

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF

“London”

It is impossible to study William Blake’s “London” without an understanding of the time in which it was written; in Blake’s opinion, the Industrial Revolution had changed the city for worse. The manufacturing work being done in factories created filth and pollution. London was dirty. Thick, black smoke from factories left behind a nasty residue where it landed. The river Thames was polluted with the byproducts of industry. The new type of work changed the city socially, economically, and topographically. Although the new industrial economy created many jobs, the wages of these jobs were low. Long hours of hard labor did not guarantee a living wage. The poor worked themselves to death in unsafe, unsanitary, and unhealthful conditions. The suffering in the streets of the city affected Blake profoundly. While he could not change society, he could observe, and express his opinion of the changes in his art.

Scholars point to the many versions of this poem found in Blake’s notes. Writing and re-writing, Blake edited his work down to every detail. Carefully selected words paint a bleak picture of London life in the late 18th century. Looking at the language he chose in previous drafts of the poem, students of Blake find he was very deliberate in his selections. His word choices are important on many levels. Scholars devote chapters to the selection of one word in the finished version of one work. Blake considered the impact of each vivid description before “London” was finished. Understanding the multiple meanings of words and being familiar with history are some of the background needed to fully grasp and appreciate the poem. An early draft began the poem:

I wander thro each dirty street
Near where the dirty Thames does flow

whereas the finished version reads:

I wander thro’ each charter’d street
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow

The change from *dirty* to *charter'd* is significant. *Charter'd* is a word of multiple meanings. According to E.P. Thompson, *charter'd* is associated with commerce and cheating. A *charter* is also a document that grants rights to individuals, at the same time limiting the rights of others. The semantic instability of such choices forms the basis of much of the body of Blake criticism.

The speaker starts by searching the streets of London for inspiration, planning to describe what he sees there. What he finds is troubling: “weakness” and “woe” in the face of every person he meets. It’s a weary life for people in Blake’s London.

In the second verse, we find more despair; it becomes a common thread in the fabric of London life. Every man, every woman, and every child can expect life and the law to produce the same misery. The challenges of life in London weigh heavy on the minds of citizens. Blake believes Londoners are shackled to an unpleasant life and that the worst of it is that the Londoners’ imprisonment is of their own conception. How can one break free when thought has created the prison? Where can a Londoner find relief? Is there any peace for weary workers or comfort for a wounded spirit? Not in these four verses.

The third verse vividly shows us what Blake means. It provides an extremely grim picture of life in London, a worst-case scenario. Chimney sweeps faced some of the worst working conditions of the day. They worked outdoors at great heights, affected by the elements, the ubiquitous smog of London, and their own fear. The work was exhausting. They inhaled the layers of soot and ash that they cleaned from the chimneys, and what they didn’t inhale ended up on their clothing. Furthermore, the job was seasonal, and many were left to beg for a living when their brooms were not busy. This was a sad image of a working life: when on the job, he risked life and limb to provide for his family, and when not working he faced desperation in the streets. The chimney sweep was forced to ask for charity. By Blake’s standards, the job that cost so much personally offered little in the way of satisfaction.

Nor is the House of God a source of comfort for the speaker of “London”: the image of the “Blackening Church” is particularly troubling. The environment of London is causing physical and spiritual decay. Industrialization is polluting the outer structure of

the churches. Inside, those seeking salvation have trouble finding it. The hard work in the factories and the bleak outlook on life is “blackening” the hearts the faithful. Instead of enlightenment, religion has become just another obligation. Instead of strengthening spirits, the churches impede peace. Blake’s opinions on organized religion, particularly on Swedenborgism, or the Church of the New Jerusalem, appear in other poems, satirically, as well.

According to the speaker, Londoners are finding no comfort in prayer and no solace in the monarchy. Behind the palace walls, England’s reigning family is removed from the strife in the streets. The King fails to address the problems facing the working people. Soldiers, sighing, blood: the images are bleak. England is losing its people to the Industrial Revolution and to the American Revolution. There is blood on the palace walls because of the losing battles: gone are both a part of the Empire and a way of life.

As Blake brings “London” to a close, we find that night, too, is powerless to bring peace to the crowded streets of the city, that darkness does not disguise despair. The speaker describes what he hears: Prostitutes curse. Babies cry. And why shouldn’t they cry? The life into which they have been born is not an easy one. It is not comfortable and promises no joy. Parents find married life unsatisfying. Blake frames the union of woman and man in terms of crisis and death, and the last word of the poem is *hearse*. Indeed, this may be the only place in which a citizen in Blake’s “London” can find rest. The hard life is finally over: a beaten spirit can leave the misery of the streets.

Family life in “London” is difficult, work is hard, the streets are dirty, and the air is filthy. There is little comfort in religion or in patriarchy. For Blake’s speaker, the late 18th century is a terrible time in which to be living in London.

CRITICAL VIEWS ON

“London”

DAVID V. ERDMAN ON PEOPLE IN BLAKE’S “LONDON”

[David V. Erdman taught at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He edited *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* and wrote *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* and *Concordance of the Works of Blake*. He also was editor of publications at the New York Public Library. In this writing, Erdman explores the ways in which the lives of 18th-century London influenced Blake’s vision of the city.]

