

AN INTERPRETATION OF SOME IMAGES AND METAPHORS OF  
'THE SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE'

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"With a work of art, the essential thing is to experience it. To experience is not the same thing as to understand"<sup>1</sup>. We experience a work of art if we enter into the imaginative world created by an artist, take it just as it is and respond to it with our feeling; if we want to understand it, we will need some formula, some pattern of familiar thoughts and notions. In the case of Blake both the factors are important: it is hardly possible to understand his art before we feel it; the process of emotional response to his art must come before the process of mental formulation, before the process of interpretation. It is so because the poet expressed the complexity and mystery of life in terms of images and symbols, without "translating the unknown into terms of the known"<sup>2</sup>. The poems of the two series form a system of which innocence and experience are vital parts. The child of innocence is radically different from the child of experience, though superficially, there seems to be little to distinguish one from the other. But for the piper and for the Bard the past, present and future are different: for the piper the past only can be the primal unity, for the present is innocence and the immediate future is experience; for the Bard the past is innocence, the present is experience, and the future a higher innocence<sup>3</sup>. It is natural, then, that the piper's point of view is prevaillingly happy, he is conscious of the child's essential divinity and assured of his present protection. In "The Songs of Experience" the Bard's voice is solemn and more deeply resonant.

<sup>1</sup> Digby, G. W.: *Symbol and Image in William Blake*, Oxford University Press, London 1967, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Digby, G. W.: *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gleckner, R. F.: *Point of View and Context in Blake's Songs in English Romantic Poets — Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams, Oxford University Press, New York 1960, p. 71.

The analysis of the two introductions gives us some basic knowledge of Blake's intended parallelism and it is here where we can already find the two major symbols of Blake's system. This system is basically simple: "Like many other artists Blake employed a central group of related symbols to form a dominant symbolic pattern; his symbols are: the child, the father, and Christ respectively, representing the states of innocence, experience and a higher innocence. These «major» symbols provide the context for all the «minor», contributory symbols in «The Songs» (...)»<sup>4</sup>.

The "Introduction" to *The Songs of Innocence* gives the image of a child. This image is a symbol of innocence, but it is also a symbol of a child of God: it stands here for the assumption that people are children of God. The assumption is quite understandable if we remember about the main notion of Blake's philosophy — the notion of the divine origin of the whole of creation. Helene Richter touches the same point:

(...) "Das Kind wird in diesen Liedern der Repräsentant der Natur in ihrer frischen, unmittelbaren Kraft, in der ungebrochenen Einheit ihrer Triebe und Gaben, die das Leben später in hemmende Konflikte bringt und in Widersprüchen zersplittert!"<sup>5</sup>.

The unity between the world of God and that of men finds its full expression in the poem: the image of the Lamb is Godlike but it is also manlike and the poet strongly stresses the mutual interdependence of the two worlds. This image is compellingly elegant because of its precision and refined economy: 1. it unities the two worlds, 2. it shows them as full of simplicity and meekness. Yet it is the world of men that is the poet's main concern and care, and it can be seen even in the pictures of Nature. The *Laughing Song* from the first cycle is such a study, a remarkable one. The metaphors and images are not very refined here, these laughing streams and green woods are really commonplace, but they, as almost all the images of the cycle, give the impression of a fresh and innocently unspoiled joy. At the same time they express the belief that in a moment of deep exaltation in life, Nature corresponds to our feelings. On the other hand, these naive images convey the poet's conviction that only a simple-natured man can spontaneously feel and respond to the feelings excited by Nature. Behind the concrete things presented in the poem there is a more profound idea. And if we can get to it, it is because of Blake's peculiar gift which expresses itself in jumping easily beyond the concrete world into a

<sup>4</sup> Gleckner, R. F.: *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Richter, H.: *William Blake*, Meitz und Mundel, Strassburg 1906, p. 49.

purely ideal realm. This seems to be imagination, that organ of insight which automatically crosses the realm of material things and finds itself in the realm of ideas<sup>6</sup>.

The world of concrete, material things is recognized by the senses (they participate in the process of mental formulation) and therefore it is more easily comprehensible to people. But the world of spirit is to be recognized through imagination, and therefore it is imagination only that can penetrate into eternity. Blake is aware of the world of the everlasting spirit because in it only he sees the real value and because penetrating into it man can get to know it. It seems to be this aspect of Blake's philosophy which W. B. Yeats stressed in his essay on Blake<sup>7</sup> and this kind of experience which Prof. Digby assumes to be the essential thing in approaching a work of art<sup>8</sup>.

