

# William Butler Yeats and Phoebe Anna Traquair: The Symbolism of Blakean Angels over a Rainbow

Yuki Takahashi

## Foreword

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) is recognised today as one of the prominent poets and dramatists of twentieth-century Ireland. He is also known as a leading figure of the Celtic Revival, a nineteenth-century cultural movement, that inspired writers and artists to seek for themes and material in Celtic myth and legend. In 1904, his efforts in collaboration with other notable Anglo-Irish writers fulfilled the establishment of the Irish national theatre, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.<sup>1</sup> Another literary achievement of Yeats in his early career is a series of studies of William Blake (1757–1827), the English visionary artist-poet. During his lifetime, Blake was regarded only as an obscure artist with little or no reputation. However, it was Blake who made a profound influence on Yeats, leading him to cultivate his thought on the aesthetic correspondence between art and literature. Yeats's father, John Butler Yeats, was the first person to recommend his son to read *The Life of William Blake* (1863) when he was about 16.<sup>2</sup> As Elizabeth Loizeaux observes, this experience

---

<sup>1</sup> Yeats's literary fellows included Lady Augusta Gregory (1852–1932), who wrote plays based on her translations of Celtic legend and folklore into English, and the dramatist John Millington Synge (1871–1909), who was inspired by the wild nature of Aran Islands in the west of Ireland and portrayed Irish peasant life.

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 114. Hereafter cited as *Au*. Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 29. John Butler Yeats (1839–1922) was a portrait painter (formerly a barrister) whose early works were greatly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite

led the young Yeats to view poetry and the visual arts in alliance, and thus in later years had an impact on the development of his writing style.<sup>3</sup> In 1893, Yeats edited *The Poems of William Blake*, and in the same year published three volumes of *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical*, in collaboration with his fellow artist-poet Edwin Ellis (1848–1918).<sup>4</sup> Eriko Hoshino points out that this three-volumed work contributed to bringing to light some of Blake’s poetical works which had been neither well known nor read.<sup>5</sup> In addition, this complete set of Blake studies featured other studies, including Blake’s biographical memoir, facsimile illustrations and art criticism.<sup>6</sup> Above all, commentary on Blake’s visual art from the symbolist viewpoint undoubtedly reveals Yeats’s knowledge of occultism, which he had pursued since the late 1880s. As Yeats’s biographer Roy Foster notes, his continuing interest in the condition of the soul after death was reflected in his studies of

---

Brotherhood in Britain. *The Life of William Blake* (1863) was completed by William Michael Rossetti, after the death of the original author, Alexander Gilchrist, in 1861. William M. Rossetti (1829–1919) was the younger brother of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), the poet and painter, also known as the founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. See also D.G. Gordon and Ian Fletcher, *W.B. Yeats: Images of a Poet* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1961), 92.

<sup>3</sup> Loizeaux, 30, 36.

<sup>4</sup> George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran, eds., *Early Essays* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 331. Hereafter cited as *Early Essays*.

<sup>5</sup> Hoshino mentions ‘The Book of Los’ (1794), ‘The Book of Ahania’ (1795), and ‘Vala’ (1795–1804), for example. See Eriko Hoshino, ‘William Blake’s Influence upon William Butler Yeats, as a Young Poet — From the Gnostic Viewpoint — #1’, *Seibu Bunri Daigaku Service Keieigakubu Kenkyu Kiyo*, vol.17 (Seibu Bunri University, 2010), 57. In his lifetime, Blake was less acknowledged as an excellent poet than a madman. In 1809, when Blake held an unsuccessful exhibition, the art critic Robert Hunt wrote a severely critical review in *The Examiner* (17 March 1809), accusing Blake of madness. See Martin Myrone, *Seen in My Visions* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 32. The English writer G.K. Chesterton, who was a contemporary of Yeats, suggested that it was ‘a popular question’ to ask about Blake’s madness, which Chesterton flatly denied. See G.K. Chesterton, *William Blake* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1910), 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> *Early Essays*, 331.

‘the Blakean idea of total art fuelled by a mystic vision’.<sup>7</sup> In the late 1890s, Yeats further developed his symbolic ideas on Blake’s art in his philosophical prose writings, such as the essays ‘William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*’ (1896) and ‘William Blake and the Imagination’ (1897).<sup>8</sup> At the turn of the century, these essays were incorporated into a collection of Yeats’s critical prose entitled *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903).

