

William Blake

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Detail from a fragment of p.3 Europe 1794/c1830-5

Notes for teachers and group leaders

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Introduction

This teacher's pack is aimed in the first place at secondary schools, but primary school teachers may find some of the suggestions for practical work on Blake useful as a springboard for their own explorations of poetry and art.

William Blake (1757-1827) saw himself as both a poet and a painter. Students studying Blake as a poet often do this through the words alone. In doing so, they may miss some of the richer meanings of his poetry which are illuminated (in both senses of the word) by his illustrations. As an art gallery, Tate Britain usually displays the work of Blake for its artistic content, but this, too, is to see only half the picture! This exhibition aims to give a more complete view of Blake's work by displaying pages from his books. Even so, this can only give a partial experience of reading Blake by showing such pages in isolation, rather than bound as a continuous narrative. In fact, the closest we can get to viewing much of Blake's work as he intended is to study facsimile copies of his books. Having said that, this exhibition will add to an understanding of Blake by displaying his work within the context of his career, and by including contextual evidence to help our understanding of why and how Blake produced his highly individual literary and artistic images.

A very brief glossary of a few of the major characters in Blake's personal mythology is included at the end of the pack.

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A brief guide to the exhibition

The exhibition is divided into four sections:

Section 1: One of the Gothic Artists illustrates the influence on Blake of medieval art in terms of its linear style, its subject matter and its reflection of an older and 'purer' society. Blake saw himself more as a medieval 'craftsman' artist and poet rather than the 'sophisticated' (and to Blake's eyes, glib) history and portrait painters held up for admiration by Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy.

Section 2: The Furnace of Lambeth's Vale introduces Blake's great 'prophetic' books, produced during the Revolutionary ferment after the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. This section includes contextual documentary material, and a 'recreation' of Blake's studio in Lambeth which gives an insight into his working methods as an artist and as a printer.

Section 3 Chambers of the Imagination takes as its theme the idea of the imagination, which was central to Blake's art and poetry. This section provides a review of the various characters in Blake's personal mythology, with an exploration of their roots as well as the symbolic meaning they take on in Blake's imaginative world.

Section 4: Many formidable works is intended to display the greatest achievements of Blake's poetry and painting by exhibiting the illustrated books, in some cases page by page, culminating in the two late, great works, *Milton* and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*.

The exhibition follows Blake's career in a roughly chronological sequence, but the ideas and themes recur throughout the works displayed, so while students may wish to concentrate on one room at a time, they should be aware of cross-referencing both backwards and forwards in terms of the images and the issues they embody.

SECTION 1: One of the Gothic Artists

Blake trained as an engraver rather than as a painter, and the emphasis in his art is always on the line and every line is carefully placed:

I intreat, then, that the Spectator will attend to the Hands & Feet, to the Lineaments of the Countenances; they are all descriptive of Character, & not a line is drawn without intention, & that most discriminate & particular. 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 Blur or Mark.
A Vision of the last Judgment

Drawing exercise: using line alone, without shading, explore the possibilities of creating a three-dimensional image.

This emphasis on line over colour reflects the eighteenth-century debate between the rival merits of design (represented by Poussin) and colour (represented by Rubens) which in turn had its origins in the contrast in the Renaissance between Florentine emphasis on design and Venetian emphasis on colour .

While the Rubenism of Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy of Arts still held sway over 18th century artistic sensibility, design was coming to the fore in the fashion for Neoclassical emphasis on line as promoted by artists like the French Revolutionary painter, Jacques Louis David, and English artists and designers like Robert Adam, Josiah Wedgwood and John Flaxman.



Flaxman, *Alcestis and Admetus* 1789



Charon, copy from the antique? c1779-80?

Blake's interest in the antique can be seen in his drawing of Charon, which seems to have been copied from an antique model, although the original has not been identified. Blake's preference for the linear forms of the Neoclassical is also evident in his writings. *The Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures* which Blake wrote to accompany an exhibition of his paintings in 1809 reveals his contempt for the type of paintings favoured by the artistic establishment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries:

In this Exhibition will be seen real Art, as it was left us by Raphael and Albert Durer, Michael Angelo, and Julio Romano; stripped from the Ignorances of Rubens and Rembrandt, Titian and Coreggio [...] The eye that can prefer the Colouring of Titian and Rubens to that of Michael Angelo and Rafael, ought to be modest and to doubt its own powers. Connoisseurs talk as if Rafael and Michael Angelo had never seen the colouring of Titian or Coreggio: They ought to know that Coreggio was born two years before Michael Angelo, and Titian but four years after. Both Rafael and Michael Angelo knew the Venetian, and contemned and rejected all his did with the utmost disdain, as that which is fabricated for the purpose to destroy art.



However, Blake drew more heavily on the linear design of medieval art. He spent many hours drawing the tomb sculptures in Westminster Abbey at the suggestion of James Basire, the engraver to whom he was apprenticed. He made a drawing of King Sebert from a mural in Westminster Abbey, which he later engraved in *Vestuta Monumenta*, and his continuing interest in Gothic art can be seen in his drawing of a figure in a Gothic apse, dated c1819.

