"The Lamb" and "The Tyger"--How Far with Blake?

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"The Lamb" and "The Tyger"—How Far with Blake?

Robert F. Gleckner

The author believes we should teach the "poetry of intellectual shock" in order to "jar the student out of his lethargy." For this purpose Blake has possibilities.

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There are a number of fairly conventional ways by which I might approach the problem of whether Blake ought to be taught in the high school classroom, and, if so, how much of Blake. I could say, for example, that much of what he has to say to us is modern, that the world of his London is precisely our world. I could say that he would speak to the students as many another poet doesn't—for he is the poet of rebellion, of defiance; he is an angry man who cries out his anger in accents recognizably similar to those we hear today. Or, I could say that he is an exciting poet who writes in simple language and that therefore he would fit well in a high school curriculum. But I shall not say any of these things—for although they are true in general, they do not seem to me to be urgent reasons for teaching any poet to high school students. I should like rather to say, simply, that we ought to teach more Blake to high school students, and teach him well, because he is a difficult, hard, tough poet—even cryptic at times—and especially because he is a disturbing poet, who attacks at one time or another almost everything we think we stand for. And finally (a point I shall not develop but only mention), he should be taught because he does not, in general, write beautiful poetry—that is, pretty words, dreamy airs, that kind of poetry which the mass mind thinks of whenever the word "poetry" is mentioned.

I am reminded here of an experience I had in teaching Keats in college—Keats, who for most people, perhaps, is the epitome of the lace-hankie type dreamer-poet. I asked a girl in my class to explain what Keats was about in the first stanza of the Ode on Melancholy—which begins like this:

No, no! Go not to Lethe, neither twist Wolf's bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine . . .

The student's answer was: "It has something to do with beauty"—for clearly her mind had been usurped by the widely accepted truth that all poetry has something to do with beauty. It was a safe answer; but, of course, it was as wrong as it could be: telling someone not to take poison, not to commit suicide, hardly has much to do with beauty.

Blake rarely concerns himself with "beauty"; in fact, his poetry is, over-all, quite unpleasant, even ugly. Still, somehow, he has come to be a "popular" poet in some respects. Everyone knows "The Tyger" (or better, everyone knows "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night"—even though they do not know who William Blake is, what his tiger really signifies, or what the forests of the night really imply). Everyone knows "The Lamb." Children recite it. Records have been made of this and other of the Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Sickeningly sweet and sentimental music has been written so that the songs can be sung. Children's
books with saccharine illustrations, which outrageously presume to somehow better Blake's own illustrations, are popular fare. All this and more—and all of it constitutes an extraordinary and terrible irony. For this nice man who wrote these nice poems, also wrote:

Prisons are built with stones of Law,  
Brothels with bricks of Religion.  
He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.  
As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys.  
Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.

This is the man who believed that Jesus Christ broke all the ten commandments—and was the better for it. This is the man who said to God about the creation of this finite world, and about God's punishment of man for not doing better with it:

If you have form'd a Circle to go into  
Go into it yourself and see how you would do. (my italics)

This is the man who, like the bitter Mark Twain most of us do not know and prefer not to know, wrote—about his good friend, the painter Fuseli:

The only Man that e'er I knew  
Who did not make me almost spew  
Was Fuseli: he was both Turk and Jew—  
And so dear Christian friends, how do you do?

This is the man who, tortured by his vision of a sinful, corrupt, vicious, strangled world, wrote in his notebook sentences like these:

To defend the Bible in this year 1798 would cost a man his life. The Beast and the Whore rule without control.  
I say I shan't live five years, and if I live one it will be a wonder. June 1793.

And who signed an album with:

William Blake. Born 28 November 1757 in London and has died several times since.

And perhaps most terrifying of all—in the face of what man has done to man—simply, "I am hid."

Blake himself is partly to blame for this irony—this way we have of accepting him as a writer of children’s poems, of pleasant lyrics, a kind of English Longfellow. In his Introduction to Songs of Innocence he wrote:

And I wrote my happy songs  
Every child may joy to hear.

And in a letter to a conventionally minded friend of his, who was clearly enamoured of what Wordsworth called the gaudiness and inane phraseology of the popular poetry of the day, Blake wrote:

You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas. [And then, bravely, for few read Blake in his own time or even knew he existed:] I am happy to find a great majority of my Fellow Mortals who can elucidate my Visions and Particularly they have been elucidated by children.

