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## “LONDON” AND ITS POLITICS

BY MICHAEL FERBER

If you cross the Thames on Westminster Bridge from Parliament to the south bank, go down the stairs on the left side, and walk a hundred yards or so you will come upon the text of Blake's great short poem "London" chiseled into the stone pavement. It is a good place to read the poem, in sight of the chartered Thames it speaks of and not far from Blake's home in Lambeth where he wrote it, though if I had been asked I would have suggested a wall near the Tower or the Docks on the north bank, where Blake later set another wanderer, in *Jerusalem*, through sights and sounds similar to those of "London." As it is, to read it at your feet, next to two benches with a view of Parliament and the Ministry of Defense buildings across the river, in a sidewalk mainly trod by tourists who have never heard of Blake and have no time to think about him on their scheduled ways to their chartered buses, is to feel its continuing relevance, its capacity to speak to our current condition, and at the same time to sense its historicity, its intense absorption in the London of 1792. Its reabsorption as a monument in late twentieth-century London has ironies enough—the sidewalk was declared a Silver Jubilee Walkway in 1977—but at least it is grounded, as it were, in a place where it may converse with the city its author loved and hated, where it may be "political" in the root sense of acting and arguing as a citizen of the *polis*.

The political or social bearings of "London" used to seem perfectly obvious—George Orwell could say, "there is more understanding of the nature of capitalist society in a poem like 'I wander through each charter'd street' than in three-quarters of Socialist literature"<sup>1</sup>—but in recent years Harold Bloom has argued, with great energy and influence, that the poem's center of gravity lies not in its encounter with London but in its transactions with a "precursor" text, Ezekiel, which so threatens the competence and confidence of the poet that the poem becomes a confession of its own inadequacy as prophecy. I think this interpretation is badly wrong-headed and the Ezekiel precedent a red herring which draws us out of the poem altogether. I believe I can show this without taking on Bloom's general theory of poetic influence, but

it will entail another detailed discussion of this much-discussed poem. There are other controversies I want to consider as well, and since one minute particular leads directly and inescapably to every other in this dense poem, I have chosen to thread through the debates, and the poem, one step at a time, however inelegant the result.

I

It is not, in this case, a critical piety to insist that the form of the poem, in sound, syntax, and breakdown of stanzas, enters fully into its meaning. Through its foursquare structure of four tetrameter quatrains wanders what Wimsatt calls a “phonemic tune” of A-sounds (*wander, charter’d, mark, man, ban*, and so forth), as if the speaker finds only one somber vowel color to speak in.<sup>2</sup> The consonants also collect into a few clusters: an onomatopoeic hiss in *hapless soldiers sigh* is the expiration of the sound spit out in CH and TS forms throughout the poem, and these in the second half alternate with the plosive PL and BL notes which are almost as harsh. In this poem about human sounds, these sounds are highly expressive (and one almost hears Blake’s name in them), but it is their formal function that is most important. The repetition of a small set of tones embodies what the speaker hears, repeated clanking of chains in slightly varying registers of despair and woe.

Repetitiveness, almost a theme of the poem, is enacted in the drearily repeated *every* and in the repeated pairings of words and clauses, themselves subsumed in hierarchies of pairs which take us beyond repetition or seriality (*face, cry, Infants cry, voice*, and so on) to a sense of inclusiveness or totalization. The speaker advances in vision, or “audition,” from merely noting a concatenation of marks on faces, to hearing a cause (*The mind-forg’d manacles*) in the sound-effects of the city, as if the chain of encounters itself takes on audible form, then to hearing *how* young victims’ sufferings redound on their oppressors, and finally to hearing an epitome of how another young victim’s sufferings infect other victims and so perpetuate the causal chain. The infinite series of encounters sums to an integral formula. Even the pairs by themselves are summary or totalizing: street and river, man and infant, church and state, harlot and bride, man and woman, birth and death.

The sense of closure, in both the form of the poem and the world it projects, is signaled poignantly with the *infant* of line 15, the victim of a victim, who takes us back to the first list of sufferers,

which also includes an infant. After the general *every Man* there is a sequence of youthful victims, perhaps in order of age (infant, sweeper, soldier, harlot), and then the last of them victimizes the first and starts the cycle over again. *Marriage hearse* powerfully encapsulates the same sense of doomed repetition: the beginning of life and its end, cradle and grave. Indeed the infant is hardly even implicit in this formula, as if infancy and childhood have been blasted out of existence in this midnight world. There is no dawn, no spring (Blake had considered “wintry streets” in a draft), no genuine cycle of renewal or rebirth. Only the dismal circles of hell.

Pressing against this strong formal structure is a great linguistic and imagistic vitality and strangeness, as if the ideas are so fierce and burning only a fearful symmetry can contain them, or the suppressed rage and grief in the speaker finds vent in syntactic distortions, like the victims themselves, who let out sounds which shake the structures governing them. If we turn now to explicate some of the words and phrases we should not let them lose their aura of oddness and depth, which is as essential to them as whatever “plain sense” we can extract.

We meet *charter'd street* right away. I have little to add to the discussions by David Erdman and E. P. Thompson of the connotations of *charter'd* which emerge when we set the poem in its historical context.<sup>3</sup> London had a charter, granting it certain privileges or liberties, and so did many commercial associations in the City such as the East India Company, prominent along the banks of the Thames. Yet one man's charter is another's manacle; charters are exclusive. It was over just this two-sidedness of “charter” and its synonyms that Burke, Paine, and many others fought their pamphlet wars. In Part II of *Rights of Man*, published the year Blake probably wrote his poem (1792), Paine wrote, “It is a perversion of terms to say, that a charter gives rights. It operates by a contrary effect, that of taking rights away.”<sup>4</sup> The adjective “chartered” had as it still does the sense of “hired” or “leased,” which combines with Paine's pejorative political nuance to suggest the monopolistic and exploitative practices of England's commercial empire. Under the regime of Pitt, as under every regime at least since the Conqueror, all Englishmen are “chartered,” and the second half of the poem is a litany of typical cases: they are sold into slavery as chimney sweepers by their fathers, impressed into the army or navy for a few shillings, hired for a few hours as harlots, or bought and sold on the London marriage market.

By beginning with *charter'd street* Blake gives away what would have been an effective epitomizing image after we had met the victims, but with such climaxes as *mind-forg'd manacles* in reserve he could afford to set the scene with so startling a phrase. How is a street chartered? Mainly by being lined with commercial houses, licensed to buy and sell. But partly too by being filled with wanderers marked like slaves by the mercantile city that owns them. How is the Thames chartered? For the most part like the street in being lined with wharves and warehouses. And perhaps as well by being "charted," mapped, bound, confined, by being turned into a street, in fact, rather than by taking its natural course. Alfred Kazin, taking *charter'd* as meaning "bound" and nothing else, says the phrase describes the river "as bound between its London shores," and Harold Bloom has narrowed this reading to "bound down by natural restriction" in a case of "'natural' chartering."<sup>5</sup> This limited reading is part of Bloom's general argument, I think quite misleading, that nature and not the social order is the villain of the piece, but nothing could have been less natural, even in 1792, than the shores of the Thames within London; for centuries it had been widened, narrowed, bent, straightened, and dredged to make it a more serviceable channel, and on both sides of it only the work of man was visible. "Charter," moreover, could in its most philosophic usage almost stand for the opposite of "nature," being an instance of convention or, in Locke's terms, a compact which puts an end to the state of nature. Part of the effect of Blake's opening lines is the linkage of something originally natural, and which still flows, to the obviously artificial streets.

That the Thames does flow, though presumably not at its own sweet will, might be taken as a hint that, though all is seared with trade, nature is never spent, and that dawn will break after the midnight of the last stanza. This is to push the poem too close to the spirit of Wordsworth and Hopkins, whose language I have borrowed, but Blake does seem to set up a contrast between the binding and restricting of *charter'd* and the liberty or purposelessness of *wander* and *flow*.

*Wander* is subtle. There is a more or less innocent pastoral use of it as "roam" or "ramble": a shepherd follows his wandering flock, I wander lonely as a cloud. Blake rarely uses "wander" in so neutral or positive a sense, but he can use the less innocent "stray" with at most a whisper of uneasiness: "How sweet is the Shepherds sweet lot, / From the morn to the evening he strays" (E 7). It is also

interesting to meet in Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (1747) a wandering Thames: "Wanders the hoary Thames along / His silver-winding way."<sup>6</sup> But sheep get lost, and in a lonely fen at night little boys are led astray by "the wand'ring light" (E 11). To wander is to be in error (from *errare*, "wander"), to be lost in the *selva oscura* where Dante finds himself. "A Fathomless & boundless deep / There we wander there we weep" (E 467).

Just where, then, on this continuum we are to locate *wander* in the opening line of "London" is a nice question, and an important one, for the nuances we give the word may send us on very different paths through the remainder of the poem. If we bring out the sense of "error" then the speaker's reliability comes into question and we get a dramatic monologue, a mode satisfying to the modern taste for irony and demonstrably a frequent recourse of Blake's, especially in the *Songs*. We can then trace connections, even a kind of perceptual complicity, between the speaker and what he experiences. "As the Eye—Such the Object" (E 634). Bloom, in his most recent reading, goes so far to take *wander* as part of Blake's confession—Bloom takes Blake without further ado as the speaker, not the speaker's creator—that he is not a prophet but at most an Ezekiel *manqué*, too weak and woeful to live up to his prototype. "A biblical prophet may wander when he is cast out into the desert, when his voice becomes a voice in the wilderness, but he does not wander when he goes through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem the City of God. There, his inspired voice always has purpose, and his inspired feet always have destination."<sup>7</sup>

This argument, however, rests only slightly on *wander* itself. It depends much more on the assumption that a passage in Ezekiel is an all-determining "precursor-text." Whether it is or not (which we shall consider in a moment), it is fair to reply to Bloom, who seems to think that all cities are the same and only poets and prophets change or swerve, that a city through which one wanders may itself be the wilderness, and not only in the wanderer's fancy. Biblical Jerusalem may have been too small to get lost in, but London in the 1790s was already enormous, crowded, unplanned, and overwhelming to anyone not yet inured to it. And what else can one do, in a wilderness of charters, of property owned by others, but wander through it? When Blake returned to the motif of a walker through London streets some ten years later (*Jerusalem*, plates 45 and 82 to 85), the walker is Los, who by this time in *Jerusalem* has

begun the work of redemption, and not an errant soul with limited vision.<sup>8</sup> He does not wander lost; he is the watchman who searches the interiors of Albion to find out why everyone is degraded or murdered. He takes his course "Among the winding places of deep contemplation intricate," surely a reference to the narrow streets of the East End, whatever else it may mean (J 45:22).

II

When Blake altered his first draft of "London" from "And see in every face I meet / Marks of weakness marks of woe" to "And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness marks of woe," he probably had no idea he was thereby posing an elaborate problem in literary allusion and biblical exegesis. I suspect he preferred *mark* to "see" because it strengthened the sense of repetition and pairing he had already tentatively established with "dirty street" and "dirty Thames" before switching to *charter'd* (cf. N 109, E 718); perhaps he liked the odd resonance of the verb with its objects, without intending any distinct second sense. Perhaps, too, Blake did not want "see" explicit in a poem dominated by hearing.

We must deal with the meaning of the poem, however, not the intention of the poet, which in any event is recoverable only from the poem itself. The primary, and perhaps the only relevant sense of *mark* is "see" or "note" (from "remark," French *remarquer*), but by making the verb and objects cognate Blake has set up what grammarians have called an "internal accusative," a suggestive name for the process of self-objectification (altering the senses to suit the environment) and projection (imagining an environment which suits one's senses) which Blake often describes. One who can only "mark" will only perceive "marks," scattered signs or symptoms, fragments of a person or of the whole society. But it is going too far to claim, as Heather Glen does, that the speaker is thus complicit in the crimes he seems to protest, "isolated and at a remove from any positive human reciprocity, yet imprinting his own damning stamp on everything."<sup>9</sup> Her case relies heavily on a second meaning of *mark* as "imprint," "stamp," or "set a mark upon," which lets her assimilate the marking of the speaker to the blackening (which she assumes is transitive), daubing with blood, and blighting with plagues that fill the rest of the poem. It is a great deal to hang on a *double entendre*.<sup>10</sup> The second meaning is not really signaled in the text, for the primary meaning is quite satisfactory, and if the oddness of the repetition makes us think

again about what *mark* might mean, about repetition itself, and about the hint of reciprocity between subject and object, it also seems to exhaust itself in such thoughts without a decision.

To give *mark* the force needed to control our interpretation to the extent Glen wishes is to make it ludicrous in its immediate context. Are we to imagine the speaker wandering through the slums near the Thames and painting streaks in the faces of every person he meets? Apparently we are, and we are given biblical warrant in a passage from Ezekiel:

... And he called to the man clothed with linen, which had the writer's inkhorn by his side;

And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

(9:3-4)

Glen does not mention Harold Bloom, who first proposed this passage in 1970 as "a precise source" for "London" and then a few years later as "the precursor-text."<sup>11</sup> The vital center of "London," as of all "strong" post-Miltonic poetry, according to Bloom, lies in its struggle with a unique fore-text and its angle of departure from that text as it wrests itself free. The poem's precursor is "quite unmistakable, even though it has also been quite unnoticed, except by myself," and Bloom interprets the whole poem as essentially a swerve from Ezekiel.

The "unmistakable" basis lies in the fourth verse, "which gives Blake not only the central image of his poem, but even the rhyme of 'cry' and 'sigh'." The central image, then, is not, as we might have thought, the manacles, church, blood, harlot, or hearse, but the marking in its dubious secondary meaning. (The rhyme of "cry" and "sigh" one would think obvious enough without Ezekiel if there were no other reason to think of him.) Presumably we are to take Blake, or the speaker, as comparable to the man with the writer's inkhorn,<sup>12</sup> walking through the city, setting a mark upon the foreheads of all the men who sigh and cry. This mark, Ezekiel goes on to explain, is the sign that its bearer is to be spared the general slaughter which follows. The Lord tells the five men who accompany the writer to "Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark," and they do just that. Ezekiel cannot bear it

and pleads with God to reconsider, but God is relentless, and the slaughter is carried out.

Now there are several curious weaknesses in Bloom's case. For the passage to serve as a parallel, Blake (or the speaker) must correspond to the man with the inkhorn, but in both of Bloom's discussions, quite different in their conclusions, it is Ezekiel whom Blake is emulating. "Between Ezekiel and himself Blake is more than content to see an absolute identity" (1970). "Blake . . . begins also by saying 'I am not Ezekiel, I am not a prophet, I am too fearful to be the prophet I ought to be, *I am hid*'" (1976). Either way, Bloom misses the point that Ezekiel is not the writer, and does not do any marking. Only if one took the writer to be a surrogate for Ezekiel could this parallel hold, though tenuously, but Ezekiel tries to intervene on behalf of those the writer condemns. Moreover Ezekiel is not a writer himself: he eats a book, but its words to Israel he speaks (2:8-3:4).

In his second and fuller treatment of the Ezekiel matter Bloom admits that "Blake does not necessarily set a mark, since his 'mark in every face I meet,' primarily is intransitive, meaning 'remark' or 'observe'." This is a sensible comment (he is mistaken about "intransitive," but the point is clear), yet in the context of his theory it is astonishing. It was the "transitive" meaning of *mark* that furnished the main reason to invoke Ezekiel in the first place. Bloom, swerving from his 1970 reading, now wants to show how much Blake is swerving from Ezekiel: "Blake's defensive reaction-formation to the call [to be a prophet] he cannot answer is to be a wanderer, and to mark passively rather than mark actively" by setting marks on foreheads. Perhaps Bloom has failed to notice that the evidence for a swerve from Ezekiel is evidence against thinking of Ezekiel at all. It is in any case a circular, self-sealing argument, capable of generating a million equally brilliant precursor theories.

