A Twist in the Tale of “The Tyger”

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 23, Issue 2, Fall 1989, pp. 104-106
comprehension and expanse of thought which at once fills the whole mind, and of which the first effect is sudden astonishment, and the second rational admiration."


1Philosophical Enquiry 58.
3Just as Burke's sublime takes on an aesthetics of darkness, deprivation, pain, and "whatever is in any sort terrible" (Philosophical Enquiry 39) so in Blake's vocabulary dark prevails numerically over light, night over day, death over life. More notably, the word terror(s) and its co-derivatives terrible, terrific, terrific, taken as a collectivity, would rank in the dozen most frequently used words in his concorded vocabulary (David V. Erdman's Blake Concordance [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967] reveals a total of 393 uses of these terms). Despite his stated aversion to Burke, Blake so closely associates the sublime with the terrific that the terminology of the latter often acquires an honorific lustre in his work. Thus we have such phrases as "Terrified at the Sublime Wonder" (a reference to the beneficent Spaces of Erin—see J 11.8–13), "terrible Blake in his pride" (When Klopstock England defied," line 2), an uncharacteristically affectionate Endymion's "Lovely terrible Los of Eternity" (FZ 90.160), the "terrors of friendship" (J 45.5), and the "terrors lions & Tygers" that "sport and play" before the Great Harvest at the end of Milton (M 42.38). In these instances terror loses most of its terrors, and one gets the sense that in such cases Blake is not paying tribute so much to the signified feeling of terror but rather to the signifier, a vocabulary of the sublime fondly preserved from the fashions of his youth.

There are 51 uses of the terms from the collectivity (astonishment) in Blake's poetry. Among poets of comparable stature, range, and sublime interests, Milton's poetry yields only 6 instances, Wordsworth's, 17, and Shelley's, 11. Pope draws upon this cluster of terms 16 times, almost entirely for his translations of Homer, and Dryden, 11 times, mostly for the Aeneid.

10This connection is reinforced by the older sense of astonished (or its variant astonied) to connote death-like paralysis and insensibility; thus the OED on astonied: "Suddenly; made insensible, benumbed, paralyzed (1611);" cf. also Milton on Satan's legions, who "lie thus astonish'd on th'oblivious Pool" (Paradise Lost 1.266).
11Philosophical Enquiry 61.
12See Philosophical Enquiry 37, 40.

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Most readers of "The Tyger" have their own ideas of its meaning: I shall not be adding my own interpretation, but merely offering a factual record of minute particulars, by pointing to a number of verbal parallels with Erasmus Darwin's The Botanic Garden. A few of these were given in my book Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets; the others I have come across more recently.

Darwin's poem The Botanic Garden was published in two parts, with Part 2, The Loves of the Plants, appearing first in 1789, and Part 1, The Economy of Vegetation, nominally in 1791, though it did not actually appear until about June 1792, probably because of delay in printing Blake's superb engravings of the Portland Vase! After my quotations I give the canto and line numbers from the third edition of The Loves of the Plants (1791) and the first edition of The Economy of Vegetation.

One of the best-known passages in Darwin's poem was his vivid description of a nightmare, based on Fuselli's painting (illus. 1), which features the half-visible head of a large animal with unnaturally bright eyes, enveloped in black night. Obviously the head is intended as that of a horse, but the word "nightmare" has no etymological connection with horses, male or female.2 (The nightmare is produced by the incubus, or "squab fiend" as Darwin calls him.) Could Fuselli's monstrous animal, with eyes burning bright in the blackness of the night, have given Blake the cue for his Tyger? Such a speculation is encouraged by a verbal parallel between "The Tyger" and Darwin's verses about the sleeping girl. The nightmare induces in her an "interrupted heartbeat" and "suffocative breath", as frightful thoughts:

In dread succession agonize her mind.
O'er her fair limbs convulsive tremors fleet,
Start in her hands, and struggle in her feet.

(Lo. Pl. 3: 68–70)

This is not quite "What dread hand? and what dread feet?" but "dread is powerfully present, "in her hands, and . . . in her feet"; and "dread" was a favorite adjective with Darwin, used twenty times in The Botanic Garden.

The burning brightness of the first two stanzas of "The Tyger" has some resemblances to Darwin's picture of Nebuchadnezzar ordering "a vast pyre . . . of sulphurous coal and pitch-exuding pine" with "huge belows" to fan the roaring flames:
Bright and more bright the blazing deluge flows,
And white with sevenfold heat the furnace glows.
And now the Monarch fix'd with dread surprize
Deep in the burning vault his dazzled eyes.

(Nov. Pl. 4: 61–64)

Nebuchadnezzar was so dreadfully surprised because
Shadrec, Meshec, and Abednego were enduring the heat
of the furnace unscathed: "Fierce flames innocuous, as
they step, retire; / And calm they move amid a world of
fire!" (Nov. Pl. 4: 69–70). In these two quotations we
have burning once and bright twice, as well as dread and
four other obvious words from "The Tyger"—furnace,
deep, eyes and fire. Also Darwin has a complete answer
to Blake's question "What the hand dare seize the fire?"

