

Blake and the diversity of influences over his poetry

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Abstract

William Blake's poetry falls into three main categories. First, there are the lyrics, of which the most important ones are the Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. In this category we find the earlier poems included in the Poetical Sketches (1769-78), many of which are indeed experiments in which Blake partially imitates earlier writers such as Shakespeare and others. Some manuscripts can be included in the first category, such as 'Pickering Manuscript', 'The Mental Traveller', 'The Crystal Cabinet', which are essential to understand Blake's developing mythology.

In the second category or group of poems we have the short prophecies which include: "Tiriell" (1789), "The Book of Thel" (1789), "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790-1793), "The Visions of the Daughters of Albion" (1793), "America" (1793), "The Book of Urizen" (1794), etc., which build up a mythology created by Blake in regard to the creation of the world and the nature of God. These "short prophecy" books should be read in conjunction with the historical events and the background of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth century. Therefore, they are very complex works, which need to be read at mythological, historical and psychological levels and above all as works of art in their own right.

In the third category or group of poems we have the long prophecies that include "The Four Zoas" (1795-1804), "Milton" (1804-1808) and "Jerusalem". Writing them in epic form, Blake strove to provide an account of the human history from its beginnings to his day.

William Blake was widely influenced by the Swedish visionary and religious thinker, Emanuel Swedenborg, by the German mystic Jakob Böhme, as well as the esoteric doctrine of Rosicrucianism¹, which had had its adherents in England since Robert Fludd. Blake was influenced by mystical and magical ideas, and since Blake was himself a visionary, his ideas often times came in the form of clearly visualized encounters with angels, prophets or other symbolic characters. Blake's poems and prophetic books, except for his first volume of poems, Poetical Sketches, were etched by himself on copper plates with decorative designs. He was an engraver by profession, and his work as a poet and prophet was little known during his lifetime.²

Keywords: William Blake, diversity, poetry.

Introduction

Speaking of the impact that Swedenborg had on Blake, W.B. Yeats in his Introduction to *The Collected Poems of William Blake* maintained that it must never be forgotten that whatever Blake borrowed from Swedenborg or Böhme, from mystic or

¹ Carl Edwin Lindgren maintains that "Rosicrucianism is a philosophical secret society which holds a doctrine or "built on esoteric truths of the ancient past", which, "concealed from the average man, provide insight into nature, the physical universe and the spiritual realm" -, *Journal of Religion and Psychical Research*, Volume 18, Number 3:141-48, 1995.

² Daiches, David, *A Critical History of English Literature: The Romantics to Present Day*, London Secker and Warburg, 1968, p. 862.

Kabalist sources, he turned to his own purposes, and transferred into a new system, growing like a flower from its own roots, supplementing in many ways, though not controverting in any main matters, the systems of his great predecessors, and that he stands among the mystics of Europe beside Jacob Boehme and the makers of the Kabala, as original as they are and as profound.³

Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794), in Blake's time, as now, his most accessible poems, drew praise from some of his greatest contemporaries. Coleridge called him "a man of Genius", exclaiming, in a letter of 6 February 1818, "verily I am in the very mire of commonplace common-sense compared with Mr Blake, apocalyptic or rather anacalyptic⁴ Poet, and Painter!" Wordsworth, according to Crabb Robinson's "Reminiscence" (1852), declared that "there was something in the madness of this man which interested him more than the Sanity of Lord Byron & Walter Scott!" Yet, Blake's poetry attracted little public notice in his lifetime⁵.

William Blake lived during a very critical period of Western history. A major event in Blake's time was the American Revolution, which occurred in 1776, paving the way for the American Independence and bringing an end to British rule over America. The impact of this revolution in his artistic work is widely reflected in his longer prophetic poem *America*. Further, the French Revolution was widely welcomed in the artisan circles, including Blake, who wrote a long poem entitled *The French Revolution*, which was intended as a poetic history of this current event in Blake's life and was supposed to be an account of Blake's understanding of the events, which are described in seven books of the poetry first published in 1791. Although Blake was not part of any radical political organizations in England at the time of the French Revolution, his works suggest a connection to revolutionary thought and the poem serves as his contribution to the debate over the merits of the French Revolution⁶. Lisa Crafton maintains that this poem should be viewed in both its historical and cultural context and within the framework of Blake's own myth-making, a nexus of meaning that offers full appreciation of the poem.⁷

According to David Daiches, "the French Revolution – or at least the idea of the French Revolution, and the mystique associated with it, was for a brief period one of the great stimulating forces on the English literary imagination. Without its impact neither Blake nor Wordsworth would have been the poets they were"⁸.