In 1906, Yeats had occasion to see a sort of realisation of Blake’s spiritual visions in Edinburgh. In his role as director of Abbey Theatre, Yeats accompanied a theatrical tour of Britain that included the major cities of Scotland. In June of that year, he wrote to one of his literary fellows, Lady Augusta Gregory:

Nearly all my time in Edinburgh I was absorbed in Mrs Traquair’s work and find it far more beautiful than I had foreseen – one can only judge it when one sees it in a great mass for only then does one get any idea of her extraordinary abundance of imagination. She has but one story – the drama of the soul. She herself describes it as captivity, the divine descent to meet it, its liberation, its realisation of itself in the world of spirit. This is told over and over again, with a manifest sincerity and intensity like that of Fra Angelico. She is herself delightful – a saint and a little singing bird... I have come from her work, overwhelmed, astonished, as I used to come

<sup>7</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life. Vol. I. The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 98-107. During the late 1880s and the 1890s, there was a ‘revival of interest in the supernatural and the occult’. Books such as Eliphas Lévi’s *Mysteries of Magic* (1886) and Cornelius Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy* (1531) were widely circulated. Yeats was among those keen to pursue spiritual knowledge and experience. As Foster notes, the manifold uses of occult practice gave him ‘metaphors for his poetry’.

<sup>8</sup> ‘William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*’ was divided into three parts and appeared monthly in *The Savoy* from July to September 1896, and ‘William Blake and the Imagination’ in *The Academy*, 19 June 1897.

long ago from Blake, and from him alone. She differs from all other modern devout painters but him in this supreme thing. The nearer she approaches the divine the more passionate become the lines – the more expressive the faces, the more vehement is every movement. To the others the world is full and the spirit empty –.<sup>9</sup>

Phoebe Anna Traquair (1852–1936) was a Dublin-born Scottish artist, a leading figure in the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain whose work encompassed mural painting, embroidery, manuscript illumination, book binding and metal enamelling, all deeply imbued with mysticism and symbolism, early Italian Renaissance paintings, and characterised by a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic featuring rich colours and patterns. According to her biographer Elizabeth Cumming, as an artist Traquair wished to ‘celebrate the potential of the human mind’ and valued the works of Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in particular for their ‘exploration of the spirit’.<sup>10</sup> What characteristics in Traquair’s works appealed to Yeats that led him to see them in comparison to Blake’s art? Considering Yeats’s esoteric, contemplative account in his letter to Lady Gregory that was mostly focused on faith in the human soul and the divine spirit, it seems that he saw something more than a superficial resemblance between Traquair’s works and those of Blake. As one who had shown a deep understanding of Blake’s principles of artistic creation, Yeats must have noticed some accordance between these two artists’ ideas in terms of visual expression. By examining Yeats’s studies on Blake, this paper considers how Yeats interpreted Traquair’s visual representation of the Blakean world of imagination.

---

<sup>9</sup> John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard, eds., *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*. vol.4, 1905–1907 (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2005), 417-418. Hereafter cited as *CL* 4.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Cumming, *Phoebe Anna Traquair 1852–1936* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland in association with National Museums Scotland, rpt. 2011), 10.

## The Drama of the Soul

In describing Traquair's works, Yeats stated that the artist has 'but one story, the drama of the soul',<sup>11</sup> which he thought would develop through the unification of earthly and spiritual domains. This phrase seems, first, based on the spiritual ideas of the eighteenth-century mystical writer and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772),<sup>12</sup> whose *Spiritual Diary* Yeats had read with passion during his occult practice in the 1890s.<sup>13</sup> Traquair had acquired the same philosophical notions through the Swedenborgian poet Garth Wilkinson (1812–1899).<sup>14</sup> In 1914, Yeats wrote an essay in which he affirmed his belief in the afterlife of the human soul.<sup>15</sup>

'The drama of the soul' should also be understood within the framework of Blake's definition that 'Art is Christianity'.<sup>16</sup> This means, as Kerrison Preston explains, the ultimate goal of 'Art' that Blake sought out was to express the 'divine humanity of God and man in one', which also suggested a consciousness akin to mysticism.<sup>17</sup> An example can be seen in *Victory* (1899–1902), the fourth panel of Traquair's major embroidery quartet work *The Progress of a Soul* (1893–1902). Based on Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portrait* (1887), it describes the salvation of the human soul after death [Figure 1]. The design of the two

<sup>11</sup> *CL* 4, 417.

<sup>12</sup> Yeats learned about Swedenborg's concept of 'conjugal love' from reading Rossetti's poetry, such as 'The Blessed Damosel' and some of his sonnet collection *The House of Life*. See Yuki Takahashi, 'William Butler Yeats and Phoebe Anna Traquair: Their Fascination with "Love's Hour" in Literature and Art', in *The Review of Liberal Arts*, vol.141 (Otaru University of Commerce, March 2021), 71.

<sup>13</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 32.

<sup>14</sup> Cumming, 17.

<sup>15</sup> 'Swedenborg, Medium, and the Desolate Places', *op. cit.*, 30-70.

