

Woolman And Blake: Prophets For Today

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR John Woolman and William Blake were both prophets, and so is Mildred Young. Already the author of a number of Pendle Hill pamphlets, she wrote the present study some years ago. Since then it has lain fallow in our files till resurrected this spring, to emerge as fresh and even more immediate than when it was first written—a rare thing to be said of any piece of writing.

Mildred has always been guided by concerns which were well ahead of their own time. In the 1930's she and her husband left the pleasant security of Westtown School, where Wilmer Young was Dean of Boys, to work side by side with sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the South. When she writes of poverty, voluntary and involuntary, as she does in the present pamphlet, she knows whereof she speaks.

This essay was first presented as the annual John Woolman Memorial Lecture in September, 1963, at Mount Holly, New Jersey.

Woolman And Blake: Prophets For Today

I

There is not the least reason to suppose that John Woolman and William Blake ever met, or ever heard of each other, though it is delightful to imagine that they might have. William Blake was only fifteen that summer of 1772 when, on the sixth of June, John Woolman, as he writes in his Journal, "landed at London and went straight-way to the Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders which had been gathered (I suppose) half an hour." He remained in London one week and then went into Hertfordshire and on north, walking through the country and the towns until he came to York where, in October, he died.

I love to think that during that week in June the grave Quaker American may have met somewhere in the green edges of London the visionary boy who was to be the greatest English poet of his time. Woolman's walks would naturally have taken him toward the open country which he loved, away from the city sights that oppressed his heart, and he might have strayed to the playgrounds of Blake's childhood which the poet described in the lyric that stands between the first and second chapters of his last poem, Jerusalem.

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

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Her Little-ones ran on the fields,
 The Lamb of God among them seen,
 And fair Jerusalem his Bride,
 Among the little meadows green.

Pancrass and Kentish-town repose
 Among her golden pillars high,
 Among her golden arches which
 Shine upon the starry sky.

The Jew's-harp-house and the Green Man,
 The ponds where boys to bathe delight,
 The fields of cows by Willan's farm,
 Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight.

She walks upon our meadows green,
 The Lamb of God walks by her side,
 And every English child is seen
 Children of Jesus and his Bride.

Blake was serving an apprenticeship to an engraver the year John Woolman came to England, and was kept sketching tombstones in Westminster Abbey by day; but occasionally he must have visited his parents, who lived within two and a half miles of all the places named in the lyric, and probably he wandered there sometimes in the evenings. It is good to think that Woolman's feet and Blake's may have walked the same paths that week in June, and that those two strangely clear pairs of eyes may have met.

II

But it is not for the sake of imaginary encounters that I have put these two names together; it is because they bring before us, in their so different styles of speech, the same human landscape, and bore into our minds with similar reflections upon that landscape and our own place in it.

Insight and mercy are the two words to express both Woolman and Blake. They spoke to their own time and the world was not listening. They speak to our time and we find it so hard to listen that we should like to tell ourselves that their words are nearly two hundred years out of date. But insight and mercy are not yet out of date.

Blake was to live fifty years and more after John Woolman was dead. Blake was to see the development of the industrialism whose beginnings oppressed Woolman's heart as he walked north through the towns. He was to see manufacturing desert the country cottages where each householder might be his own employer, and the work of wife and children supplemented the family living, and migrate to the huddled factories in the towns where the whirring machines had no use for the skill of craftsmen, and where wives and children were preferred workers because they were cheaper to hire. He was to see the face of rural England entirely altered by the Enclosure Acts. "They would have been wise Acts," says Jacob Bronowski, "had they also safeguarded those whom they dispossessed. Instead, they gave them into the hands of the large owner and the large buyer. . . . During Blake's life the cost of living roughly doubled: wages went up roughly by one-half. The gap had to be filled by hunger, or by a new spurt of work from wife and children" (*William Blake: A Man Without a Mask* [New York: Penguin, 1942] p. 99). England had for the first time ceased to grow enough grain for her own needs, and beginning with the year of Blake's birth, there were recurring years of dearth throughout his lifetime.

The year Blake was twelve, Benjamin Franklin, staying in England, wrote that he had seen, "within a year, riots in this country about corn; riots about elections; riots about workhouses, riots of colliers; riots of weavers; riots of coalheavers; riots of sawyers; riots of sailors, riots of Wilkites, riots of government chairmen, riots of smugglers"

(quoted by Bronowski, p. 54, from a marginal note of Franklin). Two years earlier Blackstone had counted one hundred and fifty crimes for which hanging was the penalty, and they were crimes against wealth and property. In 1780, there was a great riot in London; Blake, twenty-three years old, was swept along with the mob that burned Newgate Prison. When the riot was finally put down, three hundred persons had been killed; more than a hundred others were arrested and brought to trial, many of them barely out of childhood. By 1799, harsh laws called the Combination Acts had been passed to prevent laborers trying to organize to protect themselves against employers. A dozen years before Blake's death, the infamous Corn Laws were enacted in spite of a hungry and rioting population. In the intervening years, Parliament had tried taxing those who powdered their hair, but it had also discussed ways and means to reduce the consumption of bread. In 1804, amid bread scarcity, Parliament proclaimed a National Day of Fast to whip up devout enthusiasm for renewed war with France.

Blake was all his life to see the human waste and wreckage being thrown off by that era of change. He was to see hopes for human freedom flare high into the heavens with the American and French revolutions, and die back under the military oppression of the Napoleonic period. Woolman would never have trusted the violence with which these bids for freedom were made. Blake did trust it temporarily, though even as a boy writing his earliest poems, he suspected that war serves the purposes of the rich and powerful but never the necessities of the poor. He was scarcely out of his 'teens when he made a "Prologue" for a dramatic piece that he never wrote:

O for a voice like thunder, and a tongue
To drown the throat of war! – When the senses
Are shaken, and the soul is driven to madness,

Who can stand? When the souls of the oppressed
Fight in the troubled air that rages, who can stand?
When the whirlwind of fury comes from the
Throne of God, when the frowns of his countenance
Drive the nations together, who can stand?
When Sin claps his broad wings over the battle,
And sails rejoicing in the flood of Death;
When souls are torn to everlasting fire,
And fiends of Hell rejoice upon the slain,
O who can stand? O who hath caused this?
O who can answer at the throne of God?
The Kings and Nobles of the land have done it!
Hear it not, Heaven, thy Ministers have done it!

III

One crucial difference between the prophet Woolman and the prophet Blake was that Woolman was handfasted in love to a community to whom his pleadings were addressed, whereas Blake cried into the empty air. His poems were to wait a century or more for their audience. He addressed a nation that to him, in his spiritual isolation, was almost faceless; he cried to deaf ears against a nation's warmaking and empire-building that ground the faces of its poor; cried against industry that made machines of human beings; cried against trade that served luxury instead of need; cried against institutional religion that could pride itself on the charity it dispensed to the victims of the society the Church itself batted and fattened upon.

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.

Songs of Experience

Woolman, by contrast, stood face to face with the Society of Friends. He addressed them as individuals; he addressed himself as one of them. He pointed them to their tradition. He appealed to their responsibility as men claiming to contain that which is of God and in duty bound to fellowmen who also contain that which is of God. He did not so much inveigh against the evils of society as call the individual members of his own Society of Friends to resist the wrong in society with all the weight of their own way of life. "Oh, that we," he wrote, "who declare against wars, and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may walk in the Light, and therein examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates; may we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses, and the garments in which we array ourselves, and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these, our possessions or not . . ." (*A Plea for the Poor in The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia Mott Gummere [New York: Macmillan, 1922] p. 149).

He saw the seeds of war in slavery and in destitution, and in luxury and ambition. He saw the seeds of war in human depravity, but he also saw human depravity as a fruit of war and enslavement.

There is not much description in John Woolman's writing; he is apt to assume that conditions are well known to his readers and to criticize them by the religious view of life which was the measurement native to his mind, and which he assumed in others. But walking from London to York in 1772, he put down in his Journal notes about living conditions in the places he passed through.

On Enquiry in many places I find the price of Rie about 5s., wheat about 8s., per bushel, oatmeal 12s. for 120 pound, mutton from 3d. to 5d. per pound, bacon from 7d. to 9d. Cheese from 4d. to

6d., butter from 8d. to 10d., house rent for a poor man from 25s. to 40s. per year to be paid weekly, wood for fire very scarce and dear, Coal some places 2s.6d. per hundred weight, but near the pits, not a quarter so much. O may the wealthy consider the poor! The wages of labouring men in several Counties toward London, 10d. per day in common business, the employer finds small beer, and the labourer finds his own food; but in harvest and hay times, wages is about 1s. and the Labourer hath all his diet. In some parts of the North of England, poor labouring men have their food where they work; and appear in common to do rather better than nearer London. Industrious women who spin in the factories get some 4, some 5d, & so on 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 d. a day, and find their own house room & diet. Great numbers of poor people live chiefly on bread and water in the Southern parts of England, and some in the Northern parts, and there are many poor Children not even taught to Read. May those who have plenty lay these things to heart!

Gummere, pp. 305-306

Then he goes on to tell about stage coaches, their horses ruined with hard driving, their postboys riding long, cold stages "and at several places," he says, "I have often heard of their being froze to death. So great is the hurry in the Spirit of this world, that in aiming to do business quick, and to gain wealth, the Creation at this day doth loudly groan!" (ibid., p. 306)

Blake was never in his life more than fifty miles from London, and he saw the conditions, and the later aggravation of the conditions, that Woolman describes only as they were reflected in the London population into which many of the

most desperate people drifted. Not many years after Woolman wrote, Blake packed into what has been called “the mightiest short poem in our language” all the main points of his own dismay for humanity, as he saw it in the streets:

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every black’ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro’ midnight streets
I hear How the youthful Harlot’s curse
Blasts the new born Infant’s tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

“London,” from *Songs of Experience*

In these few lines we hear his cry against the monopoly of property by the rich (chartered street, chartered Thames); against the neglect and exploitation of the human mind and body; against the neglect and miseducation and abuse of children; against the drafting of youth for a nation’s fleets and armies; against the degeneration of sexual morality and family life behind the respectable front of a wealthy Church establishment.

Chattel slavery he did not see in London, as Woolman saw it in America, but he knew that England’s slave ships

plied profitably between Africa and America. In 1772, John Woolman ascertained that 100,000 Negroes were each year being stolen or bought in Africa and brought to America by English slave traders. But though Blake had no direct contact with chattel slavery, he raised his voice against slavery wherever he saw it: white enslaving Negro, man enslaving woman, woman enslaving man, the rich enslaving the poor, the powerful the weak, the violent the gentle, adults enslaving children, strong nations enslaving colonies, factories enslaving human flesh, property and finance enslaving life. Blake like Woolman raised his voice against all exchanges that are controlled by the authority of power and money.

