

Innocence and Experience

The subtitle of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is 'Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. The word 'contrary' had a very specific and important meaning for Blake. Like almost all great poets, he was an enemy of dualism. For two thousand five hundred years Western thought has been intensely dualistic, seeing everything as composed of warring opposites, head and heart, body and spirit, male and female, human and non-human, life and death, innocence and experience, good and evil, heaven and hell, as though the split between the hemispheres of the human brain were projecting itself on everything perceived by that brain.

Even worse than dualism itself is the tendency consequent upon it in Western culture to make absolute judgements between the contraries, accepting, praising, empowering one, rejecting, suppressing, attempting to exterminate the other. If we praise spirit, it has to be at the expense of body. The rebel goes to the opposite extreme and praises body at the expense of spirit. In Blake's time dualism had taken the Christian churches into the spiritually sterile cul-de-sac of preoccupation with sin, defined in obsessively sexual terms. Emily Brontë was to expose the cruelty to children of such people as the puritan Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*, whose vocation it was 'to be where there was plenty of sin to reprove'. The Churches seemed to Blake the worst enemies of any true religion.

Dualistic thinking is so built into our ordinary language, and the language of philosophy and theology, that the words hardly exist to enable us to think non-dualistically, holistically, that is in terms of systems, patterns, relationships, correspondences. But poetry is such a non-dualistic language, which is why poetry is invariably metaphorical, and the poet is the connection-man and healer. The language and vision not just of Blake but of poetry itself insists that the contraries are equally important and inseparable. 'Without contraries is no progression', wrote Blake. He sought to transform the energies generated by conflict into creative energies, moving towards mutual acceptance, reconciliation, harmony, expressed in imagery of music and marriage. He was prepared to take on this difficult task even in relation to the most polarized and apparently most mutually exclusive contraries, as he indicated in his challenging title *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Thus, by describing at the outset innocence and experience as 'contrary states of the human soul', Blake is warning us that we are not being invited to choose between them, that no such choice is possible or desirable, and that we are not simply going to be offered here the truism that innocent joy is preferable to the sorrows of experience.

Most of the poems in *Songs of Innocence*, lacking contraries, lack also energy, progression and complexity. They mime the state of infancy in their simplicity and vulnerability. Even in those poems where there is no overt foreshadowing of experience, there is an element of desperation in the joy, because we cannot avoid supplying the knowledge that the joys depicted are exclusive to infancy and very short-lived. It is like the state of Adam and Eve in the garden before the arrival of the serpent. There are many images of atonement, but it is an atonement Blake can maintain only by forcing himself

to take 'portions of existence' for the whole, by keeping at bay the contraries pressing to darken the scene, as the tiger prowls just out of sight, threatening the defenceless lamb, and the adequacy of meekness and mildness in any real world.

Blake is fully aware of several dangers in this enterprise, the greatest of which is sentimentality, one form of which is to allow oneself to fancy another reality in which, for example, lions are vegetarian. But the god who walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day is the same god who numbered the predatory lion among the first of his creatures, demanding of Job: 'Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions?'. This is very much at odds with his earlier claim to have given 'every green herb for meat' to 'every beast of the earth'. As Milton could not make his heaven as interesting as his hell, so Blake is desperate to give innocence its due before allowing experience to have its devastating say. He rejected several excellent poems from the collection, presumably because in them he had failed to keep experience out; they are frequently more explicit in their reservations (to say the least) about innocence.

Nevertheless, there are many poems from which he cannot keep out the shadow of experience. Several of the apparently carefree poems are deceptive when looked at more closely. In the 'Introduction' the poet moves through three phases. First he pipes, which always seems to Blake to suggest a purely natural and spontaneous music – what Milton called 'native wood-notes wild'. The child responds with laughter. Then he sings a song about a lamb, and the child weeps. Song, since it involves language and a fixed melody, is more complex. Although we are told that the child weeps 'with joy', the fact that we weep for both joy and sorrow perhaps indicates that they are closer than they seem. Having persuaded the singer to turn poet, the child then vanishes, so that the written songs he produces (more sophisticated again) have no live audience. He writes so that 'every child may joy to hear', but can have no assurance that they will. Moreover, the reed he converts into a pen is 'hollow', which, though literally it would have to be, cannot avoid a certain incongruity. The words 'hollow' and 'happy' sit uneasily together. The incongruity deepens when we are told that in order to write poems the speaker has to 'stain' the clear water. The word introduces, in however dilute a form, the idea of sin and corruption. In the very act of celebrating childish innocence, the poet corrupts it through his inability to prevent the shadow of his own experience falling over the scene. This drives away the very spontaneity he is seeking to express, as the scientist can never observe how creatures behave when they are not being observed.

Several of the poems, including the first two, are about a child or creature which is lost. Lyca in 'The Little Girl Lost' is upset to be 'lost in desert wild' only because she knows her parents will be worried. Lyca herself trusts that the beasts of prey will look after her, as indeed they do. Her distraught parents eventually find her sleeping 'among tygers wild', and decide to settle among the predatory beasts themselves. Since we all approach these poems from the position of experience it is impossible to avoid a degree of mockery. Blake knew this. His point, I take it, is that the infant not yet infected with fear by the adult world would feel at home in the world, at one with it, not only while under the immediate protection of parents, since without fear there is nothing it needs to be protected from. What the fallen vision of the parents sees as bloodthirsty monsters is seen by the child as guardian angels. The same point is made much more successfully in one of the 'Memorable Fancies' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. An orthodox angel offers to show Blake his 'eternal lot'. It takes him through a church and a mill to a deep

cavern full of fire and smoke and blood, spiders and serpents and other monsters, which catching sight of Blake and the angel, advance on them in fury. The angel flees, and, seeing no Blake, assumes that he has perished. Some time later Blake strolls out, and nonchalantly tells the angel: 'All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics; for when you ran away, I found myself on a bank by moonlight hearing a harper'. In other words what we see depends on our vision. A fallen or corrupted vision will see monsters and horrors, which are the images the mind projects onto the receptive face of the world. A mind in a state of innocence will see no such things, but a world reflecting the harmony within.

This parable works very well in the mythic context of the Memorable Fancy. In the much more realistic context of distraught parents seeking a child lost in a desert, we cannot keep out our sense that it would not be a good idea for the child to put its trust in lions and tigers. If the beasts of prey had turned nasty, the child could, of course, have been rescued by an angel, like the one which sets the chimney sweepers free, since in the word of innocence there are no constraints of mere likelihood. In *Poems of Experience* the idea of a lost child is dealt with more realistically, with the child as panic-stricken as the parents. To be lost is an image of alienation, the opposite of atonement. Far from feeling at home in the world, the lost child is cut off from anything it can recognize, and exposed to fear, sorrow, suffering and danger.

'The Echoing Green' is another poem which seems on the face of it wholly cheerful. But the first stanza implies that sunrise and spring are greeted with such happiness because they bring an end to the darkness of night and severity of winter. The second stanza introduces happy old people, but their memories of their 'youth time' imply that a lifetime has slipped away in no time. In the first stanza the green echoed with laughter, in the second with memories across a chasm of years. In the final stanza the green does not echo at all. The ending of the poem:

And sport no more seen
On the darkening green.

refers literally only to dusk, but surely suggests something more ominous and permanent. The world of experience, the world of 'getting and spending' that, for Wordsworth, was 'too much with us', will put an end to that kind of 'sport'. Planning permission will undoubtedly be given for the green to be 'developed' as something more profitable.

A consequence of dualism was to hand the human body over to Satan. There is God on one side and 'the world, the flesh and the devil' on the other. With subtle subversiveness Blake quietly insists in 'The Divine Image' that Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love, which the orthodox would accept as features of God, cannot exist except as they are incarnated in the dress, face, heart and form of human beings, all human beings, of whatever colour or creed. Hopkins made a similar claim:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places.
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces. ['As kingfishers catch fire']

Yet not even this poem, since it is spoken with the partial voice of innocence, can be taken at face value, as simply stating Blake's own beliefs. Like several of the poems in *Song of Innocence*, it has its counterpart and contrary in *Songs of Experience*, 'The Human Abstract'.

'The Human Abstract' begins like a poem by Brecht. The speaker points out with relentless logic that there would be no need of Pity in either God or man if there were no suffering to be pitied, no need of Mercy if there were no unhappiness; that Peace is often a condition of no more than mutual fear (the principle of the nuclear deterrent). As for what passes for Love, that can be merely selfish Cruelty creating a mystery (a system of absolute sanctions, tenets, duties) to deceive another into accepting subjugation. This is exactly what the tyrant God, under the name of Urizen, does in later books, with man's full collaboration. What finds fertile soil in the human brain is not Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love, but Cruelty, Mystery, Deceit and Death. The poem called 'A Divine Image' which Blake added to *Songs of Experience* about 1794 is clearly a description of humanity under the iron rule of Urizen:

Cruelty has a Human Heart,
And Jealousy a Human Face
Terror the Human form Divine,
And Secrecy the Human Dress.

The Human Dress is forged Iron
The Human Form a fiery Forge
The Human Face a Furnace seal'd,
The Human Heart its hungry Gorge.

Is there not a hint of Urizen in the God who sends an angel to free the chimney sweepers from their misery on condition that they be 'good' boys and 'all do their duty'. Blake finds subjection to such a god worse than subjection to cruel human fathers and masters. In the *Songs of Experience* version of 'The Chimney Sweeper' God is frankly accused of being in alliance with church and state to 'make up a heaven of our misery'.

If single vision is Newton's sleep, a lapsing of the full range of human awareness, innocence is also a sleep in which the child lapses from the threats and cares of the world into 'sweet dreams of pleasant streams / By happy, silent, moony beams' ('Cradle Song'). Dreams beguile the sleeping child into smiling rather than moaning, and only while the child sleeps are the mother's anxieties suspended. The poem ends with the extraordinary claim that the christ-child 'beguiles' heaven and earth to peace - extraordinary, that is, if we recognize the older and prior meaning of the word, with its clear implication of cheating. The word has come to be little more than a synonym for charming; but in Blake's day it would have retained much of its original connection with guile. He must have remembered Eve's excuse to God in *Genesis*: 'The serpent beguiled me'.

There is no 'Cradle Song' in *Songs of Experience*, but there is another version of the poem in Blake's manuscripts. This poem begins like the version Blake chose to publish, but ends very differently:

O, the cunning wiles that creep

In thy little heart asleep.
When thy little heart does wake,
Then the dreadful lightnings break

From thy cheek & from thy eye
O'er the youthful harvests nigh.
Infant wiles & infant smiles
Heaven & Earth of peace beguiles.

The 'youthful harvests', I take it, are all the rich joys of youth, the fulfilment of 'soft desires', which the infant has dreamed of. The contrast between the dreamed world and the world to which the infant awakens is so horrifying that the infant sees all its hopes dashed and drowned in its own tears. As Blake puts it in 'I Heard an Angel singing':

Down pour'd the heavy rain
Over the new reap'd grain.

In the other version of 'Cradle Song' the infant Christ beguiles Heaven and Earth *to* peace. Here the infant beguiles them *of* peace. Peace, that is, can never be achieved by dreaming, pretence, the 'cunning' substitution of a world we can approve of for the actual world.

The innocence of infants tempts us to fancy an impossible extension of that innocence into adulthood. In later books, *Vala* and *Milton*, Blake imagines a country where adults can live in permanent childlike innocence. He calls it Beulah, taking the name from Bunyan. In *Pilgrim's Progress* Beulah is a place of peace and beauty and abundance within sight of Heaven:

Yea, here they heard continually the singing of birds, and saw every day the flowers appear in the earth, and heard the voice of the turtle in the land. In this country the sun shineth night and day.

