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Queer Bedfellows: William Blake and Derek Jarman

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‘All revolutionaries are in many ways traditional ...’

(Blunt, 10)

The association of Derek Jarman with the work and legacy of William Blake has been frequently noted in both scholarship and popular commentary. More often than not, such commentary takes the form of brief critical observation or poetic meditation on the affinities connecting Jarman with Blake. However, it is not the goal of this chapter to furnish the complete catalogue of Blake/Jarman references and citations in print. Rather, my aims are critically to explore a range of the latter perspectives and to elaborate a fuller, more detailed analysis of the ways in which Jarman appropriates Blake as an artist and radical, located in a tradition of cultural dissent.

Critical insight into characteristic modes of popular and scholarly discourses linking Jarman and Blake is facilitated by sample commentaries from Roger Cook, John Roberts, Gray Watson and Tilda Swinton. First, following Jarman’s death from AIDS in February 1994, Cook’s eulogy, published in the obituary pages of *Art Monthly*, evoked Blake’s engraving *Glad Day* as a symbol for the deceased artist, filmmaker and gay activist:

When I think of Derek I think of William Blake’s fiery youthful giant Albion, incandescent with energy as represented in Blake’s engraving known as *Glad Day* or *The Dance of Albion*. Like Blake, he identified the ecstasy of human sexuality with freedom and protested its bondage. It was this that made him so passionate and open.

(Cook, 34)
Similarly, Roberts’ interpretation of the visionary themes of Jarman’s GBH painting series exhibited in 1984 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, identified their source in Blake’s mythic iconography and visual composition. For Roberts the dark tones and apocalyptic mood of the canvasses, their ‘passionate indignation’, resembles ‘in spirit ... Blake’s images of Urizen or John Martin’s visions of hell bursting the banks of the living’ (Roberts, 38). This comparative judgement is followed by an apposite passage from Blake’s prophetic book America:

Over the hills, the vales, the cities, rage the red flames fierce;
The Heavens melted from north to south; and Urizen, who sat
Above all heavens, in thunders wrap’d, emerg’d his leprous head

(16.1–3, E 57)

Roberts’ contextual interpretation of the GBH paintings is suggestive rather than sustained, but is not different in tenor from the more developed argument proffered by Gray Watson in a perceptive contribution to the book that accompanied the posthumous retrospective exhibition Derek Jarman: A Portrait at the Barbican Gallery, London (1996). Watson observed:

Perhaps the feature of Blake’s vision which was most crucial for Jarman, and was in fact a key to much of his work, was the personification of England as the giant Albion, the original (androgynous) Cosmic Man, an image of perfection and completeness, who is fallen (broken) and must be redeemed (re-membered). Albion, in his fallen state, was the subject of the 1984 painting series ‘GBH’, as well as of the films Jubilee, The Last of England and Imagining October.

(Watson, 44)

More recently, in August 2002, Tilda Swinton (Jarman intimate and film collaborator) evoked the Jarman/Blake affinity before an audience at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. Swinton revealed that what she ‘treasured’ about Jarman’s film work was its critical relationship to corporate aesthetics, that it offered a physic to the malady of generic British film production, an ‘antidote ... to the mirrorball of the marketable’. She affirms that what she values about his exploration of the ‘raw and dusty and inarticulate’ is the recovery of things hidden or lost, such as when we find ‘that loose corner where we might prise up