Does not the great mouth laugh at a gift, & the
 narrow eyelids mock
 At the labour that is above payment? and wilt thou
 take the ape
 For thy councillor, or the dog for a schoolmaster to
 thy children?
 Does he who contemns poverty and he who turns
 with abhorrence
 From usury feel the same passion, or are they
 moved alike?
 How can the giver of gifts experience the delights
 of the merchant?
 How the industrious citizen the pains of the
 husbandman?
 How different far the fat fed hireling with hollow
 drum
 Who buys whole cornfields into wastes, and sings
 upon the heath!

Visions of the Daughters of Albion

IV

As far as I can see, Woolman's insight into oppressions was everywhere as keen as Blake's except in one point. We have no utterance of Woolman's on what Blake always called "the Sexual Strife," under which he included all the relations of men and women, economic, physical and emotional, whether in or out of legal marriage; the miseducation of girls and boys for adult relationships; and the conflict between parents and their progeny. Auden has said that the whole of Freud's teaching was adumbrated in Blake's central work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The concern with relations between the sexes and between the generations is so strong with Blake that people are usually surprised to learn that he evidently had a happy childhood, was married forty-five years to one beloved wife, Catherine, and had no children himself. But his own family happiness did not blind him to unhappiness about him, nor to hypocrisy and cant.

Perhaps John Woolman also had some experience of this area of conflict, but I think we have no indication of it unless in one short paragraph and that so irrelevant on the page where it occurs that it was omitted in all editions until Amelia Gummere's and is there enclosed in brackets. It is found in the chapter on "Merchandising" in the *Conversations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How It Is to Be Maintained*. "There is a tender Sympathy in my heart with Such, who by their Education and condition in Life, are under greater difficulties than some others, and I feel pure love, in which desires prevail for the health and Soundness of the family." (Gummere, p. 453) Perhaps, living as he did in a mainly Quaker community, in rural New Jersey, he really was not aware of this source of suffering which seems almost to be built into the human family under whatever laws and customs they live. But it is more likely

that he knew the problem but, having no answers to offer beyond the plea that people should order their entire lives on the basis of pure wisdom and its leading, would not try to make more specific recommendations.

Blake, however, insisted that more freedom and a complete change of attitude and education, the unbinding of some legal restrictions, and the cultivation of a joyous naturalness between the sexes would release men and women from “the sexual strife.” He believed that if persons understood themselves they would understand each other. And he was not afraid of shocking people. He would have liked to be listened to, but he was not listened to, so he said what he pleased with a certain recklessness.

John Woolman was listened to by the Society of Friends, even though not much heeded, and he spoke forth his radical thoughts with a sobriety and care for accuracy that are in sharp contrast to Blake’s fire and passion. Yet the passion is there under the stillness. Woolman “must have been the quietest radical in history,” says Fred Tolles in his introduction to *The Journal of John Woolman and A Plea for the Poor* (American Experience Series [New York: Corinth Books, 1961] p. vii). Yet he was radical. He went to the root and hung on there. For him, the root was “pure wisdom,” “the principle which is pure.”

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren, in the best sense of the expression. Using ourselves to take ways which appear most easy to us, when

inconsistent with that purity which is without beginning, we thereby set up a government of our own, and deny obedience to Him whose service is true liberty.

Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes,
Gummere, p. 380

V

Sometimes people are surprised to find that so deeply spiritual a man as Woolman was so concerned with economics. His Essays are almost entirely concerned with economics. I think it is evident that he was convinced that the spiritual life of men and women is deeply conditioned by their economic life. For Woolman, the means by which a man got his living, and the way he spent his money, and the ratio of his prosperity to the prosperity of his fellowmen, whether it was greater or less, were aspects of his religion. So he pleaded with the wealthy, but he also pleaded against envy and ambition whether in the successful or the unsuccessful. He believed in labor; probably Gandhi's idea of a minimal "bread labor" for each of us would have satisfied Woolman's principle. But it hurt him deeply to see the weak overworked or in want because they could not work, and the strong idle or living upon the labor of others. It hurt him to see the whole life of any person pre-empted by labor, whether this was by necessity in order to obtain a living or by choice in order to obtain opulence. He thought that with more leisure people would grow more.

Woolman's economics may seem to us unrealistic now; they seemed unrealistic to his contemporaries, too. He held that if people would be content to supply their basic needs by productive labor on the land, or by manufacture of things really useful; if they would not crave a surplus of necessities nor any superfluities—not desire to eat or wear "things

delicate or fetched from far" —; if they would not try to accumulate estates to hand on to their children, all human beings could have what they needed without anyone being oppressed or stunted, and slavery and wars would cease. He thought that if Friends would themselves keep to these lines of conduct, they could influence the national economies in which they lived and check the increasing trend toward government based on money and power.

When he went to England on that last journey he left behind him, in the hands of the clerk of the Meeting for Sufferings of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, an Epistle addressed to the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings of Friends. The Meeting directed that it be printed and it appeared about the same time that Woolman died at York the following October. The Epistle is a long, tender, careful contention about the prevailing ways of life among Friends; it is a plea to Friends to criticize themselves and the economy in which they lived, in the light of the pure wisdom of Christ.

