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The Beauty of Blake

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Abstract: This paper looks at Pre-Romantic poet William Blake's work—mainly selections from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) to meditate upon the mystical and philosophical concepts buried in his poetry. For Blake, the contraries of innocence and experience come together and harmonize, good existing because of the co-presence of evil. At the same time, his poetry harshly critiques his contemporary social mores of slavery and the (ab)use of children as chimney sweepers. The resulting poetry is a fierce fabric of mystical complexity, progressive ideals, and revolutionary thought.

Keywords: William Blake, contraries, mystical poetry, 18th century poetry, Pre-Romantic poetry

Introduction:

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) is constituted of opposite and equally assertive moieties: the bright and pastoral *Songs of Innocence* (first published in 1789), and the dark and rebellious *Songs of Experience*. Blake's poems are written in musical structures with deceptively simple language and feature original use of symbols like the child, the piper, the poet, the father, etc. He embodies the Romantic ideal of the poetic genius's natural creation of poetry without long labor. For instance, the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* exhibits spontaneous composition in the encounter between the Piper (the poet) and his muse (a heavenly child on a cloud), in the poem's rapid progression from the immediate pipe music to the more distanced written song (Esterhammer 322).

Under the guise of writing for children, Blake creates poetic personae that emanate childlike curiosity while concurrently broaching mystical matters. "The Lamb" is set in *Beulah*, the innocent Blakean world of dreams and childhood, and the child speaker openly declares that he and the lamb he is catechizing share the same sacrificial Lamb, Jesus' name (17-18), celebrating the primal unity between the human and the natural (Abrams 59, Bloom 39). is full of answers; aptly, its contrary poem is full of questions. "The Tyger" suggests the ferocious majesty of the Creator through the heinous nature of the tiger and may be read as a critique of Christianity's tendency to erase this ferocious nature of God, promoting only the humility and obedience underlined through the figure of Christ.

Blake alludes to the myth of Prometheus (8) and Milton's Satan (17-18) to question the true temperament of God, who creates both prey and predator, and who is Father to both Jesus and Satan, contrary beings eternally at war. The poem also dwells on the passivity of good and the active energy in evil. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1792) saw these two great contraries as complementary and joined them in holy wedlock, establishing the *Doctrine of Contraries* (II.10-13) as necessary for progression, with evil or experience being a conduit leading one towards the achievement of transformative individuality, defying the homogenization purported by the corrupt Church (Plowman 116). The tiger also stands as a metaphor for a purging fire: *revolution*. As Peter Ackroyd proposes, "even as Blake worked upon the poem the revolutionaries in France were being branded in the image of a ravening beast… after the Paris massacres of September 1792… there were newspaper references to 'the tribunal of tigers'" (149). Blake successfully integrates the rhythms of innocent nursery rhymes with those of epiphanic invocation and prophetic hymn (Damrosch 80).

He not only explores theological themes but also critiques to critique contemporary society. London was suffering serious hardships due to the rise in its population, poor harvests, and war, and orphans and poor children could be sold into apprenticeships that offered meager prospects. Young boys were forced to sweep chimneys, and prostitution was rampant. The speaker of "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence* is a naïve charity child sold into bondage by his father. His friend Tom Dacre has a dream revealing the malicious untruth that suffering in life is rewarded by salvation in the afterlife. Without the agency of experience and the vocabulary to criticize, both Tom Dacre and the innocent speaker become ventriloquial voices for institutional hegemony, internalizing and parroting the language of abuse: "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" (24).

In Lacanian terms, there is no agency of language in the Imaginary Order, but only equations, intuition, and identification. It is in the Symbolic Order that agencies of language and narrative develop. However, the child speaker was sold off instead of being nurtured. Unable to complete his transition into the Symbolic Order by identifying with the patriarch, he does not know how to wield language. While the dream helps Tom endure his misery (23), Blake is not advocating passive forbearance of misery, as the Angel's promise is the direct projection of the Church's disciplinary promise to its exploited charges (Bloom 43). With the ironic use of the childlike anapestic rhythm for such sermonizing, he is attacking the Church for promoting insidious myths that enmesh children in almost a *false consciousness*, as Marx would later argue: "To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs that needs illusions" (301).