It is worth remembering that although we now know Blake largely through his own illuminated poetry, in his own time he was better known for producing engravings to illustrate the works of other writers and poets. These include the commission he accepted in 1797 to provide illustrations for Young's *Night Thoughts*, or Blair's *The Grave*, for which Blake designed the illustrations, although the plates were engraved by Schiavonetti. Blake repeatedly uses the horizontal pose of the tomb effigies that he had studied in Westminster Abbey in works like *The Grave* and in *The Entombment*, and this format, with the body seen sideways on, stretched out straight, with the arms rigidly by the sides became a symbol in his illustrations of death and/or despair.



Detail from *The Entombment*, c1805

Look for uses of this prone pose. What other poses does Blake re-use? You might suggest that your students explore the possibilities of using repeated and/or exaggerated poses to symbolise emotional or spiritual states. How might the same pose be used to represent both the positive and the negative aspect of an idea?

Does Blake use recurring images in his poetry as he does in his paintings? Do the same images, metaphors and phrases get re-used to build up the significance of the ideas?

The prostrate form lying horizontally with arms outstretched, in the Crucifix position, is used to express completely opposite ideas - at best, generation and creation; at worst, spiritual death. Blake sees Christ and God as two separate entities. While Christ represents, indeed is the imagination, *God the Father* (or *Elohim*) embodies the repression of this divine element of man. In *Elohim Creating Adam* Blake takes the biblical story of the creation of man and turns it into a horror story - the essential, spiritual part of Adam (his imagination) is being forced into taking solid shape as flesh. The imprisonment of the flesh is represented by the coils of the snake (also referring to Satan), and God is seen not as a benevolent creator, but as an oppressive, blind tyrant.

Can other familiar stories be turned around like this? Can a hero become a villain? You might encourage students to consider how a narrative might change depending on whose view of the events is presented. Is this easier to show in images or in words?

SECTION 2: The Furnace of Lambeth's Vale

It is important to remember that Blake saw himself as a poet as well as a painter. His images are nearly always related to a text, either written by himself, or by another poet (e.g. Milton or Dante). In *Songs of Innocence and Experience* we can see the way Blake integrates his poetry into his illustrations. The words themselves become part of the image, and the illustration often adds extra meaning to the poem.

If you are working in conjunction with the English department, you might encourage students to write and illustrate their own poems. Alternatively, they could choose a favourite poem and illustrate that.

Literature students need to be made aware that Blake saw his poetry as incomplete without the illustrations. Note how these intertwine with the words. More importantly, look for evidence of how the illustrations add to the apparent meaning of the poem. Note how the illustrations focus on mankind - nature is seen in terms of humanity. What does this suggest about Blake's attitudes towards the visual world?

Blake believed that the creative spirit, which he links with imagination, was present in every living thing, so that all nature partakes of this divine spark. Blake's images reflect this, as in his watercolour of *The River of Life*, painted c1803 which loosely illustrates Revelation 22, 1-2 where The River of Life proceeding from the Throne of God is mentioned. For Blake, rivers, trees, even the mildew destroying ears of wheat that are illustrated in *Europe*, are seen as aspects of humanity.



The River of Life, c1803

This relates to Blake's interest in the Swedenborgian movement, which followed the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg (who died in London, 1772). Swedenborg believed that

God is very Man. In all the heavens there is no other idea of God than that of a Man; the Reason is, because Heaven is the Whole, and in Part, is in Form as Man. By Reason that God is a Man, All Angels and Spirits are Men in perfect Form.

The Wisdom of Angels concerning Divine Love and Wisdom

Blake claimed to hate drawing from life, although he seems to have studied this briefly both at the Royal Academy Schools and at home - two life drawings survive in the British Museum - but he admitted the value of learning design through copying both nature and art. A marginal note in his copy of Reynolds' *Discourses* reads:

... no one can ever Design till he has learn'd the Language of Art by making many Finish'd Copies both of Nature & Art & of whatever comes in his way from Earliest Childhood. The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is: the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great deal. The Good one Really Does Copy a Great deal.

How much does Blake's painting and poetry copy nature? Does he represent things with photographic realism, or is his idea of what is 'realistic' different? What aspects of nature does Blake copy?

It is worth questioning what we mean by 'reality'. Blake makes no attempt to reproduce a photographic illusionism, but his illustrations and poems are about what seems to him even more 'real' and true - the metaphysical underpinnings of physical and spiritual life:

Self Evident Truth is one Thing and Truth the result of Reasoning is another Thing. Rational Truth is not the Truth of Christ, but of Pilate. It is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil.

Annotations to Francis Bacon's *Essays Moral, Economical and Political*

For Blake, life was made up of opposing elements. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* has the sub-heading 'Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. Many of these poems show this conflict and balance, for example *The Clod and the Pebble*:

*Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.*

*So sang a little Clod of Clay
Trodden with the cattle's feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:*

*Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to Its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.*

The illustration to this poem suggests a pastoral idyll, but the organisation of the optimistic clay first followed by the more pleasantly situated pebble gives the poem a darker edge. This comes from the *Songs of Experience* section, which was written later than *Songs of Innocence* but never printed on its own.

Look for evidence of this duality in Blake's other poems. These might be within the poem (as in *The Clod and the Pebble*) or between two poems from different sections (e.g. *Infant Joy* and *The Sick Rose*). Note how in the latter two poems the link is emphasised by echoes in the illustration

Songs of Innocence and Experience is the most accessible of Blake's books. The format follows that of books produced in the eighteenth century for children. Blake's book has sometimes been identified as aimed at this market. *The Tyger* is sometimes singled out in this connection:

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare sieze the fire?*

*And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?*

*What the hammer? What the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?*

*When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

Would Blake's poems have appealed to, or been understood by children? Do they work on more than one level of sophistication? In *The Tyger* does the rather cuddly, stuffed-toy tiger of the illustration match the language of the poem?

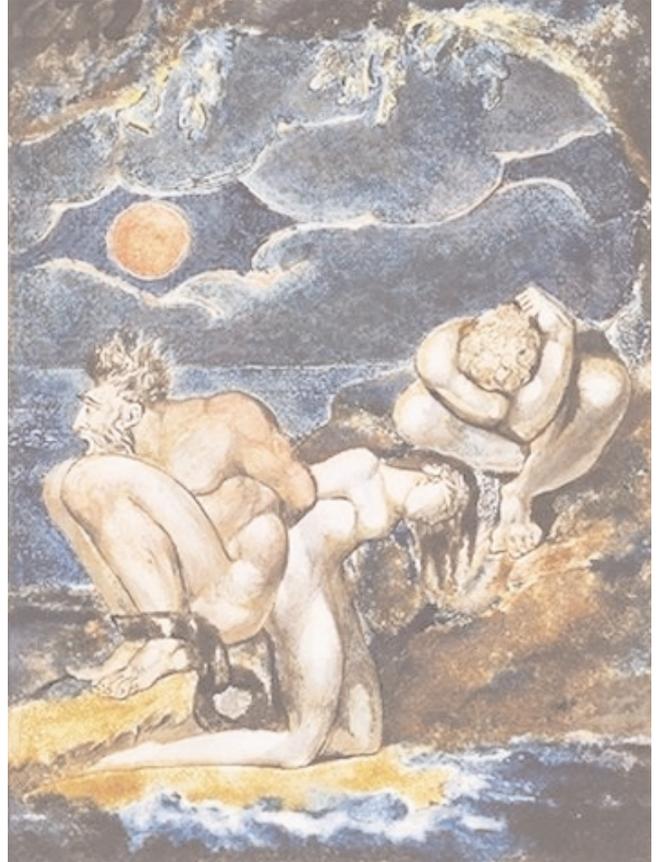
How would you go about illustrating a poem or book for children? What sort of images might appeal to readers of different age groups?

Blake was a deeply religious man, although his ideas depart radically from orthodox Christianity.

What evidence for religious beliefs can you find in Blake's poetry? Is there a message behind *The Tyger* for instance? Do his illustrations reflect orthodox images of Christianity?

SECTION 3: Chambers of the Imagination

The Prophetic Books date from the period of the 1790s, and reflect Blake's stance both as a political and as a technical revolutionary. This was the period following the American War of Independence (1778) and the French Revolution (1789) and Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) ends with the character Oothoon trapped in an eternal triangle, rejected by her true love, Theotormon, because she has been raped by Bromion. Blake's frontispiece to the book shows this clearly with the crouched figures bound together by the chains of their actions. Blake gives a ray of hope, however. In the poem, Oothoon looks towards America as the land of liberty, and Blake's next book, and the first which he entitles a 'prophecy' covers the stirrings of Revolution in Europe following the American Revolution. Like many radical thinkers in the eighteenth century, Blake at first approved of the French Revolution, seeing it as a throwing off of the ancient tyranny of despotism. The French Revolution, A poem in seven books, of which only the first was printed (in 1791) covers the early events of the Revolution and begins with a vivid description of the horrors of the Bastille. However, the later Prophetic Books deal with the revolutionary spirit of the age not historically or realistically, but metaphorically in the emergence of Orc who is the embodiment of energy.



Frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

Compare Blake's illustration of Orc in *Albion Rose* (sometimes called *Glad Day*) with the title page of the next prophetic book, *Europe*. This shows *The Ancient of Days*. How do the poses reflect the characters of *Orc* and *Urizen*? *Urizen* holds a pair of compasses which recur in other illustrations by Blake - keep your eyes open for them because he uses them symbolically to represent the insistence on rationality and confinement through measure as opposed to the freedom of the imagination.

Albion Rose was engraved c1793 and included the inscription

*Albion rose from where he labour'd at the Mill with Slaves:
Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death.*

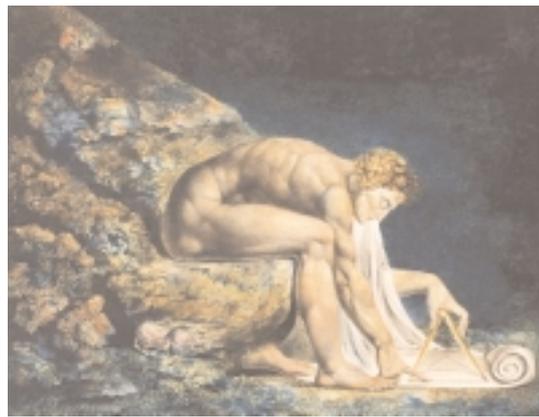
This sounds depressing, but remember that Blake considered life an imprisonment of the essential spirit of man, so death might be seen as a liberation.

