

## SEEING THINGS

REVIEW: John Higgs: *William Blake vs the World*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2021.

by Peter Brooke, downloaded from <http://www.peterbrooke.org/poetry/>

### ENGLAND'S NATIONAL POET?

*Blake vs the world* follows on from a much shorter book published in 2019 under the title *William Blake now - why he matters more than ever* and that seems to be a much better title for Higgs's overall project. Although unquestionably Blake had 'the world' against him during his life, *Blake vs the world* begins with the observation that the world now seems, remarkably if superficially, to have rallied to him. Higgs's earlier book was timed to coincide with a major Blake retrospective held in the Tate Gallery in 2019. In *Blake vs the world* he points out that not only did this exhibition sell 'close to a quarter of a million tickets during its four and a half month run' but all the reviews were ecstatic in their praise, from *The Guardian* - 'He blows away Constable and Turner - and that's with his writing hand tied behind his back' - to the *Daily Mail* - 'He was a nudist obsessed by sex who talked to angels for inspiration, but for all his madness, William Blake was one of our greatest artists.'

He goes on to show how Blake spans such a wide spectrum of British national culture, from the transgressive ('quoting Blake has been story shorthand for brooding villains who have depth, culture and sinister schemes') to the ultra-respectable in the use of his poem *Jerusalem* as a hymn that has become the real British, or at least English, national anthem. The degree of establishment support for what one would like to think of as an archetypal anti-establishment figure was shown when to promote the Tate exhibition his best known image - *The Ancient of Days* - was projected for five days onto the dome of St Paul's Cathedral: 'There are not many "unfortunate lunatics" [quoted from the only review of Blake's only exhibition - PB] who end their days in an unmarked pauper's grave yet go on to have their work used to crown the great temple of Britain two centuries later.'

Given the world's apparently universal acceptance of Blake, Higgs's task would seem to be, first, to show how the world has benefitted from this acceptance and secondly, perhaps, to show how the world could benefit even more from a better understanding of the man. With regard to the first point, his conclusion, in *William Blake now*, fills me, I have to admit, with horror:

*'Because Blake's influence has slowly saturated our culture, he has prepared us for the world we find ourselves in. We live in an imagined world now, and spend as much time in virtual space as we do in reality. We spend our evenings binging on story in the form of TV boxsets with 100-plus hours of narrative. Virtual reality and augmented reality are developing into powerful new ways to share our imagination with others.'*

But perhaps *Blake vs the world* will help us with the second point - not so much what Blake's influence is, but what it ought to be.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF LIVING IN BRIGHTON

In addition to the Blake books, Higgs is the author of *Stranger than we can imagine* (2015), an ambitious attempt to understand how the world (meaning chiefly the Anglo-Saxon world) changed through the twentieth century and *The Future starts here: an optimistic guide to what comes next* (2019). So he is someone who has given thought to the peculiarities of our present moment in time. In addition he has written a biography of Timothy Leary (2005), theorist of the uses of 'psychedelic' drugs and, in 2012, an account of the intellectual background of the band, the KLF, most famous for having set fire to £1 million in notes. And he lives in Brighton.

The importance of Brighton is explained in *The Future starts here*:

*'In April 2018, the international relocation website Morehub analysed 446 cities across 20 countries in an effort to discover which was the most hipster city in the world. The results were calculated by analysing the number of vegan eateries, coffee shops, tattoo studios, vintage boutiques and record stores for every 100,000 residents ... The result was incredibly close, but Brighton was declared the most hipster city in the world, just beating the second-placed, Portland, Oregon ...*

*'Brighton is a place of independent traders, expensive property and self-employed freelancers, and a 2018 study named it the best city in the UK to start up a small business. The large amount of digital start-up companies here has led to it being called "Silicon Beach" ...*

*'It is here that you find the merry crew who are part of the network of relationships that make me who I am. They are the cast of my personal sitcom. They are people outside of family and work colleagues who I have no responsibility for, but who I choose to be trapped with regardless ...'*

