"The Tyger" and its Maker: Blake's Vision of Art and the Artist

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LIKE A MIRACULOUS sponge, Blake's "The Tyger" has absorbed many interpretations without becoming waterlogged. Appreciators of the poem have contrasted the tiger with the lamb, innocence with experience: some wondrous nature or god has in his unquestionable wisdom created both albatross and behemoth. Critics of the poem have explored fruitfully Blake's use of irony and dramatic characterization, the tiger as the pussy cat creation of a braggart Nobodaddy; and other Blakeans have studied the text of the poem, its revisions, its historical implications, its occult symbols, and its position in the structure of Blake's developed mythology.¹

The central problem that critics of the poem must face, and often have (though too frequently within the context of a special Blakean vocabulary), can be reduced conveniently to the question, "Who made the tiger?" The answer to this question often depends upon the answer to another: "What qualities characterize this particular tiger?" The thesis of this article is that Blake himself (not Nobodaddy or Urizen or Nature), as artist, created the tiger, and that this tiger's major characteristics are those of the work of art as conceived by Blake during the writing of Songs of Experience. The poem is about the relationship between the artist as creator and the work of art as creation rather than about man's view of the relationship between the general creator of things and one of the things he has created.² The tiger is this poem in par-

¹Hazard Adams, William Blake, A Reading of the Shorter Poems (Seattle, 1963), pp. 329-332, contains a descriptive bibliography of articles and sections of books that deal with the poem. The MLA annual bibliography from 1963-1965 contains six additional items that deal with "The Tyger."

²Adam s (discussions of William Blake [Boston, 1961], p. 63) suggests that of the two major concerns of "The Tyger," "the unprolific or distorting and the truly creative process in spiritual life...the latter is a process equivalent to the process of creation in art. Creation in art is for Blake the renewal of visionary truth." To my mind, the poem is mainly about the "process of creation in art."
ticular and in general all those works of art that represent a formalization of "the forests of the night," of the world of experience and nature. The hand or eye that framed this fearful symmetry is Blake's in particular and that of the shaper of experience into artistic forms in general.

Though a literal tiger no doubt lies behind the "fearful symmetry" of Blake's tiger, the tiger seems as symbolic as the rose, the sunflower, the lily, the clod, the pebble, and the other explicitly physical items from the world of nature in *Songs of Experience*. Few critics would dispute the point: though the tiger must be visualized initially as a literal tiger, the effectiveness of Blake's poem comes from his creation of a tiger so unusual both in himself and in relation to his maker that literal visualization fails to account for the poem. Nevertheless, the effect of the first two words of the poem is to evoke a vivid literal visualization of a conventional tiger. While part of the visualization of such a tiger may involve leonine grace and beauty, certainly most readers, responding to the repetition, would associate the tiger with more than human power and forcefulness. Certainly, both in the terms of our society and in Blakean terms, there is nothing inherently evil about a tiger: that his symmetry is fearful and his terrors deadly describe the potentiality of his strength rather than the result of his destructiveness. The tiger is in no way morally or ethically reprehensible, is, in fact, no more subject to the restricting moral codes of institutions and reason than is the poet of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* who says that "Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained." The restraint placed upon the tiger is ultimately the form that his maker gives him in the same way that the formal structure of the poem "The Tyger" is the restraint that Blake places upon his imaginative conception. This kind of restraint is the price of creation.

The repetition of the word "tyger" in the first and sixth stanzas of the poem not only suggests the power of the animal but anticipates the tone of wonder that exists in all six stanzas. The initial repetition of "Tyger Tyger" anticipates the repetition of the entire first stanza in its end position, a kind of fearful symmetry itself in which the first and last stanzas are almost identical expressions of wonder, holding

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between them four stanzas of questions in which rhetoric, irony, and wonder are mixed in unequal proportions—wonder predominating. That the first and the last stanza ask a single almost identical question, and the middle four stanzas a series of questions (whether or not, or to what degree, they are rhetorical is not to the point at the moment) emphasizes that we are dealing with characteristics and actions that are both amazing and wonderful. In terms of punctuation and syntax, not to speak of semantic characteristics, from the opening words and throughout the poem this tiger is a wondrous creature.