<sup>16</sup> Kerrison Preston, *Blake and Rossetti* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1944), 60. See also Margaret Rudd, *Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W.B. Yeats* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd, 1953), 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

kissing figures, the young man and a seraph, ascending to Heaven is modelled on Blake's illustration to 'The Union of the Soul with God', the last scene of *Jerusalem* (1829),<sup>18</sup> which was included in the third volume of the Ellis-Yeats edition of *The Works of William Blake*. In Traquair's design for *Victory*, a man is lifted by an angel over a rainbow at his death. In this way, it is possible to summarise that 'the drama of the soul' that Yeats found in Traquair's works would have appealed to his spiritual reflections.



[Figure 1]  
Phoebe Anna Traquair,  
*Victory* (1899-1902) in  
*The Progress of a Soul* (1893-1902),  
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

Along with embroidery works, mural painting was another important craft genre that helped Traquair establish her career. Her involvement with the Edinburgh Social Union brought her opportunities to decorate public buildings in the city. The Edinburgh Social Union was a philanthropic organisation founded by Patrick Geddes in 1885, aimed at improving the conditions of the city's environment by bringing art into the life-space.<sup>19</sup> In that same year,

<sup>18</sup> Cumming, 66-69.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) was an environmentalist and town-planner, and professor of Botany at University College, Dundee. The Edinburgh Social Union

the members of the Union commissioned Traquair to decorate with murals the walls of the mortuary chapel at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, the premises of which were originally a small coalhouse. Taking nearly two years, she transformed it into a sacred space of solace for mothers and families who had lost their children in the squalid areas of Old Town.<sup>20</sup> The inside of the chapel is filled with images issuing from Traquair's motherly compassion and Christian belief in the salvation of the soul, expressed in biblical motifs and floral patterns, with soft and warm red, blue and green colours, as seen in [Figure 2]. It was the only artwork that Yeats specifically mentioned in his 1906 letter to Lady Gregory.



[Figure 2] The Mortuary Chapel, Royal Hospital for Sick Children

---

was set up to bring artistic and recreational activities to the working class, with the collaboration of like-minded artists and intellectuals in Edinburgh. For further information about Geddes's achievement, see Elizabeth Cumming, 'Imagination, Magic and Romance: Arts and Crafts Mural Decoration in Edinburgh', in P. Burman, ed., *Architecture 1900* (Donhead St Mary, Dorset: Donhead Publishing, 1998), 241-245.

<sup>20</sup> I am very grateful to Dr Cumming for generously guiding me to these mural decorations at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital for Sick Children in September 2017. The location of the mortuary chapel is now included in the redevelopment programme for residential use in central Edinburgh. As of January 2021, an application for Listed Building Consent was submitted by Scottish cultural organisations to protect this building of cultural value.

From 1888 to 1892, Traquair produced a mural decoration at the Song School of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral. This work may be considered a larger-scale story of 'the drama of the soul' [Figure 3]. This cathedral in Palmerston Place was opened for worship in 1879, and the Song School was built in 1885.<sup>21</sup> The sub-dean of the cathedral, Dr Casenove, who was a member of the Edinburgh Social Union, commissioned Traquair to decorate the walls with murals. The Song School, with a Henry Willis organ installed on the west wall, is used for choir practice even today. As Cumming describes the theme of the entire mural work as 'the union of the human and divine', or in other words the bond of 'the physical and spiritual worlds', is evident in the entire walls [Figures 3-1, 3-2, 3-3].<sup>22</sup> Under the single mantle of God's blessing, a large procession of people from the secular world is led by angels and divine spirits, facing towards the figure of Christ painted on the east wall. In illustrating worldly people, Traquair included portraits of not only clerics, choir boys, stone masons and workers but also particular individuals whom she admired: Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), the Poet Laureate; another major English poet, Robert Browning (1812–1889); the Pre-Raphaelite painters Rossetti and William Holman Hunt (1827–1910); Scottish historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881); and the symbolist painter George Frederic Watts (1817–1904) appear on the south wall [Figure 3-1], and the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and Blake on the north wall [Figure 3-3].<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The designer of the Song School was John Oldrid Scott. He was the son of the cathedral's architect, Sir George Gilbert Scott.

<sup>22</sup> Cumming, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-29. Other notable figures depicted in these murals were David Livingstone, who was a medical missionary and anti-slavery campaigner; H.M. Stanley, who explored Africa; Cardinal Newman, the founder of the Oxford movement; and Father Damien, the Belgian priest who worked to help leper patients in the Hawaiian Islands.





