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The Problematic Vision of Blake's *Innocence*: A View From *Night*

Approaches to William Blake's "Night" typify the larger critical view of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* as admirably accepting of Christian faith and fortitude.¹ Despite intrusions of danger and death into the pastoral sanctity of "Night," most critics have read the song ultimately as a proclamation of the essential harmony, if not expressly Christian character, of Blake's "state" of Innocence.² D. G. Gillham, for example, sees the poem's speaker as one who has a "knowledge" of "real" love which is "at the centre of the poem" (239-40), while for E. D. Hirsch "Night," like *Innocence*, reveals a "radically immanent Christianity" (29) and a "religious affirmation" (28). Although many critics perceive the song's darker elements and note, as does Harold Bloom, its "gentle irony" (41), they avoid or palliate the speaker's easy religious resolution to the poem's spiritual dilemma. Like others who sense ambiguities in "Night," Zachary Leader resolves tensions within an optimistic and transcendent Christian framework, identifying Innocence with religious faith in the midst of adversity:

As the speaker seeks out his nest, his meditations upon the night move from a sense of calm and soothing benevolence (the activities of the angels in stanzas 1 to 3) to an acknowledgement of danger and suffering. . . . The initial mood of calm acceptance lives on in stanza 4, and we feel that night's soothing influence prevents him from becoming frightened or despairing. . . . Though the angels are

ineffectual, the speaker is himself still subject to the soothing spell of night, which is why he continues to speak of the angels, its visionary form, as "most heedful." He has no clear understanding of how their benevolent protection works . . . but he still feels its presence. Though the night's traditional associations of loss and danger are well-founded, the speaker retains his innocent vision. (124)

I believe there is much in the text and design of "Night" that would have us question the speaker's "innocent vision." The speaker, who Hirsch rightly suggests is not a child (197), is in search of the comfort of the bower—a nest secure within the encroaching night:³

The sun descending in the west.
The evening star does shine.
The birds are silent in their nest,
And I must seek for mine . . .⁴

But somewhere in the course of his quest, the speaker loses sight of his own pursuit in that of nature's creatures as they too are enveloped in shadows. But the loss of self is only apparent, since what the speaker truly seeks is his own escape from danger, figured by the night and the wild beasts of prey that threaten the sheep. He finds reason for his own protection in the reassuring maternal bond between God's angelic emissaries and the natural world that keeps "all" from harm. The "feet of angels bright" move "unseen," quieting creation:

They look in every thoughtless nest,
Where birds are covered warm;
They visit caves of every beast,
To keep them all from harm;
If they see any weeping,
That should have been sleeping
They pour sleep on their head
And sit down by their bed.

Like the birds who are "covered warm," the speaker seeks his nest, a "thoughtless nest," protected from anticipated harm but also from the plaguing consciousness of his fears. The speaker wishes for all that the nest offers: womb-like warmth, security, and unself-consciousness.

Not only does the speaker clearly acknowledge the threatening beasts, but he recognizes as well that the angels are powerless to prevent the slaughter of innocents:

When wolves and tygers howl for prey
 They pitying stand and weep;
 Seeking to drive their thirst away,
 And keep them from the sheep.
 But if they rush dreadful;
 The angels most heedful,
 Recieve each mild spirit,
 New worlds to inherit.

Joseph Wicksteed is the first to my knowledge to read this passage as an allegory about the specific danger of desire or the "passions" which he claims the wild beasts represent; the angels "protect innocence and control desire," but if "desire breaks through their control," they "catch the 'tears'" and welcome souls to heaven (129). The understanding that the object of the speaker's fears is desire, Blake's energy, which is spirit and inextricably of the body and sexual, accords well with the symbolism and function of the lion who as a redeemed spirit in the speaker's vision becomes the focus of the final two stanzas. In the speaker's imagined new world, the lion is made meek and mild, de-energized by his savior:

And there the lions ruddy eyes,
 Shall flow with tears of gold:
 And pitying the tender cries,
 And walking round the fold:
 Saying: wrath by his meekness
 And by his health, sickness,
 Is driven away,
 From our immortal day.

In the *Lyca* poems and later, the lion is Blake's symbol for energy, and in "Night," he first appears as such.⁵ In the speaker's vision the lion becomes like the lamb, purified of his wrathful desire; Christ "redeems" the lion's energy that devours through his own self-sacrificing meekness.⁶

Like all others of Blake's "Christian" characters for whom the active is evil and the passive good, the speaker does not know that the "roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man" (*MHH* 8, 27). Instead, like the narrator in "A Cradle Song" and others in *Innocence*, the speaker of "Night" understands the good as lamb-like and Christ-like restraint, and heaven as a place secure from the instinctual passions that drive the wild beasts and, most likely, stir within himself. The speaker seeks to immobilize desire by transforming it into its passive opposite, a process of sublimation Blake later terms "religion," the "endeavor to reconcile" energy and reason (*MHH* pl. 16).

The speaker after the initial stanza never again refers to the "nest" he sought. By the final stanza, the focus has shifted so thoroughly to the lion that it becomes the poem's narrator, as the identities of speaker and lion become effectively confused (see also Wagenknecht 39):

And now beside thee bleating lamb,
 I can lie down and sleep;
 Or think on him who bore thy name,
 Graze after thee and weep.
 For wash'd in lifes river,
 My bright mane for ever,
 Shall shine like the gold,
 As I guard o'er the fold.

The lion has found the peaceful and passive sinecure the speaker desires, and as the fused identities would suggest, the speaker seems vicariously satisfied and, more precisely, vicariously *redeemed* by his religious vision.

The poem's narrator has gained solace in the night through religious affirmation. Like the mother in "A Cradle Song" who suffers from her own dark night of the soul, the speaker wants immunity from passion and pain and finds it in a Christ who models restraint, meekness, passivity.⁷ The price of such protection for Blake, however, is the deadly denial of desire, a process of psychic enervation that results inexorably in the spiritual devastation imaged in *Songs of Experience*. Moreover, Blake's phrase "wash'd in lifes river," could arguably signify

having "cared for and embraced life," as Leader contends (125), but just as arguably, it can suggest the "cleansing" attained through the dreadful scourge of living.⁸ The speaker envisions life as an atonement, a denial of delight, much like the mother in "The Little Black Boy," another victim of what Blake regards as false Christian doctrine:

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
Saying: coming out from the grove my love & care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Most critics who have considered the designs that accompany the text observe that the first is more obviously about a state of harmony and vitality while the second is ominous and oppressive.⁹ But because critics have read the text of "Night" as a celebration of the transcendent harmony of Innocence, they resolve away, I think too readily, tensions presented by designs that don't seem to "illustrate" the text. They have denied or mediated complexities and contradictions that would render problematic the benevolence of religious resignation. I would argue that the symbolic movement of the two illustrations of "Night" visually describes the speaker's spiritual loss in the very process of his Christian "redemption."

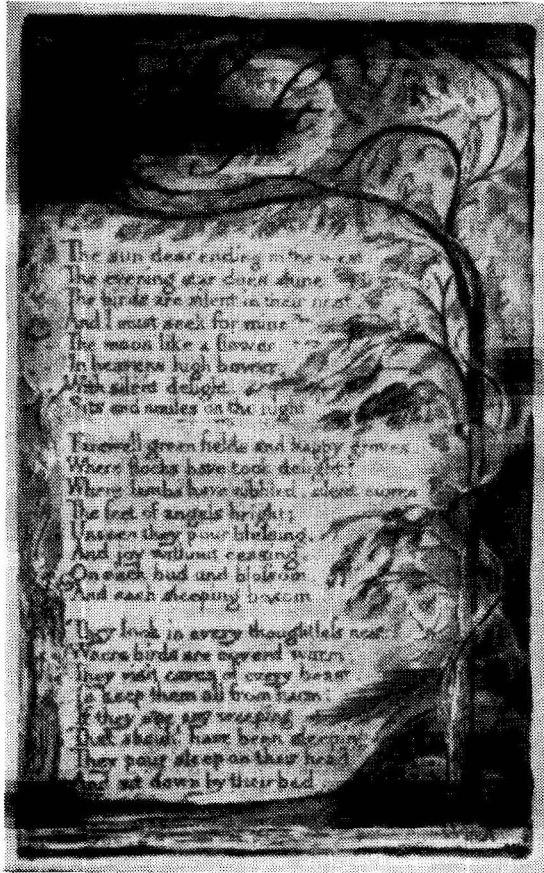
The iconography of the first design has clearly positive connotations: the sky is a lighter blue than in the second, and the moon casts a soft radiance throughout, over the golden angels that decorate the left border as well as the golden lion couched in the right corner. The sinewy and gently flowering tree that rises over the lion is entwined with a vine, and its S-curve movement signifies, as W. J. T. Mitchell describes, Blake's graphic representation of vitality and energy.¹⁰ As others have noted, the lion lies in peaceful repose, his wrath apparently appeased, perhaps by devouring the lamb. David Wagenknecht's observation is especially valuable to my argument; in reading "Night's" "essential subject" as "sexual experience," he views the lion as a "depiction of sexual contentment," which Wagenknecht argues is Blake's "Beulah within Generation" (56).

We must grapple then, as does Wagenknecht, with the seeming lack of connection between text and design. The illustration bears little, if any, apparent relationship to the action narrated by the speaker. Blake's

two art forms are independent and function by the virtue of their independence (see Mitchell 3-34); the design characteristically raises problems, often forcing readers to make connections with a text that is overtly contrary to it. The dialectical relationship of the visual and verbal has an epistemological purpose—as Mitchell writes, a "hermeneutic function, in that the contrariety of poem and picture entices the reader to supply the missing connections" (33). Furthermore, Blake's pictures do not merely comment on the text but offer a "symbolic recreation" of it that reveals eternal truths, often the "interior life" of a character only intimated verbally (Mitchell 18; 26). I suggest that if we explore the illustrations of "Night" as such a re-creation the realities of the speaker's spiritual error are given visionary form.

The first illustration forces us to seek the missing connections Mitchell considers essential to Blake's intellectual allegory. The verbal-visual interplay discloses truths that are in ironic contrast to the speaker's implied understanding of divine immanence: there is divine activity in nature, not the hustle of angels lulling to sleep all fears and desires, but the infinite wrath of the lion gratified and transmuted into infinite delight. Appropriately, the stars, symbols of Blake's cold light of reason, the "restrainer of desire," and perhaps the angels of religion that would restrain, are obscured by the moon (see Wagenknecht 51 and Grant 82).

The second design is noticeably darker in color and implication; the stars are now fully visible and the ominously thick vegetation dominates the starry night. In addition, five female figures, not mentioned in the text, gather in the centre, and the lion is curiously absent even though he is the poem's protagonist. Once again we are forced to make connections. Critics have debated the identity of the figures who appear to be more than human but not quite angelic. Although haloed, they are wingless, and the golden glow of the angels in the first plate is missing. Wagenknecht offers the most compelling and for my purpose useful explanation of the figures: he views them as symbols of the five senses, and the two in the foreground as representing the "division of touch and taste into two distinct senses, increasing the total number of senses from the Blakean four to the Lockean five" (55). All five then represent the "collective protagonist analogous to the lion-protagonist of the first picture" (54).¹¹



Blake's Night

I would suggest that the illustration is a type of psychomachia allegorizing the true internal dynamics at the core of the speaker's dream and that the five figures provide perhaps the definitive piece to Blake's graphic puzzle. The speaker's vision of womb-like retreat from desire is essentially a longing for Blake's oppressive mothering principle, the "female will" that in *The Mental Traveller* "binds iron thorns" (13) around man's head, just as "mother Enitharmom" in *Europe* laughs to see "every man bound" (12:26). In *Europe* and later, Blake equates the human division into the five senses, the domination of the mother, and the rise of Heaven as a "mighty circle turning" (*E* 9:23) with Albion's fall. The speaker's dream prefigures Albion's later sleep, signifying, as Northrop Frye says, the "passivity of his mind" as "his creation separates and becomes the 'female will' or Mother Nature. . . ." (126). Like Albion's dream, the world the speaker creates is passive and female, and the five figures, if we accept their identity as the senses, imply, like the five daughters of Tirzah, his "passive dependence on sense experience" (Frye 127). As the overwhelmingly ominous second illustration images, the speaker has fallen into a deadly dream of the mother, sensual passivity, and religious abstraction.