He reminds them of the persecution and sufferings that had been gone through in the past, by early Christians and by early Friends, in process of obtaining the religious liberty they were now in the mid-eighteenth century enjoying.

As these things are often fresh in my mind, and this great work of God going on in the world has been open before me, that liberty of conscience with which we are favoured hath not appeared as a light matter.

A trust is committed to us, a great & weighty trust, to which our diligent attention is necessary. Wherever the active members of this visible gathered church use themselves to that which is against the purity of our principles, it appears to be a breach of this trust, and one step backwards toward the wilderness; one step towards undoing

what God, in Infinite Love, hath done through his faithful servants, in a work of several ages, and appears like laying the foundation for future sufferings.

I feel a living invitation in my mind to such who are active in our religious society, that we may lay to heart this matter, and consider the station in which we stand. We stand in a place of outward liberty, under the free exercise of our conscience towards God, not obtained but through great and manifold afflictions of those who lived before us. There is gratitude due from us to our heavenly Father. There is justice due to our posterity. Can our hearts endure, or our hands be strong if we desert a cause so precious; if we turn aside from a work under which so many have patiently laboured? . . .

While the active members in the visible gathered church stand upright, and the affairs thereof are carried on under the leadings of the Holy Spirit, altho' disorders may arise amongst us, and cause many exercises to such who feel the care of the churches upon them, yet while these continue under the weight of the work, and labour in the meekness of wisdom for the help of others, the name of Christ in the visible gathered church may be kept sacred, but while they who are active in the visible gathered church remain and continue in a manifest opposition to the purity of our principles, this, as the prophet Isaiah expresseth it, is like as when a standard-bearer fainteth. . . .

The necessity of an inward stillness hath under these exercises appeared clear to my mind. In true silence strength is renewed, the mind

herein is weaned from all things, but as they may be enjoyed in the Divine Will, and a lowliness in outward living, opposite to worldly honour, becomes truly acceptable to us. In the desire of outward gain, the mind is prevented from a perfect attention to the voice of Christ, but in the weaning of the mind from all things but as they may be enjoyed in the Divine will, the pure Light shines into the soul. . . .

When . . . seekers who are wearied with empty forms look towards uniting with us as a people, and behold active members among us in their customary way of living depart from that purity of life which under humbling exercises hath been opened before them as the way of the Lord's people, how mournful and discouraging is the prospect! and how strongly doth such unfaithfulness operate against the spreading of the peaceable, harmonious principle and testimony of Truth amongst mankind? . . . I have felt a labour of long continuance that we who profess this peaceable principle may be faithful standard-bearers under the prince of peace, and that nothing of a defiling nature tending to discord and wars may remain among us.

May each of us query with ourselves, have the treasures I possess been gathered in that wisdom which is from above as far as hath appeared to me? Have none of my fellow-creatures an equitable right to any part of that which is called mine? Have the gifts and possessions received by me from others been conveyed in a way free from all unrighteousness so far as I have seen? . . .

This condition where all our wants and desires are bounded by pure wisdom, and our minds wholly

attentive to the inward council of Christ, hath appeared to me as a habitation of safety for the Lord's people in time of outward commotion and trouble, and desires from the fountain of Love are opened in me to invite my brethren and fellow-creatures to feel for that which gathers the mind into it.

Gummere, p. 482 f.

VI

In England later that year, Woolman wrote four little essays which are his final writings. They are addressed to Friends in England as well as in his own country. They are the response of his heart to what he saw in London and in the towns that were in process of being industrialized, and to what he foresaw as happening in America. He saw it all against the background of the wealthy and respectable meeting in Devonshire House which he had attended the day he landed. The only comment of his own that has come to us about that occasion is a single sentence in his *Journal*: "In this meeting my mind was humbly contrite." But the scene has been reconstructed for us from various letters and minutes. John Greenleaf Whittier related it in a footnote to his edition of the *Journal* and gave William Allinson as his authority. We have a dramatic but maybe slightly fanciful version of it in Janet Whitney's *John Woolman*. The bare outline is this.

By his own account, John Woolman arrived half an hour late, coming directly from the wharf where he had landed from a 39-day voyage in the ship's steerage. He was conspicuous in his undyed clothing and natural-colored hat, and perhaps none of this garb can have been very fresh at the end of such a voyage. The London Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders, into which he walked and where he

laid his minute on the clerk's desk, was the most august assembly to be found in the Quakerdom of that day. Probably not every Friend there was wealthy, but certainly there were Barclays and Frys, Lloyds and Gurneys, and others from the great banking and manufacturing and merchant families. Dr. John Fothergill was there. He was one of the best-known physicians and scientists of his time, Franklin's friend, of whom his biographer says that he "essayed to stand with Franklin in the breach," as the tension tightened between England and her American colonies. His brother, Samuel Fothergill, who had been to America and knew John Woolman, was absent, being then on his death-bed. William Fry was Clerk and read the minute from American Friends, recommending John Woolman as "one in good esteem among us." Janet Whitney says it was Dr. Fothergill who, after a pause, rose and said that "perhaps the stranger Friend might feel that his dedication of himself to this apprehended service was accepted, without further labour, and that he might now feel free to return to his home" (quoted from Whittier's footnote, Gummere, p. 127).

