

# Notes on the Use of Compasses in the Works of William Blake

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Aesthetics is an extremely complex subject to study because it is thought that the true value of art can only be realized through direct, personal experience. In view of this observation one can pose the following question : "How does art come into being?" In general, we can state that an artist experiences intense emotions and the desire to "express" these feelings leads to the subsequent production of art-objects. Similarly, when people try to describe some specific work of art, they will often delve into what really went on in the "mind" of the artist during its creation, or possibly refer to the historical or social settings which gave rise to the ultimate work.

Once the art-object is produced, it can then be approached and understood from many angles. We can express an interest in it from several aspects, either aesthetically or morally. The degree to which we are aesthetically concerned can also vary greatly. The meaning and the value of a work of art will thus be interpreted in diverse ways by different people, under many types of circumstances.

Works such as the poems, drawings, etchings and prophetic writings of William Blake in 18th and 19th century England have been highly appreciated and valued by both literary critics and laymen alike. People especially admire Blake's poetic quality, interpretation of the universe and mythological mystical content. In the following paper, I would like to discuss some examples of compasses or dividers, significant objects which frequently appear in the works of Blake, in an attempt to examine what these tools actually signify in terms of the poet's symbolic universe.

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Regarding compasses, James Hall, in his *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* provides the following definition: "Compasses or 'dividers' ... the attributes of numerous abstract personification: Astronomy, one of the SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS and Urania the MUSE of astronomy (covered with stars holding a globe) ; Geometry, another of the Liberal Arts and

Euclid, its historical representative . . . ”<sup>1)</sup> In addition, Hagstrum, in *William Blake, Poet and Painter* has noted that for Blake, “. . . the butterfly symbolizes the good, imaginative and bold person, and the compass stands for the god of this mechanical world :”<sup>2)</sup>

Among the most well known works of William Blake, in which we can find compasses, are “Newton” (Plate 1), a color print (1795) and “The Ancient of Days” (Plate 2), an etching which served as the frontispiece to “Europe A Prophecy” (1794). These two pieces were not merely founded on Blake's simplistic vision of the world but were rather basically rooted in his pluralistic picture of society on the whole. The compasses we encounter here are the ones that measure the vacant universe, which is one of the consequences of an industrialized society. They are drawn through Blake's imagination, which also displays his own symbolic reality.

In “Newton” the figure is that of Sir Isaac Newton<sup>3)</sup>, in the form of a nude profile, perched upon some rocks, encrusted with barnacles. He is sitting at the bottom of the Sea of Time and Space, “the sea of materialism” with polypus<sup>4)</sup> surrounding his left foot. The famous scientist is hunched over while drawing a geometrical diagram on a scroll of paper. His bent posture implies the despair that is associated with such an activity. A small compass that Newton is using to draw with is bound to the body of Urizen the Creator.<sup>5)</sup> In this print, Blake is criticizing the Newtonian lack of spiritual values of the time. However it is only a temporal conception as expressed in “A Vision of the Last Judgment”.<sup>6)</sup> Blake himself has said, “. . . he who is out of the Church and opposes it is no less an Agent of Religion than he who is in it. to be an Error and to be Cast out is a part of God's Design. No man can Embrace True art till he has Explored and cast out False Art such is the Nature of Mortal Things”.<sup>7)</sup> We can also see evidence of this notion in one of Blake's letters to Thomas Butt, “May God us keep from single vision and Newtons sleep”.<sup>8)</sup>

On the other hand, “The Ancient of Days” depicts Urizen employing a large compass as he engages in the act of defining the material world. Urizen the Creator is also an architect as evidenced by his building of Mundane Shell.<sup>9)</sup> Blake developed a mythology of his own, which did not define the figure of his vision as the Lord, but rather as something from his own imagination. He called this image Urizen, an unsympathetic spirit that he disliked intensely. Blake thought of Urizen as the creator of the world, but he also believed that the material world was corrupt, so he took him to be innately evil. Since Urizen is the creator of the world, in the above-mentioned etching, he is holding a compass in his left hand, which is considered

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“sinister” according to Blake's symbolism. Much of the force of the image in “The Ancient of Days” comes from the way in which Blake can be seen to reverse his expectations. By virtue of these symbolic characters Blake describes how man became subject to the laws of religion and mortality, and how these factors brought with them the evils of war.