He is explaining the cast of mind and social circle which helped form his ideas as to the twenty-first century future, but this is not irrelevant to his ideas on Blake given that his theme is 'William Blake now.' There are a number of recurring reference points in Higgs's books. One of the key figures in the Leary biography is the English 'beat' writer Brian Barritt. Barritt was a personal friend of Higgs who wrote his obituary for *The Independent* in 2011. *William Blake now* is dedicated to him and he is quoted in *The Future starts here*. Aleister Crowley is a recurring figure in Higgs's books, starting with the Timothy Leary. It seems that Leary was introduced to his thinking by Barritt. He occupies more space in Higgs's account of what was important in the twentieth century than I would have given him but we do learn the interesting fact that at the end of his life, in 1947, he expressed admiration for Ayn Rand. Higgs's books, to give him his due, are full interesting tidbits of that sort. Robert Anton Wilson and his novel *Illuminatus*, Ken Campbell, the theatre director who put *Illuminatus* on the stage, and Alan Moore, English comic book writer and author of the huge Blake-influenced novel *Jerusalem*, also make fairly regular appearances. As do Einstein and quantum mechanics. The central argument of *Stranger than we can imagine*, turning largely on Einstein and quantum mechanics, is that in the course of the twentieth century we lost our 'omphalos' - a stable centre to our view of the world based, in Britain at least, on *'four pillars: Monarchy, Church, Empire and Newton.'*

#### 'SINGLE VISION AND NEWTON'S SLEEP'

Newton, of course, plays an important role, together with Francis Bacon and John Locke, in Blake's view of the world. They are among the nightmares produced during the long sleep of the Giant Albion. But I would suggest that as far as Blake is concerned Newton is in principle

no different from Einstein or Max Planck or Nils Bohr. Higgs quotes the poem in a letter to Blake's friend and patron Thomas Butts that begins 'With happiness stretched along the hills' and ends:

*'Now I a fourfold vision see  
And a fourfold vision is given to me;  
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight  
And threefold in soft Beulah's night  
And twofold always. May God us keep  
From single vision and Newton's sleep.'*

I shall speak about how Higgs interprets this shortly, but, without actually quoting this passage, the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye discusses the fourfold vision in his book *Fearful Symmetry*, first published in 1947. This was the second serious effort to come to grips with the complexities of Blake's symbolic system. The first was that made by W.B. Yeats and his father's friend, the poet Edwin Ellis, published in 1893. According to Frye: *'The lowest level is that of the isolated individual reflecting on his memories and evolving generalisations and abstract ideas. This world is single, for the distinction between subject and object is lost and we have only a brooding subject left. Blake calls this world Ulro: it is his hell, and his symbols for it are symbols of sterility, chiefly rocks and sand.'*

This is the world as shown in Blake's great painting of the spiritual form of Newton, doubled up on himself in a barren landscape contemplating an abstract diagram. The next stage is a double vision because there is an encounter between a subject and an object, between the visionary and the perceived world of sound and colour. The third level *'begins with a vision of wonderful and unearthly beauty. The writings of many visionaries are full of a childlike delight in a paradisaal world which is the same world that other people see, but seen differently. Traherne's Centuries of Meditation is a typical book of this kind. This is the state Blake calls "Beulah".'* Yet, says Frye, *'they [love and wonder - PB] afford us only a lower Paradise after all ... The highest possible state, therefore, is not the union of lover and beloved, but of creator and creature, of energy and form. This latter is the state for which Blake reserves the name Eden.'*

With regard to the Thomas Butts poem I would suggest, however, that there are actually five levels - that a distinction should be drawn between 'Newton's sleep' and 'single vision.' Newton's sleep is indeed, as Frye describes it, the state of brooding on pure mathematical abstractions without sound or colour. Single vision is the condition most of us are in when we encounter, to refer to the imagery of the poem, a thistle. We see ... a thistle. But according to Blake:

*What to others a trifle appears  
Fills me full of smiles or tears;  
For double the vision my eyes do see  
And a double vision is always with me.  
With my inward eye 'tis an old man grey;  
With my outward, a thistle across my way.*

He then gets into a dialogue with the thistle / old man grey and irritated at what the thistle has to say to him, tramples it with his foot:

*Then Los appeared in all his power;  
In the sun he appeared, descending before  
My face in fierce flames; in my double sight  
'Twas outward a sun, inward Los in his might.*

Los is the powerful heroic figure, symbolic of creative power, who strides through the pages of the prophetic books.

