

Reading Blake: 'The Clod and the Pebble', 'The Sick Rose', 'The Tyger'.

1. 'The Clod and the Pebble'.

Blake's choice of clod and pebble as mouthpieces for opposing conceptions of love is carefully calculated. Half the work of the poem is already done in the title if we allow the associations of these words to flow freely. However symbolic a poet's use of a word may be, that symbolism retains and depends on the literal meaning and common associations. In Blake's less successful later poems works may be given private or esoteric meanings. The clod is soft, shapeless, malleable, passive, downtrodden. The pebble is hard, shapely, impermeable. As soon as these associations are placed within a context of sexual love, the clod is the selfless female, the pebble the selfish male. They are contraries [see the previous essay], but in a fallen world where the contraries can only remain irreconcilable opposites, locked into a relationship where one does all the giving and the other all the taking.

A shallow or too hasty reading of this poem might well lead us to suppose that we are intended simply to approve the clod's innocent and Christian definition of love and reject the pebble's cynicism and wicked selfishness, but as we have seen, this is never what Blake intends. The poem offers no possibility of a compromise. The clod tries to inhabit the world of innocence, to ignore the existence of pebbles (or even cows), to 'build a Heaven in Hell's despair'. The heaven built by the clod might be morally impeccable, but it is impossible to imagine much happening there in the way of delight. But even if it could find a like-minded partner in love, such selfless love could not progress towards a viable balanced relationship such as marriage symbolizes. The clod seems to have nothing to bring to the relationship but its own subjugation and degradation. A clod clearly cannot serve as an image of something we are meant to admire. Applied to a human being the word suggests a complete absence of energy, creativeness, character, self-esteem; it is lumpen, undifferentiated, spiritless. D.H. Lawrence suggests that for every murderer there is a murderee, that is, someone who, while not actively or consciously wanting to be murdered, subconsciously accepts the role and provokes or collaborates in the murder. In fact in the pebble the clod has found its ideal partner; the masochist has found the sadist.

To say that Blake does not approve of the clod is not to say that he approves of the pebble. In adopting a self-sacrificial role the clod is misguided, dousing its own divine spark. The pebble glories in its own evil, like Iago. It is better to be too soft than too hard. What is perhaps surprising is that the pebble should offer its own heartlessness as a definition of love.

From an early age Blake had his own highly developed sense of evil. The greatest evil seemed to him to be to deprive another of freedom. He could see around him plenty of examples of the exploitation of children and the poor. But more insidious were the 'mind-forg'd manacles' with which men sought, often in the name of Christian love or parental care, to bind children with rules and duties and creeds to save them from their own bodies and desires, which they were taught to see as sinful. Joy in almost any form was suspect. The child was thus deprived of the freedom to be itself, the freedom to be

fully male or female, and the freedom to be fully human. Blake finds the motives of parents, nurses, schoolteachers, priests, beadles, 'guardians of the poor', to be suspect or selfish. And sexual love is no exception when it manifests itself in the desire to possess the beloved exclusively, to ensure that the beloved has no life beyond providing whatever delights the master. At the age of fourteen Blake wrote one of the great poems of the language on this theme:

How sweet I roam'd from field to field,
And tasted all the summer's pride,
'Till I the prince of love beheld,
Who in the sunny beams did glide!

He shew'd me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair,
Where all his golden pleasures grow.

With sweet May dews my wings were wet,
And Phoebus fir'd my vocal rage;
He caught me in his silken net,
And shut me in his golden cage.

He loves to sit and hear me sing,
Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;
Then stretches out my golden wing,
And mocks my loss of liberty.

Wings, the ability to fly, always in poetry symbolize liberty and the life of the spirit not divorced from but animating the life of the body. Neither clod nor pebble can fly, or even move. They are spiritless, fallen into a world of inanimate matter where contraries can relate to each other only in sterile conflict or perverse, unnatural relationships.

The mature Blake produced a much more concise version of this poem:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

That he should have called this poem 'Eternity' expands the image considerably, suggesting to me that caging the loved one, binding the child, is a symptom of the larger human sickness which insists that only things which live forever have value, that the joys of this world are ephemeral and therefore delusive. For Blake it is mere selfishness, hubris, to seek to hold on to joy, to life itself, beyond its natural span.

Hopkins destroyed his own 'winged life', his poetic inspiration and joy in life, by insisting on the religion of the diamond body. But in happier years, before he dismissed the body as trash, a mere clod, he saw that mortal beauty can keep warm

Men's wits to the things that are; what good means – where a glance
Master more may than gaze, gaze out of countenance.

