



THE POETIC IMAGINATION OF WILLIAM BLAKE: RETRACING THE SYMPHONY BETWEEN *THE SONGS OF INNOCENCE* AND *THE SONGS OF EXPERIENCE*

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ABSTRACT



Critics of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* not surprisingly have focused their attention on the galaxy of characters whose voices are heard throughout Blake's poems. Along with the cacophony of voices of London's disenfranchised—the men, women and children, the chimney sweeper or the harlot who thronged London's streets and whose piteous cries became the object of Blake's concern, the two set of artistic manifestation portray a seamless blending between innocence, a gradual loss of innocence and finally a metamorphosis into a higher state of innocence. In addition to the spoken voices there runs throughout the Songs an undercurrent of silent voices—voices that can be inferred, or as Blake would say, imagined—which speaks no less directly to the reader but which illuminates the fluid connection between the Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. By giving voice to these unspoken, silent voices that haunt the margins of his poems, and complementing them with the voices of his other characters, Blake hoped to create a more sympathetic and humane vision of life and celebrates an earthly paradise in which animals and human beings live in complete harmony under the protection of a benevolent God.

Keywords: *Blake, Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience, The Four Zoas, The Holy Trinity, Blake's poetic philosophy.*

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RETRACING THE SYMPHONY BETWEEN *THE SONGS OF INNOCENCE* AND *THE SONGS OF EXPERIENCE*

"Father! Father! Where are you going?

O do not walk so fast.

Speak Father, speak to your little boy,

Or else I shall be lost." (Blake's *The Little Boy Lost*)

Only can one launch on a quest for God, have glimpses of divinity, but the divine is too vast, too many to be known in its totality- grief and sorrow, peace and strife, chaos and cosmos, darkness and light, melody and discord, innocence and experience is God. With his ignorance and wisdom, innocence and experience, strength and weakness, the human soul approximate Him, but the restrictions of the human mind are too narrow to estimate His varied possibilities. The *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* scatter in passion many a sounds that convey Blake's symbolic sense. Life or understanding, for Blake begins in the absolute innocence of the Lamb, progresses to the gradual loss of innocence and corresponding gain of experience till the crossroads of 'Tyger' is reached, the point of recognition of both in terms of the other. Blake recreates a similar idea of the "Holy Trinity" found in *The Lamb* transforming into a "fragmented trinity" of the *Chimney Sweeper*. The journey of life so far, had been through an unconscious path of inevitable reorganisation of the Lamb and the Tyger as complimentary entities state of absolute experience, the scheme of the soul's development is understood as an order and this understanding in higher innocence. Innocence and experience are thus the middle order of the four possible stages of development of the human soul. For the poet, the four stages of the soul represents the four moods- the apocalyptic mood of Eden, the idealistic mood of Beulah, the elegiac mood of Generation and from there, the mood of Ohio recognised are static and critical. The state of Experience is what Blake calls Generation and the state of Innocence. Experience dwells in that nether land between a past that no longer exists and a future that does not yet exist. Blake's symbolism is a release of the temporal and the spatial- the

projection is into the world beyond the higher innocence- the world beyond the realms of space or time. The fall of mankind till Christ's returning in the *Book of Revelation* and the foundation of the New Jerusalem finds a parallel portrayal in Albion's disintegration into the four faculties of human perception, the four Zoas- *Tharmas, Urizen, Luvah and Urthona* till Los reunites them into the "complete man".

A clear demarcation between the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* is illustrated by the imageries that Blake chooses to typify the spirits of both sets of poems. The *Songs of Innocence* are characterised by images undisputedly suggestive of the state of Innocence. Everything about the lamb is gentle-its environment and life and God has dressed the lamb in "Softest clothing, woolly bright"- the bright clothing of pure innocence. This "clothing of innocence" finds a revival in Blake's *Chimney Sweeper* where he projects the "little black thing" as an indictment against the "white snow" of the London society enshrouded in its "mind-forged manacles" where *The invisible worm, That flies in the night, In the howling storm, Has found out thy bed Of crimson joy, And his dark secret love Does thy life destroy.*

Far away from all discord, the pounding cacophony of action, the suppressed beatings of suspense, from everything that breaks the continuity of security and satisfaction, the lamb's joyful bleat is about the placid, happy rhythm of life and gives rhythm to it. The lamb gets not only a natural protection, but is given a spiritual care as god manifests Himself in the lamb. (*"Worthy Is The Lamb That Was Slain"*)

The question about the lamb's creator asked in stanza one of *The Lamb* finds a reply in stanza two in the indistinctive knowledge of the child as it gives the lamb wisdom of its own identity-an identity of discovering the divine in the self. Repeated religious references are brought in, as the child projects the Christian notion of Christ as "lamb".

