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"The Divine Image" and "A Divine Image"

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Abstract

Blake's "The Divine Image", in fact, celebrates the traditional Christian virtues of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love. Man, by nature, also possesses these virtues, but fails to realize it. A man can rise up to the level of God if only he realizes the inherent qualities in him. In this regard the poem adopts a didactic tone. It is nothing but a sermon in verse. It is extremely simple but this deceptive simplicity deepens once the reader deflects his thought towards the philosophical suggestions of the poem. For Blake man is not merely created in the image of God, but Man is God and God is Man. God and Man are the same, in so far as these attributes of God viz., Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love are shared by God and Man.

The poem "A Divine Image" on the other hand, tries to show that cruelty, jealousy, terror and secrecy are abstract ideas but they have no reality apart from human beings. It is from the heart of human beings that cruelty comes. It is human beings who are jealous, who cause terror, who create secrecy. Human heart is strong like iron. It is as powerful and as full of potentially destructive, as well as constructive, energy as a forge or a furnace. The human heart is not soft and tender but a consuming mouth, like that of a beast. The experience, for Blake means the sophisticated, post-lapsarian plight of the human beings. Blake might have wished to include this poem as the counter-part to "The Divine Image", just as he did with regard to "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" and formulated the lines in a way resembling that of "The Tyger", but never included this in the *Songs of Experience* during his life time.

Keywords: Mercy, Pity, Peace, Love, Cruelty, Jealousy, Terror, Secrecy.

These two poems of William Blake, "The Divine Image" and "A Divine Image", are approached in a threefold way concentrating on the design, text and biblical context of these poems, and a critical analysis of these poems as in the case of all *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* comes under the purview of this study.

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"The Divine Image"

"The Divine Image" is an excellent commentary on the doctrine of the indwelling of the deity. For Blake, God could not be perceived but as immanent, dwelling not 'up there and out there' in the remote space of the abysmal skies, but down to earth and within every man. As we read in Geoffrey Keynes (1985: 161), "There is a Throne in every Man, it is the Throne of God" (*Jerusalem*: plate 34:27), was the assertion made by Blake (Note 1). Again, Blake had proclaimed already in *Marriage of Heaven and Hell,*

> PLATE 11. The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive. And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country, placing it under its mental deity. Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood. Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things. *Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast.* (Emphasis mine)

When man is directed or guided by God, and when he lives up to the best that is within his inner recesses or core of the heart, when he is exercising the divine qualities of Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, then he becomes God, he ascends the throne. This is what the Bard Blake was convinced of and tried to practice throughout his life. In doing so, he was never bothered about following the tethers and curbs put on human beings by the stony letter of the law given by the institutionalized Church which always curtailed man's God-given freedom. One may wonder how an innocent child might comprehend such ideas. Although the poem goes beyond the child's familiar idea of God the Father, Wilkinson asserted: "it is a poem of innocence because it stresses God's goodness and the potentialities of man for goodness" (46). Regarding the beauty of this poem, Bentley (1975) observes: "Words and numbers present themselves unbidden, when the soul is inspired by sentiment, elevated by enthusiasm, or ravished by devotion. I leave it to the reader to determine, whether the following stanzas have any tendency to vindicate this species of poetry; and whether their simplicity and sentiment at all make amends for their inartificial and unassuming construction" (151). And Bentley does include the praise given by many distinguished poets and especially by S. T. Coleridge: "Coleridge commented in detail on the poems and their designs in a letter of 1818, praising particularly "The Divine Image", "The Little Black Boy", and "Night" as giving him pleasure 'in the highest degree'. Almost all this praise is from men of very considerable independence of taste" (8).

Blake in this poem has tried to adduce an idea that God is the essence of all virtues. A man who possesses the divine virtues is no less than God. God's abode is not the heaven, says Blake; he dwells within our hearts. And if a man manifests the special qualities of mercy, pity, peace and love, these qualities are the qualities of God

too, and it follows that man has a divine character and with these virtues man can become an *avatar* (incarnation) of God.

Blake's "The Divine Image", in fact, celebrates the traditional Christian virtues of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love. Man, by nature, also possesses these virtues, but fails to realize it. In fact, the human beings are oblivious to the qualities which are inside them. A man can rise up to the level of God if only he realizes the inherent qualities in him. In this regard the poem adopts a didactic tone. It is nothing but a sermon in verse. It is extremely simple but this deceptive simplicity deepens once the reader deflects his thought towards the philosophical suggestions of the poem.

Structure and Rhyme Scheme of "The Divine Image"

The present poem is in ballad-like stanzas of four lines each. No reader can miss the singsong quality of the verses which reinforces the calmness of the speaker's emotion. There is, of course, the seriousness in the theorizing of the idea, though it is done in so simple words that make us miss its seriousness. The trochaic meter has given the lines the lilting rhythm and movement like in most of the 'innocence' poems: the trochaic meter is suitable for poems of happy mood and in describing the merry worlds which the children like the most. The lines are alternately tetrameter and trimeter. The frequent repetition of words contributes to the simple hymn-like lullaby quality of the poem.

The Designs and Text of the Poems

Before considering the text and allusions to the *Bible* we may just examine the painting of this poem (See Figure 1, retrieved from http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience on 7 March 2017). Blake has provided this poem with an exquisitely charming design.

David V Erdman (1975:59) observes the following about the picture. At lower right of the text of the poem is the haloed, gowned Saviour as father. He stretches his left hand to raise up a naked man who can possibly be Adam or Lazarus. A naked woman who may be Eve or the woman taken in adultery lifts up her face awaiting her turn. Divine wrath and divine mercy are symbolically represented by a flower of naked fire and of a vine of tender filament that branches into leaves with lily shapes. On the top ground of flame two children kneel with hands held up under the vine seemingly to pray in their distress. Two gowned figures, one probably a woman and



Figure 1: The Divine Image

the other a man, are approaching toward them. One of them is moving swiftly and probably to announce [solace] to the children. The other one is walking toward them, bearing a pitcher or cruet in the left hand and something round under right arm, possibly a round loaf of bread (59).

The title of the poem "The Divine Image" is interpretative of *Genesis* 1:26-27: "Let us make man in our own image . . ." In the first two stanzas people in trouble pray to God whose attributes are Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love.

> To Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
> All pray in their distress:
> And to these virtues of delight

Return their thankfulness.
For Mercy Pity Peace and Love
Is God our Father dear. (Lines 1-6)

They are also giving thanks to God for helping them. But in fact there is no distinction between God and Man, and really God and Man are the same.

And Mercy Pity and Love,
Is Man his child and care. (Lines 7-8)

For Blake 'perceiving some reality as God' and 'perceiving God' are two different things. We, human beings, can only perceive as God, and cannot perceive God. "No man hath seen God at any time" because true perception is creation and God cannot be created. We may see the divine aspect of great men, but when we do, the divine in us recognizes itself. Again according to Blake we cannot perceive anything higher than a man, nothing higher than Man can exist. Northrop Frye (1947) observes:

> The artist proves this by the fact that he can paint God only as a man, though if he is reproducing senile and epicene ideas of God he will paint an enfeebled old man out of compliment to them. But there is no form of life superior to our own; and the acceptance of Jesus as the fullness of both God and Man entails the rejection of all attributes of divinity which are not human. (32)

Here it should be remembered that this idea is taken by Blake from Emmanuel Swedenborg. And in the marginal annotations to Swedenborg's *Wisdom of Angels* Blake wrote:

> Man can have no idea of anything greater than Man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness. But God is a man, not because he is so perceived by men but because he is the creator of man (*K* 90).

Thus for Blake man is not merely created in the image of God, but Man is God and God is Man. God and Man are the same, in so far as these attributes of God viz., Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love are shared by God and Man.

In stanzas 3 and 4 Love is apparently given the most predominant role. It is identified with the human form divine (L. 11) to whom every man, of every clime, prays in distress (lines 13-15):

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face:
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.
Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine
Love Mercy Pity Peace.

In the *Bible*, Jesus Christ extols, 'Love' above all. In fact, it is his single commandment, the new commandment: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one

another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (*John* 13:34). This admonition is emphatically repeated in *John* 15:12 – 16: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing: but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I heard from my Father".

The last stanza of the poem,

> And all must love the human form,
> In heathen, turk or Jew.
> Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell
> There God is dwelling too.

evidently recalls the "New Testament" doctrine of the deity's indwelling in the pure and upright heart. The "N.T." says,

> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit or living God, not on the tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts (II *Corinthians* 3: 3);

or even more clearly, "If a man loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (*John* 14: 23).