There are other reasons to object to Ezekiel as a determining or structuring presence in "London." Ezekiel's writer collaborates in a wholesale slaughter of those who are unmarked, including maids and little children who must surely be innocent of the abominations that provoked the Lord's fury. (There is even a hint that only men are to be saved.) It is true that the scribe is *saving* those he marks, but the spirit of the whole thing is, to say the least, un-Blakean. Those he saves are not the victims of abominations, not sweepers and soldiers and harlots (and we know how well harlots

fares in the dreams of the Hebrew prophets), but those whose sighs and cries are signs of regret or resentment at the abominations others have committed. And these abominations are not the buying and selling, conscripting and enslaving that pervade London but idolatries and blasphemies of various sorts—victimless crimes, if we may use the phrase. A mark *in the face*, finally, is not very much like a mark *upon the forehead*. How do you set a mark in the face? A deep mark, an inborn or mind-forged trait, might be in the face, but an ink-mark would be on it.

After all this it may be disappointing to be left with no special meaning hovering around *mark*, but E. P. Thompson, having rejected Bloom's case for Ezekiel, has proposed another biblical mark, the mark of the beast in Revelation.<sup>13</sup>

And he [the beast] causeth all, both small and great,  
rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their  
right hand, or in their foreheads:

And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the  
mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

(Rev. 13:16–17)

I think this is a good deal more plausible than Ezekiel. It does not hang, first of all, by the thread of a secondary and contrary nuance: John of Patmos does not set any marks on any foreheads; the beast does, or others do at its behest, and John only notes them. Whoever the beast is, he is not a writer or wanderer. The main abomination here is buying and selling, the commercialism of the imperial capitals of London and Babylon. London in fact seems closer to the Babylon of Revelation than to the Jerusalem of Ezekiel. Babylon is the mercantile center, and the merchants of the earth mourn for her when she falls (Rev. 18:3, 11–19). Harlotry, the synoptic evil of London, is Babylon's emblem: on the forehead of the great whore is written "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth" (17:1–5).

In the passages I have been citing from *Jerusalem*, too, the stress falls on Babylon. When Los comes down to "the trembling Thames" he hears the Daughters of Albion on the Euphrates (J 83:83–84), and they sing in lamentation, like the daughters of Jerusalem who sing Psalm 137 by the rivers of Babylon (but without the vengeful ending), about the ruins of Jerusalem in Babylon on Euphrates. Most strikingly, plate 84 carries the same design, though reversed, as the main design on the plate of "London," an old man led by a boy, and two lines provide an unmistakable cap-

tion: "I see London blind & age-bent begging thro the Streets / Of Babylon, led by a child. his tears run down his beard" (J 84:11–12).<sup>14</sup>

Another strong argument is Thompson's claim that the marks of weakness and woe would have called up the mark of the beast in the minds of Blake's contemporaries far sooner than the mark in Ezekiel. The more radical the audience, the more preoccupied it will have been with the mark of the beast. "For generations radical Dissent had sermonized and pamphleteered against the beast (Antichrist) who had his servitors 'which worshipped his image' (Rev. 16:2): social radicalism equated these with usurers, with the rich, with those successful in buying and selling" (p. 13). Thompson gives some examples from Blake's circle and from the Muggletonians, whom Blake may have known, and he could have cited others from less obscure sources. Bloom pays little respect to historical contexts, audiences, or the likelihood of allusions, or he might have wondered why only he had noticed the unmistakable. After all, if readers of Blake's day had thought of Ezekiel, they would also have thought of Revelation, which to Christians resumes and completes Ezekiel and all the other prophets.

Yet the mark of the beast also creates problems for "London." There are still those faces, rather than foreheads, and the mark is also put in the hand. At least it is *in* them, not *on* them, as in Ezekiel, and one could see in *mind-forg'd manacles*, if one wished, a brilliant conflation of forehead and hand enslaved together. But the same spirit of bloody-mindedness that made Ezekiel inapposite also rules, perhaps more strongly, against Revelation. The writer with the inkhorn at least marked those who are to be saved, and Ezekiel pleaded for a general remission, whereas all those marked by the beast are to be tortured eternally: "And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name" (Rev. 14:9). In his Cambridge Bible Commentary on this verse, T. F. Glasson calls the thought "sub-Christian" and he is quite right.<sup>15</sup> I suppose it could be argued that John does not take part in it, as the scribe with the inkhorn does, but he certainly relishes it. Those marked in "London" do not worship the beast, moreover, unless we are to take their mental manacles as implying as much; in any case they are not willing, as the worshippers of the beast seem to be. It is pretty clear that the speaker of "London" is at worst detached from the

victims, and I catch more than a hint (*pace* Heather Glen) of sympathy for them. Blake, certainly, wanted to save everybody and everything, and wherever he employs the spectacular machinery of Revelation he leaves out, with one or two brief exceptions, any expression of resentment or revenge.<sup>16</sup> The Los who walks through *Jerusalem* 45, finally, refuses vengeance and seeks to persuade Albion to forswear it as well: "O whom / Should I pity if I pity not the sinner who is gone astray!" (45:34–35).

So much for *mark*. It is better to think of Revelation than Ezekiel, but best to dwell little on either of them, lest you wander entirely out of the poem.

### III

The next richly troublesome word, *ban*, causes trouble only because it means too many things, but they are all appropriate enough, and after a short session with the *Oxford English Dictionary* one admires how potent a germ of meaning it is. Its most general sense, which draws us directly into the political and social tendency of the poem, is a proclamation or edict issued by church or state, and in particular a summons to arms or proclamation of marriage (now in the plural as "banns"). It can also mean an interdiction or excommunication by the church, whereby one is placed "under a ban"; a prohibition; and a curse. Most of these uses are French in origin; another French meaning, which I have not found attested in English but might have been known, is a trumpet-blast before a proclamation to troops. This one word, then, efficiently anticipates most of the institutions and victims of the next stanzas: church, state, marriage (itself a hybrid of church and state); soldier, wedding couple, and harlot (who utters a curse, and is under a legal and moral ban).<sup>17</sup>

*Mind-forg'd manacles* is so succinct and memorable a formula for a widely acknowledged phenomenon that it has entered the language of many who have never read Blake. Throughout Blake's work, as in the writings of most of the revolutionaries and reformers of his day who battled against "superstition" and "ignorance" as the chief props of tyranny and inequality, the image of mental slavery, of victims "In chains of the mind locked up" (E 74), holds a central place.<sup>18</sup> And in Blake as with his contemporaries the implications were not always clear. If the oppressed "people," on whose behalf the reformers were agitating, were held down mainly by their own false beliefs, then the great change might come with

little violence: the people had only to rise together and shrug off the impositions of church and state. On the other hand, the people, in England at least, showed only fitful and local, though recurrent and widespread, impulses to do so, despite heroic efforts to enlighten and organize them. An auxiliary theory, then, was always at hand, that of an alien tyranny, not derived from the people, and which might require force of arms to dislodge. English reformers were not above the anti-Catholic gambit, but they more characteristically invoked the old Norman Yoke theory, whereby the Anglo-Saxon folk with its democratic traditions has been put upon by an aristocracy which came over in 1066. More recently (and more subversively) they developed a kind of "German Yoke" theory, aimed at the House of Hanover and its Prussian and Hessian mercenaries. Blake at first took the latter approach in his notebook draft when he considered ending the second stanza with "The german forgd links I hear."

