

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

Remarks on “The Tyger”

Michael J. Tolley, Morton D. Paley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 1, Issue 2, October 1, 1967, pp. 9-14



Descending Into the Grave." This figure is almost as busty, even though Schiavonetti's engraving stands between Blake's conception and the reader. The only significant difference is that the guide in LBF has no beard, as do almost all Blake's representations of the mature Christ, including the one on the second page of "The Little Black Boy" (pl. 10). If Connolly and Levine had bothered to present this evidence to substantiate their claim that the guide is female they would at least have made an impressive case.

But the evidence that the guide is supposed to be either a woman or Christ per se cannot be found in either the poem or the picture. Where Blake wanted an indubitable Christ, as in the aforementioned plate 10, he depicted one; where he wanted an unmistakable God the Father, as in "The Little Vagabond," (p. 45), he also depicted one; likewise, where he wanted to depict women he did so with unquestionably female figures. There is one figure³ depicted in Songs, however, who is clearly related to the beardless guide of LBF. I refer to the nude and beardless male supported by two females and being given water by a bearded man in "To Tirzah" (pl. 52). This figure undoubtedly suggests Christ after the deposition, though His notable lack of beard is remarkable in view of Blake's iconography elsewhere. The fact that this picture was probably made after 1805, much later than the rest of the anthology, probably has no bearing on this iconographic detail. Even if fashions in facial hair were changing, Blake's indubitable Christs continued to be bearded.

The probable explanation for the lack of beard on the man in "To Tirzah" is that the reader is being invited to see that he too is in a plight similar to that of the male victim, who is in the condition of the crucified Christ but is not dignified, remote, and therefore irrelevant. This, at least, is what the refrain of the odd poem that was oddly added to the anthology much later seems to imply. Every man needs to say, Woman, "what have I to do with thee?" In a somewhat similar way the reader of LBF is shown a guide who, though he is God, appears like the boy's father, not like the Savior who is depicted in Church. Every reader should be able to penetrate this clean-shaven disguise but it will not help the innocent little boy to think he has no earthly father. Presumably he does not have to envision this father as a rough, tough, two-hundred percent male in order to believe in his existence.

John E. Grant
University of Iowa

³I am reminded by E. J. Rose that other kinds of connections can also be made to such a figure as that mysterious adult on plate 28, the frontispiece to Experience, who carries a winged child on his head.

* * * * *

A reply by Professors Connolly and Levine will appear in Newsletter No. 3.

Our second discussion article, by Mr. Michael Tolley of the University of Adelaide, refers to my own "Tyger of Wrath," PMLA, LXXXI (December 1966), 540-551. --MDP

Remarks on "The Tyger"

