WILLIAM BLAKE AND HIS IMPACT ON THE LITERARY, ARTISTIC AND RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION OF AUSTRALIA: REPORT ON A RESEARCH PROJECT IN PROGRESS

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William Blake has been connected with Australia since the earliest days of settlement. One of the earliest images of Aboriginals by a European artist was William Blake's engraving 'A Family of New South Wales' (1792), based on a sketch by Governor King. As Bernard Smith has pointed out,[1] Blake's interest in this subject was no doubt part of his larger interest in natives, particularly such dispossessed groups as Negro slaves. The sense of freedom and nobility that Blake expresses in this family gains depth when seen in the context of his anger against slavery expressed in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), where he writes of 'the voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money',[2] and in such an etching as 'A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows', painted in the same year as 'A Family of New South Wales' (1792).[3] This was the year in which the abolitionists campaigned intensively to abolish the slave trade - without result. Blake's engraving is one of a number of plates of the atrocities of slave owners that he made for John Stedman's *Narrative, of Five Years Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America.*

Taken together, these paintings are the visual equivalent of Blake's poem the 'Little Black Boy', in which he alludes to the suffering, but also to the unique capabilities, of the black boy:

> My mother bore me in the southern wild,
> And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
> White as an angel is the English child,
> But I am black as if bereav'd of light...
>
> And thus I say to little English boy:
> When I from black and he from white cloud free,
> And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:
>
> I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
> To lean in joy upon our father's knee.
> And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
> And be like him and he will then love me.

Margaret Preston's woodcuts 'The Expulsion', of a White angel casting out a black Adam and Eve and of black Adam and Eve being the rightful inhabitants of Eden, and 'Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden', continue this theme. Both paintings were produced in the early 1950s and were part of that post-war religious revival that led in the following year to the establishment of the Blake prize for religious art.

So Blake's name has continued to be linked with literature and the arts in this country since the earliest days.

One of the sources of this continued relationship has been the National Gallery of Victoria, which houses one of the world's greatest collections of Blake's work; this has been an inspiration for generations of Australian artists and writers.

Arthur Boyd's biblical paintings which emerged after the second world war and which reflected the horrors of that war, such as 'The Mockers' and 'The Mining Town', were characteristically Blakean in their hard hitting social criticism. These paintings were formally influenced by Bruegel and Bosch, but Boyd's later religious paintings may have been influenced by Blake's Dante illustrations which were available in the National Gallery at this time.

Boyd submitted some of his religious paintings from this period to the Blake prize, but ironically they were rejected for their most Blakean quality, their daring to connect religious themes to contemporary social realities. The Blake Prize was very much a Sydney affair, reflecting the purely aesthetic interests of the Sydney artistic elite. Early prize winners included Justine O'Brien's vacant and mannered 'The Virgin Enthroned'.

Boyd's Nebuchadnezzar series, depicting the madness of this Babylonian king who captured Jerusalem three times, is lineal descendant of Blake's Nebuchadnezzar paintings. For Blake, Nebuchadnezzar represented the madness of the materialist with single vision; he becomes bestial in seeking sustenance in material things only.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of ancient Babylon, fell from grace for placing self-aggrandisement before God and was banished to the wilderness where 'his heart was made like the beasts and his dwelling was with the wild asses... till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men'.

For Boyd, Nebuchadnezzar represented a fusion between man and natural forces. Boyd's series on this mad king were produced at the height of the Vietnam war; implicit references to napalm and other acts of contemporary violence are embodied in Boyd's imagery. In a truly Blakean mode, a biblical subject here became allegory of the descent of humanity in a

world in conflict. This quality is seen especially in Boyd's 'Nebuchadnezzar running in the rain'.

In another painting in the series, 'Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of the Tree', Boyd, like Blake, for whom the imagination was a Divine Art, expresses his sense of the transformative power of the imagination: literally and metaphorically, the dream here is a source of new growth, transforming the wilderness in which Nebuchadnezzar has been exiled.

Another artist whose work is threaded with references to William Blake is the novelist Patrick White. In his most mystical novel, *Riders in the Chariot*, he connects his sense of the liberating power of the imagination experienced by his outcast mystics (Himmelfarb, Miss Hare, Alf Dubbo and Mrs Godbold) with a quote from 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' : 'I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception, but my senses discovered the infinite in everything'. This is part of Isaiah's answer to Blake's question about the power of the prophet's imagination to penetrate into the perception of the infinite.

A more recent Australian novelist and painter, Barbara Hanrahan, whose whole spiritual quest was interwoven with a passionate love of Blake, recalls in her journals her visit to the National Gallery of Victoria in 1989: 'On Wednesday we went to the Nat. Gallery to see the Blake exhibition - we will go again... they are all beautiful, wonderful. And it is so wonderful that we are able to see so much Blake - it brings him so near'.[4]

For Hanrahan, in her life, in her paintings and writings, Blake led her to an understanding of a unique mystical reality: 'I love William Blake so much. It is like a secret thread I must follow along my life. Showing me the pattern.' Again: '.... I have to have dear Jesus - but the Jesus of Blake; not [Donald] Soper's unmystical world, which is only more unreality. It must be Blake's Imagination. And I long to read more of Blake; to know more of him. Please help me in that, too, dear God'.

