ARTWORK IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S "LONDON": IMPORTANT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN WORDS AND IMAGES

AS PINTURAS/GRAVURAS EM "*LONDON*", DE WILLIAM BLAKE: CORRELAÇÕES IMPORTANTES ENTRE PALAVRAS E IMAGENS

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ABSTRACT: William Blake's work is unique, whether by its format — verses and engravings combined on the same page — or by the complexity of his visions. This research aims to reaffirm the importance of reading Blake's illuminated books as one piece, debating about the relation between painting and poetry in his works. We are also showing the reading process of "London", illuminated poem from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (2016), in which we are considering images and verses.
Keywords: William Blake; English poetry; "London".
RESUMO: A obra de William Blake é singular, seja pelo formato em que foi concebida — versos e gravuras combinadas na mesma página —, seja pela complexidade de suas visões. Este artigo pretende reafirmar a importância de ler os livros iluminados de Blake como uma peça única, discutindo a relação entre pintura e poesia na obra blakiana. Ademais, será apresentado o processo de leitura de "London", poema iluminado de *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (2016), em que se considera imagens e versos.
Palavras-chave: William Blake; poesia inglesa; "Londres".

1. SEGREGATING MEANS IMPOVERISHING

When William Blake's name is mentioned, the first things most of the readers probably recall are his poems and verses. For years and years, his work has been segregated in order to simplify the reading and make the discussion and interpretation

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of his words and pictures possible (EAVES, 2004, p. 05). However, since *William Blake — Poet and Painter* (1964), by Jean Hagstrum, and *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (1978), by William J. T. Mitchell, this scenario has been changing. Over the last decades some critics[2] have been pointing out how this segregation can lead to critical reductions of Blake's work, which consists in words combined with images (illuminated printing, as he called it). In order to understand the association between images and words in Blake's work, it is interesting to know in advance that it differs from the relationship between poetry and painting described by the concept of *ut pictura poesis* and "sister arts", associated with Horace and Simonides of Ceos. Alcides Cardoso dos Santos (2009, p. 159) explains that "Blake's enlightened poetry highlights the insufficiency of reductionist attempts to relate the law (of text and image, regulated by the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*) and particularity (artistic singular occurrence)[3]. It is as if painting and poetry were not side by side in Blake's work, but face to face, "as integral forms of a single entity"[4] (TAVARES, 2012, p. 113, our translation): sometimes they work together to communicate the message, other times they narrate or interpret the same concept in different ways and, still, they can transmit different information on the same topic. The poems engraved with Blake's calligraphy bring up a new dimension of written word: in addition to those poetic functions already found in printed poetry — which are not obstructed, in a common book, by a reproduction technique that is based on prefabricated letters — Blake's

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[2] In Brazilian studies, the works which stand out in this sense are the ones by Claudia Rodrigues Calado (2013), who makes a semiotic analysis of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; Alcides Cardoso dos Santos (2009), who is dedicated to the studies of *Jerusalem The Emanation Of The Giant Albion* (1804); and Enéias Farias Tavares (2012), who studies the relationship between text and image in Blakean works, proposing a unified reading in some poems of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). These critics propose to analyze the illuminated work by extending their gaze to the images that accompany the poems, searching for a deep immersion in the universe offered by the engraver-poet.

[3] In the original: "a poesia iluminada de Blake põe em evidência a insuficiência das tentativas reducionistas de relacionar a lei (do texto e da imagem, reguladas pela tradição do *ut pictura poesis*) e a particularidade (a ocorrência artística singular)". (TAVARES, 2012, p. 113).

[4] In the original: "como formas integrantes de uma entidade una". (TAVARES, 2012, p. 113).

words have an expressive power based on their own form. When writing by hand, he ends up "drawing" the letters. Thus, in addition to inserting his "personal mark", as Santos explains (*apud* TAVARES, 2012, p. 88), Blake adjusts the outline and body of cursive writing to the specific needs of the work — a revolutionary procedure in the technique of reproduction, which does not cancel calligraphy, but inserts it as the essence of the poetry-painting relationship.

