



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English Literature

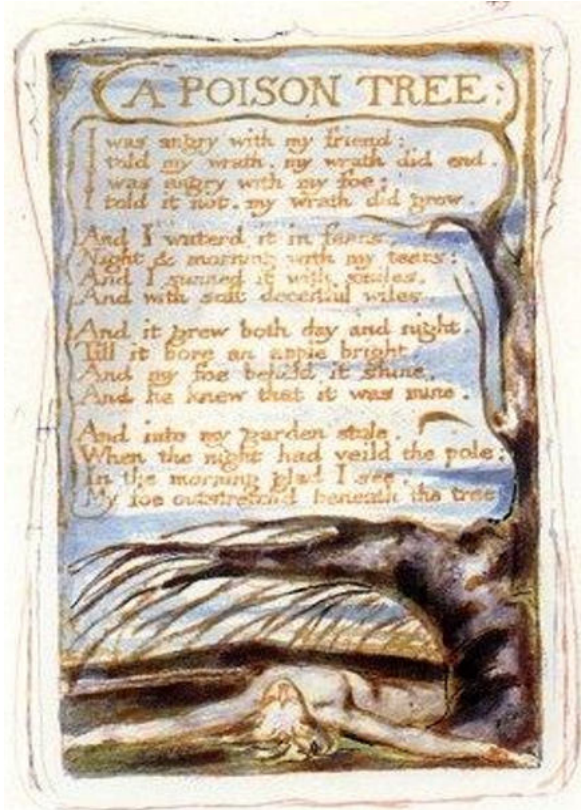
BLAKE'S POISON TREE OF LIFE AND THE PERFECT FRUIT OF CRIME

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates and realigns William Blake's short, little known but hugely enigmatic poem "A Poison Tree" along the indices of his complex relationship with the Christian doctrine. A Poison Tree published in 1794 is a poem that is little understood even today given its cryptic and aporic imagery laden with irony and allusion. The unbridled vindictive passions of Blake's double work draw unapologetically from his views on temperance and restraint. I shall try to read Blake's poem like a detective suspecting the worst in literature as in life – without deception there is no plot and no progression. That the poem inverts the schema of good and bad, God and devil, Heaven and Hell, friend and foe, speaker and listener, writer and reader is the major argument of the paper.



Blake famously judged Milton to have been "a true poet and of the devil's party without knowing it". What becomes obvious on a closer study of Blake's philosophy and poetry is that his judgment on Milton is also a compliment. Indeed, for Blake the crime of poetry is a happy one. The true poet invariably belongs to the infernal gang of the arch criminal Satan and like Milton cannot help admiring the first crime known to man. The 'first' crime is not a human act. It is not even an act. It is inaction or a refusal to act as commanded. Lucifer's (the 'effulgent one') crime of disobedience is for Blake a heroic 'act' of will. Crime is the only situation that can redeem man from the monotony of a respectability earned through a moral code of mediocrity.

Michel Foucault's analysis of developments in the field of criminality and law in the 18th and the 19th centuries is especially significant with respect to a deeper understanding of Blake's ideas on law whether human or divine. According to Foucault the prison emerged as the form of punishment for every crime growing out of the development of discipline in the 18th and 19th centuries. The development of refined forms of discipline and of discipline concerned with the smallest

and most precise aspects of a person's body are analyzed by Foucault. Discipline, he suggests, developed a new economy and politics for bodies. Modern institutions required that bodies must be individuated according to their tasks, as well as for training, observation, and control. Therefore, he argues, discipline created a whole new form of individuality for bodies, which enabled them to perform their duty within the new forms of economic, political, and military organizations emerging in the modern age and continuing to today. Blake's poem "A Poison Tree" inverts the 18th century reformist movement towards gentler generalized punishment. Out of this move, public "mini-theatres" of punishment were created wherein the convicts' bodies were put on display in a more ubiquitous, controlled, and effective spectacle. Prisoners were made to do work that reflected their crime, thus repaying society for their infractions. This would have allowed the public to see the convicts' bodies enacting their punishment, and thus to reflect on the crime. The convict in Blake's poem however, is not judged by a court of law and the punishment he or she receives is not public though it does parody the most powerful image of the publically punished body in western imagination – the image of the crucified Jesus. Blake anticipates and complicates Foucault's notion of disciplining through deception by creating a high dialectic of power and play.

Many of Blake's double works deal with the problem of developing an innate philosophy through art so much so that it becomes a critique of formal religion and orthodoxy. His oeuvre demands a feverish and insane commitment to art and his interest in philosophy and mysticism overrides his regard (if any) for religion. Indeed, for Blake religion is a vast repository of myth and symbolism that he indulges in. These propensities though evident in many of his poems "A Poison Tree stands" out in that it presents a complex mental state rich in allusion and irony. The poem has been largely (and perhaps correctly) read in the context of Blake's dissenting position with respect to the Anglican Church that he reviles. Lindsay's interpretation of the speaker of the poem as self-congratulatory and not confessional is a step ahead of staid readings that see the poem as Blake's moralizing about the evil of brooding anger and resentment. Heather Glen offers an interesting new historicist approach to the poem and sees it as having grown out of its historical and social context such as Swedenborgianism and Dissent. However, such readings though politically correct seem poetically incorrect given Blake's idiosyncrasy as a poet and an engraver. A close reading of Blake's double work unaided by a scrutiny of the engraving can be misleading.

