BLAKE'S *SONGS OF EXPERIENCE*: THE WORD LOST AND FOUND

From its frontispiece we can infer that Jesus is likely to be as important to the *Songs of Experience* as he is to the *Songs of Innocence*. Pictured in the frontispiece is a Bard and atop his head is a little boy with angel wings. The Bard's arms are raised in a semi-circular pattern above his head, where the circle is completed by the boy's hands, which extend outward in a cruciform manner and are held by the Bard. The completed circle, though a little angular, indicates a special relationship between the Bard and child. W.J.T. Mitchell considers the relationship analogous to that of 'St. Christopher carrying the Christ-child across a river, a theme which Blake and his readers could have seen in many English churches and in the works of European masters such as Durer'.[1] The analogy implies that the Bard is to protect and guide the child on the road through Experience. But the Bard has additional responsibilities, chief of which is to convey to his audience the Word, as indeed he does by walking toward us with the child on his head. What follows in this essay is a discussion of selected songs of *Experience* that demonstrate a shift from articulations of the Word — and its call for renewal — to increasingly tragic variations in response to the Word's call and finally to a searching intuition of the Incarnation in Blake's most well-known song, 'The Tyger'. As I hope we shall see, the Bard manages to fulfill his major responsibility, detecting and conveying the Word — in spite (and also in virtue) of the most difficult, frightening, and bewildering elements of Experience.

Essential to his task, of course, is his voice, which we hear intoned in the 'Introduction' to *Experience*. Much of the critical debate over this poem involves the identity and nature of its speaker or speakers. The poem's meaning and relationship to 'Earth's Answer', the sequel in all copies of *Experience*, have been variously interpreted according to this issue. In general, the opponents in the debate fall into two groups — those who argue that the Bard's voice and 'The Holy Word' (line 4) speak in unison and are redemptive,[2] and those who think that the Holy Word is a malevolent hypocritical god, referred to in 'Earth's An-

[1] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton, N.J., 1978), p. 6.

[2] See, for example, Northrop Frye, 'Blake's Introduction to Experience', in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), p. 25; E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1975), p. 210; and D.G. Gillham, *William Blake* (Cambridge, Eng., 1974), p. 52.

English Studies, 1995, 3, pp. 238-252
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swer' as the 'Selfish father of men'.[3] Supporters of the latter view consider the Bard either an adversary to this god or his malicious spokesperson. This view depends heavily on the poem's allusion to Genesis and on the problematic syntax in the first two stanzas:

> Hear the voice of the Bard!
> Who Present, Past, & Future sees
> Whose ears have heard,
> The Holy Word,
> That walk'd among the ancient trees.
>
> Calling the lapsed Soul
> And weeping in the evening dew:
> That might controll,
> The starry pole;
> And fallen fallen light renew!

According to Robert Gleckner, the allusion in lines 5-7 to Genesis 3.8 associates the Holy Word with 'the Old Testament God ... the cruel law-giver and vengeful tyrant', who soon after Adam and Eve fell appeared in the garden in order to cast them out.[4] This interpretation, however, neglects Blake's ancillary reference to Milton, which has been noted by Northrop Frye though insufficiently explained: '... as recorded in *Paradise Lost*, it was not the Father but Jesus who ... discovered man's fall' in the garden.[5] Although Genesis 3.8 was Blake's primary source, *Paradise Lost* 10.71-102 was his most immediate one. What is important about this source is that Jesus appears in the garden as a 'mild Judge and Intercessor' in order to 'mitigate' the fall and 'temper ... / Justice with Mercy' (10.96, 76-8). This Holy Word can hardly be said to seek vengeance; on the contrary, he calls humanity and nature to renewal.

Nor, as sometimes supposed, can his weeping be hypocritical. Blake's description of the Holy Word 'among the [garden's] ancient trees ... weeping in the evening dew' alludes also to Matthew 26.36-46 and Luke 22.39-46, where Jesus agonizes 'in the *garden* of Gethsemane, in the *evening* (cf. Matthew 26.20), among *trees*', on the Mount of Olives (cf. Luke 22.39).[6] In light of these allusions Blake's use of the word 'weeping' becomes richly ambiguous. The Holy

[3] See, for example, Robert F. Gleckner, *The Piper and the Bard: A Study of William Blake* (Detroit, 1959), pp. 232, 233; D.W. Harding, 'William Blake', in *From Blake to Byron*, ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore, 1962), pp. 76-7; and Michael Ackland, 'Blake's Problematic Touchstones to Experience: "Introduction", "Earth's Answer", and the Lyca Poems', *SIR*, XIX (1980), 7. All references to the *Songs of Experience* and other writings by Blake are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed. David V. Erdman, with 'Commentary' by Harold Bloom (New York, 1988). Though initially spelled out for the sake of clarity, the following titles of Blake's works are also abbreviated in parenthetical citations: *The Book of Urizen* — *BU*, *The Four Zoas* — *FZ*, *Milton* — M, and *Jerusalem* — *J*.

[4] *The Piper and the Bard*, p. 232.

[5] 'Blake's Introduction', p. 25.

[6] See Michael J. Tolley, 'Blake's Songs of Spring', in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, eds. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford, 1973), p. 100. The italics are Tolley's.

Word weeps not only for humanity but also for himself as the Savior about to face his greatest challenge — his suffering and death on the cross. (In terms of *Innocence* and *Experience* as paired groups of poems, such weeping has been foreshadowed by the grieving of Christ and the poet in 'On Anothers Sorrow' and by the tears of the lion in 'Night' — the two songs that conclude *Innocence* more often than any of the others). As an act of authentic empathy and as a recognition of immense challenge, the weeping is an appropriate adjunct to Christ's calling.

Ambiguity stems also from the Introduction's syntax and punctuation. Considering syntax the 'more reliable guide' to understanding the poem, Michael Ackland attempts to resolve the question: whom does the second stanza refer to — the Bard or the Word? Ackland answers by saying that 'two parallel syntactical units' follow the phrase 'The Holy Word' and share it as their subject. The second of these units (beginning with the words 'That might controll ...') appears to attribute responsibility to the Word for the conditions of Earth. Ackland goes on to say that the Word's speech, which is reported by the Bard in the third and final stanzas, 'seems cruel' because 'instead of exercising His power to right the situation' of fallen Earth, the Word 'admonishes' it.[7]

Despite the apparent parallelism between the first and the second stanzas, however, we can see that they remain ambiguous. Failure to recognize their ambiguity neglects Blake's main strategy, which is to identify the concerns of the Word, the Bard, and the audience. These concerns involve the poem's 'Calling', which is both an invitation to renewal and a challenge to achieve it. The challenge is not an admonition, but it does place responsibility for responding to the call with the audience — the lapsed Soul, Earth, and each and every reader. Punctuation reinforces the dual function of the call.[8] If we think of the period at the end of the first stanza as only a temporal and not a conceptual closure for the sentence beginning with the words 'Hear the voice', then the clause beginning with the words 'That might controll' and following the participle 'Calling' constitutes the essence of the sentence's message. In other words, the lapsed Soul is called 'that [*it*] might controll, / The starry pole; / And fallen fallen light renew'. To the *lapsed* Soul this is clearly an invitation and a challenge. Moreover, if the same period makes the relative clauses after 'Bard' essentially parenthetical modification that tells us what he 'sees' and has 'heard', then the participle 'Calling' can be attributed to him just as it has been attributed to the Word.

The purpose of these ambiguities is to join the voices of Jesus and the Bard and to indicate Earth's responsibility for taking up their call. But responsibility does not reside with Earth alone. Responding to a call depends on not only the

[7] 'Blake's Problematic Touchstones', pp. 5-6, 7.

[8] It should be acknowledged, however, that the poem's definitive punctuation is difficult to establish with complete certainty, for as Erdman indicates: '...one printing from an etched plate may be more lightly inked than another and miss out some apostrophes or reduce some commas to periods ...' But, 'with respect to the lyric poems', Erdman adds, 'the hazards of the present editorial choice of Blake's own punctuation are minimal' (*Complete Poetry and Prose*, p. 787).

potential respondent but also on the source of the call itself. Since the Word and his spokesperson — the Bard — are this source, they too bear responsibility for redemption. Thus, the former weeps with on-going concern for humanity. And, as the song 'On Anothers Sorrow' shows, the true poet demonstrates similar concern. The ambiguities of the 'Introduction' emphasize that salvation is the work of the human and the divine. Just as it is mistaken to lay full responsibility for Earth's situation at the feet of the Holy Word (and thereby accuse him of being cruel), so it is equally incorrect to make Earth entirely responsible for her own deliverance.

To add hope and urgency to their call, the Bard and the Holy Word use the analogy of a new dawn:

> O Earth O Earth return!
> Arise from out the dewy grass;
> Night is worn,
> And the morn
> Rises from the slumberous mass.

The imploring tone here, which derives partly from the allusion in line 11 ('O Earth ...') to Jeremiah 22.29, indicates the callers' intense concern. But there is also the recognition of Earth's capacity to respond. The fact that dawn rises 'from the slumberous mass' implies that Earth is only asleep and is capable of waking up. Moreover, her awakening is to be 'from out the dewy grass'. The call to 'return' is to a life beyond mere generative existence. But Blake's language is exceedingly subtle. The emphatic 'out' does more than simply reinforce 'from'. It suggests that Earth's rising is to be out of or through her generative life. Urging and imploring, the voice that emerges from this poem unites the Word and the Bard, divine inspiration and human genius. The main source behind the third stanza is not only the inspired prophet Jeremiah but also the English poet Spenser, in particular his *Hymn to Heavenly Love*, lines 218 and following: 'Then rouze thyself, O Earth, out of thy soil ... And read through love [the Lord's] mercies manifold'.[9] Earth's responsibility for her renewal ('rouze thyself') and the role of generative life in that process ('out of thy soil') are clearly indicated in this source. And the Lord's mercies include the 'dewy grass' and the 'slumberous mass', 'Night' and the potentially inspiring 'morn'. They include even the very limits of existence, beyond which the fall mercifully cannot go: 'the starry floor' and 'the watry shore', which have been bequeathed to Earth for her use 'till the [final] break of day'. In the last lines of the 'Introduction' the orientation of the speakers toward futurity seeks not to upbraid Earth but to foster direction and continued hope.