So it is with the double vision that the work begins, and correspondences are established between the 'external' world and the mental world, beginning of a recognition that the distinction between the two is spurious. In this understanding, 'Newton's sleep' isn't vision at all.

#### WHAT IS MEANT BY 'VISION'?

John Higgs might complain that the mathematical abstractions of Newton, Einstein and Nils Bohr have proved highly creative, what with motor cars, aeroplanes, space ships and the like. But Blake we should say is interested in only one thing - the advance of human life towards what he calls the 'Divine Vision', which may be a more accurate understanding of Eden, or the fourfold vision, than Frye's artistic creation. Motor cars, aeroplanes and space ships have nothing to do with that. They are of course very wonderful but in themselves they are dead. They have nothing to do with human life, at least as Blake would understand it.

Higgs - missing, I think, Blake's distinction between the inward eye and the outward eye - is much preoccupied with how Blake managed to see his visions, as if he actually saw the old man standing in front of him in the place of the thistle (in which case his stamping on it would surely have been very reprehensible); or, to take up a passage from the *Visions of the Last Judgment*, when the sun rose Blake saw with his external eye not 'a round disk of fire somewhat like a guinea' but 'an immense company of the Heavenly Host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty.' Oh no, no, as Blake might say, he saw it with his inward eye. But Higgs evokes 'Blake's two fold vision in which intense imagination leads to a weakened sense of self that results in imagined entities being seen as externally present' and he comments 'what he was experiencing neurologically does seem to be a state similar to that which can be triggered by psychedelic compounds.' This enables Higgs to turn back to his earlier book on Timothy Leary and to compare Blake's ascending levels of vision to a theory of ascending levels of consciousness, or 'circuits', developed by Leary. In this scheme of things, Leary's fifth circuit (the first circuit that can be opened with the use of psychedelic drugs) corresponds to Blake's Beulah and Higgs suggests (having tried and failed to produce any evidence of Blake engaging in extra-marital affairs) 'the fact that Blake, Swedenborg and Leary were all highly sexed may be significant.' Leary's seventh circuit corresponds to Blake's 'eternity' and to the experience of 'saints, mystics and psychedelic pioneers.'

It seems to me that Blake explains what he means by vision quite clearly in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which could almost be seen as a discourse on method, a manifesto for the prophetic books. It is of course a satire and commentary on Swedenborg. In it he parodies Swedenborg's manner of describing comfortable chats with angels and devils. Higgs, however, is reluctant to recognise this as satire:

*'Blake included accounts of meetings with angels, but the stories were chosen to display the limits and failings of angelic understanding. As he confessed, "I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning." To modern eyes, there is something very funny about a sentence as otherworldly and profound as this starting with the mundane phrase "I have always found ..." It is tempting to suspect that he was mocking Swedenborg, who displays a very similar attitude in his written accounts of heaven and hell. It seems more likely, though, that the similarity of prose stems from similar experience. As we know, to both Blake and Swedenborg, visions were everyday experiences. Even conversations with angels can become commonplace.'*

One wonders what he makes of the conversation Blake had over dinner with the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel:

*'I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood and so be the cause of imposition.*

*'Isaiah answered: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discovered the infinite in everything and as I was then persuaded and remain confirmed that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote."*

*'Then I asked: "does a firm persuasion that a thing is so make it so?"*

*'He replied: "All poets believe that it does and in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm persuasion of anything.'"*

