

## ***The Bard – William Blake at Flat Time House***

By Henry Whaley

Over the last few months, Tate Britain has loudly proclaimed William Blake ‘Rebel, Radical, Revolutionary’; the phrase accompanied posters covering the city, emblazoned with Blake’s dramatic final work. In November, the same work lit up the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral in honour of the artist’s 262<sup>nd</sup> birthday. More than ever before, the spirit of Blake has stalked the streets of London. Now, Blake has returned to his spiritual home, Peckham.

Chris McCabe, curator of *The Bard* at Flat Time House, who has drawn extensively from Blake’s legacy in his own poetry, confesses his astonishment that Peckham is never named in any of Blake’s poems; indeed it was on the Rye that Blake had his first vision, ‘a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars’.<sup>1</sup> This is a place that forms the nucleus of Blake’s anti-rationalist thought, a turning point in a life governed by the fantastical.

The works on display here are indeed fantastical. We are presented with two examples of poems by Gray illustrated by Blake, ‘The Bard’ and ‘The Fatal Sisters’, part of a larger commission totalling 116 pages undertaken in 1797 for John Flaxman. As McCabe asserts in the exhibition catalogue, to overlook these works based on their commissioned nature is a grave mistake; the rich dialogue between poetry and image that unfolds on these pages is an extension of an exchange taking place well beyond their borders, with Gray’s mythic imagery quoted directly in Blake’s work up to a decade either side of the examples presented.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake, ‘Pictor ignotus’* (London, 1863) p.7

<sup>2</sup> Chris McCabe, ‘The Commission as Vision’, *The Bard – William Blake at Flat Time House*, ed. Chris McCabe (Flat Time House, 2020)

From an artist whose work is so multivalent and densely constructed from a complex web of literary and ideological influences, to view Blake's imagery in direct conjunction with a narrative base is a fascinating opportunity to witness the artist's imaginative interpretational capacities at play. Indeed, his interpretations of the poetic imagery feel far from restricted. Gray's expressive language is exploded onto the page by Blake's images. In 'The Bard', the poet's description of the dramatic natural backdrop, of a 'giant-oak', a 'desert cave', of 'torrents', are anthropomorphised by Blake; they become great sinewy figures, their bodies weaving around each other, their expressions of pure emotional states accessing a latent pathos in Gray's words and bringing it to the fore.

As exhibition contributor Magnus Rena has noted in his essay for the catalogue, the pages reverse the traditions of Medieval marginalia: Blake's figures have overthrown their textual basis.<sup>3</sup> The small windows containing Gray's words are engulfed by the ferociously dramatic movement and colour of Blake's illustrations. The tight window format creates a solid boundary between the poetry and illustration, between Gray and Blake, but Blake's figures threaten to burst their ranks; on one page of 'The Bard', the ethereal bards descending from the sky press their faces right up against the wall of the box separating them from the earthly figures below, creating a palpable tension between the heavenly and the terrestrial. On the preface page to 'The Fatal Sisters', the imposing armoured figure of '*Sigtryg with the Silken Beard*' surrounds the box, enclosing it with his staff.

The second major part of this exhibition consists of contemporary responses to Blake by a group of contemporary poets led by McCabe: featured are poems by Keith Jarrett, Robert Montgomery, Niall McDevitt, Karen Sandhu, Iain Sinclair and Tamar Yoseloff. In them

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<sup>3</sup> Magnus Rena, 'The Bard and The Fatal Sisters', *The Bard – William Blake at Flat Time House* ed. Chris McCabe (Flat Time House, 2020) p.21



Figure 1 - William Blake, *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, Design 62, 'The Bard' 10, c.1797-8 (Photo: Yale Centre for British Art)



Figure 2 - William Blake, *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, Design 69, 'The Fatal Sisters', c.1797-8, (Photo: Yale Centre for British Art)

we recognise the noble figure of 'The Bard' clasping his great ornate harp on the poem's title page, the text contained in the instrument as if affixed to its strings. In the voices of these contemporary poets we may hear the bard's song.

But the role of the poet is threatened in 'The Bard's narrative, in which Edward I decrees that the bards of Wales shall be executed, ensuing their vengeful wrath. As the poem begins, we see again the bearded bardic figure, but gone is his noble gravity, his rich blue robes, his golden crown; now he grasps the strings of the harp, bloody and gigantic, in the wake of the terrible narrative of the poem. His figure surrounds the text, filling the page to its edges. This, too, may be the embodiment of our seven contemporary poets; as McCabe says, 'when poets are doing their work well [...] the establishment doesn't like them'<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> McCabe (2020) p.9



Figure 3 - William Blake, *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, Design 53, 'The Bard' 1, c.1797-8, (Photo: Yale Centre for British Art)



Figure 4 - William Blake, *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, Design 55, 'The Bard' 3, c.1797-8, (Photo: Yale Centre for British Art)

Another dialogue, between Blake and John Latham (1921-2006), is perhaps best synthesised in the title to Keith Jarrett's response to the exhibition: 'A basic diagram (or, on alternate time signatures, two incidental persons converge upon frameworks of cosmology)'. Indeed there are nearly two centuries of artistic, scientific, political and philosophical development separating the lives of the two men, yet they are infinitely comparable. Latham, whose home plays host to the exhibition, is an artist to whom Tate's 'Rebel, Radical, Revolutionary' label might just as well be applied; in his art he embraced a plurality of media to create in conjunction with his complex visionary theories of an art 'after physics'. Like Blake, the complex thought attached to his creative output has seen him labelled both visionary genius and madman. For Latham, who in 2003 declared his home a work of art, the cultural significance of Peckham in the legacy of Blake was not lost.

Flat Time House, named after his theory of time, he considered a 'living sculpture', whose rooms are named after bodily characteristics. In this exhibition, 'The Fatal Sisters' is housed in the front gallery, known as the Mind, while 'The Bard' is displayed at the back of the house, in Latham's former studio space, the Hand, analogising beautifully the artists' shared exploration of the line between mental contemplation and physical creation.

The corridor that runs between Blake's works was known by Latham as 'the shift' between thinking and making, and this is where we find our poetic responses. It is fitting to find these passages, ruminations upon the artistic creations of Blake and Latham, caught in this transitory zone. Robert Montgomery's poem, for example, is taken from one that has previously been found spread out in the streets of London, on posters and projected onto buildings; his work is always blurring the lines between poetry and sculpture. Niall McDevitt and McCabe, who will be teaming up to lead a walk through Peckham in conjunction with the exhibition, instil in their work the psychogeography of London. The work of Karen Sandhu, represented here by a poem that warrants being read aloud to be fully appreciated, verges always on performance art. Here their words are pinned down, affixed to the wall, but these are artists grappling with expressing the fugitive truths of human existence, with the same visionary curiosity of Blake and Latham

It seems only right that McCabe, who spent a year of his life trying to relocate Blake's tree, has helmed this exhibition. The result is the harmonious display of poetic and visionary minds intertwined, drawing from each other in an unending search for the sublime.

**Henry Whaley** studies Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art.