These are just two of many reference to Blake littered throughout her journal; and these two were written in the period after she had been diagnosed with cancer. She recalls in 1984: 'when I go into the radiography room for my treatment I always take my Blake book with his 'Glad Day' on the cover. So that Albion aflame is always there with me as a beautiful symbol, when I lie on the table along with the buzz of the machine'.

The contemporary composer Nigel Butterley, who is presenting his work at this conference, has been profoundly influenced by Blake. Butterley was quite young when he was attracted by the mystery of the tiger. Thereafter Vaughan Williams' Job and Benjamin Britten's setting of *The*

Sick Rose led to Butterley's own *Six Blake Songs*. More recently he has been exploring 'The Four Zoas' as a starting point for an instrumental work. His recent study of the work of Kathleen Raine, Blake scholar and poet in her own right, has helped Butterley to come closer to Blake and, he says, 'may bear musical fruit one day'.

The list of Australian writers and artists who have been touched by Blake could go on. A short list would have to include: Christopher Brennan, Gwen Harwood, Vincent Buckley, Peter Skryznecki, Robert Adamson, Denis Haskell, Nick Sykes, (poets) Sidney Nolan, Charles Blackman, (painters) Alan Tregaskis, Mark Grandison, Margaret Sutherland (composers).

Are these lines of influence merely a random collection of accidental associations, or do they suggest the pervasive impact of an eccentric radical visionary on the spiritual imagination of Australian writers, painters and musicians? Could it be argued that there is something receptive in the Australian psyche to an influence of this kind; and could it also be argued that this kind of influence has had its part in shaping a distinctive religious outlook that we find in this country?

Blake's radical, anti-dogmatic emphasis on the liberating power of the individual's creative imagination is, I believe, part of the texture of Australian spirituality as expressed in the arts in this country: in music, painting and writing.

A living writer who expresses a deeply Blakean sense of the relationship between the imagination and spiritual liberation is David Malouf. His novel *Remembering Babylon* begins with the quote from William Blake's 'Four Zoas': 'Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not'. Like Blake in 'The Little Black Boy', Malouf raises questions about the status of the soul in Black or White human beings. Like Arthur Boyd, in his Nebuchadnezzar series, Malouf here explores the experience of exile and its creative possibilities. Both artists investigate the ambivalences in the meaning of the word Babylon. The quote in Malouf's novel is from Book 3 of the 'Four Zoas' (line 102), the long prophetic poem which imaginatively documents Man's fall into psychic division and his eventual restoration to wholeness.

The four Zoas are man's Reason, his Passion, his Sensation and his Instinct. In divine man, Christ, these Zoas are harmonised, balanced; in his separation from Eden, in fallen man, these Zoas are at war. 'Man', writes Ostriker, 'has now become passive instead of active' and has fallen 'from

unity, vigour and the life of the imagination, to alienation, compulsion or passivity, and the deadness of material objects'.[5]

Malouf's novel dramatises the arrival, in an early Australian outpost community, of Gemmy Fairley, a white Australian, victim of shipwreck, who has spent seventeen years growing up with the Aborigines. Gemmy's return creates rich, complex and contradictory resonances of meaning that are Blakean in their reach.

Gemmy returns partly because he is impelled to make some reconnection with the, for him, lost language community of his childhood. On one level the novel is about Gemmy's attempt to *re-member*, to reintegrate himself with his past; this is potentially a process of healing and self-unification. On another level he *re-members*, comes into contact once again with, the Babylon which through accidental circumstances he had been forced to leave as a child.

Why Babylon? Because the white society, as depicted by Malouf is strife ridden, intolerant and fearful, desperately in need of some source of renewal and enlightenment.

As I understand it, part of the meaning of the word 'Remembering' in the novel's title alludes to this restoration, this *re-membering* of the self, from the conflict and disunity of Babylon. Simultaneously *re-membering* Babylon can also mean a rejoining of the parts of Babylon that had been divided on Gemmy's accidental exile from his original white society, with all its Babylonian attributes.

So Blake's question, is it Jerusalem or Babylon? has a real force. Is this community receptive to a new healing influence or is it antagonistic and rejecting? Putting it another way, is Gemmy's arrival, the beginning of a new Jerusalem (a time of divine vision in every individual, the beginning of the city of holy peace), or is it the confirmation of the persistence of Babylon (the place of the clash of voices, the unholy city where the God of this world is worshipped)?

The image of Gemmy balanced on the top rail of a fence, which recurs several times in the novel, is symbolic of this uneasy balance: which way is Gemmy going to fall?

Gemmy (it is clear early on in the novel) is, for Malouf, the embodiment of some potentially purifying source of life. This is sensed by some of the more enlightened members of this Queensland settlement; such as Mr Frazer, who through Gemmy's influence opens to the otherness of the land and, through this, to the otherness in his own nature, previously hidden by his materialist and utilitarian bent.