Timothy Leary emerges from Higgs's biography as a more substantial and interesting figure than I thought he was. At the time, in the friendly rivalry there was between him and Ken Kesey (author of *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* and *Sometimes a great notion*), I and my friends were on the side of Ken Kesey. Nonetheless, I don't think in any of the accounts of Leary's (or Kesey's) psychedelic experiences we read such interesting conversations as Blake had - or indeed Swedenborg had - with his angels and devils, or even with the little old man evoked by the thistle Blake found on his way. What Blake is describing isn't an external vision '*in a finite organical perception*' such as was experienced by, for example, Bernadette of Lourdes (who didn't get a very interesting conversation out of it either) but an act of the imagination. Seeing the infinite in a grain of sand he imagines it as human and converses with it, under the '*firm persuasion*' that his imagination is a work of the '*poetic genius*' (a theme developed as the conversation continues with Ezekiel), Blake's term for the Holy Spirit.

## WHAT IS MEANT BY 'IMAGINATION'?

But what gives him the confidence to imagine the thistle as human? A comment he made in the margins of Swedenborg's *Wisdom of angels concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* may help us to understand. Swedenborg writes: '*In all the Heaven there is no idea of God other than that of a man.*' Blake agrees: '*Man can have no idea of anything greater than man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness.*' In another comment he writes: '*Think of a white cloud as being holy, you cannot love it; but think of a holy man within the cloud, love springs up in your thoughts, for to think of holiness distinct from man is impossible to the affections. Thought alone can make monsters, but the affections cannot.*'

The issue, then, is what we mean by 'imagination'. This is the central issue for Higgs - his answer to the question *Why Blake matters*: 'there is a core idea that lies at the heart of his work. It is an idea that has spread through our culture in the same diverse, widespread and untraceable way that forgotten artists influence the world. It is the reason why Blake keeps bubbling back into our culture through unpoliced mediums such as graffiti or videogames, rather than through establishment endorsement. The idea is this: the human imagination is divine.'

However, as Higgs rightly says (in *Why Blake matters*):

*'It's worth stressing, however, that Blake's understanding of imagination is different to how the word is typically understood today. If you ask someone in the twenty-first century what the word 'imagination' means, they will probably say that it is just making stuff up. This is not how the word used to be understood. According to the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, there was an important difference between fantasy and imagination.'*

So what is the distinction?

*'Imagination was the arrival, from the depths of consciousness, of something genuinely new --- something original ... something never seen before.'*

He elaborates on what he means by this in *Blake vs the world*:

*'When the filmmaker George Lucas dreamt up the Star Wars universe – which became a mental playground for generations of children, spawned a multibillion-dollar empire and irreversibly changed the movie industry – that was an act of imagination. When committees of creatives are tasked by the current owners of the Star Wars intellectual property to produce more Star Wars content, that is no longer an act of imagination. Instead, it is playing around with existing ideas and falls into Coleridge's lesser category of fantasy.'*

Well. That's one way of looking at it. Here is another, taken from Yeats's introduction to his edition of Blake's poems, published in 1906:

*"God is in the lowest effects as well as in the highest causes," he wrote on the margin of a copy of Lavater's Aphorisms. "For let it be remembered that creation is God descending according to the weakness of man. Our Lord is the word of God, and everything on earth is the word of God, and in its essence is God." That portion of creation, however, which we can touch and see with our bodily senses is "infected" with the power of Satan, one of whose names is "Opacity"; whereas that other portion which we can touch and see with the spiritual senses, and which we call "imagination" is truly "the body of God" and the only reality; but we must struggle to really mount towards that imaginative world, and not allow ourselves to be deceived by "memory" disguising itself as imagination. We thus mount by poetry, music and art, which seek forever "to cast off all that is not inspiration" and "the rotten rags of memory," and to become, "the divine members."*

There's a lot that could be said in elaboration of all that, but I hope the reader gets the point. Without wishing to belittle the enjoyment I remember having when I saw *Star Wars* so many years ago, with Blake we are in a different world. But of course Blake (and Yeats) could be wrong. The idea that imagination could be a cleansing of the doors of perception so that we can see clearly a reality that transcends the 'opaque' reality of our normal perception could be completely delusional. One suspects that this is what Higgs really thinks and were he ever to meet up with Blake, they wouldn't get on very well

