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## Wisdom through Journey of Contraries: An Analysis of Innocence and Experience in William Blake's Songs

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### Abstract

Blake is a poet who is aware of the contraries manifested in life. These contraries are highlighted in his Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. There is a strain of both innocence and experience in each of the works. The two co-exist as well as complement one another. This paper shows the instances of experience in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The meaning of innocence is not realized without the presence of experience and vice versa. Blake's illustrations of his poems also throw light on the lurking world of experience.

### Keywords

Wisdom; Journey of Contraries; *Songs of Innocence and Experience*;

William Blake.

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“Without Contraries is no progression,” said [William Blake](#) – and without contraries there would certainly have been no William Blake. His imagination was shaped by the diversity of London itself, and by the contrasting, semi-rural landscape that began a couple of miles north of Soho's teeming Broad Street, where his father was a hosier. When, at the age of fourteen, he wrote the Song that begins, “How sweet I roamed from field to field,” it was an imaginative and impassioned response to his father's decision to send him to drawing school. And so the stage was set for another career of reconciled contraries: the tactile, smelly, thoroughly physical process of copper-engraving and the more elusive mental activity of making poems.

It is significant that Blake wrote the *Song of Innocence* before French Revolution but wrote the *Songs of Experience* after the dissolution that followed the carnage and collapse of justice, a few years after the calls for liberty and fraternity were enthusiastically answered. Blake does not praise innocence and damn experience, but states that both should lead somewhere-evenly to wisdom.

Blake considered *The Holy Bible* a source of his greatest pleasure. The way he read Bible was different. It was in a diabolical sense, that he read Bible as if he read it in the company of the evil. This is an act of understanding life from both ends. That is, true wisdom can be achieved only by understanding ends, the good and evil.

For Blake, the devil is a friend, not adversary because wisdom is reachable only through reason, not through faith. Wisdom is a compound of the knowledge of good and evil. Knowledge of good alone cannot be called wisdom. Innocence must be focused with experience.

Blake's idealism is no simple, reformist matter: it encompasses moral paradox, or, as we might call it these days, Relativism. His *Songs of Experience* were intended to be satires on the *Songs of Innocence* – a series which had begun as a chapbook of images entitled *For Children: the Gates of Paradise*. At first

separate publications, the collections were finally combined as *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* sewing the two contrary states of the human soul, with the *Songs of Experience* engraved, literally, on the back of the *Songs of Innocence*. But the effect of Experience on Innocence is less one of mockery than of moral complication. The Divine Image and The Human Image exemplify this relationship.

In his illuminating biography, *Blake* (1995), Peter Akroyd points out that “there may even have been copies of the combined volumes in which Experience preceded Innocence”. Placing the two poems side-by-side might help illuminate the Blakean spirit of mutually energizing contraries.

*Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are the most attractive sets of works by William Blake. *Songs of Innocence* depicts a world through the eyes of innocence, holding a hopeful attitude toward the world. On the other hand, *Songs of Experience* portrays another aspect of life in which the world is much darker sufferings are revealed in these songs and a sense of hopelessness penetrates. *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* juxtapose to give us a full vision of the world sewing the two contrary states of the human soul is included in the title page of Blake’s work. His ideas of contraries are shown in the two series of songs as some *Songs of Innocence* have their counterparts in *Songs of Experience*.

“Infant Joy” and “Infant Sorrow” are two poems from *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, respectively that serve as representatives to illustrate Blake’s idea of contraries. Blake tells us that through the eyes of the innocent, the world is beautiful and enjoyable. However, as experience accumulates, the world slowly becomes ugly and depressing. The innocent world presents an imaginative and ideal way of thinking whereas the experienced world tells us what reality is.

“Infant Joy” in *Songs of Innocence* symbolises the first stage of innocence, that is, infancy. The poem is a monologue by a two-day-old baby. The baby is delighted, and his heart is filled with ecstasy his name is Joy. The innocent state

of the human soul is shown in the poem. Blake depicts from the baby's point of view that at the time of entering the world, it is sweet and full of joy. He feels that he is gladly accepted by his mother and welcomed by the world. This presents an optimistic view of life, and a harmonious and warm atmosphere prevails in the poem. It is an enchanting poem full of hope and brightness. The world is ideal in the eyes of the innocent child and he foresees his future to be a promising one.

