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Satire and Blake: Image, Symbol and Anti-Text

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*Abstract***:** We live in troubled times, in a country that is evolving into a beast we may no longer be able to recognise. If we are to build a 'Jerusalem' in our county's 'green and pleasant land', we need a visionary prophet to find our way out of chaos to enlightenment in unification with the creator. This paper is an exploration of William Blake's symbolic use of language, the images and symbols used in his poetry, to seek answers to questions of ultimate concern. In particular, it examines the use of satire in the *Songs of Experience* to probe Blake's deliberate subversion of text in lyrical poetry.

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Martin Heidegger's study of Holderlin's, lyric poetry is to be taken as a metaphor for language's birth, he claims: "Poetry is the naming of the gods. But poetic language can only receive its naming power if the gods bring us to language."[1] Lyric poetry then is both the producer and the produce of the gods. This paper will discuss how the poetry of William Blake (1757-1827) makes and breaks the notion of God, religion, church, and state in a language that according to Heidegger shapes the essence of human beings. Through an analysis of poems from Blake's *Songs of Experience*, this essay will expand on the use of symbols and images through the form of satire in Blake's poetry. Satire is a literary device which criticises and ridicules established power structures and its vices. The doctrine of contraries and of complementarity is Blake's proclamation of the gospel. The string of irony, unrelenting satire and bitterness that mark the *Song of Innocence* and *Song of Experience* align Blake to the tradition in which authors like Erasmus, Fielding, Rabelais and Swift belongs. So powerful is Blake's handling of the weapons of criticism, as Northrop Frye points out "One may wonder… Blake's sense of the grotesque, of broad caricature and ribald parody, was really a minor quality, and good only for an occasional *tour de force*. One may wonder whether satire was not his real medium."[2] Blake's affinity with this tradition is very deep. His use of the metaphor of innocence and experience, though not rare among Romantic poets, is most complex and bold. This metaphor has the relevance to Blake not merely as a literary device but through philosophical naturalism of Locke and the belief that mind is a passive receiver, Hume's denial of the

positive existence and his rejection of traditional doctrines and that a relationship exists between the individual mind and its perceptual universe had resulted in a great epistemological shift.[3] Blake, like Wordsworth and Coleridge was influenced by the prophets and the mystical of the *Old Testament*, which asserted the primacy of imagination. Blake believed in mind's power to alter a world of its perception, to affect its own perceptual destruction by recognising its active role. Hence, the extensive use of innocence and experience in Romantic literature. The triumph of Blake's satiric art lies in the fact that he achieves a mixture of intellectual satire and prophecy, and thus, as Harold Bloom points, fuses the classical with the Biblical tradition.[4]

1. Blake's Use of Symbols and Metaphors

Blake manipulates traditional images and in the process recasts established images into symbols expressive of his own philosophy. As a result, his work often becomes a kind of critically evaluative anti text which ironically or satirically comments on and subverts past symbolic associations. This process breaks horizons of expectation of the readers as their expectations from the poet is subverted and responses manipulated by his rebellious use of traditions. Blake uses traditional motifs as thematic gestures but alters or combines them with others so as to surprise the reader into a profound awareness of his own, often subversive in meaning. This blend of satire and symbol, of traditionalism and revolt, is the unrecognised axis on which much of Blake's work moves.

Blake's poems especially are based neither on dramatic action nor lyric effusion, his paintings neither on literal illustration nor private fantasy, but on the unexpected, deliberate juxtaposition and modification of traditional images. Both in his designs and texts, Blake manages to unite diverse, even clashing symbolic elements and to arrange them into coherent,

richly suggestive wholes greater than the sum of their disparate parts. Their success of communication depends, in part, on the reader/viewer's ability to recognize the traditional images Blake uses as well as his manipulation of their original values. In the fullest sense, then, Blake's work is "re-visionary", expressing his own startling vision but doing so primarily through the audacious transformation of pre-existing icons taken from widely (and wildly) divergent sources. Blake gives us clusters of symbolic imagery that we must, in a sense, choreograph for ourselves if the seemingly unstructured mass of Blake's bizarre imagery is to take firmer shape as an intricate yet coherent pattern of symbolic relationships.

According to Abrams: "Some symbols are 'conventional' or 'public'; thus 'the Cross', 'the Red, White, and Blue', 'the Good Shepherd' are terms that signify symbolic objects of which the further significance is fixed and traditional in a particular culture. Poets, like all of us, use such conventional symbols; many poets; however, also use 'private' or 'personal symbols', which they develop themselves .... Some poets, however, often use symbols whose significance they mainly generate for themselves, and these set the reader a more difficult problem in interpretation."[5]

William Blake employed a central group of related symbols to form a dominant symbolic pattern – the child, the father, and Christ, 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*. Blake often used symbols to express increasingly subtle and complex intellectual distinctions. However, as his system developed, he found it necessary to emphasize the symbolism with an elaborate mythology,

which does not easily explain itself. The problem for readers of Blake's poetry is to maintain a balance between what he is trying to say and what the words commonly convey. The symbolism of the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* is successful, because Blake is able to maintain this balance.

Despite simple rhyming patterns and the images of children, animals and flowers, the *Songs* are argumentative or satirical, and reflect Blake's deeply held political beliefs and spiritual experiences. Blake's vision embraces radical themes like poverty, child labour and abuse, the repressive nature of state and church, as well as right of children to be treated as individuals with their own desires. Many of the poems in *Songs of Experience* respond to counterparts in *Songs of Innocence*. Appearing in *Songs of Experience*, 'The Tyger' is understood as the companion piece of 'The Lamb' in *Songs of Innocence*; both poems ask the same question: where do we come from? In 'The Lamb', an answer is given: God made us – an affirmation of faith. 'The Tyger' only implies the answer by posing the rhetorical question:

'Did he who made the lamb make thee?'[6]

Indeed, one of the most noticeable features of 'The Tyger' is that it takes the form of a series of questions, none of which are answered, but it circles around the reader in just the same way as a tiger stalks its prey. 'The Lamb' posits the process of creation as natural and harmonious, 'The Tyger' stands for something much more ferocious, wild (that which is not natural) and mysterious; the tiger comes from 'the forests of the night' and its eyes burn in 'distant deeps and skies'. Its creation is an act of audacity. The poem has references to different narratives associated with rebellion: to Satan's revolt in *Paradise Lost* ('the stars threw down their spears'), to Prometheus, a favourite of the Romantics ('What the hand dare

seize the fire?'), and, perhaps to Icarus ('On what wings dare he aspire?' – though this line might also suggest Milton's Satan). These images and associations have led some critics to read 'The Tyger' as a metaphor for revolution.

Another aspect of Blake's metaphor is, unlike the lamb, who is 'made' by God, the tiger owes its life to a combination of human labour and industrial process. 'And what shoulder and what art, could twist the sinews of thy heart' focuses on human effort, the next stanza conceives of the tiger's creation in terms of industry, using a series of metonyms for the blacksmith's forge: 'hammer', 'chain', 'furnace', 'anvil'. While, like all the Romantics, Blake was repelled by the Industrial Revolution and its objectification of human beings, this stanza has undeniable energy and a fascination with what industry can produce: "What dread grasp, Dare its deadly terrors clasp?" It is interesting to note that both the worker and the tiger are represented by a strange combination of body parts ('shoulder', 'heart', 'sinews', 'hand', 'feet', 'brain').

Characters inhabiting the *Songs of Experience* cling to the earth in attitudes of sorrow as in a 'Poison Tree' lying flat on the ground. In *Songs of Experience* we are frequently involved in monologue or soliloquy: dynamic communication is replaced by thought out statement. In 'Infant Sorrow' we hear the cerebral click of cogs as the child's brain forms its decisions: "I thought best, to sulk upon my mother's breast."[7] The child decides to "sulk" upon the breast of the mother, almost in a manner that allows the child to enjoy what little comfort it has left. It is the counter poem of 'Infant Joy'. The poem suggests that childbirth is not always joyful and happy but can bring sorrow and pain. The response of the child itself may be

different from that of the child in 'Infant Joy' when the infant is being brought helpless and naked to the "dangerous world", it expresses a wilful consciousness in the intentionality of 'sulk' and 'leapt' and the knowingness of its allusiveness both Biblical and classical.