Your study offers a great deal that is of interest and assistance, particularly your relation of the poem to the tradition of the sublime. (By the way, have you read Murray Roston's Prophet and Poet (Faber 1965) on this?) But I'm sorry to find that I cannot agree with your basic interpretation of the poem. My own findings are also mainly from the Book of Job, and so it is surprising that we should diverge so deeply. But I think you have been misled by some misconceptions that have closed your mind (the fatal and one might even feel fated thing in Blake scholarship) to what should, I think, otherwise have been clear enough. One of these misconceptions is in Blake's relation to Boehme's doctrine of the two Principles. On p. 544, you quote a passage from Aurora part II, which points out that "the Light, which dwells in the Fire, . . . is not apprehended or laid hold on by the Fire". It seems to follow that these are not contraries in the Blakean sense: they are not a devouring-prolific pair of opposites. The light co-exists with the fire, and is inseparable from it. This is not true of innocence and experience, which are separate states: one gives oneself up wholly either to the one or the other. Now the tyger is not at all necessary to the lamb, except in the sense that the tyger is one of the means of limiting the lamb's prolificness. But the lamb is necessary to the tyger, in a much more direct sense. However, the lamb must be destroyed by the tyger only on the earthly, fallen plane: in eternity, affairs are arranged differently. But eternity and the fallen world co-exist simultaneously, so that what appears to the fallen eye as a horrible act of destruction (tyger eats lamb) may appear to the eternal eye as a marriage of contraries. But such an eternal appearance could be caused only by an act of divine redemption: Blake is not so irresponsible as to suppose that what we do in our limited life does not effect our greater life. Our tragedy is just that we are crippling our eternal potentiality (putting it to sleep, in fact, at the mildest interpretation). You will see that the world-view postulated in MHH backs up this account of Blake's doctrine. It is, however, crucial to the interpretation of "The Tyger" to realize the implications of the narrator's fallen world-view of the beast. Because the eternal tyger is too great for the eye of man, we cannot see it as anything other than a horrible monster; accordingly, our fallen reasoning about the tyger's creator will be warped. I may say that, as far as "The Tyger" is concerned, it also follows that we shall be given a vision only of "God out of Christ" - we cannot see beyond the "consuming fire". (You will notice how Christ dominates the Hervey design - Damon should have been more surprised than he is that there is hardly any evidence of permanent wrath - wrath is rather swallowed up in mercy.) To Blake, Christ was the important, all-inclusive Godhead; and Christ has no part in divine vengeance. At this point I daresay you will object that I am outlining Blake's later doctrine. However, there are several indications in earlier or contemporary poems that Blake's position, while it may have received fuller and more direct expression, did not substantially alter after these years. The "Introduction" to S.E. is clear enough (my own independent study backs up Frye's reading here) and MHH contains several palpable signs of this exaltation of Christ over (what the Angels think of as) Jehovah. The Angel's view of hell proves chimerical: it has no mental reality. (Bloom is absolutely right in linking tyger and leviathan, as I will proceed to show, but so are you. It is not necessary to suppose that the Revolution symbolism affects Blake's theodicy.) The Leviathan in MHH

is tyger-striped to enhance its terribleness; but this beast is only the product of the Angel's warped mind (just as fallen tigers are only the products of our fallen minds). Then of course Blake makes a great play with Christ's denial of the law of the ten commandments, the point of which catalogue is to show that these commandments no longer should be supposed to carry divine vengeance in their wake. "The Everlasting Gospel" stresses forgiveness, but this is implicit in MHH. When Blake says earlier in MHH that Jehovah in the Bible is "no other than he that dwells in flaming fire" he is being mighty ambiguous. I think there is a reference here to Isaiah 33.14f, but in any case this is a Jehovah of the right sort, if he is a devil in MHH parlance. You will recall that in the Book of Urizen, it is Urizen who asks the Eternals why they live in unquenchable burnings: Urizen here cannot be the "Jehovah of the Bible" a/c MHH. Such a passage as that in J61: ". . . if I were holy: I never could behold the tears / Of love! of him who loves me in the midst of his anger in furnace of fire" offers the very careful distinction which in MHH is left for the reader to find. But of course MHH deals with the energy-restraint conflict to the exclusion of the sin-forgiveness idea which later dominates, and so we do not expect to find statements of the kind that crop up everywhere in Jerusalem. I think that, similarly, we would not expect to find a Wrath-Love opposition in S.E., because Blake is there intent on pointing out that men see the world as exhibiting the effects of divine vengeance only because they have misunderstood the divine intention. God's love does not have to be vindicated here: it is only necessary to show that man's point of view has nothing to do with God at all. "The Tyger" is a crucial weapon in Blake's armoury because it exposes a key misunderstanding - that God must be responsible for the dreadful things we find in this universe.

But let me try to clear out of the way another misunderstanding. On page 547 you say that "Contraries are not Negations. The Tyger is not 'a symbol of competitive, predacious selfhood.'" But Blake had not yet stated his doctrine of Negations, and we must try to reconcile the obvious fact here (tygers are negative) with contemporary theory. It works, I think, in this way: the eternal tyger is not a negative but a true contrary; however, on this fallen plane he can only appear to be negative. The distinction is made with admirable clarity in FZ VI, where Urizen finds that the fallen creatures are not as they were "in Climes of happy Eternity / Where the lamb replies to the infant voice, & the lion to the man of years / Giving them sweet instructions; . . . / . . . But these attack'd him sore". But in that much misunderstood and neglected work closer to "The Tyger", VDA, it is clear enough what Blake thinks of this creature of night that is blotted by the mild beam of day. Blake believed that the two contraries should not be reconciled, but it is always clear that he himself wishes to be on only one side - the innocent one. (The last Judgment effects this separation, so that the creators can get on with their job of being prolific undisturbed.)