## MATERIALISM AND IDEALISM

The difference between them is manifest in Higgs's views on consciousness. Higgs draws what I think is a rather good analogy between the physical brain and a television set. The mechanics of the television set are the means by which the image reaches us but in no way do they account for the nature of the image. So far so good. But elsewhere he says:

*'Reality is silent, as we understand the term. The collision of objects causes waves to ripple through the air, but this is not the same as 'sound' as we subjectively experience it. The qualities of birdsong, guitar chords or laughter that so delight us are created by our minds, based on air ripples detected by our ears, and they exist only there. Another example is colour, which also does not exist in external reality. Different wavelengths of light are reflected off different surfaces, and these different wavelengths are registered by our eyes, which send this information to our brains.'*

The famous example is the tree falling in the forest with no-one to hear it. It doesn't make a sound. This is precisely the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' qualities that characterised the thinking of Blake's great enemy, John Locke. For Locke qualities like colour and sound only exist in the mind while the reality of the object lay in its colourless and soundless measurable qualities - the waves rippling through the air. This distinction was challenged by the philosopher of 'idealism', George Berkeley, who showed that the measurable qualities were as much functions of the mind as sound and colour. In a passage in his *Commonplace Book* which Yeats enjoyed quoting, Berkeley says: *'There are men who say there are invisible extensions. There are others who say that the wall is not white, the fire is not hot. We Irishmen cannot attain to these truths.'*

For Blake the reality of the object lies in mind. What is not of the nature of mind is abstract. It isn't vision of any sort, not even single vision. It is 'Newton's sleep.' It should be clear, however, that for Blake mind was something other than our own individual minds. In the prophetic books the schema of mind is given in the 'four zoas' - the four living creatures of the vision of Ezekiel, and we as individuals participate in it. It is within us but equally we are within it. Thus, since mind is the only reality, the tree falling in the forest is an event in mind, in the universal mind, the divine Humanity. Higgs seems to acknowledge this when he says *'As far as he was concerned, the imagination of man was the source of everything both physical and spiritual'* but he continues: *'By taking this stance, Blake sidestepped the categories of idealism and materialism and he avoided the dualist question of whether the physical or the immaterial had primacy.'* On the contrary, Blake was a thoroughgoing idealist for whom matter, or 'the physical', represented 'the limit of opacity', identified with Satan - the mental category most impervious to vision.

## MAKING ALLOWANCES

It is in the light of this that we might understand the severe critique of Blake that Higgs has to offer us, a critique so severe that one might wonder what he finds to admire in him.

In *Why Blake matters* Higgs complains that Blake *'expressed the belief that the Earth was flat, for example, and denied that atoms could exist. His belief that there was more to mind than intellect blinded him to the importance of reason.'*

He elaborates on this in *Blake vs the world*:

*'There are many aspects of Blake's thought which, from a twenty-first-century perspective, we can comfortably deny. The idea that the male is primary and that the female is an emanation of the male, for example, can be dropped without much controversy. It may still be staunchly defended by theologians, alchemists and traditionalists, but they are an increasingly small minority.'*

Well, yes, certainly there aren't many people nowadays (not even among 'theologians, alchemists and traditionalists') who think that women are emanations of men. One may doubt if there were ever many people who thought that. In Blake's system it is certainly true that 'emanations', which are usually presented as being good, are female, just as 'spectres', which are usually presented as being bad, are male. But we're talking about a symbolic system whose intention it is to convey the experiences of the mind. If we start treating the prophetic books as descriptions of the external world as we experience it through the senses the whole thing will fall apart even before we begin.