2. Towards the End of the Golden String

Blake as spiritual, imaginative and artistic visionary sees so naturally a better world and his fight is towards creating that city of God, that 'Jerusalem' on earth. As a social radical he sees the everyday filth of baser materiality which births an imperfect world of cruelty and injustice. In response, he interweaves the social and the spiritual in a tapestry of art and literature that points to freedom. Blake wanted his message to be known. It was almost a duty and a calling to break the "mind-forg'd manacles" and change society through his poetry.[8] His mystical experiences and divine visions are not treasures that he hoards for himself in contemplative solitude, but experiences that he wants to share, for he wants us all to *see*. Thus, In *Jerusalem* Blake reaches out to the reader, inviting them to step into this world.

I give you the end of a golden string;

Only wind it into a ball,

It will lead you in at Heaven's gate,

Built in Jerusalem's wall.

In according agency to the reader, the text and its symbolic meanings are co-created by poet and reader as they journey towards the 'end of a golden string'. In making this journey with Blake, in engaging spiritually and intellectually with the text, the reader will make discoveries that are both the poet's and their own.

In Blake's recognition of the sacred in all, he declared that everything that lives is Holy. According to him, there is no other God, other than the one within us and honouring the God within the other is an act of worship. Thus, "Blake's metaphysics may best be described as a kind of pantheistic idealism". [9] The Creator is in the created, the created exists in the Creator, and thus there is no distinction between the Creator and the Created. Hence, for Blake everyone equally has divine potential and the ability to reflect the divine image, as do all religions that spring from the same source.

While Blake celebrated divinity in all, he harshly attacked the oppressive teachings that were being imposed by false preachers on lamb-like congregations. This corruption is expressed in 'The Human Abstract' where the virtues of delight and the "unifying forces of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love have become tools of repression – wielded by hypocritical priests and moralists".[10] For Blake the union of the soul with God was of ultimate concern and anything that came in the way of that, leading us away from freedom and imposing earthly bondage was to be fought against. "Blake believed that the only kind of revolution which could succeed was the revolution within the mind."[11] This battle was not of bloodshed and war, but a much more challenging destruction of 'mind forger manacles'. Thus, in the preamble to *The Four Zoas*, he states from the Ephesians, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places"

Although, Blake rebelled against the theology of his time, he saw himself as a true Christian, creating his own faith-system. Thus, unlike many radicals of his time, he was not

anti-Christian. However, he guarded his personal freedom and through his creative imagination forged a path of his own, through the application of his own mind to his own principles. He stated that "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings"[12]. Thus, he approached received wisdom with a questioning attitude and could not subscribe to systems laid down by others. In his characteristic voice, he stated, "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's". He encouraged the exercise of the "Divine Arts of the Imagination" so that the people could become "priests, monarchs, and artists in their own homes", rather than submitting to the false image of a God that expected oppressive religious morality. Thus, while he was drawn to religion, he made it bend to his own abstract spirituality, intellectually challenging established beliefs and standard interpretations of scripture, he boldly stated:

Both read the Bible day & night

But thou readst black where I read white

Blake's experience of the world, through a visionary gleam, was unique and we can only attempt to understand it. He could see the illusory nature of the material, apparently solid universe through symbolic visions, accessing the purer forms of the eternal world. These distinct visions allowed him to hermeneutically engage in meaning-making, as he sought answers to questions of ultimate concern. They guided his spirit and being out of chaos and complexity to a greater universal spiritual and social destiny. Thus, they were not an escape from reality, but a deeper engagement with it. In offering the world deep original insights into the 'life of things', he is a visionary prophet and as visionary, set apart and marked out for genius, moving beyond the ordinary to greatness. Thus, as depicted in the 'Auguries of Innocence', he was he able:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour

3. A Critique of Abstract Reason

Blake's attack on abstract false reason and its power to govern and destroy all it holds is represented in his mythology, by the tyrant Urizen. "Urizen falls into this world of his own making and attempts to organize it with laws generated in his own psyche".[13] It is this rationality that powers industrialization and colonialism, and constructs an oppressive morality that separates the human being from God. In holding onto the fixed principles, and rejecting imagination and innocence, the 'free thinkers' of his day had allowed themselves to be bounded in slavery. He displayed confident self-assertion and clarity of thought in expressing his own philosophy in direct opposition to the dominant worldview of the time. "Blake rejected the rationalism of Newton, the empiricism of Bacon, and the sensationalism of Locke which presented the external world as matter in motion governed by universal laws" and as a philosophical idealist he believed "that the world is not made of matter but of organized spirit".[14] Thus, Blake "not only questions many fundamental assumptions in moral and political philosophy but threatens the materialist and rationalist premises of Western civilization itself."[15] It is important to note however, that Blake was not denouncing reason and the intellect as whole, he specifically challenged the exalting of abstract reason which, in its divorce from the imagination, infects the modern world with its mechanical, reductionist worldview.

4. Imagination's Way

"The God in whose name Blake prophesies is Imagination, and it is this God who inspires artists: Jesus and his Apostles and Disciples were all artists."[16] Blake's spiritual and artistic journey are intertwined and it is in fulfilling himself as artist that he reveals himself as Christian. It is through this faculty of the creative imagination, which itself was divine grace, that he pierces the veil to see beyond the surface to what exists eternally and immutably. As poetic genius this faculty is highly developed and it was his imagination that offered him profound insights. "Blake saw his visions in a visionary or pictorial way which was the way of the ancient Hebrew prophets, Isaiah, Ezekiel and the author of the Book of Job".[17] Thus, in the *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake imaginatively reconstructs himself as prophet, propounding his own revolutionary beliefs. Blake wages his battle through his imagination, which is a superior to reason and it is through art and poetry, aimed at the reader that the battle is to be won in the reader's head, as he believed that all human beings possessed the ability to see creatively and imaginatively. All Blake wanted us to do was cleanse "the doors of perception" and "everything would appear to man as it is: infinite".

5. Power and Priesthood

Blake bore witness to the abject misery of the working classes, especially impoverished children who worked as bonded labourers. In this state of despair, one is cut off from the divine goodness and fullness of a life in God. He confronted the shocking indifference of their exploiters and began to question the myth of a glorious England. Blake painted a bleak picture of 'London' where everywhere he observed, "Marks of weakness, marks of woe".

"Blake believed that the political is the personal, and called for individual rebellion in everyday life even while working for a

total transformation of society."[18] However, he lived in times when radicals were hunted down and sentenced. His poetry and imagination was viewed as potentially dangerous, it was a time, he wrote, when "The Beast [of the State] & the Whore [of the Church] rule without control."[19] However, Blake re-worked language and symbol to continue to create subversive art and poetry. Language is a living, breathing thing, its meanings can change; symbols can be fashioned to hold prophetic messages and calls to freedom. Thus, in the garb of mythology, he attacked and painted visions of a future society, free of the rigid shackles of old. Thus, "his approach is the vigorous action of the iconoclast smashing the idols."20

The "priest and king," whose praises are routinely sung in Sunday Church, are central to Blake's criticism of the existing social order, not just in 'The Chimney Sweeper' where the phrase appears, but in several of the poems in *Songs of Experience*. If his criticism of the State is crystalized in the figure of the king, the priest is the embodiment of the evils of the Church. Blake reserves his sharpest words for the ministers of the Church; their appearance, motives and actions all closely scrutinised by his pen. The "black gowns" they are robed in no longer representing their vows of austerity, but something much more sinister.

Significantly, there are no priest figures in the *Songs of Innocence*. The closest we come to an encounter with the men involved in the affairs of the Church is in 'Holy Thursday' where we meet "the aged men wise guardians of the poor," who are unable to soar to the same spiritual heights that the orphans are able to reach.[21] The reference to the "beneficent patrons of charity schools" who rejoice

in the spectacle of parading these children through the streets of the city also deploys irony, but it is in the *Songs of Experience* that the attack becomes explicit and relentless.[22]

The satirical tone of the poems in *Songs of Experience* is also evident in Blake's treatment of the priest figures, with irony frequently deployed in these descriptions. Often, the contradiction between appearance and actuality is explored via the juxtaposition of the text and the accompanying visuals. Thus, in 'The Garden of Love' we see a beatific image of a priest in grey kneeling before a grave while the text describes the priests "walking their rounds" as if they were prison guards "binding with briars my joys and desires."[23] This contrast between the serenity of the image and the severity of the imagery of the poem creates different layers within the same text.