When we turn now to ‘London’, Blake’s ‘mightiest brief poem’,¹⁰ our minds ringing with Blakean themes, we come upon infinite curses in a little room, a world at war in a grain of London soot. On the illuminated page a child is leading a bent old man along the cobblestones and a little vagabond is warming his hands at a fire in the open street. But it is Blake who speaks . . .

In his first draft Blake wrote ‘dirty street’ and ‘dirty Thames’ as plain statement of fact, reversing the sarcastic ‘golden London’ and ‘silver Thames’ of his early parody of Thomson’s ‘Rule Britannia’. And the harlot’s curse sounded in every ‘dismal’ street. The change to ‘charter’d’ (with an intermediate ‘cheating’)¹¹ mocks Thomson’s boast that ‘the charter of the land’ keeps Britons free, and it suggests agreement with (perhaps was even suggested by) Paine’s condemnation of ‘charters and corporations’ in the Second Part of *The Rights of Man*, where Paine argues that all charters are purely negative in effect and that city charters, by annulling the rights of the majority, cheat the inhabitants and destroy the town’s prosperity—even London being ‘capable of bearing up against the political evils of a corporation’ only from its advantageous situation on the Thames.¹² Paine’s work was circulated by shopkeepers chafing under corporation rule and weary, like Blake, of the ‘cheating waves of charter’d streams’ of monopolized commerce (*N.* 113).

In the notebook fragment just quoted Blake speaks of shrinking ‘at the little blasts of fear That the hireling blows into my ear’, thus

indicating that when he writes of the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ in every cry of fear and every ban he is not saying simply that people are voluntarily forging manacles in their own minds. Hireling informers or mercenaries promote the fear; Pitt’s proclamations are the bans, linked with an order to dragoons ‘to assemble on Hounslow Heath’ and ‘be within one hour’s march of the metropolis’.¹³ A rejected reading, ‘german forged links’, points to several manacles forged ostensibly in the mind of Hanoverian George: the Prussian manoeuvres on the heath, the British alliance with Prussia and Austria against France, and the landing of Hessian and Hanoverian mercenaries in England allegedly en route to battlefronts in France.

Blake may have written ‘London’ before this last development, but before he completed his publication there was a flurry of alarm among freeborn Englishmen at the presence of German hirelings. ‘Will you wait till BARRACKS are erected in every village,’ exclaimed a London Corresponding Society speaker in January 1794, ‘and till subsidized Hessians and Hanoverians are upon us?’¹⁴ In Parliament Lord Stanhope expressed the hope that honest Britons would meet this Prussian invasion ‘by OPPOSING FORCE BY FORCE’. And the editor of *Politics for the People*, reporting that one Hessian had stabbed an Englishman in a street quarrel, cried that all were brought ‘to cut the throats of Englishmen’. He urged citizens to arm and to fraternize with their fellow countrymen, the British common soldiers.¹⁵

The latter are Blake’s ‘hapless Soldiers’ whose ‘sigh Runs in blood down Palace walls’—and whose frequently exhibited inclination in 1792–1793 to turn from grumbling to mutiny¹⁶ is not taken into account by those who interpret the blood as the soldier’s own and who overlook the potentially forceful meaning of ‘sigh’ in eighteenth century diction.¹⁷ In the structure of the poem the soldier’s utterance that puts blood on palace walls is parallel to the harlot’s curse that blasts and blights. And Blake would have known that curses were often chalked or painted on the royal walls. In October 1792 Lady Malmesbury’s Louisa saw ‘written upon the Privy Garden-wall, “No coach-tax; d—Pitt! d—n the Duke of Richmond! *no King*”’.¹⁸

A number of cognate passages in which Blake mentions blood on palace walls indicate that the blood is an apocalyptic omen of mutiny

and civil war involving regicide. In *The French Revolution* people and soldiers fraternize, and when their ‘murmur’ (sigh) reaches the palace, blood runs down the ancient pillars. In *The Four Zoas*, Night I, similar ‘wailing’ affects the people; ‘But most the polish’d Palaces, dark, silent, bow with dread.’ ‘But most’ is a phrase straight from ‘London’. And in Night IX the people’s sighs and cries of fear mount to ‘furious’ rage, apocalyptic blood ‘pours down incessant’, and ‘Kings in their palaces lie drown’d in it, torn ‘limb from limb’.¹⁹ In the same passage the marks of weakness and woe of ‘London’ are spelled out as ‘all the marks . . . of the slave’s scourge & tyrant’s crown’. In ‘London’ Blake is talking about what he hears in the streets, about the moral stain of the battlefield sigh of expiring soldiers.

NOTES

10. Oliver Elton’s phrase, I forgot where.

11. The ‘cheating’ variant is in *N.* 113; see E464, 772/K166.

12. Paine, I, 407; Nancy Bogen (*Notes and Queries*, xv, January 1968) finds Paine also calling ‘every chartered town . . . an aristocratic monopoly’ in the First Part (1791) as well. On chartered boroughs see Cowper, *The Task*, iv. 671; also John Butler, *Brief Reflections*, 1791, a pamphlet reply to Burke cited in J. T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke*, Toronto, 1963, p. 193.