The Meeting waited in silence while John Woolman struggled with his emotion over such an unheard-of rebuff. Then he rose and said that, although he could not feel himself released from the labor upon which he had come to England, yet he could not feel free to travel in the ministry without the consent of Friends, nor was he willing to be any expense to them. He mentioned that he had a trade, and that he hoped Friends would give him employment in it until the time when they might feel willing for him to carry out his concern. After this, there was a long silence, and at last (to borrow Woolman's own phrase from his early experience in the ministry) he felt "that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet through which the Lord speaks to his flock." He rose again and preached to the Meeting in the full authority of the inward commission

upon which he had left his home and crossed the ocean. The Friend who had suggested his returning home now confessed his error and expressed his full unity with the visitor. So John Woolman was "welcomed and owned" by the Meeting which had wished to reject him.

It is one of the clearest examples we have of how the judgment of the Meeting, which takes precedence over the judgment of an individual Friend, may be reversed by a deep, humble conviction of concern and faithfulness to it, on the part of the individual. The London Yearly Meeting that year passed a minute which was its first public utterance against the institution of slavery.

VII

There is nothing to call polemic in the four essays that Woolman wrote as he went north after the Yearly Meeting. They do not cite statistics, they do not argue, but they plead for examining everything in the light of pure wisdom. The first is *On Loving our Neighbors as Ourselves*.

When we love the Lord with all our Hearts,
and His creatures in His Love, we are then
preserved in Tenderness both toward Mankind and
the Animal Creation; but if another Spirit gets
Room in our Minds, and we follow it in our
Proceedings, we are then in the Way of disordering
the Affairs of Society.

People may have no Intention to oppress, yet
by entering on expensive Ways of Life, their Minds
may be so entangled therein, and so engag'd
to support expensive Customs, as to be estranged
from the pure sympathizing Spirit.

As I have travell'd in England, I have had a tender Feeling of the Condition of the poor People, some of whom though honest and industrious, have nothing to spare toward paying for the Schooling of their Children.

There is a Proportion between Labour and the Necessaries of Life, and, in true Brotherly Love, the Mind is open to feel after the Necessities of the Poor. . . .

Labour in the right Medium is healthy, but in too much of it there is painful Weariness; and the Hardships of the Poor are sometimes increased through Want of more agreeable Nourishment, more plentiful fuel for the Fire, and warmer Cloathing in the Winter than their Wages will answer.

When I have beheld Plenty in some Houses to a Degree of Luxury, the Condition of poor Children brought up without Learning, and the Condition of the Weakly and Aged, who strive to live by their Labour, have often revived in my Mind as Cases of which some who live in Fulness need to be put in Remembrance.

There are few, if any, who could behold their Fellow Creatures lie long in Distress and forbear to help them, when they could do it without any Inconvenience; but Customs requiring much Labour to support them do often lie heavy on the Poor, while they who live in these Customs are so entangled in a Multitude of unnecessary Concerns, that they think but little of the Hardships which the poor People go through.

If a Man successful in Business expends Part of his Income in Things of no real Use, while the

poor employ'd by him pass through great Difficulties in getting the Necessaries of Life, this requires his serious Attention. . . .

They of low Degree who have small Gifts enjoy their Help who have large Gifts; those with their small Gifts have a small degree of Care, while these with their large Gifts have a large degree of Care: and thus to abide in the Love of Christ, and enjoy a Comfortable Living in this World, is all that is aimed at by those Members in Society, to whom Christ is made *Wisdom* and *Righteousness*. . . .

Now to act with Integrity, according to that Strength of Mind and Body with which our Creator hath endowed each of us, appears necessary for all, and he who thus stands in the lowest Station in society, appears to be entitled to as comfortable and convenient a Living, as he whose Gifts of mind are greater, and whose Cares are more extensive. . . .

Riches in the Hands of Individuals in Society is attended with some degree of Power; and so far as Power is put forth separate from pure Love, so far the Government of the Prince of peace is interrupted; and as we know not that our Children after us will dwell in that State in which Power is rightly applied, to lay up Riches for them appears to be against the Nature of his Government.

The Earth, through the Labour of Men under the Blessing of Him who formed it, yieldeth a Supply for the Inhabitants from Generation to Generation, and they who walk in the pure Light, their Minds are prepared to taste and relish not only those Blessings which are Spiritual, but also

feel a Sweetness and Satisfaction in the right Use of the good Gifts in the visible Creation.

Here we see that Man's Happiness stands not in great Possessions, but in a Heart devoted to follow Christ, in that Use of Things, where Customs contrary to universal Love have no Power over us. . . .

Now this Subject requireth our serious Consideration: to labour that our Children may be put in a Way to live comfortably appears itself to be a Duty, so long as these our Labours are consistent with universal Righteousness: but if in striving to shun Poverty, we do not walk in that State where *Christ is our life*, then we wander. . . .

To keep to right Means in labouring to attain a right End is necessary. . . . people may grow expert in Business, wise in the Wisdom of this World, retain a fair Reputation among Men, and yet being Strangers to the Voice of Christ, . . . the Treasures thus gotten may be like Snares to the Feet of their Posterity. . . .

In the Obedience of Faith we die to the Narrowness of Selflove; and our Life being hid with Christ in God, our Hearts are enlarg'd toward Mankind universally, but in departing from the true Light of Life many, in striving to get Treasures have stumbled upon the dark Mountains.