Earth's harsh, accusatory answer to their call should come as a shock to us. But the response is understandable. Like so many other poems by Blake, 'Earth's Answer' deals with perceptions, in this case with perceptions of the divine and how they can influence an entire viewpoint. Whereas the Bard *hears*

[9] See *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, eds. John E. Grant and Mary Lynn Johnson (New York, 1979), p. 40, n. 2.

the voice of the Holy Word, Earth *hears* that of the 'Selfish father of men'. 'Earth's Answer' is a poem not about malicious, divine-forged manacles but about potentially tragic mind-forged manacles. Its first two stanzas show us Earth's dangerous misperceptions, and the last three demonstrate some of the effects of those misperceptions.

Although the poem opens with a sign of apparent hope ('Earth rais'd up her head'), it moves swiftly to a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Whereas the speakers in the 'Introduction' consider Earth asleep ('slumberous'), she considers herself imprisoned — a condition represented in the poem's design by the closed circle of vegetative life extending from a snake's tail in the bottom left corner, up the left margin, around the last three stanzas, and returning to the snake's head in the lower right corner. And even though 'the watry shore' in the 'Introduction' is a merciful boundary or limit to the generative chaos of such life, Earth perceives that boundary as a dark, frightening 'Stony' cell, in which she has been confined so long that 'her locks [are] cover'd with grey despair'. At the very least, these perceptions are drastic. But even worse is their cause, which is the more fundamental perception by Earth of God as her jailer: 'Starry Jealousy does keep my den'. Blake understands well the close relationship between perceptions and causes and effects. Just as Earth's view of the divine affects her perceptions of everything around her, so the latter influence her view of the divine. To consider oneself in prison is, almost by definition, to take a dim view of one's jailer. Consequently, Earth perceives her God as not only jealous of his power and authority but also 'Cruel' in his use of them.

Though referred to as a father, this God is actually a deceiver, whom Blake calls elsewhere 'Nobodaddy' or nobody's daddy.[10] Modelled in part after the Wholly Other in the Old Testament, this God is 'silent & invisible' (p. 471). His laws are so mysterious that he commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge and then he tempted them with one of the wiliest of his creatures — the serpent. The most terrible result of Nobodaddy's machinations, which 'Earth's Answer' decries in its last three stanzas, is the fettering of love and compassion — the true means to renewal. According to Earth, night has become 'Chain'd', and day is even more firmly bound since at that time love is considered doubly a sin. So great is Earth's despair that she feels utterly helpless, and so she commands her God to 'Break' her chains, forgetting that it is love which must deliver her. As Blake wrote in a Notebook poem (ca. 1793), 'Love ... breaks all chains from every mind' (p. 472).

The theme of love fettered demands our attention here because it involves in the *Songs of Experience* various distortions of Christ's manifestation as imaginative love or, to use Blake's phrase, the 'Human Form Divine'. The gravest of these distortions appears in 'The Human Abstract' and 'A Poison Tree'. In the next few paragraphs I concentrate on the role of false perceptions and rationalizing selfhood in these poems, which together parody 'The Divine Image' in

[10] Nobodaddy, Urizen, Starry Jealousy, *et al.* are first and foremost tyrants, as Jean H. Hagstrum argues in "'What Seems to Be: Is": Blake's Idea of God', in *Johnson and His Age*, ed. James Engell (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 432 and 434, n. 10.

the *Songs of Innocence*, distorting or perverting the Human Form Divine into universal cruelty and murderous wrath. In contrast to such gross perversion there develops an intuitive albeit limited comprehension of love mixed with wrath in Blake's most famous lyric, 'The Tyger' — a comprehension that begins to find in Jesus the ultimate union of these contraries.

Parodying 'The Divine Image', the speaker's misunderstanding of the Word in 'The Human Abstract' distorts all the 'virtues of delight' and thus the potential for the Word's manifestation in them. 'The Human Abstract' exposes the nature and manner of perception that accounts for such misunderstanding and distortion. This poem presents a spectrous form of mind in which the tendency to generalize and rationalize (rather than particularize and create) has assumed dominance. This spectrous mind (or selfhood) is the type that deduces (or *abstracts*) from an instance of either naked infant energy (as in 'Infant Sorrow') or youthful play in a garden (as in 'The Garden of Love') a frightening future of sin and damnation. Whereas the persona in 'The Divine Image' celebrates Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love as the 'virtues of delight' and the essential means of alleviating human 'distress', the speaker in 'The Human Abstract' rationalizes these virtues as mere functions of their opposites:

> Pity would be no more,
> If we did not make somebody Poor:
> And Mercy no more could be,
> If all were as happy as we ...

As a rationalization, spoken without any intention to alleviate poverty and thereby make pity needless, the first of these two couplets argues not simply for the acceptance of poverty but for its necessity as a human condition. Hence, we must 'make' it a reality by not trying to eliminate it. For this necessity insures a forum for the practice of pity so that in the natural order of things where many must be poor and some rich the former can build up treasures in heaven directly through their plight and the latter indirectly through their pity. As a bonus, the latter can also feel good about themselves for their works of mercy. But too much mercy would not be good because that would make too many people happy and thus upset the rational balance of things in which sufficient unhappiness permits charity to be shown and to do its self-fulfilling work.

