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by Grant C. Roti and Donald L. Kent

Blake's "London" is a bitter lament for the moral and political conditions of London, ending with these four lines:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.¹

"London" may very well be the least controversial of Blake's poems, but this last stanza has been a problem for critics and is in need of very close explication. The purpose of this article is not only to clarify the meaning of these lines but to show Blake's precise and detailed awareness of the social conditions of his time, and thereby to emphasize the caution expressed by some critics against moving too rapidly from fact to symbol in the interpretation of Blake's poetry.

In *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument*, Harold Bloom recognized "two possible readings" for this last stanza, readings which "may reinforce one another":

One is that the blasting of the tear refers to prenatal blindness due to venereal disease, the "plagues" of the poem's last line. A closer reading gives what is at first more surprising and yet finally more characteristic of Blake's individual thinking. Most of *London* is sounds: after the first stanza, Blake talks about what he hears as he walks the streets of his city. In the midnight streets of the city, he hears a harlot's curse against the morality of the Bromions, who speak of her with the authority of reason and society and, as they would suppose, of nature. But it is her cry, from street to street that weaves their fate, the winding sheet of their England. They have mistaken her, for she is nature, and her plagues are subtler than those of venereal disease. A shouted curse can *blast a tear* in a quite literal way: the released breath can scatter the small body of moisture out of existence. Blake knows his

natural facts; he distrusted nature too much not to know them. The tear ducts of a new born infant are closed; its eyes need to be moistened before it can begin to weep. Blake ascribes a natural fact to the Harlot's curse, and so the Harlot is not just an exploited Londoner but nature herself, the Tirzah of the last Song of Experience. In this reading, *London's* concluding lines take a very different and greater emphasis. The curse of nature that blights the marriage coach and turns it into a hearse is venereal infection in the first reading. But Blake is talking about *every* marriage, and he means literally that each rides in a hearse. The plagues are the enormous plagues that come from identifying reason, society, and nature, and the greatest of these plagues is the Jealousy of Experience, and dark secret love of the natural heart.²

There are a number of reasons for questioning Bloom's literal "closer reading."³ First of all, although most of "London" is sounds, what the speaker of the poem hears is not the curse itself but *how* "the youthful Harlots curse / Blasts the new-born Infants tear, / And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse." The object of "hear" is not the curse but the indirect question, the how-clause. "Hear" in this sense means "understand the manner in which . . .": it does not refer to a literal hearing. The speaker, walking through the midnight streets, becomes aware of the conditions and effects of the "Harlots curse," how it ruins ("blasts") and blights. Secondly, it has been suggested by Erdman that the "Harlots curse" is parallel to the "Soldiers sigh" of the third stanza, and that Blake may have been thinking about a curse written on the palace walls, not shouted in the streets.⁴ Third, Bloom's "closer reading" destroys the parallel metaphorical meaning of "blast" (ruin or destroy vegetation) and "blight." In his reading the reader's attention must move rapidly from the literal blasting (the harlot's breath moistening the baby's eyes) to the more gradual onset of blight, in spite of the alliteration. Fourth, it will be shown later in our argument that Blake also

wants to link the parallel ideas of the "Infants tear" (the infant's venereal disease) and the "Marriage hearse" (the mother's venereal disease). Fifth, and last, Bloom (apparently) rejects the interpretation that the harlot's blast of breath can literally scatter the child's tear out of existence, since a newborn baby has no tear⁵; and his point seems to be that the harlot causes the tear to come into existence by moistening the child's eyes with the breath of her cursing. But, in this case, the harlot is, logically speaking, blasting the child's eye, not the tear, unless *blast* is reinterpreted to mean "cause to come into existence," which considerably distorts the traditional meanings. The "Harlots curse" must refer predominantly to venereal disease, and this is what we intend to show in this article.

