

Bunhill Fields

by
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For some weeks I have projected a new adventure and cannot tell if I have yet completed it. I do not know whether it is a pilgrimage, a homage or an excuse for a pub crawl that somehow went badly wrong. I wished to meet a man I thought I understood, to commune in silence and take my leave fulfilledly.

Some months ago I read one of those Christian writers who said that the *genius loci* was the archetypal heathen deity; that Satan was a lord of places whose earth-bound minions jealously guarded their Appointed plots; but that the Power of Christ confounded these terminunculi and voided the tyranny of Place. He went on to illustrate the principle with an anecdote about a defensive steward-like worker he had encountered when he had entered a premises, presumably upon a pastoral mission. The author said that a few minutes of inward prayer disarmed this satanic pylorus who presently became quite accommodating. I find this story wholly credible. I have frequently encountered sinful if not satanic stewards on my rounds, though inevitably through my prideful habit of gazing into lavatory mirrors.

Before I turned to Christ I could feel the melancholic electricity of The Place its raiment of mist and sunlight its innate character and texture. Some places were restful some wistful several sordid and a few unnerving. I wrote several poems most of which were named for places and all of which were strongly located. My interests and my scientific training gave primacy to place and with place I felt secure and to place I would always home. Since my conversion places have somehow lost much of their charm as I commune with a Spirit who is everywhere and everywhen, yet absent from mundane dimensions.

So perhaps you feel something of my foreboding my hesitancy and my caution as I stalk with trepidation but with tempted steps of longing to a chartered bounded precinct, and that a graveyard? Maybe fifteen months ago I found in Foyle's a tidy stand of well-cased literary classics uniformly produced by the same publisher. A volume called "Poems and Prophecies"¹ of William Blake caught my eye but I did not buy it as I was a

bit strapped. I did, however, remember the price: £9.99. On the Tuesday before Christmas last year I returned to London with a few more funds and sought again the tidy bookstand. It was nowhere to be found for in the intervening twelve month Foyle's had reverted to its traditional disarray and it appeared that only odd copies of that publisher's volumes were scattered about. A few minutes search, however, located the main display on new shelves elsewhere. But now new temptation and new perplexity obtruded. A notice said that two volumes for the price of one could be had upon "selected" titles. Would such "selection" include the Blake? If so what should I purchase with the Blake? Milton? Homer? Virgil? What if I would be asked to pay full price for the Blake only or the same money for two other tomes?

I selected the Blake and the Milton² copies and reminded the clerk of the "two for one" offer. He accepted £9.99 for both books without demurrer and yet I felt embarrassed and disquieted. For the clerk did not make it clear to me whether I was getting the Blake for free or the Milton. You see, Milton is a genius but Blake merely an eccentric and whilst priceless genius should be gratis to all good students mere eccentricity is not worth paying for. I thought about complaining to the young man but he may have misapprehended the nature of my problem.

Why is Milton a genius but Blake an eccentric? The answer to this question has to do with both society and fashion. The son of a City notary, John Milton was born in 1608 and educated at St Paul's School and Christ's College, Cambridge. Clearly he was in youth a member of The Established Church. You see, John Milton was a comfortable middle-class polemicist, versed early in the ancient authors, and his prime years of Puritan life caught the cusp of Cromwell's Commonwealth. But he was no canting opportunist, instead a tortured devotee, perplexed by the nature of temptation and the Benisons of God. A learned man who bore his letters lightly he nevertheless invokes "divinest Melancoly" through measured sentences of breathless gravity. Blake his Georgian acolyte was born in 1757 and came to maturity in The Napoleonic Era. William Blake was the son of a Soho hosier who schooled as an engraver and earned his living as a commercial artist. Blake was working-class and his time was sold to others leaving his life's work in the margins of his days. But for all his professed contempt for education Blake was no ignoramus and loved the Hebrew and Pagan classics from an early age. Blake was a mystic visionary in an age of reason. Painter, poet, prophet, his etchings and engravings fly with wind-tossed fury as men beasts and angels strain starkly sinewed limnings across

the vaults of heaven or skulk with fear-drawn faces within their freezing tombs of fusain. An Elysian romantic whose poems bubble brook-like with enthusiastic chatter: Not as a child or much less a madman but like an amateur over-enthralled with his hobby.