Little Lamb, God bless thee!

Little Lamb, God bless thee!

The understanding of the nature of God infuses and directs these lines with a force that gathers into itself all the accumulated attributes of



God as the creator and god as redeemer which have been outlined in the poem. As a threefold *In Soft Beulah's Night*, the poem celebrates an earthly paradise in which animals and human beings live in complete harmony under the protection of a benevolent God.

In the dark forest of ignorance, the eyes of the Tyger burn with their penetrating vision. As against the lamb's brightness of innocence, the Tyger has a bright ferocity, the ferocity with which its experience keeps vigil over the lamb's innocence, protects innocence from being engulfed into ignorance. Between God's conception and his creation falls no shadow, as God the mysterious synthesis, can give symmetry and pattern to so ferocious a creation, and govern him by an immortal rhythm. "When the stars threw down their spears"- It also occurs in *The Four Zoas* in which, Urizen says:

"The stars threw down their spears and fled naked away"

Helen Gardner interprets the line in the way that the stars symbolising material power, cast aside the instruments of strife and take on pity; and the Creator, now become the God of Innocence, "smiles upon the triumph of the Lamb". The stars symbolise "the hard cold realm of Reason and War that held the earth before Compassion came with Christ". The Tyger is nothing less indeed the Divine spark, the fiercely struggling individuality. The dimension of the divine is incomprehensible in its plurality. It can find fire in "deeps or skies", in the sea bottom, or in the volcano, whose eruption is the Tyger. Deep in the soul was embedded, the forgotten spark, the fire, the vitality of life, the ferocious instinct of preservation, the courage to flout subjugation. When the dark forest of ignorance threatened to engulf and enslave life, God brought this fire, this urge to live from the depths of the soul to the pupils of eyes, that the Ignorance of existence may be viewed and assessed through this fire of Experience- the knowledge of life. The poet as a finite version of the divinity, on the viewless wings of poesy can imagine the degree of aspiration that much has gone into the creation of the Tyger. God's heart beats to the rhythm of the creation of the Tyger, and the emotion of God corresponds to his emotional strength, his art.

*"What shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart."*

Northrop Fry in his seminal work *Fearful Symmetry* reads the state of Innocence as an articulation of the Beulah of later epics, a restful mid-point between the furious energies of Eternity and the fallen world of Ulro. Beulah's cocooning world is fragile and potentially delusive. The poems in *Songs of Experience* on the other hand are "deeply acid bitten satires opposing the comforts of innocence with the disillusioned perspective of Experience in the fallen world; in the process, dramatising the distortion of innocent values. London demonstrates Blake's perception of wasted potential in the harlot. Fry associates the contrary states of innocence and experience with the Orc cycle, the major mythic dynamic he sees at work in the later of Blake's symbology.

It is in *the Songs of Innocence*, that Blake successfully paints the image of the Golden Age independent of Space or Time, objects of vague sighs and dreams of many generations of struggling humanity- an Eden as childhood sees, is brought nearer than ever a poet brought it before. For the poet was in assured position of the Golden Age, within the chambers of his own mind. As we read, fugitive glimpses open, clear as brief, of our buried childhood, of an unseen world present, past or yet to come, we are endowed with new spiritual sight, with unwonted intuitions, bright visitants from finer realms of thoughts, which ever eludes us, but hovers near. From addressing the child, the poet, by transition, not infrequent with him, passes out of himself into the child's person, showing chameleon sympathy with childlike feelings while the sweet hymns of tender infantine sentiments remain appropriate to that perennial image of meekness.

Thus, in its theological approach, it is Swedenborgian in one hand and Pantheistic in the other, while from the East, has it readily assimilated Buddhism and Brahmanism and Mohammedanism. Its supreme tendency remains to become childlike and ageless, its supreme aspiration is not virtue, but innocence: so that we may say with truth of those whom it possesses, so that the longer they live, the younger they grow, as if "passing out to God by the gate of birth, not death." It is in the context of this



larger, mystical progression-by-regression that James Thompson in his *A Strange Book* (1879) reflects on the childlikeness of Songs and the unconscious, even transmigratory identification with the child speaker that he observes in “the holy and tender and babelullabies” of Blake’s *Innocence* in particular.