The main problem in interpreting these second and third lines of the stanza lies, we suspect, in knowing what it means to *blast a tear*. Bloom also is aware of this and is to be commended for wrestling with the problem; no other critic has dealt with it in such detail. We take "blast" to mean predominantly "to ruin, destroy" (OED, II, 8), especially to ruin or destroy the bud, flower, or fruit of a plant. (It should be noted here that "blast" in the sense of "ruin" may ultimately derive from the idea of a "malignant wind" (OED, II, 7) which destroys vegetation; but it destroys the vegetation by bringing disease, not by blowing the plant to pieces. So, the "Harlots curse" may figuratively operate as a "malignant wind" but only in the sense that it brings disease, not in the sense that it blows away or apart.) But what does it mean to ruin or destroy a tear? Blake could very well have in mind the effects of a particular venereal disease, *gonococcal conjunctivitis*,⁶ a form of gonorrhea which was certainly widespread at Blake's time and which shortly after birth produces an ugly, pussy discharge from the eyes. The disease itself is an infection "contracted from the birth canal during delivery."⁷ Shortly after birth the newborn baby's eyelids are marked by a puffy, reddened appearance and are swollen shut; a green pussy discharge oozes through the closed lids. In the days before penicillin, this untreated disease progressed over a period of six weeks to involve the cornea (an important protector of the eye), resulting in a perforated cornea with loss of the eye. Thus, the child's "tears" appear to be quite literally "blasted": they have been changed to pus. The child's eyesight may also be "blasted" in that he may lose his sight.

Through this new reading, we can better appreciate the skillful parallelism of the last two lines of the poem. Blake is moving from the immediate effects of the youthful harlot on the newborn baby to her more pervasive effects on marriage in general; he is moving from the more concrete, more nearly literal blasting of the "Infants tear" to the more abstract, more symbolic blighting of the "Marriage hearse," and this shift is carefully reflected in his diction. Blasting and blighting in general destroy vegetation and the two actions are linked with the "bl-" alliteration; but *blast* refers particularly to the destruction of the bud, fruit, or flower of a plant, and so Blake uses it to refer to the actions of the harlot on the infant (the bud of the marriage plant). *Blight*, as a verb, refers to

destruction of the plant in general; and *blight*, as a noun, refers to the "baleful influence" that destroys plants or "prevents their blossom from 'setting'" (OED, 1.); and so Blake uses it to refer to the destruction of marriage (the plant which produces the bud). Also, venereal disease would prevent the "blossom from 'setting'" properly.

Just as the harlot infects the child with venereal disease (the "Infants tear") so, in the last line of the poem, she more pervasively ("with plagues") destroys marriage in general through venereal disease ("Marriage hearse"). "Marriage hearse" now becomes a dynamic symbol which fuses a number of suggestive meanings. In the context of the poem it can be read grammatically as an adjective modifying a noun and as a compound noun, each form having harmonious overtones. In the first case, "hearse" is a description which interprets Blake's culture. It refers in general to the deadly condition of marriage, in that marriage, for Blake, is a restrictive institution (deadly, in a spiritual sense) which actually fosters prostitution;⁸ and individual marriages are literally and physically deadly, since the venereal disease is transferred to the wife and children. "Marriage hearse" also calls to mind the marriage coach (marriage is again spiritually dead) and the marriage bed⁹ (marriage is again physically deadly). (An early meaning of hearse is "bier," "the movable stand on which a corpse, whether in a coffin or not, is placed before burial; that on which it is carried to the grave" OED, 2.)

In the second case, "Marriage hearse" can be taken as a compound noun; here the emphasis shifts from "hearse" to "Marriage," and "hearse" virtually becomes an appositive adjective ("marriage, which is a hearse") since "Marriage" is the object of "blights." The meaning is essentially the same, "marriage, which is a deadly condition, spiritually and physically"; but the awareness of this alternate grammatical form helps to account for the ability of the two words to resonate, so to speak, to become musically dynamic. Not only are there multiple meanings which harmonize, but there are also two conforming grammatical structures by which the meanings are expressed.

Mark Schorer, years ago, remarked that although Blake could "see spiritual realities within natural objects and . . . could impose spiritual realities upon nature," in his early poems he tends to "illuminate facts by vision."¹⁰ The last stanza of "London" shows this tendency well. The speaker is walking the streets of London, listening; but he is also a kind of prophet, the midnight also a moral and political darkness, and he hears the facts and conditions of his city and passes judgment on them. He is aware of the details of venereal disease, but he is also aware that it is a "curse," inherited in the blood, which "blasts" the child and his crying and "blights with plagues" the institution of marriage and the mothers who must carry and give birth to the diseased children.

