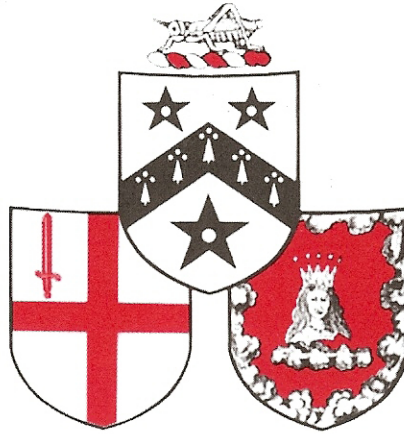


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LITERARY LONDONERS II

A Series of Lectures given in
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WILLIAM BLAKE

Peter Ackroyd

The subject of this talk is Blake, but it may not be the Blake whom we all know. It may not be the Blake of "Jerusalem" and "Tyger Tyger". Instead I want to take you into what was for me, before I began this biography, unknown territory. I want to talk to you about spiritual radicalism. I want to talk to you about a London which is as foreign to us today as Marrakesh or Delhi. I want to talk about a revolutionary city once filled with magicians and prophets and visionaries. Blake described "Spiritual Four Fold London eternal".

Let me begin at the beginning. William Blake was born within a family of hosiers. It is a very honourable trade, of course, but it also has an interesting history. Hosiers or cloth-makers, their counterparts, have always been connected with spiritual radicalism. We learn in the fifteenth century of Lollard heresy, particularly in the cloth-working villages of Buckinghamshire, Essex and Kent. Thomas Cromwell was the son of a cloth-maker. William Tyndale came from a family of cloth-workers. The phrase 'man of the cloth', popularly applied to clergymen, in fact described travelling preachers.

What did this family of spiritual dissenters read to him but the Bible? The cadences and images of that book haunted him for the rest of his life. What did he see around him as a child, too, but visions of the Bible - of prophets, of angels, and of God himself who peeped at him through the window of Broad Street. London became for him a biblical city, a city of revelation and apocalypse, the home of a true spiritual art. That is how it was that this son of a hosier, this son of religious dissent, was to create a poetry and an art as intricate and as elaborate as anything to be found in Michelangelo or in Dante.

But why on earth should hosiers be spiritual dissenters, then? It is meditative and solitary work. It is done in silence. It is the same atmosphere as that of the cobbler; and shoe-makers, too, have a history of radicalism. There is a famous book on radical shoemakers called *Lives of the Distinguished Shoemakers*. There is in fact a theory, first suggested to me by that great London historian Raphael Samuel, that radicalism itself may spring from this type of intense and silent labour. It is well known for example that blacksmiths tended to be very orthodox, very conservative, and it is generally believed that this is because they drank far too much because of the heat, and were surrounded by so much noise that they could not hear themselves think. But it was certainly solitary, perhaps meditative, artisans who characteristically did become radicals. We have to recall here, for a moment, that Blake himself - the son of a hosier - became an engraver. This is also a work to be performed in silence and in isolation, and at a later stage we will discuss the extraordinary spiritual history amongst the practitioners of that particular craft as well as among its companion trade of printing.

But let me first turn to Blake's spiritual history. Go back with him to Westminster Abbey where, as an apprentice engraver, he walked among the tombs of the great dead. It was for him a time of revelation - again and again in his art he returns to the images he first glimpsed there. The faces of the dead appeared to him in vision. The canopies of their tombs are to be found in

his art, together with the bosses, the sculpted foliage and the panels of the Abbey. And out of this emerged the last great religious artist in England.

What do we see in his work, after all, but the belief in spiritual form, the divine outline traced with love and reverence? In works such as "The Three Maries at the Sepulchre" and "On The Morning of Christ's Nativity" we see the extraordinary devotion of his nature. May I also mention that this is also very close to a Catholic art? Blake had a great reverence for the past, and for the cultural inheritance of the nation, and we ought to remember here that England was a Catholic nation for a thousand years before it ever became Protestant. Is it not possible that by those acts of divination and intuition which came so naturally to him he tapped into our forgotten inheritance?

Remember that he once saw a vision of monks in the Abbey. Remember that he once told Samuel Palmer that, of all forms of government, papal government was best. He was probably referring here to the papacy of Julius II, that great figure who wished to be buried by the tomb of Nero, the Pope who donned armour and led his troops in battle. It was he who must have inspired Baudelaire when he said that as a child he wished for one of two things - he wished either to be a comic actor or a military pope. But Julius II was also the great patron of Michelangelo and, in espousing a papal government, Blake is looking back with longing to a time when there was a public spiritual art, a national religious art to be seen on frescoes and in statuary.

But his devotion also has deeper and darker sources. We know the great images of Blake's art and prophecies - Los with his mallet, the beaked figure in Jerusalem, the hermaphrodites in the margins of "The Four Zoas". Now what do we find in the stone gargoyles and hidden images of medieval churches but the figures of the famous mallet god, of beaked figures and of hermaphrodites? These are in turn taken from the pagan past of Europe, which early Christians adopted - and Blake in turn, by an act of divinatory imagination, has found them too. He said in the catalogue to his exhibition that he had been transported back to the great cities of an inconceivably remote past - it may be that he meant it more literally than we realise. At this point, of course, he began his own spiritual journey. But before we go with him, let me take you on one of my own.

Blake was in many respects a Cockney, a Londoner of a recognisable type. What kind of radical is it that is born in Infinite London, as Blake put it? What does it mean to be 'radical' in any case? I conferred with my dictionary, and found that one of the original meanings of the word is "native heat" or the properties intrinsic to any particular body. What then is the "native heat" of Londoners? Those of you who have ever travelled on the underground - I rarely do since at my age I find it too exciting - may think you know. But it also has characteristics that are rather less palpable.

I have recently been reading Thomas More and John Milton as well as Blake. More and Milton were born within a few yards of each other - Milk Street and Bread Street respectively - but there is one particular quality which they also share with Blake. That is the capacity for abuse of the most disgusting kind. We have More telling Luther "if you extend your filthy mouth far open someone should shit in it" (not the language of a saint, perhaps, but the language of the city); and we have Milton telling various ecclesiastical dignitaries to "sit upon a stool and strain, nothing but dirt and filth comes from you." And then we have Blake. "If Blake could do this when he rose up from shite, What might he not do if he sat down to write." So there is a certain scatological tinge to the vocabulary of Londoners.

Blake was also an artisan, of course, and London artisans have always been prone to radicalism and dissent. They were almost forced to, you see, since they were always discriminated against by the established authorities. In fifteenth-century London even the indigenous artisans, outside the network of the guilds, were officially termed "foreigners". I mentioned printers, and to invoke that name is to invoke the whole history of London radicalism. But it leads to another aspect of London, and the nature of radicalism within it.

There is a wonderful story by the writer, Arthur Machen, in which he describes an area of Stoke Newington where, on occasions, an enchanted landscape can be glimpsed and sometimes even entered. Few people have seen it, or know how to see it; but those who do can speak of nothing else. Machen wrote this story, "N", in the early thirties but now, at the end of the twentieth century, we are beginning to realise that there are other enchanted areas in London which remain visible and powerful to anyone who cares to look for them. You may think we have strayed very far from Blake's spiritualism, but in fact we have only made the slightest detour.

I was recently asked to write an anniversary tribute for a newspaper called the *Big Issue*. I cannot remember now what kind of anniversary it was, but as you know the *Big Issue* is devoted to the needs of the homeless and the unemployed. I bought a copy from a charming young person on the street and, lo and behold, I discovered that it is produced and published along the Clerkenwell Road, just a few yards south of Clerkenwell Green. Where, you might think, is the enchantment here? Well, in the eighteenth century the printers of Clerkenwell were denounced by the authorities for distributing "Seditious and Blasphemous Literature". In a house on Clerkenwell Green itself, Lenin edited and published a revolutionary journal (known in translation, as *The Spark*); that house is now the Marx Memorial Library. There is, then, a continuity.

