour of a simulation of tempera painting, which he referred to as 'fresco'. Despite this hardness of style, Blake was highly suspicious of the antique. Like the Schlegels (with whom he shared the concept of art as religious experience) he came to see Grecian art as mechanical: 'Grecian art is mathematical form, Gothic art is living form.' He explained the virtues that did exist in classical sculptures by considering them to be pale copies 'from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs'. He seems to have been seeking to rediscover some such archetype when adapting the figure of Skiron from the Temple of the Winds for the figure of the Creator in *Elohim Creating Adam*.

In material terms Blake's career was a modest one. The son of a London hosier, he was trained as an engraver and attended the Royal Academy Schools to continue his education. Although he later described himself as having spent the Vigour of my Youth and Genius under Oppression of Sr Joshua and his Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves Without Employment', he appears to have achieved some recognition at first both as a designer and an engraver. Watercolours of historical subjects in a gentle linear style were exhibited by him at the Royal Academy in the 1780s, placing him in the company of the more imaginative Academicians, like Barry and Fuseli. He was also to be found at this time in fashionable intellectual circles. There are accounts of contact with such radicals as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, the great champion of female liberty. He is even reputed to have been the man who persuaded Tom Paine to leave England when that propagandist, whose *Rights of Man* (1791) called for the overthrow of the British monarchy, was on the point of being arrested for high treason.

49 BLAKE The Sick Rose 1794



The period which saw Blake's change to a more isolated path is marked by the publication of his *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and his *Songs of Experience* (1794). The first, true to its title, affirms a belief in natural human goodness. Man is seen as the embodiment of the 'Divine Image', full of 'love, mercy, pity, peace'. The *Songs of Experience* mimic the simple lyrics of the former work while opposing its message. Even though Blake finally suppressed the most savage page, in which the 'human form Divine' now stands for 'cruelty... Jealousy... Terror... and Secrecy', he openly questioned throughout the enigma of evil in a God-created world.

In these works Blake became independent in a more material sense. For he devised for them a simple form of relief etching which he could print himself



50 BLAKE From *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 1793

in his own home without the need of an expensive press. The resulting impressions were then touched up, coloured and bound by himself with the aid of his devoted wife. This was the method he used for all his illuminated books. Since word and image were combined in the same plate – as in a medieval manuscript – it led to a close synthesis of Blake's two means of expression. The poem exists in both simultaneously. In *The Sick Rose* it is left to the design to show the fatigue of the deep red bloom as it weighs the weakened stem to the ground.

As events in France inflamed hostility to radicalism in England, Blake went into semi-retirement, renting a small house in Lambeth, then just outside London, on the south bank of the Thames. Disillusionment led him to question his former assumptions; he saw the traditional concepts of good and evil as distinctions that attempted to blot out what could not be comprehended. In his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) he sought to abolish the division. It is the devil here who asserts that 'Energy is Eternal Delight'. Evil becomes for him the primal urge. Like the seventeenth-century mystic Jacob Boehme (republished in England in the 1760s), he believed it was the oppression brought about by earthly laws that caused this libidinous force to be considered evil.

Blake's prophetic books deal with the repression of energy – political in *America* and *Europe*, social in *Urizen* and sexual in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; and a series of large prints demonstrate the clouding of the spirit by materialism. Newton, who ten years earlier had been celebrated by Boullée as a liberator, here becomes an oppressor, dissecting the world with his dividers. God the Father, too, is oppressive; for it was He, the lawgiver, who

