

Ut pictura poesis: The verbal-visual synthesis in William Blake's poetic worldview

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Abstract. This paper presents a new approach to William Blake's self-illustrated poems and investigates the verbal-visual synthesis in his worldview manifestation. It is hypothesized that verbal and visual representations made a demand for each other as they reflected unified embodied conceptualizations. The purpose of this study was to examine how different modalities increased a variety of ways in which the poet could interpret his own experience and represent his vision of the Universe. The findings showed that hybrid representation of Blake's poetic worldview resulted in the increased salience of relevant information, more varied imagery and its more elaborate encoding.

Keywords: William Blake, poetic worldview, multimodality, image

1. Introduction

The interdisciplinary orientation in modern science has brought to the integrated view of human creativity, focus on individual motivation, on why people are willing to create something and how they do so. This perspective appears useful for the studies in language and literature because it suggests that our individual approaches to the environment, values, beliefs are not only shaped by the might of cultural tradition and social history, but also by our individual experiences of organizing worldviews in which entities are interpreted as holistic and meaningful. In this light, artistic creations, including works of poetry and visual art, are individuals' perspectives on life, self, others and the Universe, "viewed as a window into conscious and subconscious facets of the writer's mind" [43].

In recent years, the scientific interest to poetic worldview has tremendously grown, "primarily because language is its medium" [31]. Modern linguists and cognitive scientists deal with discourse analysis and focus on poetic structures in communication [10, 14].

The linguistic agenda of worldview looks into the merge of the cultural and the symbolic [22], metaphoric resources and poetic thinking [14, 39]. Having made a cooperative effort in bridging "the gap between mind and world" [20], cognitive linguistics and poetics have moved

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towards a rapidly growing multidisciplinary field of studies on iconicity, creation of text worlds, connections between cognitive and textual structures [9]. In addition to the insight into how poetic mind understands the world and represents it to others [16], studies in poetics have taken a new direction by applying a multimodal approach to poetry and visual arts, considering the intersection of communication and multimodality, language and literature [4, 11, 25, 44].

This new approach has provided literature in general, and poetry studies in particular, with research methods that can foster our understanding of how an individual creates and represents concepts by polycoding means, “making the intermedial play of visual and verbal even more intricate and thus more expressive” [42]. Poetry does not confine itself to spoken or written words. There has been a long history of poetry presentation alongside with decorations and illustrations. However, a multimodal format in poetry, combining verbal and visual means of expression, does not simply stimulate the intensity of feeling or enhance esthetic satisfaction. It varies the dimensions of explication, enables to say what is not said in words, or give more salience to what has been said.

For William Blake (1757-1827), a seminal figure in English visual art and poetry of the Romantic age, the illustrations accompanying his poems, went far beyond the design and performance. Blake combined his poems and engravings to create a new world, obviously bringing him joy and satisfaction. Unpraised during his lifetime for the idiosyncrasy of the poetry and behaviour, Blake created visions and mythology, symbolism, contrasting images and leitmotifs that shaped the development of English romanticism with its poeticization of everyday life and nature, glorification of the human soul, and combination of lyrics and pathos.

The ingenuity of Blake’s poetic and artistic works, aesthetics and philosophy repeatedly excited debates and opposite interpretations [24]. Philosophical affinities and the echo of Blake’s voice in modern literature are outlined in [5]. The studies of Blake’s lyrics and prophetic poems examined the dialectic of his poetic language [36], mythopoetics, biblical overtones and syncretic images [37, 38]. The translation studies prioritised the interpretation of the emotional images and symbols [15]. The frame of cognitive poetics [32, 34] revealed the mythical worlds and multiple meanings associated with the key notions and views of the poet on divinity, art, love, justice, equality, eternity and infinity, to name but a few. Multidisciplinary studies found out about the philosophical and socio-religious concepts emerging from the poems [3, 12, 13, 28, 30, 35], defined the role of allegory [2] and opposition [1, 33] in their representation. Findings regarding the technique applied by the poet to illuminate his books [18, 41] presented the aesthetics and intransigence of his views, exposed intricate connections between the style and the material processes of the produced editions.