The enchantment is one of place and of time; it is as if an area can create patterns of interest, or patterns of habitation, so that the same kinds of activity (indeed often the same kinds of people) seem to emerge in the same small territory. Consider the case of Clerkenwell once more. The first of the Tolpuddle Martyrs to return to this country was greeted on Clerkenwell Green by a large crowd. The group of political radicals known as the London Corresponding Society met in Clerkenwell. The Chartists, in part protesting against unemployment, began their marches from Clerkenwell Green. John Wilkes, the radical whose slogan was 'Wilkes and Liberty!' was born in Clerkenwell; the great visionary who lived among the artisans, Emmanuel Swedenborg, died in Clerkenwell. Wat Tyler, leading his vast army of the dispossessed, stormed the priory of Clerkenwell - just a few yards east of the offices of the *Big Issue*. So it is possible to see how, in this pattern of time and continuity, the *Big Issue* has itself found its true radical home. And of course the coincidences begin to multiply. We read in the sixteenth century chronicle of John Stow that the London cloth-makers, our old radical friends, paid fourteen pounds each year to the churchwardens of Clerkenwell.

Recall that Blake spent the formative years of his adolescence and apprenticeship in Great Queen Street. Now for three centuries the streets closest to the British Museum - in particular Great Russell Street and Great Queen Street - have been the home of occult or radical spiritual groups. The Theosophical Society had its headquarters opposite the museum itself, while the Order of the Golden Dawn met in Great Queen Street - that is also the street where the Freemasons Hall and Tavern were first established in the eighteenth century and where one of their principal temples is still to be found. The Swedenborg Society is a few yards away, opposite Bloomsbury Square, while the most famous occult bookshop in London, the Atlantis

Bookshop, is just around the corner. It is as if certain areas or certain streets of the city created their own patterns of activity, and their own patterns of inheritance. Let me mention another group of religious dissenters here, the Lollards, again for one last example. It is known that in the fifteenth century, they found refuge and fellow sympathisers in Coleman Street in the City. But then two centuries later we hear of puritan loyalists taking refuge in safe houses after the Restoration - and where do they go, but Coleman Street?

So we must see Blake living within what he called "Infinite London", "Spiritual Four Fold London eternal". He wrote this while he lived in South Molton Street - in middle age he was still very close to his birthplace in Broad Street. Like all true Cockney visionaries, like Dickens, he never moved very far within the city itself. "I behold London," he wrote, "a Human awful wonder of God." His spiritual radicalism was very much part of this city, and it is worth recalling the conditions in which spiritual and political radicalism flourished in late eighteenth-century London. It was a most extraordinary time of change and turmoil. There has never been a period in the history of London when there were so many political clubs, debating societies, dissenting groups, underground newspapers. It was a time of great religious enthusiasm, of course, with the lives of John Wesley, Joanna Southcott and Richard Brothers as the single most important examples. We have to think of a city, and of a culture, filled with radical and even revolutionary intimations. The established order of the eighteenth century was indeed coming to an end, assaulted again and again by the new industrialism, the new commercialism, the stirrings of popular or at least freeholder democracy. There was the American War of Independence. And then of course the French Revolution. We must remember, too, that for most of Blake's lifetime Britain was at war. But for him something else more important was going to happen. He believed that the old order, Old Corruption, might be broken apart and that the process of spiritual regeneration might begin.

Then look again at London itself. In the late eighteenth century this city was the single most oppressive urban conglomeration on the face of the earth. It was also the richest city on earth. It also had some of the most pernicious slums. There were many riots - by butchers, by bakers, not perhaps by candle-stick makers but certainly by coal-porters and silk-weavers. There were occasions, like the time of the Wilkes riots and the Gordon riots, when the city was more or less under the control of the mob. Blake himself was caught up in one great riot, and watched Newgate being burned to the ground and the prisoners freed. He also knew the conditions of London from very close at hand. Round the corner from his house was a parish workhouse. It was supposed to house three hundred of the poor, but it was severely overcrowded. One contemporary report speaks of "the stench hardly supportable, poor creatures, almost naked, and the living go to bed to the dead." In fact Blake's father supplied linen to that workhouse, and it is not too fanciful to imagine the young Blake delivering it at the door. So the poet of London really did know what he was talking about. He was a London radical because he knew what London was actually like. But what of his colleagues and contemporaries?

It is often assumed that Blake fell in with a group of radicals who worked with Tom Paine, the author of *The Rights of Man*, and who were associated with the newly formed Society for Constitutional Information. Blake could then be viewed as a London radical of a recognisable type. But the fact is that there is no evidence at all to suggest that Blake was closely involved with these people or groups. He may have met Paine on one or two occasions, at the house of the bookseller Joseph Johnson, but there is no record of the fact. He was certainly never a member of any of the radical associations of the period. It is a pertinent fact that he remained apart from them. "I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's," is the declaration of one of his prophetic characters, and that more or less represents his own stance in the world.

It informs his artistic experiments, the nature of his prophetic books, his very being in the world.

Now the conventional radicals of the period, like Paine and Joseph Priestley and Mary Wollstonecraft, were unitarians or deists, believers in what Wollstonecraft called "rational religion"; they were also materialists and progressives who implicitly or explicitly denied the importance of historical tradition. All of these things Blake abhorred: he believed in divine inspiration, in the presence of angels, in the paramount importance of historical and cultural inheritance. They in turn would have seen an artisan of eccentric views, if they bothered to see him at all, a journeyman engraver who could be very difficult in company - sometimes very assertive, sometimes quiet and self-absorbed. We will not find his particular form of spirituality, then, among these people. We will have to look elsewhere.

Let us start with Blake and his wife sitting naked in the garden of their house in Lambeth. It is a story told by one of his few patrons, and indeed one of his few friends. "At the end of Hercules Buildings there was a summer-house. Mr Butts calling one day found Mr and Mrs Blake sitting by this summer house, freed from "those troublesome disguises which have prevailed since the Fall". This is a mid-Victorian way of saying that they were not wearing any clothes. "Come in!" cried Blake, "it's only Adam and Eve, you know!" This has generally been dismissed as anecdote, but that is to miss one of the central aspects of Blake's radicalism. He is reported declaring, towards the end of his life, that "the Gymnosophists of India, the ancient Britons, and others of whom History tells, who went naked, were wiser than the rest of mankind pure and wise - and it would be as well if the world could be as they." Blake and his wife can in fact be seen within the context of an entire history of English radicalism. The Ranters were believed "to preach stark naked many blasphemies", and the Adamites went naked in order to practice promiscuous sexual intercourse. I don't suppose there was any other way to do it. The Quakers went "naked for a sign", in accordance with the twentieth chapter of Isaiah, and antinomians in general considered nudity to be a representation of primeval innocence before the Fall as well as an emblem of "the naked truths" of the Gospel. Blake was for a while deeply impressed with the testaments of Emmanuel Swedenborg, and Swedenborg's own interest in sexual magic - he was, after all, Swedish - is related to his belief that "nakedness corresponds with innocence". There was also the late eighteenth-century doctrine of Nareism, in more intellectual circles, which associates the practice of nudity with the liberation of female sexuality. That sounds very modern but, as we all know, there is nothing new under the sun - especially when you have no clothes on. But before we start to speculate about what was so twentieth-century about Blake and his contemporaries, we might care to wonder what remains eighteenth-century about us.

