

John Beer

Blake's Humanism



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Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

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1 Blake and his Readers

When generalizations are made about art or poetry William Blake is one of the first exceptions who has to be accounted for: the necessary adjustment is usually made either by calling him a 'genius' (with the suggestion that this compensates for certain disadvantages) or by referring to him as 'mad' (with an indulgent inflection of the voice to allow for admiration of his achievements). He has always been an odd man out, the joker in our neatly sorted eighteenth-century pack.

To write connectedly and at length about such a figure might seem to be attempting the impossible. It is not just that he refuses to reduce to our categories, escaping like quicksilver from our carefully wrought patterns of organization. With Blake, there is a further disturbing fact. His words sometimes improve when taken out of context.

I behold London; a Human awful wonder of God!

Such a line takes on new virtue when read in isolation from the page on which it occurs¹—it is as though the very space around the line gives the words greater resonance.

The final truth about Blake does not rest there, however. He had no desire to go down to history as a writer of inspired fragments—on the contrary, he wanted to produce work on the grand scale, to write an epic poem: and the effects of his desire are inevitably a part of his presented work. We must study the total context of that work if we want to see it as anything more than an obscure landscape lighted by periodic flashes; and we must sometimes do this in order to get the full effect of the 'flashes' themselves. The sort of positive qualities which Blake possessed automatically involved a certain relationship with the art, the literature and the society of his time: even his antagonisms and defensive gestures give his art some of its essential character.

Once we look into that relationship, moreover, we find ourselves involved with the widest issues. Blake was one of those men who, by standing at an angle to his age, causes us to look at it, as a whole, with new eyes. Its artistic, social and religious presuppositions are both challenged and thrown into relief.

We may begin with the question of genius and madness. The idea that there is a

¹ *Jerusalem*, 38(34). 29. NB 480; NC 665; E 178.