

William Blake's Method of Prophecy

'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create'. Such is William Blake's claim, voiced through Los, his alter ego –the incarnation of the Poetic Genius and as such, Prophet of Eternity, who in London builds Golgonooza, the sacred city of the arts and imagination. Los forces his own Spectre to work for him, prodding him with a cry of flaming fury. His Spectre gives in, cursing and howling.

This battle of unbearable tension –one, in essence, of energies– takes place in *Jerusalem, the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, one of what have become known as Blake's Prophetic Books. In it, the visionary rendition of the adventure of human existence in a universe in perpetual flux between opposing forces is fulfilled. The one hundred copper plates on which Blake etched the words and images of his epic seal the intricate cosmology that had been taking shape in the former illustrated poems.

The seal of that vision is one of hope and redemption, a hymn to the beauty inherent within the human soul's transformative force, as much as one of relentless insurrection against a desacralizing Reason and its fetters of violence, punishment, desolation and death.

In order to create those unreproducible books, of which not one copy would be identical to another (after printing they were hand-coloured by him and his wife Catherine, the daughter of a market gardener whom Blake taught to read and write, and who was to become the light and mainstay in his known moments of despair), Blake created indeed his own printing system. He claimed that it had been dictated to him by the spirit of his beloved brother Robert, whose premature death he mourned deeply. It is the 'infernal method' he mentions in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, with which he threatens to print the 'Bible of Hell' that 'the world shall have, whether they will or no'.

As with everything else in Blake's work, the material manifestation of will is nothing but the embodiment of a spiritual truth. The method used by Blake to create books that no one could imitate was the one demanded by a method for living that compelled him to apply his inspiration and intellect's whole energy to elucidate man's place in the universe, and his relationship with divinity. He would find out that being human is simultaneous with being divine, and that it is so thanks to the Imagination, which calls for every man to be an artist: not a maker but a creator, a transformative agent in equal measure to the greatest artist that has ever existed: Christ the transgressor, who lives within every man and woman.

The 'infernal method' required every single word to be skilfully written with an acid-resistant ink on pages that were lavish in graceful script, interlaced with vines, flowers, birds and human or unearthly bodies. The mental energy that engendered the poems and illustrations was manifested through a titanic physical effort to bring the books into the world. Perhaps no poet's word has ever incarnated in the world in so literal a manner. Which in this case means, transcendent.

Blake created *Jerusalem* in South Molton Street in London, close to Tyburn (where not long before those condemned by the Law had hung from the gallows), and now next to Oxford Street's commercial epicentre. The impoverished area where the Blakes lived, with a back view on what was known as 'poverty lane', would become in time one of the most strident temples for the idolatry of, and submissiveness to, the rules of a financial system that in Blake's times, as much it is in ours, was responsible for the

penury he denounced –and for his own: he died poor and almost completely forgotten in even humbler rooms in Fountain Court. He died, nevertheless, singing hymns, reconciled to his destiny because he knew that, in spite of the incessant struggle against adversity, it had been great. He had experienced in his own flesh Job's mystical abandon. In his interpretation of this Biblical story, mystical abandon becomes synonymous with artistic creation. Today the building in South Molton Street wobbles on the brink of being devoured by the very system that tried –in vain– to expel Blake from the world. But more about that later.

Let's return to *Jerusalem*. The one hundred copper plates that contained a poem the equal of which, Blake was convinced, had never been written on earth (and copper was an expensive material that the artist could hardly afford), would reveal to the world the validity of the infernal method. Blake had nurtured the hope that this revelation would help him break free from the slavery of poverty. But he didn't sell a single copy of the poem.