So Blake's sexual radicalism has its antecedents, but there was nothing which entered that wide and wonderful imagination without being strangely changed. When we talk about his radicalism, we have to remember that it was an amalgam of various sources and ideas, taken from ballads, pamphlets, books, conversations and of course from the resources of his own genius. And so we will find, in the margins of one of his most extraordinary and beautiful poems, "The Four Zoas", a number of drawings which it would be an understatement to call erotic. I will not go into details, but it suffices to say that there are pictures of homosexuality, transsexuality, child sexuality, oral intercourse, anal intercourse, dildoic excess, and any number of what the Victorians called phalloi.

An innocent might describe this as pornography, but it is nothing of the kind. It is part of Blake's religious awakening, an aspect of his radicalism far removed from the *bien pensant*

pieties of Mary Wollstonecraft or Joseph Priestley. The image of the hermaphrodite, for example, which he draws both with male and female sexual organs, is for him a literal emblem of that time before the sexes were divided and human faculties thereby distorted or degraded. We recall also his wonderful phrases, "He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence"- "Exuberance is Beauty" - and "Energy is Eternal Delight".

He was in fact fascinated by the phallos, the male member, too, and of course he knew well enough the contemporary speculations by prurient old scholars like Richard Payne Knight that that particular thing or object was the centre and source of many primitive religious cults. Here again Blake makes his own leap and, if we leap with him, we will find ourselves in the world of late eighteenth-century magic. There is a famous remark scribbled by someone in the margins of one of his letters - not many people bothered to keep them, by the way - and the remark is, "Blake, dimmed by superstition". A friend also referred in another letter in a somewhat patronising way to Blake's immersion in "dim incredulity, haggard suspicion and bloated philosophy". The writer of this letter, Thomas Butts, was a Swedenborgian and therefore to contemporary eyes at the nuttier end of the religious spectrum. For him to talk of "dim incredulity" and "haggard suspicion" suggests something very nutty indeed. So what was it?

Well, to begin with, Blake believed in magic, both white and black. He believed for example that a rival artist had been able to destroy or deface one of his own drawings by "a malignant spell". In a little poem he describes one of the rituals of such a spell - "and turned himself round three times three". I would demonstrate it for you now, but it would make me even more giddy than I am already. But we can go a little further, at least by suggestion. One of his friends was the painter Richard Cosway - for a while they lived around the corner from each other. (That is something else to remember, by the way, about London radicals and London radicalism. It was a much smaller city where radicals would know each other by sight, even if they had not been introduced.) Cosway actually described Blake as a man "of extraordinary genius and imagination". I suggest that he said this because he knew, or thought he knew, one of the secrets of Blake's art. Now the point about Cosway is that, apart from being a fashionable painter, he was also a magician and mesmeriser. There are reports of various erotic ceremonies, of the taking of drugs and elixirs, of a belief in the manipulation of the world spirit. Mesmerism itself was considered to be a magical practice. Sexual magic was popular among occultists of the period.

There is another point. Many of them also saw visions. There were the Ancient Deists of Hoxton who talked of spirits and of prophecy. One rather acerbic contemporary noticed that "any visitor not in the habit of hearing supernatural voices, or not informed of the common occurrences of the day by the ministration of Angels would have been treated as a novice." It should also be made clear that such people tended to be artisans or small shopkeepers, from the same class as Blake and his family. And of course the point here is that Blake himself heard voices, saw spirits and conversed with angels. He had seen visions since the age of four, and they surrounded him continually. But he was not necessarily alone: there were groups of Londoners, living close by him, who espoused a similar sense of life.

What else did these Hoxton visionaries discuss? Well, for a start, they reviled Newton and Newtonianism. This is something which we are now beginning to understand better at the end of the twentieth-century, perhaps, but certainly through the eighteenth-century there were groups of people who were opposed to the official science of the period - who despised materialism and rationalism, and who believed that Newtonian physics was just simply wrong or invalid. We recall Blake's lines, "May God us keep, from Single Vision and Newton's

sleep.” They were also the people who tended to distrust industrialisation and commercialism, which were of course the true fruits of science.

