



ORC

William Blake was born in 1757 into a century of revolution. The War of Independence in the colonies led to the American Revolution; in Europe the French Revolution engulfed our nearest neighbour; and in the heart of England the Industrial Revolution was beginning, an engine in our economy that would revolutionize capitalism.

We are here to celebrate Orc - Blake's figure of Revolution - in the company of a great voice of the contemporary age - Jeremy Reed.

a poem by Jeremy Reed

Jeremy Reed is a writer; he has published over 40 books including poetry, novels, biography and studies of contemporary London. His biographies include books on the French poets Rimbaud and Jean Genet, the rock star Lou Reed and Bryan Jones of the Rolling Stones.

a poem by Jeremy Reed

Besides revolutions, the 18th century was also an age of manifest injustice and the most blatant of all was slavery. Blake's engagement with the Abolition movement began early through his work as an engraver. He was commissioned to illustrate a book by John Gabriel Stedman chronicling the cruel suppression of an uprising of slaves in Surinam in South America.

a poem by Jeremy Reed

Blake's importance today - the reason he is remembered and revisited - is because he brought the conflicts of the world into his inner world. For William Blake, slavery became an inner slavery - Mind-Forg'd Manacles - the chains we forge ourselves to shackle our dreams and limit the boundaries of our lives as individuals and as social beings.

Revolution revolved inwards into Blake, perhaps as a consequence of watching the French Revolution, its excesses and suppression, and through a tide of fear that washed over the Channel to England in the decade of the 1790s.

Injustice & revolution, time & space, infinity & eternity all spiralled down into Blake's being to be recreated and made manifest in the present moment.

a poem by Jeremy Reed

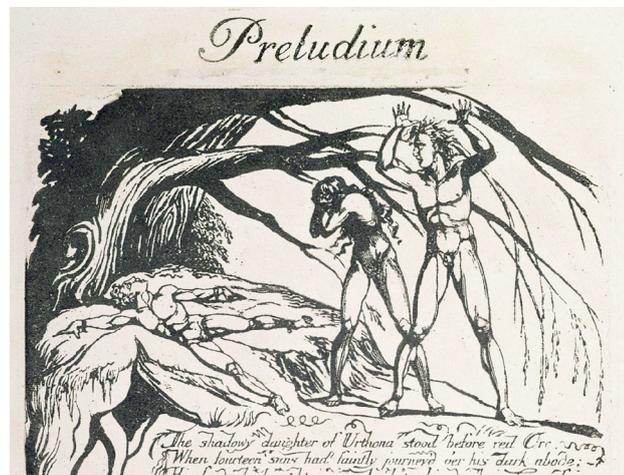
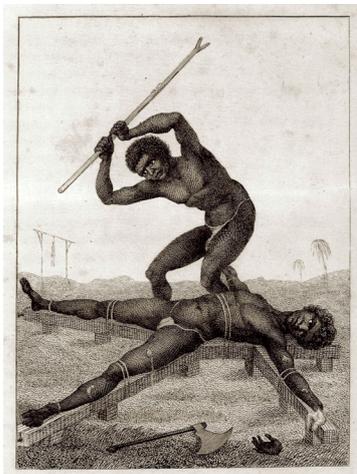
To investigate this inner world, to articulate the psychological dynamics he saw within himself, he created a pantheon of gods : Urizen, Los, Enitharmon, Tharmas, the Spectre, and perhaps the most interesting of all is Orc - the figure of Revolution who inspires the fire of creativity.

Blake was an artist as well as a poet and his representation of Orc is one of exuberant joy - the

moment where revolution escapes its chains and bursts forth into an infinite embrace of creativity. This image is known as Albion Rose or Glad Day, but is more correctly entitled Orc.



Its origin can be traced back to two previous images that Blake designed. The first is the engraving for Stedman depicting the torture and execution of a slave who is tied down on a rack. The second is in the Preludium to Blake's prophetic book America where we encounter Orc chained to a rock; again he is lying in a cruciform position but one leg is now slightly straightened towards the vertical. In the third illustration Orc rises free from his chains, still in his cruciform stance but now upright, he turns his head to us and smiles, his arms and legs outstretched in joy. So Orc arises against a background of flames, a figure of fiery revolution.



These 3 figures of Orc represent one figure in 3 different stages of a cycle, a character revolving on a wheel of life, a cycle of enslavement, death and resurrection. Orc's head itself moves in this cycle, first facing us in pleading, then turned away in despair, and finally back to us, face-on in exaltation. Revolutions also move through the cycle of Orc - a metacycle - a wheel rolling through history.

There are people here today who took part in the student revolt of 1968 and will recognize this occupation of St Paul's with nostalgia. The moment is part of a returning, turning cycle. In the same way, the lives of the artists that Jeremy Reed has retold in his biographies are figures of Orc - the poets who burn out too young, the rock stars who escape their chains only to be enslaved again to drugs or fame or money, and then die to be reborn in a muddle of myth, stardom and forgiveness.

*... Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems ...
...Where shall we take our stand to view the infinite & unbounded ...
... I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans ...*

These are Blake's key statements on revolution. These are the analytics that are needed to sustain sedition. Armed with these questions Blake set out on his journey of revolution. But he no longer joined demonstrations like he once did during the Gordon Riots. Instead he travelled inwards. The systems he talked about were the systems he found within his own psyche.

a poem by Jeremy Reed

So why is William Blake, who abandoned the outward struggle in favour of the pursuit of poetry, relevant to those who are camped here on the steps of St Paul's in protest against the financial systems that enslave us?

I would suggest that Blake is important to any peaceful movement that tries to change the world and moreover the fire of Orc guides each person who struggles to return a sense of justice and equality to our planet. The reason is this : peaceful revolutions eventually succeed, and in time their successes will be enshrined in legislation. Hard won changes will embody a new and better constitution. And who is to draft this constitution, who is to write the legislation?

In the phrase of a young contemporary of Blake, in the words of Shelley:

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

a poem by Jeremy Reed

The alchemical side of Blake, the transformational nature of his spirit, turned the outer world inwards and condensed the vast horizons of time and space into a single moment. To make Revolution exist in each and every grain of our existence.

In one of his most famous poems, William Blake wrote

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

The poem reminds me of the words of a director of a bank, the only investment banker that I know. He deals in stocks and shares, he trades in futures, one of the powerful men in the city, one of the one percent, yet a man who describes himself modestly as having just one skill, a single talent :

I can make money out of nothing - I turn nothing into wealth.

For the revolutionary, the artist, the poet, the hedge fund manager, and indeed for each and every one of us, Blake sets us a challenge. To locate the causes of injustice within ourselves, then to turn revolution into statute, and in doing this to honour the final alchemy of Orc : to turn nothing into joy.



Our thanks to Jeremy Reed, to the Tent City University and to everyone encamped here today.

Tim Heath, Chair of the Blake Society

13 December 2011