13. *Gazette*, Dec. 1, 1792. In the note just cited, Mrs Bogen suggests that Blake’s choice, in the Thames poem, of the Ohio as the river to wash Thames stains from a Londoner ‘born a slave’ and aspiring ‘to be free’ was influenced by Gilbert Imlay’s *Topographical Description*, London, 1792. On the Ohio Imlay found escape from ‘musty forms’ that ‘lead you into labyrinths of doubt and perplexity’ and freedom from priestcraft which elsewhere ‘seems to have forged fetters for the human mind’.

14. Address at Globe Tavern, Jan. 20, 1794 (pamphlet).

15. Eaton, *Politics for the People*, II, no. 7, March 15, 1794.

16. The Royal Proclamation cited efforts to ‘delude the judgment of the lower classes’ and ‘debauch the soldiery. Wilberforce feared that ‘the soldiers are everywhere tampered with. Gilbert Elliot in November expressed a common belief that armies and navies would prove ‘but brittle weapons’ against the spreading French ideas. *Life and Letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot First Earl of Minto*, 3 vols., London, 1874, II, 74. Through the winter and spring there were sporadic

attacks of the populace on press gangs and recruiting houses. Mutiny and rumours of mutiny were reported in the *General Evening Post*, Apr. 20, July 20, Aug. 3, 7, 31, Oct. 28, 30, 1793. In Ireland the mutiny of embodied regiments broached into a small civil war. See also Lucyle Werkmeister, *A Newspaper History of England, 1792–1793*, Lincoln, Neb., 1968, items indexed under ‘Insurrection, phantom’, and ‘Ireland’.

17. S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols*, Boston and London, 1924, p. 283, reads it as the battlefield ‘death-sigh’ which morally ‘is a stain upon the State’. Joseph H. Wicksteed, *Blake’s Innocence & Experience*, N.Y., 1928, p. 253, has it that the soldier who promotes peace is quelling the ‘tumult and war’ of a ‘radically unstable’ society. But Blake was not one to look upon riot-quelling as a securing of freedom and peace! Alfred Kazin, *The Portable Blake*, p. 15, with a suggestion ‘that the Soldier’s desperation runs, like his own blood, in accusation down the walls of the ruling Palace’, comes closer to the spirit of indignation which Blake reflects.

18. Elliot, II, 71. Verbally Blake’s epithet may be traced back, I suppose, to ‘hapless Warren!’, Barlow’s phrase for the patriot general dying at Bunker Hill (changed to ‘glorious Warren’ in 1793).

19. *FR.* 241–246: K145; *FZ.* i. 396: K275; ix. 73–74, 230–255: K359,363.

—David V. Erdman, “Infinite London: The *Songs of Experience* in their Historical Setting,” *Critics on Blake: Readings in Literary Criticism*, ed. Judith O’Neill (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), 65–68.

KENNETH JOHNSTON ON THE VOCABULARY OF BLAKE’S “LONDON”

[Kenneth Johnston is a Professor of English at Indiana University. He has written *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* and edited *Romantic Revolutions: Theory and Criticism* and *The Age of William Wordsworth*. This essay, like Erdman’s above, examines the people of London. Johnson believes Blake sees the people of the city victims of circumstance. He explains how the artwork and the words combine to paint a harsh picture of daily life.]

The chimney sweeper, the conscripted soldier, and the prostitute in the poem are undeniably victims, but Blake’s changes point to his conviction that repression is not simply the result of “bans” handed down from above. German George III issues the bans, Blake knows,

but even he cannot forge the manacles with which we shackle our spirits into obeying them; man's "marks of weakness" are partially the cause of his "marks of woe."

The design across the top of *London* {18} is an excellent example of the way in which Blake's designs at their best enrich the verbal statement of the poems. Because it does not relate directly to anything in the text, the design at first confuses, but its effect does jar the reader's perceptions out of the verbal and into the visual mode. On first viewing, the aged cripple and the child who seems to be leading him appear as two victims of the evils of contemporary London, but on closer inspection—of independent visual elements counterpointing independent verbal elements—we recognize a dramatization of the statement of the first stanza: the child and the ancient "mark" (see) in each other's face "woe" and "weakness," respectively. Or, more simply (since the old man may be blind), they *are* the marks—evidences—themselves. Furthermore, there is a profound irony in the situation if, as seems likely, the child is supposed to be leading the old man. Viewed against the text this is a mockery, since every stanza after the first contains a detail about the victimization of children in London. But what seems a mockery to common sense may be a profoundly sustained ironic contrast to the author of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. If we generalize the child as Innocence and the aged cripple as Experience, we can interpret the design in the larger context of the *Songs Of Innocence and Of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Does the design parallel the text by showing the inadequacies of Innocence and Experience as *separated* modes of consciousness, or is it to be read counter to the text, as a hopeful sign of human progress, a glimpse of the day when the wisdom of Experience moves forward in the city guided by the fresh simplicity of Innocent desires?⁷

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7. Cf. John Grant, "The Colors of Prophecy," *The Nation*, CC (25 January 1965), 92; E. D. Hirsch, *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake*, New Haven, 1964, 265. Both Grant and Hirsch see the design optimistically contrary to the text. Hirsch sees both the old man and the child as emblems of weakness and woe: "Like the poem, the design telescopes cause and effect."