On page 547 you also say that "Wrath is a vice only in the unfallen world of Innocence; in our world, . . . Mercy and the other virtues of Innocence are vices." This is stating things wrongly. It is only the experienced experiencer (not the innocent experiencer) who thinks that Mercy's existence depends on our making somebody poor: this is because he has a wrong, utilitarian, view of Mercy. Mercy in the world of experience becomes debased, but it remains an ideal by which the debased form can be tested.

You are wrong, too, for the purposes of this interpretation, in seeing Wrath primarily in terms of God's righteous, often future, expression of displeasure with man's sin. "The Tyger" is essentially a backward-looking poem: it looks to the Creation and Fall rather than the Parousia (a word not used in Revelation, by the way, though the concept is there). And in seeing wrath as destructive, rather than redemptive, in the context of Experience, you are led to say absurd things (excuse me) like "If the just man is to find his way out of the forest around him, he must give over his modest stillness and humility and imitate the action of the tiger." Wrath, in MHH, means primarily "righteous indignation" (and so I would read that proverb, "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction"; i.e. it is wiser to rebel against this world than submit to instruction in its ways); such indignation is behind poems in S.E. like "London," "Holy Thursday," and "A Little Boy Lost." "A Poison Tree" is of course highly relevant to this view, and it is the result of not telling one's wrath that is really tiger-like. As a parody of the Genesis 3 story, it helps to indicate what Blake thought was the true reading--God "told his wrath," and it ended there, but man misunderstood God.

I think at this stage, I can go on to offer a brief reading of salient parts of "The Tyger." As I mentioned, this is helped by reference to Job. You missed the point, I think, because it never entered your head that Blake could be criticizing such passages full of sublimity. What you have to say about the sublimity of Blake's poem is most interesting and perhaps it does help to explain why a poem nobody seems to have understood should have been so popular. (But Swinburne was pretty close, at least.) However, Blake's rhetoric serves an entirely different purpose from that of Job's God. When you say, on page 546, that "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" no more demands an explicit answer than "Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of the waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder?" you fail to see that they are completely different kinds of question. Job's question, which he puts into the mouth of his God, is designed to admit of only one answer. Blake's question is highly loaded by its direct reference to "The Lamb" in S.I. and asks whether it is possible for one Creator to rejoice in two productions, one of which is designed to murder the other. Blake's is a real question; but he asked it because he had made up his mind as to the answer, and wanted his reader to make the same leap.

The poem begins by questions reflecting primarily the awed wonder of the speaker confronted by this fiery beast, which he already sees as fearful, so that already he is questioning how beauty can be allied with something frightful (the answer is that beauty is a non-moral thing). He does not dwell on the tyger's possible connotations of wrath (your ref. to Jeremiah is indeed close) but is concerned to begin with entirely with the "how?" of the beast's creation. The notorious confusion of beast with creator which develops in "dread hand" and "dread grasp" implies a shift to moral considerations and carries a reference (see Bloom) to passages in Job 40f, where the Creator brags hideously of his own power--"he that made" behemoth "can make his sword to approach unto him" (40.19) and, talking of leviathan (41.10): "None is so fierce that dare stir him up; who then is able to stand before me?". Leviathan is indeed a "child of pride." The suggestion is so inevitable, that the reader should realize that Blake is really talking about Job's Creator. Accordingly, he should be able to appreciate the savage twist

of Job 38.7 in the lines

When the stars threw down their spears,

And water'd heaven with their tears,

Did he smile his work to see?

Blake thus shows how his speaker, contemplating such a dread beast, is forced to reject the historicity of a joyful reaction such as "When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Surely, the stars must have wept - with pity for the tyger's victims and anguish for this parody of divine creation. Miner has sufficiently demonstrated that throwing down spears is a gesture of despair (and I think you have not paid his remarkable study sufficient attention). It is possible that the spears also come from Job 41 (where they are no use against leviathan) and that Blake found particular irony in Job 41.9: "Behold, the hope of him is in vain; shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him?" (These sources do not account for all the imagery, but I do not see how we can avoid accepting the twist of 38.7).

