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松 山 大 学
言語文化研究 第24巻第1号（抜刷）
2004年9月

Matsuyama University
Studies in Language and Literature
Vol. 24 No. 1 September 2004

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To speak of William Blake's poetry is difficult, because it is a poetry that defies isolation. This is especially true of Blake's *The Songs of Innocence* and *The Songs of Experience*, which were published as companion volumes. I have chosen the word 'companion' to describe the books, because the two augment each other. The books are like the Tai-chi symbol behind Taoist philosophy — a balancing of opposites within a constant flux. This is important to remember when analyzing one poem, as I am going to do, from these books. The poems in *The Songs of Innocence* are one viewpoint, the poems in the companion volume are another. Neither book is a static statement meant to be taken as one supreme truth. However, when combined the full spectrum of the human condition emerges.

The poem “London” is from the shadowed side. It is dark in tone and feel. The reason for this is that Blake's poem is a political tract against the England of his day, and is an ironical narration — ironical because the narrator's viewpoint colors and skews what he reports.

First let's look at the social and political aspects of this poem. The opening stanza is :

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (1—4)

One of the first repetitions we come across is the word ‘charter’d’. Northrop Frye writes on the use of this word in his book *Fearful Symmetry*, “in the *Songs of Experience* the word ‘charter’d’ is used with the whole power of his (Blake’s) irony behind it (181). But what is this sense of irony? John Beer in his essay on Blake explains the word’s use that Frye only mentions :

The word ‘charter’ was originally associated with liberty.

Magna Charta, signed by King John in 1215, was
traditionally one of the foundations of British liberty,
and was one of many such charters over the centuries.

But these charters were freedoms granted to particular
classes of people : they automatically involved a loss of
liberty for those who did not belong. (20)

Within the poem the word ‘charter’d’ is not used as a word for freedom but as a word for control. Every document that is written controls what it is about. So the streets are ‘charter’d’, or laid out in much the same way as the banks around the Thames controls, or charters, the water within them.

Another way of approaching the irony of the word ‘charter’d’ is by going back to Blake’s original manuscript. This is reproduced with commentary in Wicksteed’s Blake’s Innocence And Experience : “I wander thro’ each dirty street/Near where the dirty Thames does flow” (1–2). The word ‘dirty’ is not as powerful as the word later substituted. Moreover, it seems like one of those words penned in until a better one can be chosen. This word is also a flat description. In *Blake : Prophet Against Empire* Erdman writes :

In his first draft Blake wrote ‘dirty street’ and ‘dirty
Thames’ as plain statement of fact, reversing the sarcastic
“golden London” and “silver Thames” of his earlier
parody of Thomson’s *Rule Britannia*. . . . The Change to

“charter’d” (with an intermediate “cheating”) mocks
 Thomson’s boast that “the charter of the land” keeps
 Britons Free. (256)

Now that we are in these ‘charter’d streets’ we are ready for what is in them. The first thing we observe is “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (4). These words set the tone and mood of the rest of the poem and help give credence to the ironical use of the word ‘charter’d’. Also, there are no happy faces in the crowd. These are faces of desperation marked for all to see. Furthermore, weary and woeful faces do not belong to people who are in conversation but to people who are alone even within a throng. This is quiet universal. How many people look happy when they are alone on a bus, on a train or walking down the streets? Their faces too bear the same marks that the narrator observes.

This desperation is continued in the next stanza :

In every cry of every Man,
 In every Infants cry of fear,
 In every voice ; in every ban
 The mind-forg’d manacles I hear (5–8)

Notice here the use of the word ‘cry’, which can have several meanings : to weep, to call out, and to vocalize deeply felt anguish. The latter meaning becomes manifested with the word ‘ban.’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes ‘ban’ as : a public proclamation ; a sentence of banishment ; a proclamation of marriage ; a formal ecclesiastical denunciation ; and a curse, having or supposed to have, baleful influence (646). If we keep all these meanings in mind, the despair of the poem starts to become oppressive. Everyone and everything is crying, cursed, and imprisoned.