That the tiger is burning brightly need not be understood in any special Blakean sense, except to the degree that Blake himself makes use of the traditional association between fire and creativity, between the furnace-forgé and the creating imagination. In a process of transference, that which is a product of the creative fire itself burns (in the present gerund and consequently continuously, as the burning bush burns continuously as a vehicle to embody and convey the divine presence). If this burning were a form of catharsis or purification, surely Blake would have found some way to suggest the termination or at least the result of this purgation, whereas the tense form indicates a continuous fire and the repetition of the same phrase in the final stanza of the poem emphasizes that the intervening four stanzas have in no way exhausted the tiger's fuel. The way in which the tiger burns is not the way "Whate'er is born of mortal birth" burns in "To Tirzah": "Whate'er is born of mortal birth / Must be consumed with the earth." This tiger is no more consumed than is the burning bush.

Though there have been valiant attempts to locate "the forests of the night," none have been totally successful. Blake's illustration for the poem, reproduced and discussed by John E. Grant in his "The Art and Argument of 'The Tyger,'" includes part of a rather stark, barren tree to the left of which stands the tiger. Grant suggests that "This tree of Death epitomizes the fallen or 'vegetable' world; it represents the forests of the night. . . ."4 Neither the first line of the poem, nor the poem as a whole, nor the drawing of the tree seems to me to support the first assertion; however, the second seems

like a reasonable guess at the relationship Blake intended between the poem and the illustration. The topographical relationship between the tiger and the forest in the poem is represented visually by the two main images of the illustration, the tiger and the tree. Perhaps the single tree represents the world of single vision that Blake in another place calls upon God to keep us from: “single vision and Newton's sleep.” For this world of single vision that the forests of the night may represent, that the tiger is in at the present moment of its initial introduction into the poem and at the present moment of its final appearance in the last stanza of the poem, is a cluttered and ambiguous world, the world of nature (consequently “forests”), and a world without essential clarity (“of the night”). It is the world from which the maker of the tiger draws the matter out of which he will shape the tiger and it is the world back into which (“in”) the maker of the tiger will put his creation. The tiger, “burning bright,” is the uncluttered and unambiguous product of the artist’s imagination, taking its substance from the cluttered real world and existing as an art product in that world, that is, “in the forests of the night.” To put it more succinctly, the forests of the night represent the material the artist has not imaginatively shaped into the clarity and light of artistic form. The tiger symbolizes artistic form. The single tiger shines like a bright light against a dark background.

Except for the substitution of “dare” for “could,” the first question of the poem, “What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry,” is also its final question. Both by positioning and meaning these almost identical questions are central to the effectiveness of the poem. If the tiger is this poem in particular and in general all those works of art that represent a formalization of “the forests of the night,” of the world of experience, then the hand or eye that framed this fearful symmetry is Blake’s in particular and that of the artist in general. Whereas in Songs of Innocence Blake uses, often with bitter irony, the materials of the world of the lamb as subject matter of his work of art, in Songs of Experience Blake uses the materials of the world of the tiger, the “forests of the night,” both as subject matter and, when shaped into the fearful symmetry of the tiger, as symbolic representative of the type of poem that is the product of visualizing this world. I suggest that Blake, struck by the
power of his imaginative conception of the tiger, and antici-
pating the powerful beauty that the poem would embody,
writes in the fourth line not of the "fearful symmetry" of the
literal tiger but of the "fearful symmetry" of the tiger as
this poem in particular and as a symbol of the poems of
Songs of Experience in general.

