

## William Blake: A Special “Poetic Dweller” in British Painting World

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### **Abstract**

*As an early English Romantic painter and poet, William Blake’s paintings broke the rational confinement because of the use of unlimited imagination. And also his paintings were unique compared with contemporary artists, because he always commented the social reality during the industrial revolution; In addition, his creating style was also shown according to combine paintings with poetry to express his subjects or emotions.*

**Key words:** William Blake; positive romanticism; imagination; fusion of poetry and painting

### **1. Introduction**

Hölderlin wrote in his poem, “Man is full of merits, but still dwelling on this earth poetically”. “Poetic dwelling” is one typical feature which can be found out from “utopian” romantic artists. Double barriers need to be crossed in order to get this point. Firstly, they should get rid of the shackles of reason. Romantic artists grew up in the era that the early abstract rationalism and mechanism were performed and tend to be perfect. At that time, the way people perceive the world was guided by European rationalist philosophy created by the father of modern philosophy, Descartes, who insisted on using mathematical methods to

measure the world; Newton let people see a universe which lost spirituality running and behaving in accordance with the principles of mechanics; Locke, one of the pioneers of British empiricism looked upon the mind as a piece of blank paper which accepts sensory stimulation passively. However, when dawn of Romanticism is beginning to show in the European intellectual horizon, the pioneers' long-dormant feelings are activated immediately and finally they put the elders' established principles aside indifferently because they could not stand being bound by the sour theory and they could not wait to put into a poetic and artistic creation evoked by the impulse of passion.

Secondly, they need to be free of the control of material desires. Blake was born in the period of beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain which have brought many great important impacts to the human beings, of which, it laid a solid material foundation for the nascent capitalist system, and brought human progress and civilization by means of technical rational supporting the former to get rid of the human beings' blind worship for theocratic God and the feudal monarchy. However, the human beings were placed into the confinement of materialism, and "wealth" quietly emerged as a new face of God. That is to say, the human beings found out another objective for worshipping: "wealth" instead of the God and the king.

From the above, the beginning of romanticism has emphasized on liberating from the bondage of spirits and materials: respecting for individual human worth, indifferent to the material world and regarding world of human imagination as a kind of poetic lifestyle. Therefore, it's easy to understand that strong humanism color is embodied in romantic art works. In particular, they share some common features: in attitude, despising eternal and valid truths and pursuing wild and free creation; in content, blooming personality passion and plugging in the wings of imagination for mind; formally, despising sketch and using a variety of color to present a colorful world. In these aspects, as one important pioneer of British romantic art, William Blake's works are related to all the common features. Despite all of these, his performance is also particular. He has not only been playing a pious role as "baptizing man", being committed to wash away the "rational grime" covering on other artists, evoking latecomers' new understanding of art and making him walk into a new era from the new starting line designated by him, but also put up a singular monument for the art world with his unique charm and his exquisite artistic personality style.

## **2. Blake and His Art World**

### **2.1 About Blake**

In the same generation of artists, Blake is humble but full of personality. He was born in a poor family and his families were sock suppliers. Since he was a child, he had painting talents, so his father sent him to study painting and learn standard copper etching techniques as a printmaker. When he was twenty years old, he became a skilled artisan craft, and could eventually be able to make money acting as an engraver of serving out his apprenticeship. However, he chose to continue to study at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and attempted to become an original painter turning from printmaker depending on replicating and etching. Very soon, he was tired of his studies because of disagreeing with rigid dogma and teaching methods in the academy. In 1780, he made a pair of watercolor painting "*The Death of Earl Godwin*" to attend the academy's exhibition, but he failed because of his injecting too much subjective emotion and fantasy composition in the painting and the dean's deeply rooted disdain and discrimination for civilians. As a result,

just a few months, Blake chose to leave the academy and it meant that he had abandoned the opportunities to compete with many famous painters at that time. In 1782, he married the daughter of a gardener who was virtuous and genteel, but just like him, she was also not much affected by schooling. Moreover, they had no children. Perhaps it is just because of the few life fetters that made him concern less in acts and could keep “to live for the arts” as lifelong mission. It was like what Eliot said, “nothing else to make him give up his interest or corrupt these interests: neither his wife’s and parents’ ambitions, nor restriction of social norms; neither temptation to success, nor imitation or other people’s danger”<sup>1</sup>.

