English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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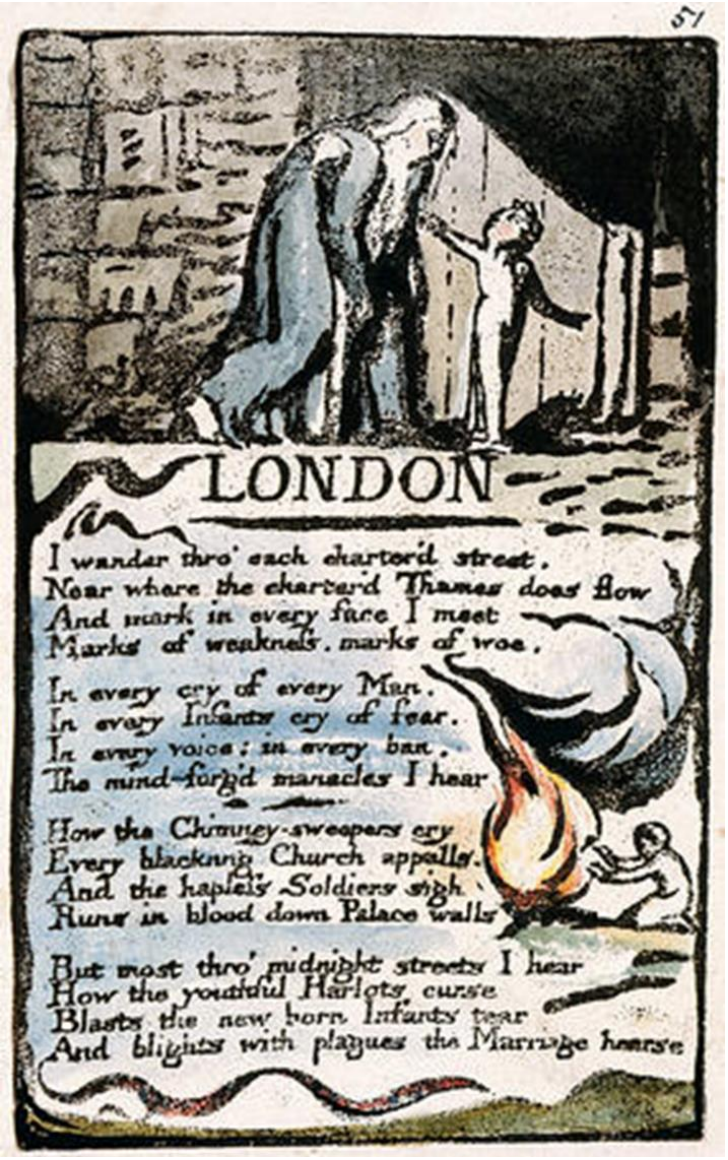
William Blake, “London,” from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794)



As I said in class, “London” is another example of Blake’s illuminated works, i.e., he engraved the poem and the images together on a single copper plate, and then, using his own printing press, he printed a copy of that plate on paper using inks. After the paper sheet had been printed, he and his wife, Catherine, painted the page with vivid water colours, giving us the memorable object that we have now.

We looked at the poem in lecture and I want to return to the poem here in the Study Notes. But let's begin by considering the image that runs along the top the poem. Notice how the poem itself ends with the grim image of a "marriage hearse." Where we might expect to see the phrase "marriage bed," a phrase associated with happiness, love, fertility, new life, and mutuality we instead see something shockingly different: marriage, Blake suggests, is too often the site of a kind of death. By all accounts, Blake himself enjoyed a long and joyful marriage, but in the poem marriage is the scene of a kind of fatality. It trundles along, and so possesses the semblance of life, but at its heart there is something dead. But along the top of the poem, we see something surprisingly different, a scene of a child leading an elderly man through a doorway. Given what you now know about what children and childhood meant to Blake, what does this scene mean? Does the poem's image offer hope, a way forward, when the poem itself does not? To borrow a phrase that the great literary critic, Tilottama Rajan, taught me: are we "still-born or still to be born?"

Lots of editors of Blake, including the editor who put the poem on-line for you to use in this class, put a period or end-stop at the end of the last line:

> And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

But if you look carefully at the image of the engraved poem you will see that Blake doesn't include an end-stop or period at all. Without any final punctuation, the poem trails uncertainly off into a kind of silence. Without that little but important piece of punctuation, the last line is made to feel more open-ended and inconclusive than it might otherwise feel. In poetry, the devil is in the details. And in Blake, "devilishness," energetic resistance and complexity, trumps "angelic" demands for control and conformity!

In many ways, "London" adopts the conventions of nursery rhymes, just like "The Chimney Sweeper." What are those conventions, and where do you seem them at work here? But there is also a big difference. "The Chimney Sweeper" provides us with a look at the world from the eyes of children---damaged children, but still children. The speaker of "London" is not a child but a kind of prophet or what the British liked to call a *Bard*, one who has the power of vision, a person who is immersed in the culture about which he has an enormously discerning eye . . . and ear. And so the poem is considerably denser than "The Chimney Sweeper." Indeed, observe how, as the poem unfolds through its four stanzas, four blocks of rhyming verse, it gets more and more difficult. Blake is asking us to look around, and listen intently, but he is asking us to look and listen most intently to the sex-workers, for the crux of the matter lies there. The poem becomes more and more difficult at that point because *this* is where the hardest things to think and see and hear lie.

It is midnight, an auspicious time of day. A terrible darkness has fallen over the city. At the witching hour, the streets of London are haunted by many thousands of sex-workers. Their cries, "curses," fill those streets and fill Blake's ear. It is the sound he hears "most" he tells us, meaning that there is something about their condition that speaks "most" strongly, movingly to him about the condition of England. By some estimates, 1 in 5 women young women living in London at the end of the 18th century were sex-workers, perhaps as many as 100,000 individuals. The Church condemns them as lewd parasites on the body of Britain, but Blake is remarkable for refusing to judge them this way. He has an example in the New Testament as a precedent for treating a prostitute with dignity and understanding. For those of you who know your New Testament, what is that precedent? The women who yell in the streets are not parasites but victims, victims of a culture that gives unmarried women far too few

possibilities for work. Impoverished and abandoned, they sell their bodies to keep body and soul together, just as fathers are forced to sell their children into the slavery of the "climbing boys." For Blake, a culture that is willing to dispose of so many women means that a terrible sickness or "curse" lies at its heart. Prostitutes are regularly denounced as morally corrupt and as the agents of disease; and yet, and this is the important point, London's men appear to have an insatiable need for prostitutes. A fatal kind of split troubles 18th-century marriage; men seek to gratify their sexual desires among prostitutes in order to shore up a fantasy of the "home" as a place of purity, unsullied by such desires. The disposable women on the streets are the "collateral damage" of this brutal fantasy about a life divided between proclaiming the purity of the soul, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, denouncing the impurity of the body, seeking its "needs" in out-of-the-way places, far from home. As Blake's vivid and dense image of the "marriage hearse" suggests, this fantasy is a deadly because it is a fundamentally *unimaginative* way to construct and control and imagine a marriage, which could instead be a passionate, loving, complicated and evolving meeting of bodies, minds, and spirits. As Blake says elsewhere in his work, it is the culture's anxious insistence on chastity, flawlessness and purity, especially in women, that paradoxically results in men electing to live these strangely divided lives, separating "sex" from "love," and seeking "sex" in one part of the city, and solely as an economic transaction, and seeking "love" in another part of the city, namely home. The body of the city of London, divided between a) a "red-light" district inhabited by the homeless and b) the homes and beds to which men returned each day, seemed to Blake to be a symptom of a the deeply divided life of Britons. What is clear is that everyone suffers: married couples and sex-workers, alike. All cry in the darkness. Blake longs for a time in which we might live our lives more imaginatively, a time when we might more fully inhabit our dreams and desires, rather than parceling them out in this way and with such deadly results. The fundamental hypocrisy of a society that creates the conditions for sex-workers--and then blames them for their condition--deeply troubled Blake, filling him with sorrow. In their piercing cries he sees the young women, like the children and the young soldiers, ground up in a heartless machine that trades in human flesh. As Blake insisted throughout his work, sexual life is a central part of the work of the imagination—but in the noisy, cramped, and dark streets of London, an inhuman economic system, a system created by human beings yet larger than any individual, has reduced that life to a brutalizing economic transaction. And this transaction may not only be between a man and a sex-worker. Like other radical thinkers of his day, including the founder of modern feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, Blake saw that too many marriages were *themselves* forms of legalized prostitution. As Wollstonecraft famously suggested in her political treatise, *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* (1792), published and widely read during the same time that Blake is crafting "London," married women are forced to exchange their bodies for economic security: for Wollstonecraft, marriage can be structurally indistinguishable from sex-work. When Blake speaks of the "marriage hearse," he may also be describing the hypocrisy of a culture that loudly proclaims the sanctity of marriage as a way to cover up the fact that it is, in the end, a form of prostitution forced upon women in a society that offers far too few opportunities to flourish on their own. Whatever marriage was once or could be, in the 1790s it is the sign of a certain social death, a "hearse."