Previous works have failed to address an important issue of the inextricable intertwine between the poetry and imprints in Blake’s book productions, “bring together what he was doing in his art... [his] labour above payment” [23] and what his poetic talent composed.

This paper presents a new approach to William Blake’s self-illustrated poems and investigates the multimodal synthesis in his worldview manifestation. Although the difference between poetic and artistic methods seems to be immense, it hardly precluded Blake from synthesizing them in creating picturesque poetic texts. With this in mind, we look at William Blake as an artistic poet.

It is hypothesized that Blake’s self-illustrated poetry collections employed verbal and visual means to elaborate his individual worldview. Created separately but used together, verbal

and visual representations made a demand for each other as they reflected unified embodied conceptualizations.

The purpose of this study was to examine the multimodal space of William Blake's poetic worldview and broaden the current understanding of how different modalities increased a variety of ways in which the poet could interpret his own experience and represent his vision of the Universe.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes research methodology, materials and sources. Section 3 examines Blake's self-illustrated poems and the role of multimodal synthesis in his worldview manifestation. Our conclusions are drawn in the final section.

2. Research methodology and materials

Ut pictura poesis "a poem like a picture", a well-cited quote from Horace's *The Art of Poetry* (*Ars poetica*), has turned into a motto which, however, advocates neither imitation nor comparison between verbal and visual arts. The original idea of Horace was concerned with the theatre as he pointed out that vision was a stronger stimulus of imagination than what we heard: "*Less vividly is the mind stirred by what finds entrance through the ears than by what is brought before the trusty eyes, and what the spectator can see for himself*" (cited in) [8]. Horace's approach gave way to the theory emphasizing aesthetic experience and creativity in arts and literature, and later stimulated ideas about semiotic constructs that consist of several codes cooperating in the production of meaning [46]. We take these approaches as starting points in our research. The study also draws on the principles elaborated in the theories of language worldview, cognitive semantics multiperspectivity of literary works and the theory of iconicity.

The theory of verbal (linguistic / language) worldview, which refers to the ideas of Humboldt and Weisgerber about the language as a mediator between speakers and the environment, posits that judgements about the world, self and others are entrenched in languages. Encompassing what is dynamic in language, worldviews evolve as socially shared or individual. The former are stereotyped and the latter appear most individualized. The most idiosyncratic worldviews are creative literary versions of the Universe, perceived as such against what is stereotyped in language [21, 22]. As to the theory of poetic worldview, it is stated that poetry reveals its interpretation of life in depiction of events, people, actions, evaluating and creatively shaping them [31].

A lot of work has been carried out within the theory of cognitive metaphor developed by Lakoff and Johnson [27]. Metaphoric thinking is recognized as a universal instrument of cognizing the world. From a multimodal perspective, metaphor is considered as a tool of multiple meanings creation, hence turning a poem into a "powerful multi-dimensional construct" [4]. A cognitive semantic approach to the figure-ground asymmetry allows to consider the dependence of linguistic encoding on the frames of reference and the degree of information salience (i.e. relevance) [40].

The theory of multiperspectivity in literary pictorialism relies upon the semiotic and cognitive approaches to focus on visual poetry, onomatopoeia, figurative language and multimodal imagery [4, 14, 20]. The interrelations between literary and mental imagery (word – image), understood as poetic iconicity, can be discovered through figurative resemblance of various

kinds (acoustic, conceptual) [26].

The key concept of this research – multimodality – is widely used, but not very well defined. Although there is some degree of overlap among approaches, the term is applied to a variety of notions and not distinguished from polycoding and intermediality. The term “multimodality” or “multimediality” as a foundational phenomenon refers to the combination of multiple sensory and communicative modes that produce meaning, such as sight, sound, print, images, music. Multimodal literary texts comprise visual and verbal modes. Non-linguistic elements in the text counted as modes [19] are considered non-verbal modalities or non-verbal text elements. The term “polycoding” is used in translation studies, while “intermediality” is applied as an umbrella-term in literary studies, media studies, art history, etc.

Unfortunately, deep research into the theory of multimodal poetic representations alongside with individual case studies, leave a considerable uncertainty with regard to the role of verbal-visual synthesis in poetic worldview manifestation. This study pertains to the cognitive-semiotic analysis of William Blake’s poetic worldview, the role of verbal-visual synthesis in its manifestation.

For the purpose of this research, we applied a set of interdisciplinary methods. The contextual, componential, and conceptual analysis used in linguistics were combined with the basic principles of the description of works of fine arts.

The data were collected from William Blake’s illustrated books containing 130 lyrical and prophetic poems accompanied by 200 imprints and drawings [6, 7, 29, 45].

3. Results and discussion

Blake endeavoured to create etchings and engravings for his books. Pictures, which appeared alongside with the texts and on the book covers, had more to offer than just a commercial value increase, entertainment or readers’ imagination trigger. Illustrations played an aesthetic role, opened a unique way of author’s artistic interpretation of the world according to the rules of beauty. Color contrasts, flowing lines, fantasy images, charming plants adorned the inspiring lines of Blake’s poems.

Having established a close bond between the written and visual parts of his books, Blake succeeded in making them integral constituents of his poetic space. By combining imprints and verses, the poet extended and varied dimensions of his worldview. It is noteworthy that pictures do not duplicate the stories in the poems but enrich them, enable readers, and the author himself, to “experience the words” and “listen to the pictures”. By means of combining verbal and non-verbal representations, Blake shifted the onus for communicating ideas from the poet onto the painter and vice versa. As Distil rightly pointed out, in the “poet / painter alliance... The painter writes and the [poet] paints; their tasks and skills are not only compatible but apparently reliant upon one another” [17]. Multimodality is an efficient tool in Blake’s hands to create his own conception of the Universe.

Space is an essential ingredient of the poet’s worldview representing a set of features: vertical/horizontal, closed / open, static/ dynamic. However, most important for the poet is the vertical measurement in which the universe is revealed “(*Thro’ the Heaven and Earth and Hell...*” (*Broken Love*)). Among the lexical means of verbalization, the most frequent (43.5%) in Blake’s poems are

the names of the airspace, rising entities or their tops, heavenly bodies (*up, high, heaven, cloud, sky, hill, mountain, rock, sun, moon*, etc.), 56.5% of words with spatial meanings are distributed among several subgroups including the designations of the bottom, deep holes, etc. (*down, under, hole, grave*, etc.) and entities located in the middle layer (*earth, ground, land*, etc.), water space (*stream, river, sea, ocean*), and the civilized space (*town, city, palace, church, street, school*, etc.), geographical coordinates of the world, and general terms (*world, Universe*). In addition, the nominative elaboration of the upper part is achieved by the employment of the verbs of vertical movement (*ascend, rise, fall, rush down* as in “*I see thy dark clouds ascend*”; “*Rush’d down like floods from his mountains*” (*The book of Ahania*)), and nouns denoting artifacts designed as vertical passages (“*Over the doors ... and over the chimneys...*” (*Europe, a Prophecy*)).

As the upper part of the world in Blake’s conception is associated with divinity, awakening and beginning, it is distanced from humans. The spatial enormousness is iconically encoded in the extended forms of verbal structures, such as polysyndetonic enumerations (“*And over the void Spaces Over Sun and moon and star and constellation*” (*The Four Zoas*)) and combinations of the adjective distant with the emphatic pluralized noun *heavens* (“*in distant heavens / Away from me*” (*ibid.*), “*the distant heavens reply*” (*Europe, a Prophecy*)). In these and other contexts, the adjective *distant* acquires the status of an epithet, enhances imagery and artistic expression. It is clear, however, that extended verbal structures deal with the concepts of eternity, infinity, spaciousness, inaccessibility of the heavens in Blake’s anthropocentric version of the Universe.

The vertical is given particular salience in the imprints. Vertical images prevail in Blake’s pictures: people are depicted in natural, comfortable poses, mostly in standing position (illustrations in *The Echoing Green, The Lamb, The Argument*). In contrast, horizontal poses, bending, kneeling, sitting, tilting seem to be forced and uncomfortable. After all, the people depicted in these poses experience pain and suffering: dead babies, a mother leaning over a child (*Holy Thursday*); the inclined figure of a child walking down the street (*The Chimney-Sweeper*); a sad woman lying on the grass (*The Angel*); an old man leaning to the ground because he is bound by the ropes of cruelty and obedience (*The Human Abstract*); the figures of children and a priest kneeling and praying in the devastated garden with graves, where flowers once grew (*The Garden of Love*).