"The Chimney-Sweeper" in *Songs of Experience* is bleaker, with the speaker singing "notes of woe" (8) while dressed in "clothes of death" (7), but what is less appalling is that unlike the speaker of the companion poem, this child is not disillusioned but remains resolutely buoyant to survive. He protests against the injustice done to him (9-12) and expressly names the culprits as his deluded parents (10) and "God and his priest and king"

(11). He does not exist in the space of *Beulah*, but in *Generation*, the world of the Darwinian struggle for life, of experience, "decay and death" (*The Four Zoas*, I.22), which can distinguish and denounce evil. Blake incriminates institutionalized religion as it preaches submission, acceptance, and unquestioning obedience: "invented only to buttress the *status quo*, it is always 'State Religion… the source of all Cruelty'" (Frye 82). According to Blake, the God of the churches is still that son of the morning, who fell — *Satan* (Bloom 2).

One can see the natural progression underlined through the Doctrine of Contraries in the contrary pair of "The Chimney-Sweeper" poems. In "London", Blake's radical protest escalates with the prophetic voice of the Bard pointing out how natural progression has been curtailed by industrialization. The use of "charter'd" (1,2) suggests accord with Thomas Paine's condemnation of "charters and corporations" in the Second Part of *The Rights of Man* (1792), wherein Paine argues that all charters are purely negative in effect as they cheat the inhabitants and destroy the town's prosperity by annulling the rights of the majority (Erdman 65). Blake, like Paine, hoped that a revolution like that in France could establish liberty, equality, and fraternity. The poet's persona is assaulted by the sights and sounds of human suffering, exposing a contaminated social system. It is almost as if Blake "heard with the ear of [his] soul the cry of the little chimney sweep, and saw with the eye of [his] mind the sigh of the hapless soldier" drip like blood down the palace wall (Damrosch 88). "London" is a political protest uncovering the wily rise of capitalism disguised as development. Blake imagines London as the corrupt city of Babylon, personified in the poem's illustration as a blind, stooped old man.

The victims of "charter'd" London have internalized the cruel, homogenizing ideology of the negation of imagination and individuality and are impeded by "mind-forged manacles" (8). Marriages were mercenarily arranged between families, wives were encouraged to be chastely asexual, and divorce was near impossible. A subculture of prostitution rose for dissatisfied men, officially condemned but in practice condoned. As written in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, brothels are built with "bricks of Religion" (III.21). The husband would contract a venereal disease from a harlot and transmit it to his wife. It would, in turn, show up in the "infant's tear" (15). Truly, the carriage that bears them away from their wedding is a hearse in disguise. Literally and figuratively, every marriage is a lifeless, loveless union.

In sixteen lines, Blake indicts "the church, the law, the monarchy, property, and marriage. In marriage, as he sees it, nearly all of the others are combined — maybe even all of them, if one thinks of monarchy as the symbolic embodiment of patriarchy" (Damrosch 93). In "The Little Black Boy", Blake critiques the colonial project's demonization of blackness, but the poem's categorical dualism, using whiteness to symbolize goodness and blackness to symbolize spiritual darkness may seem problematic today. In the phrase "bereaved of light" (4), "bereaved" has the force of "dispossessed" or "divested" (Bloom 48). In *Paradise Lost* (1667), as Lucifer and his legions are hurled headlong into hell, they lose their ethereal elegance and transform into hideous, beastly figures devoid of luster. Even

the fires in Miltonian Pandemonium radiate "darkness visible" (I.62-3), not light. The binarism involved in this narrative, along with the light/dark dichotomy promulgated by the Church, means that black evolves to stand for the *ghoulish*, and white for the *angelic*. The poem reveals the mother's misery (17) and the little boy's sorrow (2-4), showcasing their humanity to counter and respond to the colonialist propaganda of "Oriental savagery". The negative connotation of black skin shifts to a more positive one as something that will help the boy bear the heat of God's love in heaven through suffering on earth. Here, suffering has a Christian undercurrent and is intended as a pathway to salvation, not overlooking injustice. The poem attempts to deconstruct race and color distinctions by stressing upon the primal oneness of all creatures in the realm of the Divine (23-24).

Blake composes poetry as calculatedly as the Blacksmith-Creator figure crafts the tiger. In his Preface "To the Public" of *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804-20), he states: "Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place" (46-47). Out of context, his songs mean a lot less. He then becomes the simplest of lyric poets, and we miss the rarefied concepts woven into his exquisite poetry.

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