—Kenneth Johnston, “Blake’s Cities: Romantic Forms of Urban Renewal,” *Blake’s Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 417–419.

E.P. THOMPSON ON THE WAYS IN WHICH WORDS CHANGE “LONDON”

[E.P. Thompson authored *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. In this essay, Thompson takes a look at Blake’s revisions in the writing of “London”. He shows us how some seemingly simple changes have a major impact on the images and meaning of the work.]

Thus ‘charter’d’ arose in Blake’s mind in association with ‘cheating’ and with the ‘little blasts of fear’ of the ‘hireling’. The second association is an obvious political allusion. To reformers the corrupt political system was a refuge for hirelings: indeed, Dr. Johnson had defined in his dictionary a ‘Pension’ as ‘in England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.’ David Erdman is undoubtedly right that the ‘little blasts of fear’ suggest the proclamations, the Paine-burnings, and the political repressions of the State and of Reeves’s Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers which dominated the year in which these poems were written.⁴ In the revised version of ‘Thames’ Blake introduces the paradox which was continually to be in the mouths of radicals and factory reformers in the next fifty years: the slavery of the English poor. And he points also (‘I was born a slave but I go to be free’) to the first wave of emigration of reformers from the attention of Church-and-King mobs or hirelings.

But ‘charter’d’ is more particularly associated with ‘cheating.’ It is clearly a word to be associated with commerce: one might think of the Chartered Companies which, increasingly drained of function, were bastions of privilege within the government of the city. Or, again, one might think of the monopolistic privileges of the East India Company, whose ships were so prominent in the commerce of the Thames, which applied in 1793 for twenty years’ renewal of its

charter, and which was under bitter attack in the reformers' press.⁵

But 'charter'd' is, for Blake, a stronger and more complex word than that, which he endows with more generalized symbolic power. It has the feel of a word which Blake has recently discovered, as, years later, he was to 'discover' the word 'golden' (which, nevertheless, he had been using for years). He is savouring it, weighing its poetic possibilities in his hand. It is in no sense a 'new' word, but he has found a way to use it with a new ironic inversion. For the word is standing at an intellectual and political cross-roads. On the one hand it was a stale counter of the customary libertarian rhetoric of the polite culture. Blake himself had used it in much this way in his early 'King Edward the Third':

Let Liberty, the charter'd right of Englishmen,
Won by our fathers in many a glorious field,
Enerve my soldiers; let Liberty
Blaze in each countenance, and fire the battle.
The enemy fight in chains, invisible chains, but heavy;
Their minds are fetter'd; then how can they be free?⁶

It would be only boring to accumulate endless examples from eighteenth-century constitutional rhetoric or poetry of the use of chartered rights, chartered liberties, magna carta: the word is at the centre of Whig ideology.

There is, however, an obvious point to be made about this tedious usage of 'charter'. A charter of liberty is, simultaneously, a denial of these liberties to others. A charter is something given or ceded; it is bestowed upon some group by some authority; it is not claimed as of right. And the liberties (or privileges) granted to this guild, company, corporation or even nation *exclude* others from the enjoyment of these liberties. A charter is, in its nature, exclusive.

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4. See David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, revised edn. (New York, 1969) which fully argues these points on pp. 272–9. These poems were 'forged in the heat of the Year One of Equality (September 1792 to 1793) and tempered in the "grey-brow'd snows" of Antijacobin alarms and proclamations'. See also A. Mitchell, 'The Association Movement of 1792–3', *Historical Journal*, IV: 1 (1961), 56–77; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 115–26; D. E. Ginter, 'The Loyalist Association Movement, 1792–3', *Historical Journal*, IV: 2 (1966), 179–90.

5. ‘The cheating waves of charter’d streams’ and ‘the cheating banks of Thames’ should prompt one to think carefully of this as the source which first gave to Blake this use of ‘charter’d’. The fullest attack from a Painite source on the East India Company did not appear until 1794: see the editorial articles in four successive numbers of Daniel Isaac Eaton’s *Politics for the People*, II: 8–11 : ‘The East India Charter Considered’. These constituted a full-blooded attack on the Company’s commercial and military imperialism (‘If it be deemed expedient to *murder* half the inhabitants of India, and *rob* the remainder, surely it is not requisite to call it *governing* them?’) which carried to their furthest point criticisms of the Company to be found in the reforming and Foxite press of 1792–3. No social historian can be surprised to find the banks of the Thames described as ‘cheating’ in the eighteenth century: every kind of fraud and racket, big, small and indifferent, flourished around the docks. The association of the banks of Thames with commerce was already traditional when Samuel Johnson renewed it in his ‘London’ (1738), esp. lines 20–30. Johnson’s attitude is already ambiguous: ‘Britannia’s glories’ (‘The guard of commerce, and the dread of Spain’) are invoked retrospectively, in conventional terms: but on Thames-side already ‘all are slaves to gold, / Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold’. Erdman argues that the ‘golden London’ and ‘silver Thames’ of Blake’s ‘King Edward the Third’ have already assimilated this conventional contrast in the form of irony: see Erdman, *Prophet against Empire*, pp. 80–1.

6. E415/K18: If we take the intention of this fragment to be ironic, then Blake was already regarding the word as suspect rhetoric.

—E.P. Thompson, “London.” In *Interpreting Blake*, ed. M. Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5–8.

JOHN BEER ON “LONDON” AS OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

[John Beer wrote *Blake’s Humanism* and *Blake’s Visionary Universe* and the essays “Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Some Cross Currents and Parallels, 1789–1805” and “Influence and Independence in Blake”. In this essay, Beer shows how Blake’s poems can be interpreted on several different levels. Beer believes that the poem defies complacent interpretation.]

One’s judgement in so delicately balanced a matter is likely to be swayed by one’s sense of Blake’s work as a whole at this time; it is from my own sense of it, certainly, that I question whether ‘London’ is *primarily* an ‘apocalyptic’ poem—at least in the common sense of

the word. Edward Thompson argues it to be a virtue of such an interpretation that in making all the final images ones of commerce and of forthcoming doom it allows the poem to 'shut like a box'. With most eighteenth-century poets this would indeed be a virtue, but I am not sure that the same applies to Blake. For his poems have a habit (irritating when first encountered) of springing open again just when one thinks one has closed them—almost as if they were the work of a man who believed that a poem which shut like a box might also be a prison. Despite my own strong interest in the structures of ideas in Blake's poems, and the undoubted existence of an apocalyptic note in them, I also feel that the interpretations which are most faithful to their total effect are those which (like Dr Glen's) preserve an antinomian quality in the very meanings of the poems themselves.

There is on the other hand a price to be paid for such openness; for there will be times when we simply do not have the means to decide between possible interpretations. To take up one of Dr Glen's own claims, it is hard to see how we can be sure that the observer in 'London' who 'marks' the marks in the faces that he sees is thereby demonstrating an abstracting and mechanical mental narrowness of his own. The obsessive focussing of his gaze on those of others might be a sign of extreme and generous humanity rather than its opposite.

One answer to such problems, of course, is to regard them as demonstrating the hermeneutic versatility of Blake's poetry and adding to their richness; but that will not quite do either. There is something about the very intensity of his writing in such places which urges the reader to interpret it directly. On any particular occasion, therefore, it is likely that the reader will make up his or her mind one way or the other. What our discussion seems to demonstrate is that in certain cases the reading of a single word may be decisive in fixing the balance of interpretation: in so short a poem as 'London' the leading significance assigned to 'mark' is enough to swing the dominant tone of the whole.

Investigation of a single word in Blake can prove equally fruitful elsewhere—and especially so if it turns out to unravel a concise shorthand for some complicated train of thought and imagery. Another word which repays study is 'intellectual', as in the line 'A

tear is an intellectual thing'. Although that line no doubt makes gratifying reading to sentimental theoreticians, it stands out strangely in Blake—particularly since the specific use of 'intellectual' as we have come to know it belongs to a later period. At this point, however, we can turn to Kathleen Raine, who points out that 'intellect' is a term which appears in Thomas Taylor's translations from the Platonists. She quotes, for example, a passage which begins as follows: 'Intellect indeed is beautiful, and the most beautiful of all things, being situated in a pure light and in a pure splendor, and comprehending in itself the nature of beings, of which indeed this our beautiful material world is but the shadow and image . . .'⁴⁴ A passage such as this certainly seems to be echoed by Blake, who, after speaking in *Jerusalem* of Imagination as 'the real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow',⁴⁵ goes on to inquire whether the Holy Ghost is any other than an 'Intellectual Fountain'.⁴⁶ Shortly afterwards he describes God as 'the intellectual fountain of Humanity'.⁴⁷ The coupling of the two favourite neo-Platonist concepts of 'intellect' and 'fountain' as attributes of the divine provides strong evidence for the existence of a direct influence.

Although these are comparatively late statements, moreover, they seem to reflect an earlier formulation of Blake's, for his earlier uses of 'intellect' also carry a charge which suggests that he thinks of it in dynamic terms, as an in-dwelling power—directly linked, as in Plotinus, to a realm of intellect which transcends the world of generation and death.

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44. Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (2 vols, London, 1969), vol. II, p. 195, citing T. Taylor, *Five Books of Plotinus* (1794), pp. 243–4.

45. *Jerusalem* 77 (Raine, *Tradition*).

46. *Jerusalem* 77 (not in Raine).

47. *Jerusalem* 91.11 (not in Raine).

—John Beer, "Influence and Independence in Blake." In *Interpreting Blake*, ed. M. Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 220–222.

STEWART CREHAN ON THE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF “LONDON”

[Stewart Crehan is a Professor of English at the Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. He has written *Blake in Context* and *Nature's Excess: Physiocratic Theory and Romanticism*. In this essay, Crehan explains that Blake paints a bleak picture of life in “London”. He believes that religion, politics, and marriage all act negatively on the people of the city. While the poem is politically and socially critical, “London” also *describes* the life of the citizens.]

Though clearly a poem of protest, *London* transcends the rhetoric of contemporary radical protest in several important ways. First of all, the ‘I’ of the poem does not overtly accuse, but simply wanders through ‘each charter’d street’, passively recording what he sees and hears. The lack of any overt crusading outburst makes the signs of social misery (‘Marks of weakness, marks of woe’) seem all the more inescapable. Their presence overwhelms us. The monotonous repetitions of the first two stanzas (‘charter’d’, ‘marks’ and ‘every’), together with the Johnsonian generality of the ‘hapless Soldier’s’ and ‘the youthful Harlot’s’, register an ineluctable—that is, *social* condition. The perception of a doomed and rotten society is *heard* rather than seen: what we see we can choose not to see, but what we hear is less easily shut out. Individual moral outrage or denunciation is redundant in a poem whose shock effect lies in the objective force of the human images themselves.

This is, of course, a mark of Blake’s success as a poet. In Book VII of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes how as an idle resident he walked London’s streets, observing, with wonder and awe, the ‘endless stream of men and moving things’. Recording a never-ending spectacle, the poet suggests a multitudinous yet confusingly trivial variety of human specimens, but it is interesting to note that the three central figures in Blake’s poem—the chimney sweeper, the soldier and the harlot—do not occur anywhere in Wordsworth’s compendious observations. Although they loom large in Blake’s urban landscape, they were not *empirically* the obvious figures to choose.

Contemporary social protest often added the threat of divine vengeance, but in Blake’s poem no heavenly judgment is needed,

since both the judgment and the threat come from within the urban system itself. Biblical, apocalyptic allusions are present, but the workings of society revealed in the poem have an apocalyptic logic of their own. The voice of protest has been objectified. The millenarian Richard Brothers wrote of London:

her streets are full of Prostitutes, and many of her houses are full of *crimes*; it is for such exceeding great wickedness that St. John *spiritually* calls *London* in his chapter (Revelation 11:8) by the name of *Sodom* *For my designation is, and the commands of God to me are, that I shall walk through the great thoroughfare-street of the city, to pronounce his judgements, and declare them irrevocable* . . .

And a follower of Brothers, Thomas Taylor, addressed the ‘opulent possessors of property’ as follows:

Know you, that the cries of the Widow, Fatherless Children, and the defenceless oppressed Poor, are come up unto the ears of the Lord of *Hosts*. He is ready to undertake their cause: and if you repent not of your evil deeds, *He will consume you*, with the breath of his mouth.

In Blake’s *London* the possibility of that kind of judgment and repentance is excluded, since what is exposed is not ‘crimes’, ‘wickedness’ and ‘evil deeds’, but a *whole social system*.

The images in the last two stanzas show how established religion is bound up with exploitation, politics is bound up with war, and marriage is bound up with prostitution. The chimney sweeper’s cry, instead of coming ‘up unto the ears of the Lords of *Hosts*’, casts a pall over every ‘black’ning Church’, whose blackness, caused by the smoke from the chimneys that the sweeps clean, and darkening, instead of brightening, the lives of those who live under it, makes the target—here, the guilty clergy’s hypocritical concern—concretely visible. The ‘hapless Soldier’s sigh’ is not heard by God, but becomes visible as blood running down ‘Palace walls’. The image both exposes and indicts the ‘hapless’ soldier’s *true* enemy, which is not Republican France, but king, parliament and archbishop who, from the safety of their respective palaces, urge poor labouring men to die for their country, fighting the foreigner. The image, however, is ambiguous, and as such contains a prophetic warning: the blood could one day be the oppressor’s. Finally, it is not the breath of the

Lord that consumes, but the 'Harlot's curse'. The curse is syphilis, whose contagion indiscriminately blinds the new-born infant and turns the marriage bed into a 'hearse'. But the plagues with which the harlot blights the 'Marriage hearse' are also symbolic. They are a *verbal* curse on the confining hypocrisy of legalised, monogamous marriage itself. (. . .)

London is a poem of political and social protest; it is also a poem about London, and the experience of living in London. The freedom to wander the streets is shown to be illusory when a mercantile system that annuls the rights of the majority is so complete that even the Thames is 'charter'd'. By his 'marking' the speaker relates to others at a less than human level, in a vast city where all are strangers. As E. P. Thompson has shown, the word 'mark' would have had a number of associations for Blake's readers. Revelation 13:17 speaks of 'the mark of the beast' on those who buy and sell. London's streets were full of the cries of street-sellers, in which Blake's speaker hears only 'mind-forg'd manacles'. The freedom to buy and sell shackles 'every Man'—*including* the speaker—in a de-personalising system based, not on genuine human contact, but on the exchange of goods and money. There is no possibility within the speaker's mode of perception, trapped as he is in this impersonal system, of hearing a street-cry, say, as a poetic utterance, an assertion of something human behind the figure of the seller. (To illustrate this point, a 'flower man' during the French wars was heard to cry: 'All alive! all alive! Growing, blowing; all alive!' and a blind man, accompanied by his wife and children, cried his mats and brooms in rhyming couplets, ending: 'So I in darkness am oblig'd to go;/To sell my goods I wander to and fro.') Blake's speaker, as a 'free' individual wandering the streets, marks every other 'free' individual not as a person, but as a face with 'marks' in it. Into every face he meets he also draws the marks of his *own* weakness and woe; he tellingly picks out, with a deceptive lack of conscious choice, those most degraded by the system, a system in which the labour-power of infants and the charms of female children could be bought in the streets.