"Infant Sorrow" in *Songs of Experience* presents a contrary state of infancy to that of *Songs of Innocence*. The child in "Infant Sorrow" can think, come to a decision, and act upon that decision. This is an experienced child and the world in which he enters is unfavourable and unpleasant: it is a dangerous world. He does not feel the protection from his parents, but rather he feels he is bound. He wants to be free from his father's hands and the bands.

However, his efforts are futile and at last he surrenders to sulk upon his mother's breast and acts as what babies should act. It is rather sad that the child, at the time of his infancy, is already discontent with the world. This is a pessimistic sense of life, and his unhappiness gives the impression that he is unwilling to be born. His birth also has not brought happiness to the parents his mother groaned and his father wept. The world illustrated in "Infant Sorrow" is dark and the atmosphere is gloomy. We are presented with an impression that the child is going to lead a grievous and miserable life.

"Infant Joy" and "Infant Sorrow" demonstrate successfully what Blake means by the idea of contraries. Both poems depict the first stage of life: infancy and its potential development. It shows that contrary states exist within a human soul and the two states are interrelated.

Many of Blake's poems are found in two contraries: *Songs of Innocence* (1789) to which was added in 1794, *Songs of Experience*. The complete collection was called the songs of innocence and experiences sewing the two contrary states of human soul. His songs juxtapose the innocent, pastoral world of childhood with an adult world of corruption and repression. "The Lamb" represents a meek

virtue and “The Tyger” exhibits opposing, darker forces. Thus the collection as a whole explores the value and limitations of two different perspectives on the world. Many of the poems fall into pairs, so that the same situation or problem is seen through the lens of innocence first and then experience.

Blake does not identify himself wholly with either view. Most of the poems are dramatic—that is, in the voice of a speaker other than the poet himself. Blake stands outside innocence and experience, in a distanced position from which he hopes to recognize and correct the fallacies of both. In particular, he pits himself against despotic authority, restrictive morality, sexual repression, and institutionalized religion. Broadly speaking the collections look at human nature and society in optimistic and pessimistic terms, respectively and Blake thinks that one should need both sides to see the whole truth.

The *Songs of Innocence* dramatizes the naive hopes and fears that inform the lives of children and trace their transformation as the child grows into adulthood. Some of the poems are written from the perspective of children, while others are about children as seen from an adult’s perspective. Many of the poems draw attention to the positive aspects of natural human understanding prior to the corruption and distortion of experience. Others take a more critical stance toward innocent purity. The *Songs of Experience* work via parallels and contrasts to lament the ways in which the harsh experiences of adult life destroy what is good in innocence, while also articulating the weaknesses of the innocent perspective (“The Tyger” for example, attempts to account for real, negative forces in the universe, which innocence fails to confront). These latter poems treat sexual morality in terms of the repressive effects of jealousy, shame, and secrecy, all of which corrupt the ingenuousness of innocent love. With regard to religion, they are less concerned with the character of individual faith than with the institution of the Church, its role in politics, and its effects on society and the individual mind. Experience thus adds a layer to innocence that darkens its hopeful vision while compensating for some of its blindness.

Blake heightened the integration of contraries in the songs by giving overall work the subtitle, “*sewing the two contraries of the human soul*”. The most contrary relationship in the songs, of course, is that between innocence and experience. For Blake, as a quick perusal of the songs will show, innocence was largely associated. But, as a more methodical perusal will show, these associations are not absolute.

“It would be wrong to think of experience as any wiser than innocence” as noted by Nicholas Marsh or anymore cynical or word-weary. It would be equally wrong to think on innocence as more joyful or playful. There are elements of both in each. For Blake, these were virtual time-space or mind-states with postal from one or the other appearing in either world that concerned Blake, but rather the road between them which eventually led beyond all dualities.

Blake wanted his reader to hold both contraries in view in a kind of double vision. As he wrote in a letter to Thomas Butt, “for double the vision / And a double vision is always with me”. As for Blake’s view, neither the body nor the soul is to be studied in isolation as this world fail to show the fruitful contest they have with imagination.

The poem “The Lamb” begins with the question, “Little Lamb, who made thee?” The speaker, a child, asks the lamb about its origins: how it came into being, how it acquired its particular manner of feeding, its “clothing” of wool, its “tender voice.” In the next stanza, the speaker attempts a riddling answer to his own question: the lamb was made by one who “calls himself a Lamb,” one who resembles in his gentleness both the child and the lamb. The poem ends with the child bestowing a blessing on the lamb.

The lamb of course symbolizes Jesus Christ. The traditional image of Jesus as a lamb underscores the Christian values of gentleness, meekness, and peace. The image of the child is also associated with Jesus. Jesus displays a special solicitude for children, and the Bible’s depiction of Jesus in his childhood shows him as guileless and vulnerable. These are also the characteristics from which the child-speaker approaches the ideas of nature and of God. This poem, like

many of the *Songs of Innocence*, accepts what Blake saw as the more positive aspects of conventional Christian belief. But it does not provide a completely adequate doctrine, because it fails to account for the presence of suffering and evil in the world.

The pendant (or companion) poem to this one, found in the *Songs of Experience*, is “The Tyger”; taken together, the two poems give a perspective on religion that includes the good and clear as well as the terrible and inscrutable. These poems complement each other to produce a fuller account than either offers independently. They offer a good instance of how Blake himself stands somewhere outside the perspectives of innocence and experience he projects.

The poem “The Tiger” begins with the speaker asking a fearsome tiger what kind of divine being could have created it: “What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” Each subsequent stanza contains further questions. From what part of the cosmos could the tiger’s fiery eyes have come, and who would have dared to handle that fire? What sort of physical presence, and what kind of dark craftsmanship, would have been required to “twist the sinews” of the tiger’s heart? The speaker wonders how, once that horrible heart “began to beat,” its creator would have had the courage to continue the job. Comparing the creator to a blacksmith, he ponders the anvil and the furnace that the project would have required and the smith who could have wielded them. And when the job was done, the speaker wonders, how would the creator have felt? “Did he smile his work to see?” Could this possibly be the same being that made the lamb?

The opening question enacts what will be the single dramatic gesture of the poem, and each subsequent stanza elaborates on this conception. Blake is building on the conventional idea that nature, like a work of art, must in some way contain a reflection of its creator. The tiger is strikingly beautiful yet also horrific in its capacity for violence. What kind of a God, then, could or would design such a terrifying beast as the tiger? In more general terms, what does the undeniable existence of evil and violence in the world tell us about the nature of

God, and what does it mean to live in a world where a being can at once contain both beauty and horror?

The reference to the lamb in the penultimate stanza reminds the reader that a tiger and a lamb have been created by the same God, and raises questions about the implications of this. It also invites a contrast between the perspectives of “experience” and “innocence” represented here and in the poem “The Lamb”. “The Tyger” consists entirely of unanswered questions, and the poet leaves us to sense awe at the complexity of creation, the sheer magnitude of God’s power, and the inscrutability of divine will. The perspective of experience in this poem involves a sophisticated acknowledgment of what is unexplainable in the universe, presenting evil as the prime example of something that cannot be denied, but will not withstand facile explanation, either.

“The Divine Image” is one of the Blake’s most rhetorical Songs. The speaker praises both God and man while asserting an identity between the two. “The Divine Image” thus differs from most of the other *Songs of Innocence*, which deal with the emotional power of conventional Christian faith, and the innocent belief in a supreme, benevolent, and protective God, rather than with the parallels between these transcendent realms and the realm of man.

The poem uses personification to dramatize Christ’s mediation between God and Man. Beginning with abstract qualities (the four virtues: mercy, pity, peace, and love), the poem makes these abstractions the object of human prayer and piety. The second stanza explains this somewhat strange notion by equating the virtues with God himself. But the idea is still slightly unorthodox, suggesting as it does that we pray to these abstract virtues because they are God, rather than praying to God because he has these sympathetic qualities. The poem seems to emphasize that mercy, pity, peace, and love are not God’s characteristics but his substance—they are precisely what we mean when we speak of God.

The speaker now claims that mercy, pity, peace, and love are also equivalent to Man: it is in humans that these qualities find a kind of



embodiment, and they become recognizable because their features (heart, face, body, clothes) are basically human. Thus when we think of God, we are modeling Him after these ideal human qualities. And when people pray, regardless of who or where they are, or to what God they think they are praying, they actually worship “the human form divine”—what is ideal, or most godly, in human beings. Blake’s “The Divine Image” is therefore a reversed one: the poem constructs God in the image of man rather (whereas, in the Bible, God creates man in his image).

The poem does not explicitly mention Christ, but the four virtues that Blake assigns alternately to man and God are the ones conventionally associated with Jesus. Because Christ was both God and man, he becomes the vehicle for Blake’s mediation between the two. But the fact that he is the abstraction of the best in humanity underscores the elaborate intellectualization involved in Christian doctrine. Blake himself favors a more direct identification between what is human and what is divine. Thus the companion poem in *Songs of Experience*, “The Human Abstract” goes further toward exposing the elaborate institutions of religion as mental confabulations that obscure rather than honor the true identity of God and man.

In the four central stanzas, Blake's argument becomes less clear, but a number of things are worthy of note: that "peace", usually a good thing, may be the result of "mutual fear" (Blake anticipates in a single line the modern idea of deterrence - that peace is achieved by would-be enemies living in fear of each other), and how, in “The Human Abstract”, good things like “holy fears”, “tears” and “humility”, are mixed up with wickedness –“mutual fear”, “the selfish loves” and “cruelty” - in “the dismal shade/Of Mystery”. Cruelty, as he “knits a snare” or “spreads his baits” is likened to a pitiless hunter (snares and baits would be used to catch small game; “his” suggests a person, not an abstraction) while the idea of sickness or corruption is suggested by the “Caterpillar and Fly” which “Feed on the (tree of) Mystery”. As in “A Poison Tree” there is attractive fruit, though we do not know who is to eat it. The “thickest shade”, where the “Raven”

nesses, suggests the secrecy and obscurity of the “Human Abstract” here described.

The final stanza gives us the key to the poem: the “Gods” sought “in vain” in the natural world for such a tree, but the poet knows it is found “in the Human Brain” - that its existence is real, but metaphorical, rather than literal. The tree and its fruit suggest particularly the tree, in *Genesis*, of the knowledge of good and evil: as man has eaten the fruit of this tree, so he has gained this forbidden knowledge, which is particularly the subject of the poem's first two stanzas.

In talking about his choice of poetry for *contraries*, Blake believed men and women were the source of all wisdom, power, and love, and that they should live up to their amazing potential. He believed that the dogma of the Church of England and the mores of English society stifled creative and imaginative thinking, cheating men and women of one of their natural birthrights.

Biblical language elsewhere proves this contrary. When young Solomon prays for wisdom at the beginning of his kingship—a prayer that pleases God—he asks for a heart that discerns good and evil, using the same language that gives a name to this tree (1 Kings 3:9). It is worth pointing out also that Scripture calls wisdom “a tree of life” (Prov. 3:19) just like the other tree that is in the midst of the Garden (Gen. 2:9). So both trees represent wisdom. And the Bible never suggests it is wrong to desire wisdom. On the contrary, the scriptural command is briskly unambiguous: “Get wisdom!” (Prov. 4:7). Nothing in Scripture suggests that God would want his creatures to be foolish rather than wise.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of Us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Many persons are surprised that men have fallen by the impulse of Satan into eternal destruction and yet never by a single word explain how the tempter himself had revolted from God. And hence it has arisen, that fanatical men have dreamed that Satan was created evil and wicked as he is here described. But the revolt of Satan is proved by other passages of Scripture; and it is an impious madness to ascribe to God the creation of any evil and corrupt nature. When He had completed the world, he himself gave this testimony to all his works, that they were very good. Wherefore, without controversy, we must conclude, that the principle of evil with which Satan was endued was not from nature, but from defection; because he had departed from God, the fountain of justice and of all rectitude.

Wisdom does not just grow on trees. It is the fruit of a long process of maturation and experience. These metaphors, still built into our language help us see the point of the ancient story from the scripture, *The Book of Genesis*. If wisdom is to be ours, it must grow in us slowly like a tree—a tree of life—and at the end of the long growing we have its ripe fruit, sweet to the taste, which is the knowledge of good and evil. The kind of knowledge by which a king may rule well and any of us may govern our lives well. This fruit of wisdom is at the beginning beyond us and outside us, but it is not to remain there forever.

In all the poems, there is a clear connection between the outward subjects and the deeper truths they express. Thus *The Tyger* and *The Lamb* are apparently about a wild and a tame animal, but are really about God's power in creation or the power of the natural world and the nature of God as shown in Jesus Christ. *A Poison Tree* and *The Human Abstract* seem to be about mysterious trees with dangerous fruit, but really tell of the “contrary states of the human soul”.

Wisdom is a compound of the knowledge of good and evil. Knowledge of good alone cannot be called wisdom. Most of Blake's poems insist that life is a unity of the opposite and evil is a necessary component of experience. It can be concluded that wisdom can be reached only through contraries of reason, via good and evil, not just through mere faith.

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