

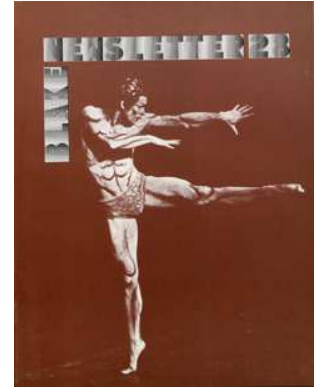
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Blake's Tyger & Richard Crashaw's Paraphrase of
Thomas of Celano's Dies Irae

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Within the past several years, critics have become increasingly aware that Blake may have known and been influenced by the poetry of Crashaw,¹ whose works, available in partial anthologies published in 1648, 1652, and 1670,² attracted a growing interest during the eighteenth century, and received frequent and favorable commentary.³ One particular poem often singled out for praise was his "Hymn of the Church in Meditation of the Day of Judgment," a paraphrase of Thomas of Celano's *Dies Irae*, originally composed in the thirteenth century as a *pia meditatio*, but popularized through its incorporation into the burial service of the Roman Church as a sequence in the requiem mass, and through its eventual adoption as an advent hymn by the Protestant churches. By Blake's time the Latin poem had achieved fame as a nondenominational masterpiece, lauded by Anglicans and Catholics alike for the sublimity of its theme and the splendid "hammer strokes" of its triple rhymes.⁴ Crashaw's translation of 1646, the second in English,⁵ takes great liberties with the Latin text,⁶ changing the form and paraphrasing the sense to achieve a distinctive sublimity of expression that reappears in Blake's "The Tyger," a poem generally supposed to be concerned with the same themes of divine wrath and the punishment of sins.⁷

Crashaw's treatment of eschatological wrath is not only in verse, but in the same quatrains (rhymed *aabb*) as "The Tyger," and close scrutiny reveals a still more detailed metrical correspondence between the two poems. Both alternate catalectic trochaic tetrameters with iambic tetrameters, although there is an 18:6 preponderance of the former in Blake's poem, a 16:8 preponderance of the latter in the first six stanzas of Crashaw's seventeen-stanza poem. In stanzas 1 and 5 of the "Hymn," which most closely resemble Blake, are found exactly the same patterns of iambic and trochaic lines as in stanzas 1, 5, and 6 of "The Tyger":

II

O that fire! before whose face
Heaven & earth shall find no place.
O those eyes! whose angry light
Must be the day of that dread Night.

V

O that Book! whose leaves so bright
Will set the world in severe light.
O that Judge! whose hand, whose eye
None can endure; yet none can fly.

1 For example, Josephine Miles, *Eras and Modes in English Poetry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957), pp. 48-49; and Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), p. 104.

2 Bibliographical details in *The Poems of Richard Crashaw*, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), pp. xliii-lxxxvi. Quotations of Crashaw's poem are from this edition, pp. 298-301. The first allegedly complete edition of Crashaw, Robert Anderson's *A Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain* (1793), IV, 707-54, appeared a year after "The Tyger" had essentially achieved its finished form.

3 See Austin Warren, "The Reputation of Crashaw in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *SP*, 31 (1934), 385-407.

4 Text of the poem and a commentary on it are given by F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), pp. 443-52. A writer in the *Christian Magazine* of 1760 made the claim that the *Dies Irae* "savoureth more of Protestantism than of Popery."

5 The first was made by Joshua Sylvester in 1621.

6 A stanza by stanza comparison with the Latin original is given by Sister Margaret Claydon, *Richard Crashaw's Paraphrases of the Vexilla Regis . . . Dies Irae, O Gloriosa Domina* (Washington: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1960), pp. 78-99.

7 As, for example, in Paley, *Energy and the Imagination*; S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924); Jesse Bier, "A Study of Blake's 'The Tyger,'" *Bucknell Univ. Studies*, 1 (1949), 35-46; and Hazard Adams, *William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963).

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Both poets have strong caesural pauses in catalectic lines, although the caesura follows the fourth syllable in Blake, the third in Crashaw. Substituting "What the . . . ?" phrases from Blake for "O that . . . !" phrases in Crashaw conveniently illuminates the resemblances, and while final meaning is certainly affected by one poet's preference for rhetorical questions over the other's exclamations, the poems are nevertheless alike in their incantatory repetition of the respective figures chosen, and both employ the same cadences to evoke a similar sense of religious awe.