Perhaps the most strident attack on the clergy appears in 'The Little Boy Lost' where we bear witness to a scene of extreme cruelty. When a child poses a rational challenge to "our most holy mystery," instead of addressing the boy's query, the priest responds through gratuitous violence and public humiliation.[24] This is the fate of the child at the hands of the priests:

> They stripped him to his little shirt,
> And bound him in an iron chain,
> And burned him in a holy place
> Where many had been burned before[25]

While there is certainly hyperbole involved in the extreme torture meted out to the child, but two key points emerge. Firstly, the priests have veered so far off the course of love and kindness at the heart of the Christian gospel that they wouldn't think twice before crushing innocence with brutality. Secondly, this is not an anomaly – the "holy" spot where the immolation occurs is one "Where many had been burned before."[26] This is not the suppression of an individual

challenge to the Church's doctrine, but a part of a cycle of violence that the priests partake in emphasized by the confusion of his parents in that final rhetorical question, "Are such thing done on Albion's shore?"[27]

We find a third kind of priest figure in 'The Little Vagabond,' where Blake's speaker reimagines the Church as an Alehouse and tries to prophesize what the substitution would achieve. Blake's rejection of puritanical remonstrations against the consumption of alcohol presents us the vision of a parson who "might preach, and drink, and sing" in this new vision of Church-as-Alehouse.[28] In this imaginary Church, we are shown the first happy priests. Thus, the alteration would not only achieve a happier congregation than the one that currently attends service in a Church that is physically and emotionally cold, but also effect a transformation of the clergy from the "poor parsons with wind like a blown bladder swell" to merrier ones that drink and sing.[29] The visual gag of the present clergy as windbags also sets up a contrast with the alternative situation, where the drunk priests may now truly "preach."

Is Blake again resorting to irony when he says that a drunk parson may preach better than the present lot of priests? Or does Blake really believe that a Church with fewer "'''Thou shalt not,'' writ over the door" would allow its priests and parishes achieve higher levels of spirituality?[30] The *Songs* don't have easy answers to the questions they raise. The figures of the priests, whether real or imagined, are themselves symbolic codes that we can use to investigate the meanings that the poetry has to offer.

Jesus, as liberator and revolutionary, represents freedom from oppressive religious morality as is evident to Blake

in Jesus' statement about the Fourth Commandment: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Jesus preached the doctrine of love not rules, which for Blake was the essence of Christianity. Thus, "The tablets of the law themselves, placed by the Established Church of England above the altar, are, Blake protests, a golden calf – as are the institutions of state and church, particularly when combined, and as are all in authority."[31]

Conclusion

We live in troubled time, in a country that is evolving into a beast we may no longer be able to recognise. If we are to build a 'Jerusalem' in our county's 'green and pleasant land', we need a visionary prophet to find our way out of chaos to enlightenment in unification with the creator. We go to Blake because he was able to never let go of the golden thread. Rooted in the experience of the divine he made sense of a complex world, offering songs of love and rebellion, as a way to freedom. Through his songs he raises questions, taking on the form of the Tyger, however he allows the reader to struggle for understanding and does not offer answers on a golden platter. The world is not always bright and beautiful, and as we feel the world shift under our feet, abstract reason cannot provide lasting meanings.

What is remarkable about Blake, is inspite of having to witness deep seated misery, injustice and hypocrisy, he did not despair and instead, "offered an alternative system of values and believed that it was possible to create a new society which would be both free and fulfilling".[32] The Bard, as spiritual essence, guides individuals towards paradise, calling to fallen man to walk again in Eden, in union with God.[33]While he depicts the "dark satanic mills" in 'London', he also offers us visions of Jerusalem and while he terrifies us with the despotic Urizen,

he offers us Albion who dances naked, free of oppression. These spiritual and social Jerusalems have to be built both within every human being and without in all lands, in an attitude of respect for individuality and diversity, in universal brotherhood

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