But in the same letter he also wrote:

You ought to know that what is Grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. [Happily his correspondent was clod enough not to realize that he was being insulted here by Blake.] That which can be made explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too explicit as the fittest for instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act.

And here we are at the core of the matter—an apparent contradiction which is not a contradiction at all, an idea which makes a careless surface reading of Blake the greatest injustice we could possibly do him. Note that he says his visions are elucidated by children—not that children are “amused” by them, or “like them,” or think them “pleasant and nice,” or commit them to memory. The child, for Blake, can elucidate, can imaginatively take in, the vision or the poem, because his inner
eye has not yet been clouded over by the pall of convention, by the obstruction of that common sense we all praise so much, by the maturity which sees often as the fool sees, which accepts present realities as the only real, accepts "fact" as the only truth, worships science as the saviour of mankind even while it is helping to blow up mankind, accepts man's mask as the true index of his character, accepts the world as it is, believing that the way to get along in it is to deal with it on the world's terms. Such blindness the child has not yet learned. He can still see, and he sees creatively; as Blake said, he sees not with the eye but through the eye. Thus we grow from sensitive child to weak man, who needs his faculties to be roused so that he may act, so that he may be a person, not a copy, so that he may be "man thinking," not an insensate aggregate of facts stored in the "accepted" categories and pigeonholes. (We should recall here that our most brilliant electronic brains can only store, sort, classify, order, record, transcribe. They do not create.)

To see "The Lamb," then, as a kind of sophisticated version of Mary's little animal of the same name, or to see "The Tyger" as frightening and terrible merely because that's what tigers in the zoo look like, is to arouse no faculties at all; it is rather to cater to the very human thirst for easy answers, which are based on even easier, unexamined alternatives—good-bad, moral-immoral, freedom-slavery, angels-devils, heaven-hell, God-Satan.

For Blake this is the ultimate surrender of one's own mind to the group mind, the comfortable position of the nonvoter who says to himself, "Why should I vote; one vote doesn't make any difference anyway?"; the lazy acceptance of another man's ideas because it is a bother to think—and besides, he's more famous than I, or more learned than I, or more powerful than I, or whatever.

The Clue to Blake

The clue to teaching Blake, then, and therefore the clue to how much of Blake to teach to young minds, is implicit in his own vigorous and courageous motto: "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." It's as simple as that. There are no other alternatives. To create for Blake was to be; this is why he insists so vehemently on judging everyone as an artist—whether they are what we call artists or not. Thus, Sir Isaac Newton to Blake was a bad artist; Sir Francis Bacon was a bad artist—not because either one of them painted or wrote, but because they believed in the limitations of the human creature—that is, because they were uncreative human beings themselves. "A poet, a painter, a musician, an architect," Blake wrote: "the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian." "Jesus and his Apostles were all Artists." "The Whole business of Man is the Arts." The uncreative life for Blake is a living death, the abrogation of one's own divine responsibility to think for one's self, the self-complacent acceptance of the tyranny of another's thought—father's, mother's, teacher's, president's, even God's.

But it is, you say, young minds that you are concerned with, not the mind that has matured to the point where it can intelligently guide the body it inhabits. Exactly. This is Blake's point, and the point of teaching him in the high schools. "Some children are fools," Blake said, "and so are some old men. But there is a vast majority on the side of imagination or spiritual sensation." It is a brave statement, for Blake knew only too well that it is in the young that the mind begins to harden, to petrify, for it is in the young, in that last gasp of freedom and irresponsibility,
that the greatest pressures are exerted—to be like the fathers, the teachers, to be like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, to be like their fellows, to "get with it," to "know the score," to learn how to "get along," to learn the value of the dollar, to plan for one's future security, to be sensible, to realize one's capacity, to settle for less, and in these ways to be what we confidently call "happy." And all of these pressures are of a piece; they constitute what Wordsworth called the "Shades of the prison-house" which "close upon the growing Boy." They constitute an insidious coercion of the infinite human mind into what Blake called a ratio. "He who sees the infinite in all things, sees God," wrote Blake; "he who sees the ratio only, sees himself only." Thus the coercion, we see, is accompanied and abetted by an inner weakness, a surrender of self to the coercion. Desire can be restrained, Blake said, only if it is weak enough to be restrained. When we accept an arbitrary "capacity" as our ultimate potential, we are lost. And when we, as teachers, accept the student's ratio, and decide that that is his "capacity," how indeed can we endeavour to speak to the whole of his humanness? The answer is, of course, that we can't; and since we can't, we cram his head with facts and say he has wisdom, we make him memorize a poem and say he knows poetry, we tell him democracy is good and communism bad and say he is politically sophisticated, we read him "The Tyger" without knowing that Blake never meant his tiger to become like the lamb, never meant it to be seen as evil, never meant it to look like a zoo tiger. But we read it to him anyway, hoping that even in his limited capacity, he will, as we say, "like" the poem.

