

William Blake

(1757-1827)

[Marinoni Mingazzini, Salmoiraghi, *A Mirror of the Times*, Morano Editore, 1989, pp. 442-449]

Blake was a great mystical and visionary poet, who found himself in opposition to nearly all the prevailing beliefs and attitudes of the 18th century. He hated the rationalism and materialism of Locke and Newton; he hated the reductive Deism and atheism of the Enlightenment philosophers, and the tepid, moralistic Christianity of the contemporary church; he hated the timid conservatism and conformity of respectable middleclass society and the commercial system that was the foundation of the prosperity of the period; he hated the realistic art and literature of the 18th century, which regarded art as "imitation".

Since Blake hated all these things, he found it necessary to create a philosophy of his own, in opposition to the basic tenets of the 18th century.

His own "system" or philosophy was a visionary exaltation of the spirit over the body, of instinct and intuition over education, and of spiritual vision over the impressions of the physical sense. He asserted that it was possible to see the infinite and the eternal beyond the material appearances of the finite world, and declared: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear as it is, infinite".

Blake expressed his ideas mainly in two kinds of poems.

The poems of the *first type* are usually short, written in simple and popular metres (usually the ballad stanza, but sometimes in octosyllabic couplets). These poems tend to make use of uncomplicated language, and their symbols and images, though often complex in their range of possible interpretations, strike the reader's imagination strongly and directly. Of this kind are the poems in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, which are all short lyrical poems of great intensity.

The poems of the *second type* are long, complex and obscure works with an arcane and allegorical meaning, which are difficult to interpret. They are usually written in blank verse, and Blake himself regarded them as his "prophetic works", like the prophetic books of the Bible, in which he expounded his philosophy in great detail. Most of these have been ignored by the general reader, and Blake's reputation rests mainly on his lyrics.

Blake's lyrical poems deal with both *the realities of the contemporary world* and *the potentiality of the spiritual world*. They therefore alternate between harshly realistic and satirical descriptions of the squalor of the contemporary world, attacks on the thinkers and concepts which Blake hated, and visions of the spiritual world which is the ultimate reality, and is infinite and eternal.

In many ways Blake *anticipates the themes of Romanticism*; for example, by his *exaltation of art*, in which he anticipated the aesthetic movement; in his *social conscience* and sympathy with the sufferings of the poor (in

which he anticipated one of the major Romantic concerns), with social justice and reform; in his belief that *art is creative vision* (in which he anticipated Coleridge's description of the psychology of the artist); and in his *attack on the values of the 18th century* (which was the necessary prelude to the creation of the new Romantic sensibility).

Another theme was *freedom*. Blake was a man who lived all the contradictions of his time. Like Rousseau, he believed that "man is born free and everywhere he is in chains"; so he hailed the American and the French Revolutions and rebelled against any form of oppression and slavery, either social, political or religious. His love for justice and democracy led him to oppose any type of institution, including Church and State, to beware of rising capitalism, to sympathize with the downtrodden classes and even to support the vindication of women's rights.

As an engraver Blake was unparalleled, and as a colourist he was a master of water colour. But he was greater as a poet than as an artist. A self-taught man, he found the models that appealed to his own genius in the Bible and in Milton, in the *Divina Commedia* and in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser and many others. Holding organized religion in low esteem, he became a follower of Swedenborg, a Swedish mystical philosopher who, with Boehme, was among the principal sources of his religious thought. He probably also knew something of Gnosticism and the Hindu religion, studied the Neoplatonists and eventually busied himself with occultism and theosophy.

Though deeply religious, Blake was not orthodox. He denied the existence of God separated from man, since God to him was the Imagination, i.e. the creative and spiritual power in man, which he often referred to as "the divine".

He believed in the biblical Fall of Man, which, however, in his opinion, was not caused by the eating of an apple (i.e. disobedience), but occurred when reason revolted against God (i.e. against the Imagination). The revolt led, as a consequence, to this world in which we live, limited in time and space through our five senses and peopled by individuals at war with one another, a world of illusion, which is but a faint shadow of the real eternal world of the Imagination.

In the name of the Imagination, Blake, dismissing materialistic science dominated by reason, always tried to discover the reality beyond the visible world. He considered ordinary living things as symbols of greater eternal values and powers, which could be described in one way only, i.e. through a metaphorical language. Hence the need to find a system of myths and symbols for portraying spiritual reality which, though invisible to men, is perfect "harmony", in contrast with our physical world which, being dominated by reason, is perfect "chaos".