But as we move into the *Experience*, the singer metamorphoses into an older child, and even a youth, but not yet a man. The experience is that of a sensitive and thoughtful boy, troubled by the first perception of evil when he has believed all good, thinking the whole world gruel and false since some playmate-friend has turned unkind, seeing life all desolate and blank, since some coveted object has disappointed in the possession. Eliot (in his essay *The Naked Man*, published in *Athenaeum*, 1920) comments that Blake was “naked”, his verse “*exhibiting a peculiar honesty which, in a world to frightened too be honest, is peculiarly terrifying*”

The contrast between the state of Innocence and Experience is projected in *Holy Thursday*, a fittingly “innocent” companion to the furious poem with the same name in *Songs of Experience* which excoriates all charity as the get-out of a society lacking in any hint of compassion. Even the poem in its “innocent” counterpart is one of mellifluous rhythm which nonetheless casts up enormous questions about what Blake means by “innocence” His *Little Black Boy* serves to teach humanity an education of compassion or pity, evident in the way he strokes his “silver hair” as if realising that whiteness cannot withstand the scorching force of God’s heat. His immortal words in *Fly*:

*“Am I not a fly like thee, or art thou
Not a man like me?
For I dance and drink and sing,
Till some invisible hand
Shall brush my wing.”*

Is almost prophetic, reminding us of the primitive Gods, of whom Gloucester says:

*“As flies to wanton boys, are we to the Gods.
They kill us for their sport”*

Blake notes in the manuscript of his poem *The Four Zoas*; “*Innocence dwells with Wisdom, but never with Ignorance*” Thus, Experience must do the work of Innocence as soon as conscience begins to take the place of instinct, reflection or perception.

But the moment Experience begins upon this work, men raise against her, the conventional clamour of envy and stupidity. She teaches how to entrap and retain such fugitive delights as children without seeking to catch or cage them; but this teaching, the world calls sin. The contrasting views of Blake’s vision of childhood becomes most prominent in his *Infant Joy* and *Infant Sorrow* that seems almost a precursor to *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* and gives us some of the most powerful images in English literature of the trauma and a fearful sense of isolation that a child can experience.

By the early 1970s, the idea that Freudian accounts of the divided self were relevant to the fall into divisions of Blake’s prophecies was not uncommon. From as early as Damon’s Blake dictionary, Freudian terminology has been used to translate Blake’s philosophy. *Songs of Innocence* is primarily concerned with familiar situations that are nurturing rather than repressive of these libidinous drives. The children in the poem, for their part, are full of fears that they cannot fully comprehend, but hark back to the trauma of separation and anticipate punishment for Oedipal desires within the family romance. *Songs of Experience*, for Diana Hume George’s *Blake and Freud* (1980) is primarily concerned with the repressive situation whereby parental figures become the “*restrainers of youthful sexuality and individuation*” The harshness of the poem *To Tirzah* seems to participate in Freud’s sense of the narcissism of parental love generating resentment in the girl child for being born a woman and in the boy, a bitterness born out of the castration complex originating fear of harbouring desire towards the mother. George shows several examples of “latent tenderness yielding latent brutality” in Experience revealing Blake’s understanding of the Freudian process of repression and sublimation that shape libidinal impulses into the form of civilisation. Perhaps, the primary example of this creation of superego is “*thou shall not*” written over every door in *The Garden of Love*:

*“I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.”*



For Diana Hume George, these lines are the recognition of the prohibition against incest- "*the mother is an erotic garden of love*"- and the child's dawning understanding that he must sublimate his feelings into a respectful worship at a distance, generating the resentment that pervades *Songs of Experience*.

Blake's most condensed indictment of the gender arrangements in a society where Love is ruled by Law and consequently dies; where virtuous females are pure, modest and programmed for frigidity, so that healthy males require whores; where whores have ample cause to curse; and where their curses have the practical effect of infecting young families with venereal diseases as well as with the more metaphoric plague of unacknowledged guilt.

If God is meek, mild and forgiving, he is dread as well. He created Christ in his own image for the deliverance of life, but when any of his creation revolts against his loving control. God realises the need to terrify to bring them back to his fold for the lamb and the tiger are his complimentary creations born out of complimentary emotions. As in *Night* where the lion will take on the protective role previously assigned to the shepherd, the dreadful experience of the Tyger griddles the innocence of the Lamb and protects it from the darkness without. This dichotomy between the gentleness and carefree rhythm of the lamb and the ferocious pouncing of the Tyger gives him the vision of the unity of seeing contradictions and is what man cannot manifest in his creation and forms the basis of the Blake's symbolism. Man can either create melody or discord, meekness or ferocity, can give it either the power to exhilarate or terrify and the quest to create perfection continues through this battlement as the poet and his readers seek, aspire from Ignorance to Ishwar:

"By the yoga of constant practice, two consciousnesses united with Him and not moving elsewhere, thinking always of Him, one goeth to the divine and supreme Purusha..."

- The Bhagavad Gita. By Sri Aurobindo

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