Gummere, pp. 489-495 *passim*

I have quoted at length from these last messages of Woolman because they are not as readily available or as much read as his Journal. Yet the shaft of their meaning strikes through nearly two hundred years of changing conditions to the heart of much that still confounds us. We have indeed "stumbled upon the dark Mountains."

VIII

Three or four decades after Woolman's death, with the American Revolution and the French Revolution past, and England in the midst of recurrent war, with the Industrial Revolution proceeding apace, and the adjustments that were needed to preserve human values lagging behind, as they always do lag behind in eras of rapid change, and as they are lagging behind now in our own era of change, Blake was writing his great, and greatly obscure, prophetic poems. Few people were to read them until our own century when suddenly their relevance glares at us out of their cloudy rhetoric. In their vast expanses of wordage, Blake hid his keen indictment of the society of the early nineteenth century.

In 1791, he had printed his poem, "The French Revolution." Here he puts into the mouth of Orleans—"generous as mountains"—his own ideal hope for a just and free society.

Then Orleans spoke; all was silent.
 He breath'd on them and said: "O princes of fire,
 whose flames are for growth, not consuming,
 Fear not dreams, fear not visions, nor be you
 dismay'd with sorrows which flee at the
 morning!
 Can the fires of Nobility ever be quenche'd, or the
 stars by a stormy night?
 Is the body diseas'd when the members are
 healthful? can the man be bound in sorrow
 Whose ev'ry function is filled with its fiery desire? . . .
 And can Nobles be bound when the people are free,
 or God weep when his children are happy?"

But now, in the years before Waterloo, years of war, of famine, of riots, when Wordsworth had turned his back on

politics, and when Coleridge and Southey had grown reactionary, Blake was writing his immense poem called *The Four Zoas*. He was to leave it unfinished and in disordered manuscript, which was not even copied until this century. Much of its meaning is hidden (Blake said of himself at this time, "I am hid"); some of it can only be guessed at, but certain paragraphs break forth in blinding light.

Compell the poor to live upon a Crust of bread, by
 soft mild arts.
 Smile when they frown, frown when they smile;
 and when a man looks pale
 With labour and abstinence, say he looks healthy
 & happy;
 And when his children sicken, let them die; there
 are enough Born, even too many, & our Earth
 will be overrun
 Without these arts. If you would make the poor live
 with temperance,
 With pomp give every crust of bread you give; with
 gracious cunning
 Magnify small gifts; reduce the man to want a gift,
 & then give with pomp.
 Say he smiles if you hear him sigh. If pale, say he
 is ruddy.
 Preach temperance: say he is overgorg'd and drowns
 his wit
 In strong drink, tho' you know that bread & water
 are all
 He can afford. Flatter his wife, pity his children,
 till we can
 Reduce all to our will, as spaniels are taught
 with art.

The Four Zoas, VII a

The reason that such passages of Blake and much of John Woolman's admonition still bites to the bone is that what they foresaw has come true. Men have come under the dominion of their own greed and their own machines. The machines may destroy us but we have lost, in our greed, the knack of refusing to co-operate in our own destruction.

There are many parallels between their period and ours. Within Blake's lifetime, there were two revolutions; in our time, how many revolutions? And two World Wars. In his lifetime manufacture was completely revolutionized by machinery, in ours by automation. In his lifetime, rural life was devastated by the Enclosure Acts and by factory production; in ours, the family farm which was a way of life as well as a means of livelihood has all but disappeared and a roving and impoverished class of workers mans the "factories in the fields." In Blake's time, the growth of trade had begun to menace international relations; in our time it has all but determined them. And in both periods human life and the human-ness of life have been forfeit. Most of all have these been forfeit since the invention of the utmost in machines, the atomic bomb.

Blake described all this in his myth:

Then left the sons of Urizen the plow and
 harrow, the loom,
 The hammer & the chisel & the rule &
 compasses.
 They forg'd the sword, the chariot of war, the
 battle ax,
 The trumpet fitted to the battle & the flute of
 summer,
 And all the arts of life they chang'd into the
 arts of death.
 The hour glass contemn'd because its simple
 workmanship

Was as the workmanship of the plowman, & the
water wheel
That raises water into Cisterns, broken and
burn'd in fire
Because its workmanship was like the work-
manship of the shepherd,
And in their stead intricate wheels invented,
Wheel without wheel,
To perplex youth in their outgoings and to bind
to labours
Of day & night the myriads of Eternity, that they
might file
And polish brass & iron hour after hour,
laborious workmanship,
Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend
the days of wisdom
In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty
pittance of bread,
In ignorance to view a small portion and think
that All,
And call it demonstration, blind to all the simple
rules of life.

The Four Zoas, VII b

For some men the “pittance of bread” is no longer so scanty. In our country, we have relieved the majority of hard, brutalizing drudgery, but we have tied ourselves hand and foot to the machines that relieved us. Meanwhile, we no longer have a place in society for those who are capable only of physical labor, and very little place for those who by choice are artisans. Persons with physical endurance or with skills were the backbone of society for hundreds of years; now we do not need them. We got rid, in England and America, of widespread poverty; when we have riots they are not bread riots now; but destitution is still destitution,

and perhaps even bitterer, when a visible majority of one's fellows are in affluence. One third of the people of the most affluent nation in the world today belong to an "other America," that is rejected into functionless neglect and lives at the verge of want. One half the world goes hungry. Color of skin still affects the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And nothing but fear of the weapons we have made keeps the proliferating sovereign nations from each other's throats.