In the summer of 1792 the British militia were drilled in Prussian military manoeuvres on Bagshot Heath. Britain had by then formed an alliance with Prussia and Austria against revolutionary France, and within a few months there was alarm among reformers over the Hessian and Hanoverian mercenaries stationed in England.<sup>19</sup> In Part I of *Rights of Man* Paine poured scorn on the idea that the Elector of Hanover could be anything but a tyrant in England: "A German Elector is in his electorate a despot. How then could it be expected that he should be attached to principles of liberty in one country, while his interest in another was to be supported by despotism?" And in Part II he traced many of England's current ills to "the coming of the Hanoverians."<sup>20</sup> Blake might have heard about a *Joint Address to the French National Convention*, sent by the London Corresponding Society in September 1792, which warned of German tyranny: "Let German Despots act as they please, we shall rejoice at their fall; . . . With unconcern, therefore, we might view the Elector of Hanover join his troops to Traitors and Robbers: But the King of Great Britain will do well to remember that this country is not Hanover—should he forget this distinction, we will not."<sup>21</sup>

In replacing "german" with *mind* Blake undoubtedly improved the line, but he did not abandon social or political meanings in favor of timeless metaphysical ones, as some critics would have it; he took up a different political position. True, *mind-forg'd manacles* by itself may connote a tragic view of human nature, doomed

to misery and oppression from its own innate folly, but that view, ostensibly beyond politics but nearly always politically conservative in fact, has little warrant in the context of the poem, which names some specific victims of distinct social evils. To admit, however, that the victims' manacles are, at least in part, products of their own minds is to acknowledge the depth of the social problem. Were it only a Norman or German yoke, the task of throwing it off would be an easier one, if more violent, than educating and organizing the entire population. It might even be accomplished with external help, as the slave trade was abolished in 1807. Blake uses the slave trade example in *Jerusalem* to draw the distinction between external and internal tyranny, between Germans and the mind:

When Africa in sleep  
 Rose in the night of Beulah, and bound down the Sun & Moon  
 His friends cut his strong chains, & overwhelm'd his dark  
 Machines in fury & destruction, and the Man reviving  
 repented  
 He wept before his wrathful brethren, thankful & considerate  
 For their well timed wrath. But Albion's sleep is not  
 Like Africa's: and his machines are woven with his life[.]  
 (J 40:19–25)

The wrathful brotherly friends, Erdman conjectures, are the English supporters of the Slave Trade Bill, whose success in Parliament made the frequent risings on the African coast unnecessary (or so they hoped). But what can the militant friends of liberty do to free their fellow Englishman whose manacles are “woven with his life”?<sup>22</sup> They need a different kind of politics, a politics of “Mental Fight” against the interior tyrant and “Wars of mutual Benevolence” with their errant brethren. The next line of the *Jerusalem* passage sums it up: “Nothing but mercy can save him!”

This passage is spoken by the inspired voice of “Bath,” perhaps a reference to Rev. Richard Warner of Bath who published a sermon in 1804 called *War Inconsistent with Christianity*,<sup>23</sup> but Los has to learn it himself as he searches for the “Opressors of Albion” who buy and sell England's youth and mystify them with religious pomp. He cannot find them. He “saw every Minute Particular of Albion degraded & murderd / But saw not by whom; they were hidden within in the minute particulars / Of which they had possessd themselves” (J 45:7–9). Los concludes, as Bath did, that vengeance is vain and forgiveness alone the answer. That may

seem a vague program of social reform, but it is not passive or quietist. Quite the contrary.<sup>24</sup>

Some critics have taken *mind* to refer to the speaker's mind as well; after all, it is *every Man*, and *mind* is not explicitly restricted. Why should the speaker be exempt? One can then ask if he has, in his mind, the mind of the poem, manacled others besides himself. On *wander*, then, on one reading of *mark*, and on *mind*, one can erect a theory of the speaker's complicity. I have given reasons why I think this theory cannot rest on *wander* or *mark*, and the very ambiguity of *mind* is a reason to distrust it as another support. The mind in the first instance is the mind of each one who cries or issues a ban; it might plausibly include every Londoner; but as it stands there is no warrant for including the speaker: it does not say that every mind must forge these manacles. The speaker is far beyond sighing and crying. He has already made the discovery that England's grave social ills have mental causes, and by that mental act he has already partly freed himself from whatever mental chains he bore. It is natural enough to think of him as affected by what he experiences, a victim by empathy with his fellows, and we may think he has not arrived at the highest imaginative comprehension or spiritual liberty (it may be impossible before all or most of his fellows have joined him), but he is on his way, and he will take us with him if we let him, if we do not insist on an ironic reading of the poem which reinslaves the speaker to the very doubt and despair he is seeking to understand.

#### IV

Those who argue that the speaker sees or hears only fragments—marks, faces, cries—slight the three images in the second half, which go far beyond the isolated, concatenated encounters the poem begins with. If *mind-forg'd manacles* is already a strong summarizing image, those which follow are almost visionary in their compact complexity and their power to force into our imaginations, as Raymond Williams puts it, “the submerged connections of this capital system.”<sup>25</sup>

That soldiers have much to do with palaces, whatever else we may say about the image, is obvious enough, but it is not so clear what comparably intimate submerged connection we are to see between chimney sweepers and churches. Churches have chimneys and hire sweepers, no doubt, but a more general relationship

seems understood: that the church, as guardian of orphans (most sweepers were effectually orphaned),<sup>26</sup> and as especially concerned with all children, ought to be intervening to change the lot of the poor climbing boys, but it is not, and so the cry—"weep weep weep weep," as Blake has it in the *Innocence* sweeper poem—haunts the church's conscience. Both of Blake's sweeper poems link the boys to the church and its perverse otherworldly religion. The sweeper of *Experience* tells his questioner that his father and mother, who made him a sweeper, cannot see through his childish gayety and have gone hypocritically "to praise God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery." Much more subtly, the sweeper who speaks in *Innocence* tells how Tom, another sweeper, makes up a heaven of his own misery, with an angel in it who warns him, even in heaven, to be a good boy. So much for the angelic Christianity of the priests.

Precisely what process is going on with the church in line 10 it is difficult to say, and just about every possible permutation has had its defenders. *Blackning* seems genuinely polysemous and not merely ambiguous. Most critics have taken it as transitive and then offer candidates for its object, chief of which is the sweeper, whose life in soot, whether from the church's own chimneys or not, makes him a kind of scapegoat for the church's sins. Or, keeping in mind the two sweeper poems, we may see the church as blackening the minds of the sweepers, manacled them to keep them in thrall to her mystery and tyranny. Adams reverses the relationship, and says the sweeper is "the blackener of the church": "The soot of the chimney sweeper's physical surroundings infuses the spirit of London with blackness. . . . Each cry creates more blackness."<sup>27</sup> It is an attractive image, but the grammar of line 10 will not permit it; the only way to get the churches black is to take *blackning* as intransitive, and then no other agent need be conjured up, or none but the smoke of London commerce, blessed by the churches themselves. "If Industry is in my diocese," Blake has a bishop say, "Religion will flourish"; the bishop goes on to recommend war with France to maintain British commercial sovereignty, as several real bishops notably did in Parliament in 1778.<sup>28</sup> But "destruction hovers in the city's smok": its "Smoke destroyd the pleasant garden" which once was Albion (E 433, 375), and now it blackens the church's once white limestone after which Albion was named. The sweepers, by concentrating the church's sins, by their redemptive childish energy (and the two boys in the designs may hint at this),

even by cleaning the church's chimneys, may be said to lighten or whiten the church which tends on its own to blacken.

That, in a way, is what *appalls* means. In its main sense "dismay" or "terrify," "appall" retains a trace of its older meaning, "make pale"; when one is frightened one trembles in a pallor. Bloom (1961) has the fine suggestion that an appalled church stands revealed as a whited sepulchre, an emblem of hypocrisy with a goodly outside but uncleanness and death within (Matt. 23:27). It condemns the sweeper to wear "the clothes of death," his black suit (and soot), and is shocked at the sight and sound of him, while piously pretending concern over the plight of the London poor. Some critics, including Bloom (after 1961), argue the opposite color change, to cast a pall or drape in a pall, but it is based largely on a pun, for "pall" and "appall" are not related in etymology or meaning. It may be that Blake packed too many colors into this line, but I think it makes the line more coherent to entertain the paradox of the church paling at the sweeper's cry while blackening on its own, than to imagine the cry doubling that blackening by casting a pall.<sup>29</sup>

When we say we "are appalled" by something we imply horror, dismay, perhaps indignation, but not guilt. This prevalent passive sense today may obscure our understanding of Blake's line, for the church is surely guilty, and indeed confesses its guilt by turning pale. The sweeper's cry is active: consciously or not the sweeper accuses or indicts the church, throws it into pallor or consternation. Thompson cites a very strong usage in 1792 by the radical Christian William Frend: "Oh! that I had the warning voice of an ancient prophet, that I might penetrate into the innermost recesses of palaces, and appal the haranguers of senates!"<sup>30</sup>

The sigh of the soldier, presumably fallen in battle, transforms itself into a portentous sign. The palace has blood on its hands for issuing the bans which have forced young men by the thousands into war against other young men, also conscripted, who have no quarrel with each other.