In his study, William Mitchell (1978) concludes that in Blake's composite art neither the graphic nor the poetic aspects predominate consistently. The relationship between painting and poetry is mostly that of energetic rivalry, in which a dialogue is established between two independent, autonomous artistic means of expression. For Thomas Frosch, in his *Blake's Composite Art*, Mitchell

> shows how Blakean practice contradicts point by point the principles of the 'ut pictura poesis' tradition, in which the imagination is given a visual analogy. Blake emerges convincingly here as an anti-perspectival, anti-pictorial artist; for him poetry and painting, far from seeking analogous methods, each have to find individual ways of being visionary. But with the text attacking objective time and the designs attacking objective space, both cooperate in reshaping the perceptual world. (FROSCH, 1979, p. 41).

Duality is the central theme of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (2016) and, as the subtitle suggests, Blake recognizes two forces that guide human existence; although opposed, they exist and are articulated within the same being. The same happens with poetry and painting in Blakean context, which do not coincidentally share the same media: before being analogous, they have their own and peculiar characteristics, and through these particularities of each one the artist is able to deconstruct moral and social concepts already established. In this sense, the artist seeks a unity between material and mystical or spiritual perceptions, intending to reveal the power and energy that the human being can achieve through imagination. Therefore, the establishment of boundaries between painting and poetry in order to

equalize them is something that is way far from the illuminated work that, on the contrary, aims to free them — which does not mean separating them. Mitchell explains that "Blake transforms traditional theories about the relationships of the 'sister arts' into the principles of his own visionary art form" (1978, p. xv).

The detailed and painstaking process in the composition of the illuminated books, created by the poet himself (called by the critics as Blake's printing process), shows Blake's concern about both the material and spiritual aspects of the work, as well as his conception about the artistic making and the sense of fusion and complementation between the verbal and visual arts. Therefore, ignoring one of these two aspects would compromise possible readings based on the original work created by the author. In *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (2004, p. 08), Morris Eaves explains:

> That reductive summary points toward a root cause of Blake's difficulty. His choice, perhaps his destiny, to work as maker of words, maker of images, and crossbreeder of both, amounted to a decision to live in incommensurable neighborhoods of meaning. In doing so he positioned himself facing upstream against the mainstream of modern human understanding, whose bedrock is the principle of specialization as a means of acquiring, organizing, encoding, and transmitting information. He abandoned us in turn to a modern dilemma: can the whole be understood through its parts? Can a simplified, specialized approach ever connect us to the vast and elusive whole that he used his multiple talents to incorporate in one package? (EAVES, 2004, p. 08).

Answering Eaves' last question: probably not. Blake created his own mythology based on a system of equivalences and symbols that work in a particular logic, which he could only communicate through poetry and art, that is, through the integration between paintings, illuminations and verses.

With that in mind, the proposal of this research is to share the reading process of "London", trying to explore not only the words, but also the paintings/engravings, which consists in designs created by engraving, and colored by hand in watercolor. This illuminated poem is part of the book *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*,

published in 1794, originally produced as illuminated book, hence engraved, hand-printed, and colored by Blake himself and his wife, Catherine Blake. The final intent, not yet totally accomplished in this article, is to get closer to the whole idea of the poem. To read "London" properly, it is not only necessary to be aware of its historical context but also to look carefully at the images that go with the verses. That way, it is feasible to search for an interpretation that unites the two arts used by the artist, making a more comprehensive understanding of the work possible, although it is far from being definitively deciphered.