It is a place where all the contraries with which the pilgrims have wrestled for so long melt away. Here there is no despair or death. Here the weary pilgrims can rest before the final short stage of their journey. There are orchards, vineyards and gardens. It is like Eden before the fall. It is so pleasant that many pilgrims are tempted to remain there, to lapse from the final challenge to achieve their full adult awakening. It is not intended as a place to stay long. For those who do so it becomes a Lotus Land or a return to the womb. In *Vala* Blake describes Beulah as 'a soft Moony Universe, feminine, lovely, / Pure, mild & Gentle', and in *Milton* the inhabitant of Beulah is 'as the beloved infant in his mother's bosom round incircled'. They are enclosed in perfect security, everlasting holiday, their spirits sealed in permanent delusion:

Where the impressions of Despair & Hope for ever vegetate
In flowers, in fruits, in fishes, birds & beasts & clouds & waters,
The land of doubts & shadows, sweet delusions, unform'd hopes.
They saw no more the terrible confusion of the wracking universe.

They heard not, saw not, felt not all the terrible confusion,
For in their orb'd senses, within clos'd up, they wander'd at will.
And those upon the Couches view'd them, in the dreams of Beulah,
As they repos'd from the terrible wide universal harvest. [Vala IX]

One consequence of dualism is that, being unable to see the whole, we can only see, or deliberately choose 'portions of existence', and invest all our faith and energy in them. To choose only the portion Blake calls innocence is to leave oneself open to justifiable mockery, since that position, paying no debts to reality, is sentimental, opposed to the glaring evidence, blind to 'the terrible wide universal harvest', fanciful in allowing itself to resolve all problems by recreating the world as it ought to be or perhaps once was, or by direct intervention from the world of spirit. But to reject innocence in favour of experience is to lay oneself open to perhaps even more damaging charges: cynicism, sterility, spiritless materialism, repression – everything Blake includes in the term 'single vision'. But if experience alone is the single vision of Newton's sleep, innocence alone is the beguiled vision of rose-coloured spectacles.

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Blake was not, on the whole, a great admirer of Wordsworth, who made, he thought, too much of the non-human world, as if mountains, for example, had meanings other than those conferred on them by human vision. But he was a great admirer of Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from recollections of early Childhood'. Though Blake frequently compared the innocence of the infant to the innocence of Christ, there is no suggestion in Blake as there is in Wordsworth, that infant joy derives from the 'vision splendid' of the soul's prenatal existence in heaven. Heaven and hell in Blake are other names for states of the human soul. His terminology and imagery translates much more easily into psychological than eschatological terms, and indeed the work of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung constitutes just such a translation.

But Blake and Wordsworth are very close in their description of how that innocence comes to be lost. Wordsworth's lines:

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy

are pure Blake. Sleep, darkness and prison are the images both poets choose to describe the state of the soul once fallen into the world of experience. Blake calls it 'single vision and Newton's sleep'. By single vision he meant (among other things) vision which denies the contraries by insisting on the primacy of fact and reason, reason uninformed by other human faculties and therefore a form of blindness, reducing everything to the mechanical and material. This seemed to Blake to have happened to the very soul of England with the so-called 'enlightenment' of the eighteenth century and the rise of mechanistic science. As John Beer puts it:

Each man became centre of his own mechanically organized little universe, disregarding his imagination as a meaningless accessory except in moments when he wished to relax from the serious clockwork of life.

[*Blake's Visionary Universe*, 39]

Only a society which had lost its humanity could have perpetrated the evils of Blake's time. Both Blake and Wordsworth were deeply concerned with the exploitation and persecution of children in their own day. Not long before Blake, the Wesley brothers, founders of Methodism, had taught that laughter, singing - other than hymns - and dancing were sinful and should be eradicated in schools. Children were condemned to slavery in the mills, and often died there. In Blake the little boy becomes a chimney-sweep, the little girl a harlot. Deeper than these specific abuses is the imposition by society on the young (beginning with parents and nurses) of the false inauthentic values of a society living in bad faith. The parents, having been themselves brainwashed, become in turn agents of this society. Parental pressures are later institutionalized in the form of schools and churches. And all this often in the name of love. The main concern of Blake and Wordsworth is with the systematic stultification of the children's souls and crippling of their capacity to lead fulfilling lives, which would probably happen to some extent in any 'civilized' society at any time.

. In the 1920s D.H.Lawrence described a mining village where the school (next to the Wesleyan chapel) mixes 'the suggestion of a chapel and a prison'. In the school children are 'singing' - but 'anything more unlike song, spontaneous song, would be impossible to imagine'. Lawrence's Blakean plaint against 'the utter negation of the gladness of life' is as relevant now as ever. He bewailed that people were being 'beaten down' with the 'din-din-dinning of books, schools, cinemas, clergymen, the whole national and human consciousness hammering on the fact of material prosperity above all things'. That din has now been amplified a thousandfold by the mass media.

But Blake and Wordsworth were not primarily reformers in the social sphere, like Dickens. They knew that though society can exacerbate the process, it is also something which happens to some extent to every human soul as it moves from infancy through childhood. T.S. Eliot's poem 'Animula' is a wonderful commentary on the process, borrowing terms from Blake, Wordsworth and Whitman (whose poem 'There was a child went forth' is another account of the same process). Eliot speaks of the 'heavy burden of the growing soul' confronted

With the imperatives of 'is and seems'
And may and may not, desire and control.

What Blake called the 'mind-forg'd manacles' of duties, rules and disciplines and the obligation to choose between contraries, are being fastened on the child by the adult world. The child shrivels under the weight of mere facts which

Curl up the small soul in the window seat
Behind the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

The child is taught to fear pleasure and mistrust imagination, with disastrous consequences:

Issues from the hand of time the simple soul
Irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame,
Unable to fare forward or retreat,
Fearing the warm reality, the offered good,
Denying the importunity of the blood,
Shadow of its own shadows, spectre in its own gloom,
Leaving disordered papers in a dusty room.

That is the sterile waste of life Blake saw as a betrayal of a divine gift.

For Wordsworth what is lost is a form of knowledge which we then spend the rest of our lives trying to recover. He even goes so far as to address the infant as 'thou best philosopher'. For Blake there is no such knowledge attributed to infancy. On the contrary, innocence is closer to blissful ignorance. What is lost at the fall is liberty (to be oneself and fulfil one's desires) and atonement, in its original sense of at-one-ment, the sense of being at home in the world. Nothing need yet be tested against experience, and there is no clear distinction between waking and dreaming. The infant can, if necessary, dream a world to match its own desires, a world, for example, in which lions are as cuddly and harmless as lambs. Wordsworth would like nothing better than to have remained a child all his life. But Blake, even if he had not seen the infant as doomed to fall into a life of sorrows, would not have wished to prolong that state beyond its natural term. Lacking contraries, it is a state incapable of progression towards the specifically adult pleasures and fulfillment – understanding, creativity and sexual love. Only after the fall into experience and several years in the limbo of single vision is a person equipped to progress towards what Blake was later to call fourfold vision.

The stages out of single vision are, first, to recognize the all-pervading symptoms of single vision as such, and undertake the psychic journey out of its dark prison; second, to release the energies, which, by the damming of their natural channels, have been forced into destructiveness, for their original creative purposes; third, to recover innocence, but a very different, mature, adult, strong innocence possible only on the far side of experience (Blake calls it 'organiz'd innocence'), the kind of strong innocence Shakespeare gives to most of his late heroines; and finally to acquire the new vision which becomes available to man when he has thrown off the 'mind-forg'd manacles', dispensed with the Newtonian blinkers, cleansed the doors of perception, transformed the warring energies within (the 'reptiles of the mind'), and reconciled the contraries in selfless love. Fourfold vision is imagination, which is simply how we see when our vision is whole, not fragmented, how we function when all our subtle senses (not just the gross physical five) are fully operational. It is the divinity of fully realized humanity.

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