¹ *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 26-27.

² (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 141-42.

³ Bloom's "closer reading" is actually two readings: (1) a literal reading which takes the curse to be an oral imprecation moistening the baby's eyes, and (2) a symbolic reading dependent on this literal reading. In this paper we are directly questioning only the first.

⁴ David V. Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 278.

⁵ This interpretation is something of a straw man anyway; that the harlot's breath can literally scatter the baby's tear out of existence is contrary to ordinary language and the facts of experience.

A more common interpretation would reply that Bloom is demanding too technical a knowledge of his reader and of Blake when he points out that a newborn baby has no tear (at any rate, a "newborn" baby could be two days old, and have tears). Such a reading would also take "Infants tear" as a *synecdoche* meaning "infant's crying." This, however, leaves the reader suspecting that Blake used "tear" largely because it rhymed with "hear"; it shows a faulty craftsmanship in Blake which we do not feel is necessarily in the poem.

⁶ For a complete description and a photograph of an infected child see *Adler's Textbook of Ophthalmology*, 8th ed., ed. Harold G. Scheie and Daniel M. Albert (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1969), p. 147. Dr. Kent is responsible for the medical information given at this point in the article; we are also partly

indebted to Virginia Burpos of Bridgeport, Connecticut, for this reading of the poem.

⁷ *Adler's Textbook of Ophthalmology*, p. 147. Since *gonococcal conjunctivitis* is a form of gonorrhoea, it is not prenatal or congenital. A number of commentators have referred to the "curse" as "prenatal," thinking, no doubt, of the blindness resulting from congenital syphilis: see Bloom, p. 141; M. H. Abrams' comments in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams *et al.*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), II, 59; and Bloom's comments in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander, *et al.* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), II, 27. Since venereal diseases were not differentiated until late in the nineteenth century, Blake and others could easily have thought of any form of gonorrhoea as congenital and so a "curse" passed on in the blood. See Charles Clayton Dennie, *History of Syphilis* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1962), esp. p. 92f.

⁸ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 94 and 265.

⁹ See Abrams' comments in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, II, 59; and Bloom, p. 142.

¹⁰ Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 378.

Preface to the Revised Edition of Blake's Notebook

by David V. Erdman

Reviewers were generous in their praise of the first edition; their welcoming of this facsimile as "an essential guide"--"both stimulating and useful" and even "something of a landmark"--lulled my critical faculties, so that when the opportunity of a reissue arose my first inclination was merely to correct the manifest errors and occasional misprints, to put a proper note of identification near the finely sketched portrait of Blake's wife Catherine on Notebook page 82 (Geoffrey Keynes having pointed out that the sketch had been copied by Frederick Shields for the 1880 *Gilchrist Life* and there identified), and, with the necessary rearrangement of adjacent items, to correct my mistaken dating of Poem 78 in the Table on pages 56-58 and in the explanation on page 71. I intended also to cite briefly, in the note to page 27, a clear solution to the puzzle of Emblem 10 which was proposed by Robert N. Essick in his review in *Blake Newsletter* 32 (Spring 1975) pp. 132-36.

When I sat down to check through the reviews for specific criticisms and suggestions, however, I

was gradually drawn into a sober reappraisal of my "readings" of two of the emblem designs, one being that of the figure resting on a cloud in a star-studded sky used by Blake in his strategic "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*. "On pages 73 and N57, the figure in Emblem 36 must surely be identified not as the future Bard but as the future Earth," declared Jean H. Hagstrum in his review in *Philological Quarterly*, 53 (Fall 1974) 643-45. "Her position resembles that of a clear but unmistakable Blakean icon . . . the position of Earth, of the Clod of Clay or Nature in *Thel*, of the sleeping girl in *America*, and of *Vala* in *The Four Zoas*." Long uncertain about this figure, I had defined it as "the alerted Soul on her cloud" as late as the galley-proof stage of the first edition, then persuaded myself that it was, after all, "the Bard on his scroll." Sir Geoffrey Keynes had once agreed that it was the Bard but in his recent facsimile edition of the *Songs* (1967) had come round to seeing it as "Earth . . . a female figure reclining on a couch borne on a cloud among a night of stars." What finally convinced me were two pages of close