Method in Blake's "Mad Song"

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The consensus among Blake scholars seems to be that Blake's "Mad Song" depicts the condition of insanity. A handful of critics will occasionally concede that the speaker may be a poet who has lost his sanity because of his poetry, but they invariably offer "inability to create" as the specific cause of his dementia. The evidence suggests, however, that the speaker's "affliction" is not impotence but omnipotence.

"The most interesting influence of the *Reliques*," says Margaret Ruth Lowery in *Windows of the Morning*, "is found in Blake's 'Mad Song,'" which, she contends, "shows the influence of no one single poem, but is a compound of many." Like all the mad songs collected in Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a book owned and annotated by Blake, "Mad Song" is written in the first person and shares the same general theme. "All emphasize the frantic, tortuous nature of madness; all seek pity for their woe. . . . In ideas, in imagery, in phrasing, in rhythm," Lowery concludes, "Blake's debt to no one was more direct than of his 'Mad Song' to Percy's *Reliques*."[1]

In his *Fearful Symmetry*, Northrop Frye discusses the correspondence between the mental condition of the "Mad Song" speaker and the state of his physical surroundings, a correspondence common in Romantic poetry. Frye observes further a desire on the part of the speaker to perpetuate this correspondence and considers him a prisoner of space and time,[2] an idea echoed and expanded by Harold Bloom.

In his commentary in David Erdman's edition of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Bloom argues that Blake's "radical innovation on the Elizabethan 'mad song' and its imitations [was] to make the song a satire upon both its willfully deranged singer and the mental world that singer seeks to escape."[3] Bloom also suggests that Blake's poem may be an ironic commentary on the escape of the poets of the Age of Sensibility--Smart, Cowper, Chatterton, Macpherson, and Collins--into melancholia and despair. Says Bloom in *Blake's Apocalypse*: "The grimness of Blake's irony is probably due to the little poem's satiric function as the young poet's warning to himself."[4]

In discussing the influence of the *Reliques* on Blake's "Mad Song," Lowery notes that four of the six poems selected by Percy "attribute madness to love, or being in love. There is nothing in Blake's poem that speaks of love; rather there is a suggestion that the madness is over his poetry."[5] For John Ehrstine as well, the speaker is "apparently a poet [who] cannot use his imagination."[6]

In his captivating *Curiosities of Literature*, Izaac Disraeli traces the origin of the "Tom o' Bedlam" character--the traditional hero of the mad song. The overcrowding at Bethlehem Hospital forced its governors to release prematurely inmates who then "wandered about the country, chanting wild ditties, and wearing a fantastical dress to attract the notice of the charitable, on whose alms they lived." As with any successful money-making gimmick, imposters called "Abram men" soon joined the ranks of the "legitimate." Disraeli cites Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear* as the most likely original dramatic representation of a Bedlamite character.[7]

According to Robert Reed's *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage*, the mad characters of Elizabethan playwrights were "little more than stereotyped renditions whose disordered minds were capable of imagining superhuman achievements"; "the Jacobean madman, on the other hand, was a much more objective study; he expressed the frustrations, not the potentialities of mankind." Jacobean portrayals of mad characters were quite often modeled not on the original "Tom o' Bedlams," but on the "Abram men"

who impersonated them: "The Jacobean malcontent was forced by the moral decadence of his environment to disguise himself as the madman or the fool." Such a character, moreover, usually served as a vehicle for satire, often uttering the most profound and enlightened statements in the play.[8]

The Tom o' Bedlam poem which most closely follows, chronologically, the counterfeit mad songs of Edgar seems to be that reprinted by Joseph Ritson, Disraeli and Percy in their respective collections and beginning "From the hag and hungry goblin."[9] Jack Lindsay, whose *Loving Mad Tom* is the most thorough and authoritative text on the subject of mad songs, cites, as "the first printed example of a clear reaction from the poem," two stanzas from Ben Jonson's *The Masque of the Metamorphosed Gypsie* which in turn inspired Herrick's "The Night-piece to Julia."[10] In addition to adapting the mad song form for use as a wooing poem, Herrick used it elsewhere, as in "Upon Jane and Jone," when depicting characters who are not what they seem, who, like the counterfeit Toms, "sham Abraham."

