Dear students, since classes can not be taken in ~~classroom~~ in direct mode right now, I have decided to share some study materials with you people, so that you can study at your home. I have provided here an excerpt titled 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' from C.M. Bowra's book The Romantic Imagination. This will help you in your understanding of Blake's poems that are in your syllabus. Please study this along with the poems. I will provide other study materials in due course of time. Please stay at home. Study well and utilise your time. Thank you.

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II

SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

IN 1789, the year of the French Revolution, William Blake issued his *Songs of Innocence* as the first volume to be produced in his new manner of illuminated printing. In 1794 he reissued it in the same manner, but with the addition of *Songs of Experience* to form a single book. This book is noteworthy among Blake's works because it is the only volume of poems which he himself published. The *Poetical Sketches* of 1783 was published by the Reverend Henry Mathew, no doubt with Blake's approval or acquiescence but not with his own loving care. Blake's other publications were either prophetic books or prose works, not poetry in the strict sense. The fact that Blake published the *Songs* as he did shows what importance he attached to them. There can be no doubt that he intended them to be as good as he could make them both in contents and in appearance. The Rossetti manuscript shows not only what pains he took in revising his texts but what self-denial he exerted in omitting from the book poems which are among the best that he wrote but which for some reason he did not think suitable for publication in it. A book formed with such care deserves special attention. Blake was thirty-seven when he issued it in its complete form, and it represents his mature, considered choice of his own poems. It is perhaps not surprising that in recent years scholars have tended to neglect the *Songs* for the prophetic books; for the *Songs* look limpid and translucent, while the prophetic books are rich in unravelled mysteries and alluring secrets. But the *Songs* deserve special attention if only because they constitute one of the most remarkable collections of lyrical poems written in English.

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Blake made in practice a distinction between poetry and prophecy. In the first place, he recognized and maintained a difference of form. In the *Songs* he uses the traditional metres of English songs and hymns without even repeating the experiment, made in *Poetical Sketches*, of lyrical blank verse; in the prophecies, modelling himself on the Bible and Ossian, he uses what is in fact free verse, and his reasons for this are given in the foreword to *Jerusalem:*

> When this Verse was first dictated to me, I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence, like that used by Milton and Shakespeare and all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming, to be a necessary and indispensible part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself.[1]

In the prophecies Blake speaks as an orator and needs an orator's freedom: in the *Songs* he sings and needs the regular measures of song. In the second place, Blake's purpose differs in the *Songs* and in the prophecies. In the prophecies he had a great message for his generation, an urgent call to awake from its slothful sleep, a summons to activity and to that fuller life which comes from exerting the imagination. At the beginning of *Milton* he displays his purpose:

> Rouze up, O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court and the University, who would, if they could, for ever depress Mental and prolong Corporeal War.[2]

This is not the spirit in which Blake begins the *Songs of Innocence* with a poem significantly called "Introduction":

> Piping down the valleys wild,
> Piping songs of pleasant glee,
> On a cloud I saw a child,
> And he laughing said to me:

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course true. The mere meaning, extracted from the poems and paraphrased in lifeless prose, is indeed a poor thing in comparison with what Blake wrote. The poems succeed through the magnificence of their poetry, and no analysis can take its place. At the same time, it is almost impossible to read and enjoy poetry without knowing what it means, for the good reason that the meaning is an essential part of the whole and makes an essential contribution to the delight which the poems give. To acquiesce in ignorance of the meaning is more than can reasonably be asked of us. Human curiosity and the desire to gain as much as possible from a work of art reject this limited approach and force us to ask what the subjects of the poems are. Nor does this destroy our pleasure in them. When we know what Blake means, we appreciate more fully his capacity for transforming complex states of mind into pure song and for giving to his most unusual thoughts an appeal which is somehow both intimate and rapturously exciting.

That Blake intended his readers to understand what he said and to pay an intelligent attention to it is clear from his title-page, which describes the songs as "showing the two contrary states of the human soul." Blake groups his verses under two main headings, and there is plainly a great difference of character between the two parts. In so arranging his work, Blake followed his own maxim that "without Contraries is no progression."[4] The contrast meant much to him, and we neglect it at the risk of misunderstanding his intention. So emphatic a division is not to be found in the prophetic books and shows that, when he chose, Blake could impose a fine architectural order on his work. Perhaps he was able to do this because the material and manner of the songs fall more easily into a definite shape than does the various stuff of the prophetic books. In the *Songs* Blake limits himself to a special section of material which is relatively clear in its outlines and limits. He has distilled his thoughts into the shape of song, and his appeal is more direct and more im-

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mediate than it can be in the more complicated technique of prophecy.

The two sections of Blake's book, the songs of innocence and the songs of experience, are contrasted elements in a single design. The first part sets out an imaginative vision of the state of innocence: the second shows how life challenges and corrupts and destroys it. What Blake intended by this scheme can be seen from the motto which he wrote for the book but did not include in it:

> The Good are attracted by Men's perceptions,
> And think not for themselves;
> Till Experience teaches them to catch
> And to cage the Fairies and Elves.
>
> And then the Knave begins to snarl
> And the Hypocrite to howl;
> And all his good Friends shew their private ends,
> And the Eagle is known from the Owl.

This little poem shows how the *Songs* are related to some of the most persistent elements in Blake's thought. Since for him the primary reality and the only thing that matters is the active life of the creative imagination, he has nothing but contempt for empiricist philosophers who build their systems on sense-perceptions instead of on vision. Blake believes that the naturally good are deceived by such theories and so corrupted by them that they cease to think for themselves, and restrict those creative forces which he calls "fairies and elves." When this happens, knavery, hypocrisy, and self-seeking enter into the soul, and the state of innocence is lost; but for those who have eyes to see, the free, soaring spirit of the eagle is visible in all its difference from the sleepy, night-ridden owl. This is the main theme of the *Songs*. In the first part Blake shows what innocence means, in the second how it is corrupted and destroyed.

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Blake's state of innocence, set forth in symbols of pastoral life akin to those of the Twenty-third Psalm, seems at first sight to have something in common with what Vaughan, Traherne, and Wordsworth say in their different ways about the vision of childhood which is lost in later life, and it is tempting to think that this is what concerns Blake. But he is concerned with the loss not so much of actual childhood as of something wider and less definite. For him childhood is both itself and a symbol of a state of soul which may exist in maturity. His subject is the child-like vision of existence. For him all human beings are in some sense and at some times the children of a divine father, but experience destroys their innocence and makes them follow spectres and illusions. Blake does not write at a distance of time from memories of what childhood once was, but from an insistent, present anguish at the ugly contrasts between the childlike and the experienced conceptions of reality.

With a book which deals with so poignant a subject, it is tempting to look in Blake's own life for some event or circumstances which forced this issue so powerfully on him. That he was deeply troubled by it is clear not merely from the agonized poems of *Songs of Experience* but from the prophetic books, *Tiriel* and *The Book of Thel*, which seem to have been written in 1788 and 1789. In Thel Blake presents a symbolical figure who lives in an Arcadian state of innocence but finds herself appalled and helpless before the first appearances of reality; in *Tiriel* he makes his chief figure die when he realizes that he has erred in substituting the deadening rule of law for the free life of the imagination. Both books are, in a sense, concerned with the tragedy of innocence. Just as Thel is unable to endure reality when she sees it and flies back into eternity, so Har and Heva, who represent an innocence which has outlived its real strength, are unable to help Tiriel in his great need. The problems suggested in these two books are not the same as in the *Songs*, but there seems to be a common basis of experience, something which, even when he was writing the *Songs of Innocence*, deeply

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troubled Blake and forced him to think about this issue in more than one way.

When he composed the *Songs of Experience*, Blake seems to have passed through a spiritual crisis. He, who was in many ways the healthiest of men, wrote in 1793: "I say I shan't live for five years, and if I live one it will be a wonder." Something had shaken his trust in himself and in life. What this was we can only guess, and such clues as are available point to a combination of different causes. The trouble was already there in 1788 when he wrote *Tiriel*, but it seems to have grown and to have preyed more insistently on his mind in the following years. It did not in the least interfere with his creative powers. Indeed, at this time he did an astonishing amount of work both as a poet and as an artist, and most of it is as good as anything that he ever did afterwards. But Blake's genius was not discouraged by trouble and anxiety, and that he had these in full measure is beyond reasonable dispute. In the first place, his rapturous hopes in the French Revolution, expressed in his prophetic book called after it and written in 1791, were soon replaced by the recognition that events were taking a course not to his liking. The English Government was hostile to the Revolution, and Blake's own friends, like Thomas Paine, whom he saved from arrest by a timely warning in 1792, were in danger. What such a disillusionment meant to a visionary like Blake can be seen from his *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, with its passionate denunciations of oppression and slavery. He was brought down with a terrible shock from his visions of reformed humanity to a realization of what political events really were.

In the second place, Blake's domestic life seems at this time to have passed through a strange phase. His excellent wife did not sympathize with his idealistic views of free love and resolutely opposed them. To Blake at first this was an unforeseen denial of the spirit, and it shook him deeply. It seems even for a time to have broken his trust in himself. He found his solution soon enough, and the rest of his life was spent in unclouded happiness

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with his wife. But what he felt at the moment can be seen from his strange poem "William Bond," and especially from three verses in it:

> He went to Church in a May morning
> Attended by Fairies, one, two and three;
> But the Angels of Providence drove them away,
> And he return'd home in misery.
>
> He went not out to the Field nor Fold,
> He went not out to the Village nor Town,
> But he came home in a black, black cloud,
> And took to his Bed, and there lay down.
>
> And an Angel of Providence at his Feet,
> And an Angel of Providence at his Head,
> And in the midst a Black, Black Cloud,
> And in the midst the Sick Man on his Bed.

Since by "fairies" Blake means the impulses of the creative imagination, it is clear that in this crisis his inner life has received a terrible blow from "Angels of Providence." In his language they are the forces of legality and moralism in which he saw the most sinister enemies of the free life of the imagination. He, who had put all his trust in this free life, found himself frustrated and depressed by the forces which he most condemned. Partly in politics, partly in domestic life, partly no doubt in other matters, Blake seems to have discovered that his central and most cherished beliefs were not shared by others but were the object of hatred and persecution. At some date in these years the common world was revealed to him, and he found it more frightening than he had ever suspected. From this discovery the *Songs* were born.

Blake's crisis takes place in a spiritual order of things and involves spiritual values, and for this reason he has to speak of it in symbols. What he describes are not actual events as ordinary men see and understand them, but spiritual events which have to be

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stated symbolically in order that they may be intelligible. In the *Songs of Innocence* Blake's symbols are largely drawn from the Bible, and since he makes use of such familiar figures as the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God, there is not much difficulty in seeing what he means; but in the *Songs of Experience* he often uses symbols of his own making, and his meaning is more elusive. Indeed, some poems in this section are fully understandable only by reference to symbols which Blake uses in his prophetic books; and since the meaning of most symbols tends to be inconstant, there is always a danger that we may make his meaning more emphatic or more exact than it is, especially since, as Blake grew older, he developed his symbols and by placing them in precise contexts gave them a greater definiteness. But in both kinds of song it is clear that Blake anticipates those poets of a hundred years later who forged their own symbols in order to convey what would otherwise be almost inexpressible, since no adequate words exist for the unnamed powers of a supernatural world. Blake's own view of his method can be seen from a letter to Thomas Butts:

> Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding, is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry.[5]

Since by "Corporeal Understanding" Blake means the perception of sense-data, and by "Intellectual powers" the imaginative spirit which is the only reality, it is clear that in his view poetry is concerned with something else than the phenomenal world, and that the only means to speak of it is what he calls "allegory." It is true that elsewhere he sometimes speaks disparagingly of allegory, but that is because he distinguishes between true and false allegory.[6] For him allegory in the good sense is not the kind of "one-one correspondence" which we find in *Pilgrim's Progress,* but a system of symbols which presents events in a spiritual world.

In the *Songs of Innocence* the symbols convey a special kind of existence or state of soul. In this state human beings have the

same kind of security and assurance as belongs to lambs under a wise shepherd or to children with loving parents. Nor is it untrue to say that both the shepherd and the father of Blake's poems is God. It is He who is Himself a lamb and becomes a little child, who watches over sleeping children and gives his love to chimney-sweepers and little black boys. In the fatherhood of God, Blake's characters have equal rights and privileges. 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, but says expressly:

> 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.[7]

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

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is able to transform existence. For Blake, God is the divine essence which exists potentially in every man and woman.

The power and appeal of this belief appear in "The Divine Image." The divine image, of course, is man, but man in part of his complex being and seen from a special point of view. Blake speaks quite literally and means to be taken at his word when he says:

> To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
> All pray in their distress;
> And to these virtues of delight
> Return their thankfulness.
>
> For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
> Is God, our father dear,
> And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
> Is Man, his child and care.
>
> For Mercy has a human heart
> Pity a human face,
> And Love, the human form divine,
> And Peace, the human dress.
>
> Then every man, of every clime,
> That prays in his distress,
> Prays to the human form divine,
> Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.
>
> And all must love the human form,
> In heathen, turk, or jew;
> Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
> There God is dwelling too.

The divine qualities which Blake enumerates exist in man and reveal their divine character through him. Though Blake says of man's imagination that "it manifests itself in his Works of Art,"[8] he spread his idea of art to include all that he thought most im-

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portant and most living in conduct. In mercy, pity, peace, and love, he found the creed of brotherhood which is the centre of his gospel. He knew that by itself love may become selfish and possessive and needs to be redeemed by other, generous qualities. It is in the combination of these that man is God. In the state of innocence, life is governed by these powers, and it is they which give to it its completeness and security. That is why Blake calls his *Songs of Innocence* "happy songs" and says that every child will joy to hear them.

In his prophetic books Blake presents something like the state of innocence in what he calls Beulah, a kind of lower paradise, inferior indeed to the highest state of the active imagination which he calls Eden, but superior to the lower states in which reason inhibits and kills the imagination. His Beulah has its own peculiar charm, as of a world of dream:

> There is from Great Eternity a mild and pleasant rest
> Nam'd Beulah, a soft Moony Universe, feminine, lovely,
> Pure, mild and Gentle, given in mercy to those who sleep,
> Eternally Created by the Lamb of God around,
> On all sides, within and without the Universal Man.
> The daughters of Beulah follow sleepers in all their dreams,
> Creating spaces, lest they fall into Eternal Death.[9]

When he wrote that, Blake had already decided that Beulah was not the highest state. It is not perfect because there is no effort or struggle in it as there is in Eden, and a full personality can be realized only if men leave Beulah for a state less confined and less secure. There can be little doubt that even when he wrote the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake had formed some of these ideas. He saw that though this state of childlike happiness, which he seems to have enjoyed in his first manhood, is wonderfully charming, it is not everything, and it cannot last. To reach a higher state man must be tested by experience and suffering. This is the link between the two sections of Blake's book. Experience is not only a

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fact; it is a necessary stage in the cycle of being. It may in many ways be a much lower state than innocence, and this Blake stresses with great power, but it is none the less necessary. The difference between the two states is reflected in the quality of Blake's poetry. Sweet and pure though the *Songs of Innocence* are, they do not possess or need the compelling passion of the *Songs of Experience*. In dealing with innocence Blake seems deliberately to have set his tone in a quiet key to show what innocence really means in his full scheme of spiritual development. He was careful to exclude from the first part of his book anything which might sound a disturbing note or suggest that innocence is anything but happy. That is why he omitted a striking verse which he wrote in the first version of "A Cradle Song":

> O, the cunning wiles that creep
> In thy little heart asleep.
> When thy little heart does wake,
> Then the dreadful lightnings break.

The illusion of childhood and of the human state which resembles it must be kept free from such intruding suggestions, and there must be no hint that innocence is not complete and secure.

From innocence man passes to experience, and what Blake means by this can be seen from some lines in *The Four Zoas*:

> What is the price of Experience? do men buy it for a song?
> Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price
> Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.
> Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,
> And in the wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain.[10]

Blake knew that experience is bought at a bitter price, not merely in such unimportant things as comfort and peace of mind, but

in the highest spiritual values. His *Songs of Experience* are the poetry of this process. They tell how what we accept in childlike innocence is tested and proved feeble by actual events, how much that we have taken for granted is not true of the living world, how every noble desire may be debased and perverted. When he sings of this process, he is no longer the piper of pleasant glee but an angry, passionate rebel. In "Infant Sorrow" he provides a counterpart to his "Introduction" and shows that even in the very beginnings of childhood there is a spirit of unrest and revolt:

> My mother groan'd! my father wept.
> Into the dangerous world I leapt:
> Helpless, naked, piping loud:
> Like a fiend hid in a cloud.
>
> Struggling in my father's hands,
> Striving against my swadling bands,
> Bound and weary, I thought best
> To sulk upon my mother's breast.

At the start of its existence the human creature feels itself a prisoner and, after its first efforts to resist, angrily gives up the struggle.

When experience destroys the state of childlike innocence, it puts many destructive forces in its place. To show the extent of this destruction Blake places in the *Songs of Experience* certain poems which give poignant contrasts to other poems which appear in the *Songs of Innocence*. For instance, in the first "Nurse's Song" he tells how children play and are allowed to go on playing until the light fades and it is time to go to bed. In this Blake symbolizes the care-free play of the imagination when it is not spoiled by senseless restrictions. But in the second "Nurse's Song" we hear the other side of the matter, when experience has set to work:

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When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisp'rings are heard in the dale,
When days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.

Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night arise;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,
And your winter and night in disguise.

The voice that now speaks is not that of loving care but of sour age, envious of a happiness which it can no longer share and eager to point out the menaces and the dangers of the dark. It sees play as a waste of time and cruelly tells the children that their life is a sham passed in darkness and cold, like one of Blake's terrible prophetic scenes of desolation, as in *The Four Zoas:*

But from the caves of deepest night, ascending in clouds of mist,
The winter spread his wide black wings across from pole to pole:
Grim frost beneath and terrible snow, link'd in a marriage chain,
Began a dismal dance. The winds around on pointed rocks
Settled like bats innumerable, ready to fly abroad.[11]

The first and most fearful thing about experience is that it breaks the free life of the imagination and substitutes a dark, cold, imprisoning fear, and the result is a deadly blow to the blithe human spirit.

The fear and denial of life which come with experience breed hypocrisy, and this earns some of Blake's hardest and harshest words. For him hypocrisy is as grave a sin as cruelty because it rises from the same causes, from the refusal to obey the creative spirit of the imagination and from submission to fear and envy. He marks its character by providing an antithesis to "The Divine Image" in "The Human Abstract." In bitter irony he shows how love, pity, and mercy can be distorted and used as a cover for

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base or cowardly motives. Speaking through the hypocrite's lips, he goes straight to the heart of the matter by showing how glibly hypocrisy claims to observe these cardinal virtues:

> Pity would be no more
> If we did not make somebody Poor;
> And Mercy no more could be
> If all were as happy as we.

In this corrupt frame of mind, selfishness and cruelty flourish and are dignified under false names. This process wrecks the world. Harsh rules are imposed on life through what Blake calls "Mystery," with its ceremonies and hierarchies and its promise of "an allegorical abode where existence hath never come."[12] It supports those outward forms of religion which Blake regards as the death of the soul:

> Soon spreads the dismal shade
> Of Mystery over his head;
> And the Catterpiller and Fly
> Feed on the Mystery.
>
> And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
> Ruddy and sweet to eat;
> And the Raven his nest has made
> In its thickest shade.
>
> The Gods of the earth and sea
> Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree;
> But their search was all in vain:
> There grows one in the Human Brain.[13]

So Blake re-creates the myth of the Tree of Knowledge or of Life. This tree, which is fashioned by man's reason, gives falsehood instead of truth and death instead of life.

Perhaps the worst thing in experience, as Blake sees it, is that it destroys love and affection. On no point does he speak

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with more passionate conviction. He who believes that the full life demands not merely tolerance but forgiveness and brotherhood finds that in various ways love is corrupted or condemned. In "The Clod and the Pebble" he shows how love naturally seeks not to please itself or have any care for itself, but in the world of experience the heart becomes like "a pebble of the brook" and turns love into a selfish desire for possession:

> Love seeketh only Self to please,
> To bind another to Its delight,
> Joys in another's loss of ease,
> And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.

The withering of the affections begins early, when their elders repress and frighten children. In "Holy Thursday" Blake shows what this means, how in a rich and fruitful land children live in misery:

> And their sun does never shine,
> And their fields are bleak and bare,
> And their ways are fill'd with thorns:
> It is eternal winter there.

The horror of experience is all the greater because of the contrast, explicit or implicit, which Blake suggests between it and innocence. In "The Echoing Green" he tells how the children are happy and contented at play, but in "The Garden of Love," to the same rhythm and with the same setting, he presents an ugly antithesis. The green is still there, but on it is a chapel with "Thou shalt not" written over the door, and the garden itself has changed:

> And I saw it was filled with graves,
> And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
> And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
> And binding with briars my joys and desires.

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In the state of experience, jealousy, cruelty, and hypocrisy forbid the natural play of the affections and turn joy into misery.

Blake's tragic appreciation of the restrictions which imprison and kill the living spirit was no purely personal thing. It was his criticism of society, of the whole trend of contemporary civilization. His compassionate heart was outraged and wounded by the sufferings which society inflicts on its humbler members and by the waste of human material which seems indispensable to the efficient operation of rules and laws. In "London" he gives his own view of that "chartered liberty" on which his countrymen prided themselves, and exposes the indisputable, ugly facts:

> I wander thro' each charter'd street,
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
>
> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.
>
> How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
> Every black-ning Church appalls;
> And the hapless Soldier's sigh
> Runs in blood down Palace walls.
>
> But most thro' midnight streets I hear
> How the youthful Harlot's curse
> Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
> And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

The child chimney-sweeper, the soldier, and the harlot are Blake's types of the oppressed – characteristic victims of a system based not on brotherhood but on fear. Each in his own way shows up the shams on which society thrives. The chimney-

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sweeper's condemned life is supported by the churches; the soldier's death is demanded by the court; and the harlot's calling is forced on her by the marriage-laws. The contrasts between truth and pretence, between natural happiness and unnatural repression, are stressed by Blake in these three examples, and through them we see the anguish in which he faced the social questions of his time.

The astonishing thing about the *Songs of Experience* is that, though they were inspired by violent emotions and have a merciless satirical temper, they are in the highest degree lyrical. Indeed, no English poet, except Shakespeare, has written songs of such lightness and melody. Yet Blake's subjects are not in the least like Shakespeare's. He writes not about fundamental matters like spring and love and death, but about his own original and complex views on existence; and the miracle is that in presenting themes which might seem to need comment and explanation, he succeeds in creating pure song. His words have an Elizabethan lilt, a music which emphasizes their meaning and conforms exactly to it. Despite his strong emotions and his unfamiliar ideas, Blake keeps his form miraculously limpid and melodious. This success is partly the result of a highly discriminating art. Blake made many changes in his texts before he was satisfied with a final version, and these show how well he knew what he was doing, how clear an idea he had of the result which he wished to reach. But this art was shaped by a creative impulse so powerful that it can only be called inspiration. Blake indeed believed that his words were often dictated to him by some supernatural power. As he wrote to Thomas Butts about a prophetic book, "I may praise it, since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary; the Authors are in Eternity." [14] In the strange workings of the creative mind there is a point at which words come with such force and intensity that they have a more than human appeal. Though the poet may not receive them all at once but gradually find, as Blake did, the exact words which he needs, yet these songs are miracles because their creation cannot be

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explained and because with them we feel ourselves in the presence of something beyond the control of man.