“The Songs”

The *Songs of Innocence* were published in 1789. It was Blake's first volume to be printed from copperplate and decorated by hand. In 1794 Blake reissued it with the same Illuminated printing process, but with the addition of *Songs of Experience*, to form a single book under the title *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

Easier and more lyrical than the Prophetic Books, and less committed than the poems of revolt, the *Songs* should first of all be enjoyed more for their musicality than for their possible symbolic meaning. Each one of the two sets, written in simple, almost naive language rich in monosyllables, contains from twenty to twenty-five short poems, sometimes different in form and content, but united by a common inspiration and by a single design.

The *first* set is a poetical description of man's state of "innocence" which, in the *second*, is replaced by "experience".

Yet, though the loss of innocence is traditionally identified with the loss of childhood, **in Blake childhood represents not so much a particular age as a state of the soul, a childlike view of life, which may persist in maturity, too.** So the children who people the *Songs of Innocence* symbolize the ideal condition of man who still feels close to his divine origin and partakes of eternal truths.

But man cannot remain a child for ever: in order to grow and develop his vital energies, he must know not only joy but also sorrow, and must be tested by experience. So, though paid for with suffering, experience becomes a necessary stage in the cycle of life, since, as Blake himself stated, **"without Contraries is no Progression.** Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence".

Bearing in mind these ideas, we can appreciate the clear, pastoral symbolism of the *Songs of Innocence*, mainly drawn from the Bible, as opposed to the symbols of the *Songs of Experience*, which are more elusive in meaning.

The Lamb and the Tyger

These two poems are usually read together, since they are both about the problem of Creation and the identity of the Creator. They are therefore joined together by the same main theme, (which is summed up in the questions "Did he who made the Lamb make the Tiger?") as well as by the same devices, i.e. the use of questions and repetitions.

At a first superficial reading they may appear as the pictures of two real animals, each one with its own features (woolly soft fleece and tender voice vs. burning eyes) and set in its natural habitat (stream, mead and valley vs. forest). But it is soon clear that they hold a deeper meaning and that the Lamb and the Tiger are symbols open to manifold interpretations.

The Lamb may in fact represent the perfect innocence of childhood (emphasized by the identification of the animal with the child), while the Tiger symbolizes the evil that comes from worldly experience. In the Bible Christ is also defined as a Lamb. Moreover, the pronoun "I", in the first poem, may refer either to an imaginary child or to the poet himself. The number of identifications thus increases, so that "childhood" assumes a wider meaning than "infancy", and symbolizes a state of soul which may also be present in an adult.

In the second poem the symbolism becomes even more complex, since each word should be analyzed first in itself and then in relation to the others.

For example, the word burning ", referred to the Tiger, may evoke the image of the animal's eyes burning with rage and violence, but the addition of "bright" ("burning bright,") (l. 1) turns the Tiger into something shining, which may also symbolize the light of the spirit or of the genius, overcoming error and ignorance represented by the "forests of the night" (l. 2), (an image that reminds us of Dante's "selva oscura "). The same happens with the binomial "fearful symmetry" (l. 4), the second term of which modifies the first, arousing admiration for the strength and beauty of the animal and for the daring of its creator.

Creator and creature end therefore by defining each other by their particular nature [1]. the tiger is so beautiful and powerful that it must have been created only by a God who, in his turn, reveals himself through his terrible creature. So, if the Lamb partakes of the nature of God, the Tiger, too, represents a quality of the divinity. And if the Lamb represents the sweetness and meekness of Christ, the Tiger, which consequently is not the negation of the Lamb, represents the "other" Christ, who descended among men offering them a revolutionary and violent message of love which is hard to understand and accept (that's probably why the "stars" (l. 17), symbols of reason and order, threw down their spears, defeated) [2]

The Lamb and the Tiger therefore symbolize two different aspects of the same subject, be it Christ (shift from gentleness to violence), or man (shift from innocence to experience), two aspects which do not destroy but complete each other.

Blake certainly wanted the two sets of the Songs in parallel. To this purpose he introduced in both of them a number of parallel poems, alike in the titles and themes but different in the form, language and slant, as we can see in the poems given below for study and analysis.