There is another curious parallel in Darwin's pic-
ture of the night-flowering Cerea, who lifts her brows "to
the skies" at midnight, "Eyes the white zenith; counts
the suns, that roll / Their distant fires, and blaze around
the Pole" (Nov. Pl. 4: 21–22). Blake sets "the fire of thine
eyes" deep in "distant . . . skies": the image is similar,
though the Tyger is very different from the strange plant
that flowers unseen.

In an earlier canto of The Loves of the Plants there
is a correctly-ordered preview of Blake's word-sequence
“deeps . . . on . . . wings . . . aspire . . . fire”: Darwin

Calls up with magic voice the shapes that sleep
In Earth's dark bosom, or unfathom'd deeps;
That shin'd in air on viewless wings aspire,
Or blazing bathe in elemental fire.

(Loz. Pl. 2: 297-300)

Darwin likes the “aspire/fire” rhyme and uses it in The
Botanic Garden on three other occasions (Loz. Pl. 1:

After all these parallels you may think it is easy to
find a parallel for anything. But that is not so: unlike
conventional literary criticism, which can sweep un-
wanted facts under the carpet, source-hunting is sharp
and scientific—failures cannot be hidden. Thus there is
no “fearful symmetry” to be found anywhere in the verse
of The Botanic Garden. Also Darwin never mentions a
Tyger specifically in his poem. The nearest he comes to
to it is with his fierce-eyed “Monster of the Nile”: “With
Tyger-paw He prints the brineless strand . . ./ Rolls his
fierce eye-balls, claps his iron claws” (Ec. Veg. 4: 434,
437). Nor does Darwin offer a “forest of the night”: his
closest approach is when Hercules “drives the Lion to his
dusky cave” in “Nemea’s howling forests” (Ec. Veg. 1:
313).

No labor of Hercules is needed, however, to find
parallels in canto 1 of The Economy of Vegetation, be-
cause its subject is Fire. Darwin tells us how Vulcan and
Cyclops “forged immortal arms” on “thundering an-
vils”; when Venus came to watch them she “Admired
their sinewy arms, and shoulders bare, / And ponderous
hammers lifted high in air” (Ec. Veg. 1: 169-70). Blake
has shoulder, sinews, hammer and anvil, though his im-
 mortal artificer is forging not fearsome weapons but a
fearsome Tyger. Darwin is equally creative at times, for
example in bringing to birth the Tyger-pawed Monster
of the Nile:

First in translucent lymph with cobweb-threads
The Brain's fine floating tissue swells, and spreads;
Nerve after nerve the glistening spine descends,
The red Heart dances, the Aorta bends.

(Ec. Veg. 4: 425-28)

The first two lines answer Blake's “In what furnace
was thy brain?” In the last line Darwin's phrase “The red
Heart dances” is too pretty for Blake, who soberly states
“thy heart began to beat”; in Urizen, however, closer
links with Darwin's picture can be found.

There are many other parallels from canto 1 of The
Economy of Vegetation. For example, lines 216–22 have
“dread Destroyer. . . bright . . . dread snakes . . . immor-
tal . . . Terror.” The noun chain appears thirteen times
in The Botanic Garden, notably in the picture of a shak-
led “Giant-form” bursting his chains to bring about the
French Revolution, an image that may have links with
Blake's French Revolution. However, the phrase “what
the chain?” does not appear in The Botanic Garden. Nor
do Blake's “deadly terrors”: the best Darwin can offer is
“twisted terror” (Ec. Veg. 3: 502), with “sinewy should-
ers” in the previous line, to parallel “shoulder . . . twist
. . . sinews . . . terrors” in the third and fourth stanzas of
“The Tyger.”

That brings me to the fifth stanza of “The Tyger,”
which I have already discussed at some length in my
book, where I quoted from Darwin's long note on the
aurora, to show that it might be a source for “the stars
threw down their spears.” I also gave a quotation from
Darwin's Zoonomia, with his evolutionary explanation
—now sanctioned by modern science—of how the tyge
was created from the same original “living filament” as
the lamb. Thus he answers Blake's question in stanza 5,
and the query in stanza 1 about the frame of the tyger's
fearful symmetry. Darwin's answer was timely too, for
volume 1 of Zoonomia was published in 1794, the same
year as Songs of Experience.

Perhaps I have been twisting the tail of the Tyger
too sadistically; but a full scholarly appreciation of
Blake's poem should take account of all such verbal
parallels. There is much evidence that Blake was in-
fluenced by Darwin between 1789 and 1795, so the par-
allels may well be significant.

1Desmond King-Hele, ed. The Letters of Erasmus Darwin
4See D. Worrall, “William Blake and Erasmus Darwin's Botanic
5See Desmond King-Hele, Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic
6Worrall 397-417; N. Hilton, “The Spectre of Darwin,” rev. of
King-Hele, Romantic Poets, chap. 2.