And Lawrence praised the Etruscans for valuing the life of the present rather than wanting to build eternal cities – ‘burdens on the face of the earth’ – like the Romans, who despised and tried to extinguish the Etruscan joy in life. The Etruscans were not concerned with the pursuit of such absolutes as Heaven, Hell or Eternity, but with seizing the passing day in all its sacred joy.

2. ‘The Sick Rose’

Here again the title encapsulates the essential dynamic of the poem. The rose is an archetypal symbol, which means that it has been seized on by all cultures which have known roses as symbolizing very much the same range of human experience, and is spontaneously recognized as doing so even by those who do not know what a symbol is. [The same can be said of the tiger.] Archetypes contain the ability to release a certain range of meanings with peculiar depth and power. Things become symbols because of characteristics evident in ordinary life, and these remain the primary elements in the symbol however much it might have been elaborated in the literary tradition. We are all aware of the rose as a queen of flowers, beautiful, rich in colour (especially the red rose), heady in perfume, sensuous in texture, incurved, enfolding erotic promise. The rose activates all the senses like the body of a desired woman. Rose metaphors are part of our common language. Rosy cheeks signify health; rosy lips are asking to be kissed. Few men have never sent a woman a bunch of red roses; and even when there is no verbal message, the woman has no difficulty knowing what that means. Burns wrote: ‘My love is like a red, red, rose’. In giving a woman a red rose, a man is giving her an image of herself, or herself as he would wish her to be, rich with sexual passion.

As a primary female sexual symbol, the rose in the ancient world was attributed to Aphrodite/Venus, goddess of sexual love. The book which distilled and defined the courtly love invented by the medieval troubadours was called the *Roman de la Rose*, where the rose symbolizes a woman's awakening to sexual love.

If we add together all the associations of the word rose, those we supply from our own experience, those common in our culture, and those we happen to be familiar with in the literary tradition, we have a very strong sense of youth, health, beauty and joy, of the feminine at its most desirable, of vitality and creativity, of the gratification of erotic desires. The last adjective we anticipate is ‘sick’. Sickness, disease, corruption, are not only contrary to all the primary meanings of ‘rose’, but strike us as a violation of them, a sacrilege. The two words cancel each other out, leaving a void, a chaos. The title enacts linguistically the degradation of the rose the poem then dramatizes. Blake was by no means the first poet to exploit this shock effect. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare, needing to convey what happens when the natural progression of the seasons is violated and Great Creating Nature made sterile, writes: ‘heavy-headed frosts / Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose’. And in *Lycidas* Milton wrote ‘as killing as the canker to the rose’.

The poets Blake was most familiar with and most respected were Shakespeare and Milton, and he expected his readers to know them well. 'The Sick Rose' draws so heavily on both of them that it can hardly be read, or loses half its force, if the reader is unaware of the power and quite specific meanings flowing into this poem from *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*.

In Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, Satan, having crossed the howling storm of chaos, 'with meditated guile' flies 'as a mist by night' into Eden, where he enters the serpent, the fittest creature to communicate his 'dark suggestions' to Eve. (The first meaning of 'worm' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'serpent, snake, dragon'.)

Eve separate he spies,
Veiled in a cloud of fragrance, where she stood,
Half-spied, so thick the roses bushing round
About her glowed ...
Herself, though fairest unsupported flower,
From her best prop so far, and storm so nigh.

His avowed purpose is 'all pleasure to destroy' since he has lost his own capacity for joy. When Eve tells Adam what has happened, he describes her as 'deflowered':

From his slack hand the garland wreathed for Eve
Down dropped, and all the faded roses shed.

Nakedness and sex become for both of them a cause for shame, which they had never known before.

This story, with its memorable imagery of the invisible tempter flying through a howling storm, becoming a worm, and desecrating the joy of the marriage bed for both man and woman, clearly looms behind 'The Sick Rose' and feeds it with potent suggestions. These suggestions mingle with others from Shakespeare. The worm which destroys the beauty of a young woman must remind us of Viola's story of an imaginary sister:

She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pin'd in thought.

This hints at a new perspective on the worm. Blake would have had less sympathy than Shakespeare with Patience on her monument. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake takes up a provocatively contrary attitude:

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.

What Blake is saying here is that unacted desires *are* infants in their cradles, and to leave them unacted is effectively to prevent their continuing life, to neglect to feed them until they pine away; that we have a sacred responsibility to act upon our desires, to give appropriate expression to the god-given energies which flow through us, as sacred a

responsibility as to nurture our offspring. The same point is made less provocatively on the previous page:

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained;
and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.
And being restrain'd, it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of
desire.

The next stage would clearly be to pine away altogether.

Thus the fatal 'concealment' is blamed on reason interfering where it has no business, that is, in governing desire. Shakespeare would probably agree, since Viola's desire is much stronger than her imagined sister's, and too strong to be restrained. Later heroines such as Desdemona and Perdita are quite outspoken about their sexual desires. Fallen reason, in the dualistic world I described in the previous essay, usurps its place by assuming that desire is sinful unless circumscribed by laws, rules, duties, threats, fears and shame.

This tyranny of a largely male (and often hypocritical) reasoning over female sexuality is precisely the theme of the other Shakespeare passage which stands behind this poem. Laertes, himself something of a libertine, nevertheless takes it upon himself to try to instil in his sister Ophelia fear of her own sexual desires:

And keep you in the rear of your affection
Out of the shot and danger of desire.
The chariest maid is prodigal enough
If she unmask her beauty to the moon.
Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes.
The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclos'd,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent.
Be wary then: best safety lies in fear.

Claudius is not the only source of contagion. Both Polonius and Laertes are quite capable of pouring poison into Ophelia's ear. Perhaps Ophelia (a 'rose of May') is destroyed by the dark 'love' of father and brother with its injunction to concealment, secrecy, fear and shame. Desire and duty are pushed into such outright opposition that there is no possibility of resolution, and Ophelia lapses into madness and death. This is close to being the central theme of the play, since Hamlet himself is also a sick rose. It is Ophelia herself, before her own blasting, who describes him as 'th'expectancy and rose of the fair state':

Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy.

Hamlet has just advised her to enter a nunnery. One symptom of Hamlet's tainted mind is his inability to accept female sexuality, even within marriage:

Why, she [his mother] would hang on him [his father]
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on.

Given the conception of Hamlet himself, his father's love for his mother can hardly have spurned the physical to the extent that Hamlet claims:

... He might not betwixt the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly.

Other poems by Blake himself add further resonances and suggestions. 'A Little Girl Lost' is very explicit. The word 'lost' is ironic, as in Lawrence's novel *The Lost Girl*, since the girl has found joy in love, and is lost only in the eyes of her father, who trembles with fear, living as he does in a time (Blake's own) when 'Love! Sweet Love! was thought a crime'. The father's 'loving look' causes her to shake with terror; his 'dismal care' will drive him to try his best to reduce his daughter to a state of despair. In 'Earth's Answer' Earth is already so reduced. She describes herself as 'free Love' prisoned in darkness by 'the father of the ancient men':

Selfish father of men!
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear!
Can delight
Chain'd in night,
The virgins of youth and morning bear?

Does spring hide its joy
When buds and blossoms grow?

An uncollected poem called 'To Nobodaddy' takes up this answer to a fallen god whose favourite words are 'Thou shalt not', in terms even closer to 'The Sick Rose':

Why art thou silent & invisible,
Father of Jealousy?
Why dost thou hide thy self in clouds
From every searching eye?

Why darkness & obscurity
In all thy words & laws,
That none dare eat the fruit but from
The wily serpent's jaws?
Or is it because Secrecy gains females' loud applause?

Even if we do not make these connections with Shakespeare and Milton and Blake himself consciously, if we have read these plays and poems at all they are bound to operate subliminally, giving additional resonance to almost every word in the poem. The miracle of 'The Sick Rose' is that Blake has distilled all of this into thirty-four simple words.

3. 'The Tyger'

This poem is clearly not an attempt to describe an actual tiger. Blake's idiosyncratic spelling of the word suggests rather a sort of demonic essence of tiger, which the poem invokes and interrogates. Blake needs to confront and acknowledge the contrary of the lamb (see the previous essay) to see if it is possible to come to terms with it. The God of lambs is the God of the New Testament, of the infant Jesus meek and mild, divine energy in its most loving and loveable incarnation. The tiger is raw, destructive, terrifying energy, like the God of *Job*, who specifically identifies himself with thunder and lightning, with such monstrous creations as Behemoth and Leviathan, and with the eagle on the crag:

From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off.
Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she.

Blake does not always use symbolism in the evocative and accessible manner I have been describing in the two previous commentaries. In the prophetic books his symbolism is often part of an elaborate, abstruse, largely private system, accessible only to Blake scholars (who usually disagree among themselves about its meaning). Some of the symbolism of 'The Tyger' is interpreted by scholars as part of this system (particularly the stars throwing down their spears); but it seems to me that in the context of the poem, *Song of Innocence and Experience* as a whole, and the bible, the symbolism does what is required of it effectively enough. It is not intended to expound systematic thought, but to convey Blake's sense of awe, and the difficulty of coping with the contraries when, to our inadequate vision, they are at their most mutually exclusive.

The poem has eleven question marks, and is in the interrogative mood throughout. The questions are all variants of the same question: what god do we have to imagine capable of conceiving of a tiger, forging it, grasping the fire, clasping the deadly terrors necessary in the actual creation of it. What sort of god would even want to create tigers? Certainly not the loving gentle god of the Christian tradition.