Los, as we have seen, embodies in *Jerusalem* the prophetic spirit, and two of the great illuminated books, *America* and *Europe*, actually include in their title the words 'A prophecy'. But as Patrick Harpur rightly points out in his eloquent and compelling introduction to this new Spanish edition, and as is also understood by S. Foster Damon in his essential *A Blake Dictionary*, Blake considered the prophet to be not someone who foresees the future, but rather the one who reveals eternal truths –hence his entwined Poet-Prophet identity. Prophecy is inner vision, its dictate eternal. Blake, who from childhood inhabited the visionary experience and understood it as a natural phenomenon –the manifestation of divine imagination in man, which we could all access if we liberated our senses and our consciousness from the yoke of reason– could therefore claim, unabashedly, that Ezekiel and Isaiah dined with him.

Though *Tiriel* (unfinished and published posthumously) can be considered the first of the Prophetic Books, Blake's method properly speaking would not render visible fruits in its coupling of word and image until *The Book of Thel* – the story of the young virgin who interrogates the world in distress, mourning the fleeting nature of her existence yet terrified fully to enter it (the intersection, so to speak, of innocence and experience, two of Blake's fundamental contraries). It would be followed by *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that irony-laden song, rich in aphorisms as unforgettable as they are perplexing, which we go on reading, scrutinizing and quoting obsessively without ever wholly unravelling its meaning. Whereas the *Marriage* cannot be understood without considering Blake's ambivalent relationship to Swedenborg, whom he had admired so much he could only knock him off his pedestal with this merciless satire, it goes well beyond a mere settling of scores. It contains in a nutshell the core of Blake's guiding principles as an artist and as a man –essences, in fact, indivisible. Fuelled as it is by blasts of just rage, its characteristic burning, insubordinate ferocity culminates, as does Blake's life itself, in a luminous song of praise: 'For everything that lives is holy'.

To date, we're still trying to define the political dimension of Blake's works. We know he raged against all forms of tyranny, opposed slavery and war, and there are evident political references in works such as *The French Revolution*, *America*, *Europe* and *The Song of Los*. He was critical of a belligerent Crown at a time when such a stance might well put one's life at stake, as England entrenched itself against the threat of the Napoleonic invasions. Perhaps he had a narrow escape when he was accused of sedition by Schofield, the drunken soldier with whom he was involved in a fracas during his stay in Felpham, on the South Coast of England –a bitter incident that provoked in him and Catherine enormous anxiety, added to that of their privations and the failure that their only attempt to live outside London had turned out to be. In Blake,

revolutionary fierceness is embodied in his character Orc, the son of Los and his emanation Enitharmon. Though doubtless a hero, as all characters in Blake, who understood well the cyclical nature of the battles within the human spirit, he is ambivalent; as the spirit of rebellion in the material world, he's still a lesser manifestation of the emotions: repressed love turned into war. The Blakean narrative, therefore, is not crowned by the glorification of rebelliousness *per se*, which can only lead to the sterile return of Urizen's stagnant empire - for isn't that germ nestled in all revolutions? Urizen is the fallen and vengeful god of reason who provokes the destruction of the world he claims to have created, and to love. Blake, horrified by the atrocities of the French Revolution, which he had initially extolled, or dragged by an inflamed mob during the anti-Catholic Gordon riots, knew this menace well, and he never succumbed to blind adherence to any cause. His vision transcends political circumstance, which is just a point of departure to address the inexorable question of human violence. In fact, Blake's vision transcends *all* sorts of circumstance.

The source of oppression in Blake's work is not only political and material; it doesn't arise either from solely psychological or spiritual springs. The one makes the others evident, since nothing in human experience is ultimately classifiable, separate or static. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* Blake tackles oppression from that other backbone in his work which is sexuality, the most powerful channelling of energy as manifestation and agency of 'the Naked Human form divine', the most destructive one when repressed, an instrument for violence or the slavery of possession, or gateway to the desacralizing of its primal delight.