Gemmy's presence, for Frazer, throws into question the quantitative, rational approach to truth, symbolised in the theodolite, that surveyor's instrument that prepares the way for the destruction of the landscape:

> The theodolite offers only one way of moving into the continent and apprehending the scope and contours of it... Our poor friend Gemmy is a forerunner. He is no longer a white man, or a European, whatever his birth, but a true child of the place as it will one day be...[6]

So Gemmy here becomes the central symbolic figure for a way forward for the world.

The tragedy of course is that the community he comes into has by and large lost all sense of the sacred. While what he brings with him and discovers is the source of divine vision, of Jerusalem, he finds himself in Babylon, where the impulse is to put him in a sack and seal up his doors of perception.[7]

While the thematic issues are Blakean enough, what connects Malouf's vision to Blake's most closely is his emphasis on the power of imagination as the vehicle for spiritual personal and social transformation.

For Blake, 'The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination, that is God himself, The Divine Body, Jesus: we are his Members.'[8]

Imagination as a transformative instrument, as embodied especially in the power of words and images, runs through this novel as a whole. For Lachlan (the young boy who first finds Gemmy) it is his own image-making that gives him access to the chthonic power embodied in Gemmy. Here, through Lachlan's eyes, is the image (reminiscent of a Sidney Nolan painting) that brings Gemmy into being:

> In the intense heat that made everything you looked at warp and glare, a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them. (p.2)

For Gemmy, his rediscovery of the words of his childhood begin to give him imaginative access to parts of himself that had lain dormant for decades :

> There was a different story... which had another shape, and might need, for its retelling, the words he had in his mouth when they first found him, and had lost... (p.27-28)

> ...if he could get the words inside him, as he had the soaked mush, the creature, or spirit or whatever it was, would come up to the surface of him and take them. It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognise him.
> He did not want to be taken back. What he wanted was to be recognised. (p.32)

Language here connects Gemmy to images of his childhood. The word re-cognise here, in its primary meaning, is cognate with *re-membering:* with restoration, wholeness. In a graduation speech at Macquarie University, David Malouf had this to say about this process:

> ...Language settles us in the world we see and touch; it settles the world in us. It embodies the order our minds aspire to. Used in a certain way, as poets try to use, it can restore to us that primitive and magic moment of original naming when the object out there and the word we found for it were one. Restore is the word here; the process is restorative. It gives us back the world in its original immediacy and innocence, and we need that for our health; as we need the stories too in which our experience is restored to us, but shaped now, and made accessible to understanding by a form that fits some deep prototype and allows us to see, through the muck and muddle and pain and terror at times of mere happening, that it has meaning.

For Gemmy, for Malouf himself, for us, this imaginative process is an agent in the restoration of the self. And it is not only through words. This restoration of part of himself through language has to be balanced in Gemmy's case (that archetype of a new humanity) against that wordless apprehension of visionary reality that has also been his experience with his Aboriginal foster brothers:

> When all the proper formalities had been exchanged, and the necessary questions asked and answered, the silence between them as they sat, all three, and faced one another, became a conversation of another kind; and the space between them, three feet of baked earth where ants in their other life scurried about carrying bits of bark and other broken stuff in the excited scent of a new and foreign presence, expanded and became the tract of land up there under the flight of air and the stars of the night sky, that was the tribe's home territory, with its pools and creeks and underground sources of water, its rock ridges and scrub, its edible fruit and berries and flocks of birds and other creatures, all alive in their names and the stories that contained their spirit, for a man to walk into and print with the spirit of his feet and the invisible impact of his breath. (p.117)

For William Blake the creative imagination of the individual, named Urthona, is the Northern Zoa; Urthona is a blacksmith constantly preoccupied with creating forms. His forge is in the deep dens or caves of the subconscious; his sense is the ear; his art is poetry, which when it degenerates, for Blake, becomes Religion.

Karen Armstrong, who spoke at our conference this year, has spoken (in her keynote address 'Is God the Product of Our Imagination', and in her

published lecture 'The Future of God') of the need for Christianity to learn from the artists and poets a means of restoring to religion a patient receptivity, a vibrant contact with our inwardness.

David Malouf's religious outlook, apparently standing outside any church as such, clearly linked to the social and imaginative radicalism of an artist like William Blake, and profoundly in quest of reconciliation in our community, is a vital element in the fabric of contemporary Australian spirituality.

This paper signals the beginning of a major study on William Blake's wider influence on Australian religious and artistic consciousness.

REFERENCES

[1] *European Vision and the South Pacific* (London: O. U. P., 1960), p. 128.

[2] Plate 2, line 8.

[3] For a reproduction of this etching and the engraving "A Family of New South Wales", see Martin Butlin and Ted Gott, *William Blake in the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria* (Melbourne: The Robert Raynor Publications, 1989), pp.89, 91.

[4] Extracts from Hanrahan's as yet unpublished diaries are courtesy of Elaine Lindsay, who is about to publish the diaries with U. Q. P.

[5] *William Blake: The Complete Poems,* ed. by Alicia Ostriker, p. 922.

[6] *Remembering Babylon,* (London: Vintage 1994), p.132. All further page references in the text are to this edition.

[7] See the episode where the locals try to drown Gemmy in the river.

[8] Laocoön Plate.