Or again as St. John speaks in a vision,

> I heard a great voice from the throne saying. 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away'. (*Revelation* 21: 3-4)

Thus if a man, be he a heathen or a Turk or a Jew, is keeping the word, the commandment of love, there God dwells certainly. As A.M. Wilkinson (1977) affirmed: "God is within all men, irrespective of creed or religion, even with the Jews who crucified Christ, and with the Turks, who were Mohammedans, and who were traditionally thought of in England as typifying despotism, cruelty and tyranny" (46).

In many of the Innocence Songs Blake seems to suggest that this is life seen through Innocent eyes. R.B. Kennedy (1970) suggested that this was not Blake's position in the Experience. In the case of "The Divine Image" those innocent eyes "see God truly, and see that God and Man share the same nature, or at least the same good qualities - mercy, pity, peace, and love - but they do not see that these virtues are corrupted in the world of senses" (152). But Blake's position will become clearer, if we consider this poem in the light of a passage from *Jerusalem* where Jesus says:

> Wouldest thou love one who never died
> For thee, or ever die for one who had not died for thee?
> And if God dieth not for Man & giveth not himself
> Eternally for Man, Man could not exist, for Man is Love

> And God is Love; every kindness to another is a little Death
> In "The Divine Image", nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood (pl. 96, 23-29; *K* 743).

Blake asserts that the commandment of love and brotherhood of all men is the fundamental principle of God's dwelling in us. Evelyn Underhill (1958) described this passage from *Jerusalem* as an "almost perfect epitome of Christian theology and ethics" (107).

It is evident that in "The Divine Image", Blake personifies God in human terms: god is no one but the apotheosis of the human ideals and desire. Notice how anthropomorphism is diligently treated here more positively than derogatively. According to Blake, whoever or even the God we have conceptualized doesn't much matter: what matters to us is the concept of god, made up of the good that we all cherish, need and desire. When we are in distress, when we are in need of help, sympathy, support or encouragement, we desire to look up to a perfect being who can give them all. It is then that we imagine and make god, the psychologically real imaginary being, a symbol of love, prosperity, strength, wisdom, a curer of maladies, and a reliever of pain. This is what we find in the underlying patterns of all mythologies of the world, including the myth of the *Bible*, the Vedas, the *Quran*, and all other religious myths of the world. This poem is a simple statement about the way human beings make their gods, apparently different but actually embodying the same human dreams and desires. The four personified figures of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love can be easily identified with the virtues of delight for us to get relief from distress; living in the world of imperfections, human beings create them especially in moments of distress.

It is important to note that even Blake's use of titles "The Divine Image" in the 'Innocence Songs' and "A Divine Image" in its 'Experience' version, suggests Blake's preference to the former. Moreover, it should be noticed that the implicit suggestion that "all religions are one" may be set against the proselytising zeal of the late eighteenth-century Evangelicals, whose hope of imposing 'civilisation' and Christianity on the benighted heathen was more important than a recognition of common humanity *with* the heathen. Though such sentiments of identity and unity of all religions have now become the stock-in-trade of liberal humanists, in Blake's age they were those of revolutionary democrats. And that is the uniqueness of Blake whom his contemporaries viewed as mad. An avid reader of Blake cannot miss how satirically Blake had expressed the exercise of charity by the Church people in treating the poor orphan children in Holy Thursday (*I*).

"A Divine Image"

Before proceeding to the next poem mentioned in the title of this study, "A Divine Image", a note of observation about some scholars' carelessness in collating the Title and text of the poem would be in place. For example, Makdisi (2003) affirms: ". . . just as God has been seen as immanent in all animate and inanimate forms, rather than being a transcendent force outside of those forms, as we are reminded, for

example, in "A Divine Image" and goes on to quote the lines of "The Divine Image", "All must love the human form, / In heathen, turk or jew, / Where Mercy. Love & Pity dwell, / There God is dwelling too" (179). Later in the same book, Makdisi (2003) has included the whole text of the poem "The Divine Image", but throughout his discussion in his book, he attributes its title to be "A Divine Image" (247-248, 249). Considering this poem (although the title is wrongly put as "A Divine Image") together with 'Holy Thursday' and 'The Chimney Sweeper', Makdisi observed that "all three of these songs share a highly critical attitude toward the religious conventions of the established church, which Blake identified elsewhere in unambiguous terms as the 'state religion' that he associated with such notorious 'state tricksters' as the bishop of Llandaff, and, moreover, with that version of the *Bible* which had been repeatedly deployed as 'a State Trick, thro which tho' the People at all times could see they never had the power to throw off'" (247-248). Makdisi continued: "In the less explicitly philosophical language of "A Divine Image", [by which he should have meant, "The Divine Image"] the essential being in common of Christian, Heathen, Turk (i.e., Muslim), and Jew is constituted by their heterogeneity, rather than by their sameness. The relationship of essence and identity formulated by Blake is something like the relationship of substance and mode in Spinoza. In both cases, essential unity is sharply differentiated from homogeneity, and, as we have seen, in both cases this opens up the possibility of a kind of freedom that is far less constraining than the emergent discourse of "liberty" constructed around the position of a supposedly transcendent bourgeois subject, whose freedom could be worked out only in a network of relations with "others" who are more or less free" (248).