[Figure 3-1] *The Powers of the Lord* by Phoebe Traquair, on the south wall of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh (from left: Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, D.G. Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Thomas Carlyle, G.F. Watts)



[Figure 3-2] South wall of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh



[Figure 3-3] *Holy and Humble Men of Heart* by Phoebe Traquair, on the north wall of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh (William Blake is on the left)

### Blakean Angels

A particular motif is found in Traquair's mural paintings: angels with scarlet, pointed wings hold their arms high up to the sky, as shown in [Figure 2] in the mortuary chapel of the Royal Hospital for Sick Children. These figures reappear in another of Traquair's murals in the Song School. Again, on its west wall, the same scarlet-winged angels, this time in the form of a quartet and with more varied, vivid colours, are depicted as hovering over a rainbow [Figure 4].<sup>24</sup> This image is based on an illustration by Blake of the Book of Job (Plate XIV), which contains the passage 'When the morning Stars

<sup>24</sup> Her colour expression developed especially after a visit to Italy in 1889, where she was deeply impressed by Botticelli and Fra Angelico. See Cumming, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 28-29, 31-33. *CLA*, 417.

sang together, & all the Sons of God shouted for joy', from the Old Testament (*Job xxxviii: 31*).<sup>25</sup> In Blake's illustration, God appears in the centre as 'the Divine Imagination' and a vision of the universe is displayed representing 'the fourfold soul of man: the flesh, the brain, the heart and the imagination'.<sup>26</sup> The realm of the imagination is placed at the top of the whole composition, wherein a quartet of angels sings with upheld arms. Above them, the starry space expands, suggesting 'there are worlds in the human soul as yet unknown'.<sup>27</sup> These angels served as models for Traquair's angelic figures, and according to Cumming, Traquair often selected this motif to express 'the union of the human and divine'.<sup>28</sup> In the side margins of Blake's illustration, there are scenes of the six days of creation from the Book of Genesis. Likewise, in Traquair's mural, natural motifs of God's creation such as mountains, animals and fish, the sun and moon, are depicted around the angels. Yeats, who owned an original print of Plate XIV,<sup>29</sup> regarded Blake's Book of Job illustrations as 'the crowning work of his [Blake's] life',<sup>30</sup> so he would have noticed Traquair's Blakean angels when he observed her mural works.

---

<sup>25</sup> In the authorised edition of *The Holy Bible* (1611), this phrase appears: 'When the morning starred sang together, and all the sonnes of God shouted for joy'.

<sup>26</sup> S. Foster Damon, *Blake's Job: William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1966), 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* In *The Holy Bible* (1611), this passage appears: 'Canst thou bind the sweete influences of // Pleiades? Or loose the bands of Orion?' (*Job, xxxviii*). In Blake's illustration, the constellations of Pleiades and Orion are placed at the highest corners of the design.

<sup>28</sup> Cumming, 33-34.

<sup>29</sup> Loizeaux, 30.

<sup>30</sup> William Butler Yeats, 'William Blake and His Illustrations to the Divine Comedy', in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 125. Hereafter cited as *E&I*.



[Figure 4] Angels on the west wall of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh

### The Lines: 'the great and golden rules of art'

Closer attention to the details presented in Traquair's mural paintings reveals that the design consists of distinct figures and forms, drawn in clear outlines. In comparison to Blake, Yeats paid particular attention to 'the lines', saying, 'the nearer she [Traquair] approaches the Divine the more passionate become the lines – the more expressive the faces, the more vehement is every moment'.<sup>31</sup> Such an instinct to perceive a surge of piety, in proportion to the intensification of linear expression, is no doubt based on his Blake studies.

In 1896, Yeats wrote 'Blake's Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*', which appeared serially in *The Savoy*. In the first part,<sup>32</sup> while admitting that 'the

<sup>31</sup> *CL* 4, 417.

<sup>32</sup> The original text of this essay was published serially in three successive issues of *The Savoy*: 'I: His Opinions upon Art' appeared in No.3 (July 1896), 'II: His

technique of Blake was imperfect, incomplete', Yeats emphasised that 'where his imagination is perfect and complete, his technique has a like perfection, a like completeness'.<sup>33</sup> It should also be noted that Yeats admired Blake's illustrations to Book of Job because he regarded it 'the highest point of imaginative and delineative art'.<sup>34</sup> Blake's technique, which Yeats praised, consisted of the use of lines. He used outlining, not only to draw corporeal objects but also to give reality to 'Vision or Imagination', which he believed to be the 'Representation of what Eternally Exists. Really & Unchangeably'.<sup>35</sup> Margaret Rudd points out that Blake had definite opinions about painting styles and rejected the generally accepted techniques, such as the chiaroscuro of the Venetians. Instead, he placed importance on the precision of outline, which defined the shapes he saw in visions and made them clearer than natural objects.<sup>36</sup> By quoting Blake's own account in the *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), Yeats highlighted the artist-poet's artistic principles:

He [Blake] was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind's eye, when exalted by inspiration, were 'eternal existences,' symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments... 'The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: that the more distinct, sharp, and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the

---

Opinions on Dante' in No.4 (August 1896), and 'III: The Illustrations of Dante' in No.5 (September 1896). Overall, this essay included ten illustrations from Blake and one from Botticelli.

<sup>33</sup> *E&I*, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Edwin Ellis and W.B. Yeats, *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical* (1893; rept. New York: AMS Press, 1979), vol. I, 129.