But Higgs is magnanimous: *'Perhaps if we make allowances for this [the limitations of the age in which he lived, an age in which, we are told, people believed that women emanated from men - PB] when we consider Blake, future historians will be kind enough to make a similar allowance when they look back at us.'* He continues: *'Blake's denial of reason has also not aged well. Blake believed only what his senses showed him and as a result he insisted that the world was flat and that atoms did not exist.'*

The first point to be made here is that Blake emphatically did not believe only what his senses showed him:

*How do you know but every bird that cuts the airy way  
Is an immense world of delight, closed by your senses five?*

A recurring theme in Blake is the creation of the senses presented as a horror story, as in this account of Los (let us call him the Imagination though it's more complicated than that) creating a physical form for Urizen (let us call him the reasoning faculty though it's more complicated than that):

*In harrowing fear rolling round  
His nervous brain shot branches  
Round the branches of his heart  
On high into two little orbs  
And fixed in two little caves,  
Hiding carefully from the wind  
His eyes beheld the deep  
And a third age passed over  
And a state of dismal woe.*

A passage actually quoted elsewhere by Higgs.

Of course that was written before Darwin came along. We know a lot more nowadays about how eyes are formed Although those of us who have read Richard Dawkins's *Climbing Mount Improbable* may still have doubts as to whether it can be fully explained by natural selection nonetheless we do know that it wasn't done by Los the Blacksmith, spectre of the fallen Zoa



Urthona, creating a body over many ages of dismal woe for the fallen Zoa Urizen. But we can make allowances for the age of ignorance in which poor Blake was living.

## ATOMS AND PARTICLES OF LIGHT

Blake denies the existence of the atom in a letter written towards the end of his life to his friend and patron George Cumberland, but as always it has to be read in context and the context is complicated: *'I know too well that the great majority of Englishmen are fond of the indefinite which they measure by Newton's doctrine of the fluxions of an atom, a thing which does not exist. These are politicians and think that Republican art is inimical to their atom, for a line or a lineament is not formed by chance. A line is a line in its minutest subdivisions, straight or crooked. It is itself, not intermeasurable by anything else.'*

Blake is defending his own method of art against the fashion for what he called 'blotting and blurring' but, as so often, he extends this specific argument into a more general world view, defending the line as experienced by the craftsman against the line as experienced by the mathematician. The craftsman's line is a simple, single act. The mathematician's line is a series of dots, each represented by a number. The mathematician sees the world in terms of what we may now think of as pixels, different arrangements of tiny elements that are identical, therefore intermeasurable. Infinitesimal calculus, as developed by Newton and Leibniz is an attempt mathematically to measure continuity, including the continuity of time. It works for a huge variety of practical applications but it isn't true to the real nature of things, the real nature of 'a line or a lineament' as they exist in the imagination. The same can be said of Einstein's time treated as a fourth dimension and his 'space-time.' It is a fiction that works for certain practical purposes. And of quantum mechanics which, imagining time as a succession of discrete particles of space, has much in common with Newton's infinitesimal calculus. Interestingly, Higgs understands the fictional nature of these mathematical devices when, in *Stranger than Fiction* he sings the praises of what he calls 'multiple-model agnosticism':

*'Multiple-model agnosticism is an approach familiar to any scientist. Scientists do not possess a grand theory of everything, but they do have a number of competing and contradictory models, which are valid at certain scales and in certain circumstances. A good illustration of this point is the satellite navigation device in a car. The silicon chip inside it utilises our understanding of the quantum world; the GPS satellite it relies on to find its position was placed in orbit by Newtonian physics; and that satellite relies on Einstein's theory of relativity in order to be accurate. Even though the quantum, Newtonian and relativity models all contradict each other, the satnav still works.'*

Blake evokes the atom again in what may well be my own all time favourite poem, the poem that begins *Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau:*

*The atoms of Democritus  
And Newton's particles of light  
Are sands upon the Dead Sea shore  
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.*

Blake does not actually deny the existence of the 'sands upon the Dead Sea shore'. He just feels that they are dead while the living reality lies in mind, represented here by the shining tents.