Mark Schorer says that, for Blake, "Man in a factory was a slave in precisely the sense that man was a slave in the Newtonian universe." He symbolized the tyranny of rationalist philosophy "by creatures caught within wheels, by slaves grinding at the mill. War, which [afterwards] was to become the greatest industrial operation of all, was inhuman in exactly the same way. . . [Blake's] proverb 'Bring out number, weight, and measure in a year of dearth' . . . points in many directions, but for Blake all these directions pointed, back to the single fact: the substitution of mechanical for living values" (*William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, [New York: Henry Holt Co. Inc., 1946] p. 173-4).

"Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field," cried Blake, paraphrasing the Declaration of Independence in his poem, *America*. He repeated the same lines at the end of *The Four Zoas*, in his vision of a redeemed society.

Let the slave, grinding at the mill, run out into
the field;
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the
bright air.
Let the chained soul, shut up in darkness and
in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty
weary years,

Rise and look out: his chains are loose, his dungeon
 doors are open;
 And let his wife and children return from the
 oppressor's scourge.
 They look behind at every step & believe it is
 a dream.
 Are these the slaves that groan'd along the streets
 of Mystery?
 Where are your bonds and taskmasters? are these
 the prisoners?
 Where are your chains? where are your tears? why
 do you look around?
 If you are thirsty, there is the river: go, bathe your
 parched limbs,
 The good of all the land is before you, for Mystery is
 no more."

The Four Zoas, IX

"Attempting to be more than Man We become less," Blake makes one of his immortals say at the great final feast. Again and again, Woolman called on Friends to put themselves into the place of those who are oppressed, into the place of those who are being made less than men in order that Man may attempt to be more than Man; he pointed first to the slaves, but he pointed also to the other poor, even those poor who prey upon the even poorer. During the Journey he made to the Indians at Wyalusing, he was much burdened by the wrong done to Indians by white settlers who sold them rum and cheated them by taking their land for little or no payment. He wrote hotly in his *Journal*: "... it is an evil which demands the care of all true lovers of virtue to suppress." But then quickly he reminded himself of the conditions of the white settlers themselves. "... the people on the frontiers among whom this evil is too common, are often poor; and . . . they venture to the outside

of a colony in order to live more independently of the wealthy, who often set high rents on their land" (*Journal*, American Experience Series Edition, p. 139).

I often think we might bear this passage in mind when we swell with righteous wrath against the white southerner, forgetting that the wealth of the South was for decades after the Civil War piped out into northern pockets, and that it is only to be expected that whoever is made to feel small and inferior will invariably turn his resentment against anyone else whom he in turn can make feel small and inferior. When Woolman saw the Indians cheated by poor settlers, he knew that he must look straight back to wealthy Philadelphia, and once again address himself to his own people, the Society of Friends. For their share in the wrong, he as a member of the Society made himself partly responsible.

Blake uttered, in the tremendous lament of Enion, the cry of all suffering life.

Why does the Raven cry aloud and no eye
pities her?
Why fall the Sparrow and the Robin in the
foodless winter?
Faint, shivering, they sit on leafless bush or
frozen stone
Wearied and seeking food across the snowy waste,
the little
Heart cold, and the little tongue consum'd, that
once in thoughtless joy
Gave songs of gratitude to waving cornfields round
their nest."

The Four Zoas, I

This is the existential cry out of the suffering that is inherent in life. Woolman and Blake saw that it is for man, with his God-given grace of insight, with "Mercy, Pity, Peace,

and Love," to mitigate this suffering where he can, and never to increase it wilfully. Wherever a man is oppressed by other men, his misery accuses every man who prospers in the oppressive society, accuses even the most benevolent of the prosperous.

X

Blake's mind was much more complex than Woolman's, for all the similarity of their prophetic insight. We do his complexity less than justice by considering him only from the point of view at which his thought touches Woolman's; yet his insight at this one point does not go as deep as Woolman's. His complexity, along with the fact that he found no audience, drove Blake into obscurity and prolixity. Much of what he wrote seems dross, clouding up the clear stream that flows in his best work, whereas every line of Woolman is as limpid as distilled water. Blake had not undergone the intense inner simplification that pure wisdom, the principle which is pure, had early wrought in Woolman's character. He saw indeed "the Divine Image" in every man, "that of God in every man":

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

"The Divine Image," from *Songs of Innocence*

But instead of tenderness toward even the deformed and distorted image, as we feel it in Woolman, the vision of man's divine possibility wrought in Blake a rage against the forces that deform it. His *Songs of Innocence* and some other early poems breathe a perfection of simplicity that matches Woolman's *Journal*. They are among the purest lyrics in the language, as Woolman's is some of the purest

prose. But Blake's spirit had to be smelted in a furnace of revolt and anger. To the *Songs of Experience* he added, though he never published it, this terrible poem which he called "A Divine Image." As a minor mercy, he put the indefinite article to this title.

Cruelty has a Human Heart,
 And Jealousy a Human Face;
 Terror the Human Form Divine,
 And Secrecy the Human Dress.

The Human Dress is forged Iron,
 The Human Form a fiery Forge,
 The Human Face a Furnace seal'd,
 The Human Heart, its hungry Gorge.

Once he had seen this second Divine Image, it took him years to work back to the first. Nevertheless the forces of simplification were ever at work in his profound spirit.