This brings us to the last line in the second stanza : “The mind-forg’d manacles I hear” (8). A manacle is something that binds or imprisons. This refers us back

up to the beginning of the poem where the streets are chartered. This also gives us a reason for the misery that is being described — the mind itself is in prison. Harold Bloom in his book *Blake's Apocalypse* writes about these chains :

Every voice and every ban (Pitt's [Pitt wrote of London as city of oppression] bans against the people — but every vow authorized by society including those relating to marriage) has in it the sound of the mind-forged manacles, but that mind is every mind, and not just the mind of Pitt. It is because all men make and accept mental chains. . . (141)

Another thing that should be noted is that the words 'mind-forg'd manacles' are not the original. The original phrasing was, "the German-forg'd links I hear" (Wicksteed 241). Wicksteed explains what these links were :

England had been in alliance with Prussia in Blake's infancy during the Seven Years War and had more recently employed German troops in the American War of Independence — so that when in 1792 Prussia declared war on the French Revolution, Blake no doubt considered that London was in some sense involved in a crime of militarism against liberty. (242)

However, the 'german-forg'd links' has a different intent than the 'mind-forg'd manacles'. For one thing the German links are produced by a force outside London. The mind-forg'd manacles are shackles made right at home — either by the state or by the people themselves. Also the movement from the German-links shows a progression from the topical or local to the universal. We, as readers, would need a footnote to understand the historical content — we do not need that for the manacles, because we can figure out the meaning that the mind itself has

wrought its own insidious prison quiet clearly.

Furthermore, on a stylistic level the heavily rhythmic 'Thê mînd fórged mánâcles î hêar', not only pounds upon the ear in a copy of a hammer pinging away forging the chains, but picks up the repeated Ms in the words mark and meet at the end of the first stanza. This repetition serves as a poetic exclamation mark — whereas not only are 'the German forged links' a more predictable iambic meter, they lack the stylistic reference back to the first stanza.

We now arrive at what is the most stunning and graphic imagery in the poem :

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
 Every blackning Church appalls,
 And the hapless Soldiers sigh
 Runs in blood down Palace walls (9—12)

First let's look at how the chimney-sweeper's cry and the church is used within this stanza. Edward Larrissy in his book, *William Blake*, writes :

In the third [stanza] he [the narrator] is able to perceive
 the guilt for the sufferings of chimney sweeps and
 soldiers being ascribed to its true bearers, Church and
 Palace. (43)

Harold Bloom picks this up in his analysis :

It is because all men make and accept mental chains that
 the Chimney-sweeper's cry makes the perpetually
 blackening Church yet blacker. . . . "Appalls" means
 "drapes in a pall" here ; in its intransitive sense it hints,
 not that the exploiting Church is all unhappy about the
 sweeper's servitude, but that it trembles involuntarily at
 the accusing prophecy of the cry. The hapless Soldier,
 enforcing a ban he has not the courage to defy, releases a

breath that is a kind of prophetic handwriting on the wall
of the Palace. . . (141)

To concur with both of these viewpoints, I would like to point out that the poem so far has been a building up of horrors, a listing of the ills of society. This can be seen if we note that we have gone from the ‘marks of weariness’ to these prophetic cries. It should also be noted that chimney sweepers were young children small enough to be lowered into the chimneys.

It is also important to realize how the church was handling its social responsibilities and how Blake viewed the church. J. G. Davis in his book *The Theology of William Blake* writes about the bishops spending very little time in their dioceses and concludes :

It is not surprising therefore to find that the clergy stood aloof from the people, for spending so much time and energy in promoting their own interests, they took little notice of the population, and those few priests who did so only threw into greater relief the apathy of the Church as a whole.

The Church’s disregard of social problems disgusted Blake. (9)

Magaret Bottrill in her book, *The Devine Image*, summarizes Blake’s view of the church and gives a good explanation as to why the church and the palace occur within the same stanza :

Man’s fear of punishment is exploited by kings and lawgivers : priests in addition play on his fear of the unknown. The priest to Blake is the symbol of the arch-hypocrite — he who in the name of the God of love and light threatens and mystifies. And to the end of his days he coupled in his thought kings and priests as embodying that moral tyranny which hinders the free development

of man. (41)

The final stanza is a climax in this listing of horrors :

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Harlots curse

Blasts the new born Infants tear

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse. (13–16)

This ending was added after he had completed the first three verses. Wicksteed writes about this addition :