This frontispiece to “Europe A Prophecy” shows Urizen with an outstretched left hand directed into the dark infinite universe. He is holding a pair of compasses and is using them in an attempt to set up some sort of a boundary while drawing a circle. Creation is therefore viewed as the act of a person being imprisoned in the material world. It is the act of an evil spirit that does not permit one to see the infinite world of human beings.

Another example that we can point to is from “Europe A Prophecy” (Plate 3) itself :

A  
Prophecy  
The deep of winter came ;  
What time the secret child,  
Descended thro' the orient gates of the eternal day  
War ceas'd, and all the troops like shadows fled to their abodes.<sup>10)</sup>

In this work we can observe that the upper-case letter A is fixed as if embedded in a pair of compasses. From the left of the A a human willow and a date palm emerge. The title “A Prophecy” is surrounded by flowers, trees, children and angels. This fixed compass point A must be considered to be a kind of highly decorative design, which naturally embodied Blake's own integrated concept of nature.

This theme is further elucidated in PRELUDIUM (Plate 2), “... And who shall bind the infinite with an eternal hand? To compass it with swaddling bonds? and who shall cherish it With milk and honey? I see it smile and I roll inward and my voice is past”.<sup>11)</sup> Ultimately however, Blake compromises by saying, “... The Whole Creation Groans to be delivered ; there will always be as many Hypocrites born as Honest Men and they will always have superior Power in Mortal Things”<sup>12)</sup> and “Forgiveness of Sin is only at the Judgment Seat of Jesus the Savior where the Accuser is cast out. not because he Sins but because he torments the Just and makes them do what he condemns as Sin and what he knows is opposite to their own Identity”.<sup>13)</sup>

Furthermore, in "Application", found in "There Is No Natural Religion",<sup>14)</sup> we see God as a carpenter drawing something on the ground with the obvious aid of a compass. This work, executed in illuminated print (Plate 4) says: "He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only. Therefore, God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is".<sup>15)</sup> God is now presented to us in a bearded human form, on hands and knees, drawing a triangle which mirrors the shape of his compasses. At the same time we can see the infinite flowering of life before our own eyes.

"By attending to the 'Ratio' alone, he 'sees himself only', that is the external equivalent of his geometrical mind. The images of a man, bending over and using dividers here and in the frontispiece to 'Europe' (also called 'The Ancient of Days'), has countless precursors extending back to the Byzantine mosaics of God the Father in the act of creation. The significant inclusion of a geometrical diagram suggests that Raphael's portrayal of Euclid in 'The School of Athens' may have been particularly relevant to Blake's concerns here".<sup>16)</sup>

A somewhat different interpretation of compasses exists in a watercolor entitled "Jacob's Dream" (circa 1800) (Plate 5). Its origin can be found in the Bible,<sup>17)</sup> as follows, "And Jacob . . . . lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there, all night, because the sun was set ; and he took of the stones . . . and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and beheld a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven ; and beheld the angels of God ascending and descending on it".

In the above painting, on a zigzagged shaped ladder, two angels are descending several steps above the bottom rung. One of them is holding a huge compass in her left hand, as if to measure the promised land. Unlike our previous examples of Urizen and Newton, who both use compasses to aid in measuring the limitations of the material world, here the spirit of visual art appears. It is as if the Spirit of God is descending by way of art while, on the contrary, it is possible for mere human beings to ascend to heaven via art.

A rather different aspect of a compass is visible in Plate 12 of "Jerusalem" (1804), which is Blake's longest and most complex work. Here a male figure is descending vertically holding a compass which is pointing to both the word "joy" as well as the North Pole on a globe. On this beautifully colored plate Blake has engraved the following words: "And the Four Points are thus beheld in Great Eternity West, the Circumference: South, the Zenith: North, The Nadir: East, the

Center, unapproachable forever. These are the four Faces towards the Four Worlds of Humanity In every Man.” According to Blake, as the Emanation of the Giant Albion, Jerusalem represents and is specifically defined as Liberty, an early gift from God, which provides the true inspiration for all mankind.<sup>18)</sup>

There are also some other passages in the Bible that mention compasses in which wisdom speaks and says, “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old . . . before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth . . . when He prepared the Heaven, I was there : when He set a compass on the face of the depths : when He established the clouds above : when He strengthened the fountains of the deep”.<sup>19)</sup>