If you read any of the pamphlets attacking these activities, you will get some idea of the occultism which suffused certain London radical circles in this period. One such pamphlet was entitled *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*. These occult gatherings were also associated, in the words of the anonymous author, with “the mystical whims of J Behmen and Swedenborg” - both great influences upon Blake - “by the fanatical and knavish doctrines of the modern Rosycrucians - by magicians - Magnetisers - Exorcists”. We can also add to the litany from another pamphlet: “Alchymists, Astrologers, Calculators, Mystics, Magnetisers, Prophets and Projectors of every kind.” And that, in fact, is exactly the radical milieu in which we may place William Blake. People read Boehme just as he did. People read Paracelsus. It was a way of trying to hang on to some kind of reality beyond the world of the manufactory and the workhouse.

One or two other points come into view here. Someone once pointed out to me that Blake’s work often included the symbols of freemasonry. It sounded a strange idea but, in fact, I looked at the painting described to me and there was indeed all the symbolism of the freemasons. I am not suggesting that he was a member of that group - far from it - but I am suggesting that he was open to the claims and symbols of a group of people who believed themselves to be possessed of ancient wisdom. Another example may suffice here. The visionaries were linked to the mesmerists and alchemists of London, as I related, but what else do these practitioners have in common? They share a belief in the fundamental unity and restoration of the spirit. For the mesmerists it was a question of manipulating the world spirit within the human body. For alchemists the transmutation of base metals into gold was an emblem of the restoration of the imagination and divinity within the alchemist himself. This is the message of Paracelsus, whom Blake read. And what do we find in the very curve and cadence of Blake’s prophetic books but the need for the restoration and regeneration of the Divine Man, Albion, the primal human being? His is the first great epic concerned with what we now call the struggle between psychological faculties - like the magician, the alchemist, and the mesmeriser, he wished them to be restored to their ancient and innate harmony.

It was an ancient wisdom, perhaps. But it was also a modern wisdom. It was Blake who first made the connection between thwarted sexuality and violence, a revelation not vouchsafed to us until the beginning of this century. It was also Blake who first made the connection between phallocentric sexuality and the established Church. But there are small points as well as large ones. We know the introduction to “Songs of Innocence” when the piper is requested to “Pipe a song about a Lamb...Piper pipe that song again.” Well in AD 680 the first English poet, Caedmon, was visited in a dream by a spiritual messenger who requested him to “sing me a song...you shall sing to me”. I was reading in Erasmus only the other day of those prophets who were so inspired (and he gives this as the prime example) that they drank oil in mistake for wine. What do we learn in Blake’s biography but the time when he drank walnut oil in mistake for something more alcoholic? Small events, as I say, but God, as well as the devil, is in the detail.

But Blake was not only a visionary and a prophet. He was also a great artist and, if we look, we may find a tradition of artistic radicalism to which he was partly attached. It will not explain him. He is too great a genius to be understood merely in terms of his origins or his associations. But it may help to bring him forward once more as a living Londoner. Let us

think of a friend of Blake who shared his profession. William Sharp, the engraver, became a theosophist and then a Swedenborgian. Later he became a disciple of Richard Brothers, the self-styled Slain Lamb of Revelation and the founder of that movement known as the British Israelites. But Sharpe was not only a Swedenborgian and a spiritual radical - he was also a member of the Society for Constitutional Information who engraved a banner with the title 'A Declaration of Rights'. He was, like Blake, a radical in every sense. I have already noted that engravers, like printers and hosiers, tended to become radical by some process of osmosis. Perhaps engravers became radicals, too, precisely because of their professional skills: they knew that the reality of images and symbols was made, not given. And what can be made can also be unmade. Another example of what one might call the artist as purveyor to the people rather than to the establishment is Philippe de Loutherbourg, the great scenic designer and inventor of the very popular Eidsophusikon - a sort of interior *son et lumière*.. He was also a Swedenborgian and a freemason. He was a mesmerist and magnetic healer, as was Cosway the painter. Do you see what an extraordinary nexus of belief and practice and politics grew up in this city two hundred years ago? Now it has almost faded from view - it was not considered serious by the whiggish historians of the nineteenth century - but it was there. Perhaps I might say, it is here.