The urban experience in *London* is not only alienating, but is one in which growing violence and incipient revolt are strongly felt. Though the speaker makes no direct accusation, rising protest is

heard in the tone of voice, from ‘I wander’ to ‘But most . . .’. The poem moves from a kind of weary aimlessness (suggested by the long vowel sounds in ‘charter’d’ and ‘mark(s)’) to the shocked exclamations (‘How . . .’ etc.) of stanza three, with its emphatic trochaic rhythm, to the verbal violence of the climactic final stanza, with its rasping ‘curse’, ‘Blasts’, ‘blights’ and ‘plagues’. The poem is a violent crescendo of verbal sounds and meanings, held within a tightly disciplined form. Its hyperbolic extremism is an imaginative revelation of a whole urban process, as the poem moves from alienation and distress to inarticulate violence.

—Stewart Crehan, *Blake in Context* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, 1984), 72–79.

GAVIN EDWARDS ON REPETITION IN “LONDON”

[Gavin Edwards has taught at the Universities of Sydney and Gothenburg and at St. David’s University College. He has published *George Crabbe’s Poetry on Border Land* and *George Crabbe: Selected Poems*. In this essay, “Repeating the Same Dull Sound”, Edwards probes the meanings of the words *charter’d*, *ban*, *curse*, and *mark* within the context of “London”.]

‘London’ (and I am taking the word as the title of the poem beneath it rather than the caption of the picture above it) obviously involves a sequence of voices heard in the street, over and over again. But its interest is wider than that; it includes a whole range of acts of vocalisation and scription: sighs and charters and marks as well as curses and bans. Four of Blake’s words are particularly interesting in the present context: ‘charter’d’, ‘ban’, ‘curse’, and ‘mark’. They are all words that, in other grammatical forms, can act as performatives. Briefly, performative utterance are utterances that themselves perform the actions to which they refer. Thus:

Lawyers when talking about legal instruments will distinguish the preamble, which recites the circumstances in which a transaction is effected, and on the other hand the operative part—the part of it which actually performs the legal act which it is the purpose of

the instrument to perform. . . . 'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother' would be an operative clause and is a performative utterance.

This example is pertinent for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates that written discourse (a charter, for instance) can involve performative utterances. Second, 'I give and bequeath x to y' is clearly a formula, a repeated phrase, and it needs to be if the instrument is to be legally binding. Furthermore such ritual performatives are clearly always of particular significance where conventional relationships are being established in a conventional context—such as the fixing of rights of property and inheritance (charters for the incorporation of companies or towns), social contracts between rulers and ruled (Magna Carta), articles of apprenticeship (such as those signed by James Blake and James Basire), marriage ceremonies (the 'I do' of William Blake and Catherine Boucher, the 'I declare you man and wife' of the parson), and baptisms (I name this child . . .). Such situations provide most of J. L. Austin's examples, and Blake's poem is overwhelmingly concerned with the overlapping areas of Church, Law, property, generational inheritance, and marriage.

As for the words themselves, 'I curse' would be a performative, as would 'I ban', and the poem also alludes to the banns of marriage, which gives us the parson's 'I publish the banns of marriage between . . .'. Charters are legal instruments that have to involve performative utterances, though I have not come across a charter in which the word itself is used performatively (as in 'I/We charter'). Finally, 'mark' is a special case to which I shall return.

Evidently these words in Blake's poem ('charter'd', 'ban', and 'curse') are not themselves performative. But as nouns or participial adjectives, they are what Barbara Johnson has called 'deactivated performatives'. And the particular force that seems to animate them in the poem derives, I believe, from their direct reference to situations in which those same words help to constitute performative utterances. Austin points out that in performative words there is an '*asymmetry* of a systematic kind [with respect to] other persons and tenses of the *very same word*'. For instance, 'I curse you' is a performative utterance, whereas 'he curses you', like 'I hear you', is not since it refers to an event independent of the referring utterance.

The words in the poem—‘charter’d’, ‘ban’, and curse’—derive at least some of their force from how they embody this asymmetry. They refer to conditions in the world outside the poem, but how they so refer is determined by the fact that, as deactivated performatives, they are also existentially linked to actual performative utterances. The poem’s words actually do bear the operative power of performative utterance within themselves, in a congealed form. Consequently the social conditions to which the words refer, as well as the words themselves, appear as the marks of acts performed another grammatical form by the utterance of those very same words. Those social conditions are represented therefore not so much as facts but as *faits accomplis*. The word ‘charter’d’ bears repetition in the poem because of the force to which it is linked. These performatives are uttered in Churches and law Courts where their force is inseparable from the fact that they have been said before and will be said again.

