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Blake's LONDON

Blake's "London" is rife with polysemous terms and fecund phrases, but none is more dynamic than "blackning Church"[1] (line 10)—a description that has long resisted a definitive critical interpretation because its verb is cunningly ambiguous.[2] Contemporary scholars continue to disagree about what is going on in line 10, although they commonly and, in my view, erroneously seek a traditional grammatical explanation.

Walter S. Minot, for example, designates *blackning* an intransitive verb that describes "... the blackening of the church by soot."[3] Michael Ferber, on the other hand, initially views the Church "as blackening [*v.t.*] the minds of the sweepers, manacling them to keep them in thrall to her mystery and tyranny"; he later concedes that *blackning* might be intransitive given the plausible presence of "the smoke of London commerce ... [which] ... blackens the church's once white limestone after which Albion was named."[4]

But in checking this phrase against accepted grammatical paradigms (which disallow ambiguous terms), Ferber and Minot have, in effect, revoked Blake's poetic license. These critics fail to recognize not only that "blackning Church" is a double entendre, but that as such it also plays an integral role in furthering one of the poem's major themes: the reflexive and cyclical nature of institutional oppression.

The Church is *simultaneously* a blackener and self-blackening, as is apparent from the context in which that institution is mentioned in the poem's third stanza:

> How the Chimney-sweepers cry
> Every blackning Church appalls,
> And the hapless Soldiers sigh
> Runs in blood down Palace walls

The Church, a blackening force, shrouds the Sweeper in its soot (which he, of course, is charged with removing) even as it darkens his spirit by scoffing at his misery. But it is in keeping with Blake's sense of karmic justice[5] that the Church's impiety and scorn are reverted; for just as the Soldier's sigh stains with blood the walls of the pernicious institution that conscripts him, so does

the Sweeper's voiced torment resound upon his oppressor, blackening it in kind.

The dual meaning of "blackning Church," then, is consistent with the poem's predominant ethos: that oppression will be revisited upon the oppressor.[6] Nowhere in "London" is this principle more evident than in the fourth stanza where

> ... the youthful Harlot's curse
> Blasts the new born Infants tear
> And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse[.]

The Harlot—a perverse mother figure—passes down to her child a legacy of corruption and contagion, one that likewise infects the marriage institution (and, by association, the Church), ensuring for posterity an endless cycle of excoriation and oppression.

Here, however, Blake renders problematic any determination of a primal cause for the miasma that hangs over his squalid metropolis: all—Harlot, Infant, and Church—appear equally fettered by an eternal and tautological causal chain that blights their existence. If anything, the poem's finale, with its emphasis on recurrence, suggests that culpability for London's abject atmosphere rests with dull repetition itself. This is not to imply that the Church is absolved of its part in fostering urban decay; on the contrary, by placing it within the very cycle of stagnation that it perpetuates, Blake achieves an even stricter indictment of organized religion: he aligns the Church with that which is antithetical to the "Poetic or Prophetic character" and "stand[s] still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull/round over again[.]"[7]

In the final analysis, "blackning Church" must be regarded as a cleverly duplicitous description and not, as some would have it, simply a grammarian's delight. After all, this phrase denotes more than a sooty shrine or a tyrannical temple: it signifies a dark and monolithic monument to monotony, torpor, and ennui.

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NOTES

1. William Blake, "London," *William Blake's Writings,* ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr., 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978) 1: 191. All subsequent references to Blake's writings are from this edition.

2. Most critics regard *blackning* as either a transitive or intransitive verb. The exception is E.P. Thompson, who, in his article "London," states that "the *adjective* [emphasis mine] 'blackning' visually attach[es] to the Church complicity in the brutal exploitation of young childhood along with the wider consequences of the smoke of expanding commerce." See *Interpreting Blake,* ed. Michael Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978) 16.

3. Walter S. Minot, "The 'Marriage Hearse' in Blake's 'London,'" *Papers on Language and Literature* 28.1 (1992): 90.

4. Michael Ferber, "'London' and its Politics," *ELH* 48 (1981): 324. Earlier in his essay, Ferber writes that "*blackning* seems genuinely polysemous and not merely ambiguous" (324). But despite his argument for multiple meanings, Ferber falls prey to the same grammatical trap that snares Minot (i.e., traditional rules of usage inform his interpretation of *blackning*). Thus, for Ferber, the verb may be assigned transitive or intransitive status but not both—at least not simultaneously. The following passage, in which Ferber qualifies his analysis, is illustrative: "['London's'] victims, or rather the victim's outcries, do all the work, govern all the verbs (unless *blackning* is transitive), while church, palace, and hearse silently register the outcries ..." (326).

5. Blake thematizes this concept again in "America, A Prophecy" (lines 89–95):

> . . . Ah rebel form that rent the ancient
> Heavens, Eternal Viper self-renew'd, rolling in clouds
> I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's shore,
> Writhing in pangs of abhorred birth; red flames the crest rebellious
> And eyes of death; the harlot womb oft opened in vain
> Heaves in enormous circles, now the times are return'd upon thee,
> Devourer of thy parent, now thy unutterable torment renews. (1:144)

6. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. has likewise recognized this theme. "Blake's technique throughout ['London']," he writes, "is to compress the horror and its cause into a single image that enforces a grim justice by showing the way in which the horror appalls, defaces, and blights the very tyranny that has caused it." See *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* (1964; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975) 264.

7. Blake, "There is No Natural Religion" 1: 13.

Coleridge's CHRISTABEL

> They crossed the moat, and Christabel
> Took the key that fitted well;
> A little door she opened straight,
> All in the middle of the gate;
> The gate that was ironed within and without,
> Where an army in battle array had marched out.
> The lady sank, belike through pain,
> And Christabel with might and main
> Lifted her up, a weary weight,
> Over the threshold of the gate:
> Then the lady rose again,
> And moved, as she were not in pain. (lines 123–34)

A common way to explain Geraldine's sinking before the castle gate is to cite a medieval legend that evil spirits cannot by their own efforts cross a threshold that's been blessed.[1] But the poem itself shows no sign that Coleridge means to invoke such a legend, and there is a far better way to explain the sinking, one that relies upon cues and clues for the pertinent contexts.

What causes Geraldine to sink is not the blessed threshold but the accursed gate as Coleridge has so suggestively characterized it: