The Genitals are Beauty, An Exhibition

Keri Davies

A universal ethics of obligation may actually promote fair play for “alterity” by insisting that everyone, no matter how “other,” is on the same moral footing. Blake's contemporary, the novelist Elizabeth Hamilton, made this point when she had one of her characters remark that Jesus was the first philosopher who taught respect for women, because he preached a truly universal ethic, one that decreed no special moral rules for women:

Women, we learn from the gospels, frequently composed a great part of his audience: but to them no particular precepts were addressed, no sexual virtues recommended.... His morality was addressed to the judgment without distinction of sex. His laws went not to fix the boundaries of prerogative, and to prescribe the minutiae of behavior, but to fix purity and humility in the heart.4

Blake's Christianity may not have prompted him to worry very much about other people's "unabsorbable, indigestible residue"; but neither did it prompt him to prescribe the minutiae of their behavior. He thought that the commandment to love and forgive other people implied a commandment to let them be free: “Jerusalem is called Liberty among the Children of Albion” (Jerusalem 54.5, E 203). Liberty was grounded on moral principles that could be recommended to everyone.

The complexities of this kind of Christianity are not quite captured by Moskal’s reference to Blake’s Jesus as “an alternative way of looking at the moral life from the grid of obligations and duties used by promulgators of universal laws” (32). Still less helpful is Moskal’s characterization, derived from Stanley Hauerwas, of ethics as it is ordinarily understood: “in its emphasis on duty and obligation as they pertain to all individuals interchangeably, the standard account [of ethics] alienates each individual from his plans, metaphors, and stories” (2).

Moskal tends to measure Blake’s success as an ethicist by his (imperfect) success in forming ethical conceptions that escape the terms of the “standard account.” But her idea of the “standard account” is needlessly reductive. The notion that people are morally obligated, for instance, to love their neighbors as themselves doesn’t imply that they have to alienate themselves from their own plans, metaphors, and stories; it doesn’t even imply that they have to like their neighbors. (Indeed, one’s sense of the neighbors’ otherness will probably be sharpened considerably by one’s sense of an obligation to forgive them.) Every great system of belief associates its ethic of obligation with a rich variety of metaphors, stories, and plans of life. This richness is surely one of the reasons for Blake’s attraction to Christianity and for his ability to adapt its ethical narratives and metaphors to his own literary and intellectual plans.

It is regrettable that Moskal brings current intellectual assumptions to bear on Blake without subjecting them to the kind of criticism to which she subjects his own ideas. In this respect, however, she is by no means unusual; few contemporary critics interrogate their framework assumptions as skeptically as they interrogate their primary texts. Moskal’s subject, however, is of unusual interest, and what she says about it is also of unusual interest, both for its own sake and for its ability to provoke debate.


Reviewed by Keri Davies

“The Genitals are Beauty” is the second exhibition organized by Tim Heath at the House of William Blake. In July and August 1994, three floors of 17 South Molton Street were taken over by “An Interior for William Blake,” a mixed show of artworks and craft pieces, some on a substantial scale, exploring the themes of Innocence and Experience in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Songs. Monday-Friday, 6-17 February 1995, the House of William Blake staged a second show, on a more intimate scale and confined to one room of the former Blake residence (and the only survivor of his London homes). Tim Heath had invited a number of artists and craftspeople to respond to the line from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: “The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands & feet Proportion” (F. 37).

The genitals, in art as in life, can still be a source of consternation and anxiety. Not all the artists who took part in the first show were willing to work to the new brief. In the event, 41 artists and craftspeople provided paintings, drawings, ceramics, jewelry, photographs and sculptures on the theme of the human sexual organs.

The history of genital display in English art is a history of concealment and suppression. Blake’s erotic drawings in the V&A manuscript were mutilated (perhaps by John Linnell), while Turner’s were burned with the agreement of the National Gallery.1 There are, however, two notable early examples of upfront sexuality in the history of English art: the Cerne Giant (an ithyphallic figure, possibly of Hercules, cut

1 Not by John Ruskin, as is sometimes claimed. Turner’s erotic drawings were left to the nation. Ruskin couldn’t possibly have been allowed to destroy state property—it was a government employee, the National Gallery curator Ralph Nicholson Wornum, that struck the match. See Tim Hilton, John Ruskin: The Early Years (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 250.

into the chalk hillsides in Roman or pre-Roman times above
the Dorset village of Cerne Abbas and the sheela-na-gig (c.
1135) that boldly confronts the visitor to the church of St.
Mary and St. David at Kilpeck (Herefordshire) with her
ostensive vulva.