Blake created a range of characters who evolve through his books and are not always consistent, but are used to represent concepts. Blake's mythology becomes increasingly complex as the books progress, and there is still confusion about exactly who represents what. Blake uses poses and attributes to identify particular characters/ideas, as in the examples of *Orc* and *Urizen*.

In some cases Blake uses historical or biblical characters. The two large prints of Newton and Nebuchadnezzar form part of a series of large prints begun in 1795, and which, unusually, have no accompanying text. The series of twelve prints seems to have been conceived in contrasting pairs, such as *Newton* and *Nebuchadnezzar* (relating to Blake's interest in opposites - see above).



Nebuchadnezzar, 1795



Newton, 1795

What comparison is Blake making here? What can we tell about his attitudes towards Newton and Nebuchadnezzar? Note the pose of Newton, curled in on himself. What does this suggest?

Think about how you might explore the idea of contrast by using opposing pairs of images. This might be through subject, pose, colour or contrasting light against dark. How might this be used to convey opposing abstract concepts like love/hate; good/evil; reality/fantasy?

In the age of Enlightenment and Reason of the eighteenth century, Newton and his rational, scientific explanations for the world seems almost a God - but not to Blake! Alexander Pope wrote his Epitaph: Intended for Sir Isaac Newton in 1730 which shows the eighteenth-century view:

*Nature, and Nature's laws lay hid in night,
God said, Let Newton be! and all was light.*

Blake, however, saw Newton as the symbol of the repression of the Imagination and the creative, artistic spirit by reason and the embodiment of the idea that everything can be measured and understood. In contrast, Nebuchadnezzar (who was punished by God for his unbelief and pride in the Book of Daniel 4.31-3) is shown turning into an animal, symbolising for Blake the bestiality (and thus the inhumanity) of the man who has become a slave to the senses. Pure sensuality, like pure reason, is seen as antipathetic to Imagination.

Blake based Newton on an earlier illustration in *There is no Natural Religion* (c1788) where it illustrates

Application. He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only.

And he wrote to his patron, Thomas Butts, in 1802:

*May God us keep
From Single vision and Newton's sleep!*

The illustrations of both *Newton* and *Nebuchadnezzar* show Blake's debt to earlier artists, particularly through a study of engravings of their work. *Newton* is based on figures by Michelangelo (look at the muscles in his back!), and *Nebuchadnezzar* is based on an engraving by Dürer of *The Penance of St. John Chrysostomus*.

These large prints show another aspect of Blake's technique which Frederick Tatham (born in 1805) described:

Blake, when he wanted to make his prints in oil, took a common thick millboard, and drew in some strong ink or colour his design upon it strong and thick. He then painted upon that in such oil colours and in such a state of fusion that they would blur well. He painted roughly and quickly, so that no colour would have time to dry. He then took a print of that on paper, and this impression he coloured up in water-colours, re-painting his outline on the millboard when he wanted to take another print. This plan he had recourse to because he could vary slightly each impression; and each having a sort of accidental look, he could branch out so as to make each one different.

Tatham got some of his facts wrong - Blake never used oil, and millboard would probably have been too soft - but this gives a general idea of his technique.

Try experimenting with this method of printing using water-based colour (poster, acrylic, etc) and firm cardboard or something similar. Note how the texture of the board shows as a mottling effect in the print. What other materials might be used as a base to print the original from? Does reversing a design through printing it need to be taken into account when making the design in the first place?

[Slides can be useful in showing this because you can reverse them to make the comparison easy]

SECTION 4: Many Formidable Works

Blake made illustrated books out of Milton, the Book of Job and Dante's *Divine Comedy* as well as inventing his own epic, *Jerusalem*. The imaginative nature of his painting and poetry is obvious in his own productions, but when he illustrates the work of another writer, he rarely does anything as straightforward as simply matching his pictures to the existing text. Blake seems to see other people's poetry as a springboard for his own ideas.

What unusual readings of Milton and the Bible can you see in Blake's work? Why does he choose these particular texts to illustrate? What would appeal to him about them? What do they have in common?

Blake had an ambiguous but intimate relationship with Milton. He admired his creative inspiration, but condemned his Puritan theology. As a deeply passionate, emotion and sensual man, Blake believed Milton had allowed his creative imagination and desire to be fettered by Reason. Blake does not illustrate *Paradise Lost* but uses Milton to explore poetic inspiration as a way of redemption from Reason and the tyranny of conventional morality.

