

Hints to a Hypothetical Artist

William Blake (1757 – 1827) is one of my literary heroes, and I was therefore pleased when a seminar on his life and work was held at Adhithana under the title 'Energy is Eternal Delight'. The retreat was accompanied by an exhibition of Blake's illustrations to *The Book of Job*, organised by Satyalila. There was also a reproduction of his engraving 'Death's Door', which shows an old man wearing shepherd's garments and with a lantern in his hand about to enter the darkness of a crypt. I greatly enjoyed being wheelchaired round the exhibition by Paramartha, who explained to me the illustrations from *The Book of Job*, some of which I remembered quite well and could almost see in my mind's eye. We had entered the Library atrium in which the exhibition was held by the front door, and we left by the back door, which leads into the grassy area in which paths have been laid down by Sanghadeva, who is planning further developments in the shape of flower beds and a water garden. Paramartha pushed me along these paths, pointing out as he did so the spot where I am sooner or later to be buried, so that I felt that I was standing, like Blake's old man, at my own 'death's door'. There was nothing morbid about this. It was a fine summer morning and I was out in the open, enjoying the fresh air and the sight of the adjacent fields.

Blake was not only a great artist but a great poet, a very rare combination, especially at his level of achievement. The only other example of this combination of which I am aware is Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1830 – 1894), another of my literary heroes. I was familiar with Rossetti's work well before I was aware of Blake's. In the passage that led from my room to my parent's bedroom there was a small reproduction of 'Dante's Dream', one of Rossetti's major works, the original of which I was to see in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, many years later. I remember sitting in front of it with a friend, while another friend filmed me as I talked about the work. One night Dante had dreamed that Beatrice, the unattainable object of his youthful passion, was dying, and the painting depicts his dream. Clad in his customary black, the tall figure of Dante stands looking at the dying, half-risen Beatrice, who is garmented in white, with golden hair hanging down. Two handmaidens in raiment of soft green hold a canopy over her. An angel dressed in red, with red wings, holds Dante's hand and leans down to Beatrice, his lips almost touching hers, as if love could bring her back to life.

Dante was the subject not only of Rossetti's art but also of his poetry, especially of his long poem 'Dante in Verona'. The subject of the poem is Dante's years of exile in Verona, and Rossetti prefaced it with a quotation from *The Divine Comedy*. Though born and bred in Florence, the internal politics of his native city forced Dante into exile, and the lines quoted by Rossetti express all the bitterness of his soul:

Yea, thou shalt learn how salt his food who fares
Upon another's bread, – how steep his path
Who treadeth up and down another's stairs.

It is the cry of exiles everywhere and at all times, including our own.

I have visited both Verona and Ravenna, with its umbrella pines, where Dante died and where he is buried. The city is also associated with Shelley and Byron, two other exiles, though they were exiles for social rather than political reasons. Their stay in Ravenna and their evening rides together along the seashore are commemorated in Shelley's long poem 'Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation'. In the poem Julian stands for Shelley and Maddalo is Byron, and we are given a vivid portrait of the relationship between the two poets, so different from each other in character and personality, as they ride and talk together in the fading light.

Rossetti naturally had a closer connection with Dante than did Blake. He was himself of Italian descent, though born and brought up in London, where he became one of the founder members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of English painters, poets, and critics who rebelled not only against the Mannerism that succeeded Michelangelo and Raphael but also against the materialism and philistinism of the age. Blake, too, was a rebel in his own way and aspired to build Jerusalem 'In England's green and pleasant Land'. This was an aspiration that was shared by some of the later Pre-Raphaelites, especially by William Morris, who was an active socialist and author of *News from Nowhere*, a utopian vision of a future socialist England. Though much less close to Dante than was Rossetti, Blake towards the end of his life produced a series of illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*. It is interesting to note that the manuscript of some of Blake's poems came into Rossetti's hands and has become known as 'The Rossetti Manuscript'. Rossetti appears to have appreciated Blake's poetry, different as it was from his own, for he was a man of catholic tastes. He was also the first to appreciate Fitzgerald's *Rubâ'iyât of Omar Khayyâm*, copies of which he gave to his friends.

The poetry and art of both Rossetti and Blake were an essential part of the world of my imagination in my early teen years. These were the years in which I wrote my first poems and devoted much of my spare time to drawing and painting. It then seemed to my elders that I was more likely to become an artist than a writer. These were also the days when I attended the Sellingcourt Rd Senior School and was a pupil of Mr Smoker. On the walls of Mr Smoker's classroom there hung three pictures, all of which I remember and even see in my mind's eye as I write. There was a painting called 'Napoleon on Board the Bellerophon', in which the ex-emperor is seen standing on the deck of the ship. He is being taken into exile and is gazing at the receding shores of France. At some distance behind him there is a small group of English officers, one of whom is surveying Napoleon with an expression of mingled curiosity and satisfaction. On the other side of the door hung 'The Golden Stairs', by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones. It showed a number of beautiful young women, all clad in white and with fair hair, making their way down a spiral staircase. At the back of the classroom there was a print of William Caxton in his Westminster workshop, showing his printing press to Edward the Fourth and his Queen. I do not know whether Mr Smoker had chosen the pictures or whether they had been supplied by the LCC's Education Department. Whatever it may have been, they were part of my regular environment for a year or more, and it is not surprising that I should remember them.

Though I wrote poetry and drew and painted various figures, both historical and imaginary, there was no crossover between the two. I neither illustrated my poems nor wrote poems about what I had painted. It is only very recently that I have seen the possibility of illustrating something I have written, whether poetry or prose. I am thinking in particular of my story 'Four Visits', which I think lends itself to illustration, especially as there are five figures in it. If I possessed the requisite talent, I would have tried to do the illustrations myself, but since this is not possible I would appeal to those of my friends who are artists to carry out the work in my stead. In order to help them, I would like to make a few suggestions.

The figure of the Virgin Mary, clad in her traditional white and blue, should be in the middle of the picture. On her left, clad entirely in white, there should stand the figure of Kuanyin. Since I have not described the latter in much detail, the artist should feel free to depict the figure in his or her own way, provided only that it is recognisably the Buddhist Bodhisattva. I would also like the two figures to be depicted at the point at which they start merging. Below the two ladies there should come the decidedly masculine figure of Māra. When I wrote about him in 'Four Visits' I did not see him as the rather ineffective Māra of the Pāli scriptures. I saw him as the much more dangerous Māra of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*, which I studied some time ago with Paramartha. Māra is bulky and brown in colour and he occupies more than twice the space occupied by the two ladies. His expression is one of extreme cunning. I sit to Māra's left and should be depicted sitting in my

armchair with my back to the viewer, so that only the back of my head is visible. The Angel sits on the right arm of my chair and should be depicted just as I described him – young and beautiful and with multicoloured wings. Thus I am between Māra and the Angel and our three heads are in alignment, so that Māra speaks into my left ear and the Angel into my right. Red roses should naturally feature, and I leave the artist free to place them wherever he or she thinks fit. Above the two ladies is the blue sky, perhaps studded with stars. At the bottom of the picture I suggest that the artist should depict the Adhithana skyline, including the Library where I saw the Blake exhibition with which this article starts.

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