POETRY AND PAINTING IN BLAKE

INTRODUCTION

A large body of criticism is available on Blake. It has been a great problem to canonize the creative works of Blake in terms of a systematic chronicity. But critics have finally ascertained the Blake canon and this set in motion an enthusiastic movement to substantiate the creative role of Blake.

In fact Blake cannot be classed. He was the most independent artist that ever lived. He had his own sources of inspiration, his own strange technique, his own method of printing, his own method of illustrating and his own secret way of reproducing his illustrations. One may say that Blake was the first of the great nineteenth century poets: a mystic who derived his mysticism from Paracelesus and Jacob Boheme: an artist whose sense of movement occasionally triumphed over the bad, elongated, sculpturesque tradition of his day. Blake was of opinion that poetry is the revelation of truth as perceived by the individual soul. When Blake had written that kind of poetry and a few more in the same manner, he bade an everlasting farewell to formalism and since this time he put his trust in the living image which begot in him the desire to create, knowing that if he was faithful to vision the image it would make for itself is the only body that had a right to live in. By so doing he not only killed the formalism of the eighteenth century but before it was born, signed the death warrant of all the pretentious exhibitionism that has been written since.

Blake was a man who believed that poetry had the power of transmitting divine communications. He was an artist who believed
that art can never exist without 'spiritual beauty displayed'. He was a man of titanic energy who was always ready to speak the truth. Blake's desire was to bring the soul of man objectively into conscious view: he strove to do what had never been done before: to portray the soul not subjectively through the image of nature but objectively through the images of his own imagination. Literary criticism as a fine art naturally demands a unity. It is impossible to achieve objective unity if the subject is partially unknown. Blake did not appeal primarily to reasoning faculty. The most sublime poetry, he describes, lies in the allegory addressed to the intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the corporeal understanding. Blake drew and wrote to reveal spiritual truth. Spiritual truth does not lie on the surface of appearances: and indeed it is often contradicted by appearances, and where Blake found that contradiction he did not scruple the inherent truth. Blake could see, that without departing from stark natural semblance it was not possible for an artist to express profound spiritual truth. In fact, if Blake had ever come to appreciate the inherent merits of portrait-painting, his true genius would never have been side tracked. So Blake's persistent resolve to paint nothing but his own visions lifted the art of painting for ever out of the rank of mere representation. Blake freed the western art from slavish adherence to Nature. But the prevailing style favours an economy of words and simplicity of manner that is derived straight from Blake's earlier poems.

Six years divide Blake's earliest book of poems, *Poetical Sketches* from the *Songs of Innocence*. These six years mark the biggest change he ever experienced. In them he passed from the representational to the symbolic poet; from the exquisite traditionalist to the genuine creator; from the youth who re-echoed
the loveliest strains in English lyrical poetry to the man who set forth from the garden of innocence to trace the course of human life from Eden to the new Jerusalem.

The change is reflected by the manner in which the two books were produced. The Poetical Sketches were sponsored by the Reverend Henry Matthew, printed in plain, traditional type without illustrations at the expense of others. He wrote the poems, drew the designs, etched them in an entirely original manner, printed them himself, coloured them with his own hand and finally published himself. Blake had learnt the mighty lesson of self-reliance.

In fact, many different critical thinkers have been affirming the interconnection between poetry and painting. But in creative practice this could not be properly synthesized by any other than Blake. Thus Blake holds a unique critical position in the history of harmonizing poetry and painting. The poetry of Blake is analogous to the vibrations of music. The reader must be in tune: in tune to some extent with Blake, but still more in tune with himself. He has to be imaginarily awake and intellectually keen. He should be ready to give his ordinary critical faculty a good rest.

To enjoy Blake-music one must wait patiently, until a phrase that deeply pleases us could be heard. Blake's commitment to art is one of the firmest in the history of English culture. His art rested on moral, religious and philosophical foundations. Aesthetic form was hammered out in cultural and intellectual struggle.

The living unity of Blake's art can be more easily comprehended if poetry and painting can be analysed side by side and can be treated as separate entities as well as an integrated whole. That is to say vital coherence could be noticed when lamb and
boy, tiger and tree, appear in both word and design. In this case, the text provides what the design lacks and the design provides what the text lacks.

The *Songs* of Blake happens to be a work that spans the whole course in Blake's poetical maturity. In fact quite apart from its intrinsic value as Blake's most successful major work, the *Songs* proves to be the best introduction to some of his difficult and splendid creations in that it embodies concretely their personal and spiritual history to which they consistently allude. The tradition of the sister arts as modified in the eighteenth century stands useful because it shows the kinds of thing Blake was reacting against. Actually the concerned tradition focused on uniting the verbal and graphic arts. The attempt to make poetry visual and to make pictures speak was a complicated idea in that it anticipated the independent reality of space and time and treated them as the irreducible foundations of existence: "Blake never collected the many correspondences that his mythology attains a classificatory system, but its implicit existence has been accepted by some of his interpreters".\(^1\)

However it should always be borne in mind that literary pictorialism is more literary than pictorial. During its long history, the art of literary pictorialism has sometimes seemed to proceed quite independently. In the eighteenth century, knowledge of painting was widespread among poets and this knowledge, in turn, affected the visual imagery of poetry. In fact the pictorial form, along with the narrative and didactic logical form, has been one of the alternative methods of ordering this material that a neoclassical poet had at his disposal. In fact each set of *Songs* transforms an immediate reality. In the illustrations Blake makes the point clear
that the fulfillment of innocence actually depends on the natural simplicity of mind and spirit.