It is again in a poem entitled *The Little Black Boy* where Blake crosses the realm of the concrete, the familiar and finds himself in the realm of ideal. He achieves it by means of a single image once more and it is here where we must admire the power of his illustration. The image of a tent for a kingdom of God carries in itself the notion of the nomadic life, something of primitivism and something of battle. It corresponds also to the Biblical story of Noah's sons; it may be an echo of the curse cast on Cham and the promise for Japheth of living in the tents of Shem.

"When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,  
I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear  
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him, and he will then love me".

(*The Little Black Boy*)

The poem was quite an event in the English literature of the times because of its political context: speaking in the name of tolerance the poet presents the black boy in a particular social and political setting of the American Revolution. The poet again crosses the realm of the concrete but this concrete could not be denied.

One more thing characteristic here is the appearance of the Lamb-image in a new context: it is completely humanized. It does not con-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Perkins, D.: *The Quest for Permanence*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1955, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Yeats, W. B.: *Essays and Introductions*, The Macmillan Co., New York 1961, pp. 112—14.

<sup>8</sup> Digby, G. W.: *op. cit.*, p. 94.



tradict the image of the lamb from the previous poems of the first cycle, it is rather meant as its completion. In this setting the poem must be understood as Blake's desire to see the kingdom of Heaven on Earth. It will happen when people have understood the mystery of their divine origin and come back to the state of their original excellence throwing away their custom of judging by appearances. An accompaniment to the poet's dream of the future is the poem entitled *Night*, a delicate and charming study of Nature when the Sun is "descending in the West"<sup>9</sup>.

We have here, as it were, a reconciliation of day and night. They delicately flow together, there is no violent change in nature; all the day's affairs have been finished and the night is a natural completion and fulfilment of the day; it is the time for rest and peace, for musing. It is the time when a man feels the harmony of Nature and that between Nature and Man.

The language of the poem is very simple, as usual in Blake's songs (the word "song" itself implies that simplicity), but the atmosphere of a calm, fresh night is rendered by the use of a simple simile which describes the moon as a flower. The word "flower" acts on two senses: we can see, but also smell; we can breathe the freshness of the night and enjoy the bliss it carries. It is the night as children might dream about, and the images here, not very refined but vivid and colourful, match nicely the atmosphere of a child's dream.

(The metaphor that bestows on the moon human attributes, especially the use of the verb "smile" to render the calmness of the moon, creates this fable of a happy child.

The sorrow of the night described in the "Introduction" to the second cycle is also expressed in one word only, but what a different effect it produces:

"Night is worn (...)"  
(Introduction)

The word "worn" gives the impression of something gloomy and dirty and the mood created by a word which is never used to describe the phenomenon of Nature, suits well the idea of a gloomy night that kills human hopes).

The beautiful poetic images of the angels descending into the valleys inhabited by people are, as it were, taken from the fable of universal

<sup>9</sup> Blake, W.: *Night* in *The Poetical works of William Blake*, Oxford University Press, London 1959, p. 75.

happiness and reconciliation. It seems that the poet never crosses here the realm of the ideal but it is not so. The last images of the Lamb guarded by the mild beasts which have been washed in "life's river" are the poet's message to his fellow human beings. He sets the harmonious structure of the universe against human beings who trouble the harmony of nature with their base life and cruel deeds. The salvation is the river of life, the sacred waters of which wash away evil and dirt, and the poet clearly stresses that it is this river of life. This image predicts the future progress of *The Songs of Innocence* into *The Songs of Experience*. It is a distinctive mark that progress will go along the paths of life in the sense that the human race will reach the state of the sublime innocence only through participation in life, in experience as the poet would call it. But so far, there is no sign of it, we have only a beautiful fable for children and the prevailing mood of it is optimism.

The same optimism, the same imagery of religious kind we will meet in *The Chimney Sweeper*, the poem that expresses Blake's social indignation. The imagery of the poem is built up in a very refined way, with the help of colours. There are only two contrasting colours, black and white, and they are exquisitely balanced. Thus, the image of the black coffin is a symbol of the little chimney sweeper's troublesome life and it is uppermost in the minds of those who know anything about the problem which was the target of the humanitarians of those times, and the angel's bright key creates a clear contrast to it, bringing in light and with it (as usual in Blake's imagery) — hope.