Blake's archetypal characters are further developed –painstakingly and not without contradiction– in *The First Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, *The Book of Los*, the unfinished *Vala or The Four Zoas* and *Milton* (where a dauntless Blake invokes the blind poet so as to right his spiritual erring, then integrates him within himself to reformulate his song). Finally, in the above-mentioned *Jerusalem*, Albion –a mythical and fallen England who represents the whole of humanity– undergoes the journey of the divided being, torn between the energy of its pristine emanations and its spectre's drives. He will then become redeemed humanity, and divine (that is, free), mirror of Jesus, ablaze with imagination. Imagination, and not fantasy; a creative potency that pulls down the barriers imposed by our reason, our ego and our senses so that we can see everything that dwells in this world as it really is: infinite. For, as Blake puts it, *The Imagination is not a State. It is the Human Existence itself.*

This continual abiding in numinous vision, and the understanding of the forces that battle within man (acknowledged much later by modern psychology), earned Blake in his lifetime the stigma of madness. He was mocked, ignored, recipient of numerous insults. He raged, he drank his cup of bitterness and despair... but kept up, unflinchingly, his 'mental fight'. The fragment that this quote comes from, the preface to the vaster poem *Milton*, is now a sort of alternative national anthem of England known as 'Jerusalem' (it must not be mistaken for the illuminated poem of the same title), albeit one that is not necessarily fully understood - used by both rebels and renegades as much as by the nationalist right, exalted in Danny Boyle's spectacle to inaugurate the Olympic Games, and routinely chorused in football matches.

But which is that England, that 'green and pleasant land'? Just as with Blake's London, it both is, and is not, the region marked out by its geography. It is a visionary land, just as Golgonooza is a London that has to be built in and from London, in spite of and against all the miseries and forms of slavery that people the material city. Alchemical process, to extract from the flesh of reality the gold of its essence: the golden string that will lead the poet to heaven's gate, the golden sandals he wears for the road, the golden strokes

with which Blake, assisted by Catherine, exquisitely framed and illuminated his illustrated poems; the gold that appears mysteriously in his diary of 23 May 1810: 'found the Word Golden'.

Avant-garde before the term even existed, in his fierce, lonely battle against every convention in his world, against the institutionalized Church and the power of monarchy, the prevailing language of weapons and the ravages of the Industrial Revolution, all forms of complacency in the arts (including Reynolds' pre-eminence), against the castrating notion of punishment and any form of surrender to a lethal status quo, he lived and survived (in an autograph album he would sign 'born 28 Novr 1757 in London, & has died several times since') with no more true sustenance than the spiritual, and no more support than Imagination, his visions and Catherine's loyalty, his ignored work and his faith in a Jesus-man-poet-artist redeemed in the flesh and in creative joy.

He is buried in a common unmarked grave (his present tombstone in Bunhill Fields stands in the wrong place). Of the eight buildings in which he lived in London, seven have been demolished. The only one standing, in 17 South Molton Street (one of the floors of which has been for decades a stronghold for his legacy and opens its doors to native and foreign pilgrims in search of the Soho visionary's footprints), has now a waxing salon on the ground floor, among dozens of fashion boutiques, and currently seeks a buyer for several millions of pounds. The anxiety for squeezing as much as possible from what were, and still are, humble Georgian rooms, has provoked ungainly attempts at expelling Blake's last vestiges, doing violence to the space that two hundred years ago saw the birth, from the press that among vapours of acids and ink occupied a good part of one of the two small rooms inhabited by the impoverished Blakes, of *Jerusalem's* 100 copper plates.

Just as his England and his London, ever present as a hypnotic rosary in his poems, Blake's work is everywhere and nowhere, as elusive as its very contents. Its drama of cosmic dimensions, which culminates in the celebration of the inexhaustible energy of the human soul brimming over with divine imagination, is the gift comprised in the Prophetic Books, created with Blake's own method that is not contained anywhere, because its concern is with the eternal.



The Prophetic Books. in Spanish

There are only a few known copies of the original printings of William Blake's Prophetic Books. His printing method did not grant him the financial independence he longed for, though it did yield his work's individuality, made manifest in unique objects of exquisite beauty. This is partly the reason why Blake is an artist and poet much talked about but little truly known, and even less read, even in Britain. Any reproduction of the books as they were conceived –a unity made of word and image– is a demanding and loving endeavour.