³ Yeats, W.B., *William Blake Collected Poems*, Routledge Classics, London and New York, 2002, p. xxxi

⁴ "Anacalyptic" turns out to be a highly suggestive term for thinking about Blake; it suggests both a sense of the apocalyptic and an understanding of the Old Testament as a prefiguration of the New Testament (e-source: http://www.friendsocoleridge.com/membersonly/Baulch_ColBlake.html).

⁵ Natarajan, Uttara, *The Romantic Poets, A Guide to Criticism*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 4.

⁶ Crafton, Lisa Plummer, *The French Revolution Debate in English Literature and Culture*, pp. 41 – 43.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Daiches, David, *A Critical History of English Literature: The Romantics to Present Day*, London Secker and Warburg, 1968, p. 875.

It was the Industrial Revolution that brought a change to new industrial practices in the period from about 1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840. This change included going from hand production methods to machines, new chemical manufacturing and iron production processes, which improved efficiency in all aspects. It also included the change from wood and other bio-fuels to coal. It began in Great Britain and within a few decades spread to Western Europe and the United States. The Industrial Revolution marks a major turning point in history. Almost every aspect of daily life was influenced by it in some way. Nevertheless, and despite all the glory that came with it, certain social classes were badly affected by this great change, such as being economically exploited. Certain individuals from these social classes protested against this revolution among whom also two poets, William Blake and later Thomas Hardy, that used their poetic talents to craft poems that protested the effects of the Industrial Revolution in England. Much of his protest is felt in the poem "Chimney Sweeper", where Blake challenges the involvement of small children in such hard physical labour as well as the dark background of child labour that was prominent in England in the late 18th and early 19th century, attacking directly the state government and the church, as two main institutions which failed to protect the rights of children. Hence, in paradoxical language Blake writes:

*A little black thing among the snow,
Crying "weep! 'weep!' in notes of woe!
'Where are thy father and mother? Say!'--
'They are both gone up to the church to pray.'*⁹

William Blake lived and produced his literary work between the 18th and 19th centuries. His paintings and poetry had appeared long before the date of the publication of *The Lyrical Ballads*, 1798, which is taken as the date of the beginning of the Romantic Movement. Therefore, his literary work has been characterised as "Pre-Romantic", as it falls between two major Literary Movements, the Neo-Classical Period and the Romantic Period. Pre-Romanticism is said to include James Thomson, William Collins, Thomas Gray, William Cowper, Christopher Smart and Oliver Goldsmith. These poets show a quasi-romantic sensitivity to nature, plus an interest in interiority and extreme emotions. Additionally, almost all of them suffered from mental breakdowns in one way or another. Therefore, "they fit the popular association between madness, inspiration and Romantic genius"¹⁰.

The Romantic Period followed the Age of Sensibility and the Augustan Literature, which were both part of the Neo-Classical Period (1660–1798), with Alexander Pope being one of the representatives of this age, who is best known for his satirical verse and famous for his use of the heroic couplet.¹¹ The poetry from Alexander Pope's death in 1744 to the early publications of the first generation of the Romantic poets in the 1790s is defined as the "post-Augustinian" period, but more often as the "pre-Romantic". Northrop Frye in an essay published in 1956 suggested calling this period "the Age of Sensibility", rather than defining it as "as a period of reaction against

⁹ Blake, William, *The Chimney Sweeper, Songs of Experience, Stanza I.*

¹⁰ Quinn, Vincent, *Pre-Romantic Poetry*, Northcote House Publishers, Ltd, 2012, p. 3.

¹¹ A heroic couplet is a traditional form for poetry commonly used in English literature.

Pope and anticipation of Wordsworth”¹².

The Romantic Period, though a short period, is as complex and diverse as any other period in British literary history. Most of the literary scholars have grouped five poets as the representatives of this period, the well-known Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, adding Blake later to the group. Their work has been regarded as the foundation of a unified Romanticism.