Comparing and judging only according to 'what he has already perciev'd' in the order of things, the Human Abstract cannot conceive of that order any other way. Consequently, he considers such mutual negations as fear and peace — no doubt the multitude's fear and established authority's peace — to be essentially interdependent. But he who sees only 'what he has already perciev'd' — i.e., his own abstractions — sees his selfhood only. In the dull and restrictive round of such perception there is unfortunately no end to self-re-flection, self-regard, and self-love. So even though 'mutual fear brings peace', such peace is only temporary 'Till the selfish loves increase' and thereby undermine it. An order that is based on self-love is really not so orderly after all. In spite of occasional charity and momentary peace, self-love is fundamentally hypocritical and cruel. With its increase the reigning god of the day becomes Cruelty per-

sonified. Sometimes overt but more often quite subtle, Cruelty reveals his most covert form in an alliance with fear, particularly holy fear, with which his pious but selfish tears cultivate a mentality of Humility and submission in the face of an invidious order that should not exist. As a terrible mind-set nurtured by Cruelty, Humility's servitude and resignation to him are aptly described in the poem's central metaphor of cultivation: 'Then Humility takes its root / Underneath his foot'.

Growing out of false Humility and inhuman submission is the Tree of Mystery with its 'dismal shade', which obscures vision with the belief that such 'mutual' relationships as those between pity and poverty, mercy and misery, must be accepted because ultimately they are 'mysteries'. So dark, enormous, and entangling is this Tree that mortal life and even eternity (symbolized by the 'Fly' and the 'Catterpiller', respectively) depend on it for sustenance and meaning — both of which are limited. But perhaps the worst aspect of this Tree is its 'fruit of Deceit', in particular the deception that the selfish order of things is necessary and unchangeable. With its 'dismal shade' and 'fruit of Deceit', the Tree of Mystery is truly the habitation of darkness and death, as signified by 'the Raven'. That this habitation lies deep within 'the Human Brain' should not surprise us, considering the Human Abstract's narrow circle of perception.

Because this Tree 'grows' within humanity, we have a kind of perverse incarnation in contrast to the Human Form Divine presented, or rather embodied, in 'The Divine Image'. In actuality, this gross incarnation is only a partial one, for Blake wanted to emphasize in 'The Human Abstract' the domination by spectrous brains that distort both humanity and God. The full embodiment of the Human Abstract and its completed parody of the Human Form Divine appear in 'A Poison Tree', a poem about another form of Cruelty — wrath. Instead of merely exploring the consequences of repressed anger, this poem incarnates them. Wrath becomes a poison tree.[11] Or rather, since the tree represents the body (as trees sometimes do elsewhere in Blake's work — cf. *America*, pl. 16; and *Milton*, pl. 19), this anger becomes a sick and infectious body, which has repressed it into hypocritical 'Christian Forbearance' (the original title of 'A Poison Tree') and thereby perverted honest emotion into wrath and murder.

Like Cruelty personified in 'The Human Abstract', the speaker in 'A Poison Tree' imitates only one aspect of the divine nature — its wrath. As Kathleen Raine says of the speaker, the 'purely human truth [that his forbearance is repressed wrath] is illustrated by an implicit analogy with the behavior of the God of Genesis', who hid within the Tree of Knowledge 'what [Jacob] Boehme calls "the Wrath of the Anger of God". This wrath is invisible ... and this God, Blake implies, conceals his evil intentions toward Adam, and awaits what he knows is bound to follow: Adam ... is lured by the brightness of the apple, steals the forbidden fruit, and dies'.[12] Just as this God of wrath entrapped the

[11] See Philip J. Gallagher, 'The Word Made Flesh: Blake's "A Poison Tree" and the Book of Genesis', *SIR*, XVI (1977), 239.

[12] Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1968), II, 39.

first parents, so Cruelty in 'The Human Abstract' and the speaker in 'A Poison Tree' entrap their victims. Blake's figures are equally 'creative' in their machinations. Cruelty cultivates his 'snare', the Tree of Mystery, by watering the ground with selfish fears and tears, from which the Tree takes root. Similarly, the angry persona 'waterd' his rage 'in fears, / Night & morning ... with tears'. Like both Cruelty and the God of Genesis, this persona resorts to hypocrisy in his creation, sunning his wrath 'with smiles, / And with soft deceitful wiles'. And like both 'the fruit of Deceit' on Cruelty's Tree of Mystery and the alluring but forbidden fruit on the Tree of Knowledge, the speaker's ultimate product is a poisonous 'apple bright'. As another Human Abstract, the speaker reflects in his repression and guile and in their deadly effects his implicit perceptions of the God of Genesis as a secretive, deceptive, and vindictive creator.

At the end of 'A Poison Tree' the gladness with which the persona views his dead victim ('In the morning glad I see...') makes the malice and sickness of his wrath frighteningly clear. Robert Gleckner compares this gladness to the smile of the creator in 'The Tyger': 'Did he smile his work to see?' Gleckner acknowledges that the Tyger's creation is 'at once an act of mercy and a menace'.[13] But his comparison tends not only to imply that Blake's most famous poem deals mainly with a wrathful god (the Tyger's creator), but also to play down its genuine struggle and partial achievement in reconciling divine wrath with divine mercy. The remainder of this essay examines 'The Tyger' in terms of this struggle and achievement.