Blake’s use of these words tends to confirm another of Austin’s contentions, that performative utterances depend for their plausibility on at least a tacit acceptance by the interlocutor of the conventions involved in their use. Indeed to describe the situations of their use as conventional implies as much. Most of Austin’s examples, and these three words from the poem, are concerned with human power relationships. And the poem’s use of these words suggests that to be at the receiving end of performative utterances of this kind is to be more than labelled: it is to take the label to heart, to assume it as one’s identity, even unwittingly. The religious and juridical act of christening could be taken as exemplary in this respect. It is an act of labelling imposed arbitrarily on the basis of our father’s name and our parents’ wishes that we take as the sign of our personal identity. The achievement of the poem is to register such acts as the imposition of arbitrary labels that are nevertheless not external to those who receive them: as marks inscribed by authority that are also signs of an inward condition, marks ‘Of weakness and of woe’.

There is only one actual performative in Blake’s poem, and that is ‘I . . . mark’. Of course, one sense of the verb *mark* in the poem is ‘to observe’. In this sense the word reports on the poet’s action as he walks the streets and is not performative. But since the same word

used as a noun in 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe' refers to physical alterations of the human body, 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 also a reference in 'I . . . mark' to itself. In so far as 'I . . . mark' means 'I observe', the relationship established between the marked faces and the poet who marks them is of the fatally reflexive kind that Heather Glen has so accurately described. Blake, she argues, shows us what it means to be both at odds with and yet conditioned by one's cultural ethos:

The relentless, restricting categorising which stamps the Thames as surely as it does the streets is like his own mode of relating to the world. He may 'wander' freely enough, but he can only 'mark' one repetitive set of 'marks' in all the different faces before him.

And this is still the case if one admits the sense of 'mark' as an act of perception involving a registering or noting of what is perceived. The writer and reader implied by that registering are still caught within the same kind of specular relationship, in a poetic utterance that presents itself as an unmeditated survey of the reality it simply repeats. But in so far as 'I . . . mark' refers also to itself as an act of inscription, all those mirror-relationships are fissured, marked, rendered problematic. The best way to explain this effect is in terms of the different forms of the present tense that the ways of reading 'I . . . mark' imply. The poem employs a generalising present tense, one that describes 'what I am doing' but 'what I do' (repeatedly). But in so far as 'I not . . . mark' is self-referential, it introduces the present tense of 'what I am doing,' and this has a number of consequences. First, it links the poetic utterance existentially to the writing self, in a way that can be associated with the existential link that I have argued for between the deactivated performatives and the actual performative utterances to which they refer. But, second, this self is not the unitary entity that its grammatical name, 'first person singular', suggests; it is not the anterior source of the utterance. 'I . . . mark' is self-referential both in the sense that it refers to the self and in the sense that it refers to itself. 'I . . . mark' describes me in the act of scription, but it also *is* the act of scription. Consequently the present it reveals is not a moment but a movement, and there is no governing Subject but a continual differentiation in which the

subject of the act of writing and the subject of what is written never finally coincide or separate.

—Gavin Edwards, “Repeating the Same Dull Round,” *New Casebooks: William Blake*, ed. David Punter (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 108–120.

HAROLD BLOOM ON WANDERING THROUGH “LONDON”

[Harold Bloom is Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University. He has written more than 16 books and edited more than 30 anthologies, including *Blake’s Apocalypse*, *William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and *Modern Critical Views: William Blake*. In this writing, he compares Blake to a Biblical prophet who wanders through the city creating verse full of words worth studying.]

Blake begins: “I wander thro’ each charter’d street,” and so we begin also, with that wandering and that chartering, in order to define that “I.” Is it an Ezekiel-like prophet, or someone whose role and function are altogether different? To “wander” is to have no destination and no purpose. 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. Blake knew all this, and knew it with a knowing beyond our knowing. When he begins by saying that he *wanders* in London, his Jerusalem, his City of God, then he 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*.”

“Charter’d” is as crucial as “wander.” The word is even richer with multiple significations and rhetorical ironies, in this context, than criticism so far has noticed. Here are the relevant shades of meaning: There is certainly a reference to London having been created originally as a city by a charter to that effect. As certainly, there is an ironic allusion to the celebrated political slogan: “the chartered

rights of Englishmen.” More subtly, as we will see, there is a reference to *writing*, because to be chartered is to be written, since a charter is a written grant from authority, or a document outlining a process of incorporation. In addition, there are the commercial notions of hiring, or leasing, indeed of binding or covenanting, always crucial in a prophetic context. Most important, I think, in this poem that turns upon a mark of salvation or destruction, is the accepted meaning that to be chartered is to be awarded a special privilege or a particular immunity, which is established by a written document. Finally, there is a meaning opposed to “wandering,” which is charting or mapping, so as to preclude mere wandering. The streets of London are chartered, Blake says, and so he adds is the Thames, and we can surmise that for Blake, the adjective is primarily negative in its ironics, since his manuscript drafts show that he substituted the word “chartered” for the word “dirty” in both instances.

—Harold Bloom, “Blake and Revisionism,” *William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, Chelsea House, 1987), 55–58.