<sup>35</sup> William Blake, 'A Vision of the Last Judgement', David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 554.

<sup>36</sup> Rudd, 11.

less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation... How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflections and movements? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden but the definite and determinate? What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wiry line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions? Leave out this line and you leave out life itself; and all is chaos again, and the line of the Almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist' ... 'The beauty proper for sublime art is lineaments, or forms and features that are capable of being the receptacles of intellect.'<sup>37</sup>

Thus, Yeats regarded Blake as an exceptional artist who 'strove to embody more subtle raptures, more elaborate intuitions than any before him'.<sup>38</sup>

Returning to Traquair's murals at the Song School, a similar technique of outlining may be seen. To be sure, all the choir boys on the east wall are depicted differently from each other through clear outlines [Figure 5]. Some are looking earnestly at the songbook and others are looking away as if to show their minds are straying from the choir practice. Even the wrinkle lines of their garments are depicted differently, although all the boys are clad uniformly in the same robes. Also on both the south and north walls, not only human figures but also the items in their hands, such as books, a palette, a basket and a flag, and even cattles and pebbles, are represented in minute detail [Figures 3-6]. By taking good advantage of Blake's principle of lineament, Traquair's

---

<sup>37</sup> *E&I*, 119-121. Ellis-Yeats, *The Works of William Blake*, vol. II, 375, 380. In the first text of this essay in *The Savoy*, it is stated, 'How do we distinguish the owl from the beast'.

<sup>38</sup> *E&I*, 127.

creation can be seen as giving a lively atmosphere to the union of the physical and the spiritual.



[Figure 5] Choirs on the east wall of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh



[Figure 6] North wall of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh

## The Symbolism of the Rainbow

In addition to Blakean angels, the motif of a rainbow, often painted in rich and brilliant colours, characterises Traquair's works. As [Figure 4] shows, for example, a translucent arch appears over the angels on the west wall of the Song School. It is certain that the rainbow was Traquair's favourite motif, but Yeats must have found more significant symbolism that the rainbow signified hope in Blake's art.<sup>39</sup> For example, in one of Blake's illustrations to *Jerusalem*, a rainbow is depicted above a sleeping person. In the Ellis-Yeats edition of *The Works of William Blake* (1893), the rainbow is described as a 'sign of Hope' and therefore the 'possessor of the Three Colours', probably by Ellis.<sup>40</sup> The colour symbolism of the same rainbow is restated in the chapter entitled 'The Symbolic System', in which Yeats displayed his knowledge of occultism. He explains that the 'wall of three colours' overarched the sleeper 'only because Man when awake, or aroused to the use of spiritual sight, can see beyond the rainbow'.<sup>41</sup> The imagery of a man at a spiritual awakening like this, can be compared to Blake's interpretation of 'Noah's rainbow'. According to the Book of Genesis, after Noah and his family survive the Flood, God promises them and all earthly living creatures eternal prosperity by presenting the rainbow as a symbol of God's covenant with man (Genesis 9:8-17). Therefore,

<sup>39</sup> S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, rept. (New York: Dutton & Co., Inc, 1917), 340.

<sup>40</sup> Ellis-Yeats, *The Works of William Blake*, vol. II, 220. In 1900, Yeats explained in his personal copy of the Blake volumes, that he wrote 'the greater part of the "symbolic system"' (in vol. I), while the rest of the book was by Ellis. See Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 47-48. Rudd, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ellis-Yeats, *The Works of William Blake*, vol. I, 313. In 'The Symbolic System' (309-314), Blake's copious use of colour symbolism is explained systematically. For further information on Yeats's understanding of Blake as a mystic, see Adams, 48-56.



Blake asserted, 'Noah's rainbow is the hopes and promise of immortality'.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, in his essay 'A Vision of the Last Judgement', Blake stated that Noah and his sons Shem and Japhet represented 'Poetry, Painting & Music, the three Powers (in Man) of conversing with Paradise, which the flood did not Sweep away'.<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, in discussing Blake's art, Yeats also associated 'Noah's rainbow' with these three genres of art. In his *Savoy* essay in 1896, Yeats, quoting Blake's original text from 'A Vision of the Last Judgement', wrote:

If a man would enter into 'Noah's rainbow,' he[Blake] has written, and 'make a friend' of one of 'the images of wonder' which dwell there, and which always entreat him 'to leave mortal things,' 'then would he arise from the grave and meet the Lord in the air'; and by this rainbow, this sign of a covenant granted to him who is with Shem and Japhet, 'painting, poetry and music,' 'the three powers in man of conversing with Paradise which the flood "of time and space" did not sweep away,' Blake represented the shapes of beauty haunting our moments of inspiration: shapes held by most for the frailest of ephemera, but by him for a people older than the world, citizens of eternity, appearing and reappearing in the minds of artists and of poets, creating all we touch and see by casting distorted images of themselves upon 'the vegetable glass of nature'.<sup>44</sup>

Considering Blake's ideas that Yeats shared in this way, it is important to recognise that Traquair was also aware that each of these 'three powers' was equally a prime factor in her own art. In 1893, Traquair wrote a little poem in a

---

<sup>42</sup> Damon, 341.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 301. Erdman, 559.

