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### Innocence and Experience : Two Contrary Spiritual States

#### 'The Lamb'

'The Lamb' is one of the simplest and finest lyrics in the *Songs of Innocence* and the words are mostly monosyllabic. The poem finds similar innocence in the child, the lamb, and the Christ. Praise wells up here for God whose goodness is revealed in His gift of innocence. Innocence is there in all the lyrics of the *Songs of Innocence* but it is hardly so impressive and pervasive in the other *Songs*.

The joyous child is Blake's major symbol of Innocence and this child is the speaker in 'The Lamb'. The poem is a paean to innocence and joy and belongs to the same group of poems as 'The Echoing Green', 'Laughing Song', 'A Cradle Song', 'Spring' and 'Infant Joy'. Our appreciation of innocence and joy naturally leads us to God, the generous giver of these gifts.

The lamb is primarily a sacrificial animal representing purity, innocence and perfection. In Christian art, the lamb is an emblem of the Redeemer : the allusion is to the Gospel according to St. John i. 29 : 'Behold the Lamb of God [Latin *agnus Dei*], which taketh away the sin of the world.' This is how John the Baptist refers to Jesus. The lamb in Blake's poem is as much Christ, 'the lamb of God', as God Himself. The Creator is one with His creation and there is complete identification between the two.

Symbolism is absolutely basic to Blake's poetry, not only to his later Prophetic books but also to his earlier lyric poetry. He was a mystic in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* as well and it was possible for Blake to express his ideas—to the extent that mystical ideas can be expressed at all—only through his symbols. The words of Caroline Spurgeon are worth recalling here :

'Symbolism is of immense importance in mysticism; indeed, symbolism and mythology are, as it were, the language of the mystic. The necessity for symbolism is an integral part of the belief in unity, for the essence of true symbolism rests on the belief that all things in Nature have something in common.

something in which they are really alike. (*Mysticism in English Literature* (Cambridge, 1913), p. 8)

Earlier the same critic has pointed out that the starting point and the goal of all mystical thinkers is their belief that unity underlies diversity:

'This... is the basic fact of mysticism, which in its widest sense may be described as an attitude of mind, founded upon an intuitive or experienced conviction of unity, of oneness, of alikeness of all things. From this source spring all mystical thoughts, and the mystic of whatever age or country would say in the words of Krishna :

"There is "true" knowledge. Learn thou it is this :  
To see one changeless life in all the lives,  
And in the separate, One Inseparable."

*The Bhagavad-Gita*, Book xviii.

This fundamental belief in unity leads naturally to the further belief that all things about us are but forms or manifestations of the divine life, and that these phenomena are fleeting and impermanent, although the Spirit which informs them is immortal and endures.' (Ibid., pp. 2-3)

This concept of the unity in diversity is actually one of the major tenets of Indian philosophy, especially Vedanta. It is, however, difficult to determine to what extent, if at all, Blake was familiar with the works of Vedanta.

The symbolism in 'The Lamb' is simple and obvious. For Blake the lamb and the child symbolize innocence. They also stand for God and Jesus Christ. In the *Songs of Innocence* the symbols relate to a special kind of existence or the state of the soul. In this condition human beings have the same kind of carefree and contented existence as is enjoyed by lambs under a gentle shepherd or by children who have affectionate parents. It has also to be noticed that both the shepherd and the father of Blake's *Songs* are God. It is He who is himself a lamb and becomes an infant. He looks after sleeping children and His heart is full of love for chimney-sweepers and little black boys. 'In the fatherhood of God, Blake's characters have equal rights and privileges', says C. M. Bowra. 'But by it he means not quite what orthodox Christians do. Blake, despite his deeply religious nature, did not believe that God exists apart from man.' Bowra then quotes the specific words of Blake from his 'Annotations of Berkeley's *Siris*' : 'Man is All Imagination. God is Man



and exists in us and we in him... Imagination or the Human Eternal Body in Every Man... Imagination is the Divine Body in Every Man.' Bowra further observes :

'For Blake, God and the imagination are one; that is, God is the creative and spiritual power in man, and apart from man the idea of God has no meaning. When Blake speaks of the divine, it is with reference to this power and not to any external or independent godhead. So when his songs tell of God's love and care, we must think of them as qualities which men themselves display and in so doing realize their full, divine nature. For instance, in 'On Another's Sorrow,' Blake says :

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,  
And thy Maker is not by ;  
Think not thou canst weep a tear,  
And thy Maker is not near.  
O! He gives to us His joy  
That our grief he may destroy ;  
Till our grief is fled and gone  
He doth sit by us and moan.

Blake means that every sigh and every tear evoke a response from our divine nature and through this are cured and turned to joy. Compassion is-part of man's imaginative being, and through it he is able to transform existence. For Blake, God is the divine essence which exists potentially in every man and woman.'