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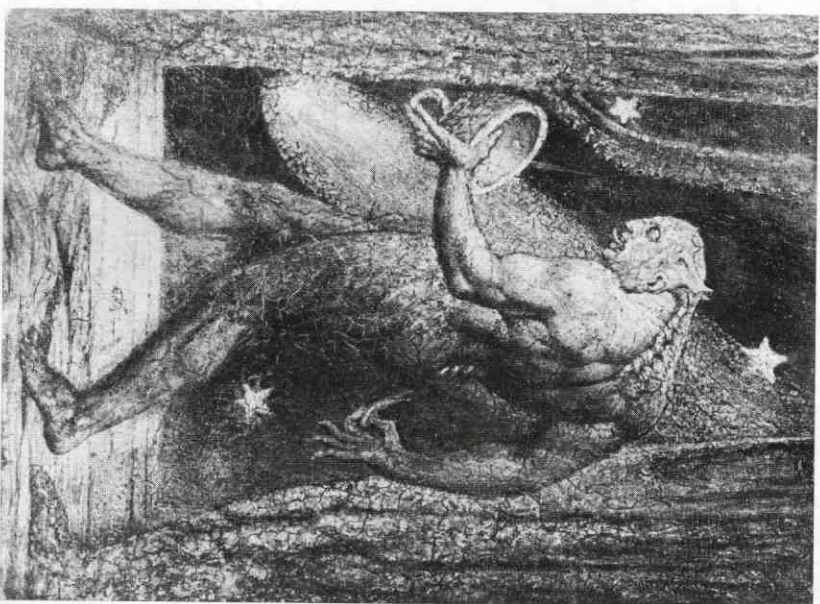
sundered Heaven and Hell by His expulsion of the devil. Called by Blake by His first Biblical name Elohim ('judges') He is shown virtually dragging Adam into existence. These works, exactly contemporary with Carstens' *Night with her Children*, show a similar creation of monumental vigour by the compression of bold figures into a tight space. Both Carstens and Blake drew in fact on Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling for this, and for the morphology of their figures. But unlike Carstens, Blake had inherited none of the Renaissance master's humanism. Nothing could be further from Michelangelo's God, making in man the beautiful embodiment of His own image, than this terrifying picture of a free spirit being enslaved by mortality – with the serpent already entwining his leg.

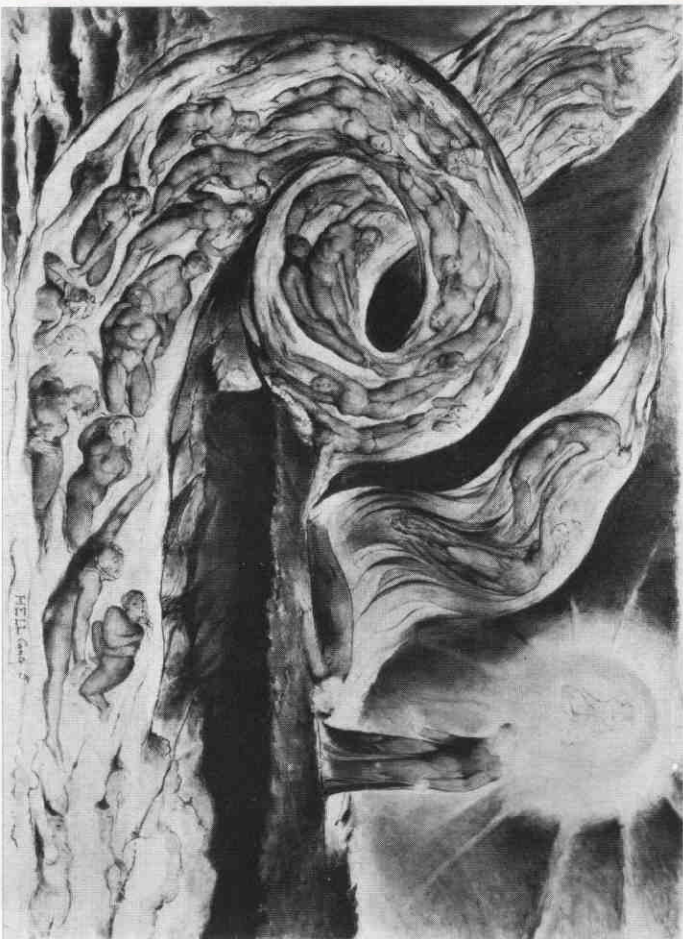
The dark years of the 1790s were followed by three years in the country (1800–3) at Felpham. When he returned to London he was no more accepted than before – his only one-man show (held in 1809 at his brother's house) was dismissed by the one newspaper that reviewed it as a 'farrago of nonsense'. Yet he seems to have felt a new inner peace, for his interest turned from oppression to salvation. This was the message behind *Jerusalem*, on which he was to work for the next twenty years.