Romanticism is the name given to a variety of thought, writing and general artistic world-view that became dominant in Europe from the later eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. Some date its beginnings in England from the French Revolution of 1789 and the radical poetry published by William Blake between 1789 and 1795, others to the publication in 1798 of the *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but its origins are probably earlier. Certainly the concept of the “Romantick” is found already in the 1730s. Its ending is generally considered to be some time in the 1830s, with the political changes created by the extension of the right to vote in 1832, or the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837. The Romantic novel, perhaps because of developments in printing and distribution of the form, flourished somewhat later, arguably beginning with Jane Austen’s release of “Sense and Sensibility” in 1811, and ending with the Brontës around 1850. However, both the start and the end of the period generally considered “Romantic”, as well as its major constituent features, are subject to debate. The relation between the natural world and the beholder, with the consequent states of feeling that are aroused and reflected, is a central element of British Romanticism, but it is not the only one, nor is it always independent of other strong features. Political elements are featured quite prominently in much Romantic writing, growing from a sense of the injustice of eighteenth-century political and social structures. Also during this period runs a rejection of formal religion, often finding expression in recourse to earlier forms of belief, such as classical or pagan myth. Often these ideals come together, as for example in the interest in traditional forms and legends, and the use of ballad forms that recount traditional stories that contain ideas of social, political or emotional freedom.¹³

Writers working in the period 1785–1830 did not think of themselves as “Romantic” - the word was not applied until half a century later, by English historians. Contemporary reviewers treated them as *independent individuals*.¹⁴ The imagination of many Romantic period writers was preoccupied with the revolution, and from that fact and idea they derived the framework that enabled them to think of themselves as inhabiting a distinctive period in history.¹⁵

The most important thing about William Blake’s personal literary background is that he was self-taught, and as such he depended a lot on the literary materials that

¹² Salusinszky, Imre, *Northrop Frye’s Writings on the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (Essay Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility)*, University of Toronto Press, 1956, pp.130-137.

¹³ Sillars, Stuart, *British Romanticism The Literary Encyclopedia* 2008, pp. 1-5.

¹⁴ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol.2, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2006, p. 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.52.

were available to him. The Bible was one of the first books he was in touch with, and therefore it is normal to see the impact of his biblical knowledge being reflected in his literary and craft art, especially in his *Songs* and the Prophetic Books. Every now and then we will encounter images from The Bible or even verses being quoted, rewritten or implied within particular verses in his poems.

The work of John Milton had a great impact on him and his literary writings. Blake considered Milton to be his predecessor. William Blake wrote "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" largely as a response to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. However, in a particular situation he says of Milton that he became "...the devil's party without knowing it" [*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1790–93)], opposing what he intended to write in his *Paradise Lost*, who claimed 'to justify the ways of God to man' (Book 1-*Paradise Lost*) and implying that actually he justified the rebellion of Satan against God!

Probably the best assessment regarding William Blake's relation to his literary and painterly background is given by the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye in his book, *Fearful Symmetry, a Study of William Blake*:

"Many students of literature or painting must have felt that Blake's relation to those arts is a somewhat quizzical one. Critics in both fields insist almost exclusively upon the angularity of his genius. Blake, they tell us, is a mystic enraptured with incommunicable visions, standing apart, a lonely and isolated figure, out of touch with his own age and without influence on the following one. He is an interruption in cultural history, a separable phenomenon."¹⁶

Just as Northrop Frye did, we still need to raise the question of how it can be that this "lonely and isolated figure" can also be seen in a quite different light, who as a writer and an artist, regardless of all difficulties that he encountered, managed to make his way to the centre of the stage of the British cultural history and English Literature in particular! Northrop Frye has given us an answer maintaining, just as many other critics believe, that all is a result of his genius – "Critics in both fields insist almost exclusively upon the angularity of his genius".

Songs of Experience were written as a response to his first set of poems called *Songs of Innocence*, which represent a state of innocence, of purity, of holiness, of perfectness, of love, of joy, untouched by evil and uncorrupted by the sinful nature of humankind. They were indeed:

...happy songs
every child may joy to hear

In the *Songs of Experience* Blake is determined to make a call, in order to get back to the previous state of innocence which is sadly broken, as is also the relationship between man and God. The soul of human beings has fallen and therefore it has become a *lapsed soul*,¹⁷ and as a result of it, the Voice¹⁸ is *weeping* over this fall and this break of a divine relationship. Hence, the call to return to the state to which they once belonged:
O Earth, O Earth, return!

¹⁶ Frye, Northrop, *Fearful Symmetry, a Study of William Blake*, Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 11.

¹⁷ As referred to the fallen humans by Blake in the introductory poem *Introduction*.

¹⁸ Meaning the Voice of the Bard, the Poet, or perhaps the Voice of God.

Arise from out the dewy grass;

- *Introduction*

Songs of Experience is the opposite of the *Songs of Innocence* or another "vision of the same world, as it appears to the "contrary" state of the soul that Blake calls "experience," ... It "is an ugly and terrifying one of poverty, disease, prostitution, war, and social, institutional, and sexual repression, epitomized in the ghastly representation of modern London".¹⁹ *Songs of Experience* cannot be read alone and without having read in advance the book of *Songs of Innocence*. In his prophetic book called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake stated that "without contraries is no progression"²⁰

"Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell."