<sup>44</sup> *E&I*, 116-117.

letter to her nephew Willie Moss as follows:

To the artist, be he the poet, painter or musician,  
 the world is a great treasure house, stored with  
 endless material for him to use, teach yourself to  
 match the beauty of red-tipped buds, sunlight through  
 green leaves, the yellow gorse on the hill, the song of  
 wild birds, so on, step by step, the world opens out.  
 This is life. This is to live, the perfection comes  
 when one's own life is in harmony with this beauty...<sup>45</sup>

Her joy in creating art inspired by colourful nature is undeniable, and it deserves notice that this verse is addressed particularly to 'the artist, be he the poet, painter or musician'. Amongst Blake's 'three powers', certainly music also had a great influence on Traquair's career, as well as painting and poetry.

### Painting, Poetry and Music, Encapsulated in Architecture

It is certain that Yeats was also aware of Traquair's love of music, as he recollected 'after dinner everyone sat listening to Mrs. Traquair, who as it were, sang a little happy childlike song'.<sup>46</sup> As the building's name indicated, Traquair's mural decorations for the Song School were in fact early examples of her attempt to combine music with painting. Cumming explains that through her artwork Traquair sought 'an artistic synthesis of building and decoration, of

---

<sup>45</sup> Front page of Elizabeth Cumming, *Phoebe Anna Traquair HRSA (1852–1936) and Her Contribution to Arts and Crafts in Edinburgh*. PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1986.

<sup>46</sup> *CL* 4, 418.

fine and decorative art, and of music, poetry and art'.<sup>47</sup> To be sure, the original concept of the Song School was 'to fill the place, so to speak, with *visible* song, to embody the rapture of praise, which is the highest expression of the spiritual life of man'.<sup>48</sup> Referring to Traquair's own words 'an artist's work in this world is to "sing"', Cumming emphasises her intention to 'create visual music' in the form of 'symphonic' architecture that would 'make walls sing'.<sup>49</sup>

Several years later, this attempt became actualised on a greater scale inside the Catholic Apostolic Church (now the Mansfield Traquair Centre). Officially the mural decoration of this church was commissioned again through the Edinburgh Social Union in 1892, but it was reportedly decided to do so upon Traquair's own remark 'I want to paint these walls', addressed to the deacons when she was touched by 'the swelling notes of the organ resounding through the church'.<sup>50</sup> In 1905, an art critic, A.F. Morris, wrote about this masterpiece by mentioning Blake's 'three Powers:

Imagination is the touch of nature that gives the kinship to poetry, music and painting, and each in its turn inspires the other. Music has had a great influence on Mrs Traquair's career. Especially has it played its part in her mural designs; indeed it was the prime factor in the decoration of the Catholic and Apostolic Cathedral... and a slight discussion as to monetary and other difficulties ensued, which she concluded by saying, 'Well! If I am to paint these walls, no one in Edinburgh can prevent me: and if I am not

---

<sup>47</sup> Cumming, 'Imagination, Magic and Romance: Arts and Crafts Mural Decoration in Edinburgh', 243.

<sup>48</sup> *Guide to the Mural Decorations Painted by Mrs. Phoebe Ramsay Traquair between 1889 to 1892 in the Song School of St. Mary's Cathedral*. The italic quotation is in the original.

<sup>49</sup> Cumming, *op. cit.*, 243. Here Cumming quotes Traquair's letter to her nephew Willie Moss, dated 15 March 1896 (NLS, MS 8122 fol.66).

<sup>50</sup> A.F. Morris, 'A Versatile Art Worker: Mrs. Traquair', *The Studio*, vol.34 (1905), 339.

going to paint them, no one in Edinburgh can make me!’<sup>51</sup>

This episode suggests Traquair’s confidence as a celebrated artist and her passion for attaining her ambition.

As a result, over a span of nearly nine years, Traquair painted individually more than 250 figures of angels and choirs on walls more than 20 metres in height, as well as various scenes from the Old and New Testaments and numerous decorative motifs of flora and fauna, spreading to every corner of the church’s interior. In considering this church decoration in relation to music, the gilded gesso should be noted. It is used for the harps, trumpets and haloes of angels on the west wall [Figure 7], and for ritual items and the haloes of the four cherubim on the chancel arch [Figure 8]. The effect is remarkable, creating ‘a rich sculptural unity of wall and paint’.<sup>52</sup> [Figures 7 and 8] show these golden reliefs enhanced by sunlight coming in through the window, thus accentuating the presence of music that contributes to beautifying this church. Regarding the earlier mention of Blake’s definition ‘Art is Christianity’, Preston explains its essence, saying ‘the supreme value of the artist to the community is in the gaining for himself and others of increased knowledge of God and the wholeness of man. This gives a rhythm to life and music in soul’.<sup>53</sup> Taking Preston’s point into account, it can be said that Traquair’s creative imagination worked to evoke spiritual music that would lead the congregation to sense the divine humanity of God as close to themselves.