2. *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE* – A DARK NURSERY RHYME

Regarding the illuminated book *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, it is known that the first part — *Songs of Innocence* — was individually printed in 1789, and, five years later, the second part — *Songs of Experience* was added. According to Richard Holmes (BLAKE, 2016, p. 09), *Songs* (both parts) were composed in line with the traditional 18th century nursery rhymes illustrated books[5]. The first part features a flutist (the Piper) as a narrator; he sees a smiling child appearing on a cloud — an angel, according to the opening picture — and asks him to play, sing and write songs of joy, which "Every child may joy to hear" (BLAKE, 2016, p. 04). Here, the illuminated poems give us the description of pastoral landscapes, such as woods and flowering and sunny fields, in which feelings of joy, tenderness and protection predominate — although they are not limited to these aspects, since some illuminated poems of that part present a dark atmosphere of tension, for instance, "The Chimney Sweeper" and "On Another's Sorrow". In the second part, the songs of the experience subvert this

[5] In the introduction to the Tate Publishing's edition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Richard Holmes considers the following works as representatives of the 18th century nursery rhymes genre: *Divine Songs* (1715), by Isaac Watts; *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), by Mrs. Anna Barbaulds; and *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), by Mary Wollstonecraft, which was illustrated with engravings by Blake himself (HOLMES, 2016, p. 09).

nursery rhymes tradition, presenting a darker version of the same landscapes, now with the presence of threats, in addition to the dark streets of the city permeated by the feeling of cholera, cruelty and injustice, like a protest to the unhappiness that plagues the world.

Thus, *Songs*' subtitle, *Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* (1794), reveals Blake's claim to explore the sense of duality in the human soul, which justifies the division between songs that deal with innocence and with experience, in an attempt to illustrate the opposites that make up the human being. However, they are not opposites in the conventional conception of good and evil, but in a pattern of contraries, which involves mystical conceptions in a subjective and symbolic cycle of human soul and thought transformations. This idea is explicit in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), when Blake declares that what religion calls "evil" is nothing but energy; a feature that is part of humankind and guides to human evolution. As Harold Bloom (2003, p. 14) remind us, *Songs of Innocence* opened the doors to Blake's literary productivity, which was influenced by the French Revolution — that coincidentally began in 1789 — and the American Revolution, two important upheavals that followed the Industrial Revolution. Although these influences are more explicit in Blake's prophetic works, it is possible to find resonances of world conflicts in *Songs* as well.

In *Experience,* keeping the structure of the lullabies, the songs of experience unveil a dark world of suffering and injustice, causing unrest in the serene environment illustrated by the songs of innocence; now, nature is skittish and insurgent, in disharmony (more explicitly in the illuminated poems "Earth's answer", "The Sick Rose" and "A Poison Tree"). Therefore, Blake turns to social criticism, especially in the illuminated poems "London" and "The Chimney Sweeper". The voice that narrates the songs of the experience is the bard's one, who walks through the dark streets of the city taken by the Industrial Revolution in a hostile scenario, full of threats

and permeated by suffering, injustice and cruelty. As Eric Hobsbawm (2014, p. 59) points out, even though the term "industrial revolution" was only coined in the 1820s, the events that encompass this conflict precede it, beginning around the 1760s and "exploding" in the 1780s — a time when Blake's literary production was taking its first steps. According to Bloom (2003, p. 41), "in Blake's opinion, the Industrial Revolution had changed the city for worse. [...] While he could not change society, he could observe, and express his opinion of the changes in his art", which is clearly present in "London". In contrast, D. G. Gilham (*apud* TAVARES, 2012, p. 164) believes that one should not read the illuminated poem "London" as a mere expression of Blake's opinions, nor as a social manifesto. Thereby, in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Blake exposes issues that arouse reflections about all aspects of humanity.

However, in addition to the dialogue that each poem establishes with its paintings, there is still to be considered the link between the illuminated poems of each part of *Songs* for a wider and deeper reading of the book. Most of *Innocence*'s poems have a correspondent one in *Experience* ("The Lamb" and "The Tyger", for example). Nevertheless, "London" is one of the few poems from *Experience* that does not have a direct correspondent in the first part. Still, it is possible to find echoes of this poem in "The Ecchoing Green", if we consider "London" a darker version of it.