Blake's wonderful visual imagination creates images which are quite new in English literature, especially the little illustrations showing the everyday activity of washing the boy's hair. In this poem the Lamb-image undergoes a further development; it appears here in an everyday, or rather commonplace, context. It is used in a commonplace simile:

"There is Little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,  
That curled like a lamb's back, was shav'd (...)"  
(*The Chimney Sweeper*)

The reader can observe the evolution which the image has undergone: in the opening poems of the cycle it appears in a religious context and bears all the attributes of the divine Lamb, the symbol of Christ; then, in *Night* or *The Little Black Boy* it is humanized in the sense that it embodies some features of human insight; and in *The Chimney Sweeper* the evolution brings the essential features of lamb — the animal. The evolution towards the physical and everyday world is



marked very strongly in the two ending poems of the first cycle which, at the same time, seem to be the key to the whole of the work.

In *The Little Boy Lost* the boy gets lost at night following "a vapour", mistaking it for his father. The Little Boy Found is led back to his searching mother by God who has taken the same father's shape. The two poems sum up Blake's philosophy: the child is led astray and aright following the father: it could not do otherwise: to the little innocent boy, experience, whether true or false, has the same shape. But the poet strongly stresses that innocence itself is far too little, and it is no longer enough for the innocent child to go from false experience to true by chance. It is experience itself that the child itself has to learn. Blake's heroes will undergo various tests in *The Songs of Experience*, and the physical world, full of contradictions, split between Good and Evil, will give them many opportunities to participate in the sacred act of the trial by fire. After this they will learn to follow a greater innocence, and to follow it by choice, not by chance. That marks the basic difference between the two sets of songs and it is the reason why "what was begun as a fable in the child cult, has become, in its new setting, a searching test of faith"<sup>10</sup>. The child is a symbol of man in the first stage of his development, the father of the poems can be explained as a symbol of human search for understanding along the paths of abstract thinking, and the image of the mother to whom the child is brought back is explained by H. Richter as a symbol of the worldly part of human nature, the body itself: "... Die Mutter ist in diesen Gedichten des Menschen irdischer Teil, die Natur, die Sinnlichkeit in ihm"<sup>11</sup>.

The fact of bringing the child back to the mother implies the child's return to some starting point from which it will begin its search again. This point seems to be everything with which the child is born: intuition, imagination. This gives meaning to the earthly, bodily part of the child that should be guided by intuition and imagination on its way through experience, looking for other patterns in life than those of his father. It must be remembered that *The Songs of Innocence* depict the state of mind of the poet who greeted the French Revolution with enthusiasm and firmly believed that it would open the gates of a New Jerusalem, whereas *The Songs of Experience* express the social bitterness and the poet's disappointment with the Revolution which did not seem to fulfil the previous hopes<sup>12</sup>. Therefore the symbol of the Father

which appears in these songs bears all the features of a bitter grown-up man who has resigned his innocence and squandered a big chance. Here it is parents who get lost and are found following the child, here the child becomes the teacher. In *The Little Girl Lost* and "The Little Girl Found", the two poems from the second cycle, the girl, having taken her lesson from Nature, leads her parents safely home although the titles suggest a reverse situation. The parents are saved because they have trusted an innocent instinct, that power which has nothing to do with reasoning and abstract thinking (the girl's name, Lyca — in Greek "wolf" — suggests some wild power of Nature). Experience, embodied in the grown-ups, must learn to follow a greater innocence embodied in the child who has learned her lesson from Nature. Innocence has mastered Nature (the lion had learned to lie down with the child, the Lamb of God) but it has to master the world of men as well, and therefore it will have to master the false experience the forms of which are fixed in societies. And *The Songs of Experience* show all the forms of it, they enumerate them, as it were. The mutilation of societies is shown as the result of the activities of the false experience. Newtonian rationalism is attacked in the "Introduction" to the second series as confining the world of Nature with fetters of rational thinking. When the poet uses the metaphor of a "starry floor" to describe the firmament, he reverses the familiar pattern the reader has in mind to denote the canopy of heaven. The commonplace floor has nothing to do with the starry firmament and therefore it appeals so strongly as a firm, solid material thing overshadowing the light for which people are longing.