This sense is intensified by both poets' use of similar diction. The word *dread* occurs three times in each poem, "dread hand," "dread feet," and "dread grasp" in Blake, "dread Night," "dread Lord," and "dread *Ite*" in Crashaw. Blake's "deadly terrors" is matched by Crashaw's "Horror of . . . Death," and the word *horrid* itself appears as "horrid ribs" in an earlier draft of "The Tyger."⁸

Josephine Miles has discussed Blake's use of the imagery of cosmic passion and sense impression, designed to evoke a sense of the sublime of terror, and Morton Paley has applied her observations specifically to "The Tyger." Blake's practice in this regard could be modelled on Crashaw's in the "Hymn." Blake's cosmos of "Distant deeps or skies" and star-filled heaven is matched by the "Heaven & earth," the "round [of] the circling sun," and the "hell . . . beneath" of Crashaw. As Blake's cosmos is penetrated by an immortal hand or eye, and traversed on aspiring wing, so Crashaw's world on the Day of Judgment, alerted by the trump of doom, responds with a universal groan before the inescapable hand and eye of its Judge. Crashaw's depiction of divine wrath, while not achieving anything approaching Blake's concreteness, confronts us with a figure of fire possessed of a "face" and eyes which burn with an "angry light," closer to Blake's tiger than other manifestations of divine wrath cited to explain this image.⁹ In Blake the tiger stalks the "forests of the night," and the image of the forest sometimes appears in the Bible in conjunction with visions of divine retribution. In the *Dies Irae* the trump of doom resounds through the *sepulchra regionem*, which Crashaw renders as "the caues of night," literally the graves of the dead, but perhaps like Blake's image signifying more generally the fallen world. Finally, the most intriguing coincidence of images may be that between the reference in the "Hymn" to the moment "When starres themselues shall stagger," and the reference in "The Tyger" to the moment "When the stars threw down their spears." There is no source in Thomas of Celano for Crashaw's image, an indication that Crashaw's version is the most promising place to look for any possible influence of the *Dies Irae* on Blake, and if the influence is genuine it suggests that the image in Blake may be more conventionally apocalyptic than has generally been supposed.

By the late 1700s the *Dies Irae* was established as the most famous short treatment of the subject matter of doomsday, and Crashaw's English version

of the Latin hymn was also well-known and much admired. It is therefore quite likely that the "Hymn" would have come to mind when Blake was composing "The Tyger," and since, through its poetic rhythms, diction, and imagery much of the distinctive flavor of the "Hymn" is recaptured in "The Tyger," Crashaw's poem may indeed have been quite fresh in Blake's memory.

Whatever his literary indebtedness, Blake certainly wrote poetry of a kind to elude definitive explication by comparison with other poets' similar treatments of similar themes. But for the purpose of understanding the material transubstantiated in the crucible of his imagination, some note of the inferences to be drawn from a recognition of the possible influence of Crashaw's "Hymn" on "The Tyger" may legitimately be offered in conclusion. That Blake subscribed to Jakob Boehme's doctrine of contraries is well known, and often cited to explain certain aspects of the tyger, in whose fearful symmetry are reconciled beauty and ferocity, Christ and Yahweh, divine mercy and divine justice. The most significant effect of seeing in "The Tyger" reminiscences of the "Hymn" is to focus attention on Blake's poem as an apocalypse, to fasten certain of its activities in time, and to make it a manifestation of divine wrath *in actu* rather than *in posse*. By combining apocalyptic images with the act of creation conceived as the forging of the tiger, Blake has added to the sense of fearful symmetry a sense of fearful simultaneity. In God's (or the visionary poet's) eternal present, a world created to be destroyed is a world at once created *and* destroyed, the two activities blurring and fusing in the finely appropriate image of the smith at his forge. Blake's poem suggests such a perspective by seeming to speculate on the future possibility of creation/destruction (what hand *could* frame, what hand *dare* seize, what art *could* twist),¹⁰ when the stars have already capitulated to chaos and destruction of the not-yet-created is complete. This view of time accords with what is elsewhere known of Blake's imagination. In *Jerusalem* he says: "I see the Past, Present & Future existing all at once Before me." Crashaw's "Hymn" helps us, I think, to recognize that imaginative power to fuse time functioning in "The Tyger."

⁸ Texts of the various drafts and a detailed discussion of their significance for an understanding of the evolution of the poem may be found in Martin K. Nurmi, "Blake's revisions of *The Tyger*," *PMLA*, 71 (1956), 669-85.

⁹ Paley, pp. 41-42, cites Biblical examples of divine wrath conceived "in images of fire and beasts of prey." In most instances, however (Mal. 3:2 and Amos 5:6 are exceptions), God is not identified with fire but uses it as His means to destroy the world. In Zephaniah 1:14-18, the source of the opening stanzas of the *Dies Irae*, there is reference to the Lord's wrath and "the fire of his jealousy."

¹⁰ The tense and mood of *dare* is already a vexed question. See Fred C. Robinson, "Verb Tense in Blake's 'The Tyger,'" *PMLA*, 79 (1964), 666-69; and John E. Grant and Fred C. Robinson, "Tense and the Sense of Blake's 'The Tyger,'" *PMLA*, 81 (1966), 596-603.