In *The Complete Angler*, Izaac Walton and Charles Cotton attribute the Bedlamite verse beginning "Forth from my dark and dismal Cell" to William Basse.[11] Lowery observes in *Windows of the Morning* that the fourth stanza of this poem, which also appeared in Percy's *Reliques*, may well have been the model for the rhythm of Blake's "Mad Song."[12]

The other mad songs contained in Percy's *Reliques* include a satire on evangelists by Bishop Corbet; "I'll sail upon the Dog-star" by D'Urfey, the most prolific of mad song writers; two by Henry Carey as erratic in form as D'Urfey's, and likewise concerning madness induced by unrequited love; and an anonymous effort beginning "Grim king of the ghosts, make haste," presumably written around the middle of the seventeenth century.

Since he titled his poem "Mad Song" and yet abandoned the traditional mad song stanza--two trimeters, two dimeters, and a final dimeter, rhyming xabba or aabbx--one suspects that Blake intended the reader to ponder this discrepancy. The use of both the mad song form itself and the mad character as vehicles for satire was well established when Blake wrote his poem.

Though he rejected the traditional five-line stanza and the refrain which followed in the earliest versions, Blake did employ the double stanza common to many mad songs, combining two quatrains rather than two five-line stanzas, and he did, in his own way, alternate trimeter and dimeter lines, though using couplets and crossing his rhymes rather than embracing them. In rejecting the traditional refrain used by Bedlamites for begging, Blake indicates that the speaker of his "Mad Song" is not flaunting or simulating his "madness" for financial ends.

Blake retains the traditional temporal setting of the mad song, night with dawn approaching. Like the speakers of most mad songs, his speaker displays a preference for night and a concomitant distaste for day. Blake's speaker also imitates his mad

ancestors in personifying the forces of nature. And his brain struck like theirs by intense light, he too cries to the heavens. As the Bedlamite characters of early mad songs described the bondage which they had suffered in asylums, so Blake's speaker seems to be detailing a bondage or enslavement, but of a more abstract sort. As to the speakers of earlier mad songs, to Blake's speaker sleep seems a means of relief.

Although Blake's "Mad Song" appears to be the first use of the form to portray the "madness" of poetic inspiration, nevertheless there are hints of this theme in the earliest mad songs, even in those of Shakespeare. In *King Lear* Edgar may very well be feigning a sort of poetic madness in claiming that "the foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale" (III.vi.28-29), since the nightingale commonly symbolized the poet. His reference to "the night-mare, and her nine-fold" (III.iv.115) may be a deliberately perverse or demented allusion to the goddess Memory and her nine daughters, the Muses.

The mad song beginning "From the hag and hungry goblin" also contains suggestions that the madness depicted is a poetic one. The last stanza begins

> With a host of furious fancies
> Whereof I am commander,
> With a burning spear,
> And a horse of the ayr. . . .

The poet is commonly depicted as one who is surrounded by "furious fancies," and the horse of the fourth line suggests Pegasus, the Greek representation of poetic inspiration. The speaker's assertion in the sixth stanza of this poem that he knows more than Apollo may be construed as a manifestation of the poet's vanity.

In Basse's "Forth from the dark and dismal Cell," the speaker refers not only to Apollo, but to Vulcan as well, appealing to the latter to "knock off my troublesome shackles." Here Vulcan, god of fire, appears to be a variant or dimension of the poetic deity which Apollo generally represents. He is invoked to rend what seem to be the same shackles from which Blake's speaker desires to escape, those of time. Basse's speaker actually encounters his oppressor, "Old Time":

> When me he spies
> Away he flies,
> For Time will stay for no man;
> In vain with cryes,
> I rend the skies,
> For Pity is not common.

Both Shakespeare and Herrick used the mad song form when presenting characters whose external appearance belied their true dispositions, Shakespeare with Edgar who feigned madness, Herrick with Jone the seemingly virtuous whore. Blake's poem, too, is a portrait of someone who seems to society something other than what he is. Because of the nature of the poetic process and because of the prejudices of society, the inspired poet is deemed mad.