In this essay, I have wanted to propose a reading of "Night" that would problematize the song's "innocent vision." I would like to suggest also that the darker chords within "Night," evident in other songs as well, create a discourse that runs counter to *Innocence's* dominant strains of Christian harmony and love. The dangers of "Night" would indicate not only ambiguity in *Innocence* but the incipient formation of Blake's later theme—the spiritual threat of the oppressive Christ and mother—that emerged fully in *Europe* just five years after *Innocence*.

NOTES

1. For instance, Anne Mellor writes that in "text and in design, these songs present an ideal, or 'divine', image of the child and man of Innocence as he could be, as he is born to be, but not usually as he is. Blake's *Songs of Innocence* are religious prophecies, not depictions of social reality," (194). Others come closer to seeing more complexity in the religious vision of *Innocence*, but all to my knowledge fall short of exposing its false Christ and dynamics of repression that, I suggest, undermine the apparent harmony and benevolence of its pastoral metaphor. David Wagenknecht offers many astute insights into the work's darker, even subversive elements, but overall he views Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* within the pastoral tradition as ultimately "expressing reconciliation" (5) between the states of Innocence and Experience or Beulah and Generation. The "vision of Innocence" involves a "conscious division in the form of a pastoral fiction. Innocence self-consciously maintains the gap between the lamb and the Generation which would devour him" (99). The "tendency of Innocence" ironically is to "maintain the order of reality within which the lamb stands as sacrificial victim" (99). Zachary Leader also eludes the tensions of Innocence; for example, although he sees the Christ of "The Little Black Boy" as sinister, he concludes that the boy's Christ is an aberration—the "Christ not of Innocence but of Experience—a world where the traditional Christian virtues of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love are transmogrified into pious-seeming parodies of themselves" (115).
2. To my knowledge, only Edward Larrissy suggests a more problematic and darker reading more consistent with mine; he sees the poem as "answering a need for security which is in itself potentially debilitating and enslaving" (28).
Major studies of "Night" include those by Wicksteed, Gleckner, Adams, Hirsch, Gillham, Wagenknecht, and Leader.
3. Robert Gleckner identifies the speaker as the "Piper of the *Songs*," (122). Wagenknecht argues that he is a "naive," "'innocent,' narrator" and "speaks with the accents of a child" (39). Leader identifies him simply as a "weary traveller" (128).
4. All textual references are to David Erdman's edition. Although I recognize that there exists no "Ur-text" but rather only ideally a composite of differences, my analysis of Blake's visual art is based on Copy Z of the *Songs*, Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress.
5. Adams, like Wicksteed, sees the lion as "sensuality," (213); Irene Chayes likens Blake's wild beast in the *Lyca* poems to Isaiah's violent beasts of prey—"a last manifestation of material power, including human passions, that is also the first manifestation of divine power and is indispensable to a return to the state of Eden" (70). Wagenknecht offers the most thorough analysis of the Lion as a symbol, pp. 36-57 especially.

6. Gleckner notes that the "lion becomes *the* Lamb by devouring the lamb" (124), while Wagenknecht claims the lion is not "identical to the lamb but its protector" (49).
7. For a study of mothers in *Innocence* in this light see my "Mother Figures in Blake's *Song of Innocence* and the Female Will."
8. Gleckner also reads the image of being washed in "life's river" as a purification by suffering: "the last stanza of *Night*, then, involves a multiple identification of the lamb, lion, the shepherd, the Christ, all now washed in the river of experience. . . ." (124).
9. See especially Wagenknecht, 51-57, and Leader, 126-129.
10. For the most valuable analysis of Blake's visual schemata, see Mitchell, pp. 40-77 especially.
11. Although Wagenknecht is more cautionary in his optimism than most critics, he reads the taste-touch image as suggestive of resurrection despite the graphic details that he admits "complicate simple optimism" (56). Wagenknecht notes that the haloes on the two females appear "more golden" than that of the others and the ground beneath them lighter and less shadowed (54), and that the taste-touch figure points us "in the direction of resurrection" (55).

I see little difference in the glow of the halos. Leader cites no difference between the two in the foreground and the group of three (128); Erdman writes that in the various copies of *Innocence*, "usually they all have 'conspicuous haloes,' sometimes a large glow for each group," (62).

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