The important thing about this change in the "London" is that he [Blake] has come to conceive that the desecration of womanhood is something more infamous, or at all event more blasphemous, even than the cruelty to children. (252)

But what is the root of this desecration ? It is the repression of natural desires that become distorted and grotesque under the bonds of society. Harold Bloom writes about this social plague :

. . . the blasts of the tear [can] refer to prenatal blindness due to venereal disease, the plague of the poem's last line. . . but it is her [the harlot] cry from street to street that weaves their fate, the winding sheet of England. They have mistaken her, for she is nature, and her plagues are subtler than those of venereal disease. . . Blake is talking about every marriage, and he means literally that each rides in a hearse. The plagues are the enormous plagues that come from identifying reason, society, and nature, and the greatest of these plagues is the Jealousy of Experience, the dark secret love of the heart. (141–142)

I have been going through this poem as a social tract. The ‘charter’d streets’ are imprisoned by the laws that are meant to be freeing. So are the minds of men and children. The ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ are fetters of the mind that have been built by the people themselves and by the church and state. In turn this repression leads to the imprisoning of natural appetites, which in turns leads to the cursing, or the death, of marriage, the most sacred union of man and woman. However, this is not the complete reading of the poem.

As mentioned in the beginning, *The Songs of Innocence* and *The Songs of Experience* are companion volumes, and that neither one is the supreme truth or viewpoint, but have to be combined to achieve the full panorama of the human condition. The fact that this vision of London is just a view is brought out by the use of a first person narrator. The first word in the poem is ‘I’. This calls to our immediate attention that we have to filter the description through a persona.

This persona is not a passive one. First of all he is wandering. To wander gives the impression of a person roaming in a lost or dejected state. It also can mean to deviate from an approved path, as in ‘wander from the fold’. This narrator is not sitting on his doorstep taking pictures of those who walk by. John Beer concurs with this :

We have an immediate impression of a man walking the
streets, reflecting on the civilization about him, peering
intently into the faces of all whom he meets to see what
is to be read there, and finding primarily to bleak
qualities : weakness and woe. (19)

The narrator as an active voice is picked up by Edward Larrissy in his discussion of the verb, ‘mark’ :

... the speaker could be seen as investing his surroundings
with a partial interpretation. Many commentators have

marked the insistent repetition of the word 'mark' in the first stanza, and the fact that the verb 'to mark' can be both 'to notice' and 'to inscribe upon': the speaker could be thought of inscribing the marks of weariness and woe on those whom he encounters. (43)

This repetition of the word mark is also very interesting on a stylistic level. The first time we encounter the word it is within an iambic foot, 'ând mârċ'. The second and third time we encounter the word the iamb is reversed into a trochee, 'mârċs ôf'. Furthermore the first repetition builds up stress while the third is the equivalent of the crash of a cymbal. When read aloud the voice skims over the first mark, rises on the second, and because of the weak syllable 'ness' followed by the comma, pauses quite dramatically before crashing down. All of this accomplishes not only the emphasis of the word but underscores that this is a very active narrator inscribing his view upon the world.

This poem persona is continued in the second stanza. In this stanza we move from the visual to the auditory. The description, which is all inclusive, is of every voice. The narrator does not hear anyone who is happy, and it is the narrator who is doing the hearing. We are told this at the end of the second stanza: "The mind-forg'd manacles I hear" (8). This thought is picked up again in the fourth stanza's opening line: "But most thro' midnight streets I hear" (13). Notice that there is a personal voice here. We would get a different reading if we were to change the words 'I hear' to 'are heard'. If the latter were used, then anyone walking the street would hear these 'mind-forg'd manacles'. However, this is not the case.

A question the use of this narrator brings up is, how do we view the social outrage of this poem? Is it cancelled because this is only the view of one person? My answer is: no. While the use of the narrator brings up the question of view it does not cancel the validity of the view. One person may see a forest fire as

cleansing, another may see the same fire as destructive. Just because one sees it as cleansing does not mean that the fire is not destructive. Also, how the person views and judges what he sees is as reflective on him as it is on the world around him. So Blake's use of the first person narrator does not let us off the hook. The irony of the poem tightens. Not only are the people chained in 'mind-forg'd manacles' — the narrator is too. He cannot escape his vision. This is all he can see and hear.

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