**Blake on Ideas**

Blake once wrote a poem about the essence of joy—which, like all abstractions which were to him an abhorrence, he sees as a human being, or better, as a potential human being, a child. He calls the poem "Infant Joy"—a lovely, ungrammatical exemplum of, and hymn to, pure innocence:

I have no name:
I am but two days old.
What shall I call thee?
I happy am,
Joy is my name.
Sweet joy befall thee.
Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee:
Thou dost smile,
I sing the while:
Sweet joy befall thee.

We should have our classes read this. But we should also point out quickly that this represents only one side of things, one state of the human soul as Blake put it, and an all too fleeting state at that. There is the other side, the contrary state of the human soul, and it is this state which we are in. We should not have our classes read the one without the other, for the second is the cruel but necessary puncturing of the illusion of the first. The second is called "Infant Sorrow":

My mother groan'd, my father wept;
Into the dangerous world I leapt,
Helpless, naked, piping loud,
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands
Striving against my swaddling bands,
Bound and weary, I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

When I saw that rage was vain,
And to sulk would nothing gain,
Turning many a trick and wile,
I began to soothe and smile.

And I soothe'd day after day
Till upon the ground I stray;
And I smile'd night after night,
Seeking only for delight.

And I saw before me shine
Clusters of the wand'ring vine,
And many a lovely flower and tree
Stretch'd their blossoms out to me.
My father then with holy look,
In his hands a holy book,
Pronounced curses on my head
And bound me in a mirtle shade.

So I smote him, and his gore
Stained the roots my mirtle bore;
But the time of youth is fled,
And grey hairs are on my head.

We all strive against our swaddling bands when young—and even as we do, like a strait jacket or a Chinese finger-lock, those bands grow tighter about us. Till bound and weary we make a decision: Don’t fight it; pretend to give in. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, and fight ’em on their own terms. If sulking doesn’t work, rage loudly and furiously at what everyone has done to you, poor miserable you. And when that doesn’t get you anywhere, try a few tricks of the trade, learn the ropes, play the game. Use every device in your developing repertoire of gambits to gain pleasure—and profit, of course—for yourself. Never mind the others; they’re doing the same thing. Just look out for yourself. But as you reach out for that tempting flower of success, the holy, self-righteous law brands you as evil and binds you in the eternal bonds of suffering, enslaved humanity. Now you are a man.

Or if we refuse to recognize ourselves here, if we refuse to see that we allow ourselves to be enslaved by forces which we ourselves create and perpetuate, we should read on to discover how little human, finally, we really are. In Blake’s parlance, we cease to be human and become an abstract quantity. Here is his “Human Abstract”:

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

And mutual fear brings peace,
Till the selfish loves increase:
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,
And waters the ground with tears;
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head;
And the Catterpillar and Fly
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

The gods of the earth and sea
Sought through nature to find this tree.
But their search was all in vain.
There grows one in the Human Brain.

The Effect of Blake

All of this is pretty grim, I agree. Indeed we are repelled by it—as we should be. And this brings me to my main point about Blake’s poetry. It is that kind of poetry which ought to be taught in high school because it is impossible to remain neutral in the face of its onslaught on our cherished values. Jerome S. Bruner, professor of psychology at Harvard, recently put it succinctly: “The objective of education is not the production of self-complacent fools.” Rather, it is a process by which we teach the young student to doubt, to conjecture, to wonder, to be confused. The trouble with a good many students when they come to college is that they are never disturbed or confused about anything. They have no basis on which to be confused or disturbed, because we have so carefully sheltered them from confusion that in their boredom with the old clichés, they have simply accepted them without a fight—they sulk upon their mother’s breast, simply because that is the place where everyone sulks. We have taught them that some guys are good guys, and some are bad guys; we have given them labels to tack onto their perceptions; but we have not taught
them very well how to see in the first place.

Once, when teaching Clifford Odets’ short, biting play about a taxicab strike, Waiting for Lefty, I asked my students on a quiz who or what was the villain of the piece. They were unanimous in their answers—unanimously wrong; for they all answered “the Communists,” or “Communism,” despite the fact that the real villain was clearly, melodramatically, even cruelly presented by Odets as the powerful, rich, capitalistic, unscrupulous head of the taxicab company, who was squeezing his nonunionized drivers dry. It was my first frightening awakening to the fact that even when given a clear set of good guys and bad guys, even with a program, these college students could not tell the players—so brainwashed were they with pat answers. And I am also reminded here of the extraordinary reaction of people to Sinclair Lewis’s Babbitt—that vicious, heavy-handed satire on the middle-class businessman, his narrow provincial mind, his unthinking prejudices, his dishonesty and hypocrisy, his crassly commercialized religion, etc. But—despite all this—the people who read of him liked him; he was really a fine fellow, a good guy. That is, they identified with him because he was like they were, and hence he was all right with them.

It is precisely this sort of thing that Blake meant by “mind-forged manacles” (in his poem, “London”). We forge manacles for our own minds by limiting our perceptions and values to easy black-white dichotomies that are comfortable to live with: lambs are nice and tigers are terrible. But certainly part of Blake’s point in these two poems is that they both were divinely created to be exactly what they are; they are neither nice nor not nice. They are simply a lamb and a tiger. It is man who puts labels on them and decides, in his appropriated omniscience, that one is good and one is evil. It is man who manacles his own brain and then blames it on society, government, his father, his God, or whatever. Like the fox in Blake’s proverb, “he condemns the trap, not himself.” As for “The Tyger,” we do not, indeed somehow we can not, bring ourselves to think, as the speaker of the poem cannot, that God could have created such a thing as a tiger, when he could have gone on creating lambs. In one of his great and disturbing works, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (which is perhaps more central to an understanding of Blake’s ideas than any other single work), Blake has the Devil speak a series of Proverbs. They should be read by all students along with Poor Richard’s Almanac and the myriad books of conventional, homey mind-forged manacles that we have been taught to accept blindly as the only wisdom.

“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” we say. Blake says, “Opposition is true friendship.” We stare and blink; we ought to be disturbed. But we think at any rate, and if we think hard enough we can see that perhaps it is true that, as Blake says, “Without contraries is no progression.”

As soon as we iron out all the contraries, cancel out the opposition, reconcile all differences, and agree—we cease to move, indeed we cease to be what is our most precious birthright—ourselves. “The same dull round, even of a universe,” Blake said, “would soon become a mill with complicated wheels.” We say, “Be prudent.” Blake says, or rather his Devil’s advocate says, “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”; and “Prudence is a rich, ugly, old maid courted by incapacity.” “Be discreet,” we say, or you will get into trouble. Blake says, “Always be ready to speak your mind and a base man will avoid you.” “Improvement makes strait roads,” he agrees; “but the crooked roads without improvement are road of genius.” Do we have the courage to contradict
him, the wherewithall to argue with him? Perhaps. But, to teach him aright, we've got to let the student hear him first, before there is any problem. We have been taught to choose between lambs and tigers; but how does one choose between a God who creates a lamb and a God who creates a tiger? Indeed, must we choose?

Again and again in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” Blake pounds at the same point—you have eyes to see and a brain to act upon your perceptions; be yourself, exercise to the fullest your own divine individuality and originality. It is not so much conformity that he berates (though that is what we would call it, I suppose) but rather the more terrible crime of unthinking, servile imitations:

The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow.
The apple tree never asks the beech how he shall grow; nor the lion, the horse, how he shall take his prey.
If the lion was advised by the fox, he would be cunning.
No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings.