## 2.2 William Blake’s Unique Art World

### 2.2.1 Ready to criticize and reveal the reality

Obviously, Eliot aims to point that Blake’s great achievements have benefited from his living environment and life experiences: not receiving higher education, no guiding from great teacher, and not too much desire for materials, which made him free of rules and refrained from imitation, so that he could devote into original creativity according to his own taste. Still and all, Eliot has unintentionally revealed the reason why Blake’s romanticism had become so positive. Owing to no pressure from stereotype and others, Blake could perceive and criticize the world on his eyes. His exposure to social misfortune and inequity as well as his critique to reality can be found in the most of his works. To take *Satan Punish Job with Boiling Pain* as an example, the picture presents a maltreated Job: Satan, standing on Job, opens his giant deep red wings whose rim is jagged. Dark clouds are behind him and the sun falls in the dim of light. Job is lying painfully on the ground. It is easy to relate it to the fate of the toiling masses living in the social unrest of 18th century in British. Here Blake states clearly his sympathy to the oppressed people and opposition to the oppressor. Another picture *God Judge Adam* alludes to the worship of money and pragmatism in the real world of that age. In this painting, the naked Adam stands and receives blame from noble and severe God. Adam is so addicted to material enjoyment that feels ashamed to death. The picture is obviously an author’s indictment to materialistic industrial society. In his masterpiece *The Lord Made Adam*, he pictures God directly as the opposite of mankind--an elder and a tyrant. Once the human body is created, it’s tightly coiled by snake which stands for the original sin. His freedom of spirit is deprived. He lets out a scream of pain under pressure. God who creates the spiritual suffering of human is pushed to the opposite.

These factors in the Black’s works are precious in his time. That’s the reason that he’s been called the rare positive romantic painter. Indeed, British in the 18th century are lack of soil of positive romanticism. Unlike France, the revolutionary situation of “atmosphere of the wind over flat” and later the heated bourgeois revolution are enough to agitate the enthusiasm of domestic artists and impulse them into creation of the radical art. Britain, by contrast, whose bourgeois revolution was not thorough enough and also it has been a distant memory. And at that time, many artists were mesmerized by the prosperity of industrial revolution. They were still immersed in the excitement brought by rational enlightenment so that they were too busy to use picky eyes to view the society. Even as the emergence of the new problems and new crisis which some pioneers had witnessed, they could not find other ways but to evade from the society in action, and in imagination, to recall the rural life and medieval patriarchal society that had not been affected by industrial civilization. The prosperity of British landscape of that time reflected this tendency. Blake’s honest and deep eyes, however, has had deep insight into reality of the society.

### 2.2.2 Building an imagination kingdom in contrast to the real world

Blake was good at shaping a spiritual world opposite to the reality of the material world in order to criticize the former: either let the material world feel ashamed through beautifying the spiritual world, or showed the importance of spiritual world through belittling the material world infinitely. In 1795, he painted the picture of “*Nebuchadnezzar*”, which depicts the crazy state of ancient Babylonian king after the demise of former Nigerian spirit. The king in the painting is physically fit, but his round eyes stare in horror shining light, naked hairy, crawling on the ground like cattle, like walking corpses. The picture indicates that the disillusionment of the spiritual world is dreadful. However, this stunning terrorist effect from the painter extremely shocked exaggerated imagination, and these endless imaginations produced a kind of “live” effect which is integrated into the painting. Rich imagination is a common feature of the romantic works of art, but nobody used it so extremely like Blake, and his imagination is often unrestrained, flowing and infinite. They are so unparalleled to show some kind of genius by no means only originating from shaping of an objective environment as what Eliot said. In Blake’s eyes, imagination could be directly connected with God and nothing could prevent it. He created the image of God in the illustration of his own poems “*Europe, a prophecy*”: staying in a round hole, snow white hair, beard fluttering, naked body, physically fit, being bent over and measuring the earth with a huge compass. He said, “I can neither see God, nor hear his sound, because the limited ability of my perception; but my spirit can reveal every thing infinitely”<sup>2</sup>. Obviously, he put into the Spirit of God among all things, wishing to use imagination to capture a permanent relationship between human cells and all creatures on earth and between: as long as you see a “God” in all things, you would see the forgiveness, pity, peace and love and so on beyond the specific images that appear in various forms of God image. It can be proved in his delicate “*pity*”, illustration of Act 1 Scene 7 in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The play says, “And pity, like a naked new-born babe, Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubim, horsed upon the sightless couriers of the air, Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye, That tears shall drown the wind.” Blake explained this picture: pity is a compassionate middle-aged woman riding a horse drifting in the deep night sky. When saw a dying puerpera lying on the ground, she caught the newborn in her arms. When we see the picture, we could not help asking: Who is the “pity”? Who is God? Who will rescue the child? Who should have mercy on the mother? It is difficult to discern the far-reaching implication.

His watercolor “*River of Life*” describes this picture: angels fly in the river and the children floating on the side of God are swimming along the flowing water of life and years to the sun at the end of the long river. The entire screen is filled with supernatural light and filled with timeless poetry. What on earth the painting wants to express? It is very puzzling. We know that an artistic conception of a picture is the projection of his spiritual world for an artist. For a talented artist as Blake, how high the imaginative wings can fly, how deep the meanings of his works are. Therefore, it’s very difficult even impossible to understand what Blake means. Based on this, Liang Shiqiu commented, “we admire his genius extremely, but it’s a pity that he did not turn his uninhibited fantasies to be disciplined and cut the gorgeous and eccentric ingredients in his pictures”<sup>3</sup>. In Liang’s opinion, Blake’s uninhibited imagination seems to undermine their perfect works. However, we believe that it is the infinite imagination of Blake which gives endless vitality to his art according to endow them endless meanings. This point is being proved recently by some scholars who are interested in exploring Blake’s works from the angles of modernism and postmodernism.

### 2.2.3 With painting in poetry and poetry in painting

The third characteristic which discriminates Blake from other romantic painters is that he has reached the highest artistic boundary “with painting in poetry, poetry in painting”. He is not only a painter, but also a poet. His dual identities empower his works with different nature compared to other general artists. Poetry and paintings separately belong to different manifestations of art, there are differences in many aspects: the art of painting is visible and it is pleasing with its shape, lines and colors yet poetry is a sense of art, and it is pleasing with love, text and sound. However, Blake was good at combining those two together to express common purposes, common artistic spirits and to show his own spirit and tell his innermost clamor. He wrote in the foreword of the catalog to one exhibition: “is it only limited to the real and tedious depict for painting? Only manifesting an object of dying and death? Can’t it have its own creativity and fantasy like poetry or music? No! Not like that! Painting, like poetry and music, is existing and rejoicing in the presence of immortal minds.”<sup>4</sup>

With the same purpose, he realized integrations of drawing and poetry in his many productions. His most famous poems, “*Songs of Innocence*” and “*Songs of Experience*” are accompanied by a lot of their own illustrations. These illustrations and poetry blend each other, and constitutes a typical mode of intertextuality in mutual interpretation. The illustration’s color in the poem of “*Lamb*” chosen from “*Songs of Innocence*” is soft and bright. Willow decorates both sides of the text, and at the bottom of the text is “bright soft” colors and lines depicting children with flock. The naked kids tease with flock, looking innocent, just like a little angel dropping from the sky. Picture and the image of the gentle lamb being described in the poem are setting against and complementing each other. The combination of the poem and the picture vividly shows the poet and painter’s yearning for the harmony of the universe and his gratitude for the mysterious power creating such a docile lamb.

Correspondingly, the illustration in the “*Tiger*” chosen from “*Songs of Experience*” generally presents the tiger’s prestige and evil spirits in ax strokes and bold lines. And in thick black and dark blue color, the painter rendered the tiger’s body: the image of “shining flame and burning in the darkness of the forest” seems to have just been refined from furnace which makes us feel like a nice coherent entity with formidable power corresponding to the image described both in the poem and in the picture. We can’t help asking, “Who creates the tiger? Is it the mysterious power that creates the meek lamb creates the mighty tiger?” The poem and the illustration were arranged to complement each other and the poet and painter expressed his feelings incisively and vividly by the harmonious whole.

“*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*” is another fusion body of Blake’s poetry and painting. He said in the poem, “I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning. Thus Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new; tho’ it is only the Contents or Index of already publish’d books.” The illustration which matches the poem is a naked man who sits on the mound and spreads legs with two feet together. He propped his hands from behind the ground, with left knee on a skeletal skeleton, gazing up the sky. The light from the heaven shine his body and the exposed genitals. According to the poem, “And lo! Swedenborg is the Angel sitting at the tomb; his writings are the linen clothes folded up”, we know the man in the picture who sticks in the empty tomb innuendoes Swedenborg. Swedenborg is a Swedish scientist, philosopher and theologian. He is the founder of “the New Jerusalem Church” in 1788 in London, on behalf of reason and religion. Thus, the

drawing and poetry have a common intention: attacking social reality of the dead cultural and educational instrument and mocking the reality of the Church ignorance and hypocrisy. As can be seen from these examples, although poetry and paintings belong to different artistic expression, Blake use “ideographic” approach to create a highly successful fusion: deepening pictures with words, and use pictures to activate text. The overall value of the works of art is enhanced in mutual fusion and interpretation which demonstrates vividly Blake’s artistic technique of “poem in painting and painting in poetry”.

### 3. Conclusions

In fact, these three features of Blake’s art are unified. If criticizing the reality of the society is an important theme in his art, then to build an endless imaginative kingdom in contrast to the reality is important means for him to interpret this kind of theme, yet the unity of poetry and drawing can be seen as the effective way to strengthen it. Certainly, all of those three regard imagination as the media and require using imagination to realize. As he himself said, “All forms are in perfect by means of poetic vision, but this is not abstract, not from nature, but from the imagination.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, “those whose thoughts never travel in paradise are not artists.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed so, he spent his whole life in the dream. Although his whole life is full of merits and accomplishments, he always dreamt of a kind of poetic habitation.

### Notes

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