

W. Blake & W.B. Yeats in The Tunnel of Time

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Abstract: *This article traces a comparative view of the sacred and symbolic dimension in two congenial poets: William Blake and William Butler Yeats. Blake is a precursor of Romanticism in English poetry and Yeats has called himself “the last of the Romantics” at the start of his career. As a profound admirer of Blake’s work, Yeats has dedicated years in the reading and interpretation of his Prophetic Books. The impact of such interest is one of the focus here, as well as their views on mimetic and symbolic art. Yeats shows us in his essays on Blake that he struggled to make a distinction between these two forms of representing reality.*

Keywords: *Poetry; symbolism; representation in art; imagination.*

Blake wrote that the ability to communicate with Heaven is given to us through Poetry, Painting and Music. For him, the three are inseparable and the way they relate is an integral part of all he has accomplished. Much has been written on Blake’s literary career but not much on the poet-artist. Most critics, such as Harold Bloom, believe that the engraved poems are independent of their illustrations. They do not take into account, for instance, the fact that Blake has called his *Songs of Innocence* (1789) “illuminated printings”, the first of a series to be produced by means of a method invented by him. Actually, we can read in a flyer advertising the 1809 exhibition of his artistic productions:

If a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet is a phenomenon worthy of public attention, provided that it exceeds in elegance all former methods, the Author is sure of his reward. (Symons 1907, 50)

One of the exceptions to the critical tendency to distinguish the poet from the engraver or the draughtsman was Arthur Symons who, besides discussing biographical and literary aspects in his book *William Blake* (1907), concentrates on how poetry and engravings interact in his work. For Symons, Blake’s genius is due to his surprising imagination, or vision, which many contemporaries (and even the nineteenth-century criticism) consider as a kind of madness. Before W. Wordsworth’s and S. T. Coleridge’s

preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Blake had pronounced the word that, according to Symons, would be most used in the turn of the century – “imagination”. Blake would say that nature does not contain the supernatural, so it dissolves. Imagination is Eternity. With such convictions, he rebelled against the artistic tendencies that were prevalent in the first half of the eighteenth century, believing that the year in which he was born, 1857, marked the beginning of a new order against detested Reason, “the Indefinite *Spectre*, who is the *Rational Power*” whose main representatives, Bacon, Newton, Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau mocked Inspiration and Vision:

Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau;
Mock on, Mock on, 'tis all in vain.
You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again.

And every sand becomes a Gem
Reflected in the beams divine;
Blown back, they blind the mocking Eye,
But still in Israel's paths they shine.

The atoms of Democritus
And Newton's particles of Light
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,
Where Israel's tents shine so bright.
(Blake 1957, 83)

Blake demonstrated, thus, that he despised a faithful copy of life, since observation, one of the daughters of memory, would destroy and kill imagination. The difference between observation and vision in the arts can be explained in the question and answer included in his “Descriptive Catalogue”:

Shall Painting ... be confined to the sordid drudgery of facsimile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances, and not be, as poetry and music are, elevated into its proper sphere of invention and visionary conception? No, it shall not be so! Painting, as well as Poetry and Music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts. (*apud* Symons 1907, 183)

One century after the publication of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, calling himself “the last of the Romantics”, William Butler Yeats, at 25, marks his place in the “processional order” of visionary and mystic poets, such as Blake. He states that in this context the word is synonym of tradition and, as the last Romantic, he was to inherit the richness of this legacy and to transform it. Having inherited from his father the enthusiasm for the English poet, he read Blake's work when he was fifteen or sixteen years old, feeling a great affinity with him, because their temperaments, dominated

by imagination and “vision”, were very similar. To evaluate the essential role of the author of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in Yeats’s formative years, it is enough to remember that during four years he dedicated himself to the interpretation of the mystical philosophy of the *Prophetic Books*. His meeting, during the spring of 1889, with Edwin Ellis, who also deeply admired the English poet, led them to the project of organizing *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critic* in three volumes. It started with discussions on the philosophy of Boehme and Swedenborg in an attempt to understand *The Book of Tell*, first of the prophetic books, copied by Yeats at the Bodleian Library; they worked over still unknown manuscripts and elaborated a list of mystical terms used by the author. The copy of the documents was also made at the British Museum and in Red Hill, where the descendants of John Linnell, a friend of the poet, lived. It must have been fascinating to be able to read and copy manuscripts by Blake! Did Yeats and Ellis evaluate the importance of what they were doing? While they wrote, the old Linnell was there, sitting, apparently to sharpen their pencils, but probably, according to Yeats, so that the papers wouldn’t be stolen. Yeats talked about the experience in his letters. To miss Tynan, in an 1889 letter, he justified the choice of the Prophetic Books:

You will be surprised to hear what I am at besides the new play; a commentary on the mystical writing of Blake. A friend is helping me or perhaps I should say I am helping him, as he knows Blake much better than I do, or anyone else perhaps. It should draw notice – be a sort of red flag above the waters of oblivion – for there is no clue printed anywhere to the mysterious “Prophetic Books”. (Yeats 1953.106)

The publication became reality in January, 1893. It is an essential achievement for the understanding and fruition of the great visionary artist. It helped Yeats, as he himself confessed, to crystalize ideas that were also his own. He, as Blake, aimed at creating a poetry with strict relations with art, in the Pre-Raphaelite’s way. The alliance of literature and painting was one of the most marked characteristics of the movement initiated in London in the first half of the nineteenth century. Yeats traced an inverted route from painting to literature, composing, for instance, a play inspired by one of John B. Yeats’s paintings. The critic Richard Ellmann notes that *Wanderings of Oisín* with its Pre-Raphaelite’s style and symbolist method has scenes that “suggest a Rossetti or Burne Jones painting” (1979. 52).