Value of the Unconventional

But these proverbs also imply a number of things beyond the horror of imitation and conformity. They imply, it seems to me, that by teaching poems that are easy and conventional, we are merely adding to the store of easy answers the student already has. By teaching poems that have a vocabulary suited somehow to a particular grade level, we counteract that natural elasticity of the student’s mind—and instead pander to his “capacity” (whatever that is, and however we know about it). Thus when he comes to college he knows a little bit about a lot of things, and he has been “exposed” (as we say) to some poems; but he has seldom thought, even a little bit, about that lot of things that he “knows.” We often complain that students can’t write even when they get to college. It’s a grievous problem, I agree. But it’s even more discouraging to discover that they don’t have anything to write about—that they haven’t been prodded or goaded or disturbed or bothered or challenged enough even to ask meaningful questions. They have answers; but, alas, so often they are merely the old dichotomies again, what every normal redblooded American boy or girl has already said more times than is humanly bearable. Do you prefer lambs or tigers? The answer is easy; it takes no thought; there is no confusion, no problem, no doubt, no necessity to wonder. And it does not occur that one does not have to prefer lambs or tigers.

A. E. Housman once wrote a delightful poem about all this—more temperate and amusing than my prose: “Terence, This is Stupid Stuff,” the “this” of course being poetry. Over beer and victuals in a pub, the first speaker in the poem berates Terence, the poet, for writing such stupid stuff:

Pretty friendship ’tis to rhyme
Your friends to death before their time
Moping melancholy mad:
Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad.

Terence’s answer is to my point:

Why, if ’tis dancing you would be,
There’s brisker pipes than poetry.

Oh, many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse,
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God’s ways to man.

And then he goes on:

Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck’s a chance, but trouble’s sure,
I’d face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.
I agree. This is what poetry is for. This is a good reason for teaching it as early as possible in the schools. But it is also the most urgent reason for teaching difficult poetry in high school, for teaching especially what we might call the poetry of intellectual shock (God knows, the movies and television give our students enough of the other kind of shock)—an intellectual shock to jar the student out of his lethargy, to make him question—himself and all others, to make him uncomfortable with the old dichotomies, to encourage indeed his rebellion, but at the same time to provide him an intelligent context for that rebellion to rumble around in. It has always seemed to me that much of juvenile delinquency is merely rebellion in a vacuum—the spirit without the matter, or perhaps better, the physical accouterments of rebellion without the discriminating powers to understand the nature of the rebellion or what is being rebelled against. Like the young man, accused recently of shooting a 15-year-old girl: when asked why, he merely replied: “I hate the whole damn world.” It is not much worse, I submit, to say, “I don’t understand it, but I know what I like” or, that poetry has something to do with beauty.

To teach Blake well is a final problem—and I cannot say much about it here. That he is a demanding poet his own statement makes clear: “Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place; the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts, the mild and gentle for the mild and gentle parts, and the prosaic for inferior parts. All are necessary to each other.” More helpful, perhaps, is the fact that he is an extraordinarily consistent poet—that is, whenever we find a king in his poetry we know he is writing of tyranny; whenever anyone is lost, we know that that person is, in some way, in error because he refuses or is unable to see. Moreover, he is what I call a cumulative poet—that is, one who builds his images and symbols carefully as he goes along, from poem to poem, deliberately misusing, warping, modifying the conventional associations of those images and symbols, forcefully challenging his reader in every line to dare to hang on to his conventional notions in the face of this, and this, and this. This does not mean, of course, that we should encourage the student to accept the validity of Blake’s assertions and discard his own. That would be merely to substitute one tyranny for another. But by exposing him to the vigorous, trenchant, passionate cry of an unconventional poet, we can, I think, arouse his sluggish faculties to act; we can help the student, in Emerson’s words, to lift the iron lids of his sluggard intellect; we can, simply, give him something to think about. Without more of Blake than a meek lamb and a fierce tiger acting conventionally in a kind of good-guys vs. bad-guys Grade B movie melodrama, we might just as well not teach him at all. Blake wrote:

I give you the end of a golden string;
Only wind it into a wall:
It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate,
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.

We need not try to be our student’s saviours; but if we don’t give them the end of the golden string, how will they ever be able to wind it into a ball?