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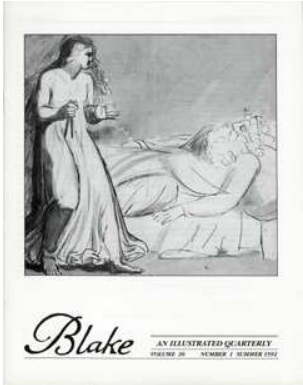

The Sickness of Blake's Rose

by Michael Srigley

Blake's poem, *The Sick Rose* is probably one of the best-known, best-loved and yet, as I hope to show, least understood poems in the English language. Its popularity is due to its apparent simplicity and to its generous ambiguity. When students are asked to give their own impressions of the poem, their responses are usually vague and various. It is about love or beauty undergoing corruption; it is about the frailty of goodness or the destructive power of time. All the interpretations have in common a general sense of something beautiful being defiled or desecrated. A similar variety of interpretation within the same limits is found in literary criticism. One of the most elaborate interpretations is offered by Kathleen Raine. She suggests that the key to the poem is to be found in the tale of Psyche and Eros in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, which Blake is known to have admired.[1] The mysterious "invisible worm" of the poem is traced to Eros as the invisible winged serpent whom Psyche will marry according to the Oracle of Apollo. David Erdman approaches the meaning of the poem through Blake's illustrations to it, and finds both markedly erotic.[2] In one illustration, a worm "extends a curved phallic body out from the flower centre and about the human form of the Rose." The girl's face "registers desperation and we see the sharp proboscis of the worm turning out from below her dress as about to attack her." Despite the phallic imagery and the suggestions of incipient rape, Erdman interprets both the etchings and the poem as basically optimistic; their message, he concludes, is that "life is mortal." He also finds a sign of hope in the upraised arms of one of the girls: it indicates that "a worm hidden in secret may be reborn as a boy or girl."

It is not my purpose to criticize or dismiss such interpretations of *The Sick Rose*; each of them in its own way throws some light on the poem's 'intention,' to use the Renaissance term. Rather, I wish to suggest that there is an alternative approach to a lyric such as this, one that concentrates on the details of the poem and seeks to elucidate them.[3] As various, more recent studies of Blake's deceptively simple poems have shown, they are often richly complex and repay close analysis. *The Sick Rose* belongs to this category. Kathleen Raine has written that

> Blake's obscurities are never vague; they are hard, precise, and insoluble until we have the key to their meaning; then they vanish altogether.[4]

I believe this is true in particular of certain obscurities in *The Sick Rose*, not least the nature of the nocturnal "invisible worm" which causes the sickness of the Rose.

First the poem itself:

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

In a draft of this poem, the 'his' of the penultimate line is replaced by 'her.' This indicates that in Blake's mind the invisible worm could be of either sex. Further information about the worm can be gleaned from the poem. It is invisible, it flies by night in a howling storm, and it seeks out the Rose as the object of its "dark secret love." Its love is in some way surreptitious; as the imagery of the poem suggests it is sexual; and as we learn from the final line it is destructive. It causes the Rose to become sick. Let us look more closely at the various meanings of the word *worm*.

The Worm

Among the more normal meanings of this word listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, there are two figurative ones that might throw some light on Blake's "invisible worm." According to one (II.1) it is "a grief or passion that preys stealthily on a man's heart or torments his conscience (like a worm in a dead body or a maggot in food)," with examples from 900 A.D. onwards. Alternatively (II.b), it is defined as "a whim or 'maggot' in the brain; a perverse fancy or desire; a streak of madness or insanity, often *wild worm*." This figurative worm is the embodiment of some powerful human feeling that preys stealthily on the mind and causes a form of abnormality. Behind these figurative meanings lies a long tradition of various nocturnal worm-like spirits that can travel to a human being and induce some form of abnormal state. It is to this tradition that Blake's "invisible worm" belongs. These invisible spirits, known as *lares* or *larvae*, are mentioned by St. Augustine in his *Civitas Dei* (Ix. ix. Loeb ed.) and became part of the demonic lore inherited by the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Boccaccio in his influential iconographical work, *De deis gentium* (1472, p. 295a) states that these spirits were created by Morpheus, the deity of dreams, as phantasms which according to popular belief "invade the sleeping and weigh down on them, pressing and oppressing the senses." In the form of incubi and succubi they visited sleeping persons, causing them to have vivid erotic dreams. In the 12th Book of *Orlando Furioso*, Orlando is described as being pursued by a phantom copy of his Angelica. This phantom is called "notturne larve," a nocturnal ghost or spirit that haunts lovers. A similar incident occurs in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (I.i.34 ff) when Archimago employs two magical flies to

