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The Tyger

The Poem

“The Tyger” is a short lyric poem of twenty-four lines that asks, without giving explicit answers, how an all-perfect God responsible for innocence and goodness can be the creator of violence and evil. Its questions are unanswerable, for they search a realm altogether beyond human understanding. Divine creation occurs outside time and place through a being who is, by definition, incomprehensible and worthy of the childlike wonder expressed by the poem’s speaker before the terrible beauty of a dark, alien reality.

That William Blake envisioned all reality as a duality of light and dark, peace and violence, good and evil, and innocence and experience is indicated by the full title of the volume in which “The Tyger” appeared: *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. According to Blake’s private mythology, the ideal is an artistically and imaginatively unified humanity (or cosmos) harmonizing the contraries, which, in this volume of his poetry, are split into psychological realms of innocence (vulnerable to victimization by a stifling adult world) and of experience (a fallen world of suffering, evil, and division). Thus, instead of an integrated primal human being, there is in this volume a poem of innocence entitled “The Lamb” juxtaposed to its contrary, “The Tyger,” arguably the greatest and most cryptic lyric poem in Blake’s entire literary canon.

The poem begins with a childlike speaker directly addressing a tiger and receiving no answers to repeated questions about its creation. The first three quatrains describe the beast in terms of a frightening beauty: The tiger is a fiery, luminescent intrusion in the dark forests of the world of experience; it is paradoxically frightening and well-proportioned; its eyes burn ferociously; its heart smoulders with pent-up energy; and its feet evoke dread. The poem asks how a being of divine might (“hand”) and divine design (“eye”) could create this terrible beauty (lines 3-4). In what primordial deep or mysterious steep (as in the Genesis account of the universe’s creation) did the being fashion this fiery beast? Where did the being get the rebellious pride of a Satan, a Daedalus, or a Prometheus to defy the natural order of things and seize the fire engendering this monstrous creature? What kind of strength (“shoulder”), artistry (“art”), and force (“hand”) moulded the dreadful beauty into existence (lines 9-12)?

The fourth quatrain depicts the Creator as an omnipotent blacksmith keeping the beast under rein with a “chain” as the Creator fashioned its mind and yet remained supremely impervious to its terror (lines 13-16). The fifth quatrain is the most difficult to decipher and continues to stress the being’s transcendent omnipotence through an obscure reference to God’s victory over the rebellious angels in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667). The defeated rebel angels become transmuted into stars surrendering their spears in shower-producing tears (Blake’s contemporaries called shooting stars “angel tears”). The all-powerful being paradoxically created this evil and destroyed it, in the same way that this being made the lamb (see Blake’s poem of that title) and its opposite, the tiger (lines 19-20).

How can this be? The final quatrain repeats the first quatrain with haunting effect to deny readers an easy answer to this question, yet it suggests that the creation of evil by the Creator of goodness is true and beautiful, even if the divine paradox is beyond human comprehension.

Forms and Devices

“The Tyger” consists of six quatrains, each with couplet rhymes and a rapid singsong meter of three trochaics and one stressed sound in every line (“Týgr! Týgr! búrnirígr”). Consonance and assonance are pronounced, especially in the repetition of *s* and long *i* sounds throughout the poem. The complex sound system has the incantatory effect of a visionary nursery rhyme, with a childlike speaker probing very adult questions about the ultimate meaning of what remains the mystery of reality.

Like other songs of innocence and experience, “The Tyger” is a miracle of compressed metaphor, word usage, and symbol that explode into a multiple suggestiveness helping the poem attempt to perform the impossible, to apprehend the ineffable, and to rest in wonder before the inscrutable spectacle of a Creator of contraries, of unity supreme over dualities and contradictions.

Compressed metaphors equate the Creator to a blacksmith (lines 13-16) and equate the creation of the tiger to the reckless daring of archetypal rebels such as Satan and Daedalus, who stormed the heavens on wings, or Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods to give light and warmth to the human race (lines 7-8). Compressed word usage (in, for example, line 10) generates the double meaning of a Creator fashioning a heart out of twisted sinew and knotting up the heart to produce pent-up energy in the tiger. Blake’s ellipsis (the deletion of words to the bare minimum needed for communication) pervades the description of the tiger’s traits and the Creator’s attributes. Compressed allusions to Milton’s conquered rebel angels, to the Genesis account of primordial Creation, and to Blake’s “The Lamb” occur in the fifth quatrain to underscore the paradoxical omnipotence of the Creator.

Finally, the tiger itself is a famous example of a compressed and evocative symbol. Blake was a painter-engraver who added colored pictures to accompany the texts of many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Since “The Tyger” included a small painted representation of a four-footed “symmetrical” animal, a reader’s contemplation of the tiger symbol involved both reading and seeing it. The visual and printed symbol of the tiger has an immense complexity of meaning. The tiger signifies more than evil; it also suggests a mysterious, passionate, and violent beauty at odds with the pat, peaceful innocence of its contrary, the symbol of the lamb in Blake’s complementary poem. At the time of the French Revolution, the tiger was popularly conceived as a symbol of revolution. Blake welcomed the French Revolution and might have intended his tiger to be a symbol of something more than repellent evil. The tiger is, although terrifying, part of God’s all-beautiful creation, beyond the human ability to comprehend completely.

Themes and Meanings

“The Tyger” is about the divinity and mysterious beauty of all creation and its transcendence of the limited human perspective of good and evil that the miseries of human experience condition one to assume. Divine creation occurs outside time and place through a being who is, by definition, inscrutable and worthy of the childlike wonder expressed by the poem’s speaker. Humans see contraries and find evil awful; God created the contraries and pronounced them both beautiful.

“The Tyger” is a Blakean song of experience that is to be contrasted with its contrary song of innocence, entitled “The Lamb.” Questions also recur in “The Lamb”: “Little Lamb, who made thee?/ Dost thou know who made thee?” That poem, however, answers the questions it poses with a simple, almost pat affirmation that the Lamb of God the Poet-Christ of the realm of innocence became an innocent to make all humanity innocent in His own image and thereby made all those who are meek and mild worthy of God’s blessing:

He is calléd by thy name, For he calls himself a Lamb: He is meek & he is mild, He became a little child: I a child & thou a lamb, We are calléd by his name.

By contrast, “The Tyger” contains no explicit answers to ultimate questions, although some answers are implicit precisely because of the absence of answers. The mystery of reality does not lend itself to simple, pat formulations of everyday statements. If the poem “The Lamb” excludes all terror and complexity from life and finds only gentleness and mildness, then “The Tyger” rejects such simplemindedness and opposes a doubleness under a Creator of mercy and aggressiveness, peace and violence, and good and evil, all of which are subsumed in a divine beauty beyond limited human power to grasp fully as a unity. The very concept of the tiger’s “fearful symmetry” is a paradox of terrifying richness and terrible beauty that is difficult for the human imagination to apprehend but not for the divine imagination to create.

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