Some of the artists displaying work in “The Genitals are
Beauty” were clearly working in the tradition of the Cerne
Giant and the sheela-na-gig, a tradition that is always con-
frontational and sometimes comic. Thus the self-portrait
“Do I make myself clear?” from Sheila Brannigan was a pho-
tographic print which asked us to consider if portraiture
can be genital. Equally confrontational were drawings of
the female pudenda by Bryan Smith (“A Dangler’s Delight”) and
Sheena Vallely; while Frances Vallaydon-Pillay contributed
a lovely painting (“He’s so beautiful”) of an erect penis sur-
rounded by flowers.

Daniel Lehan’s papier mâché “Hermaphrodite holding
Serpent Aloft,” with a gold phallus and red breasts, had just
the right tender clumsiness. I enjoyed Juliette Gatto’s “Aliens
took my Genitalia”—a flying merkin made of papier maché
and wire. And Anne Hardy’s fabric sculptures of wobbly-
floppy penises were irresistibly joyful and comic. The spirit
of punk (always sexually confrontational) lived on in James
Anderson’s lurid T-shirt “Nudity Costume,” as it did in jew-
elers Spencer Smargiassi’s silver and garnet “Giving Head
Tiara.” Jo Saunders’s “Snatch & Sports Bag” offered one of
the most imaginative interpretations of the brief: PVC and
fake-fur mini rucksacks representing the vagina, and all-pur-
pose denim sportsbags denoting the penis.

Blake’s contemporary Richard Payne Knight, in his study
of phallic worship, wrote that, in antiquity, “The Female Or-
gans of Generation were revered as symbols of the gener-
ative powers of Nature, or matter, as the male were of the
generative powers of God.” This “sex-as-mysticism” line has
had its twentieth-century adherents, most notably Eric Gill.
Throughout his life Gill obsessively drew his own and his
friends’ genitals. Similarly, the wood-sculptor David Gil-
bert carves each year a “Spring Phallus.” They are beauti-
fully crafted, but too self-consciously heroic for my taste.

But it’s the makers of pots, vessels, and containers that
find it all too easy to go for alchemical imagery—to turn
every cunt into an alembic, as it were. Alison Wolfe-Patrick
contributed some beautiful ceramics that nevertheless
seemed to me to fall into that trap. But I very much admired
Adeasi Uka’iro’s copper vessel entitled “Oriaku.” Here the
alchemical imagery didn’t seem at all forced.

In the search for ever more recondite sources for Blake’s
art, it can be forgotten that sometimes he speaks directly
and simply from the heart, saying what he thinks and mean-
ing what he says. Amongst those works which seemed to me
to achieve just that directness and simplicity were water col-
ors by Claudia Böse (“A Touch of Sweetness in my Heart”)
and Alan Young (“Joys Impregnate, Sorrows Bring Forth”),
a suite of woodcuts (“The Genitals are Beauty”) by Paul Pe-
ter Piech, and the delightful wooden toys of Peter Markey.

“The Genitals are Beauty” thus tied together a roomful of
genitals with some of the kitschy inheritance of St. Valentine’s
Day. Instead of a catalogue, the exhibiting artists also con-
tributed self-Portraits of their genitals for an accompanying
book.

The exhibition is part of a project to secure all five floors
of 17 South Molton Street as a memorial to William Blake.
With a foothold on the first floor, the House of William Blake
is working toward a property buyout as an advertising and
to grow up to be a centre for the dissenting imagination in
honour of Blake’s enquiring yet awkward spirit.”

1 Richard Payne Knight, An Account of the remains of the worship of
Priapus, lately existing at Isernia in the kingdom of Naples, in two letters,
one from Sir William Hamilton ... to Sir Joseph Banks... and the others
from a person residing at Isernia: to which is added, A Discourse on the
worship of Priapus, and its connexion with the mystic theology of the
Ancients, by R. P. Knight (London: T. Spilsbury, 1786) 47.