We were carried away in thousands from London; & in tens  
Of thousands from Westminster and Marybone in ships closd  
up:  
Chaind hand & foot, compelled to fight under the iron whips  
Of our captains; fearing our officers more than the enemy.  
(J 65:33–36)

Church and state are both exposed as instruments of tyranny by the changes wrought on them by their victims. Blood drains from

the faces of hypocritical churchmen when they hear “weep, weep, in notes of woe”; blood drains from the wounds of the hapless draftee and returns as handwriting on the wall. What the handwriting portends is uncertain: no apocalyptic intervention is adumbrated in the poem. The blood is only a sign of guilt. One thinks of the House of Atreus and its royal sins (an abandoned manuscript draft of “London” names an “ancient curse”), the inescapable cycle of blood-vengeance generation after generation; at least, with a Cassandra to cry it out, the hidden sin manifests itself.<sup>31</sup>

This may be the place to point out that throughout the poem it is the victims, however woeful or hapless, who are the active ones and the institutions which are passive. The victims, or rather the victims’ outcries, do all the work, govern all the verbs (unless *blackning* is transitive), while church, palace, and hearse silently register the outcries, blanching, bleeding, or blistering with their impact. Blake knew as well as anyone how fiendishly active the oppressors of Albion could be, and gave his rational villain Urizen a great deal of work to do, such as building a temple of law and reason (J 58:21f). But Blake characteristically projects in his imagery a model of society and how it changes which was almost universal among middle-class European revolutionaries of his time and is still prevalent today, according to which the old order is cold, rigid, congealed, static, a shell or skin that must be sloughed off, a crust of ice that must be broken or thawed for new life to emerge. The model enlists the cycles or “revolutions” of nature—dawn, spring, awakening from sleep, recovery from illness—on behalf of the oppressed, the vital center of society, the productive classes, the inevitable heirs. It suits as well the idea discussed earlier that the people need only shrug off their self-derived tyrants. This imagery is everywhere in the Romantics: “The world’s great age begins anew, / The golden years return, / The earth doth like a snake renew / Her winter weeds outworn.”<sup>32</sup> It pervades Blake, though it is often modulated through Christian symbolic structures and partly “denaturalized.” In the *Songs* Blake shows with great subtlety how children manage to generate worlds of color and delight in whatever nooks and crannies the tyranny of their elders absent-mindedly leaves them. In “London” that creativity shows itself in the cries that fill the interstices of the chartered world and bounce against its walls. The poem pays a somber tribute to the silent power of that world, however, in the final

stanza, where one victim's spasm of protest destroys another victim with no overt intervention by an outside force.

That buying and selling are the underlying social disease emerges when we remember that the chimney sweeper's cry is not only a sigh but a vendor's call, and that the boy's father may have sold him when he could scarcely make that cry. It is less directly entailed in the case of the soldier, though it is obvious enough that commercial imperialism had much to do with the wars against revolutionary France under active preparation in 1792. (The first one broke out in February 1793.) But Blake locates commercialism closer to the heart of soldiering. Soldiers, however hapless, may be mercenaries; "soldier" itself meant "mercenary" (from French *soulde*, "pay," from Latin *solidus*, the coin) and seems to have the word "sold" in it.<sup>33</sup> English soldiers, unlike the Hessians and Prussians drilling in London parks, were conscripted by indirect economic methods: by hunger, by unemployment, by enclosure of agricultural lands. Some perhaps were lured in time-honored fashion by harlots into taverns where they were recruited into the army or navy by sergeants generous with drink: "They buy his Daughters that they may have power to sell his sons" (J 44:29).<sup>34</sup> Though he could not find a succinct overt connection between the soldier and buying and selling, Blake includes him in another notebook poem which has three of our four victims:

There souls of men are bought & sold  
And milk fed infancy for gold  
And youth to slaughter houses led  
And beauty for a bit of bread[.]

(N 107)

That soldiers and harlots inhabit a common world is clear, and it is to the harlot and her extraordinary curse that we must now turn.

v

Blake had originally planned, as we can see in his notebook, a three-stanza poem ending with the sweeper and the soldier; he began the third stanza with "But most the chimney sweepers cry . . ." Sweeper and soldier were to climax the series of things seen and heard with their more inclusive and explicit interconnections. But, having listened again to London, Blake groped for an even more powerful and synoptic climax, making four starts on a new

fourth stanza about the harlot, which all begin with the “But most” taken from the former climax, before he settled on the version we know.<sup>35</sup> We have already considered what makes it an epitome of the sort of insight the speaker has been gaining as he walks: a situation involving at least four people, victims ultimately of *both* church and state, the turning of the cycle to perpetuate suffering into a new generation, and death: slow and agonizing with the sweeper, sudden and bloody with the soldier, here cast abroad as disease and as the constriction of the soul in a loveless marriage.

Rather like *ban*, the final stanza will accommodate so many meanings it threatens to disintegrate into no clear meaning at all. The temptation is to rule meanings out and restrict the stanza to something visualizable or translatable into allegory, but that is to risk losing its scope and depth at the same time. The wonder of it is its capacity to absorb specific narrow readings without sounding general or abstract: the curse may be a bit vague, but blasting a tear, whatever it may mean, is certainly concrete, and the plague-ridden marriage-hearse rolls through our minds with a nightmare’s force. It is as if we have two or three vivid episodes from several possible stories the remainders of which we can only infer. A young harlot has a baby she doesn’t want; she curses it when it cries; she screams at a passing wedding party (“A plague on you!”) out of envious hatred. Or the baby belongs to a young bride, whom the harlot envies for her motherhood and sanctioned status. Perhaps its father has been the harlot’s client, and brings a curse on his head for choosing respectability (yet, such is marriage in eighteenth-century London, he’ll be back). Whoever its mother may be, she may carry a venereal disease endemic to whorehouses and pass it to the baby, who will be blinded by it. And so on. These little plots are each inadequate to the stanza, but taken together they begin to sound its depths.

One of the chief controversies concerning this stanza, at the center of which once again is Harold Bloom, is the venereal disease question. Over the idea of prenatal blindness caused by syphilis, Bloom has preferred two other “natural facts,” the first being the fact that babies are born unable to weep until their tear-ducts are moistened.<sup>36</sup> “A shouted curse can *blast* a *tear* in a quite literal way; the released breath can scatter the small body of moisture out of existence” (1963). That certainly picks up one sense of *blast*, as a wind, though it ignores its almost invariable association, in both Blake and the Bible, with disease. But as this literal blasting pre-

sumes the prior existence of tears to be blasted it does not furnish much support for the metaphorical blasting that seems to be prenatal—tearlessness at birth. If Blake is alluding to this tearlessness, moreover, why blame it on a prostitute, since all babies, even those born of parents who have never come near one, are alike in this? Bloom has no answer; he simply barges forward. “Blake knows his natural facts; he distrusted nature too much not to know them. . . . Blake ascribes a natural fact to the Harlot’s curse, and so the Harlot is not just an exploited Londoner, but nature herself. . . .” (1963). The question-begging “and so” here leads to an allegorical reading of the harlot based on nothing else in “London” but derived from Blake’s later personification of nature as Vala, who is often called a harlot, along with similar figures Tirzah and Rahab. Even if we were warranted in passing from poem to poem with so little ado, to say that nature is a harlot is not at all the same as saying that all harlots, poor things, represent nature.