The stars do not burn. They glitter with a cold reflected light. They exist above and beyond this world. That they have spears suggests that their function is to defend heaven from hell. They glitter like a heavenly army bristling with gleaming weapons. They seem therefore to symbolize the cold light of reason attempting to control and subjugate the rebellious energies of the nether world. But the tiger outshines and appals them, so that they throw down their weapons and weep in abject surrender. Reason is no match for energy or desire unless it can be somehow chained (as it usually is in human beings). Blake distinguishes clearly between reason, which is reductive, mechanical and visionless, and wisdom, which sees the need for balance, inclusiveness, and therefore does not ultimately desire a world in which lions lie down with lambs. As Blake says in

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 'tygers of wrath' are wiser than 'horses of instruction' (perhaps a dig at Swift's Houyhnhnms).

What God says to Job about Leviathan could equally be said of Blake's tiger:

I will not conceal his parts, nor his power, nor his comely proportion.
Who can open the doors of his face? His teeth are terrible round about.
When he raiseth up himself, the mighty are afraid: by reason of breakings they
purify themselves.
The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold: the spear, the dart, not the
habergeon.
Darts are counted as stubble: he laugheth at the shaking of a spear.
Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear.
He beholdeth all high things: he is a king over all the children of pride.

None of the poem's questions implies an answer. Each question increases the inconceivability of an answer. Yet Blake assumes that there must be an answer; that the tiger itself constitutes an answer, could one but get one's mind round it, get past the mental block of terror. And that terror is also somehow a form of exultation. The tiger's symmetry is simultaneously fearful and incredibly beautiful. It is a creature of the forests of the night where sunshine never penetrates; yet it burns brightly with a fierce flame. Its light and heat must be generated entirely from within. The brightness is spirit; the burning is body-heat, incarnate energy. The tiger's hide is the outward showing of its perfect inner balance, so that one cannot tell whether it is bright tongues of flame against a background of darkness or dark stripes against a background of fire.

The deadly dualism which still causes us to divide the divine creation into the acceptable (cuddly lambs) and the unacceptable (fierce tigers) applies equally in the sphere of morality, where the more fiery human passions, such as desire, are rejected and degraded as sins. To Blake nothing natural is evil; but the healing of this dualistic split in the human psyche requires nothing less than a marriage of heaven (light) and hell (darkness) in perfect symmetry. In Wolfram von Eschenbach's medieval romance *Parzival*, the champion whose glory far outshines Parzival's is his brother who 'was mottled like the magpie, being both black and white'. Ted Hughes uses a blackbird to symbolize exactly this balance:

And the blackbird
Sleeking from common anything and worm-dirt
Balances a precarious banner
Gold on black, terror and exultation.

Hughes was to take up exactly Blake's line of questioning in 'The Tyger', and make it perhaps his central theme. At first, in the jaguar poems, he can get no further than Blake, only invoke the demon, then stand in awe. But ten years later he wrote 'Tiger Psalm'. 'Tiger-psalm' was originally conceived as a dialogue between Socrates and Buddha. Gradually Buddha's side of the argument resolved itself into a tiger and Socrates' into the principle of machine-guns, 'as if the whole abstraction of Socrates' discourse must inevitably, given enough time and enough applied intelligence, result in machine

guns'. It is an argument between single vision and fourfold vision. The tiger, unlike the machine-gunners, is carrying out a perfectly rational, restrained and sacred activity:

The tiger
Kills like a fall of cliff, one-sinewed with the earth,
Himalayas under eyelid, Ganges under fur -

Does not kill.

Does not kill. The tiger blesses with a fang.
The tiger does not kill but opens a path
Neither of Life nor of Death:
The tiger within the tiger:
The Tiger of the Earth.
O Tiger!
O Brother of the Viper!
O Beast in Blossom!

In his report on visions seen by thirty-five subjects after taking the hallucinogenic drug harmaline in Chile, Claudio Naranjo tells us that seven of them saw big cats, usually tigers, though there are no big cats in Chile and no tigers in the New World. One woman had a tiger guide throughout her journey. Another actually became a tiger:

I walked, though, feeling the same freedom I had experienced as a bird and a fish, freedom of movement, flexibility, grace. I moved as a tiger in the jungle, joyously, feeling the ground under my feet, feeling my power; my chest grew larger. I then approached an animal, any animal. I only saw its neck, and then experienced what a tiger feels when looking at its prey.

[Michael J. Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, OUP 1973, 185]

Naranjo comments: 'This may be enough to show how the tiger by no means stands for mere hostility, but for a fluid synthesis of aggression and grace and a full acceptance of the life-impulse beyond moral judgement'. This is the synthesis and acceptance Blake sought.