All his life Blake was poor and his best work was scorned. It was not in the current fashion. He earned his living by painstakingly engraving the designs of artists now mostly forgotten, and by illustrating books valued now only because they contain Blake's designs. But he kept time free for his own graphic art and for his poetry even though he could not sell the pictures or publish the poetry. It is recorded that once when he was refused by a publisher to whom he applied, he turned away quietly, saying: "Well, it is published elsewhere, and beautifully bound." He had found access to an "elsewhere," in which his spirit was at home. But in his last years, a group of young artists gathered around him, buying enough of his pictures to keep him and Catherine in food and firing. One of them, Samuel Palmer, has left us a description of the two rooms in London which were the Blakes' household and workshop in their

old age. “. . . whatever was in Blake’s house,” he writes, “there was no squalor. Himself, his wife, and his rooms were clean and orderly; everything was in its place. His delightful working corner had its implements ready—tempting to the hand” (in Alexander Gilchrist’s *Life of William Blake* [London: 1863] p. 324). “He ennobled poverty by his conversation,” says the same writer, “and the influence of his genius made two small rooms in Fountain Court more attractive than the threshold of princes.” (*ibid.*, p. 322)

Blake’s poverty, even though he ennobled it, was not his choice except by his refusal to cater to popular taste. John Woolman’s poverty was the expression of a conviction, but he too ennobled it. We like to think that we have something of a replica of his house in the John Woolman Memorial House at Mount Holly, New Jersey. We have a verbal picture of his home written by Samuel Neale, an Irish Quaker who visited New Jersey in 1771. “[John Woolman’s] concern,” wrote Neale, “is to lead a life of self-denial: pomp and splendour he avoids; does not choose to use silver or useless vessels that savour of the pomp of this world. His house is very plain, his living also; yet he enjoys plenty of the good things that are necessary to Christian accommodation; we dined with him and were kindly entertained” (Gummere, p. 118).

Blake knew the rejection of the best he had to offer, as John Woolman also had known it that day in 1772 when the Meeting of Ministers and Elders wished to send him home unheard. Like Woolman, Blake had learned to look over the world’s response and to rely on that which he knew in himself to be eternal.

Near the end of his myth, *Jerusalem*, he makes his Albion (who is Man) awake from a long nightmare of separation:

... he moved upon the Rock.
The Breath Divine went forth upon the morning
hills. Albion moved Upon the Rock
Then Jesus appeared standing by Albion as the Good
Shepherd
By the lost sheep that he hath found, & Albion knew
that it
Was the Lord, the Universal Humanity; & Albion
saw his Form
A Man, & they conversed as Man with Man in Ages
of Eternity.

...
Albion said: "O Lord, what can I do? my Self-
hood cruel
Marches against thee, deceitful. . .

... to meet thee in his pride."
Jesus replied: "Fear not, Albion: unless I die thou
canst not live;
But if I die I shall arise again & thou with me.
This is Friendship and Brotherhood: without it Man
is not.

...
... Thus do Men in Eternity
One for another to put off, by forgiveness, every sin."
Albion reply'd: "Cannot Man exist without
Mysterious
Offering of Self for Another? Is this friendship &
Brotherhood?"

...
Jesus said: "Wouldst thou love one who had
never died
For thee, or ever die for one who had not died
for thee?
And if God dieth not for Man & giveth not himself

Eternally for Man, Man could not exist; for Man
is Love
As God is Love: every kindness to another is a
little Death
In the Divine Image, nor can Man exist but by
Brotherhood.”

Jerusalem, 95 & 96 passim

XI

Beside this dream and awakening of Blake's Albion, I want to set John Woolman's well-known but priceless account of a dream and awakening of his, which he wrote down when he was at Preston Patrick in Westmorland County. It was one of the last entries in his Journal, although it had happened during severe illness more than two years earlier.

. . . I was brought so near the gates of death, that I forgot my name. Being then desirous to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy colour, . . . and was informed that this mass was human beings, in as great misery as they could be, and live, and that I was mixed in with them, and that henceforth I might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being. I then heard a soft melodious voice . . . and I believed it was the voice of an angel who spake to the other angels. The words were *John Woolman is dead*. I soon remembered that I was once John Woolman, and being assured that I was alive in the body, I greatly wondered what that heavenly voice could mean. . . . it was a mystery to me.

I was then carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and heard

them blaspheme the name of Christ, at which I was grieved for his Name to me was precious.

Then I was informed that these heathen were told that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ; and they said among themselves, If Christ directed them to use us in this sort then Christ is a cruel tyrant.

All this time the song of the angel remained a Mystery, and in the morning I was [not] disposed to talk much to anyone; but was very desirous to get so deep that I might understand this Mystery.

My tongue was often so dry that I could not speak till I had moved it about and gathered some moisture, and as I lay still for a time, at length I felt divine power prepare my mouth that I could speak, and then I said, 'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ that liveth in me, and the life I now live in the flesh is by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.'

Then the Mystery was opened and I perceived there was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented, and that that language, *John Woolman is dead*, meant no more than the death of my own will. (Gummere, p. 308-9).

George Fox once referred to "that which binds and chains and gives to see over the world." Woolman and Blake had both submitted to a binding and chaining in tasks laid on them not by their own choice, and in submission to the task they each found freedom. A modern poet has said: "Freedom, I see, is the final task of servitude" (Charles Williams, "The Queen's Servant," in *Taliessin Through Logres*).