One actually feels he quite likes Newton's corpuscular theory of light, an anticipation of Einstein's photons. Remember that for Blake, in order to experience the holiness of anything (a white cloud for example) we have to imagine it in relation to the human form. And then read this from a poem in a letter addressed to Thomas Butts (not the same letter or poem quoted earlier on the fourfold vision):

*To my friend Butts I write  
My first vision of Light  
On the yellow sands sitting,  
The Sun was emitting  
His glorious beams  
From Heaven's high streams.  
Over sea, over land  
My eyes did expand  
Into regions of air  
Away from all care  
Into regions of fire  
Remote from desire;  
The light of the morning  
Heavens mountains adorning:  
In particles bright  
The jewels of light  
Distinct shone and clear.  
Amazed and in fear  
I each particle gazed,  
Astonished, amazed;  
For each was a man  
Human-formed. Swift I ran,  
For they beckoned to me  
Remote by the sea,  
Saying: 'Each grain of sand,  
'Every stone on the land,  
'Each rock and each hill  
'Each fountain and rill,  
'Each herb and each tree,  
'Mountain, hill, earth and sea,  
'Cloud, meteor, star  
'Are men seen afar.'*

## HOW TO SEE THE EARTH

I feel embarrassed inflicting my prose on the reader after a poem like that - and it gets more wonderful as it goes on - but I suppose I have to address the serious charge brought against Blake that he thought the earth was flat. The passage this brings to my mind comes from *The*

*Mental Traveller*, one of the most complex and interesting of Blake's poems (an attempt to understand it is at the root of Yeats's *A Vision*):

*The guests are scattered through the land  
For the eye altering alters all,  
The senses roll themselves in fear  
And the flat earth becomes a ball.*

*The stars sun moon all shrink away  
A desert vast without a bound  
And nothing left to eat or drink  
And a dark desert all around.*

The whole poem is so strange and complicated that one hesitates to comment but these two verses are fairly straightforward. As always, Blake is concerned with the experience of the mind, with the imagination. We can imagine the earth as a flat surface rich in wonderful things with a friendly, neighbouring Sun and Moon. Or we can imagine it as a characterless ball hung in the middle of a vast dark desert separated by huge distances even from the Sun and Moon.

We live in a strange period of human life in which there are people willing to spend unimaginably huge sums of money in order to fly into space to see the world in this second form, believing that in so doing they are having some sort of spiritual experience. In Blake's eyes this is just idiocy but Higgs is sympathetic. Discussing the US mission to the moon in *Stranger than we can imagine*, he says excitedly:

*'When they rounded the dark side of the moon, the crew of Apollo 8 became the first humans to see the whole of planet Earth, hanging alone in space, blue and white and indescribably beautiful. They photographed it, and called that photograph Earthrise. In 1948 the English astronomer Fred Hoyle, who coined the term the Big Bang, predicted that "Once a photograph of the Earth taken from outside is available, a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose ..." In the twentieth century mankind went to the moon and in doing so they discovered the earth.'*

From Blake's point of view, however, you can make a much more interesting and valuable discovery of the earth merely by walking out of your front door.

## 'NATURE' AND THE MATRIX

Finally in this account of the ways in which poor Blake has been left behind by the march of civilisation, there is his 'attitude to nature':

*'His brand of Divine Humanism draws a clear line between mankind and the natural world. Blake declared that "nature is the Devil", because it was devoid of the light of consciousness and the imagination. But he was living at a time before ecosystems were under the stresses they are now and before the interconnectedness of the biosphere was formally understood. There was not then the current understanding of systems theory, or an awareness of how reliant we are on the rest of nature from the level of microbes upwards. We now understand that humanity is a part of the biosphere and that we depend on it for our very survival. Blake recognised the beauty in nature, of course, but he saw it only in terms of how it made him feel.'*

I may have said enough already to reply to this. Blake precisely does not *'draw a line between mankind and the natural world.'* His objection to 'nature' is really an objection to the word 'nature' precisely because it characterises trees, animals, birds etc as having an existence separate from mind. For Blake, everything is mind, which he imagines as human mind because he cannot imagine it otherwise. *'Everything that lives is holy,'* Blake famously said (it is the last line in *the Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Mind is not the individual mind of you and me but our individual imagination is precisely the means by which the individual mind can connect with and be informed by the Universal Mind and therefore with everything that the scientists, or, for the time, 'natural theologians', call 'nature'. It's all one, but the natural theologians present their 'nature' as something separate and apart, existing independently of the human/universal mind.