And what was it, then, to be a radical painter or a radical engraver? Remember that these people were not exponents of salon art or portrait painting; they were engaged in the engraving of prints which would have a wide circulation, and of images which would have a large public audience. And what we see emerging in their work is something close to patriotic radicalism or nationalistic radicalism. Recall that it was the radical demagogue, John Wilkes, who first proposed the establishment of a national gallery of art in London. And what are the images characteristically to be seen in the paintings and engravings of William Blake - the bard, the druid, the ancient of days, the liberated figure of one young man known in one version as "Albion Rose"? Who or what is Albion? Albion is the ancient name of England itself, and it is one that Blake uses continually. And what was the call among the radical groups, but the return to ancient English liberties? That is why curiously enough, the great London antiquarians like Thomas Holis were also radicals. We go back to the young Blake in Westminster Abbey - in that sacred place he saw the legendary history of England revealed. That was for him the primary spiritual revelation. The bardic figure is very important to Blake - not only because it represents the prophet and the visionary but because that figure is related to Celtic legend and the whole mythological alternative to eighteenth-century polity. The figure of One Man, the Divine Human, the leaping figure of Albion Rose is linked to the idea of the nation as some ancient living organism and not some hierarchy of functions or needs... That is why Blake is so concerned with Gothic art, and with the builders of the cathedrals: he was convinced that there was an English spiritual art which had been systematically stripped away by the rationalists and the scientists who organised the perceptions of the state. Innate 'Gothic' liberties were also considered as an alternative to the artificial faction politics of the eighteenth century. All these ideas were an integral part of the nationalistic and artistic radicalism of the day, and my point is that there was a whole fund or repertoire of images upon which they could draw. Looking at the Chartists and Fabians of a later date, I think it would be fair to say that these contemporaries and acquaintances of Blake represented the last great wave of nationalistic radicalism in our culture.

What is it that he wrote in 1808? He spoke of "all his visionary contemplations, relating to his own country and its ancient glory, when it was as it again shall be, the source of learning and inspiration". This was not the spiritual dissent with which Tom Paine or Joseph Priestley was associated. It was not internationalist. It was not progressive. It was not rational. It was

touched with occultism, with sexual libertarianism and with a reverence for the past. It was, in fact, an emanation of this city we live in now. One thing we have to remember, you see, is that London has always been a dark city. For a thousand years - literally a thousand years - it has been built upon the imperatives of finance and commerce and power. As the London alchemist said, "It is the city of gold, it is the city of fire, it is the city of death." It is the city where the extremes of the human condition meet; it has attracted many generations of the poor and the dispossessed, and then crushed them in its progress. This is what Blake saw when he walked through the chartered streets, observing the marks of weakness and the marks of woe. And what was this radicalism of his contemporaries, with its interest in occultism and the resources of some great spiritual past? It was a way of finding alternative sources of power. It was a way of confronting the darkness on its own terms. It was a way, alas unsuccessful, of constructing a mythology as powerful as that which Newton had established.

Of course he did not succeed, but I believe that now, finally, his time may have come. He is at last beginning to be understood and recognised as a great visionary of the human condition, and a great prophet of our technological age. I do believe, also, that he will become the great prophet of the next millennium.

I will end with some lines from the poet himself:

*Are these the slaves that groaned along the streets of mystery
Where are your bonds and task masters are these the prisoners
Where are your chains where are your tears why do you look
around
If you are thirsty there is the river go bathe your parched limbs
The good of all the Land is before you and Mystery is no more*

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