Interpreters of the song disagree, as Morton Paley observes, 'about whether the Tyger is "good", [i.e.] created by the Lamb's creator; ambiguous, its creator unknown and the question of the poem unanswerable; or "evil", created by some maleficent force'.[14] Of the scholars representing these views, three are especially noteworthy: Joseph Wicksteed, John Grant, and Harold Bloom. According to Wicksteed, 'The whole thesis of "The Tyger" is that he is a spiritual expression of the Creator himself'; and this expression is essentially good because the creator of the Tyger created also the Lamb.[15] Although Wicksteed does little more than assert these claims, Grant agrees with him that the Tyger and the Lamb derive from the same creator. But their reconciliation has not been made possible here and now by the Incarnation. Thus, according to Grant, 'the poem is not a vehicle for positive thinking, but a study in [its speaker's] perplexity and metaphysical rebelliousness' concerning this terrifying yet beautiful creature.[16]

Taking a position quite different from Grant's and Wicksteed's, Bloom asserts that the speaker as a voice of Experience 'desires to delude himself' by considering the Tyger and its maker not only frightening but also diabolical. This

[13] *The Piper and the Bard*, pp. 257, 278.

[14] Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford, 1970), p. 39.

[15] Joseph H. Wicksteed, *Blake's Innocence and Experience: A Study of the Songs and Manuscripts* (London, 1928), pp. 196, 198.

[16] John E. Grant, 'The Art and Argument of "The Tyger"', in *Discussions of William Blake*, ed. John E. Grant (Boston, 1961), pp. 74, 75, 73, 64.

Tyger, Bloom says, is a 'precise parallel to the Behemoth and the Leviathan' in Job 40-41.[17] Indeed, there are some similarities among these creatures: in the Behemoth's and the Tyger's twisted 'sinews' (Job 40.17); in the Behemoth's bones of 'brass' and 'iron' (40.18), which suggest that he, along with the Tyger, is possibly the work of a powerful craftsman-god; and in the Leviathan's mouth of 'burning lamps / *And* sparks' (41.19), which ally him with the 'burning' Tyger in terms of additional particulars from the same god's forge. Like the Leviathan that breathes fire and glares in the Job designs that Blake executed for Thomas Butts, the Tyger burns all over and has fire in its eyes. But lest we think that such comparisons necessarily imply a malicious creator of malevolent creatures, we need to recognize that the Tyger burning 'bright' in the forests of materialism and error is not wholly evil. Its fiery wrath could in fact eliminate the forests of darkness by shedding light upon them or by burning them up. The Leviathan too is apparently a creature of potent contraries: '...sorrow is turned into joy before him' (41.22). As Blake's poem implies, the Tyger of Wrath is also the Lamb of Love; and their reconciliation *is* made possible by the Incarnation. How this is so mostly eludes the speaker; that this is so he begins to see.

His vision depends on his capacity to imagine and create. As God says to Job, '...thine own right hand can save thee' (40.14). As a source behind Blake's poem, Job 40-41 can serve to lessen rather than increase our perceptions of either rebelliousness or delusion in the speaker. God says to Job, 'He that reproveth God, let him answer it' (40.2), and Job no longer reproves. Nor does Blake's speaker although he does ask some of the deepest and most difficult of questions. But they are not contentious. They genuinely seek to understand and in doing so they intuit an incarnate form of the divine, in which the persona begins to see his own participation. In other words, he imagines and speaks inquisitively and thereby comprehends at least partly within himself a creator whose union of such apparent opposites as danger and beauty seems at first beyond any comprehension.

The speaker's intuitions about this creator begin immediately with a perception of the amazing contrariety within one of his creatures. The Tyger 'burning bright' possesses powers to destroy and darken as well as illuminate. This combination of powers is especially puzzling because while the powers may appear to constitute opposites, canceling one another out, they do not. It is precisely the Tyger's 'burning' that makes it appear 'bright', and it is its brilliance that makes it appear to burn. This intimate union of contraries is what makes the Tyger and therefore its creator so fascinating. The fact that the speaker articulates this union and is presumably a thoughtful human being suggests that he may be on the verge of some deeper understanding. That this is possible so early in the poem might arouse our skepticism, but we must recognize that the opening and closing stanzas of 'The Tyger' are summational frames which outline

[17] Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), pp. 146, 147. For similar views, see Philip Law, 'Innocence Renewed: The Divine Images of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*', *Theology*, LXXXIX (1986), 276; and Robert F. Gleckner, 'Blake's "The Tyger" and Edward Young's Book of Job', *Blake*, XXI (1987-8), 99.

the speaker's intellectual and emotional awareness. Just as his opening question, 'What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?' assumes the possibility of a framer of the Tyger, so the speaker assumes for himself a similar possibility — that of framing and uniting (through words) his contrary intuitions.

The one important difference between the opening and closing frames of the poem is, of course, the change from the word 'Could' to the word 'Dare', which has been variously interpreted as an expression of the speaker's indignation[18] or as a reflection of his sensitivity to contradiction within the divine mind.[19] But, whereas 'Could' suggests the persona's desire to understand the power or capacity (what *could* it be?) that creates the Tyger, 'Dare' implies an admiration of such power. Indeed, according to the *OED*, one of the meanings of this verb is 'to dazzle and fascinate'. The persona's concluding admiration of the Tyger's creator is not the same, however, as the awe or wonder expressed earlier in the poem. Instead, it is a sense of the remarkable nature of the creator, a sense the grasping of which has involved the speaker in a similarly creative role — as singer of a song he has endeavored to frame according to the complexities of its subject.

The middle stanzas of the poem explore more specifically what the persona imagines and comes to admire. They represent a difficult journey in awareness. With awe but also with fear and trembling the speaker travels into the abyss of his imagination and from there arrives at a sudden though accountable recognition. His awe, beginning with an acknowledgement of the Tyger's 'fearful symmetry', becomes immediately more specific in the question: 'In what distant deeps or skies. / Burnt the fire of thine eyes?' Just as this question implies an indeterminate location for the Tyger's first perceptions, so it suggests a ubiquitous creator — one who functions in the depths of Experience, and possibly even in hell, as well as in the heights of heaven. The speaker's wonder continues in the next two questions: 'On what wings dare he aspire? / What the hand, dare sieze the fire?' But here wonder is mixed with fear since the creator not only soars with aspiration but also boldly grasps earthly and perhaps hellish means to implement it. At this point in the poem the god that the persona imagines resembles Icarus and Prometheus — both of whom were bold, Icarus for his flight and Prometheus for his theft of fire from the ancient gods.[20]

The allusion to Prometheus leads into the darkest and most frightening intuition of the persona concerning the Tyger's creator: the possibility that this creator could be a powerful and violent demiurge — a blacksmith-god. That Prometheus was the thief of fire is relevant since it is the primary means, according to the speaker's imagination, by which this god does his work. His blaz-

[18] See 'The Art and Argument', p. 75.

[19] See Lionel Trilling, 'Tyger, Tyger!', in *Prefaces to the Experience of Literature* (New York, 1979), p. 217.

[20] Scholars who detect in line 8 an allusion to Prometheus include: Jesse Bier, 'A Study of Blake's "The Tyger"', *BuR*, I (1949), 40; F.W. Bateson, ed., *Selected Poems of William Blake* (London, 1957), p. 118; and Warren Stevenson, '"The Tyger" as Artifact', *Blake Studies*, II (1969), 9.

ing forge incites dread in the mind of the persona, who envisions that the most terrible aspects of the Tyger and its shaper merge. The beast's forbidding heartbeat appears to have been set by the 'dread hand' and 'dread feet' of the god as he trod the lever-and-chain of his bellows and pounded on his anvil. Struggling to comprehend this apparent demiurge, the persona formulates an embodied vision in which forceful shoulders and hands wield the hard and heavy implements of a forge in order to create a beast whose 'deadly terrors' seem almost equal to their creator's.

How the speaker manages the sudden crossing from such terrors to the calm, almost serene, perspective in the fifth stanza is an enigma that many readers find difficult to resolve. Indeed, how does he move from the fiery and forceful blacksmith-god to the bemused creator referred to in the following lines?

> When the stars threw down their spears
> And water'd heaven with their tears:
> Did he smile his work to see?
> Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

While not agreeing about the precise meaning of the first couplet in this stanza, scholars consider seriously the idea that it refers both to the constraint and rigidity that Blake often associated with stars (as in the phrase 'Starry Jealousy' in 'Earth's Answer') and to a 'breaking down of these barriers separating' humanity from what is best in them.[21] The surrender and pathos implicit in the couplet suggest the opportunity for some kind of release or deliverance from the confinements of fallen life. The past tenses throughout the stanza imply that the fixed state of stars whirling about in their own orbits has ended. Since obviously it is the persona who speaks these lines, he must surely have some sense of an opportunity at hand. But what precisely is it and how has he intuited it? How has the persona made the sudden leap from furious blacksmith to smiling creator?

The best way to understand this leap is to recognize who the blacksmith is and, in particular, what his incarnate creativity begins to mean for the persona. As Morton Paley argues,[22] the blacksmith clearly resembles Los — the fiery, hard-working, and self-sacrificing smithy in Blake's prophecies, who like the speaker possesses a fallen but redeemable and redeeming imagination. The implements that are used to create the Tyger — the hammer, the chain, the furnace, and the anvil — are assigned to Los in Blake's prophecies. Plate 6 of *Jerusalem* portrays him with all four of these implements. And as if to answer the second question in the fifth stanza of 'The Tyger' ('Did he who made the Lamb make thee?'), plate 73 of *Jerusalem* tells us that Los created in his furnaces both 'the Tyger' and 'the wooly Lamb' (lines 17, 18).

[21] Martin K. Nurmi, 'Blake's Revisions of *The Tyger*', *PMLA*, LXXI (1956), 672. See also Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (New York, 1959), p. 214; and David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J., 1969), pp. 194-6.

[22] *Energy and the Imagination*, p. 57.

As a Promethean smithy, this energetic genius gives incarnate form to his creations. Despite intense fear and anxiety, the persona of Blake's song begins to show his awareness of this formative power — especially by referring to the 'art' and 'grasp' with which the blacksmith shaped the Tyger into a flesh-and-blood 'symmetry'. In the prophecies Los uses the same power to establish the limits of fallen existence — specifically of Urizen, who rebelled against the Divine Humanity (cf. *The Book of Urizen*, pls. 8-13, and *The Four Zoas* 53.20-55.9). In doing so, Los functions as both a Prometheus and a 'visionary of Jesus' (*FZ* 12.25), imitating their creative work and becoming their continued embodiment in the form of Poetic Genius (cf. *FZ* 90.37 and *J* 96.7, 22).