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* This episode is also quoted by Cumming in full text, in *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 50-51.

<sup>52</sup> Cumming, ‘Imagination, Magic and Romance’, 243.

<sup>53</sup> Preston, 60.



[Figure 7] Details of the west wall in the Catholic Apostolic Church, Edinburgh





[Figure 8] Details, and the Whole Chancel Arch, in the Catholic Apostolic Church, Edinburgh

As another important factor characterising this church decoration, the clear outlines, or Blake's 'great and golden rule of art', should be noted. As seen in the Song School murals, but in far greater number, every figure in the murals of the Catholic Apostolic Church is sharply outlined, and painted variously with different expressions on their faces [Figures 7 and 9]. Here again, clear outlines give reality to angels and saints as well as to all living creatures and landscapes. Furthermore, Yeats's comment that 'one can only judge of it when one sees it in a great mass, for only then does one get any idea of her extraordinary abundance of imagination',<sup>54</sup> becomes most applicable to this massive-scale mural work. Particularly in the largest mass of figures rejoicing at Christ's Second Coming on the west wall, the images and emotions of a unified multitude are overwhelmingly intensified [Figure 9].



[Figure 9] West wall, the Catholic Apostolic Church, Edinburgh

On the east ceiling of the chancel, the Blakean angels reappear, with God's creation depicted both at their feet and behind them: land and water, trees and flowers, birds and animals, the king and the people. Notably, the reliefs of the

---

<sup>54</sup> *CL* 4, 417.



sun and stars in gold, and the moon in silver, are charming points to attract viewers [Figure 10].



[Figures 10] Angels on the East Ceiling, South Chancel Aisle of Catholic Apostolic Church, Edinburgh

In addition, a variety of signs of covenant, namely rainbows, bring Blake's 'three powers' to mind again. The massive assembly of choristers on the west wall is encircled with a band of prismatic hues [Figure 9]. On the chancel arch, four figures of great cherubim stand in a translucent rainbow, as in [Figure 8]. The trumpeter Angel of Awakening on the south chancel aisle, in [Figure 11], is surrounded with a seven-colour circle of light. This is one of the illustrated scenes from the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-3), symbolising the awakening of the spirit.<sup>55</sup> To borrow Yeats's words, these examples show how Traquair repeatedly 'represented the shapes of beauty haunting our moments of inspiration',<sup>56</sup> and embraced viewers into the arches of ephemeral iridescence treasured in this church.



[Figure 11] The awakening of the Ten Virgins in the south chancel aisle of the Catholic Apostolic Church, Edinburgh

In discussing the influence of Blake's art on Yeats, Rudd remarks that Blake, who strove to give a clear vision of the unity of God and man, had a conviction that a true mystic's poetic imagination could be identified with the Christian faith.<sup>57</sup> In other words, as Adams emphasises, Blake made 'no

<sup>55</sup> Cumming, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 56.

<sup>56</sup> *E&I*, 117.

<sup>57</sup> Rudd, 4-5.

distinction between poet and prophet, poetry and religious prophecy', so he believed that prophetic art in the religious sense would disclose 'the pattern of human life' and thus present the spiritual community of God and the wholeness of man.<sup>58</sup> The Catholic Apostolic Church is one notable example of how such a communal vision, created by synthesising painting, poetry and music, is realised by a theatrical effect.

## Conclusion

The imagination that Yeats fostered through his study of the aesthetics and the works of Blake, was surely translated into a material reality by another spiritual apostle of Blake, Traquair. The words Yeats used to describe, as 'delightful, saint and a little singing bird',<sup>59</sup> evince his excellent and resourceful understanding of this craftswoman who relentlessly pursued the joy of artistic creation, with sincere piety and a love of music.

## References

### Primary Sources

Armour, Margaret. 'Mural Decoration in Scotland, Part I'. *The Studio* vol.10 (1897): 100-106.

Chesterton, G.K. *William Blake*. London: Duckworth & Co., 1910.

Ellis, Edwin, and Yeats, William Butler. *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*. 1893; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1979.

Morris, A.F. 'A Versatile Art Worker: Mrs. Traquair'. *The Studio* vol.34 (1905): 339-43.

---

<sup>58</sup> Adams, 31-32.

<sup>59</sup> *CL* 4, 417.

- Symons, Arthur. *William Blake*. London: Martin Secker, 1924; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1973.
- Yeats, William Butler. *Autobiographies*. London: Macmillan, 1980.
- , *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1961.
- , *Explorations*. London: Macmillan, 1962.