- *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Blake is exploring two different worlds at not only physical levels but - deeper than that - at spiritual levels, too. The world of experience is not a beautiful world; it is full of terror, pain, loss, sickness, hunger, even the death of little children! And the key question of the entire book of the *Songs of Experience* is linked with the origin of evil in human life. The question shall remain rooted in our minds as strongly put forward by Blake himself in his poetry:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

- *The Tyger*

The question regarding the main themes in the *Songs of Experience* is addressed exactly in the title of the book, and they are about the "contrary state" of "experience" in human soul. Now the word "experience" can be translated as "eating the fruit out of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil"²¹, or in other words experiencing the opposite state of "innocence". Thus, we can state that some of the themes in the *Songs of Experience* are poverty, disease, prostitution, war, social, institutional and sexual repressions, religion, church, the Industrial Revolution, etc.

Symbols are drawn from English folklore, the Bible as well as Mythology. Blake is known for creating his own or rather private mythology, too. Using the symbol of sunflower as drawn from the mythology, Blake presents us, among others, with the picture of a fallen human or the man who lost innocence. According to Northrop Frye the sunflower is the flower "which wistfully follows the sun across the sky all day, a perfect symbol of the "vegetable" life rooted in this world and longing to be free"²².

¹⁹ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, 8th Edition, Norton and Company, New York, 2006, p.81

²⁰ Blake, William, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Dover Publications, 1994, Plate 3.

²¹ Yeats, W.B. Preface to *William Blake Poems*, Notes, Routledge Classics, London and New York, 2002, p.247.

²² Frye, Northrop, *Fearful Symmetry, A Study of William Blake*, Princeton University Press, 1947 p. 74.

*Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done.*

The *Songs of Experience*, being a continuation of the *Songs of Innocence*, aimed at showing that innocence cannot last forever unchallenged and that it is under continuous threat as we move into adulthood while encountering responsibilities, cares, duties and needs. These states of human soul are made even worse by the tyranny and harshness found at political levels, through the rule of the moral law and an ethic of punishment (an example of this is seen in the poem "The Garden of Love" when the banning expression "thou shalt not" is written over the door), rather than offering forgiveness and acceptance at religious level, as well as with our personal selfishness, possessiveness and jealousy at personal and psychological levels.

*And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.*

According to Stanley Gardner, Blake was a man without a mask as, according to him, Blake thought that the God worshiped in the churches of England was not the true God, and the teachings were not drawn from the true Christian doctrine and were not Biblical at all. Therefore, he took the courage to object to this way of living and worship.

Some of the symbols that are most often used in the *Songs of Experience* are the symbols of garden, rose, forest, tree, stars, animals/insects, such as: tiger, lamb, worm, colours such as: black, crimson, blue, green; bloodstain, river Thames, etc. to be elaborated thoroughly below. Often symbols have also literal meaning. For example, the blackening of the churches in the poem "London" was both symbolic and literal. On the other hand, the bloodstain on the palace, as recorded in the third stanza, is only symbolic: as the State was guilty of the slaughter of its soldiers.

*How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every black'ning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.*

Blake does not invent a symbol, he simply sees behind an old maxim a truth that no one dared to face and has the courage to speak out the truth that he encountered in his everyday life, hoping to make a difference through his pen, which consequently makes him both a visionary and a poet.

Blake had the courage to question the beliefs of the London society, drawing a note of criticism towards not only parents who ought to have been caring for their children, but also towards the state and the Church that received people for worship and prayer while having abandoned their children out in the snow or forced them to work in a very hazardous kind of labour, such as it is the case with the children in the "The Chimney Sweeper".

Because I was happy upon the heath,

*And smiled among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.*

Blake paid a lot of attention and gave himself entirely into his work. His poetry was not merely an expression of feelings and ideas into verse and shape of poetry, but more than that, his poetry was an instrument of attacking and challenging the world surrounding him, the political and religious leadership of his age.

To give more power to his verse, Blake decided to engrave his verses in copper plates, by providing visual images of what he thought his poetry was intended to communicate. Thus, in a separate chapter his craft of copper engravings and their significance to the *Songs of Experience* poems shall be elaborated into more detail.

Finally, it can be stated that William Blake used his art of poetry as a weapon in his hands to fight for justice and on behalf of those who were forgotten by the society, who were neglected by priests or taken for granted by politicians!