Blake's major weakness was to reject a dialog with his time. And yet this lends him a certain celestial timelessness, a negation of time and place, or rather the transcendence lent by the Spiritual. In the age of Laplace, Blake hated the memory of Newton whose infinitesimal evolutions set the solar clockwork ticking. Yet, unlike Dante, Blake could advance no competing cosmology with which to convince a skeptical public.

It would never have occurred to Milton defensively to rail against science. He would have considered science an obscure and dilettante pastime, useful chiefly for embarrassing the papacy. It is worth remembering that even by Blake's day many scientists were ordained men who saw their work as Praise of God by better manifesting His Design to a benighted World. Acceptance of the Axioms of Euclid (or Riemann or Lobachevsky) or the unvarnished impressions of experience is always a Vote of Faith. Thus science has much of the fiduciary character of classical religion. Because, however, it is Praise without Prayer it is dangerously value-free and perhaps that is what appalled the printer prophet as his genius was impressed between the forme of Authority and the platen of Conviction. So science is a reversion to classical Paganism in its worship of nature but differs from that in its conception of the disinterested Godhead and therefore sat snugly with both the deism and the atheism of The Enlightenment. Those who see Blake as an incondite extension of Gray's Romantic prospectus can credibly point to The Book of Thel (1789) a tender and touching, but unsentimental, allegory. Certainly Linnaeus, de Saussure, Lamarke and William Smith would have had no difficulties with this very earthly vision of organic and atmospheric metaphors, though at that time a distinction was imagined to exist between the vital and physical sciences.

Today we find it difficult to interpret the following words as anything other than a (meta)physical postulate:-

**Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction
and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate,
are necessary to Human Existence.^a**

Yet Blake saw no inconsistency between that and the apparently static, dismissive vision implied by:-

**The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of Light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.^b**

Duration is at the heart of the scientific interpretation of existence. The lofty Milton has this to say "On Time":-

**And Joy shall overtake us as a flood;
When every thing that is sincerely good,
And perfectly divine,
With Truth, and Peace, and Love, shall ever shine^c**

because like his successor Addison he inhabits an integrated universe where the natural world is godly but subject and shall be superseded when the Appointed Day arrives.

In contrast Blake's even more lovely words are wholly anthropo-referential and abstracted into an entirely moral realm where time and space are irrelevant:-

**And all must love the human form
In heathen, turk or jew.
Where Mercy Love & Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.^d**

It was with this last sentiment in mind that I retired for lunch before catching the tube to Old Street. It occurred to me that William Blake had been penalised, even in death, for his non-conforming views. It is very likely that he was a follower of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian who settled in London and there propounded Quaker-like ideas. Swedenborg contemplates an inner light of Divine Grace inherent in men and celebrated by the above verse. Like Quakers, Swedenborgians seem to have favored silent worship and to have avoided professional priesthoods. At any rate, there is a marked anti-clericalism in Blake's writings though he tended to tone it down for publication as can readily be seen when the several variorums of "The Garden of Love" are traced. Whilst neither Quakerism or

Swedenborgianism are actively anti-clerical they share with Blake the belief in God in Every Creature and it is likely that Blake adopted this concept from Swedenborg in early youth, perhaps after meeting the mystic in person. In many of Blake's Songs, including famously "The Tyger", this belief in the divine inspiration of the animal is strongly projected.

When I emerged at Old Street the gray still air of midwinter hung damply like a saturated garland across the soaked and spattered sidewalks of City Road. It was late lunchtime and the pullulating suits were striding three abreast to their dowdy postwar offices. This was ever the dog-eared end of The City's chartered compass, two hundred years ago a shunned ribbon of blighted ground separating the metalworking districts of Holborn and Clerkenwell from the Huguenot silk-lofts of Shoreditch and Spitalfields. The area had been intensively bombed in World War Two but no Polumbo or de Vries had seen fit to try his talents here. I ambled South past the shop that specialises in company flotations and The Seattle Coffee Company which serves a mean cappuccino. I wondered if in the former establishment they might make me a company to measure taking into account my girth and stature and the weather and whim of the season. Would such an enterprise float more like the creamy froth on the cappuccino or more like the discarded Embassy packet which graced the stagnant sump of the traffic-coned cable-trench? With a little care I found the gate to Bunhill Fields burial ground. The carved red granite gate posts read that the ground had first been made available for interments in 1665 as the plague gathered momentum and an isolated extramural site was required for the infected dead. As the plague subsided the unconsecrated plot was made over to bury the heretics unfit to profane the circumvallated City or share the rest of the faithful. I read with astonishment that before The Fields were closed in 1857, one hundred and sixty thousand persons were there inhumed.