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51 BLAKE *Ghost of a Flea* 1819–20





53 BLAKE *Whirlwind of Lovers* c.1824

Hell, but laments his return to the conventional Church in Heaven. As Dante is led by Virgil through the circles of Hell they are shown clothed respectively in red and blue, the colours of feeling and imagination, so essential for the poet. In these watercolours (there was also an uncompleted series of engravings after them), Blake's Michelangesque forms have become so completely imbued with flickering colours and Gothic linearity that the whole appears as a trance-like rhythm of energy. Such scenes as the *Whirlwind of Lovers*, in which the unfortunate Paolo and Francesca are seen with the others who share their fate, form the perfect conclusion for the career of an artist who had always insisted on the strength and clarity, the super-reality, of the visionary.

Blake died, as he lived, praising the Lord. His latter days of joy and steadfastness are perhaps the most compelling witness to his achievement. In the existential terms that he laid down he had succeeded in reconciling the contraries of Heaven and Hell that had been sundered by the lawgivers. He had survived isolation and degradation with his resilience and his receptiveness unimpaired.

Anti-heroes

The vision was one way of penetrating the surface; satire is another. Yet this most anti-heroic form of insight assumes many shapes. Sometimes it proceeds by wit, and sometimes by fantasy; and when it does so by the latter it implies the grotesqueness and absurdity of the caricature.

The eighteenth century was a consummate age of satire. The charm and irresponsibility of the Rococo itself was a mockery of the pompous Baroque. Mythology disintegrated into erotic adventures, and that type of social-life painting was popular that poked fun at human conceits. In England and France, where social and political reform were matters of genuine concern, however, such mockery had a serious side. The ironic allegories of Swift, Hogarth and Voltaire were designed to change people's awareness, to make them feel the need for reform. Yet none of these satirists saw any place in their work for the free-ranging inventiveness of caricature. For them it remained too close to the Italian word that described it: *caricare*, 'to exaggerate'; they wished to expose by an appeal to reason. Voltaire would no doubt have agreed with the *Encyclopédie* of his colleague Diderot, when it defined caricature as a kind of *libertinage d'imagination*, which might be used for harmless amusement, but could have no more serious purpose.

For William Hogarth (1697-1764) the distinction between this and the mockery of his 'Modern Life' series was a crucial one. He dissociated himself utterly from caricature. The advertisement to his classiest production, *Marriage à la Mode*, was a series of head studies entitled *Characters and Caricaturas*. In this, a set of 'character' studies after Raphael's tapestry cartoons are opposed to a group of grotesques that one is tempted to describe as caricatures of caricatures. Most telling of all is the artist's arcane allusion in the text below to the preface of Henry Fielding's novel *Joseph Andrews*; for here is written: 'in the Caricatura we allow all licence. Its aim is to exhibit monsters, not men.' There was no place for monsters in Hogarth's art, only for the exposure of human weakness.

For the Romantics, caricature ceased to be a vulgar harmless pleasure; they lived in a world in which the irrational could no longer be discounted. The visions and demons that visited Blake, Fuseli and Goya suggested a new repertoire to the cartoonist, and raised his trade to an art. Never before would one of them have been described as 'the foremost living artist of the whole of Europe' as James Gillray was in 1806.

Gillray (1757-1815) came to his profession with the highest credentials, for he had studied at the Royal Academy Schools. He was the true mock-heroic counterpart to the history painter. His etchings display all the expertise of a first-class draughtsman; they abound too in erudite cultural allusions that would have been appreciated by the fashionable society that