Cruelty, jealousy, terror and secrecy are abstract ideas but they have no reality apart from human beings. It is from the heart of human beings that cruelty comes. It is human beings who are jealous, who cause terror, who create secrecy. Humanity is, therefore, not soft and tender. It is strong like iron. It is as powerful and as full of potentially destructive, as well as constructive, energy as a forge or a furnace. The human heart is not soft and tender but a consuming mouth, like that of a beast.

There are people who believe that "A Divine Image" is only an appendix to the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and not an actual song in it. We reproduce it here as the next picture in our study (See Figure 2; retrieved from: http:// www.bartleby.com/235/88.html on 6 March 2017).



Figure 2: A Divine Image

Great Books Online website, www.bartleby.com observes there: "[it] cannot, strictly speaking, be regarded as part of the foregoing book [*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*]. A companion poem to "The Divine Image" (75), it seems to have been engraved by Blake in the same manner as the rest, with a view to its forming one of the *Songs of Experience*. It was not, however, included in any authentic copy of the *Songs* issued during the author's lifetime, and is only found in an uncoloured impression in the British Museum Reading Room copy, where the watermark of the paper, which is dated 1832, proves that it must have been printed, perhaps by Tatham, at least five years after Blake's death". We subscribe to this view, yet the poem is considered here due to it is similarity in name with "The Divine Image" (See Figure 2).

The Text of the Poem

Cruelty has a human heart,
And Jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine,
And Secrecy the human dress.
The human dress is forged iron,

The human form a fiery forge,
The human face a furnace sealed,
The human heart its hungry gorge.

Noticing the vocabulary used in this poem, one is immediately tempted to contrast the language of "The Divine Image" with that of "A Divine Image", just as in the case of the poems "The Lamb" and "The Tyger". But, unlike in the *Songs of Innocence* "The Divine Image" all the eight lines of this Song of Experience "A Divine Image" have negative connotations about human life. The experience, for Blake means the sophisticated, post-lapsarian plight of the human beings. Blake might have wished to include this poem as the counter-part to "The Divine Image", just as he did with regard to "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" and formulated the lines in a way resembling that of "The Tyger", but never included this in the *Songs of Experience* during his life time. However, it must be specially noticed when the whole octave of this poem depicts the negative forms of human beings, never ever is any of these negative aspects used in reference to God. Austin Allen (n.d.) comments: "This poem shows how Blake's religion and visions formed his work. He clearly shows that the all-knowing God is pure, while humans possess all that is evil or all the sin that is in the world. Humans get jealous, are cruel, keep secrets and terrorize people or places in name of religion" (Allen).

Blake believed that a complete vision of life, of God and of people could only be obtained if contraries are held together. The world encompasses the tenderness of the lamb and the ferocity of the tiger. There is fierce energy at the heart of the world as well as beauty and gentleness. In "Lamb" and "The Tyger" Blake tried to identify the qualities of Lamb like mildness and gentleness and the fierce tigers in the wrath of God in the person of Jesus Christ his master and God figure. Jesus Christ behaving gently and mildly throughout his life, but letting loose the whips of tigers of divine wrath at the cleansing of the temple should not be forgotten in this connection. A true divine image must reflect this truth. If we say that human beings are the image of God, then these ideas must be related to God, too, just as to Man.

This poem, however, reflects the standpoint of experience. It looks at human beings when they have been corrupted by the 'mind-forg'd manacles' discussed in "London" or are dominated by the growth in the human brain illustrated by *The Human Abstract*. This produces a distorted and incomplete vision of human beings, in which all their power and energy is interpreted and expressed in ways which are life-denying and destructive.

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