As elsewhere, this oppression is embodied in the figure of Urizen, the God of the Old Testament, whom Blake sees as the real Satan. Plate 18 from *Milton* (1804-8) reuses the spread-armed pose of Urizen and puts into his hands the tablets of Hebraic Law. The inscription at the bottom of the plate reads

To Annihilate the Selfhood of Deceit & False Forgiveness

You can see a very similar pose in one of the large prints of c1795, *The House of Death*, which seems to be based on a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost* where St. Michael describes to Adam 'The Lazar House' (*Paradise Lost*, XI, 475-493). The sightless eyes symbolise the figures' spiritual blindness, and can also be seen in the depiction of God in *Elohim Creating Adam* of 1795.



The House of Death 1795

For Blake Elohim, the God of the Old Testament, and Urizen represent the tyrannical use of law, narrow, blind and inflexible which has no element of mercy or imagination in it. In *The Book of Urizen* (lines 31-40) he puts these words into the mouth of Urizen:

*Lo! I unfold my darkness, and on
This rock place with strong hand the Book
Of eternal brass, written in my solitude ...
One command, one joy, one desire,
One curse, one weight, one measure,
One King, one God, one Law.*

How might students depict symbolically either in poetic or pictorial terms, what they see as wrong with our own society? What themes would students focus on in terms of what is good and bad in contemporary society? Do any of these echo Blake's ideas?

In his later years Blake's reputation as a poet, painter and philosopher grew among a small group of young men who were either artists or had artistic interests. They began to treat Blake as a kind of 'guru' - a wise man whose words contained deeply spiritual meaning. Blake believed in a literal as well as a metaphorical world of spirits. He claims to have seen the spirit of his dead brother, Robert, rising to heaven clapping his hands with glee, and to have seen at the age of eight *a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings, bespangling every bough like stars.*

To his young admirers he described the spirits who visited him and guided his art. With their encouragement he drew images of these Visionary heads and at the insistence of the watercolourist John Varley, Blake produced the famous image of the *Ghost of a Flea* (c1819-20) first as a drawing and then as a painting. Blake told Varley that while he was completing the drawing, the flea told him that all fleas were inhabited by the souls of those men who had been bloodthirsty to excess during their lifetime.

Varley commented:

I felt convinced by his [Blake's] mode of proceeding, that he had a real image before him ...

and he described Blake's words on seeing the ghost of the flea:

There he comes! his eager tongue whisking out of his mouth, a cup in his hand to hold blood and covered with a scaly skin of gold and green.



The Ghost of a Flea, c1819-20

In fact, Varley probably took Blake's visions - his spiritualization of things - more literally than the artist himself. Note that Blake is still seeing nature in terms of man - the flea has the body of a man, not an insect. The dark tone is due to chemical changes in the medium.

Blake often refers to the 'eternal forms' of things. These remain the same regardless of individual variety and seem to relate to Plato's ideal forms. In *Milton* he states:

*Whatever can be Created can be Annihilated: Forms cannot;
The Oak is cut down by the Ax, the Lamb falls by the Knife,*

And *Jerusalem* ends:

*All Human Forms identified, even Tree, Metal, Earth & Stone: all
Human Forms identified, living, going forth & returning wearied
Into the Planetary lives of Years, Months, Days & Hours; reposing,
And then Awakening into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality.*

How might you represent the 'eternal forms' of things? Is this about finding a way of representing something essential about a thing, whether animal, vegetable or mineral? Blake seems to see the 'eternal forms' of everything in terms of humanity. Do you? How else might you represent, or symbolise, the essence of a flea - or a tree, or a car, or a mobile phone?

There is nothing modest about Blake's claims for his poetry. In the preface To the Public of *Jerusalem* he writes:

When this Verse was first dictated to me, I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence, like that used by Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming, to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadence & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place; the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts, the mild & gentle for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic for inferior parts; all are necessary to each other. Poetry Fetter'd Fetters the Human Race, Nations are Destroy'd or Flourish in proportion as Their Poetry, Painting and Music are Destroy'd or Flourish! The Primeval State of Man was Wisdom, Art and Science.

In rejecting the typical smooth, regular lines of eighteenth-century Augustinian poetry, Blake is showing his revolutionary spirit.

Blake stands at the pivot of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. In his influence from Neoclassical linear design, and his insistence on the importance of man, he is an eighteenth-century being, reflecting Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* of 1733 which stated

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man*

However, in his rejection of scientific enquiry and fact, and his emphasis on the spiritual and imaginative, Blake belongs in the ranks of the Romantics. In the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge, published in 1800, Wordsworth wrote a Preface in which he described poetry as:

the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings

and the idea of a wild, irrational emotion began to take over from the cool, controlled rationality of the Age of Reason. Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of the second generation of Romantic poets, wrote an essay, *In Defence of Poetry*, in 1821, in which he discussed the differences between Reason and Imagination:

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which are called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced; and the latter, as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity ... Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance. Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be 'the expression of the imagination' ...

Imagination was to be considered as the way to explore the intangible aspects of mankind. Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria* (1817)

The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.

For many Romantics, including Blake, Imagination was linked with God, and poets like Wordsworth and painters like the German Romantic, Caspar David Friedrich, go on to link this with Nature. Romantic poets and painters often put great emphasis on Nature and on man's relationship with it, but unlike the eighteenth century views of Nature which show the landscape as tamed by man and therefore in the service of man, the Romantics see Nature as something wild and powerful which can overwhelm man both physically (as in avalanches etc), and metaphorically (as in the imaginative contemplation of the beauty of Nature).