By 1976, in any case, Bloom had discovered another natural fact, menstruation. “The harlot’s curse is not, as various interpreters have said, venereal disease, but is indeed what ‘curse’ came to mean in the vernacular after Blake and still means now: menstruation, the natural cycle in the human female.” The speaker hears “*how* another curse or ban or natural fact (menstruation) blasts or scatters another natural fact, the tearlessness of the new-born infant.” One would very much like to hear that *how* (Bloom’s italics), since Blake knows his natural facts. What on earth has menstruation to do with an infant’s tears, or tearlessness? What, for that matter, does it have to do with infants at all, since for the preceding nine months, at least, the infant’s mother has had no periods? Why, once again, drag the harlot into this universal situation? And why privilege menstruation over the more obvious and relevant natural cycle of birth? Bloom’s answer is simple. “For Blake every natural fact equals every other natural fact.”

The natural fact that venereal disease of one sort or another causes blindness before or shortly after birth was well known in Blake’s day.<sup>37</sup> Thompson cites lectures and publications from 1790–92 on the *lues venerea*. There is simply no reason to rule it out as one of the plagues blighting the marriage hearse. Venereal disease being largely a social product, however, Bloom dismisses it, intent as he is on making London’s ills natural and inevitable.

There is also no reason to restrict *blasts* to something only windy and dry. Almost everywhere it appears in Blake, usually as a noun,

it includes the meaning of the verb parallel to it in “London,” *blights*. In an early manuscript fragment Blake has a phrase that sounds like a gloss on line 15 of “London”: “swift as the Nightly Blast that Blights the Infant Bud” (E 439). “Blast” is, after all, the normal term for a plant disease, and plant diseases were widely believed to be borne on the wind, a “plague wind” (A 14:8) like the howling storm that bears the invisible worm to the rose in “The Sick Rose” of *Experience*. At Genesis 41:23 and 27 Pharaoh dreams of “seven ears, withered, thin, and blasted with the east wind.” Even where “blast” is mainly a trumpet noise it has effects on vegetation. When Newton seized the trump and “blow’d the enormous blast,” the angels fell like yellow leaves in autumn (Eur 13:4–8), and in his design for plate 9 of *Europe* Blake has two splendid fairies blowing plague or mildew through looping trumpets. So interwoven are all the senses of wind, disease, and loud martial sounds, finally, that even a blight is once blown on a military instrument: “For the husbandman weeps at blights of the fife, and blasting trumpets consume / The souls of mild France; the pale mother nourishes her child to the deadly slaughter” (FR 209–210).<sup>38</sup>

Although this final image reveals several submerged relationships, it also brings to light the sundering of relationships, the divisions within eighteenth-century London which maintain the serialization of social life the speaker reflects in the opening stanza and the victimization he describes throughout. The plagues emanating from the harlot’s curse suggest the disease that befall Albion as he falls into division (J 4:13 *et passim*); the boils and blisters of her venereal disease, if that is what it is, are marks of the larger social disease keeping us apart from one another, denying us “the heaven of generous love” by “selfish blightings” (VDA 7:29). The quintessential division here, I think, is that between harlot and wife. Each suffers for being only half of what she might be if the commercial tyranny would let her, and man suffers for having his duty and his pleasure split into two. “What is a Wife & what is a Harlot?” Blake asks, “are they Two & not One? can they exist Separate?” (J 57:8–9). In two senses his answer is no. You cannot create virginal and virtuous brides ready to assume the roles expected of them in eighteenth-century England and not simultaneously create a large society of whores to provide what had to be left out. Harlotry is the dark side, the midnight side, of the coin of marriage. The coin, in fact, is an apt image, for marriage has become

as commercial a transaction as prostitution, and a loveless one at that: the rules forbidding free gratification of eros generate two markets, an open market and a black market, in women. The rules make "A Religion of Chastity, forming a Commerce to sell Loves" (J 69:34). What men really want, secondly, is a woman who is both bride and harlot, loving helpmeet and sexual playmate: "In a wife I would desire / What in whores is always found / The lineaments of Gratified desire" (N 105, E 465).<sup>39</sup> But in Hanoverian England marriages were arranged and passionless, divorce was nearly impossible, and prostitution flourished.

## VI

Knowing how well Blake could describe the arrival of dawn or spring, of the insurrection and the resurrection, of the Last Judgment over an individual or Albion himself, we may wonder why he left "London," otherwise so comprehensive a condensation of his larger vision, at the hour of midnight. Surely some revelation is at hand! It may be partly this unrelieved one-sided bleakness that has moved some of our critics to scan the imagery for signs of the apocalypse, such as the blood on the walls, or for symptoms of the speaker's own incapacity to see beyond the midnight world or of his collaboration in it. We might even see in *midnight* itself a hint of the coming dawn, for these plagues that smite the new-born sound a little like the archetypal tenth plague of Egypt, the smiting of the first-born at midnight, which finally broke the will of the Pharaoh (Exodus 12:29). We can find in this a suggestion of the marks of weakness and woe, for it was the mark of the lamb's blood on the lintel and side-posts that made the plague pass over the Hebrew slaves and smite only the first-born of the Egyptian masters.<sup>40</sup> The notebook poem we just cited, which Blake later quarried for "London," has a stanza which expresses the desire, even the plan, for an exodus from London to the promised land of America:

Tho born on the cheating banks of Thames  
Tho his waters bathed my infant limbs  
The Ohio shall wash his stains from me  
I was born a slave but I go to be free[.]

(N 113, E 464)

It is suggestive imagery: the Thames is the Nile (secondarily the Euphrates) and the Ohio is the Jordan, the exodus is a baptism, a cleansing of the stains or marks of buying and selling and cheating. But as he abandoned this imagery Blake also set aside the theme

of escape from slavery. He seems not to have entertained for long the widely expressed idea of emigration as a solution to England's social problems; we are all in this together, we are members of Albion's body politic.<sup>41</sup> Blake's exile, and the exile of his poem's wanderer, are internal, and their liberation is from the mind-forged manacles that prevent every Londoner they meet from understanding what they understand. In this sense, perhaps, the truth makes them free. And in this sense, as Hazard Adams puts it, "London," "through the fierce delineation of its vision, becomes an affirmative poem." For "to see error in its completed form is to vitiate its power" (p. 285). To put it in Blakean terms, "London" is the Limit of Opacity of London. But this affirmation seems not so much in the poem as beyond it, a little like the grim exhilaration we sense in the end of a tragedy like *King Lear*, after we have seen the enormous power of evil but in having seen it feel a little readier to confront it. And if the speaker is in some sense released, those he sees and hears are not.

It is as a more comprehensive framework, a perspective beyond the midnight world of London, or at best only hinted in it, that we might consider the two designs that accompany the engraved text. There is admittedly nothing obviously cheerful about the designs: an old man on crutches helped by a little boy, another boy warming himself at a fire, both set in nighttime. One might argue, too, that the old man, prominently and centrally placed, is the "I" of the poem, the wanderer himself; that he could well be blind would account for the darkness and the stress on auditory imagery. He resembles the old man at the bottom of "The Human Abstract" (a plate which follows "London" in a few copies and is almost always placed near it), later to be named Urizen, out of whose head seems to grow a rope or chain, suggestive of the mind-forged manacles. He also resembles the bard in "The Voice of the Ancient Bard" who sings of those who "stumble all night over bones of the dead" and "wish to lead others when they should be led" (E 32). If this is such a stumbler, at least he is led here, as he should be.

But the old man is no more likely to be the bard, who after all sings about those who stumble from a superior vantage, than the speaker of "London" to be a hapless soldier. Only if one is already convinced of the salience of dramatic irony in the poem, the weakness of the speaker's vision, does it make sense to see the old man as a self-portrait. It is almost as plausible to attribute the poem to

the little boy who is helping him, who is portrayed twice, and who is clearly looking at the face of the old man and able to see marks of weakness and woe in him. He could be “The Little Vagabond” (immediately before “London” in a few copies and always near it), though he speaks in solemn grown-up tones.