The wrath in "The Tyger" is principally Blake's (the Creator smiles): and the speaker is moved to express righteous indignation in the last line of the poem (= "How dare he?"). Blake rouses our indignation at this false idea of God ("The Lamb" can be used as a test, if it need be) and so sets us wondering (a) who the Creator really is? (b) what is the real God's relation to the Creator? Basically, of course, the Creator of the tyger is man himself; he has created this whole space-time universe by seeing the Eternal world narrowly (and guiltily). But Los is put forward as a kind of Gnostic Creator, and as you note there is a clear cross-reference from the end of B.L. to "The Tyger". Los is man's fallen organizing principle here, completing with much toil only "a Human Illusion", which in S.L. becomes "a Philosophy of Five Senses" that makes even Urizen weep. Ultimately, Blake is able to see this work of Los as an act of mercy, but in S.E. he is concerned with rousing man to a sense of his own limitations and particularly to show man that he has treated God unjustly by attributing evil to him.

Michael J. Tolley

The University of Adelaide
Adelaide, South Australia

* * * * *

First, I think it's you who have misread Boehme. The contraries are inseparable in the Godhead, but man separates them. In the Fall, man leaves the unity of the two Principles and by an act of will exposes himself to Wrath cut off from Love. The Love principle persists, however, if man will turn to it--just as the possibility of a regained Innocence is implicit in Experience. The Tyger does not eat the Lamb; its prey is the false good of priest-and-king morality. You are merely assuming the narrator's "fallen world-view." The perspective from Experience is a partial one, but so is that from Innocence. The speaker of "Pity would be no more" is right from the perspective of Experience: charity only masks the viciousness of the world in which he lives. But his view is a dead end, leading not to the achieving of a triumphant harmony (Oothoon) but to bitter passivity.

Why are the questions of Job and of "The Tyger" different? The lightning

of thunder, Leviathan and Behemoth are all terrible creations as is the Tyger, yet they were made by God. You haven't given any reason for believing that Blake is criticizing the sublimity of the original here. The weeping of the stars is certainly an act of despair on their part, but considering the meaning of the stars in Blake's symbolism, their despair is auspicious--it means that man is about to emerge from their domination. Blake may be alluding to Job 38.7 here, as you suggest, as well as to Revelation 12.4; but in any case it is to invest the stars with his own meaning. He is saying, in effect, that the stars should have wept when the Tyger was created, for it meant that their power would be overthrown.

Blake does, later, create a demonic parody of Leviathan in the Nelson portrait, and this is a parody of the sublime, along with Behemoth in Pitt and the two monsters in the Job engraving. But this was after Blake had concluded that all violence was evil, that revolutionary violence corrupted the ends which revolution was supposed to bring about, and that the only solution for human society was regeneration through love. This was not his view in 1792, as we see in the "Fayette" poem, for example, where LaFayette's pity for the Queen is vehemently criticized. Blake's pacifism emerges with the failure of the French Revolution and the development of the Napoleonic tyranny; his later views should not be back-read into his earlier ones. This, I think, accounts for most of the differences in our interpretations--you are assuming that all Blake's works fit into a consistent pattern of thought, while it seems clear to me that there are some profound changes in his ideas between The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and Jerusalem, with the main transition taking place during the years when Blake was working on The Four Zoas.

MDP

One of the pleasantest results of publishing the Newsletter has been receiving letters from many Blake scholars in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. All too often, I'm afraid, my answers have been shorter and later than I could wish. This situation will probably get worse rather than better, as it would be impossible for me to take the time to answer letters as they deserve and put out the Newsletter, in addition to doing my own work. Therefore I ask the understanding and indulgence of our readers, who have been (and will, I hope, continue to be) generous with their contributions of material and comment.

This winter I expect to be travelling to a number of Blake collections, and although mail will eventually reach me, forwarding may take as much as two weeks. It would be helpful if readers marked Newsletter correspondence "Blake Newsletter" in the lower left hand corner of the envelope. In that way, I can make whatever special arrangements are necessary more easily. The deadline for copy for the next issue is December 10. --MDP