deceive the Red Cross Knight. One fly is sent to procure a lascivious dream from Morpheus, while the other becomes a phantom copy of Una which attempts to seduce the Knight and arouse him sexually. These nocturnal spirits travel to men or women and cause them to have erotic dreams that can result in orgasm. In a learned commentary on Genesis published in 1601, Benedictus Pererius gave the standard view of what are today called 'wet dreams':

> when men are polluted by nocturnal seed, a succubus-demon is there, acting through a body of air in the form of a woman.[5]

We can now understand why Blake could vacillate about the gender of the "invisible worm." If it was visiting a man it would be the female succubus, and a male incubus if visiting a woman. We can therefore deduce that the Rose in the final version of the poem stands for a young woman being visited by a male incubus in the form of an "invisible worm."

The idea of the "wild worm" infecting the mind of a person and a nocturnal *larva* fused in the seventeenth century, when the meaning of *larva* as ghost, skeleton, or mask, was extended by biologists to include grub or maggot, a meaning which the word "worm" also once had (O.E.D. under "worm," 5). To obtain some idea of how Blake may have visualized the "worm / That flies by night," let us now consider a seventeenth-century engraving found in a work that Blake almost certainly knew. This is the *Lumen de lumine* (1652), the alchemical allegory written by Thomas Vaughan, brother of the metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan. As Raine has suggested, this allegorical vision of Thalia revealing the secrets of alchemy to an adept in the depths of the earth is a major inspiration of Blake's *The Book of Thel*. Blake would certainly have been interested in the emblematic engraving which opens *Lumen de lumine*, as well as in the commentary on it in the main text. The central panel of the engraving shows an oval of illuminated ground surrounded by darkness. In the center is an altar with a candle on it signifying *Lumen Naturae*, the Light of Nature. An Angel with raised sword and a ball of thread is seen to the left, while to the right a blindfolded man is groping his way towards the surrounding darkness designated *Regio Phantastica*, the Region of Fantasy. Awaiting to seize him there are various winged creatures including basilisks and winged serpents or worms with coiled tails. As we learn from Vaughan's commentary on this scene, the blindfolded figure being initiated into the mysteries of alchemy will stray into the monstrous region of fantasy unless he accepts the protection of the Angel and uses the thread of Ariadne to guide him through the labyrinth of the alchemical *opus*. His goal is both above and below him. Above is the *Mons Magorum Invisibilis*, the Invisible Mountain of the Magicians. Below is a large winged dragon with its tail in its mouth, the alchemical *ourobouros* enclosing a heap of gold on which a child is sitting and the inscription *Non nisi parvilis*, intimating that only as children can we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Concerning the basilisks and winged worms that infest the Region of Fantasy, Vaughan has this to say: in gaining access to the caverns of the Invisible Mountain where the secrets of alchemy are to be discovered, great care must be taken because

> they are very dangerous places after Night, for they are haunted with Fires, and other strange Apparitions, occasion'd (as I am told by the Magi) by certaine spirits, which dabble lasciviously with the sperm of the world, and imprint their Imaginations on it, producing many times fantastic, and monstrous Generations.[6]

It is these monstrous productions of sexual imagination that are shown flying in the dark as basilisks and worms or snakes, seeking to waylay the candidate during his maze-like initiation into *the Mysteries of this my <Thalia's> Schoole*.[7] As the alchemists repeatedly claimed, sexual abstinence was a prime requirement for accomplishing the Work; the basilisks and winged worms therefore represent erotic temptation to the practitioner of alchemy. As we shall see, these nocturnal spirits were believed to be created from a special sperm created during erotic dreams or imaginings.