The Promethean-Christian nexus in 'The Tyger' is particularly significant and can adjust our understanding of the poem along more hopeful lines than usually acknowledged. Like Christ, Prometheus threw in his lot with humanity and took upon himself the suffering of creatures who were otherwise doomed. Though wary of Greek tragedy and the idea of fate, Blake must have recognized in *Prometheus Bound* a great prophecy, for lines 773-807 of the drama anticipate a savior.[23] In spite of many differences between the Greek and Christian myths, it is little wonder that early church fathers pointed to Prometheus as an archetype of Christ. Tertullian, for example, spoke of the '*crucibus Caucasorum*' and exclaimed that '*Prometheus deus omnipotens blasphemiis lancinatur*', while others found a god-and-man in the bold anagram *Protheus* or suggested various specific parallels between Prometheus's suffering and Christ's passion.[24] The mystery of the smithy's work, which amazes Blake's persona just as it does anyone sensitive to great archetypes, is that it participates in fallen life and yet transcends it. This creator's 'hand or eye', fully integrated in the union of energy and vision, is 'immortal', and his incarnate work is infinitely aspiring. He and his actions resemble the Incarnation itself (cf. *FZ* 100.8-10).

In addition, his gift of form to fallen life, like Christ's gift of himself, is offered so that this life can be recognized for what it is and transfigured. In Blake's brief epic *Milton* transfiguration is especially the work of Los the

[23] See Aeschylus, *Prometheus Chain'd*, in *The Tragedies of Aeschylus*, trans. R[obert] Potter (Norwich, Eng., 1777), pp. 45-8. Blake probably owned a copy of the second edition of Potter's translation of Aeschylus (1779). See G.E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records Supplement* (Oxford, 1988), p. 124. That the poet recognized Prometheus's binding and suffering on Mount Caucasus as Christ-like can be seen in the binding and suffering of Orc in plate 1 of *America* and in his association with Christ by Urthona's 'shadowy daughter' on plate 2: 'Thou art the image of God ... / And thou art fall'n to give me life' (lines 8-9). Cf. Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977), p. 153, lines 578-85. Even modern classicists occasionally refer to Prometheus's suffering as a 'crucifixion'. See R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), p. 182.

[24] Tertullian's Latin refers to Prometheus's long-suffering 'Caucasian crucifixions', the story that 'Prometheus, God Almighty, is torn [repeatedly] to bits with blasphemies' (*Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans [Oxford, 1972], I, 5). For evidence of Blake's awareness of patristic thought, see Bo Lindberg, *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job*, Acta Academiae Aboensis, Series A Humaniora, vol. 46 (Abo, Finland, 1973), pp. 130-3, 136-7.

smithy, who re-creates 'in the Nerves of the [human] Ear ... the glorious Sun each morning' (29.40-1). Through Los, through Jesus, through Poetic Genius (in which the speaker of 'The Tyger' begins to participate by word and developing awareness), fallen existence becomes fortunate though not without enormous pain, suffering, and fear — not without the wrath of the Tyger. Read as possibly the most compact and tentative theodical statement in all of literature, the fifth stanza of Blake's song advances from contracted and constrained existence, symbolized by the stars, to a release from it in the shedding of repentant tears capable of nourishing heaven itself. This, of course, is not Milton's theodicy, in which the fallen starry angels drop their weapons but do not repent (*Paradise Lost* 6.826ff.). This is Blake's theodicy — his vision of a divine plan. The stars that throw down their spears are the followers of Urizen, his 'self-begotten armies', which he led against the Divine Humanity. By throwing down their spears, the stars symbolize the surrender of Urizen's forces to creation and potential redemption through Los's and Jesus's work.[25]

As a result of the fall of Urizen, then, a most amazing event took place. Line 17 ('When the stars threw down their spears') hints at it with remarkable subtlety. The line's association between spheres (stars) and spears calls to mind the image of globes of irradiating fire like the glorious sun itself and thus implies a deep and mysterious connection in the speaker's psyche between the fall of Urizen and his starry host and the descent and incarnation of the divine Son. With love and compassion for the fallen the Infinite forced himself, hammered himself, into the circumscribed but energetic limits of fallen life. Astonishing as the creation and incarnation of the Tyger are for the speaker, far more astonishing and deserving of admiration is the self-limitation of God — to become fallen in order to redeem the fallen.[26] If the creator could do this, he could certainly create the Tyger as well as the Lamb and embody himself in both.

'Did he smile his work to see?' Undoubtedly, because his plan is a divine and human comedy. And the speaker is on the verge of detecting its sublime humor. A sensitive star-gazer, as the words 'forests of the night' and 'distant deeps or skies' imply, he must surely glimpse in the stars that rain down in stanza 5 an image of the divinely comic pattern of wrath and judgment redeemable through mercy and forgiveness. In the first four stanzas of 'The Tyger', awe is mixed with struggle and fright. But in the momentary leap from the fourth to the fifth stanza, the persona enters the moment of Los, the moment that not even spectrous dread or the Human Abstract can assail. Although the speaker has not yet 'rightly placed' or integrated this moment in his life (see *M* 35.42-5), he

[25] As part of a political prophecy of the early 1790s, these stars represent also 'the day of repentance', according to Erdman (*Blake*, p. 196) — the day when monarchy's soldiers shall 'throw down ... sword and musket', nobles 'shall ... unbuckle / The girdle of war', and priests 'Shall weep, bending to earth embracing the valleys, and putting ... hand to plow' (*The French Revolution*, p. 296, lines 220-4).

