

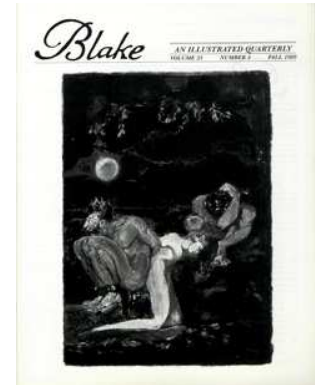
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A Twist in the Tale of “The Tyger”

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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." Here is a sampling of similar contemporary opinions: "The sublime . . . takes possession of our attention, and of all our faculties, and absorbs them in astonishment"; "[the sublime] imports such ideas presented to the mind, as raise it to an uncommon degree of elevation, and fill it with admiration and astonishment"; "objects exciting terror are . . . in general sublime; for terror always implies astonishment, occupies the whole soul, and suspends all its motions." See, respectively, *Works of Joseph Addison*, 6 vols. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811) 4: 340; Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Cowley," *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (1905; Oxford: Clarendon P; New York: Octagon Books, 1967) 1: 20-21; James Usher, *Clio: Or, a Discourse on Taste*, 2nd ed. (London: T. Davies, 1769) 102; Hugh Blair, "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian," in *The Poems of Ossian*, trans. James Macpherson, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1773) 2: 422; Alexander Girard, *An Essay on Taste* (London: A Millar, 1759) 19.

⁵*Philosophical Enquiry* 58.

⁶Dionysius Longinus, *Essay on the Sublime*, trans. William Smith (London, 1756) 3.

⁷Just as Burke's sublime rides 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*, *terrified*, 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* 11.8-15), "terrible Blake in his pride" (When Klopstock England defied," line 2), an uncharacteristically affectionate Enitharmon's "Lovely terrible Los wonder of Eternity" (*FZ* 90.160), the "terrors of friendship" (*J* 45.5), and the "terrific 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.

⁸There are 51 uses of the terms from the collectivity (*astonish(ed)(es)(ing)(ment)*) 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*.

⁹See Nelson Hilton, *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 16-17, and especially 239-57.

¹⁰This connection is reinforced by the older sense of *astonished* (or its variant *astomied*) to connote death-like paralysis and insensibility; thus the *OED* on *astomied*: "Stunned; made insensible, benumbed, paralyzed (1611)"; cf. also Milton on Satan's legions, who "lie thus astonisht on th'oblivious Pool" (*Paradise Lost* 1.266).

¹¹*Philosophical 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.¹ 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 Fuseli'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 Fuseli'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 heart-pulse" 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.

(*Lov. 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 bel-lows" to fan the roaring flames:



Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 inches, 1781. Courtesy of The Detroit Institute of Arts.

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.

(*Lov. 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!" (*Lov. 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 picture of the night-flowering *Cereia*, 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" (*Lov. 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 deep;
That shrin'd in air on viewless wings aspire,
Or blazing bathe in elemental fire.

(*Lov. Pl.* 2: 297-300)

Darwin likes the "aspire/fire" rhyme and uses it in *The Botanic Garden* on three other occasions (*Lov. Pl.* 1: 281-82; *Ec. Veg.* 1: 225-26 and 1: 255-56).

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 unwanted 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 it is with his fierce-eyed "Monster of the Nile": "With Tyger-paw He prints the brineless strand . . . / Rolls his fierce eye-balls, clasps 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*, because its subject is Fire. Darwin tells us how Vulcan and Cyclops "forged immortal arms" on "thundering anvils"; 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 immortal 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.³

There are many other parallels from canto 1 of *The Economy of Vegetation*. For example, lines 216-22 have "dread Destroyer . . . bright . . . dread snakes . . . immortal . . . Terror." The noun *chain* appears thirteen times in *The Botanic Garden*, notably in the picture of a shackled "Giant-form" bursting his chains to bring about the French Revolution, an image that may have links with Blake's *French Revolution*.⁴ 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 shoulders" 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,⁵ 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 tyger 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 framer 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 evidence⁶ that Blake was influenced by Darwin between 1789 and 1795, so the parallels may well be significant.

¹Desmond King-Hele, ed. *The Letters of Erasmus Darwin* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 215.

²N. Powell, *Fuseli: The Nightmare* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).

³See D. C. Leonard, "Erasmus Darwin and William Blake," *Eighteenth Century Life* 4 (1978): 79-81.

⁴See D. Worrall, "William Blake and Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden*," *Bulletin of New York Public Library*, 78 (1975): 397-417.

⁵See Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (London: Macmillan Press, 1986) 49-50.

⁶Worrall 397-417; N. Hilton, "The Spectre of Darwin," rev. of *The Botanic Garden*, by Erasmus Darwin, *Blake* 15 (1981) 36-48; King-Hele, *Romantic Poets*, chap. 2.