Across The Fields lay Bunhill Row where Blake's cynosure the blind Milton wrote "Paradise Lost" as the epidemic grew and The Fields opened, for he too was an outcast in a Royalist land. It is difficult, however, to see as blind a man with Vision to write:-

**His words here ended; but his meek aspect
Silent yet spake, and breathed immortal love
To mortal men,...^e**

I entered the graveyard. The guidebooks had told me of the many noble planes which shaded the meditative sitter from the Sun of Summer, but the only exfoliants I saw were the peeling flags of ponding Portland stone along the crossing walkways. Also I had read of the profusion of wild flowers which softened with gay delight the somber stones of this urban oasis. But the only wild flowers I found were these flowers of London town, the devout and dissident men and women who had graced a sullen country to here be discarded like withered wreaths of triumph. White crowded ranks of limestone headstones etched blank of all memorials by the acid rains of centuries infested every foot of ground. Green iron railings separated the living from the dead as lone walkers hurried through the massing graves. In a broad crossing I found the stone thought to be near to Blake's resting place, next to Defoe's obelisk. Blake's parents also lie somewhere here. I paused at the stone and offered a prayer of thanksgiving for the compassion and genius of William but I did not pray for him as I take his Everlasting Ecstasy for granted. Further across the graveyard I encountered by surprise the resting place of Thomas Bayes the statistician and said a similar prayer requesting just a tiny part of the goodness and the talent of these two fine men. Bayes presence puzzled me as I thought he was an Anglican vicar. Later reading discovered that Bayes was the Presbyterian minister at Tonbridge Wells where he died. His father had been the Presbyterian minister in Leather Lane (Clerkenwell) and the younger Bayes had been brought back to London for burial in the family plot. It is intriguing that even Presbyterians were buried as heretics since their church is that Established in Scotland. John Milton died a member of The Established Church and is buried intramurally 650 meters South- West of Bunhill Fields at St Giles, Cripplegate, now an ancient church isolated in the midst of the Barbican development.

I entered Bunhill Row and walked South through the invisible wall. Modest and understated stands a little black cast iron obelisk in the middle of Moor Lane. Picked out in white are cast reliefs: a vertical line with "CITY OF LONDON" on its Southern side. The young Japanese women patiently awaited their lifts as they stood on the granolithic steps of their polished plate glass banks. They almost certainly thought that the little pillar was just a traffic bollard decorated with the customer's name and would have been incredulous to learn that that on the Southern side was London and that on the Northern somewhere else.

A studious eye can still discern a subtle but abrupt change in wealth and function at that boundary but the living and expanding world of

London has long embraced the ejected remnants of heathens, heretics, turks, jews and all. For though it is our habit to think of a great city as an aggrandising organism amebically growing from its nucleus it is in reality the congregation of centripetal creatures who meet by migration to where their aspirations may be shared and fulfilled. The divisions and the doctrines of old have lost their import for the native and the immigrant alike. To today's denizens of City and city Bunhill Fields is an unregarded relic another ancient graveyard keeping who knows who.

Last Sunday another migrant to another land spoke to me through a Friend from the days of Bunhill's prime. In the Doric prose and shining metaphor of Milton's century he said to me:-

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers.³

References

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(Quotation from the writings of William Penn, 1693)
 - a The Argument
"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"
 - b "Mock on, Mock on!..." (Untitled Poem)
Lines 9-12
From The Rossetti Manuscript in The British Museum

- c "On Time" Lines 13-16
- d "The Divine Image" Lines 17-20
- e "Paradise Lost" Book III Lines 266-268