[26] For a fuller treatment of the Incarnation as kenosis elsewhere in Blake's work, see Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (East Lansing, Mich., 1976); and Dennis M. Welch, '"Cloth'd with human beauty": *Milton* and Blake's Incarnational Aesthetic', *R&L*, XVIII (1986), 1-15.

stands ready to do so. By the fifth stanza fear and trembling have modulated into a sublime but faintly understood vision of incarnation and redemption, the implicit nexus being that Los — the Promethean smithy — and through him Jesus — the creative Logos — have embodied the Tyger of Wrath and the Lamb of Love, which are one.

If the verbal text of 'The Tyger' challenges our perceptions, so also does its illustration. The obvious lack of ferocity in the Tyger of the design as compared to the Tyger of the poem has caused many to wonder what Blake was up to. John Grant, for example, has argued that the illustration parodies the Tyger's participation in the divine life: 'When immortal energy is hammered into merely mortal form, what else can appear but a parody of eternal vitality?'[27] The poem itself, however, is precisely such a hammering and yet it conveys this vitality well enough to awe many of its readers. Why didn't Blake do the same with the illustration? We certainly cannot accuse him of having been unable as a painter to depict a ferocious beast. His *Behemoth and Leviathan* in the Book of Job designs is unquestionably horrific. In addition, the head of the gruesome tiger that he sketched in his Notebook comes much closer to what we tend to expect of the finished design for the song.[28]

To explain this enigmatic design other scholars have suggested that Blake was trying to humanize the Tyger[29] or portray on its lips 'the smile of the Deity'.[30] But these views involve rather personalized perceptions of the animal's facial lines, which are not identical from copy to copy of the poem. A more compelling interpretation is that the design reflects not only the persona's potential awareness of a comic vision (such as discussed above) but also Blake's effort to convey this vision from his own perspective. As a participant in incarnational work along with Los, who has 'smild with joy' at another of his creations (*Book of Los* 5.45), Blake must have smiled too at his own work — especially upon giving it definite form and upon understanding something of its significance for himself and humanity. A hopeful, comic, possibly even millennial union of the Tyger and the Lamb is intimated in the design, for its 'beast' while recognizably a tiger is almost as much a lamb in size and mildness. Other details in the illustration support this interpretation. Whereas in the text the Tyger burns 'bright' amidst the 'forests of the night', in the design he stands backgrounded by pink sky and flanked by the leafless branches of a single (often colorful) tree — these images tending to dismiss, as David Erdman says, 'either forest or night as perdurable'.[31] Certainly, the Tyger in the design is closer to organized 'Innocence' than to violent and divisive 'Experience'.

Although the speaker in 'The Tyger' enters an abyss of doubts and fears not unlike those expressed (albeit differently) in 'Earth's Answer', 'The Human Ab-

[27] 'The Art and Argument', p. 80.

[28] See *The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile*, ed. David V. Erdman (Oxford, 1973).

[29] Harold E. Pagliaro, *Selfhood and Redemption in Blake's Songs* (University Park, Penn., 1987), p. 87.

[30] *Blake's Innocence and Experience*, p. 193.

[31] David V. Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (New York, 1974), p. 84.

stract', and 'A Poison Tree', he manages to struggle through that abyss. Whereas the persona in 'Earth's Answer' lies imprisoned in misperception and angry despair, this speaker responds not so much to a direct call as to a series of challenging questions that he himself asks. And while the 'tears' in 'The Human Abstract' and 'A Poison Tree' embody deception and destructiveness, the 'tears' in 'The Tyger' embody a difficult yet potentially redemptive response by creation's first fallen forms to the Word's call — a response that includes the speaker as he begins to intuit that call beneath the surface of his own questions. As framer of the words of his song, he begins to participate in the work of the Word itself.

Eventually after the fall the 'starry pole' will come under humanity's 'controll' and no longer stand as an *ignis fatuus* for Earth's travellers. For this to happen, humanity must respond — even, perhaps especially, by asking questions. The self-deceiving mind-forged manacles of the Human Abstract must be broken, so that 'Starry Jealousy' and the Tree of Mystery no longer stand as obstacles to human vision and human community. By asking questions the speaker in 'The Tyger' adopts a posture like that of the Human Abstract, but the speaker's questioning does not distort and negate the virtues of delight and the means to community and renewal. Instead, his questions enable him to glimpse through the negativities of doubt and despair the very source of those virtues in the redeeming self-limitation and expansive creativity of the Human Form Divine. In contrast to 'The Human Abstract' and 'A Poison Tree', 'The Tyger' hints at no false Incarnation. The smile of the creative Logos is no illusion. Just as in the Incarnation, so also in Blake's best-known song: the journey downward turns out to be upward. By observing the eagle (of genius) that soars at the top of this illuminated poem just as we begin to read it, we may prepare ourselves from the outset to detect both Blake's and his speaker's rising vision.

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