That the "hand or eye" that framed the tiger is an im-
mortal one should come as no surprise to readers of Blake and
does not contradict the equating of the creator of the tiger
with Blake himself. For Blake, not only is "everything that
lives . . . holy," but everything that lives on the human level
is potentially immortal, immortal through the exercise of the
imagination. In the Blakean ontology, God becomes man to
the extent that man becomes God. Man's rise to divinity or,
more accurately, his attempt to regain the shape and sub-
stance of his partially lost or reduced divinity, is directly
dependent upon his use of his imagination. Man becomes God
when man extends his imagination so as to create out of the
raw materials of experience the work of art that transcends
the world of experience. The answer to the first question of
the poem, then, is first Blake, then the artist, then man. Blake
as artist could create the tiger. Blake as artist, extending
his imagination, could expand the god-like within himself,
could, in effect, be immortal. Like the tiger, the maker of the
tiger is wondrous to behold. Blake the artist does not fear to
recognize his immortality; in fact, he stands in awe before
his own fearlessness.

The reader who has followed thus far can, I believe, antici-
pate the pattern, if not the details, of the remainder of the
explication. "In what distant deeps or skies

\[\text{I burnt the fire of thine eyes}\]

may refer either to the eyes of the tiger, espe-
cially since it is the tiger who has been "burning" in the first
stanza, or to the eyes that are the visualizing and concep-
tualizing agents of the body, or, more accurately, of the
imagination, to which belong also the "immortal hand or eye"
that "could frame thy fearful symmetry." The direct address
of the statement certainly indicates through the use of "thine"
that the voice of the poem is speaking to and of the tiger.
But to settle for this direct identification is, I believe, to dis-
regard some of the important complexities of the poem. For
example, most critics agree that the eye image in Blake rep-
resents, among other things, "the shaping spirit of imagina-
tion."5 Certainly it represents this in line three. The words "burn" and "fire" suggest the hot crucible of the creative imagination. Blake often topographically mythologizes and creates a place that is the crucible or forge of creation, as he does in the fourth stanza of the poem when he compares the process of creation to the muscular efforts of the great smithy Vulcan pounding matter into form in his hot furnace.

I suggest that though the voice of the poem directly addresses the tiger as art product in the second stanza, the tiger has become associated inseparably with his maker the artist. The eye of the third line of the first stanza is associated with the eyes of the second stanza in the relationship of maker to made, he whose imagination is fire creating a product that burns.

The "distant deeps and skies" would then refer, like "the forests of the night," to the place in which (notice the use of "in" in both the second and fifth lines of the poem) the work of art exists, if it were not for the change in tense. We have moved from the present of "burning" to the past of "burnt."6 Whereas in the first stanza, as in the last, the art product is being described in its timeless and forever present existence, the second stanza has begun referring in the past tense to the same art product in its finite moment of creation. The four middle stanzas of the poem describe in the past tense the activity of the artist and the developing characteristics of his work of art during those particular moments of creation. The final stanza, significantly, returns to the present tense. The "distant deeps or skies" refer both to a place and a time: the place is a place of the imagination, existing somewhere in the mind (and consequently "distant," elusive, always escaping the geography of latitude and longitude) and the time is the moment in the past when the imagination conceived the tiger and the tiger first burned.

The "wings" on which the maker of the tiger "dare . . .

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5Adams, Discussions, p. 56.
6Fred C. Robinson in "Verb Tense in Blake's 'The Tyger,'" PMLA, LXXIX (1964), 666-669, argues that the "dare" in the first and final stanzas is a form that could have been used as either past or present tense in the eighteenth century, and that Blake uses it as a past tense form. I do not find his argument convincing: it is based upon inconclusive historical evidence and not upon the poem itself; it fails to deal with the present tense of the participle "burning" in the first and final stanzas; and it suggests that the poem is far less rich than it really is.
aspire” are the conventional wings of the creative imagination, perhaps the wings that Daedalus made and with which Icarus flew. The “dare” is the challenge, that Blake is to emphasize in the final stanza, of becoming immortal, of becoming God, by extending the imagination and recalling fallen man’s lost or reduced divinity. In Blake’s view, one “dares” to be an artist. The “aspire” is a positive use of a word that Blake uses ironically in “Ah! Sun-flower,” and perhaps is connected to the traditional religious use of breath to denote the soul, or the spirit, or the holy ghost; perhaps connected to the romantic use of the breeze or the wind as a metaphor to describe the rebirth of the creative imagination. The hand that again “dares” to “seize the fire” is the hand of the artist grasping the fires of the creative process and, as Vulcan in stanza four or the sculptor figure in stanza three, using the fire like a blowtorch to impose form upon matter.