Poets and painters have not always accepted the label 'Romantic' - both the English poet Byron and the French painter Eugène Delacroix considered themselves more 'Classical' than 'Romantic' - and Blake would probably have rejected any attempts to pigeonhole his work.

What (if anything) does Blake have in common with other Romantics? You might look at Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, etc., in poetry, or Palmer, Fuseli, Turner, Constable, etc., in painting. Does the label 'Romantic' relate to subject matter or to style?

Blake's Mythology

Blake invented his own mythology in which characters depicted in his works were used to represent both the particular and the general. He also drew on biblical and, to a lesser degree, historical and literary figures, but he then transforms these into symbolic representations of his own poetic world. Listed below are a few of the key figures/concepts which can be found in Blake's work. A more detailed account can be found in S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (1965).

- Albion** Stands for both England and mankind. *Jerusalem* tells the story of Albion's Fall and regeneration through Christ.
- Zoas** Albion's Fall is brought about by his division into the four Zoas, (the Greek name for the four beasts of the Apocalypse as described in the book of Revelation). In Blake, these are depicted as four separate characters who each represent one of the four aspects of man: Tharmas (the body); Urizen (reason); Luvah (emotion) and Los-Urthona (imagination). Albion can only be redeemed by the reunion of these separate elements, restoring him to wholeness.
- Urizen** One of the Four Zoas who represents reason - seen by Blake as oppressive and the opposite of imagination. Usually depicted as an old man with a beard (as in *The Ancient of Days* and *The Creation of Adam*), he is the Jehovah of the Old Testament, vengeful and blind, forcing man into misery and submission to false religion.
- Los The central figure in Blake's thought, representing imagination - Los creates Urizen, but becomes a slave to his own creation. He pursues Redemption but has to inhabit the temporal world of experience. He is both spiritual artist and prophet, but is thwarted by his counter-principle Enitharmon and by man's reasoning component, which is hostile to vision, and which Blake calls Spectre. Los corresponds to Christ, who also represents imagination.
- Enitharmon** The emanation, or female part, of Los. She embodies indulgence in the senses and their repression through the code of chastity and as such stifles imagination. She also represents art in the service of false religion and by extension the decorative and frivolous arts. She comforts Los, but also emasculates him artistically.
- Jerusalem** The emanation of Albion. She is reunited with Albion in his Redemption in Christ at the end of Jerusalem and represents liberty and man's desire to unite with Christ.
- Orc** Son of Los and Enitharmon, Orc represents Energy and the spirit of Revolution. Los and Enitharmon chain him to a rock because they are jealous of him, but he breaks his chains at the outbreak of the American Revolution, challenging the oppression of the Old Order (represented by Urizen) with a New Order. His fires burn up the hypocrisy of conventional morality.

Blake's appeal 'for young-minded people of all ages and decades'.

Being both artist and poet, Blake appeals to those two groups of people for a start, but his influence extends even wider. The three essays that follow (and there could have been many more) show how. They are written by Anthony Dyson, who has a small printing press where he works in a manner not very different from Blake; Liz Ellis, who worked with homeless people for many years, and discovered that they admired and identified with Blake; and Malcolm Livingstone, who is a teacher, and the source of the quotation that heads this paragraph.

William Blake: the Practical Man

Anthony Dyson

Quite rightly, Blake is known above all as a visionary poet and artist; but almost every day, however obliquely, I find myself pondering on Blake the practical man, a man capable of great technical ingenuity with the relatively limited means available to him.

I run a small private press where I print etchings and engravings - my own and those of other artists and engravers, living and dead. The oldest I have so far printed are the copper plates engraved during 1726 by William Hogarth, to illustrate Samuel Butler's political satire, *Hudibras*. When half a century later Blake worked in the engraving trade (on which experience he was to base his unique solution to the private production of his own books), engraving and printing processes were unchanged - had been unchanged - since the fifteenth century and remain in essence the same today. Whenever I print a plate I proceed almost exactly as Blake did. In his words to a friend, I "warm the Plate a little and then fill (the etched or engraved crevices) with Ink by dabbing it all over two or three times...then with the palm of the hand...wipe the surface of the plate till it shines all over - then roll it through the Press with 3 blankets above the Plate, and pasteboards beneath it next to the Plank...". However, I hardly ever need to warm the plate since today's less sticky inks are easier to wipe from a cold plate; instead of Blake's leather-covered ink dabber I have the advantage of soft plastic rollers; I remove most of the ink with a pad of stiff tarlatan before hand-wiping; and although it is still called a plank, the bed of my press is made of iron.

I find it astounding that Blake achieved such sophisticated results using a wooden rolling-press in the cramped space of the ground floor of his small terrace house (long since demolished) at 13, Hercules Buildings, Lambeth. Constructed like a washing mangle, such presses consisted of a strong framework supporting two hardwood rollers. A heavy flat bed (the "plank") was run between the rollers, driven by the printer hauling on long spokes radiating from a spindle on the upper roller. Unaided by gearing, this was heavy work; and Blake would have needed to keep the plank moving smoothly since any interruption would cause a disfiguring "bar" to spoil the impression.

Blake didn't live quite long enough to benefit from the new iron presses that began to appear in the 1830s. My own iron press was made in about 1840. Although the bed, at 36" by 60", must be much bigger than that of Blake's press, the hand-cut double gearing and the fly wheel that supercedes the spokes of its predecessors makes my press much easier to operate. I have just spent the best part of four months printing eleven illustrations for each of 150 hand-printed books of poetry. Most of the illustrations were etched or engraved in either copper or zinc; one was a two-plate colour-print requiring precise registration; and one was incised in hardboard. Each of the eleven presented its own problems and needed to be printed differently. I wouldn't - couldn't - have dreamed of undertaking the task with Blake's viscous inks, with plates needing to be warmed over smouldering charcoal, with seemingly intractable problems of registration and with hands blistered by long hauling at the wooden press; but the vision of his stubborn and ingenious achievement was one of the things that kept me going.

(Note: I am grateful to Michael Phillips whose paper on Blake, published in *The Library*, Vol. 16, No.4, December 1994, deepened my insight into the artist's working conditions)

William Blake and the Voice of the Unheard

Liz Ellis

“This work is fantastic...was he homeless? How did he paint them? I found out about Blake when I was in prison...Did he have problems selling his work? I agree with him about religion.”

For nine years I ran an arts project at an East London centre working with people in housing crisis, many of whom had used mental health services. The arts project had started at the request of the people using the day centre. The centre is very close to Whitechapel Art Gallery and many members of the art group visited and discussed the shows and wanted to know more about how professional artists lived. We began an informal library and early on William Blake and his work became one of the most frequently borrowed and discussed and, when there was the chance, visited.

One conversation revolved around Blake's particular mix of the political with the spiritual, and was based on the speaker's detailed knowledge of Blake's writing. Blake's position on the edge of organised politics and popular protest was easy to link with the regular housing demonstrations, the campaign against poll tax and anti-racist marches that were current during the late nineteen eighties and nineties. Also, many people identified with Blake's search for a personal spirituality that had relevance outside the organised structure of the church. The reservations and criticisms Blake expressed about the church being out of touch with lived experience echoed with the lives of many sleeping rough.

An issue for any of us who struggle to express our understanding of the world visually, and to communicate this with others, is how to make this visual language expressive of ourselves, what materials to use, how and when text needs to accompany an image, what size the work can be, can we afford to make it... In the development of his own iconography and use of materials Blake makes these issues engaging and relevant, and we can easily identify with them. Blake's handmade books, combining text and image, were of great interest to many at the centre. His ingenuity and use of limited resources in making these books were of direct relevance to many people using the centre who were continuing to write and make visual work at times of acute emotional and financial crisis. For many people, their private and personal space and possessions amounted to what they wore and what they could carry, and their own drawings and writings were part of this, stored in one pocket of the rucksack or rolled up in the carrier bag.

I was an art student when I began work at the centre, having just left work as a psychiatric nurse, and was struggling to make sense of how art could have any relevance to the rest of my life. I was interested and moved by the way Blake had an immediate impact and direct relevance to many of the people at the centre. This knowledge was crucial in the development of my commitment to community education and my own arts practice.

“The voice of the unheard” was the title chosen by the group of artists and writers from St Botolph's centre for their 1994 publication with the South Bank Centre.

Sitting Sly - a teacher's version of Blake

Malcolm Livingstone

Blake didn't have much time for schoolteachers like me. Under my cruel eye outworn, kids in my classroom are like birds in a cage - how can you expect them to grow and learn and spread their wings and sing? All my teaching is throwing sand against the wind to blind myself and my students. I believe that education has to do with encouraging people to ask questions, do I? The questioner who sits so sly shall never know how to reply. I'm bought and sold. Blake didn't like teachers. Why should teachers like Blake?

When I was at school there wasn't much Blake on the curriculum; but university was a different matter. I never in my student life could get anything finished in time for the deadline, and in due course I had to go to beg for another few days for my essay on Blake. My teacher, the incomparable Jack Rillie, looked me over with concern. 'People dive nonchalantly into Blake and then seem to forget to come up for air. Blake is dangerous. Watch yourself.'

In those days, any time I was in London I would find a way of spending an hour touring round the Tate's Blake collection. I wanted to like it better than I did. How on earth could Blake, that bonny fighter in the army of Liberation, turn out so many tableaux that seem frozen, ponderous, portentous? Those heavy-headed twins, the Damner and the damned - OK Billy, we get the message, but couldn't we have a few more rampageous ghosts of fleas instead? Of course I didn't have to go all the way to exotic Sixties London to find Blake: *Adam and Eve* had pride of place on the walls of Pollok House, just a mile down the road from where I lived in Glasgow. But how could the author of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* turn out such a pair of cissies? No wonder Jehovah made mincemeat of them, the poor experienceless innocents, wandering about the Pollok Estate with their fancy permed hairdos (it's a bit daunting to think that Blake probably intended Adam - and perhaps Eve too - as a sort of idealised self-portrait).