Two examples must suffice to illustrate Blake's art of song, and each is equally wonderful. The first is "The Sick Rose":

> O Rose, thou art sick!
> The invisible worm
> That flies in the night,
> In the howling storm,
>
> Has found out thy bed
> Of crimson joy,
> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy.

This illustrates in an astonishing way Blake's gift for distilling a complex imaginative idea into a few marvellously telling words. If we ask what the poem means, we can answer that it means what it says, and that this is perfectly clear. It conjures up the vision of a rose attacked in a stormy night by a destructive worm, and so Blake depicts it in his accompanying illustration. But, as in all symbolical poems, we can read other meanings into it and make its images carry a weight of secondary associations. We may say that it refers to the destruction of love by selfishness, of innocence by experience, of spiritual life by spiritual death. All these meanings it can bear, and it is legitimate to make it do so. But the actual poem presents something which is common and fundamental to all these themes, something which Blake has distilled so finely from many particular cases that it has their common, quintessential character. And this Blake sees with so piercing and so concentrated a vision that the poem has its own independent life and needs nothing to supplement it. If we wish to know more about Blake's views on the issues at which the poem hints, we may find them in his prose works and prophetic books. But here he is a poet, and his thoughts are purified and transfigured in song.

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My second example is "Ah! Sun-flower!":

> Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
> Who countest the steps of the Sun,
> Seeking after that sweet golden clime
> Where the traveller's journey is done:
>
> Where the Youth pined away with desire,
> And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow
> Arise from their graves, and aspire
> Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

This raises questions similar to those raised by "The Sick Rose." Again a complex thought is distilled into two verses, and again what matters is the imaginative presentation which transports us in intense, excited delight. Here Blake's theme is not quite so single as in "The Sick Rose." He has transposed into this song his central ideas and feelings about all young men and young women who are robbed of their full humanity because they are starved of love. Because of this, the youth pines away with desire and the pale virgin is shrouded in snow. It is the pathos of their earth-bound state that the song catches and makes significant through Blake's deep compassion. The central spring of the poem is the image of the sun flower. The flower which turns its head to follow the sun's course and is yet rooted in the earth is Blake's symbol for all men and women whose lives are dominated and spoiled by a longing which they can never hope to satisfy, and who are held down to the earth despite their desire for release into some brighter, freer sphere. In this poem Blake expresses an idea which means a great deal to him, but he does not explain or elaborate it. He assumes that his poem will do its work by itself, and his reward is that "Ah! Sun flower" belongs to that very rare and small class of poems in which inspiration carries words to a final enchantment.

The *Songs of Experience* are more powerful and more magical than the *Songs of Innocence* because they are born of a

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deep anguish, from a storm in the poet's soul. Blake knows that one kind of existence is bright with joy and harmony, but he sees its place taken by another which is dark and sinister and dead. But Blake was not content simply to complain or to criticize. He sought some ultimate synthesis in which innocence might be wedded to experience, and goodness to knowledge. That such a state is possible he reveals in the first poem of *Songs of Experience*, where he speaks with the voice of the bard and summons the fallen soul of earth to some vast apocalypse:

> O Earth, O Earth, return!
> Arise from out the dewy grass;
> Night is worn,
> And the morn
> Rises from the slumberous mass.
>
> Turn away no more;
> Why wilt thou turn away?
> The starry floor,
> The wat'ry shore,
> Is giv'n thee till the break of day.

The world is still wrapped in darkness, but the stars which pierce the night are a sign of other things to come, and the sea of eternity beats on the narrow shore where mankind lives.[15] The "break of day" is Blake's symbol for the new life in which both innocence and experience are transformed, and the soul passes in its cycle to a fuller, more active life in the creative imagination. As Blake says in a note written on a page of *The Four Zoas*:

> *Unorganiz'd Innocence: An Impossibility.*
> Innocence dwells with Wisdom, but never with Ignorance.[16]

The true innocence is not after all that of the *Songs of Innocence*, but something which has gained knowledge from the ugly lessons of experience and found an expanding strength in the unfettered

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life of the creative soul. Beyond experience Blake foresees this consummation and hints that it will come, even though he is concerned with the dark hither side of it.

Blake knows well that such a consummation will not come simply from good will or pious aspirations and that the life of the imagination is possible only through passion and power and energy. That is why he sometimes stresses the great forces which lie hidden in man and may be terrifying but are none the less necessary if anything worth while is to happen. He sees that the creative activity of the imagination and the transformation of experience through it are possible only through the release and exercise of awful powers. He chooses his symbols for these powers in violent and destructive things, as when in his *Proverbs of Hell* he says, "The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God," or "The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity, too great for the eye of man." [17] It was in such elemental forces that Blake put his trust for the redemption of mankind, and he contrasted them favourably with the poor efforts of the human intelligence: "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." The wrath which Blake found in Christ, his symbol of the divine spirit which will not tolerate restrictions but asserts itself against established rules, was the means by which he hoped to unite innocence and experience in some tremendous synthesis.

The poetry of this desire and of what it meant to Blake can be seen in "The Tyger." Here, too, enraptured song conveys in essential vision some themes which Blake presents elsewhere in more detail. This is the pure poetry of his trust in cosmic forces. The images of "The Tyger" recur in the prophetic books, but in the poem, detached from any very specific context, they have a special strength and freedom. The tiger is Blake's symbol for the fierce forces in the soul which are needed to break the bonds of experience. The "forests of the night," in which the tiger lurks, are ignorance, repression, and superstition. It has been fashioned by unknown, supernatural spirits, like Blake's mythical heroes,

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Orc and Los, prodigious smiths who beat out living worlds with their hammers; and this happened when "the stars threw down their spears," that is, in some enormous cosmic crisis when the universe turned round in its course and began to move from light to darkness — as Urizen says in *The Four Zoas,* when he finds that passion and natural joy have withered under his rule and the power of the spirit has been weakened:

> I went not forth: I hid myself in black clouds of my wrath;
> I call'd the stars around my feet in the night of councils dark;
> The stars threw down their spears and fled naked away.[18]

If we wish to illustrate "The Tyger" from Blake's other works, it is easy to do so, and it adds much to our understanding of its background and its place in Blake's development. But it is first and last a poem. The images are so compelling that for most purposes they explain themselves, and we have an immediate, overwhelming impression of an awful power lurking in the darkness of being and forcing on us questions which pierce to the heart of life:

> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
>
> In what distant deeps or skies
> Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
> On what wings dare he aspire?
> What the hand dare sieze the fire?
>
> And what shoulder, and what art,
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
> And when thy heart began to beat,
> What dread hand? and what dread feet?
>
> What the hammer? what the chain?
> In what furnace was thy brain?

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What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Just as early in the *Songs of Innocence* Blake sets his poem about the lamb, with its artless question,

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

so early in the *Songs of Experience* Blake sets his poem about the tiger with its more frightening and more frightened questions. The lamb and the tiger are symbols for two different states of the human soul. When the lamb is destroyed by experience, the tiger is needed to restore the world.

In the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* there are only hints of the final consummation which shall restore men to the fullness of joy. The poems are concerned with an earlier stage in the struggle and treat of it from a purely poetical standpoint. What Blake gives is the essence of his imaginative thought about this crisis in himself and in all men. When he completed the whole book in its two parts, he knew that the state of innocence is not enough, but he had not found his full answer to his doubts and questions. From this uncertainty he wrote his miraculous poetry. Against the negative powers, which he found so menacingly in the ascendant, he set, both in theory and in practice, his gospel of the imagination. Strange as some of his ideas may be to

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us, the poetry comes with an unparalleled force because of the prodigious release of creative energy which has gone to its making. The prophet of gigantic catastrophes and celestial reconciliations was also a poet who knew that poetry alone could make others share his central experiences. In the passion and the tenderness of these songs there is something beyond analysis, that living power of the imagination which was the beginning and the end of Blake's activity. In *A Vision of the Last Judgment* he says:

"What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round "disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty."[19]

Because Blake pierced beyond the visible world to these eternal powers and made them his daily company, he was able to give to his poetry the clarity and the brightness of vision.

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