In fact, the grand style of painting requires minute attention and ought to be kept separate from that of history and other day-to-day affairs. The ornamental style of poetry often tends to spoil the charm and magic of the grand art of painting that only finds its culmination in that region where it both absorbs and assimilates the poetical fragrance to give forth a new and unique existence – lucid, vital and effective. And in that region poetry and painting get fused. Blake, in his poetry exactly attempted that fusion in which he was more than successful. In fact the historian of painting finds it extremely difficult to relate Blake with the flow of continuity in this realm of art and yet he has to appreciate the uniqueness of Blake's art. On the other hand, the historian of poetry observes, a kind of individuality and brilliance in Blake's work, unknown in the history of English poetry. Most of the students of literature or of painting are of opinion that Blake is a mystic, standing apart, a lonely and desolate figure who has lost connection with his present age and not able to relate with the years to come and this is where Blake is unique: he stands neither in the past, nor in the present, not even in the future and yet he has got the tremendous power to assimilate, harmonise and fuse all the currents and the cross-currents of the past, present and the future. In fact, in him we find a new art that defies analysis and ignores classification, but attempts a unique fusion where art of poetry and that of painting often tend to find a single entity – charming, vigorous, lucid and vitally alive. And Blake's power of producing this unique art found its root in his sense of responsibility both to god and to society as well. The immediate social impact had a very strong influence on Blake's poetry that had
hardly any resemblance with the creation of the poets of the second half of the eighteenth century such as Smart, Cowper, Chatterton, Collins, Burns. So, the sense of spiritual loneliness was a significant factor that often influenced Blake’s art. In fact one of the most striking things about Blake’s art is his power of crystallization. Blake dwells in a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception have become charged with a new intensity of symbolism. This point seems to be highlighted in the whole works of William Blake.

In fact, the Songs of Innocence was the product of a mind, unspoiled by the naked brutality of this day-to-day reality. But the complicated events and complete emotions soon converted Innocence into Experience. Blake saw the misery of the poor people, loitering in the streets of London. Slowly but inevitably he found himself preoccupied with the problems of Good and Evil. Actually the charge of ugliness is not so much irrelevant here. And then he composed the second set of poems - The Songs of Experience. The character of the ‘designs’ in the two sets of poems was different from one another. In the Songs of Innocence the designs are found to be touched with a soft delicacy whereas it is extremely hard in the case of Songs of Experience. The poetry as well as the painting got invariably fused in Blake’s poetry.

In fact William Blake had the distinction of gaining gradual recognition throughout the final decades of nineteenth century. Algernon Charles Swinburn happened to be the first major critic to dwell upon Blake in one of his critical essays in 1868. In fact Blake’s glory continued to flourish throughout the first half of twentieth century and he drew an increasing amount of critical attention from the modern critics. Dr. John Sampson (1905), Sir Geoffrey Keynes
(1925) and Sloss and Wallis (1926) heavily insisted on the Blake-criticism in their editorial works. Joseph Weeksteed’s analytic view on *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job* and the biography of Mona Wilson (The Life of William Blake) remained the standard account of his life for quite a long period of time. *William Blake: His philosophy and Symbols* published in 1924 was S. Foster Damon’s significant contribution to a substantial critical understanding of Blake. The middle of the twentieth century as well as the last decade of twentieth century witnessed significant development in Blake-criticism. Significant contributions in this field came from David V. Erdman, Jacob Bronowski, Harold Bloom, S. Foster Damon and many others. In recent years the Marxists, Cultural Materialists, Structuralists, post-Structuralists, Deconstructionists, Psychoanalysts, the Feminists … all seem to have continued their research on Blake.

Northrop Frye in his *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, dwells upon mythic, religious and symbolic analysis of Blake’s poems. Frye admits that writing *Fearful Symmetry* compelled him to become absorbed in larger critical theory implicit in Blake’s view of Art. In Blake’s poetry the idea that vision is more real than the dull or oppressed world we perceive with our physical sense, draws our attention to a considerable extent. The logic that Frye systematically presents before us does confirm that his deep interest in Blake actually focuses on aesthetic issue. Frye asserts that Blake’s symbols are distilled from a tradition of emblems and myths which are profoundly expressive throughout the literary-world. Frye implies that we have something constant underlying the varieties of different texts; something all have in common irrespective of time.
and place and that Blake's mythic system presents this inherent, underlying proximity.