Ediciones Atalanta's bilingual publication of the Prophetic Books in two volumes (the second one will appear early in 2014), with reproductions of the illustrations, is of supreme relevance for the understanding of these works in the Spanish-speaking world, where the existing translations of Blake are little known, and where an integral publication that bears witness to the transcendence and beauty of these books has never been attempted before. The two volumes are complemented by the simultaneous publication of Kathleen Raine's –one of the most sensitive authorities on Blake– *Ocho ensayos sobre William Blake*. The latter includes the illustrations to *The Book of Job*,

following Raine's original comments on each plate in her essay 'Suffering According to Blake's Illustrations of Job', and is beautifully translated by Carla Carmona. Both editions are objects of beauty in their own right, designed and produced with painstaking care given to the tiniest details, and remind us of what Blake knew well: that form is also content –not all of human experience can be reduced to an electronic format.

The *Prophetic Books* are preceded by a lucid and impassioned introduction by Patrick Harpur, who accurately places Blake's work and thought in its historical context as a rebellion against the barrenness of the 18th Century's rampant rationalism, ignited by the conviction that the soul's main faculty is not reason, but imagination. Harpur draws an admirably clear outline of Blake's complex geography and the characters that people his personal mythology, and delivers a moving text that urges us to enter the living universe, still relevant today, of the fierce spirit that was William Blake.

In turn, Bernardo Santano, in the translator's preface, eases the reader's access to a work that may be intimidating in its complexity, reminding us that it is developed in a symbolic dimension that makes it unclassifiable. He portrays the English poet and artist as an 'instrument of a kind of organic evolution' that is reflected in the metric diversity of his verse, and he reflects on how with the passage of time the understanding of Blake's work has gained in depth, while concurring with Harpur in his interpretation of the concept of prophecy in these poems.

Santano also provides a brief preface for each poem, succinct texts that help us understand both the mythology Blake developed throughout his books and the technique with which he worked on each of them.

Translation of the Prophetic Books in full is a titanic task. There will always be as many translations as there are interpretations of Blake's work –and these are infinite– but it would really be pedantic to point at details of essentially subjective disagreement in so vast and outstanding a feat as that achieved by Santano. I refer the reader to the poignant voices of Oothoon, Bromion and Theotormon in *Visiones de las hijas de Albion*, or Ahanian's lament at the end of *El libro de Ahanian* to have a glimpse of the universe that these translations open up –truly for the first time– to the Spanish speaking reader.

The inclusion in this edition of *Tiriel* and its illustrations, which are generally little known, as well as of the unfinished *Vala, or The Four Zoas* (with a preface that helps us navigate its particularly complex universe) is something to be grateful for. The reproduction of some of *Vala's* plates, with their scratched-out lines, amendments and sketches, offers us the privilege to have a glimpse into Blake's creative process.

All the illustrations are neatly and faithfully reproduced, and whereas no reproduction can convey the deep emotion of the original copies and their most subtle shades and details, Atalanta without doubt brings us as close as it can possibly be to that experience.

I don't believe it would be an exaggeration to say that this edition of William Blake's Prophetic Books in Spanish is one of the most important publishing events in that language for decades, and the simultaneous edition of Raine's essays is a fitting complement. Atalanta thus continues the generous and invaluable labour that Jacobo Siruela started in the 1980s with Ediciones Siruela, led by one of the Blakean guiding principles: that of the transformation of human experience by virtue of imaginative vision.

Adriana Díaz-Enciso



* A glimpse into the first volume of the *Prophetic Books* and Kathleen Raine's essays can be had on Atalanta's webpage:

<http://www.atalantaweb.com/libro.php?id=94>

and

<http://www.atalantaweb.com/libro.php?id=88>

The original version in Spanish of this essay and review were published in *Laberinto*, the cultural supplement of Mexican newspaper *Milenio*, and can be read in:

http://www.milenio.com/cultura/metodo-profecia-William-Blake_0_203380178.html