

XI

Disorder and Resolution:

William Blake's 'London' and William Wordsworth's 'London 1802'.

ALEX DEAMER

In this essay I examine the differing attitudes towards disorder and resolution in William Blake's 'London' and William Wordsworth's 'London 1802'. In particular, I suggest that whilst both poems are united by their scathing critiques of late eighteenth-century society, they present divergent understandings of this environment and the means by which to ameliorate its ills. Where Blake's poem crystallises the class struggle endemic to an increasingly industrial capitalist economy and the consequent urge for revolutionary action, Wordsworth's sonnet presents a lost yet unified England that must invoke its Miltonic past as a normative guide.

Published just eight years apart, both William Blake's 'London' (1794) and William Wordsworth's 'London 1802' present vitriolic critiques of prevailing eighteenth-century mores. Yet, despite this parallelism, the poems betray distinctly disparate philosophies – the former embarking on an iconoclastic path, deploying no positive metaphysic, or worldview, and the latter calling for a comparatively conservative retreat to Miltonic England, which forms a kind of foundational myth. Whilst both artefacts indict the society that spawned them, then, they also articulate two differing romanticisms. In this essay I suggest such difference is manifest along two primary axes: first, the poems' conceptions of disorder and society; and, second, their accounts of resolution - that is, their reactions to the former.

Blake's 'London' and Wordsworth's 'London 1802' converge most obviously in their accounts of societal disorder – a topos immediately established in their shared use of water tropes. In 'London 1802', the speaker states that England has become 'a fen / Of stagnant waters', a metaphor indicating

an absence of current or flow, and consequently, an absence of societal direction or purpose.¹ Similarly, in 'London', we encounter the 'charter'd Thames', a phrase that, belying its aural lucidity, is semantically jarring, locating the once free-flowing river within a capitalist lexicon: even nature is commercially managed in Blake's London.²

Yet, whilst the waters of Wordsworth's 'London 1802' remain stagnant for all to see, the chartered waters of Blake's 'London' continue to flow, suggesting that societal disorder is not always consciously apparent, but rather, occurs far more insidiously than Wordsworth's image implies.³ This reality is magnified in stanza 2 of Blake's 'London', where the speaker outlines the extent of the mental limitations, imposed by a burgeoning capitalist economy:

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.⁴

Interestingly, the speaker *hears* these manacles 'In every *voice*' (emphasis mine), a point reinforced in the following stanza, which bears the acrostic HEAR. Indeed, this same stanza further highlights the aural with its emphasis on 'cry' and 'sigh'. The speaker, consequently, aligns the manacles with the voice and what is heard, which by extension, draws our attention to language – indeed, even a cry is means of communication – thus suggesting a kind of proto-Foucauldian critique, which posits discourse as a locus of power. Indeed, this reading is further supported by the ineluctable anaphora 'In every', which, in addition to driving the stanza to a compelling crescendo, reiterates the monolithic, all-pervasive linguistic matrix, which supports and reproduces society's 'false consciousness'. For Blake, then, disorder and oppression are woven within the very discourse that his speaker inhabits, whereas for Wordsworth, such phenomena are comparatively visual: we *see* societal stagnation, we *see* the dissolution of our 'English dower'.⁵

This disparity between notions of disorder deepens as we consider the two poems' differing conceptions of society. In Wordsworth's 'London 1802', we are presented with a homogenous society: it is 'England' that needs Milton's guiding presence, having lost 'manners, virtue, freedom, power'.⁶ Hence, the speaker inducts the reader into a particular paradigm of 'Englishness', which is underpinned

¹ Wordsworth, William, 'London 1802', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Stephen Gill, (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p.151, ll.2-3.

² Blake, William, 'London', in *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, ed. by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.107, l.2.

³ Blake, l.2.

⁴ Blake, ll.5-8.

⁵ Wordsworth, l.5.

⁶ Wordsworth, l.8.

by difficult notions of national identity and seemingly shared, universal values – there is no evidence of societal division, only societal sickness.

Blake's 'London' offers no such homogeneity. Instead, we encounter three symbols of class oppression: the chimney sweeper, the soldier, and the harlot:

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

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.⁷

The church, which should be caring for the orphaned children it exploits, is 'blackening', both literally, through the children's carbon-stained faces, and figuratively, through its growing burden of hypocrisy. And the 'Palace walls' are similarly stained, marked by the blood of innocent soldiers – an image suggesting the bloody revolution then occurring in France. Finally, we discover the poem's third figure, the whore or harlot, who, like the child workers and the soldiers, has been preyed upon, this time by the institutions of marriage and prostitution. The 'Harlots curse' is far reaching, capturing the misfortune of her professional circumstance and the children that result, as well as her syphilitic burden, which will return to plague the marriage bed of 'respectable society'. This point is further entrenched through the quasi-oxymoronic 'Marriage hearse', a metaphor that not only reinforces the stifling, deathly nature of human institutions, but highlights the dangers to which married men, infected with venereal disease, exposed their wives. This final scene, then, leaves the poem in a state of painful reproduction, where intercourse, birth, and death replicate societal ills *ad infinitum*. Unlike Wordsworth's 'London 1802', then, which is marked only by societal sickness, Blake's 'London' is also marked by societal division – it is a monument to class struggle.