Blake begins "Mad Song" with a brief description of the speaker's environment--a cold, windy night--immediately thereafter invoking Sleep in a way reminiscent of Sidney and Daniel, each of whom begins one of his sonnets in a similar fashion. The "morning" in the middle of the first stanza unites the contrary states of day and night--symbolically reason and energy perhaps--and, of course, "Without Contraries is no progression."[13] The birds--of dawn, not day--also represent unions of contraries, of earth and air, or body and spirit. The first stanza ends with the scorn of the birds of dawn, which parallels the scorn of the speaker and the scorn which Blake himself felt toward those who mocked inspiration and labeled him a madman. Moreover, the bird imagery calls to mind the traditional symbolic association of the bird with the poet and with the holy spirit, most specifically in the forms of the nightingale and the dove. By crowding after night, Blake's speaker makes clear that he shares the birds' scorn for the earth, that he identifies with them, that--figuratively speaking--he wants to fly.

In the second stanza, the speaker directs his cries to heaven, presumably the habitation of the Muse-like Sleep. The words "vault" and "paved," used to describe heaven, suggest not only riches but also the possibility of travel or transmigration across a celestial pathway. The word "notes" reiterates the identification of the speaker as a poet. Here the interpretations of Lowery and Ehrstine collapse: if the poem is intended to depict a poet unable to use his imagination, how is it that the speaker manages to compose and sing "notes"? The last two lines confirm the identification by demonstrating the ability of the speaker's music to confront, control and incorporate the forces of nature. In these lines Blake alludes to Shakespeare's Prospero, who also could "make mad the roaring winds, / And with tempests play." Since Prospero is the main character in *The Tempest*, the juxtaposition of the words "tempests" and "play" is not likely accidental. Blake is drawing a parallel between the speaker of his poem and the magician Prospero, who typifies the poet scorned by and scorning his native society.

Blake's speaker begins the third stanza by comparing himself to "a fiend in a cloud." In addition to representing the body--the fiend corresponding to the spirit enclosed or, as in Platonic theory, imprisoned in the body--the cloud may also symbolize the limitations of reason, which restrict and confine the energy represented by the fiend. As death frees the soul from the body, so night presumably frees the fiend from his cloud. In turning his "back to the east, / From whence comforts have increas'd"--suggesting both the comforts of day and the luxuries traditionally associated with the orient--the speaker rejects what Blake, in *Jerusalem*, called the "strong delusive light of Time & Space."[14] Like the speaker of Carey's second mad song, Blake's speaker elects to "leave this false, imaginary light, / And seek the dismal shades of night." And like the speaker in Daniel's "Care-charmer Sleep," he invokes Sleep to "restore the light."

Blake's speaker thus remains faithful to his genius. In turning his back to the east, to the light of day, he turns to a different light, a light which is painful rather than comforting, one which seizes his brain rather than his eyes. (Does not the word "seize" in the second-to-last line suggest the ages-old interpretation of seizures as manifestations of divine inspiration or genius?) In turning his back to the east, the speaker symbolically annihilates the world of reason--the world of the critic who thinks him mad--and seeks refuge in the tempestuous nightly world of energy.

The speaker of Blake's "Mad Song" is not mad, but inspired. Blake's "radical innovation on the Elizabethan 'mad song' and its imitations" is not, as Bloom attests, making the song a "satire upon both its willfully deranged singer"--the traditional satiric use--"and the mental world that singer seeks to escape," but rather making it a satire on the self-imposed judges of artistic propriety. The irony of the title is that the term "mad" is their description, not Blake's. Sure enough, the critics have interpreted the song much as the Jacobean mad character's fellow actors interpreted his comments--"as the blunt railleries of a demented mind." Perhaps the poem is, as Bloom contends, "the young poet's warning to himself," but if so, Blake was admonishing himself not to avoid madness but to be prepared to have that label attached to products of his imagination. Blake knew that "Mad Song" would be misinterpreted. And so it has been.

[1] (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1940), pp. 161,165.

[2] 2nd ed. (1947; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), p. 179.

[3] (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 887.

[4] (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 19-20.

[5] *Windows*, p. 161.

[6] *William Blake's Poetical Sketches* (Pullman: Washington State Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 87-88.

[7] (New York: World Publ. House, 1876), pp. 203-04.

[8] (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), p. 113.

[9] Ernest Rhys, ed., *Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906) and Joseph Ritson, *Ancient Songs and Ballads*, 3rd ed., rev. (London: Reeves and Turner, 1877).

[10] Jack Lindsay, *Loving Mad Tom* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1970), p. 66.

[11] Izaac Walton and Charles Cotton, *The Complete Angler* (London: Frederick Warne, 1888), p. 147.

[12] *Windows*, p. 161.

[13] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 34.

[14] Erdman, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 228.