Another critical book Blake: Prophet Against Empire published in 1954, may be regarded as a complementary volume to Northrop Frye's books. Erdman's book is charged with detailed research into the political, social and historical conditions and events of Blake's time and his interpretation of Blake's works focuses itself on both the aesthetic and politics of his time. In fact throughout his book Erdman maintains the same pattern of argument: he looks forward to the socio-political background of Blake's time. Erdman observes meticulously that Blake was pointing out how many reformers and radicals were looking to the Irish movement expecting that it would liberate Ireland and this happened when Blake was composing some of his major poems. In brief, Erdman's book happens to be a great achievement combining literary and historical scholarship. In fact while Frye explores Blake's aesthetics and the story of imagination, Erdman focuses his attention in exploring the social and political Blake.

Middleton Murry appears to be significant name in the arena of Blake-criticism. His famous critical book William Blake appeared in 1933. He points out that Blake broke into one of the loveliest songs of Innocence in the middle of his manuscript called An Island in the Moon. Murry is of opinion that the recognition of this sense beyond sense is a fundamental issue to Blake and Murry starts his analysis by pointing out that spiritual experience is two fold in character in that it discloses both the world out side and the world we see with our physical senses every day. And inevitably both this world pass into a new world ... the world of Imagination. Blake induces us to go on finding out what Murry calls a kind of spiritual
sensation. Murry asserts that all the writings and complication of visions recorded in the Blake canon are directly and logically connected to the complete understanding of Blake. In reality Murry is found to follow up his analytic imagination and in doing so he pays particular attention to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Everlasting Gospel* and *Milton*. It proves to be an instructive and lucid account of the coherence of Blake's thought, emphasizing the way that each of the poet's particular insights seems to be necessarily part of his large vision, so that when his poetry is at its best we can follow his ideas easily. Murry highlights how the doctrine of two selves developing into the mythic states, explode in the late Prophetic books——*Milton* in particular. In fact Murry's book is traditional in comparison to scholarship of Northrop Frye, in that he focuses on Blake's writing themselves and concentrates his efforts on explaining the text to his reader relying very much on the evidence of Blake's words and not indulging in journeys through analogies from literary mythical-history. Murry was able to bring forth Blake before the readers as a lucid writer by making his creativities intelligible and comprehensible to both the readers as well as to the critics. So Murry's book remains valuable particularly in contrast to the artificial writings plentifully found in Blake-criticism.

Nelson Hilton's essay "Blake in the Chains of Being" was first published in 1980. Hilton's creative analysis on *London* directs its approach to what is called deconstruction. Hilton gives a brief discussion of the 'great chain of being' quoting Pope and saying that he sets the tone for the century's sense of the image and a longer discussion of Hume, Bacon and Locke on language. Hilton explores that the profound insight into the linguistic character of 'London'
has been expressed by other critics --- Gavin Edwards and Harold Bloom, for example, but he takes the issue with Bloom's conclusion that the construction of language in the poem evokes nostalgia for a past. Jacob Boheme's references may be taken into consideration.

Camille Paglia's book *Sexual Personae: Art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* was published in 1990. Actually when she comes to Blake, we can expect Paglia's analysis to focus on sex both as it features in his works and as his sexuality is expressed in the making of his works. In her chapter on Blake, Paglia's central observation is that Blake's writing is split by a terrible contradiction: Blake wants to free sex from its social and religious constraints. In the *Songs of Innocence* where sex-war is not an issue, one may observe the sadism and vampirism of male authority that figures such as in the exploiters of 'The Chimney Sweeper' and 'The Little Black Boy'.

In *Infant Joy*, a devouring presence waits, a Blakean Tiger; the reader, paglia sees this poem subverting the values of nurturing and caring by hypnotically enticing the reader into sadism, so that just as with the oppressive hypocrisy of authority in “The Chimney Sweeper”, there remains no selflessness or self-sacrifice, only refinements of domination.

Therefore Paglia regards Blake's doomed and contradictory sexual themes as being fundamentals to the story of gender, art and 'Western Culture'; that is the larger subject of her books.

Paul Younquist, in 1986, on his creative writing *Madness and Blake's Myth* suggests that William Blake was basically a visionary. When Blake got matured, his vision inspired poems and paintings of rare intensity. Even in youth they shaped his experience and
expression of the world. Blake’s works were frequently dismissed as the scrawls and dawdling of a mad man. Blake, younquist believes, gives original form to vision but with stipulation that its authority be limited to the aesthetic. Blake’s vision, though potentially religious, resists dogmatic formalism and yet cannot be confined to the aesthetic without violating its social urgency. Actually Blake’s paintings are copies of what he sees in his visions, his books.

Nicolas M. Williams in 1998 through his critical composition *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* holds on the view that Blake indissolubly links his poetry with a theme of interest to both the ideologists of his own time and the critics of the present time.

Saree Makdisi, in 2003, in his brilliant composition *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790’s* delivers a lot of interesting and aesthetic depth of Blake-ideology and talent. In fact he thinks Modern scholars often find it difficult to account for the profound eccentricities in the work of William Blake dismissing them as either a historical figure or simply as a meaningless proposition. A reliable and comprehensive framework for understanding these peculiarities was developed successfully by Makdisi. In accordance with the opinion of Makdisi Blake’s poetry and drawings should compel us to reconsider the history of the 1790s. In his work Makdisi shows how Blake questioned and even subverted to the commercial and political liberties that his contemporaries championed while developing his own radical aesthetic.