The central problem of the poem lies in locating the speaker in what one may call a less general way. This becomes possible when one closely examines the second movement of the poem beginning with the third stanza. The first movement comprising the first two stanzas disconcerts the reader with the rude honesty

of the speaker and his hypocritical stance towards the "foe". The language betrays a tone more complacent than confessional and the reader forms no favorable opinion of the "deceitful" speaker. The second movement witnesses an unnatural growth by "day and night" of the speaker's gall "till it bore an Apple bright". The appearance of the apple is the culmination of the speaker's "wrath" in an invisible act of crime. Its brightness is not coincidental as it is meant to tempt the reader and arrest the attention. The apple is as manifest as the source of its nourishment is not. The apple could be read as the poem itself growing out of the poet's ire against his "foe" - hidden, ambiguous, and "deceitful". The poem shines as a specimen of and an argument for (at least to the untrained/ complacently naïve/ jaundiced eye of dogma) "Christian forbearance" – a title he initially intended for the poem. That the poem was read by some as a confessional is ample proof of the "apple" being tempting enough. Blake's foe, of course, is different from the speaker's "foe". It is here that one encounters a fascinating inversion. The poet's foe is the speaker of the poem.

The choice of "an" apple is deliberate just as the omission of the definite article in the title of the poem is. Blake creates in his poem a mad Kantian dialectic which Sampson erroneously mistakes for "a balance of innocence and experience". There is, one could suggest, a deliberate stalling of the process whereby meaning is extracted. The poem refuses to give in to a context, a time, a place, or specificity so to say –textual or otherwise. The "tree" is only "A poison tree". The "apple" is just "an apple". The "foe" of the speaker is as genitively "mine" as the "apple" is. The speaker, it seems, loves to hate the "foe", nurturing rather lovingly the hatred he feels for the latter. To complicate things further, this hatred seems a priori. We are never told *why* the speaker hates the "foe". The difficulty thus increases when we are confronted with a non-causal narrative demanding our judgement as readers.

Who then is the speaker of the poem? Is it God as Sampson interestingly suggests? The arguments for reading the "I" of the poem as God are not easy to find except for the obvious ones in the speaker's emphatic "mine" and "my" for the apple and the garden respectively. This reading, though interesting, fails to explain who the foe is if not man. Moreover, who is the "friend" in the opening line of the poem if not Satan. This is a rather shocking inversion of the biblical myth which is subsumed by the demands of Blake's muse. The identification of the "foe" as man registers an ancient and inexplicable grudge that God holds against man in that he banishes Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden for the fault of his errant "friend" the devil. Blake's working class background exposed him to a fuller though 'wrathful' survey of the miseries of ordinary men damned inside factories and workhouses. It was this morbid understanding that led him to see the church's promise of post-mortem graces (while the devil of a "friend" was at large) as invalid. This reading demands considerable revulsion for God (on Blake's part). That done the rest falls easily into place with Adam meeting his fate in the fall. Such a reading also finds support in another ancillary fact associated with Blake's reception as a poet.

The Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica has bestowed on Blake the title of 'saint'. The implications of this canonization are contrary to what one might expect ordinarily. The Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica is an international fraternal initiatory organization devoted to propagating the Law of Thelema. - a philosophical, mystical and religious system elaborated by Aleister Crowley. Edward Alexander Crowley, also known as both Frater Perdurabo (Brother I shall endure to the end) and the Great Beast was an English occultist, mystic and ceremonial magician, responsible for founding the religious philosophy of Thelema. Crowley was also a bisexual, a recreational drug experimenter and social critic. In many of these roles he "was in revolt against the moral and religious values of his time", espousing a form of libertinism based upon the rule of "Do What Thou Wilt". He was consequently dubbed by the media as "the wickedest man alive". In the 19th century famed poet and free love advocate Algernon Charles

Swinburne wrote a book on Blake drawing attention to the above motifs in which Blake praises "sacred natural love". It is 'natural' that Blake, whose poetry was appropriated and read by the followers of a cult that revolts against orthodox Christianity and its commandments, also reviled God and established Christian values.

The last two lines present the final and the crowning ambiguity of the poem. The syntax is dense with meaning and the word "glad" behaves like a free radical bonding with ease to the various possible meanings. Who or what is "glad"? The morning, the speaker or is it the "foe"? The speaker seems to have a stronger case given our reading of the rest of the poem and the self celebratory tone of the speaker elsewhere. The title also makes more sense with the "foe" lying prone on the ground after being poisoned by the deceptive apple. An analysis of Blake's original print at this stage raises a few questions. The "garden" looks more like a wasteland and the tree is a positively barren one. How could such a tree ever bear any fruit let alone "an apple bright"? Blake with his eye for detail could never have missed the contradiction in the text and the image. The bright "apple" and the blasted tree could never have been an organic whole. The emphatic "my" of the text and the barren "garden" of the image suggest darkly the disjunction of mind and matter. The painting juxtaposes visually, the reality of the barren tree with the invisible "apple" (bright" as reported in the text of the poem). The "foe" instead of lying prone on the ground is lying flat on his back with his limbs "outstretched" in the Vitruvian fashion. The Roman Vitruvius believed, as did many other orders of classical architecture that the human form is the principal source of proportion and balance.