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So far we have taken up only a few limited examples of compasses that can be found amongst the many works of William Blake. In the ironical pictorial language of “The Ancient of Days” and the desperation of “Newton”, two antagonistic worlds of heaven and earth exist, yet they are linked together as one within the plural layers of the artist's vision. In addition, the origin of the “Newton” motif is believed to have come from the “There Is No Natural Religion” series. Here a similar figure accompanies the idea that “He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only,” for the diagram is only a reflection of the limits of his own perfection, although in the end, this materialism reveals that natural religion is nothing more than the scientific materialism that Satan has thrown off. A compass for “Newton” then is a kind of tool that he employs to limit the world, namely reason, whereas the one in “Jacob's Dream” is used by the spirit of humanity to unify people with God. In other words this is the unification of science (Urizen) and imagination (Los).<sup>20)</sup>

In discussing the genius of Blake, Edward Lucie-Smith has pointed out that, “. . . He declared that : ‘Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho' ever acute) can discover.’ These visionary beliefs inform the whole of his work, whether written or drawn, and were to be echoed again and again, years later in the work and the writings of what we now call the symbolist movement”.<sup>21)</sup>

Throughout his works, William Blake expresses the feeling that if human beings try their best to enter into the spiritual world, the more important, deeper, mystical and infinite world can be

reached. However, he also believes that our inner perceptions can be severely limited by materialistic reason. For him, God and imagination are one. God is the creative and spiritual power in human beings, but without human beings, God cannot possibly exist. Blake is deeply concerned with the concept of the many uses of compasses in his interpretation of the universe and the revelations of his own mind in relation to both the world and the times in which he lived.

### Notes

- 1) James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art*, p.73.
- 2) Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake, Poet and Painter*, p.52.
- 3) Sir Isaac Newton, 1642-1727, English philosopher and mathematician who formulated the Law of Gravity.
- 4) polypus (polyp), sedentary type of animal form characterized by a more or less fixed base, columnar body, and free end with mouth and tentacles.
- 5) Urizen the Creator symbolizes Reason. He is the limiter of Energy, the law maker and the avenging conscience.
- 6) David V. Erdman, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p.544.
- 7) Ibid., p.551.
- 8) Ibid., p.693.
- 9) S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, p.287. Mundane Shell and Mundane Egg form the three-dimensional world of time and space, in which fallen man incubates until he hatches and reenters Eternity.
- 10) David V. Erdman, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p.60.
- 11) In Blake's Lambeth prints, "Europe A Prophecy" (1794), there are 15 plates in which PRELUDIUM can be found in plates 1 and 2.
- 12) Ibid., p.554.
- 13) Ibid., p.555.
- 14) Ibid., p.2. There Is No Natural Religion (b) (1795).
- 15) Ibid., p.2.
- 16) M. Eaves, R. N. Essick & J. Viscom, *William Blake, The Early Illuminated Book*, p.40.
- 17) Genesis 28 : 10-12.
- 18) Op. cit., Damon, p.206.
- 19) Proverbs viii, 22-28.
- 20) Op. cit., Damon, p.246. Science (Urizen) ; Imagination (Los, is Poetry, the expression in this world of the Creative Imagination.).
- 21) Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art*, p.33.

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Plate 1  
From *William Blake*, Michael Davis



Frontispiece: 'Europe'. (Illuminated printing) Fitzwilliam Museum

Plate 2  
From *William Blake*, Raymond Lister

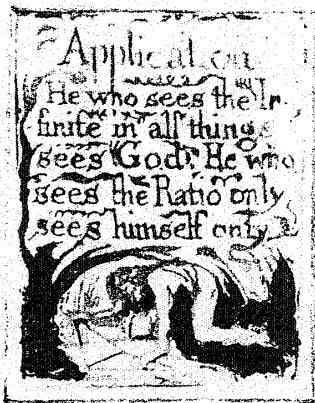


Plate 3  
From *The Continental Prophecies*, Vol.4.



Jacob's Ladder. (Water-colour) British Museum

Plate 5  
From *William Blake*, Michael Davis



Religion

Plate 4  
From *The Early Illuminated Books*, Vol.3.

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