Conventions and restrictions of the religious set are classified by Blake as the heaviest fetters of man's life. Blake shows that religion takes the form of mystery depriving life of joy and making a dismal duty from love for God and people. The poet elevates love by making it a revelation of divinity, the most vital power in men. In his approach love is a garden where beautiful flowers of man's noble deeds and intentions are growing. When the bright garden is changed into a gloomy chapel, love ceases to be the noblest of human instincts. Deprived of joy and the Sun by dreary guards of law, love becomes a dismal duty<sup>13</sup>. Defending man's right to love, the poet defends human right to ruling over his bodily form, and thus, defends man's right to nonconformity. The battle with the uniform material law is to be found in the poem entitled *The Little Boy Lost*. We know the image, but here the expression differs: the child is no longer protected by God. The

<sup>10</sup> Bronowski, J.: *William Blake. A Man without a Mask*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> Richter, H.: *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bronowski, J.: *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Blake, W.: *The Garden of Love*, in *op. cit.*, p. 99.



little boy is condemned to the stake for his supposed profanity. The image of the stake contributes much to the development of the pattern of the cycle; it means that the boy has undergone his own experience: he himself has chosen his way and he accounts to his choice. The stake-image marks a new step forward in the progression from innocence to experience. In fact it is the first experience of the boy and is to be understood as some purifying, and at the same time confirming, power. On the other hand, the stake means here just what it meant in the old days of the Inquisition: a symbol of punishment for the crime of blasphemy. For the boy it means punishment but it is priests who are to be blamed, not the boy, and therefore on the higher level it is a kind of test that will prove the boy's truth and confirm his faith in the validity of his own code. Experience kills innocence as it could not do anything else. It can only teach people how to entrap and retain such delicate creatures, things, and emotions, as only children are able to enjoy without seeking to catch or cage them. Man is fastened to his old customs and prejudices as a sun-flower is fastened to the soil that breeds it. He is constantly longing for the Sun, for serenity and brightness, turning his face to the Sun, but cannot escape his fate. The sun-flower is a metaphor of human life and the image reveals once more the Sun lies the secret of their divinity, because they strive towards (or a man) labouriously climbing the endlessly numerous steps of some terrific stairs or ladder:

"(the sun-flower) weary of time  
 (...) countest the steps of the Sun"  
 (Ah! Sun-Flower)

Yet the poet stresses that in the very fact that men lift their faces to the Sun lies the secret of their divinity, because they strive towards infiniteness. It is the contradiction between body and soul, or reason and imagination which exists in the world of people to push the world on. The question of this contradiction is fully explained in *The Tiger*. The Tiger incarnates, as it were, all the contradictions which cause sorrows to the whole creation. The poet asks if it is possible that God created both the Lamb and the Tiger as but the two sides of the same power which reveals itself in Good and Evil, and that the energy that springs from the conflict between the two powers, pushes the world on. They both have to exist if people are to distinguish between them and to choose. The aboriginal innocence must be armed with experience lest it gets lost in the "forest of the night". The Tiger illuminates the darkness of the night because in the new context it is the Tiger, the incarnation of wild unbridled life, that becomes the teacher of life.

A kind of a poetic summing up of the two series of songs can be found in *The Divine Image* for *The Songs of Innocence* and *The Human Abstract* for *The Songs of Experience*. *The Divine Image* describes virtues of Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love as the reflections of God in human beings and praises the nobility of the human beings who are capable of following the Creator.

*The Human Abstract* shows the same virtues but growing inhuman in self-interest: priests and kings use the virtue of pity as an excuse for poverty, and define peace as an armistice of fear.

The two above mentioned poems would not charm the reader with their refined imagery, but they appeal by their outward directness and bitterness. The language of the songs is basically simple and yet little pictures Blake creates are well balanced and appealing. It has been mentioned above that Blake possessed the gift of visual imagination and also had a very fine ear for sounds. His language might therefore become an excellent tool. He does not use many words to render a special effect, and yet, though so simple and few in number, they create an enchanting pattern of the poet's language. Sometimes they sound like the roar of a cannon, sometimes like music. They render the rhythm and calmness or the speed and motion of human life.