It has been necessary to investigate this highly taboo area of human belief in order to discover the lost context of a poem like *The Sick Rose*. It was precisely such an investigation into the taboos surrounding sex in his own age that Blake undertook. It is well-known that he regarded the Pauline Christian attitude towards sex as unhealthy and as the cause of much abnormality. It warped the natural sexuality of young men and women; it corrupted family life; and it led to prostitution and venereal disease. Through enforced celibacy it was also the cause of much sexual prurience in the Church itself. In his poetry, Blake frequently attempted to expose this diseased attitude to sex, and some of the key passages will be cited later. The point I wish to make here is that *The Sick Rose*, far from being a vaguely romantic evocation of the susceptibility of beauty to corruption, is in fact a detailed analysis of the causes of the sexual malady of Blake's times. Its general diagnosis can now be summarized. The "invisible worm" is the embodiment of the sexually heated fantasies of a male, traveling by night through the "howling storm" of erotic passion to the woman being imagined and desired by the solitary lover. To understand this strange idea of what can be called telepathic sexual intercourse between a man and a woman who are physically apart, we must now consider the writings of someone who inspired both Vaughan and Blake. This is the sixteenth-century physician and alchemist, Paracelsus.

Paracelsus and Invisible Illnesses

Blake left it on record that the two figures to whom he was most indebted were the mystic, Jakob Boehme, and the physician, Paracelsus. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he claims that "any man of mechanical talents may from the writings of Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen produce ten thousand

volumes of equal value with Swedenborg's."[8] In a verse letter to John Flaxman of 1800 he again mentions Paracelsus and Boehme as sources of inspiration, claiming that they have actually appeared to him.[9] Discussing the influence of Paracelsus on Blake, S. Foster Damon has suggested that the paramount importance given by Blake to the human imagination derives ultimately from Paracelsus.[10] This is true also of the negative power of the human imagination when uncontrolled or distorted by wrong desire. What a man imagines, he becomes, declared Paracelsus in his *Archidoxis*, which would have been available to Blake in the English translation of 1656.[11] This applies both to the use of the creative imagination and of a diseased imagination. Paracelsus' fullest treatment of uncontrolled imagination as the cause of various psychological or physical diseases is his *De Causis et Origine Morborum Invisibilium*, originally published in German in 1565 in *Opera Omnia*, and reissued in Geneva in 1658 in Latin translation.[12] Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether Blake was acquainted with this work, I shall first give an account of its relevant portions.

As the title of the book indicates, it deals with the causes and origin of invisible diseases. Among these Paracelsus includes diseases born of the imagination, and these he covers in Book III of *De Origine*. When uncontrolled the human imagination was shameless and obstinate and gave rise to many human ills.[13] This was particularly so in illnesses deriving from an overactive sexual fantasy. It is this fantasy that creates a false sperm from which incubi and succubi are produced. More particularly, this false sperm or "corrupted salt" is

> born of the imagination in Amor Heroes <solitary sex>. What is this love? It is none other than when someone creates a woman in his mind through the power of fantasy, and making love with her satisfies his love. From this act results the ejaculation of a useless, feeble sperm incapable of generating children. From this sperm, however, incubi and succubi are created. (*Iam vero sperma hoc, ita productum, ex imaginatione in amore Hereos natum est. Quid vero iste amor est? Nihil aliud, quam quod sibi aliquis per phantasiam in animo foeminam fingit, & cum hac re habendo, amorem suum exsatiat. Unde surdi quoque fatui spermatis exitus est, quod ad liberorum generationem ineptum est. Ex illo tamen spermate* Incubus & Succubus *gignuntur*).[14]

The adulterated sperm produced by the erotic imagination is carried off by nocturnal spirits (*per nocturnos spiritus*), and "hatched into serpents, worms (*vermes*), toads and similar impure creatures," including as Paracelsus also says basilisks. They pass from the heated imagination of one person to the person being imagined. This can explain acts of black magic. For example,

> if a man has a strong and evil imagination, and wishes to injure another, such beings are always ready to hand to lend a helping hand for the accomplishment of his purpose.[15]

The *larvae* used for such a transmission

> can only act upon men if the latter make room for them in their minds. A healthy mind is a castle that cannot be invaded without the will of its master; but if they are allowed to enter, they excite the passions of men and women, they create cravings in them, they produce bad thoughts which act injuriously upon the brain; they sharpen the animal instinct and suffocate the moral sense.[16]

In a passage from *Philosophia Saqax*, Paracelsus describes how this transmission takes place:

> Spirits desire to act upon <a person's imagination>, and they therefore often make use of his dreams for the purpose of acting upon him. During sleep the sidereal man may by the power of the imagination be sent out of the physical form, at a distance to act for some purpose. No place is too far for the imagination to go, and the imagination of one man may impress that of another, wherever it reaches.[17]

The same idea is found in another passage:

> One man may communicate his thoughts to another with whom he is in sympathy, at any distance however great it may be, or he may act upon the spirit of another person in such a manner as to influence his actions after the latter awakens from his sleep, and in this way he may even injure the health of the latter, and upon this law of Nature is based the possibility of witchcraft and sorcery.[18]

In these various excerpts from the writings of Paracelsus are to be found, I believe, either the main source of or a striking analogue to ideas used by Blake in *The Sick Rose*. The poem is essentially a distillation of the Paracelsan teaching concerning the transmission at a distance of passionate imaginings from one person to another, as found primarily in *De Origine morborum invisilibum* but also referred to in other works by Paracelsus. The sickness of the Rose has been caused by the fantasizing of a lonely young man as he conjures up an image of a woman and imagines making love to her. From the ethereal sperm produced by this act of erotic imagination, an "invisible worm" is created which flies through the tempestuous night from the lover to the beloved. As an expression of his "dark secret love" it carries out an act of violation on the young woman. It is for this reason that Blake speaks of this form of love as destructive.

The role of the young lover in the drama evoked in *The Sick Rose* is concealed, but it comes out clearly in a passage in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, describing the erotic experiences of a young girl and youth as each lies alone in bed:

> The moment of desire! The moment of desire! The virgin
> That pines for man shall awaken to enormous joys
> In the secret shadows of her chamber: the youth shut up from
> The lustful joy shall forget to generate and create an amorous image
> In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow.[19]

The girl is awakening from a powerful erotic dream, while the young man, deprived of natural "lustful joy," conjures up in his solitude "an amorous image" of the desired woman. The two halves of the passage are joined by a colon, perhaps suggesting that the sexual climax of the girl and the erotic imaginings of the young man are interrelated and simultaneous. Her pining for a man travels to him as "an amorous

image"; his longing for her travels to the girl to become her partner in the sexual dream. As in *The Sick Rose* with its "dark secret love," their loves are conceived in "secret shadows" and in "the shadows of his curtains." Here for Blake lies the unnatural character and essential sickness of their love. It is also unnatural in that the youth "shall forget to generate." This may echo the observation of Paracelsus that erotic imaginings lead to a form of sterile sperm that is incapable of producing children. The young man, condemned by the Christian norms of society to living in unnatural celibacy, is compelled to create "a woman in his mind through the power of fantasy," as Paracelsus wrote.

The sickness in the love of the boy and girl is traced by Blake to religion. In lines that immediately follow those we have just discussed, Blake writes in fierce irony about monastic celibacy and its effects:

> Are not these the palaces of religion, the rewards of continence;
> The self-enjoyings of self-denial? why dost thou seek religion?
> Is it because acts are not lovely that thou seekest solitude
> Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of desire?[20]

Enforced continence leads to sexual sickness in the form of narcissistic "self-enjoyings of self-denial" in darkness and solitude. This abuse of sexuality is seen by Blake as epidemic in quality and as spreading almost as a viral infection to all young love. Here again his conception of the "self-enjoyings of self-denials" found at the heart of the celibate Church is remarkably close to Paracelsus' view. In his treatise on plagues, *De pestilate*, Paracelsus draws attention to the dangers of convents, monasteries, and houses of prostitution, because in such places a lascivious and evil imagination is especially active, and great quantities of sperma are there collected by evil spirits, and that sperma contains a powerful Mumia which may be extracted, and transformed into evil things.[21]

From the revulsion towards sexuality inculcated by the Church arises a psychic pestilence that is destroying the Garden of Love. Its victims are named in *The Sunflower*:

> Youth pined away with desire,
> And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow.[22]

As William J. Keith has rightly suggested, the individuals in this poem and in *Vision of the Daughters of Albion* are varieties of Ovid's Narcissus, but it is important to stress that for Blake their self-consuming, sickly narcissism was imposed on them by the puritanical norms of a superficially Christian society.[23]

This interpretation of *The Sick Rose* and of related poems by Blake rests on the assumption that Blake was conversant with Paracelsus's strange ideas concerning invisible diseases and telepathic infection. As we have seen, Blake himself claimed to have been in direct contact with the spirits of Paracelsus, Boehme, Milton and other discarnate entities, but such a claim is treated today with skepticism. Eliminating then direct communication with the spirit of Paracelsus as the source of Blake's information about invisible diseases, there is the possibility that Blake read *De Origine* in the Latin of the 1658 edition. It is know that by 1803 Blake could read both Latin and Greek, and that his Greek was as fluent as that of "an Oxford scholar."[24] Unfortunately, it is not known when Blake began learning these languages. There remains the possibility that Blake could have learnt Paracelsus's teachings about invisible diseases from people in his circle of friends who were interested in such matters. In her forthcoming work entitled *Men of Desire: Swedenborg, Blake and Illuminist Freemasonry*, Marsha Keith Schuchard investigates, among other things, the keen interest in Paracelsus, Swedenborg and in Cabalism in the circles that Blake frequented. She has generously allowed me to make use of some of her findings.[25]

Paracelsus in the Late Eighteenth Century

In the *Catalogue of Ancient and Modern Books* (1787) listed as available in the London bookshop of John Denis, Dr. Schuchard notes the following items:

> # 4945 Auriolus Phillipus Theophrastus, his five Books of the Causes of Invisible Diseases, *manuscript, fairly wrote*
>
> # 4927 *Paracelsi Opera Omnia* (1662)
>
> # 5241 *Paracelsus his Archidoxes* (1660)

John Denis was the English agent for the distribution of Swedenborg's works in England. Schuchard has also examined a handlist "Catalogue of the Library of Richard Cosway," now in the Huntington Library. Cosway, painter and mystic, was a lifelong friend of Blake's. The Catalogue contains the following works by Paracelsus in English translation: *On the Nature of Things* (1650 and 1674); *New Light of Alchymy* (1674); *The Supreme Mysteries of Nature* (1656); *Philosophy Reformed* (1657). The catalogue does not list Cosway's collection of occult manuscripts. A catalogue of the library of the artist, Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, includes under item 136 a number of books by Paracelsus. Like Cosway, de Loutherbourg was a Freemason and a follower of Swedenborg, and probably known to Blake. Schuchard points out that interest in Paracelsus was also widespread in a wider circle of Swedenborgian Freemasons. Such figures as Manoah and Ebenezer Sibly, General Charles Rainsford and Dr. Sigismund Bacstrom all possessed private libraries of occult literature, and refer to Paracelsus in their published writings and manuscripts.

It is clear then that in the final decades of the eighteenth century Paracelsus continued to be read and studied and that his teachings interested the members of the occult circles that Blake frequented. The printed works of Paracelsus were still available in private libraries and for sale in John Denis's bookshop in and about the year 1787. It is of particular interest that

in that year Denis had for sale a manuscript English translation of Paracelsus's *De Origine morborum invisilibium*, the very work which, as I claim, Blake was influenced by when he came to write *The Sick Rose* only a few years later. Blake and his wife joined the Swedenborgian Society in 1789, and it is reasonable to assume that Blake frequented John Denis's bookshop. The copies of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* and *Divine Providence* in English translation which Blake procured in 1789 and 1790 were published by John Denis.[26] Even if Blake had not read the English translation of Paracelsus's *De Origine* available in Denis's bookshop, there were a number of Swedenborgians and other esotericists close to Blake who were interested in Paracelsus, as Schuchard has documented, and who could have supplied him with the requisite information about its ideas.

In whatever exact way Blake may have acquired knowledge of Paracelsus's *De Origine*, it seems to me clear this work played a significant part in the genesis of *The Sick Rose* and that an awareness of its ideas illuminates the central drama of the poem. It enables us to understand more exactly the nature of the invisible worm that flies by night, the urge that drives it through the storm, and why its love is destructive. It also throws light on one of Blake's major preoccupations: the blighting effect on young people of the Church's condemnation of sexuality as sinful by nature. Because of this condemnation, sexual attraction does not lead to sexual union, nor does it result in generation. It leads only to solitary, imagined sex which Blake sees as enfeebling and as sick and sterile. The poem is therefore an expression in a powerfully compressed and suggestive form of Blake's conviction that the Church's condemnation of sexuality as intrinsically shameful has caused a widespread social and psychological sickness. It leads to the breaking of the marriage bond, to prostitution, to venereal disease, and to a fevered eroticism that is essentially unhealthy. It manifests as a destructive "dark secret love" instead of Oothoon's "lovely copulation" in bright daylight. It is furtive instead of open. *The Sick Rose* not only forms an integral part of Blake's attack on negative Christian attitudes towards human sexuality, but it is remarkable for its specific diagnosis of the illness that this attitude has brought about. Using traditional demonic lore but above all the ideas of Paracelsus, Blake suggests that the human imagination when unregulated is able to create a strange psychic cloud of pollution hovering over society and infested by the weird creatures of erotic longing. It is these in the form of the "invisible worm," the spectral *vermis* of Paracelsus's *De Origine*, that travel telepathically from person to person bearing erotic infection. As Blake wrote "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence."[27]

[1] Kathleen Raine, Blake and Tradition, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968) 2: 199-201.

[2] The Illuminated Blake, annotated by David V. Erdman (Garden City, NJ: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1975) 81-82.

[3] Paul Robinson, "What Psychology Won't Explain" in Michigan Quarterly Review (1980): 45-46.

[4] Kathleen Raine, Blake and Antiquity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977) 12.

[5] Pererius, *Commentarium et Dusoputationem in Genesim* (1601), v. I, p. 387, col. b, para. 64.

[6] Thomas Vaughan, *Lumen de Lumine* in *The Works of Thomas Vaughan*, ed. Alan Rudrum (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 317, 643-48.

[7] Vaughn 310, 435-36.

[8] *Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London; New York, Toronto: Oxford UP, 1966) 158.

[9] Keynes 799

[10] See *A Blake Dictionary* (1979), ed. by S. Foster Damon, under "Paracelsus." See also Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford, 1970) passim, for parallels between the thought of Paracelsus and Blake.

[11] *The Archidoxes of Magic by Paracelsus*, transl. by R. Turner (London,1656); 2nd ed. 1975 (London: Askin Publlishers, 1975) introd. by Stephen Skinner.

[12] All quotations are from the ed. of 1656.

[13] *De Causis* 128, in *Opera Omnia*.

[14] *De Causis* 120.

[15] Franz Hartmann, *Paracelsus: Life and Prophecies* (New York: Rudolph Steiner Publications, 1973) 92.

[16] Hartmann 93.

[17] Hartmann 112.

[18] Hartmann 213-14.

[19] Keynes 194.

[20] Keynes 194.

[21] Hartmann 124.

[22] Keynes 215.

[23] William J. Keith, "The Complexities of Blake's Sunflower: An Archetypal Speculation," in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 58.

[24] Keynes 821.

[25] The information and quotations contained in the following paragraph documenting the interest in Paracelsus in the eighteenth century were kindly supplied to me by Dr. Schuchard.

[26] Information about Denis's role in the publication of these two works of Swedenborg was kindly supplied by Dr. Schuchard.

[27] Keynes 151.