Both alternatives dissatisfy, and as no old man and no vagabonds are named in the poem (unless the boys are sweepers, but they are not black and not carrying bags of soot or brushes), we may well surmise that the design functions as a fifth stanza, or as an illustration to a missing stanza. Here are more victims, perhaps, though they do not seem to be uttering cries; here are youth and age, another cycle of generation, emblems of hope (the boy looks up, he builds a fire) and inevitable despair. If we see signs of hope, however, then this fifth stanza is not another dreary repetition. Maybe we are to see the old man as indeed a victim, even *the* victim of stanza I, obviously marked by weakness and woe, and the boys as agents—to put it rather grandly—of redemption. There is not very much they can do, but they do it. They help old men to shelter, or at least compassionately befriend them, they build fires to keep warm, big enough for several people. (Big enough, in fact, to suggest an apocalyptic purging of London—and of “London.”) Their clothes are green in most copies, an unlikely color for London, and expressive of youth and spring. Though smoky, the fire gives off light as well as heat, and on the two companions a light from above shines through the midnight darkness. It is hard to resist thinking of the line in Isaiah, “and a little child shall lead them” (11:6), foretelling the coming of the Redeemer.

The upper design, as we mentioned earlier, is repeated reversed on plate 84 of *Jerusalem*, and the old man there is clearly identified with London itself. “I see London blind & age-bent begging thro the Streets / Of Babylon, led by a child” (84:11–12). We may, if we wish, map these lines back ten or fifteen years onto “London”; the old man in our poem, we notice, stands immediately above the title like a statue on a pedestal. If we do, we are not entitled to transfer the speaker with it, for the “I” of plate 84 is not Los the explorer of cities but the Daughters of Albion, who sing in lamentation, remembering only the Jerusalem of the past, now in ruins, and retaining just enough of hope to call on Los with his globe of fire. Los listens to their lamentations but looks to the east for the coming dawn and sings a song in reply to the daughters. In the midst of

Babylon Los sees something invisible to the daughters, manacled in their despair: "I see the New Jerusalem descending out of Heaven."

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Charles Dickens" (1940), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters I* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), p. 427.

<sup>2</sup> William Wimsatt, *Hateful Contraries* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 235. I shall put all quotations from "London" in italics, to distinguish them at a glance from other quotations. The text for "London" and all other Blake passages is either David V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, fourth rev. ed. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970) (abbreviated E), or David V. Erdman, ed., *The Notebook of William Blake* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973) (abbreviated N). Other abbreviations: J = *Jerusalem*, A = *America*, VDA = *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Eur = *Europe*, FR = *The French Revolution*; Erdman = David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, third rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977) (first edition 1954); Thompson = E. P. Thompson, "London," in Michael Phillips, ed., *Interpreting Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978). Biblical quotations are from the King James.

Harold Bloom has commented on the poem at least five times; I shall refer to his commentaries by date. They are 1961: *The Visionary Company* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), 1963: *Blake's Apocalypse* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), 1970: "Blake's Jerusalem: The Bard of Sensibility and the Form of Prophecy," chapter 5 of *The Ringers in the Tower* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971); first appeared 1970, 1973: Notes to Blake in Bloom and Lionel Trilling, ed., *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), and 1976: *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Erdman, pp. 276–7; Thompson, pp. 6–10. See also Wimsatt, pp. 232–33.

<sup>4</sup> *Rights of Man*, ed. Henry Collins (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 242; quoted by Thompson.

<sup>5</sup> *The Portable Blake* (New York: Viking, 1946), p. 13; Bloom (1963), p. 45; Bloom (1973), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> In his watercolor illustration to the title-page of Gray's poem, Blake's Thames does not wander or wind its way at all. It is confined to a narrow strip behind a massive stone wall in the foreground.

<sup>7</sup> Bloom (1976), p. 37. Bloom's rather noisy notion of a prophet contrasts with Isaiah's messiah, who is the strong silent type: "He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street" (Isaiah 42:2). Noisy or not, shouldn't prophets listen first? Heather Glen goes Bloom one better, adducing Lamentations 4:13–14 for a suggestion that the speaker, if he is a prophet, is an accessory to the crimes he witnesses: "For the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her, / They have wandered as blind men in the streets . . ." But this passage is apt only if one has already decided the speaker is criminal or blind, and that decision depends mainly on *mark*. Heather Glen, "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking," in Phillips, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Hazard Adams usefully cites many of the relevant passages from *Jerusalem in William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963), but he does not bring them to bear as pointedly as he might, and he ignores differences from "London." It is too simple to claim that "Los and Blake and the speaker of 'London' are the same" (280).

When Blake speaks *in propria persona* early in *Jerusalem* (5:16–26) he confesses to having wandered but it has not kept him from his prophetic mission: "Trembling

I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me. / Yet they forgive my wanderings,  
I rest not from my great task! / To open the Eternal Worlds . . ."

<sup>9</sup> Glen, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> It is only fair to point out, however, that in one of the *Jerusalem* sections I have been citing for their resemblances to the "London" situation Blake does quibble on "mark": "The land is markd for desolation & unless we plant / The seeds of Cities & of Villages in the Human bosom / Albion must be a rock of blood: mark ye the points / Where Cities shall remain & where Villages" (J 83:54–57). The second "mark" can certainly mean "make a mark" as well as "observe." The general purport, on the other hand, is quite the opposite of criminal complicity: these are the surveying points for the new Jerusalem.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, 1970; Bloom, 1976. Further quotations from Bloom, unless otherwise indicated, are from the 1976 essay.

<sup>12</sup> That the man is a writer might seem to make Ezekiel more likely; after all, Blake was a writer, too. But there is nothing else in "London" to suggest the speaker is a writer. The character closest to the proper *persona* of Blake is Los, who is almost always a blacksmith, occasionally a sculptor or draftsman, never (I think) a writer. When he walks the London streets in *Jerusalem* he carries a globe of fire. In "London" it is too dark by the end to do much writing—or marking.

Gavin Edwards, in "Mind-Forg'd Manacles: A Contribution to the Discussion of Blake's 'London,'" *Literature and History*, 5 (1979), 87–105, also assumes the speaker to be a poet, *the* poet, Blake, "and since the practice in which the poet is actually engaged involves inscription on paper and the subsequent biting of the copper plate by acid to reveal the letters in relief; then surely there is a reference in 'I . . . mark' to itself?" Well, no.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, pp. 10–14. I am adding my own arguments to some of Thompson's.

<sup>14</sup> The next line, "The voice of Wandering Reuben echoes from street to street," is also suggestive. Mapping it onto "London," we would get a hint that the real errancy is not in the speaker but in the voices he hears. See also J 74:16–17. At J 45:23–25, on the other hand, Los sees Jerusalem in London, and even Bethlehem, but not Babylon. (I have been using *Jerusalem* as an analogy that provides hints of meanings to be tested independently in "London," not "conclusive evidence" of what Blake was thinking of, as Thompson puts it. *Jerusalem* was written ten or fifteen years later than "London.")

<sup>15</sup> (Cambridge, 1965), p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> One of these exceptions, the explosive apocalypse in "Night the Ninth" of *The Four Zoas*, contains a passage about "marks" which would serve well as a commentary on "London":

And every one of the dead appears as he had lived before  
And all the marks remain of the slaves scourge & tyrants Crown  
And of the Priests oergorged Abdomen & of the merchants thin  
Sinewy deception & of the warriors outbraving & thoughtlessness  
In lineaments too extended & in bones too strait & long  
They shew their wounds they accuse they seize the oppressor  
(FZ 122:41–123:5)

<sup>17</sup> Bloom (p. 39) notes that *ban* and *infant* are etymologically akin, and "infant" originally meant "incapable of speech." But the Latin sense of *infans* does not seem to be signaled, and at least the first of the infants is quite capable of making a noise.

Bloom actually says "infant" *means* "incapable of speech," but that is to confuse etymology with meaning, which he does throughout his chapter.