Young women, young soldiers, and children: all disposable populations whose cries go mostly unheard. But Blake hears them and sees them. He "marks" them, meaning he "remarks" or "recognizes" them as the precious creatures that they really are when no one else will in the anonymous streets of this ferocious city. He also "marks" them, meaning he leaves a trace of himself on them, in effect tagging them. He marks their individual faces, tracing the lineaments of sorrow in each. Marking faces would

mean a great deal to an artist who literally *made* marks in the copy plates--scratching words into the metal surface using a tool called a *burin*—that he used to created his illuminated works. This repeated emphasis on marking cannot help but recall all those moments in the bible in which marks and markings are significant: the mark of Cain, the mark of the Beast, to name only two.

As I said in class, when Blake was drafting out the poem, and thus before he committed the poem to a copper engraving (after which there can be no more revisions!), he wrote "The German-forg'd manacles" rather than the phrase we eventually got, "The mind-forg'd manacles." What do you make of that revision? "German" refers to the Hanoverians, the royal family in England at the time, who were German. But Blake is trying to put his finger on something about what it means to live an incarcerated life, an imprisoned life. The King was indeed ordering the arrest of more and more of his subjects, who he feared were seditious, i.e., not loyal to the crown. He and his agents were responsible for enchaining thousands of prisoners. The courts and the government issued more and more "bans" against citizens who were said to have revolutionary or dissenting thoughts. This was a deeply paranoid time in England . . . and it got much worse as the disastrous and costly wars the French dragged on. And of course, these repressive "bans," whose impact Blake feels and hears everywhere in the streets, most directly and disproportionately affect the powerless, including children and street women. But it is not that kind of brutal and direct force that finally concerns Blake here, as powerful and troubling as it is. Instead, Blake sees another kind of imprisonment, namely the ways in which you or I, under certain conditions, become our *own* jailors. When our imaginations wither, when we are no longer willing or able to put our imaginations to use, we end up administering and controlling *ourselves*. You know the expression, "You are your own worst enemy," meaning, there is something in you that is preventing you from being the person you most deserve to me. You have enemies, real enemies, but the worst enemy of all is not out there but *in here*.

Carefully consider how Blake treats the cries of the chimney sweepers, whose voices you've already heard in the poem from *Songs of Innocence*. Note how the cry that is heard is instantly translated into something tangible and visible: the cry "Every black'ning Church appalls." This translation between senses (a sound becomes a picture, in this case) is called *synesthesia.* These strange shifts in how the senses work give the poem a dreamy, even nightmarish feel, which makes sense since the whole thing takes place in the dead of night. (The soldier's cry undergoes an analogous translation: the cries suddenly look like blood running down the walls of the royal palace, as if shaming the monarchy for prosecuting useless and murderous wars, wars which are, after all, mostly fought by youth.) Tarry with that strange phrase, sensitizing yourself to how Blake, as a poet's poet, is contorting language, molding and remolding it. Somehow the children's' cries *blacken* the church, perhaps staining it, marking it, reminding parishioners that child slaves live and die just outside the church doors. The blackening is the mark of the Church's indifference to the children, the very creatures that Christianity makes a point of welcoming. Do these cries then *appall* the Church, shaming it? Or is the church *appalled*, its officials saying, "that's a damn shame about those gangs living and dying out there," and then doing nothing at all to help. Perhaps *appall* means to shroud the church in a pall, the ceremonial cloth with which the dead are buried. The cries of the climbing boys sound the demise of the Church. Perhaps that is what Blake means. This phrase in the poem is there to slow you down, capture your attention . . . and wake you up.