In stanza three the artist becomes titanic, a Michaelangel-esque figure, as in Blake’s muscular broad-shouldered Jesus in Night VIII of The Four Zoas. He is a shaper and maker whose great physical strength represents the power of his imagination, and who as literal figure is the artist as sculptor, shaping and molding out of recalcitrant material a victory over chaos and nature. The “shoulder” and the “art” refer to the physical strength and the creative agility of the artist to “twist the sinews of thy heart.” The artist must exert all his power to “twist,” to forcefully shape, the powerful muscles of the inner being of the tiger, vigorously to grasp unformalized experience and nature and shape it into a work of art.

The meaning of the final two lines of the third stanza depends upon what verb and subject one reads into the final sentence, “What dread hand & what dread feet?” Is this the dread hand and the dread feet of the sculptor or of the tiger? And what about these appendages? Dreadful yes, as an adjectival characteristic, but with what verb, omitted and understood or applicable by attraction, are these appendages associated? For I think we can recognize at this point that if our art product, the tiger, is dreadful in the same sense that he

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2See G. E. Bentley, Jr., William Blake, Vala, Or The Four Zoas (Oxford, 1963), p. 114, for this drawing.
is fearful, that is, breath-taking, powerfully striking, and incredibly wonderful, our art maker both directly and indirectly shares in these characteristics. What we say about the tiger we must say also about the maker of the tiger. In this sense, then, whether the dread hand and the dread feet are the tiger's (the illustration would not support this) or the sculptor's (dread in the sense I have indicated above but with special emphasis on physical power, as if the sculptor were standing feet apart, his powerful arms raised, his whole body poised for the effort of artistic creation) cannot, at least here, matter very much. If they are the tiger's the verb would simply indicate existence, the being of the new creation. If they are the artist's, then the verb, by attraction and common sense, would be “seize” or “twist” or some rough synonym that would not be inconsistent with the actions we expect of feet. But at this point the maker and what he has made need not be separated.

In stanza four the maker of the tiger is no longer only the artist-sculptor but the artist-blacksmith as well, an anticipation of Los, whom Blake associates with “the strong-handed Hephaistos,” the artificer or Vulcan of Greek tradition. It is Hephaistos-Vulcan who has “built a house by means of his craftsmanship and cunning” for each of the gods in Olympus, has built, in fact, a heavenly city, a forerunner of Golgonooza or the New Jerusalem that Los the blacksmith is to create. Here the maker of the tiger is the conventional Vulcan-Thor-Daedalus figure of mythology who goes “to forge in the smithy of” his “soul the uncreated conscience of” his “race.” What “the uncreated conscience” makes when it creates itself is a work of art. Blake asks, what hammer was used to make you, what chain? The hammer, of course, is the instrument of the maker of artifacts, the chain is the chain that holds down as in a firm vise the artifact being made. We are in the workshop of Vulcan, the coals are blazing, and the blacksmith-artist is exerting his powerful bared muscles. The work of art, the tiger, powerful itself, is chained down to the anvil. Like a fearless blacksmith, the artist, holding the “deadly

terrors" of his imaginative conception, shapes and molds it under the white hot heat of creative activity. Blake's images in this stanza are neither bold nor original; they are a traditional part of the mythology associated with man as artist. The furnace is not the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar which Blake associates with the four states of existence, but the traditional furnace of creative activity, the imagination of the artist, in which the artist creates his awesome tiger.