Higgs couldn't have got it more wrong. It is actually Higgs who wants to draw a clear line between mankind and the natural world. In *The Future starts here*, arguing, of course correctly, that we are totally dependent on (I'm sorry. I don't claim to be William Blake. I can't help myself) 'nature', Higgs evokes *'the American biologist E.O.Wilson'* (recently deceased as it happens) who argues for what he calls 'Half Earth.' This is a suggestion that, given the importance of natural processes to the wellbeing of the Earth, understood in James Lovelock's terms as 'Gaia', a coherent self sustaining ecosystem, half the Earth should be given over to 'nature' to do its own thing - 'rewilding.'

So far so good, I would say and I don't think Blake would have any problems with it. But how does Higgs understand it? *'As Wilson describes mankind, we are currently "'Obsequious to imagined higher beings, contemptuous towards lower forms of life." Half-Earth changes this, defining us as nature's equal. Digitally enhanced mankind and nature are the dual inhabitants of Earth. They are not slave and master, but instead must try to live together in a sustainable partnership.'*

*'Digitally enhanced mankind ...'* What Higgs is envisaging is that while 'nature' does its own thing in one half of the Earth, mankind will be living a quite separate life in something that rather resembles the virtual world of The Matrix. Some sort of arrangement will have to be made, one assumes, for feeding us but he doesn't have a lot to say about that. By contrast he has quite a lot to say about life in the matrix. It looks very exciting. Apparently:

*'The development of haptic gloves is making great strides and looks set to revolutionise our experience of virtual worlds. "Haptic" refers to the sensation of touch, and a haptic glove allows you to touch, feel and manipulate objects in VR.'*

Higgs is slightly suspicious about Virtual Reality (VR) because it is such a powerful medium. It might be used by people he doesn't like - Russian troll farms for example - to promote political causes of which he disapproves - brexit for example. He prefers what is called 'Augmented Reality' (AR):

*'In some ways AR is the opposite of VR. Instead of allowing you to enter a computer-generated world, it allows the digital realm to enter the real world ...'*

*'What the potential of AR glasses offers is not seeing Pikachu on the pavement ahead when you hold up your smartphone, but simply seeing Pikachu on the pavement in front of you, behaving independently and interacting with the environment ...'*

*'These potential glasses would not have a built-in camera, so they would not be seen as a privacy risk in the same way that the much-criticised Google Glass prototype was. They would simply sit on your nose like regular sunglasses and, through wi-fi and the benefits of cloud computing, enhance and enchant the room you are in ...*

*'The initial uses of the technology include games such as Minecraft or Street Fighter played on the kitchen table instead of a screen, or games where you run around your own home shooting at the virtual aliens or zombies breaking in ...*

*'There is something valuable about sharing your home with something non-human. AR could offer virtual pets that are playful and entertaining, but which never leave a dead bird at the top of the stairs or crap behind the sofa. Your room could become a virtual aquarium, with immaterial fish swimming around the lights, while your children play with a cat-sized pony in the back garden ...*

*'It's not hard to imagine a situation similar to Philip Pullman's His Dark Material books, in which everyone is accompanied by their own 'dæmon' that takes the shape of an animal of their own choosing ...*

*'We once thought that computers were things we would enter, but it may be that we had that the wrong way around. It is the digital spirits who will enter the real world, and enchant it, as the line between the physical and the digital becomes increasingly blurred. As we create this digital realm we will be, effectively, exploring our own imaginations. Our world could be anything we can dream up. For all the danger, there will be great joy to be had, as well as excitement, surprise and a lot of laughter. We are looking at a creative opportunity unsurpassed in human history ...'*

Those are the sort of things you get to know about if you live in Brighton. That's what Higgs means by 'imagination'. That's why he thinks Blake, who believes that the human imagination is divine, matters now, more than ever.

Peter Brooke  
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