An amusing essay could be written on the impact of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1969) on the Yale English Department. At the back of the dictionary is a little lexicon of Indo-European roots, edited by Calvert Watkins; it is "the pre-

historic component” of the etymologies the attested component of which is found in entries of the main body of the dictionary. It is marvelous to see all the roots together; it inspires the belief that this really is a language which one could study like Greek or Latin. That is one error; a worse one is the assumption that the “meaning” of the roots (always very general, often only guesswork, and only of roots, not of words) is somehow preserved through all the millennia and passed on to all the morphological descendants in every language. Here is Bloom in the opening sentences of his contribution to the “Yale Manifesto,” *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979): “The word *meaning* goes back to a root that signifies ‘opinion’ or ‘intention,’ and is closely related to the word *moaning*. A poem’s meaning is a poem’s complaint.” The second sentence is a complete *non sequitur*; the etymology may be interesting but it establishes nothing about the meaning of a poem. J. Hillis Miller, in the same anthology, shows that “host” and “guest” derive from the same root and concludes, “a host is a guest, and a guest is a host.” Indeed, Miller celebrates this method as a way “To get so far or so much out of a little piece of language, context after context widening out from these few phrases to include as their necessary milieux all the family of Indo-European languages, all the literature and conceptual thought within those languages,” etc. Why these milieux are necessary, and for what, Miller does not say. The far and the much he gets he does not get from a little piece of language but from Watkins’s list of roots.

Bloom in his 1976 chapter on “London” compounds the etymological fallacy with careless mistakes. “Let us return to ‘wander’ which goes back to the root *wendh*, from which come also ‘turn,’ ‘weave,’ and ‘wind.’” Feeling doubtful of this remarkable root, with which Bloom weaves a good portion of his argument (“To weave is to wind is to wander is to turn is to blight and blast”), we look it up in Watkins and find “to turn, wind, weave” as *meanings*, not derivatives, of *wendh*-. Bloom also claims that the Indo-European root *dhabh*- (“to fit together”) and the Hebrew word *dabhar* (“word”) are related. He did not find that in Watkins, or anywhere else.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of precedents for *mind-forg’d manacles* in James Thomson and William Cowper, see Graham Pechey, “The London Motif in Some Eighteenth-Century Contexts,” *Literature and History* 4 (Autumn 1976), 2–29.

<sup>19</sup> Erdman, pp. 247, 277. I see in the *Oxford English Dictionary* that “ban” is also a division of the Prussian *Landwehr*. Was the term circulating among British troops in the summer of 1792?

<sup>20</sup> Collins, ed., pp. 149, 247.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), pp. 501–03. A version retranslated from the French was published by an Anti-Jacobin group in 1793.

<sup>22</sup> The machine so woven hearkens to the “Sexual Machine” of the previous plate (J 39:25), a term for everyone born into this fallen “Vegetated” world. That certainly sounds like an irremediable fate, far beyond politics, but the point is to beware of rushing into premature action when the situation is not ripe (this is during the Napoleonic Wars). There is certainly a shift in Blake’s attitude from 1792 to 1807—a greater stress on the agency of Jesus and far less on the revolutionary Orc—yet we must remember that Jesus is not an external agent but a spirit in everyone, and Los is his propagandist.

<sup>23</sup> Erdman, pp. 476–78.

<sup>24</sup> From groups like Gerard Winstanley’s Diggers through Shelley’s “The Mask of Anarchy,” from the strategies of Gandhi and Martin Luther King to the key weapon of workers, the strike, the principle of nonviolence has been wedded to active political struggle. See Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

<sup>25</sup> *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford, 1973), p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> See Martin K. Nurmi, "Fact and Symbol in 'The Chimney Sweeper' of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*," *BNYPL* 68:4 (1964), 249–56.

<sup>27</sup> Adams, p. 282. Adams cites other uses of "blackening" in Blake but neglects to note that they are all intransitive. He may have been influenced by the manuscript lines, "But most the chimney sweepers cry / Blackens oer the churches walls," but Blake changed those lines.

<sup>28</sup> *King Edward the Third* ii:25–26 (E 417); cf. Erdman, p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> Wimsatt has the color of *appalls* right (1965), and I have borrowed his terms. Bloom (1963, 1973) gives no justification for his new reading. (Adams in 1963 has "Each cry creates more blackness, casts a further 'pall' upon the church's own condition.") By 1976 Bloom has connected the draping of the church in a pall with the marking (in black ink) of Ezekiel's writer, "giving it an edge over the royal palace," which is marked in blood (red ink, I suppose, for debts). This is quite a little apocalyptic image, but it has no basis in the poem, and it generates extraneous absurdities like edges in some race for salvation.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, pp. 16–17. Jonathan Culler takes "appalls" in its "literal" sense to mean "horrify" and then considers the strategies readers have deployed to make stanza three coherent, always putting a church "horrified" parallel to a palace with blood on its walls. No doubt readers do seek and impose unity or coherence, but the only strategy needed to make these lines coherent, at least on the first level, is to look up the word in the *OED*. See Jonathan Culler, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," in Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, ed., *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 60. Of Blake's seven other uses of "appalls" some have to do with pallor or faintness; once at least the one whose soul is appalled cannot easily be taken as guilty ("The Grey Monk," line 18; E 480).

<sup>31</sup> Erdman (pp. 278–79) argues that *sigh*, like "murmur," could have a more forceful meaning than expiration in death; it could be the sounds of mutiny. I would not rule this out, but it fits ill with *hapless* and the general tenor of victimization.

<sup>32</sup> Shelley, *Hellas*, ll. 1060–63.

<sup>33</sup> The Chichester Court in 1804 recorded the charge that Blake had said, in an unwitting pun, "... and all you Soldiers are sold for Slaves." Jacob Bronowski, *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 112.

<sup>34</sup> Erdman, p. 467.

<sup>35</sup> A full account of the successive revisions is found in Michael Phillips, "William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* from Manuscript Draft to Illuminated Plate," *The Book Collector*, 28 (1979), 17–59.

<sup>36</sup> In 1963 and 1973 Bloom allows the venereal disease reading as possible but less significant than his; in 1976 he dismisses it altogether. At no time does he give arguments against it.

<sup>37</sup> Grant C. Roti and Donald L. Kent suggest *gonococcal conjunctivitis*, a form of gonorrhea contracted during delivery and progressing to a perforated cornea in six weeks. See "The Last Stanza of Blake's London," *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 41 (1977) 20. They also analyze pretty thoroughly Bloom's 1963 discussion.

<sup>38</sup> In his earliest "London"-like notebook poem Blake has "Why should I . . . / . . . shrink at the little blasts of fear / That the hiring blows into my ear" (N 113, E 464). These blasts are mainly the bans and other noisy manifestos of tyranny, but to shrink is not far from to wither, like a plant. And is Blake suggesting a pun on "ear"? See *Hamlet* III, iv, 65–66.

<sup>39</sup> Blake is fair to women in this: "What is it women do in men require / The lineaments of Gratified Desire" (N 103, E 466). What happens to the bride who enters the marriage hearse, or the "frozen marriage bed," as Oothoon puts it, Blake's

wonderful female advocate of free love or “lovely copulation” in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, is vividly described by her to her jealous, possessive boyfriend:

. . . she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot; is bound  
In spells of law to one she loathes: and must she drag the chain  
Of life, in weary lust! must chilling murderous thoughts, obscure  
The clear heaven of her eternal spring? to bear the wintry rage  
Of a harsh terror driv'n to madness, bound to hold a rod  
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day; & all the night  
To turn the wheel of false desire[.]

(VDA 5:21–27)

<sup>40</sup> Before he settled on *blights* Blake had “smites” in the notebook, echoing Exodus 12 more closely, where “smite” or “smote” occurs three times. He saw London in an Egyptian bondage as a variant of the Babylonian bondage; see, for example, J 45:11–13. Objections to an Exodus allusion would begin, of course, with the fact that “first-born” and “new-born” are more alike in sound than meaning.

<sup>41</sup> It is interesting that in 1794 the Welsh radical Morgan John Rhys founded a utopian settlement called Beulah on the Ohio River in Pennsylvania.