Just as the two poems present differing conceptions of society, they diverge further in their reactions to their environment. In Wordsworth's 'London 1802', we find a kind of foundational myth, an idealisation of Miltonic England as a seat of 'inward happiness' that will resolve societal woes and, thus, which allows for an aspirational worldview.⁸ In Blake's 'London', however, we find no such vision, but rather, a condition that compels revolution whilst withholding any more substantive resolution. This is reiterated in the two poems' differing temporal trajectories, with 'London 1802'

⁷ Blake, ll.9-16.

⁸ Wordsworth, l.6.

continually looking to the past – note the proliferation of past-tense verbs ‘dwelt’, ‘hadst’, and ‘didst’ – and ‘London’, conversely, immersing the reader within the present – ‘I wander’.⁹ In the former, the ideal society has dissolved with Milton, and must be resurrected. In the latter, however, society has no guiding light, rather it is institutional hypocrisy that compels change – there is no normative model to erect, only the present model to destroy.

This temporal disparity underpins the two poems’ differing epistemologies. In Blake’s ‘London’, the very possibility of knowledge – or at least the credibility of time-honoured ‘wisdom’ – is brought into question. This is reflected in ‘London’s’ iconoclastic trajectory, which results in the destruction of traditional institutions, rather than the advancement of specific values – indeed, the poem comes closest to positing values only in highlighting their absence. The value of freedom, for instance, which, alongside ‘virtue’ and ‘power’, is explicitly coveted in Wordsworth’s ‘London 1802’, is never expressly mentioned in Blake’s poem.¹⁰ Yet, despite this, the latter’s river imagery connotes liberty, and indeed, its growing absence in the unnaturally ‘charter’d’ landscape – a move that reflects the work’s concentration on the present; it is ultimately concerned with engaging and inspiring the imagination, encouraging the reader to break the ‘mind forg’d manacles’, rather than invoking past exemplars or prescribing a substantive value system.¹¹

This epistemic gulf widens as we encounter the volta to Wordsworth’s ‘London 1802’, which in response to the octave’s disorder, crystallises not just the potential for, but the very means to resolution in its eulogistic praise of Milton, who like a sort of Christ figure, forms a model of ethical knowledge:

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.¹²

The speaker anoints his subject with a holistic series of similes, likening him to a ‘Star’, the ‘sea’, and the ‘heavens’ – not only is Milton a moral paragon, his soul is perfectly complete, it is heaven and earth. Yet, like Christ, we learn that he still travelled ‘on life’s common way’, and thus provides a normative guide that readers must follow in order to salvage England from the stagnant fen it has become.

⁹ Wordsworth, ll.9-12; Blake, l.1.

¹⁰ Wordsworth, l.8.

¹¹ Blake, ll.1-2.

¹² Wordsworth, ll.9-14.

In 'London 1802', then, resolution is simply a return, a looking back to, and emulating of, what was; whereas in 'London', resolution is left to the reader, the poem's objective is to inspire rather than prescribe. In this sense, then, Blake's 'London' not only denounces the *zeitgeist* that bred it, but simultaneously empowers the disempowered – those who possess the latent yet revolutionary power to annihilate it.

Whilst both Blake's 'London' and Wordsworth's 'London 1802' agree that the then current order is sick, their understandings of this sickness, its origins, and its resolution, are clearly incompatible. In 'London', we discover how monolithic institutions, namely the church and the state, are corrupting human potentiality, and in particular, oppressing and exploiting society's most vulnerable members, symbolised by the chimney sweeper, the soldier, and the harlot. Yet, in 'London 1802', society's fall is linked to the etiolation of these very institutions – the 'altar', religion, and the 'heroic wealth of hall and bower', the economy, for instance, are not painted as tyrannical forces, but rather, as powers that must be restored to their earlier glory.

Similarly, whilst Wordsworth's 'London 1802' constructs a romanticism of promise, which posits testing notions of national identity underscored by an overt didacticism as the means of resolving societal disorder, Blake's 'London', through its refusal to prescribe anything other than revolutionary action, calls for a proto-Nietzschean transvaluation of values. Rather than retreating to a former idealised society, Blake's poem refrains from postulating any substantive value system, instead advancing an open romanticism that, although full of rebellious potential, leaves the forging of new values to the reader, thus encouraging the imagination to destruct the 'mind-forg'd manacles'. Indeed, this division between iconoclasm and conservatism, between autonomy and didacticism, is articulated most pithily in Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell', where we read: 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction'.¹³

¹³ William Blake, 'Proverbs of Hell', in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ed. by Michael Phillips, (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2011), p.68.

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