The salience of the vertical is enforced by manipulating the viewer’s position. The sky and the sun may be drawn from below and make an impression of dominance. By violating the principle of ordering and perspective, Blake succeeds in focusing on individual objects. In order to accentuate on the image of the shining sun, the artist violates the rules of perspective: despite the distance, the sun in the background looks closer than other subjects in the picture, because it is depicted in brighter colors than the blurred outlines of people or animals in the foreground (see *The Black Boy* and *Fly*). We suggest that Blake’s choice of ordering, perspective and viewpoint reflects his interpretation of the world, place and value of various entities.

In contrast, the trees and people are portrayed from their level, hence achieve equality in the sense that they exist together in the same place and at the same time. In the poems, the sameness of nature and humans is created by metaphor and metaphonymy. Metaphors assign nature various human characteristics and manifest as personifications: “*the lonely dale*” (*The Little Boy Found*), “*And now her feet step on the grassy bosom of the ground*” (*The Four Zoas*), “*That earth from sleep <...> shall arise*” (*The Little Girl Lost*), “*list’ning to the voices of the ground*” (*The Book of Thel*). Metaphonymy exploits interaction of metaphor and metonymy, where the

personification of nature is highlighted by the synecdochic laughter of children in the green meadow: “*When the meadows laugh with lively green*” (*The Echoing Green*). Employing “sliding” mapping between different domains (‘human’ – ‘nature’) or within the same domain (‘laughing people’ as a part of the scene – ‘laughing people in the meadow’ as the whole scene, Blake establishes similarity and contiguity between nature and people, makes them integral parts of the whole.

The verbal and the visual modes in Blake’s poetic worldview operate in tandem and produce the effect of the whole. In cognitive terms, textual and pictorial modes interplay to realise the figure/ground alignment. A good example is a three-stanza hymn to happiness and togetherness called *The Laughing Song*. The format of *The Laughing Song* page in Blake’s book is a vertically oriented sequence of segments. The title and the stanzas are placed between the images of the people celebrating and a vine twig garland. The space is shared equally between the text of the poem and the pictures. Being framed, the poem and the images make an integrity implying the idea of the unity between nature and humans. As Blake praises the world, both human and natural, the text and its illustration complement each other in the symmetric representation of these two facets.

By expressing his pastoral invitation to *carpe diem*, Blake encourages other people to enjoy life: “*Come live, and be merry, and join with me*” (*The Laughing Song*). However, only five lines out of fifteen in the poem portray the celebration “*Where our table ...is spread ... / To sing the sweet chorus*” (ibid.). The first two stanzas worship nature in the picturesque and detailed description. Through a chain of fast-forwarding personifications Blake creates the image of beaming nature: “*... the green woods laugh ... the dimpling stream runs laughing... the air does laugh ... the green hill laughs ... the meadows laugh ... the grasshopper laughs ... the painted birds laugh*” (ibid.). Depicted in a specified way, the image of “*the lively green*” is encoded via syntactic parallelism and lexical repetitions (*green, laugh*): “*... the green woods laugh with the voice of joy, / ... the hill laughs with the noise of it*” (ibid.). The repetitions combined with indexical onomatopoeia (“*Ha! Ha! Ha!*”) add to the image of “*the merry scene [around]*” and manifest “togetherness”. The human facet has lover specification. Thus nature is the figure and people are the ground in the verbal dimension.

The joyful mood of the poem is enhanced by the picture. A group of people in circle are at table “*with cherries and nuts*” (ibid.), drinking, merrily singing and laughing. The central figure of the picture shows William Blake drawn from behind. We suggest that Blake’s choice of a drawing scenario, portraying himself in a very distinct movement and when facing the party, communicates the ideas of togetherness and involvement. This can be inferred from the relational deictic reference in the poem (*our table, join with me*). The whole scene is drawn from the normal viewpoint and that is how Blake himself sees the world. The choice of the viewpoint when an adult is standing up allows Blake to make the scene look most real, as we are accustomed to see. The party is pictured on the rich green background occupying approximately one the third of the picture. Since humans are more salient than nature in the visual dimension, people are the figure and nature is the ground. By integrating the text of the poem into the illustration, Blake eliminates the asymmetry between the figure and the ground and establishes the balance between nature and humans.