Disregarding the problems associated with the use of an ambiguous verb like "outstretched" is difficult and one can not take for granted the death of the "foe" by poisoning. On the contrary, the posture of the rather well proportioned young man in the painting suggests a sense of release and relief after a dose of nirvana. Having partaken of God's wrath the knowledge of good (God before the fall) and evil (God after the fall) is complete and the fallen are fortunate as suggested by Blake's painting. In death, is the release of the human subject raised to tragic proportions (as in the painting where the "foe" seems to have fallen into a noble and heroic stupor).

Finally, one could read the poem as exemplifying *heteroglossia* in that it houses with marked economy two conflicting and powerful discourses namely a near modernist, monoglossic preference for authority and teleology challenged subtextually and even subliminally by an almost post modernist resistance to the same. The Blakean antinomy functions here precisely in the "I" impossibilities of situating what the poet Derek Walcott calls "that terrible vowel" the "I".

John Holcombe's useful internet entry on Bakhtin's work refers to:

what Bakhtin called *doubly-orientated speech*. Four categories make up the latter: stylization (a borrowed style), parody, skaz (oral narration) and dialogue (a hidden shaping of the author's voice).{3}

Bakhtin stressed the *multi-layered nature of language, which he called heteroglossia...* characteristic of the various professions, industries, commerce, of passing fashions, etc., but also socio-ideological contradictions carried forward from various periods and levels in the past. **Language is not a neutral medium** that can be simply appropriated by a speaker, **but something that comes to us populated with the intentions of others.** Every word tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially-charged life. (italics mine)

Blake's poem, I suggest, subscribes to all the four categories

mentioned in Holcombe's analysis of Bakhtin. The poem would seem, on a closer reading, to be a parodied version of the myth of the fall minus the female agency. The dialectic of forbearance and vendetta defines the "hidden shaping of the author's (double) voice". For Bakhtin two distinct voices - the author's speech and another's speech - were oriented toward one another within the same level of conceptual authority. One of the most striking features of 'A Poison Tree' is its inwardness; an oppressive and dark solitude seems to fill the atmosphere of the poem. This inwardness throws into relief the monologue's extroverted expression. The form of the poem most certainly lends itself to an "oral" narrative style similar to Eikhenbaum's description of *skaz* as a form of unmediated or improvisational speech. The Russian formalist Vinogradov developed the idea that *skaz* comprised a series of signals that aroused in the reader a sense of speech produced by utterance, not writing. Though *skaz* is mostly understood to be a category applied to prose, it can be useful in our understanding of poetry too. Any reading of Blake's poem and especially of related criticism should take into account the "interpretive communities" being subscribed to. More importantly, as Holcombe suggests in context of Bakhtinian analyses, one should not forget that such "communities" constantly evolve through:

A network of alliances, overlapping and shifting frames of references which are constantly being modified...

Blake's short poem betrays a similar susceptibility to another analytical category developed by the French literary theorist Roland Barthes in his influential book *The Pleasure of The Text*. The pleasure derived from Blake's text is what Barthes calls *jouissance* (French for 'bliss' and also 'orgasm'). This kind of pleasure derives from 'writerly texts' that demand the reader's active participation, even a re-enactment of the author's business of writing so that the text's unity is forever being re-established by its composition, the codes that form and constantly slide around within the text. In reading Blake's 'writerly text', we penetrate an 'open' text more than willing to get laid in a new semantic setting. To relate the poem with dissent in a general way like earlier readings do will not suffice to decipher the poem's particularities and break its "hermeneutic circle", nor will its particularities alone lead us to a new understanding of a *whole reality*. Blake's own comment as an apprentice (in the margins of his copy of his teacher Reynold's *Discourses* at the Royal academy) about the "pursuit of general truth" is revealing:

"To Generalize is to be an Idiot; To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit".

The way out of the vicious hermeneutic circles that pre-figure our readings of any text is to cut tangents of imagination into wider and independent interpretive orbits. Blake's poem in its 'telling' design encourages the active reader to adopt a deconstructive approach whereby the structures and props of signification are turned upon themselves and the text takes to its heels after having 'told' upon a society that prohibits 'telling'. Indeed the poem's psychological origin is in "wrath" which "did grow" when the speaker "**told it not**". The poem is 'telling' about the hazards of 'not telling'. Traditional textual readings of Blake's poem bring about in effect what one may call the 'untelling' of what(ever) the poet has 'told' in the poem. The elusive and absent fruit of the Poison Tree is not forbidden, at least, to the reader. It grows within the latter's mind as an understanding of the oppression specific to their times. To read the poem's "I" as God is not to suggest that Blake's intention in the poem was to vilify God as the perpetrator but only to propose a possible critique of a hypocritical Christian society misrepresenting God so much so that "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion".

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