## Manuscripts and Bible

National Library of Scotland, MS 8123.

*History and Description of the Decorations* by Mrs. Traquair, published by the Royal Edinburgh Hospital for Sick Children c. 1900.

*Guide to the Mural Decorations painted by Mrs. Phoebe Ramsay Traquair Between 1889 to 1892 in the Song School of St. Mary's Cathedral*.

*The Holy Bible*, an extract reprint in Roman Type, page for page of the Authorised Version (1611) with an introduction by Alfred W. Pollard. Oxford University Press [Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1985].

## Secondary Sources

Adams, Hazard. *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968.

Billigheimer, Rachel V. *Wheels of Eternity: A Comparative Study of William Blake and William Butler Yeats*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1990.

Bornstein, George and Finneran, Richard J. eds. *Early Essays*. New York: Scribner, 2007. Vol.4 of *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*. 14 vols.

Bowe, Nicola G. and Cumming, Elizabeth, eds. *The Arts and Crafts Movements in Dublin and Edinburgh 1885–1925*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998.

Cumming, Elizabeth. *Hand, Heart and Soul: The Arts and Crafts Movement in*

- Scotland. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006.
- , 'Imagination, Magic and Romance: Arts and Crafts Mural Decoration in Edinburgh'. In P. Burman, ed., *Architecture 1900*, 240-249. Donhead St Mary, Dorset: Donhead Publishing, 1998.
- , 'Patterns of Life: the Art and Design of Phoebe Anna Traquair and Mary Seton Watts'. In B. Elliott and J. Helland, eds., *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880–1935: The Gender of Ornament*, 15-34. London: Ashgate, 2002.
- , 'Phoebe Anna Traquair: Angels and Changing Concepts of the supernatural in fin-de-siècle Scotland'. In P. Jupp and S. Buckham, eds., *Death in Modern Scotland, 1855–1955: beliefs, attitudes and practices*, 11-30. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016.
- , *Phoebe Anna Traquair 1852–1936*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland in association with National Museums Scotland, 2005. rpt. 2011.
- , *Phoebe Anna Traquair HRSA (1852–1936) and Her Contribution to Arts and Crafts in Edinburgh*. PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1986.
- , 'Pure magic: the power of tradition in Scottish Arts and Crafts'. In S. Alfoldy, ed., *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, 173-190. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007.
- , 'The Murals', 'The Stained Glass'. In *A Guide to The Manfield Traquair Centre*, 17-31, 43. Edinburgh: Friends of Mansfield Traquair Centre, 2006.
- Damon, S. Foster. *A Blake Dictionary: The ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. 1965; rept. New York: E. D. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1971.
- , *Blake's Job: William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1966.
- Erdman, David V, ed. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly revised edition with new foreword and commentary by Harold Bloom. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008 (first edition

- in 1986).
- Ferguson, Megan C. *Patrick Geddes and the Celtic Renaissance of the 1890s*. PhD dissertation, University of Dundee, 2011.
- Foster, Roy. *W. B. Yeats: A Life*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997-2003.
- Frayne, John P., ed. *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1. London: Macmillan, 1970.
- Frayne, John P. and Marchaterre, Madeleine, eds. *Early Articles and Essays*. New York: Scribner, 2004. vol. 9 of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*. 14 vols.
- Gordon, D.G., and Fletcher, Ian. *W.B. Yeats: Images of a Poet*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 1961.
- Hoshino, Eriko. 'William Blake's Influence upon William Butler Yeats, as a Young Poet — From the Gnostic Viewpoint — #1', *Seibu Bunri Daigaku Service Keieigakubu Kenkyu Kiyō*, vol.17 (Seibu Bunri University, 2010), 57-62.
- Kelly, John, and Schuchard, Ronald, eds. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*. vol.4, 1905-1907. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2005.
- Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann. *Yeats and the Visual Arts*. London: Rutgers University Press, 1986.
- Mitchell, W.F.T. *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Myrone, Martin, ed. *Seen in My Visions: A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures*. London: Tate Publishing, a division of Tate Enterprises Ltd, 2009.
- Preston, Kerrison. *Blake and Rossetti*. 1971; rpt. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1944.
- Rudd, Margaret. *Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W.B. Yeats*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd, 1953.

Takahashi, Yuki. *W.B. Yeats in the Irish Arts and Crafts Movement*. PhD dissertation, Aoyama Gakuin University, 2016.

---, 'William Butler Yeats and Phoebe Anna Traquair: Their Fascination with "Love's Hour" in Literature and Art'. *The Review of Liberal Arts*, vol.141. Otaru University of Commerce, March 2021: 63-86.

---, 'William Butler Yeats and Phoebe Anna Traquair: "The Drama of the Soul" Embroidered in Scotland'. *The Review of Liberal Arts*, vol.143. Otaru University of Commerce, March 2022: 51-72.