Harmony with nature is a recurrent theme in Blake’s works of art. In many engravings, the branches of trees, vines and flowers are made of thin and smooth lines. Curvilinear lines are

used to form the image of nature embracing, covering and protecting people (*The Echoing Green*, *The Lamb*, *The Fly*, *The Little Girl Found*, *Holy Thursday*, etc.). The image of vine, which is notably found in Blake's drawings and illuminations, is connected with the Christianity, the symbol of Christ, his blood, and believers: *Nurse's Song*, *Earth's Answer*, etc. At the same time, illustrations reinforce the pastoral idyll created by the poems: tiny figures of dancing children look like natural extension of vines, leaves and calligraphic curls.

The idea of divine nature echoes in the poems with animalistic and floral motifs. Contrary to personified nature, Blake attributes animal and floral features to humans. How nature is employed by Blake to view humans can be demonstrated by similes and metaphors that realize mappings between nature as the source domain with human as the target: "Grey-headed beadles... / as white as snow" (*Holy Thursday*). Christian symbolism abounds in poems in the forms of similes comparing children with lambs, birds, flowers: "Round the laps of their mothers / Like birds in their nest" (*The Echoing Green*), "these flowers of / London town!" and "multitudes of lambs" (*Holy Thursday*), or "dovelike sighs" (about a happy sleeping child in *A Cradle Song*). Such imagistic reference to Christ, innocence and protection is continuously repeated throughout Blake's poems to weave together human, nature and God.

Kaleidoscopic images in Blake's books evoke a changing flow of associations. Visuals are dynamic like collages assembled of multiple pieces: a realistic depiction of people dancing or sitting around the oak (*The Echoing Green*, *Spring*) or a fairy-tale like scene with the lion next to the figures of naked people under the branches of a colossal tree (*The Little Girl Found*). Not only does the imagery allude to *Arbor mundi* "the tree of life", it also embodies the concept of everything, creates a bittersweet atmosphere of reality and fantasy, causes the feeling of joy and sadness.

Colour is a significant constituent in Blake's poetic worldview. Visual images are built on colour contrasts: some scenes or segments are full of light and brightness (*Spring*), while others drown in darkness (*To Tirzah*). With the help of colours Blake represents the duality of the world, one part of which is lit with light (*white, golden, silver, green*), but the other is deprived of it (*pale, black*). With the help of a colour contrast, Blake represents the most remarkable antinomies of his world. Day and night, life and death, innocence and experience, joy and sorrow, moral and physical worlds are embodied with the help of opposing, yet cooperative colours: "And I am black, but O! my soul is white; / White as an angel is the English child, / But I am black, as if bereav'd of light" (*The Little Black Boy*), "Your spring and your day are wasted in play, / Your winter and night in disguise" (*Nurse's Song*). The words and visuals are combined to fill the space of the books with primitive innocence, childish simplicity, tenderness and grace that contrast with delusion and the chaos of the world of experience. By sensory contrast Blake renders the split of the world into something that continually pleases the eye and something somber.

Blake's artistic eye and skill allowed him to engage a wide colour palette and play with hue to represent the continuity as well as the dynamism of space and time in gradations. Let us consider the scene of a day break from *The Four Zoas*. First, shifting from dark reddish-blue to deep red, then to the mix of yellow and warm light bright, and finally to transparent, Blake portrays a gradual transition from night to daytime: "But purple Night, and crimson Morning, and golden Day, descending / Thro' the clear changing atmosphere, display'd green fields among / The varying clouds, like Paradises stretch'd in the expanse, / With towns, and villages, and temples, tents, sheep-folds and pastures, / Where dwell the children of the Elemental worlds in harmony"

(*The Four Zoas*). The break of the day is depicted through Blake's eyes with the help of poetic enumerations of colour terms, names of the parts of the day, listing out elements of the scene.

Another example is the image of falling asleep in the illustration to *A Cradle Song* created by gradual change from transparent yellow and dark blue to opaque dark blue. In the poem, the transition from wakefulness to sleepiness is lexicalized by the verbs denoting creation ('begin to exist' as in "*form a shade*", 'make a path by moving quickly, or twisting' as in "*weave the brows*"). The visual and verbal images appear complementary in representing a dynamic scene of falling asleep.

The combination of the text and the etching provides the integrity and multimodality of the poetic space. It is not the inclusion of visuals that matters in Blake's books, but the artistic synthesis of the written text and pictures. A bright example of how meaning is created across the forms of Blake's pieces is his poem called *Night*. The image of night in the visual mode is formed by stimulating intramodal visual sensations of space, shape and colour. The picture is a vertical depiction of the night sky occupying the most of the imprint space. Blake uses a broad tonal range of dark blue and green contrasting with a strong milky highlight to accentuate the focal elements – the verses in the moonlight. The lines of the poem are running on the page as if they are stretching in the air to meet the branches of the tree and become almost indistinguishable from them. That is how Blake pictures the beauty and serenity of the night. The visual image is complemented by a magnificent verbal portrayal appealing to seeing and hearing. With the help of metaphors Blake worships the glamour of the night: "*the moon like a flower*", "[the moon] *smiles on the night*", "*heaven's high bower*" (*Night*). Through repetitions, the poet evokes the feeling of stillness. The alliteration involving the fricative /s/ mimics silence: "... *silent delight, / Sits and smiles...*" (ibid.). It might even support gravity associations of lightness as sibilants in English are "less heavy" than stops. The anaphoric repetition and polysyndeton deliver an artistic effect of sameness, the lack or absence of movement and change: "*And keep them ... / And pitying the tender ... / And walking round... / And now beside thee ...*" (ibid.). The poem and its presentation demonstrate the efficiency of imagic and diagrammatical iconicity in synthesising visual and verbal dimensions in Blake's poetic worldview.

Perceptual images appealing to gustatory, olfactory and tactile modalities are involved occasionally to manifest contrasts: "*Smelling to his [lion's] prey; / But their fears allay / When he licks their hands, / And silent by them stands*" (*The Little Girl Found*); "*Softest clothing woolly bright; / Gave thee such a tender voice*" (*The Lamb*); "... *the Church is cold; / But the Alehouse is... warm*" (*The Little Vagabond*). Although successfully produced, they have low occurrence in Blake's poems. It may be suggested that such images are not experienced as vividly as images generated from visual or auditory modalities. This is evidenced by the verses in which gustatory, olfactory and tactile descriptions are contextually close to prevailing visual and auditory ones: "*How sweet is the shepherd's sweet lot! / ... For he hears the lambs' innocent call, / And he hears the ewes' tender reply; / He is watchful while they are in peace...*" (*The Lamb*). The second explanation for the low frequency of gustatory, olfactory imagery may be the well-documented difficulty to name odors and tastes. The third reason might be inadequacy of the imagery to the themes of the poems. The above-cited instances are from the poems representing symbolic themes connoting ever-recurring ideas of God's creation, Christian compassion, the physical incarnation of the deity in *The Lamb* and *The Shepard*, or forgiveness and salvation in *The Little Vagabond*. By appealing to different modalities, Blake used creatively varied approaches to communicating

his own experience and knowledge of the world.

4. Conclusions

The poet-painter William Blake efficiently exploited verbal and visual means in order to manifest the centerpiece and less-central concepts of his worldview. The choice and application of multimodal tools is determined by Blake's life experience, knowledge of the world, response to external influences, specificity of his imagination. Blake's talent and ingenuity led him to produce multimodal complexes in which verbal and visual dimensions became complementary. The visual-verbal synthesis enabled the poet to manifest the order of the universe as he imagined it and considered fair. The hybrid representation of Blake's poetic worldview resulted in the increased salience of relevant information, more varied imagery and its elaborate encoding. The study of Blake's *ut pictura poesis* demonstrated how we can interpret the world through thought, experience, senses, and creativity.

This study is another step towards our understanding of aesthetic aspect related to the construing language and visual forms, mental and embodied juxtapositions.

Authors' contributions

Tetyana Kozlova: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing original draft, Supervision; Olga Klymenko: Term, Writing original draft, Editing; Iryna Shyrokovska: Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis.

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