(*The Romantic Imagination* (London, 1961), p. 34)

In a number of Blake's poems we find the celebration of the divinity and innocence of not merely the child but also perhaps the least harmless of earthly creatures, that is, the lamb. In 'The Lamb', the child, who is the speaker of the poem, asks the lamb whether it knows who has created it. The child does not wait for the lamb's reply; he hastens to answer the question himself. We have the feeling that he does so not because the lamb cannot communicate but because of his own eagerness and enthusiasm to utter the name of God of many virtues. The child refers especially to God as the Son—one of the aspects of the Trinity. The meekness and mildness of God are also those of Jesus Christ. And Christ described himself as the Lamb of God. The child concludes with a reference to his own as well as to the lamb's affinity to God. Thus the oneness of all of them is established. Simplicity,

innocence and divinity are virtues that are extended even to the world of animals. As a result, there is a revaluation of values and the lowly creatures like the lamb have a more elevated position in human society. The child, Christ, and the lamb—all the three are unified. And this union necessarily includes the Father-aspect of God as the Son-aspect is already there. All the four together form the Holy Quartet.

All this lengthy and logical explanation of the symbolism of 'The Lamb', however, spoils the beauty of the exquisite poem which is sheer magic. It is not only one of the shortest and simplest of English lyrics, it is also one of the most wonderful.

### 'The Tyger'

'The Tyger' has already been discussed in the earlier essay on Blake the mystic. Here are some further points.

Blake directly addresses the 'tyger' in what is perhaps the most well known of his poems and intends to discover what divine purpose it serves. The basic question the poem asks is about creation itself : how can we reconcile the meek Love that creates the innocent lamb with the strong Force that creates the furious tiger? Is it the same God who does both?

But the question is actually not as simple as that, because, as David Punter rightly points out, at the same time Blake is suggesting an equivalence between divine creation and that of the artist/poet who 'frames' the tyger. 'For Blake, as for Coleridge, there was little difference : the activity of the human creator is a version of divine creativity, and the artist has to be daring, to take risks, in order to produce images of supreme importance to humanity.' (D. Punter, *York Notes on 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience'* (Delhi, 2001), p. 33) Punter is alluding to a famous passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (chapter 13) : 'The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am.'

Later, in a longer gloss on the poem (page 57), Punter observes that 'The Tyger' is ruled by symmetry : symmetry between stanzas, between lines, and within lines, but there is a significant lack of symmetry between the opening and concluding stanzas ('could' in stanza 1 is changed to 'dare' in stanza 6). By way of explanation the critic suggests



that the epithet 'dread', which means both 'fearsome' and 'fearing', is of immense significance. It is in this context that he poses the question: what might it mean to try to 'frame' the tyger's 'fearful symmetry'?

Punter provides us with two possible answers from the poem itself, answers which are closely involved with a complete theory of the human and the divine. The first interpretation is as follows. The tyger, like all other beasts and like man himself, has been 'framed', i.e. made, by God. In the second interpretation, which is more aesthetic and comprehensive, the responsibility for 'framing' the tyger (here in the sense of transforming him into a work of art) belongs not to God but to the artist, the poet. Therefore, Punter is led to conclude that 'we may see Blake's poem as asking a reflexive question about the role of the writer, and about the writer's—and artist's—relation with the "untameable" materials of the imagination with which he works.' (Ibid.)

The critic explains these untameable materials. He thinks that they may be the 'wild' itself—wild nature, the beast 'out there'. They may also be the wild inside, the 'beast within'. With the ideas of Sigmund Freud implicit in his mind, Punter relates the untameable materials to 'the unconscious within us all, that compund of desires and drives which always and everywhere rises up to upset the attempted rule of "framing" reason. Thus the tyger stands as an emblem for energy, for a power which, while in one important sense 'symmetrical'—that is to say, perfectly formed—is also beyond all framing, control, capture.' (Ibid.)

Blake was likely to have been aware of the mythological background of the tiger. In the East the tiger, and not the lion, is generally regarded as the king of beasts. The animal represents royalty, courage, ferocity and wrath. It is always a symbol of power. In Indian mythology Shiva, in his role of destroyer, is associated with the tiger. He wears a tiger-skin when depicted in his destructive aspect. It is proper to use a tiger (or deer) skin to sit on during yogic meditation. In Buddhism the tiger is one of the 'three senseless creatures', depicting anger (the monkey represents greed and the deer love-sickness).

As 'The Tyger' and 'The Lamb' are interlinked, we may conclude our discussion of the first poem on a comparative note. 'The Tyger' consists of twenty-four lines while 'The Lamb' consists of twenty lines. In both the poems there are a number of sentences in the interrogative form. There are five question-marks in 'The Lamb' and as many as

fifteen in 'The Tyger'. In 'The Lamb' all the questions are found in the first stanza while the answers are to be found in the second. The abundance of questions in 'The Tyger' only adds to the bafflement and mystery inherent in the poem. 'The Lamb' begins with the question of the gentle creature's creation and ends with a benediction. 'The Tyger' also begins with the question of the fierce creature's creation and ends more or less on the same note. There has been a natural development in 'The Lamb' but the wheel has come full circle at the end of 'The Tyger'.