

## Arts & Letters

### BLAKE: *A Biography.*

By Peter Ackroyd. Knopf. 399 pp. \$35

If anybody was ever born to endure life's hardships, it was surely William Blake (1757–1827). Ignored by most of his contemporaries and thought mad by some, he suffered the condescension of lesser poets and artists and barely eked out a living from his work in the engraving trade. Yet he was more than consoled by a powerful visionary gift that many people took as the sign of his instability. From around the eighth year of his life, when he glimpsed the face of God at his window, Blake was inclined to believe that the sensible world was an illusion and snare, of use only if one could see through it to the spiritual reality beyond.

The great source and medium of vision, Blake held, was the Imagination, which in turn he claimed was nothing less than the divine itself.

If all this makes Blake sound like the supreme protohippie, Peter Ackroyd's richly detailed biography should dispel the notion. What sets Blake worlds apart from the would-be visionaries of the consumer age was his heroic commitment to work, his belief that in visions begin responsibilities.

Born in London to a family of Dissenting Protestant tradespeople, William, the third child, was taken on as an engraver's apprentice at age 14. While mastering the craft, he developed his own considerable poetic and artistic gifts. Yet early on, he found himself at odds with England's art establishment. As a student at the Royal Academy, he made clear his preference for pure outline, clearly defined form, and water-based paints—a style distinctly at odds with that of the reigning master, Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose oil paintings of historical subjects Blake found, in Ackroyd's words, “too fluid and indeterminate.” Reynolds and his followers reciprocated by never taking Blake's work seriously.

Ackroyd is at his best evoking Blake's

London, particularly the neighborhoods of the working poor, where Blake lived for all but three of his 70 years. The biographer shows how this urban scene fueled Blake's moral indignation and nurtured a radical visionary poetics. After reading Ackroyd's book, no one can think that the boys immortalized in Blake's famous poem “The Chimney-Sweeper” were quaintly colorful creatures of an earlier age; their lives were simply wretched, and Blake's

bitterness toward a society that tolerated such exploitation was great. Yet, as Ackroyd writes, “Blake was in no sense a ‘Romantic’ artist, like those of the next generation, who despised trade and who tended to withdraw from the urban turmoil.” Blake saw the lineaments of the New Jerusalem even in London's squalor



and suffering.

Blake made his artistic purpose emphatically clear: “I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.” Ackroyd judges Blake to be not only a great artist but also a true prophet: not a soothsayer, but someone who saw clearly what *is*. Before almost anyone else, Blake discerned the limits of the scientific worldview; he created Urizen, one of the most compelling figures in his elaborate mythology, to dramatize the inadequacy of the merely reasoning mind.

Blake's life was not all a tale of woe. Though he managed to alienate most of his patrons, a few stayed loyal until his death. And in old age, he found new admirers among a group of mystically inclined artists who called themselves the Ancients. By far, though, Blake's greatest blessing was his wife, Catherine. This simple, unlettered woman believed in his visions, worked tirelessly as his assistant, and indulged his every whim, including a fondness for *alfresco nudism*.

Despite Blake's many quirks, the relatively eventless course of his life does not make for a particularly compelling story—

at least as Ackroyd tells it. Yet Ackroyd does do many things right. One is to set forth the terms and trying conditions of Blake's great project without explaining away (or worse, psychologizing) his visionary genius. Such tact, though leaving us eager for more answers, turns us toward the only reliable source—the works of the artist himself.

—Jay Tolson

**ORNAMENT:**

*A Social History since 1450.*

By Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard. Yale Univ. Press and the Victoria and Albert Museum. 232 pp. \$45

Upper-class English ladies have never worn tattoos. Or have they? In 1901, Lady Randolph Churchill celebrated the coronation of Edward VII by having a tiny serpent tattooed on her forearm. Tattoos were all the rage at the time. By 1920 the traditional prejudice against tattooing had returned, and Lady Churchill was never seen in public without a bracelet covering the spot.

The authors of this fascinating book do not say whether Lady Churchill ever regretted her tattoo. But they do explain much else, including the likely reason why she chose the serpent motif. Snodin, head of the designs collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Howard, an art historian at the University of Sussex, begin their survey in 1450, when the invention of printing led to the circulation of Renaissance and other design ideas throughout Europe. By the mid-1500s, art patrons were poring over “emblem books” in search of “visual symbols of personal qualities that a patron aspired to.” In this context, the serpent was “a symbol of eternity.” Hence the serpent embroidered in the sleeve of Elizabeth I in the famous “Rainbow” portrait (c. 1600).

As a social history of ornament, this book is a first. Snodin and Howard explain that 19th-century “grammars of ornament” classified visual motifs (everything from the Corinthian acanthus to the Chinese Willow Pattern) according to a hierarchy of aesthetic and moral value. With the 20th century came a different approach, one that read psychological meanings into various recurring images. (Need we dwell on what Lady Churchill's serpent would have meant to a generation raised on Freud?) This lavishly

illustrated volume takes the next step, which is to give historical context to our understanding of ornamental hierarchies and of the rules shaping ornament's private and public uses. Today's postmodern designers like to think they are beyond such considerations, but, as the authors wisely point out, “If rules are broken, then people choose to do that consciously; the very process of breaking rules emphasizes the fact that normally they are there.”

—Martha Bayles

**ROSEBUD:**

*The Story of Orson Welles.*

By David Thomson. Knopf. 448 pp. \$30

Forget the aging, obese Orson Welles, who promised to “sell no wine before its time” on television in the 1970s and '80s. This biography begins with the golden, whirling days of Welles's early career, when the handsome boy out of Kenosha, Wisconsin, had boundless creative vitality—and the power to charm anyone, in the theater or out. In 1931, the 16-year-old Welles was appearing at the Gate Theater in Dublin. In 1935, he was staging a sensational *Macbeth* with black actors in Harlem. Two years later, he was directing and starring in *Doctor Faustus*, working with John Houseman and Marc Blitzstein on the inflammatory prolabor musical *The Cradle Will Rock*, and lending his plummy voice to the radio role of Lamont Cranston in *The Shadow*. Welles (and Houseman) launched the Mercury Theater with a revelatory *Julius Caesar*. When the Mercury began a weekly radio series in 1938, Welles hoodwinked the nation with *War of the Worlds*, his notorious fake news broadcast of a Martian invasion.

Then Welles invaded Hollywood, where he directed a first feature that many regard as the best film ever made by an American: *Citizen Kane* (1941). He went on to make a second, darker movie, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), that might have been even greater had it been released in the form Welles intended. But he was in Brazil spending—