As we could see, considering also the images that compose the work helps the reader to understand that innocence and experience are parts of existence, they are "the two opposite states of the human soul", as Blake says in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience's* subtitle, inherent to the passage through this world.

3. READING "LONDON"

As mentioned before, in order to come closer to all the possible meanings inside "London", we need to comprehend the period when it was conceived. Moreover, taking

a deep look at the images that compose the illuminated printing along with the verses will open a new door on interpretation, especially in "London", where the designs tell us a different story from the poem. In *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (2004, p. 02), Morris Eaves suggests to a beginner reader the use of two techniques to better understand Blake's work: "One: stick to the shortest and simplest works. Two: parse them into their constituent parts, usually words and images, and keep those segregated. Blake is simplest when the two techniques are combined". However, Eaves concludes that this technique, in critical reading, is insufficient: "Such leaks, as it were, around the edges of all simplified approaches are sure indications of their inadequacy: they are critical reductions, and sometimes useful for that, but not critical solutions" (EAVES, 2004, p. 05). Once this is a work in progress, here we share the steps recommended by Eaves, and the beginning of a combined reading as well. Following is the reproduction[6] of the illuminated poem[7].

[6] The reproduction of "London" presented here corresponds to Copy Z, available in the digital file *The William Blake Archive*.
[7] Plate transcription: London / I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow. / And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe, / In every cry of every Man, / In every Infants cry of fear. / In every voice; in every ban. / The mind-forg'd manacles I hear / How the Chimney-sweepers cry / Every blackning Church appalls. / And the hapless Soldiers sigh. / Runs in blood down Palace walls / But most thro' midnight streets I hear / How the youthful Harlots curse / Blasts the new-born Infants tear / And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse (BLAKE, 2016, p. 46).

FIGURE 1 — BLAKE, "LONDON", 1826

The artwork brings three figures: an elderly man, a child, and a vagabond (that could also be another child). They are not explicitly mentioned in the verses, but they are the centerpiece of the illuminated poem. On the other hand, the poem presents other three noteworthy characters — the Chimney Sweeper, the hapless Soldier, and the Harlot. What could be the relation between these characters? The verses describe a dark, dirty, and polluted London: the factories dominated and changed the city's way of life. Despite the lots of jobs offered, the work conditions were awful: too many hours of labor, a ridiculously low remuneration, unhealthy procedures, and an extreme exploitation of the workers. Even little children were forced to work cleaning the chimneys, which was acceptable for most of the society at the time. This last fact, in particular, bothered Blake the most — the illuminated poem "The Chimney Sweeper" has two different versions, one in *Innocence* and another in *Experience*, both denouncing the abuse of child labor, and this same critique is present in "London" as well.

Many scholars point to the importance of Blake's word choices, since it is known that he made lots of drafts, changing the vocabulary here and there for a reason. In *Bloom's major poets: William Blake* (2003), Harold Bloom, David Erdman, Edward P. Thompson and Gavin Edwards pay special attention to the word *charter'd*, used to describe London's streets and the Thames river: according to the scholars, the first option was *dirty*, but Blake ended up using that tricky word of multiple meanings instead. As Bloom (2003, p. 42) explains, based on Thompson's interpretation, "*charter'd* is associated with commerce and cheating. A *charter* is also a document that grants rights to individuals, at the same time limiting the rights of others". Another important observation, made by Erdman (2003, p. 44), explains that Blake was parodying the British patriotic song "Rule, Britannia!" (1740), with lyrics (poem) written by James Thomson, and which stands that Britain had "the charter of the land"

and, therefore, "Britons never will be slaves" — exactly the opposite of London's reality at that time. The free Muses from Thomson's poem becomes the youthful Harlots in Blake's one; nothing is pure or bright in the real Britain. If we consider that a charter gives privileges to a few (companies, investors etc.) and denies those privileges to others, it is possible to infer that Blake's choice points to the lack of opportunity and freedom of the English working class, and to the power of corporations.

