LONDON by William Blake

William Blake (1757-1827) wrote many great poems which remain widely read and studied. But 'London' is, along with 'The Tyger', possibly the most famous of all his poems. 'London' was first published in 1794 in his volume *Songs of Experience*, which was written to offer the flipside to the positive, transcendent message present in Blake's earlier volume *Songs of Innocence*. Although the poem's meaning is pretty clear and straightforward, it is our intention in this analysis to uncover some of the more curious aspects of its language.

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

(The spelling given in the above version is the spelling in Blake's original.)
In summary, Blake describes the things he sees when he wanders through the streets of London: signs of misery and weakness can be discerned on everyone's face, it seems. Every man's voice – even the cry of every infant, a child who hasn't even learnt to talk yet – conveys this sense of oppression. It's as if everyone is being kept in slavery, but the manacles they wear are not literal ones, but mental – 'mind-forg'd' – ones. Somehow, they are even more powerful, since they mean the oppressed is unlikely ever to rise up and challenge that which tyrannises over them.

The third stanza sees two institutions associated with wealth and grandeur – the Church and the Palace – invaded by the corrupt realities of Blake's London: a world in which industrialisation leads to small children being exploited and maltreated through their employment as chimney-sweeps, and in which 'hapless' (i.e. unlucky) soldiers sent off to fight spill their blood for uncaring kings. 'Appals' in this stanza is a nice word: the Church is literally turned the colour of a pall (black) by the sooty breath of the chimney-sweep, but palls are associated with funerals, summoning the premature deaths of so many children who died from injury or ill-health while performing the job of a chimney-sweep. The word also, of course, carries its more familiar, abstract meaning: 'appals' as in shocks.

But the fourth and final stanza suggests that the most pervasive and frequently heard sound on London streets is the sound of a young mother – who is also a prostitute – cursing her newborn infant's crying and 'blight[ing] with plagues the Marriage hearse'. This last image cannot easily be paraphrased, so the whole stanza requires a bit of unpicking:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

That final image – the oxymoron of the 'Marriage hearse' (hearses are for funerals, not weddings) – appears to mean that the young unmarried mother's unwanted child, and the misery of both mother and infant alike, is the final nail in the coffin of the idea of marriage as a sacred union which is associated not only with bliss but with blessing (because it is, or was solely in Blake's time, a holy ceremony; but also because people talk of a marriage being 'blessed' with a child). A 'curse', of course, can be merely a loud cry (or, in modern American slang, a swear word), but the word carries a ring of profanity at all times. That final line is a masterstroke: first the near-alliteration of the *bl* and *pl* plosive sounds in 'blights' and 'plagues', but then the oxymoron of 'Marriage hearse', with 'hearse' itself being a horrific constricting of '*Harlot's curse*', the line it rhymes with.

Note Blake's use of the word 'charter'd', twice in this first stanza: both the streets of London and even the natural geographical feature, the river Thames, have been mapped out and demarcated by man. With this word

(Blake originally wrote 'dirty', but later changed it to 'charter'd'), Blake suggests that many human miseries are caused by the systems and laws other men have imposed upon the poorest and most wretched in society. This analysis of Blake's poem is borne out by his later use of the word 'ban' ('In every voice: in every ban'): a ban is a public proclamation, often declaring an edict or law (most commonly, of course, to declare that something is outlawed – or, if you will, 'banned'). More restrictions, more manacles – if not physical ones, then certainly mental or 'mind-forg'd' ones.

The poem is written in fairly regular iambic tetrameter:
'I ***wan***der ***thro'*** each ***charte***r'd ***street***'. Blake uses this metre in a number of his poems, so it may be over-analysing the poem to suggest that this choice of metre is of specific significance for 'London'. Having said that, the iambic rhythm and the locking of the *abab* rhyme scheme does reinforce the poem's sense of relentlessness, as Blake confronts the horrific prisons, real and psychological, that Londoners live their lives trapped within.

That said, Blake does not stick to the iambic metre throughout. A number of lines, such as the last line of the first stanza, begin with strong trochaic feet, and the third stanza is entirely trochaic:

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

Some critics have analysed the poem in its historical context. It's been suggested that the 'mind-forg'd manacles' refer to London's, and England's, unwillingness to follow the lead of France and revolt against their tyrannical oppressors: the French Revolution was five years old when Blake published 'London', and Blake's support of the French Revolution lends credence to this interpretation of the poem. Is he bemoaning Londoners' reluctance to free themselves, and their apparent willingness to remain slaves?

What is perhaps also worth noting about 'London' – by way of concluding this brief analysis – is the fact that the final three stanzas all concern attempts to vocalise something. 'London' is a decidedly oral poem, but it is concerned with voicelessness rather than the voice. Blake may mention 'every voice', but we never hear anyone's voice utter anything specific. The mouth is

used to 'cry' (three times), 'sigh', and 'curse', but never to utter any meaningful objection or opposition to the 'manacles' that keep Londoners in their psychological chains. (Though for our money the third stanza's combination of the aural and the visual in the images of the chimney-sweep's cry turning the walls of the church black, as if with his sooty breath, and the soldier's dying breath or 'sigh' running in blood down the Palace walls, is the finest thing Blake ever wrote.)

Even the harlot's baby is an 'infant' – literally, someone unable to speak, from the Latin *infans*. But Blake, through writing a poem like 'London', could give a voice to the voiceless – or rather, could lend his voice to their voicelessness, to suggest that such wretched misery goes beyond words, at least for those suffering London's hardships.

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