You couldn't reach your teens at the start of the Sixties and be indifferent to Blake. The Sixties dragged Blake out from the pickling jars of academia and reinvented him as the Grand Anarch of Flower Power. Everything that lives is holy became a mantra for the decade - encouragingly benevolent, until you realise that Blake wouldn't have reckoned that very many of us are properly alive in his understanding of the word. In any case, it was always the chewier Blake that interested me - the tyger rather than the lamb, experience rather than innocence. I didn't have much time for meek and mild Blake. I liked Blake because he was angry.

Blake tells us somewhere or other how he invited the prophet Isaiah to tea, and questioned him about where he got the nerve to lecture people in God's name: to say thus saith the Lord when he meant thus saith Isaiah. Wasn't he worried that people would get the wrong idea? That they would be imposed on, become carrion for cult-vultures? Isaiah answers that sure enough, he has never had any insider dealings with God - no visions, no private messages - but that has never inhibited him from acting on the confident assumption that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God.

Blake himself was honestly indignant about lots of things. He got vitriolic about the materialism of the artistic establishment of his day, about what he saw as their treason to the creative imagination. He got disproportionately cross about his friends' small-minded inability to cope when on sound Poison Tree principles he Told them his Wrath. He got bilious over the understandable caution of the young women he knew about letting him scramble impulsively into bed with them with a view to establishing by direct experiment whether, in the words of his scribbled jibe, their knees and elbows were only glued together, or fastened by some more permanent psychological lock.

But more potently, and more relevantly for young-minded people of all ages and all decades, Blake got indignant about freedom. The teenager I was thirty-five years ago found his indignation both heady and challenging. I could relate to his political anger about Empire, and oppression, and war, and grinding poverty, and the slave trade, and the exploitation of women through prostitution, and the scandalous treatment of children in the market economy. I was stirred by his anger about the constricting prisons

for the mind built and maintained by church and school and moralising public opinion; and most notably about their necromantic chicanery in transmuting love - sweet love - into a crime. I was challenged by his anger about our timid bad faith in failing to recognise and trust our human, our divine, creative imagination. I was impressed by his anger with God for being the most oppressive forger of mind-manacles of them all - for his self-deceit in blinding his holy spirit to his true nature as the Devil - for being an old-fashioned Nobodaddy schoolmaster, in fact (but there is hope even for God in Blake; the Accuser who is the God of this World may be a tyrannical dunce thirsty for worship and punishment, but he is also, if he would only acknowledge it, the son of morning, the lost traveller's dream of haven).

Dangerous, my teacher warned me. Some people, myself included, have indeed got lost in Blake's gothic sci-fi universal mythology, with its sudden hair-raising flashes of Freudian imagery; like other huge closed self-validating systems it is delightfully obscure, and there is plenty of room for armies of doctoral students to spend solitary lifetimes wandering around inside it (note Blake's own dismissive advice to Creators of Universes: If you have formed a Circle to go into, go into it yourself and see how you would do). But the real dangerous quality about Blake for me is his habit of barging obstreperously and unexpectedly out of the past and inviting us through his work to face the question not just is this beautiful? Or is this well-made? But is this true? You can read Wordsworth's Intimations, for instance, without feeling existentially challenged to say yea or nay to the enticing map of the human journey which his poem lays out for you - but Blake on freedom? Blake on how life ought to be lived? The man turns his art into a fight for ideas, and he wants you to commit yourself. He wanted me to commit myself. I found that scary then and I still do.

(Hold it right there! I hear one of Blake's devilish angels snorting in my ear. We're talking about the undisputed supremo gold-medal grandmaster crank of English art and letters here. You're suggesting that we have to take Blake's ideas seriously? What about Blake the misogynist, to go no further? His version of the nature of women may have seditious appeal to shy adolescent male intellectuals, but are we supposed to stay patient with the Golden Net picture of female sexuality when we grow up? Think of all those women-without-vertebrae in his pictures, looking as if they'd been squeezed out of a tooth-paste tube, the smeddum-less contraries of that heroic energy is eternal delight and exuberance is beauty you ask us to believe he's celebrating?)

You've made your point angel. But beyond and dwarfing the crankiness - how can you read Blake without asking yourself - well is he right? Are good and evil different animals from everything we've been taught? Are we all quarter-sexed, like he says? Is he right about Jesus? Is he right about science and technology? Am I really in prison, with bars I can't see - and is it as easy as he says to walk out of it? Is it true that the unspoken mission of state and church and school is to keep the doors of that invisible jail bolted tight shut? And what are we going to do about it, since the hand that crushes the tyrant's head becomes a tyrant in his stead? And - well can we not hope to build schools that open cage doors instead of locking them, and where fear isn't on the syllabus?

Two hundred years haven't made Blake safe. He still tantalises us with impossible, seductive promises - life doesn't have to be the way it is - life isn't the way you think it is, if only you would open your soul's eyes and see.

So here's some advice for the DfEE and Ofsted: keep the Sick Rose out of those GCSE Eng Lit anthologies. Ban Blake from our schools. Don't let young people near him.

Oh yes, he's dangerous.

(Malcolm Livingstone is Deputy Headteacher at Oakbank Comprehensive School in Keighley)