Thus, in the first stanza, the speaker wanders the streets of London and sees a corrupted city, with unaided, miserable people. The second verse shows the suffering of Londoners, from children to adults. In this part, Blake comes up with the idea that the weak people of London are prisoners on their own minds — "The mind-forg'd manacles" (BLAKE, 2016 p. 46). As Erdman (2003) indicates, Blake did not mean that people are chaining themselves for their own will, but the circumstances of extreme poverty and exploitation lead them to this condition. And this is the reason why the workers cannot release themselves. The following stanza brings up two of the characters mentioned before, the Chimney Sweeper and the hapless Soldier. Here, Blake criticizes the Church, which had failed on giving hope to the weak and suffering Londoners — even the Church is polluted by the factories. While the chimney workers cry, the soldier's sigh runs on the walls like blood, illustrating his despair or even regret for fighting for Britain, since he may have realized that the true enemy is not France, but Britain itself, for leaving its people to die and starve. The soldier's scene also refers to the defeated battles of Britain, lost in the Industrial and American Revolutions. The final stanza presents the same streets at night, that are not darker than during the day, but still bleak; then we see another character, the prostitute — representing one more social issue of that time. The words here are strong: *curse*, *plagues*, *hearse*. According to Stewart Crehan (2003, p. 54), "the 'Harlot's curse' […] is syphilis, whose contagion indiscriminately blinds the new-born infant and turns the marriage bed into a 'hearse'".

Observing the illuminated poem, we notice the rivalry between text and image, for example, in the smoke from the fire that goes towards the written text, occupying its space; in the way the title of the poem is inserted below the scene of the child and the elder, as if it was engraved on the floor through which the characters walk; and in the total filling of the page with strong, cold and dark colors, and only the background of the verses with a lighter color and without total filling. The illuminations or ornaments, as in many illuminated poems from *Experience*, no longer show branches and vines, but a simple outline on the left of the page, which may be a plant, yet very much resembles the snake at the bottom of the copper plate in "Earth's Answer". When we look at the verses, we can realize it was written twice, to give the effect of a brown shadow on the letters, which could represent the dirt and the smoke caused by the factories. At the bottom, a brown thick and wavy trace crosses the page, interpreted by Robert Essick (2008, p. 117) as "the worm of mortality" that appears in the poem "The Sick Rose", but it could also be the snake that is at the bottom of the page of "A Cradle Song". Both worm and snake are generally symbolling negativity or evil, evoking images of death, sin, danger, cheating and even fear — elements that match with the illuminated poem's environment.

Although some scholars are used to mentioning the artwork when they are discussing the poem, most of the time the reading is superficial — the images are considered unusual illustrations of the verses. However, "London" is one of the illuminated poems in which images and words do not match directly; and this fact is barely commented in most of the essays. Kenneth Johnston (2003, p. 48) has gone a little further on this issue, paying special attention to the pictures in "London", although he has considered that "Blakes's designs at their best enrich the verbal statement of the poems" — which still puts the words in a superior position in comparison to the artwork. More than "enrich", the images *say* something else; they do not exist *because* of the words, but *with* the words; they are another language used by

Blake to express his art. And that should be enough to explain why the images and the verses in "London" are not explicitly related. The artwork shows an elderly man being led by a child on a dark street, at the top of the plate. It is interesting to observe that the figures of the old man and the child are lightened, as if they were being guided by some creature of the light — or even by God. The elderly seems weak, bending, crestfallen, looking down (or he might be blind) and perhaps he uses a cane with the left hand. Different from the verses, here we can see a little bit of hope. Below this scene, in the middle of the text, there is a human figure, who is a boy according to Essick (2008) and Tavares (2012), warming his hands over a fire. The blaze mixes with the smoke that impregnates the handwriting (which we perceive by the gradual transition from red to orange, yellow and gray) and appears to form a flower (that is more or less evident, depending on the analyzed impression). According to Kenneth Johnston:

> On the first viewing, the aged cripple and the child who seems to be leading him appear as two victims of the evils of contemporary London, but on closer inspection — of independent visual elements counterpointing independent verbal elements — we recognize a dramatization of the statement of the first stanza: the child and the ancient "mark" (see) in each other's face "woe" and "weakness", respectively. Or, more simply (since the old man may be blind), they *are* the marks — evidences — themselves. Furthermore, there is a profound irony in the situation if, as seems likely, the child is supposed to be leading the old man. Viewed against the text this is a mockery, since every stanza after the first contains a detail about the victimization of children in London. But what seems a mockery to common sense may be profoundly sustained ironic contrast to the author [...]. If we generalize the child as Innocence and the aged cripple as Experience, we can interpret the design in the larger context of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. (JOHNSTON, 2003, p. 48).

The three characters from the artwork are indeed victims of London, just as the Chimney Sweeper, the hapless Soldier and the Harlot, but they are not necessarily representations of the first stanza. It is important to consider that it is the speaker who sees marks of suffering in every face — "I wander thro' each charter'd street, [...] / And

mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (BLAKE, 2016 p. 46). Affirming that the elderly and the child see suffering in each other’s face is accepting that one of them, or even both, is the speaker of the illuminated poem — which does not seem to be the case. But yes, they are probably exampling the weak and unfortunate faces the narrator finds through London’s streets, yet it is hard to believe that their role on the illuminated page is merely a reiteration of textual information. It is also necessary to reconsider Johnston's assertion about the “profound irony” contained in the possibility that the boy is guiding the old man, because even though the child is constantly victimized in the poem (and in *Songs* in general), he or she is also many times described as wise, since through imagination he or she connects with innocence. "The Lamb" is one of the illuminated poems that demonstrates the greatness of the child, who is directly connected to Christ (ESSICK, 2008, p. 118). A suggestion is that Blake represents the kid in “London” as the only hope of overcoming and seeking better conditions for Londoners, especially if we consider that the child portrayed on the copper plate is being illuminated by a divine force.

Nevertheless, the reading of the child and the old man as representations of *Innocence* and *Experience*, respectively, seems likely. But the challenge is to uncover if the innocence is something lost in the past or if it is a hope of a better future. As Johnston wonders,

> Does the design parallel the text by showing the inadequacies of Innocence and Experience as *separated* modes of consciousness, or is it to be read counter to the text, as a hopeful sign of human progress, a glimpse of the day when the wisdom of Experience moves forward in the city by the fresh simplicity of Innocence desires? (JOHNSTON, 2003, p. 48).

According to our analysis, Johnston's second inference looks more promising. Considering the central idea of *Songs*, that the human being is naturally constituted by contrary energies and that, when admitting this foundation, transcends a plan of

evolution, it would be reasonable to say that the scene of the child guiding the elder represents the fusion of innocence and experience, that is, the assimilation of that duality and the understanding that human salvation is in harmony between these two opposite energies. The child portrayed in "London", who appears innocent, is actually taking the lead and making decisions. Furthermore, the child is not so far from the figure of the "tyger", especially when we think about the fearless animal revealed in the verses, but which is passive and assertive both in the images that accompany the verses of "The Tyger" and "The Little Girl Found". As it is stated by Essick (2008, p. 118): "All is dark, but the child's actions show an active compassion never demonstrated by the poem's speaker". Innocence, therefore, is the guide for the acceptance of the opposites of the human soul, but it loses its potency if separated from experience: there is no paradise without hell; there is no joy without suffering; there is no life without death. Nature is perfect in itself, as well as the human being, but when disconnected from his or her own essence, and breaking with innocence, the human becomes cruel, proud, insensitive and, consequently, more harmful than the purest manifestation of evil.

Lastly, although many critics over the years (especially from the end of the twentieth century) have come to recognize the importance of considering images and verses in reading William Blake's illuminated books, few have actually looked at the illuminated work of the poet-painter in search of meanings that consider both languages used by him. Therefore, we hope this article motivates future Blakean scholars to get into Blake's illuminated works, seeking to reveal interactions not yet discovered.

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