That a cosmic drama with theological overtones immediately follows Blake's description of the activities of a Vulcan-artist has puzzled many critics of the poem. References to stars throwing down their spears and heaven being watered appear in later Blake poems, and perhaps the same special Blakean theological considerations apply to "The Tyger." If my interpretation of the poem, however, is valid, it is completely unnecessary to assume that Blake in approximately 1790 had worked out in specific detail the complicated mythology of man's fall to which he first makes detailed reference in Vala or the The Four Zoas, the first draft of which was probably composed between 1795 and 1797. It is sufficient, I believe, to interpret these most troublesome lines within the context of the poem itself.

David Erdman, who uses the figure of "the creative blacksmith who seizes the molten stuff of terror and shapes it into living form on the cosmic anvil" to describe the artist of stanza four, suggests that the "stars throwing down their spears" is the direct result of the exertions of the blacksmith who "drives out the impurities in a shower of sparks, like the fallen stars children call angels' tears." Here the exertions of the blacksmith directly cause the metaphorical heavenly downpour. Erdman's reading is convincing and economical, and I will add to it only by saying that it seems to me quite plausible that by "the stars throwing down their spears" Blake may have meant to describe metaphorically the tradi-

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12See Frye, pp. 271-272.
13G. E. Bentley indicates (p. 157) that "the first fair copy, about 1797 . . . is obviously a fair copy of rough drafts which have not been preserved." Though Blake revised the manuscript through 1804, I am guessing that he began work on it as early as 1795. Erdman's educated guess is that Blake wrote "The Tyger" "between 1790 and late 1792" (Erdman and Bloom, p. 714).
tional unusual heavenly phenomena that conventionally accompany an unusual occurrence or creation in the human world, such as the disturbances in nature that accompany the braggart Glendower’s birth in *Henry IV*. The stars throwing down their spears could, of course, represent falling stars in the night sky. They would “water heaven with their tears” in the sense that heaven, the whole night sky, is metaphorically rained on by a shower of shooting or falling stars. The phrase “star-shower” is a common one. A reading along these lines would seem to me sufficient, though certainly neither exhaustive nor exclusive; and would have the virtue of keeping us within the context of the poem. The heavens respond to the fearlessness of the artist and the fearfulness of his creation.

The final questions of the stanza emphasize the wonderfulness of the artist and his work of art. In both cases the answer to the question is yes. The “glittering eyes” of the artist “are gay,” like those of the Chinamen of Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli.” That he smiles now with the joyfulness of a god who is beyond mortality and “the forests of the night” is no surprise, since he himself has become immortal through his actions as an artist. The final question, rhetorical and slightly ironic, asks did he who made the poem “The Lamb” or the illustration for that poem also make the poem “The Tyger” or its illustration. Is the artist who created these two very different works of art the same man? Did the poet who could conceive of the work of art as an image of gentleness and pastoral beatitude also conceive of the work of art as an image of fearful wonder and mental apocalypse?

Finally, Blake returns in the stanza to the first, and the fearful symmetry of his work of art is complete. The single change from “could” to “dare” emphasizes the almost unbelievable boldness of the artist in daring to create something as fearful and as awesome as this poem and the *Songs of Experience*. As the series of questions develop, the answers become more and more obvious. If my interpretation of the tiger and “the forests of the night” is accurate and my answers to the questions correct, the poem as a whole must be seen as a series of rhetorical questions framed by an image that represents the work of art and an image that represents the world of experience, of nature, from which the work of art derives its subject matter and in which as artifact it
exists. The answer to the questions is "Blake himself," or some surrogate for Blake, say Daedalus or Vulcan, or the sculptor, the artist in general, or the imagination of the artist, or even what the artist has created as something inseparable from the artist himself. Regardless of the surrogate, which supplies valuable modifications and extensions, the point is the same.

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