In many of his critical essays, Yeats reflects on questions central to the artistic creation. Two of them show the young Irish poet pondering on the work of the poet-artist: *William Blake and the Imagination* (1897) and *William Blake and His illustrations of the Divine Comedy* (1897), both included in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, a title that is an explicit allusion to one of the favourite topics of the author of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

In his first essay, Yeats defines the English poet as one of those authors who writes for the future since, not having a model in the world he lived in, he became confusing

and obscure for his contemporaries. As during his own time imaginative works had the function of amusing people, while sermons would shape souls, Blake announced art as religion. If imagination is the first reflection of divinity, the imaginative arts are, therefore, the greatest divine revelations; the sympathy for all living things, virtuous or sinning, that those arts describe, is forgiveness of sin preached by Christ. For Blake, according to Yeats, “the reason, and by the reason he meant deductions from the observations of the senses, binds us to mortality because it binds us to the senses, and divides us from each other by showing us our clashing interests; but imagination divides us from mortality by the immortality of beauty, and binds us to each other by opening the secret doors of all hearts.” (Blake 1989.112). The importance of the author of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, according to the essayist, lies in the fact that he was a symbolist claiming for a mythology such as the Celtic or Gaelic or Scandinavian, where he could extract symbols from. Since his world did not possess one, he was obliged to invent it.

William Blake and His illustrations of the Divine Comedy is divided in three parts: the ideas, the philosophical systems and the several illustrations of Dante’s work. Again, Yeats emphasizes the role of Blake as the first writer in modern times to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great works of art with the symbol or the symbolic imagination which he preferred to call “vision”. If the symbol is “indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame” (*op. cit.* 22), allegory is one of the probable representations of something, or familiar principle, and belongs to fantasy and not to imagination: the symbol is the revelation, allegory is fancy. For Blake, Painting, Poetry and Music are the powers, still not snatched away by time and space, making possible a communication with heaven. This doctrine suggests that the world of imagination is the world of eternity and it is, therefore, important to separate the world of fantasy, created in moments without inspiration, of memory or fancy, from the moment of vision.

Yeats asks if Blake would be a realist of the imagination; or a symbolic realist, as the Pre-Raphaelites. He reminds us that Blake’s struggle was to make a distinction between these two forms of representing reality. In this complex essay, Yeats lingers on what Blake thought of Poetry and Painting: “As poetry admits not a letter that is insignificant, so painting admits not a grain of sand or a blade of grass insignificant, much less an insignificant blot or blur” (1989.27). In Yeats’s words, Blake’s illustrations of the *Book of Job* and of the *Divine Comedy* are “the crowning work of his life” (*op. cit.* 30). The Irish poet has no doubts that some of the illustrations of the Dante’s book that occupied Blake for the last ten years of his life, have come to perfection and he arrives to the conclusion that though sometimes “the technique of Blake was imperfect, incomplete, ... where his imagination is perfect and complete, his technique has a like perfection, a like completeness” (1989.31).

In the struggle between the mimetic and the symbolic schools, there is no doubt about the winner, if we consider what Yeats has written in many of his critical essays. Nevertheless, as it was well observed by Symons, with the invention of the “illuminated

printings”, Blake “was the first and remains the only, poet who has in the complete sense made his own books with his own hands; the words, the illustrations, the engraving, the printing, the colouring, the very inks and colours, and the stitching of the sheets into boards” (Symons 51).

When Blake illustrates the *Divine Comedy* (1307-1313), something already done by Botticelli between the years 1480 and 1495, he knew the art and vision of Dante and interpreted them graphically in the period between 1820 and 1827; at the end of the nineteenth century, Yeats reflects about these illustrations of Dante’s work through the vision of Blake and his own, in interesting resonances, in a kind of time tunnel by which the art of many centuries has flowed.

Notes

- * This is an updated version of the text which was first published in D.O. Leitura/Abril 2002. Universidade de São Paulo. 27-33. Translated from the Portuguese by Andréa Martins Lameirão Mateus.

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A Memorable Fancy William Blake

I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation.

In the first chamber was a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a cave’s mouth; within, a number of Dragons were hollowing the cave.

In the second chamber was a Viper folding round the rock & the cave, and others adorning it with gold silver and precious stones.

In the third chamber was an Eagle with wings and feathers of air: he caused the inside of the cave to be infinite, around were numbers of Eagle like men, who built palaces in the immense cliffs.

In the fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire raging around & melting the metals into living fluids.

In the fifth chamber were Unnam’d forms, which cast the metals into the expanse. There they were reciev’d by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries.