
 WILLIAM BLAKE

Song

How sweet I roam'd from field to field,
 And tasted all the summer's pride,
 'Till I the prince of love¹ beheld,
 Who in the sunny beams did glide!

He shew'd me lilies for my hair, 5
 And blushing roses for my brow;
 He led me through his gardens fair,
 Where all his golden pleasures grow.

With sweet May dews my wings were wet,
 And Phoebus fir'd my vocal rage;² 10
 He caught me in his silken net,
 And shut me in his golden cage.

He loves to sit and her me sing,
 Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;
 Then stretches out my golden wing, 15
 And mocks my loss of liberty.

1783

Song¹

Memory, hither come,
 And tune your merry notes;

1. In Greek myth, Eros or Cupid.

2. Fervor, i.e., my strong desire to sing.

1. Cf. *Under the Greenwood Tree* in *As You Like It* 2.5.

And, while upon the wind,
 Your music floats,
 I'll pore upon the stream, 5
 Where sighing lovers dream,
 And fish for fancies as they pass
 Within the watery glass.

I'll drink of the clear stream,
 And hear the linnet's song; 10
 And there I'll lie and dream
 The day along:
 And, when night comes, I'll go
 To places fit for woe;
 Walking along the darken'd valley, 15
 With silent Melancholy.

1783

Mad Song¹

The wild winds weep,
 And the night is a-cold;
 Come hither, Sleep,
 And my griefs infold:
 But lo! the morning peeps 5
 Over the eastern steeps,
 And the rustling birds of dawn
 The earth do scorn.

Lo! to the vault
 Of paved heaven, 10
 With sorrow fraught
 My notes are driven:

1. Cf. the songs of the Fool in Shakespeare's great scene of madness and incipient madness in *King Lear* 3.2. In a marginal comment on Spurzheim's *Observations on Insanity* (1817), Blake wrote: "Cowper came to me & said, 'O that I were insane always; I will never rest. . . . You retain health & yet are as mad as any of us all—over us all—mad as a refuge from unbelief—from Bacon Newton & Locke.'" (Cowper, like the other 18th-century poets Christopher Smart and William Collins, actually went insane.)

To THE MUSES 3

They strike the ear of night,
 Make weep the eyes of day;
They make mad the roaring winds, 15
 And the tempests play.

Like a fiend in a cloud
 With howling woe,
After night I do croud,
 And with night will go; 20
I turn my back to the east,
From whence comforts have increas'd;
For light doth seize my brain
With frantic pain.

1783

To the Muses

Whether on Ida's¹ shady brow,
 Or in the chambers of the East,
The chambers of the sun, that now
 From antient melody have ceas'd;

Whether in Heav'n ye wander fair, 5
 Or the green corners of the earth,
Or the blue regions of the air,
 Where the melodious winds have birth;

Whether on chrystal rocks ye rove,
 Beneath the bosom of the sea 10
Wand'ring in many a coral grove,
 Fair Nine,² forsaking Poetry!

1. Mountain in southern Phrygia, celebrated in classical mythology.

2. The Nine Muses.

How have you left the antient love
 That bards of old enjoy'd in you!³
 The languid strings do scarcely move! 15
 The sound is forc'd, the notes are few!

1783

The Mental Traveller¹

I travelld thro' a Land of Men
 A Land of Men & Women too,
 And heard & saw such dreadful things
 As cold Earth wanderers never knew.

For there the Babe is born in joy 5
 That was begotten in dire woe,
 Just as we Reap in joy the fruit
 Which we in bitter tears did sow.

And if the Babe is born a Boy
 He's given to a Woman Old, 10
 Who nails him down upon a rock
 Catches his shrieks in cups of gold.

3. The poem is Blake's lament, in the diction of later 18th-century poetry, over the failure of the inspiration that had been manifested by the "bards," the older British poet-prophets.

1. A useful clue to this cryptic narrative is Blake's assertion in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: "Man passes on but States remain for ever. He passes thro them like a traveller who may . . . suppose that the places he has passed thro exist no more. . . . Every thing is Eternal." In the poem, the Mental Traveller can be regarded as a visitor from another planet—the "eternal" realm of imagination—to our fallen, temporal world. His travelogue describes the temporal sequence of States that he discovers, but which "cold Earth wanderers never knew" (line 4) because their view of their lot is that of delusory sense-experience, not of imaginative vision. These States are the persisting forms through which all earthly existence passes; they are equivalent, in Blake's prophetic poems, to Beulah, Generation, and Ulro.

Our temporal world is "A Land of Men & Women too" (line 2). In the temporal cycle, the female is represented in the predominant guise in which she appears to the male perspective, at each stage of his development. The female cycle is thus complementary and opposite to that of the male, moving from an old, cruel, oppressive mother-figure (or wicked stepmother), through the form of mistress and prolific wife, to that of female infant, and on to oppressive crone again. Blake's description of the cycle assimilates elements of pagan myth (especially the myth of Prometheus, in lines 11ff.), fairy tales, and the Gospel story of Christ (e.g., lines 13ff., 93ff.). But the full significance of this travelogue, like that of Blake's other myths, is open-ended rather than explicit.

This poem was not etched by Blake, but it survived in what is known as the Pickering manuscript.

THE MENTAL TRAVELLER 5

She binds iron thorns around his head,
She pierces both his hands & feet,
She cuts his heart out at his side 15
To make it feel both cold & heat.

Her fingers number every Nerve
Just as a Miser counts his gold,
She lives upon his shrieks & cries
And she grows young as he grows old. 20

Till he becomes a bleeding youth
And she becomes a Virgin bright,
Then he rends up his Manacles
And binds her down for his delight.

He plants himself in all her Nerves 25
Just as a Husbandman his mould,
And she becomes his dwelling place
And Garden fruitful seventy fold.

An aged Shadow soon he fades
Wandering round an Earthly Cot,² 30
Full fillèd all with gems & gold
Which he by industry had got.

And these are the gems of the Human Soul
The rubies & pearls of a lovesick eye,
The countless gold of the akeing heart 35
The martyr's groan & the lover's sigh.

They are his meat, they are his drink,
He feeds the Beggar & the Poor
And the wayfaring Traveller —
For ever open is his door. 40

2. Cottage.

His grief is their eternal joy,
 They make the roofs & walls to ring,
 Till from the fire on the hearth
 A little Female Babe does spring.

And she is all of solid fire 45
 And gems & gold, that none his hand
 Dares stretch to touch her Baby form
 Or wrap her in his swaddling-band.

But She comes to the Man she loves
 If young or old or rich or poor, 50
 They soon drive out the aged Host,
 A Beggar at another's door.

He wanders weeping far away
 Untill some other take him in,
 Oft blind & age-bent, sore distress 55
 Untill he can a Maiden win.

And to allay his freezing Age
 The Poor Man takes her in his arms,
 The Cottage fades before his sight,
 The Garden & its lovely Charms. 60

The Guests are scattered thro' the land,
 For the Eye altering alters all;
 The Senses roll themselves in fear
 And the flat Earth becomes a Ball.³

The Stars, Sun, Moon all shrink away— 65
 A desert vast without a bound,
 And nothing left to eat or drink
 And a dark desert all around.

3. Blake claimed that the post-Copernican and Newtonian conception of the earth "as of a Globe rolling thro Voidness . . . is a delusion of Ulro" (*Milton*, plate 29).

THE MENTAL TRAVELLER 7

The honey of her Infant lips
The bread & wine of her sweet smile 70
The wild game of her roving Eye
Does him to Infancy beguile.

For as he eats & drinks⁴ he grows
Younger & younger every day,
And on the desart wild they both 75
Wander in terror & dismay.

Like the wild Stag she flees away,
Her fear plants many a thicket wild;
While he pursues her night & day
By various arts of Love beguile, 80

By various arts of Love & Hate,
Till the wide desart planted o'er
With Labyrinths of wayward Love,
Where roams the Lion, Wolf, & Boar,

Till he becomes a wayward Babe 85
And she a weeping Woman Old;
Then many a Lover wanders here,
The Sun & Stars are nearer rolld.

The trees bring forth sweet Extacy
To all who in the desart roam, 90
Till many a City there is Built
And many a pleasant Shepherd's home.

But when they find the frowning Babe
Terror strikes thro' the region wide;
They cry "The Babe, the Babe is Born!" 95
And flee away on Every side.

4. Man eats and drinks "the bread & wine" of line 70—the delusive communion of the female in one of her roles, that of seductive harlot.

For who dare touch the frowning form,
 His arm is withered to its root;
 Lions, Boars, Wolves, all howling flee,
 And every Tree does shed its fruit. 100

And none can touch that frowning form
 Except it be a Woman Old;
 She nails him down upon the Rock,
 And all is done as I have told.

ca. 1803

1863

Letters on Sight and Vision¹

To Thomas Butts² (Nov. 22, 1802)

[WITH HAPPINESS STRETCHD ACROSS THE HILLS]

Dear Sir,

After I had finished my Letter I found that I had not said half what I intended to say, & in particular I wish to ask you what subject you choose to be painted on the remaining Canvas which I brought down with me (for there were three) and to tell you that several of the Drawings were in great forwardness; you will see by the Inclosed Account that the remaining Number of Drawings which you gave me orders for is Eighteen. I will finish these with all possible Expedition, if indeed I have not tired you or, as it is politely calld, Bored you too much already; or if you would rather cry out Enough, Off Off! tell me in a Letter of forgiveness if you were offended, & of accustomed friendship if you were not. But I will bore you more with some Verses which My Wife desires me to Copy out & send you with her kind love & Respect. They were Com-

1. Blake wrote these pronouncements about the difference between “corporeal” sight and imaginative vision at times when a friend, a patron, or the need for money was putting pressure on him to turn from his visionary art to more fashionable modes of representation.

2. Thomas Butts (d. 1845) was a staunch supporter who, though only a chief clerk in the Public Record Office, bought more of Blake’s works than did any other contemporary. To this friend Blake expresses his anguish at the demands of William Hayley (1745–1820), a well-to-do writer and patron of the arts who, after having settled the Blakes at Felpham in Sussex, was trying to impose on the artist, for what he thought were Blake’s best interests, his own conventional standards and tastes.

posed above a twelve-month ago while Walking from Felpham to Lavant to meet my Sister:³

With happiness stretchd across the hills
 In a cloud that dewy sweetness distills,
 With a blue sky spread over with wings
 And a mild sun that mounts & sings,
 With trees & fields full of Fairy elves 5
 And little devils who fight for themselves,
 Remembering the Verses that Hayley sung
 When my heart knockd against the root of my tongue,
 With Angels planted in Hawthorn bowers
 And God himself in the passing hours, 10
 With Silver Angels across my way
 And Golden Demons that none can stay,
 With my Father hovering upon the wind
 And my Brother Robert just behind
 And my Brother John the evil one⁴ 15
 In a black cloud making his mone—
 Tho dead, they appear upon my path
 Notwithstanding my terrible wrath;
 They beg, they intreat, they drop their tears,
 Fild full of hopes, fild full of fears— 20
 With a thousand Angels upon the Wind
 Pouring disconsolate from behind
 To drive them off, & before my way
 A frowning Thistle implores my stay.

3. The verses that follow express Blake's dissatisfaction with the vexations of his mundane life, and the conflict he felt between the need to provide for the material wants of his family and the betrayal this seemed to involve of his own artistic genius, which manifests itself to him in outward form as the accusing figure of Los. The poem distinguishes four ways of viewing the natural world. Its last six lines indicate that these four modes, from single up to fourfold vision, are related to the four "States" of human consciousness—from Ulro (the world view of Newtonian science), through Generation, and Beulah, to the ultimate imaginative vision, Eden, in which the objects of the world of nature, freed from the illusory categories of time and space, are revealed in their eternal and human forms. This highest "fourfold vision" is correlated also, in Blake's mythology, with the "expanded" and integral vision of the world as perceived by the "human fourfold"—that is, by the four Zoas when they have been reintegrated into the redeemed Albion.

4. The ne'er-do-well of the family: he had enlisted as a soldier and died soon after. Blake's father, James, died in 1784. Three years later his brother Robert died of consumption; Blake, who was devoted to him and attended him on his deathbed for two sleepless weeks, said that all his life thereafter Robert conversed with him "daily and hourly in the spirit."

What to others a trifle appears 25
 Fills me full of smiles or tears,
 For double the vision my Eyes do see
 And a double vision is always with me:
 With my inward Eye 'tis an old Man grey,
 With my outward a Thistle across my way. 30
 "If thou goest back," the thistle said,
 "Thou art to endless woe betrayd;
 For here does Theotormon lower
 And here is Enitharmon's bower
 And Los the terrible⁵ thus hath sworn: 35
 Because thou backward dost return
 Poverty, Envy, old age & fear
 Shall bring thy Wife upon a bier,
 And Butts shall give what Fuseli gave,
 A dark black Rock & a gloomy Cave."⁶ 40

I struck the Thistle with my foot,
 And broke him up from his delving root:
 "Must the duties of life each other cross?
 Must every joy be dung & dross?
 Must my dear Butts feel cold neglect 45
 Because I give Hayley his due respect?
 Must Flaxman⁷ look upon me as wild,
 And all my friends be with doubts beguild?
 Must my Wife live in my Sister's bane,
 Or my sister survive on my Love's pain?⁸ 50
 The curses of Los the terrible shade
 And his dismal terrors make me afraid."

5. Theotormon is one of the four sons of Los and his Emanation, Enitharmon. These personages serve here as guardians of Blake's fidelity to the promptings of his poetic genius. (For Theotormon's earlier role as the jealous lover of Oothoon see *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.)

6. The rock and cave are among Blake's recurrent symbols for the fallen, or "unimaginative," world. Henry Fuseli was a fellow-artist, friend, and admirer of Blake, but the two had recently quarreled; the threat seems to be that Butts will do likewise, and so destroy Blake's imaginative state.

7. John Flaxman, a well-known sculptor of the time; like Fuseli, he admired Blake's work and helped him in his profession, but the relations between the two artists were sometimes strained.

8. Blake's sister, Catherine, lived with Blake and his wife at Felpham, and the two Catherines did not get along with each other.

So I spoke & struck in my wrath
 The old man weltering upon my path.
 Then Los appeard in all his power— 55
 In the Sun he appeard, descending before
 My face in fierce flames; in my double sight
 Twas outward a Sun, inward Los in his might.⁹

“My hands are labourd day & night,
 And Ease comes never in my sight. 60
 My Wife has no indulgence given
 Except what comes to her from heaven;
 We eat little, we drink less;
 This Earth breeds not our happiness;
 Another Sun feeds our life’s streams, 65
 We are not warmèd with thy beams;
 Thou measurest not the Time to me,
 Nor yet the Space that I do see;
 My Mind is not with thy light arrayd
 Thy terrors shall not make me afraid.” 70

When I had my Defiance given,
 The Sun stood trembling in heaven;
 The Moon that glowd remote below
 Became leprous & white as snow;
 And every Soul of men on the Earth 75
 Felt affliction & sorrow & sickness & dearth.
 Los flamd in my path, & the Sun was hot
 With the bows of my Mind & the Arrows of Thought;
 My bowstring fierce with Ardour breathes,
 My arrows glow in their golden sheaves,¹ 80
 My brothers & father march before,
 The heavens drop with human gore.

Now I a fourfold vision see,
 And a fourfold vision is given to me;

9. To the poet’s “twofold” vision, the material sun is recognized, in its spiritual form, as Los.

1. Compare the bow and arrows of “Mental Fight” in the poem *And did those feet*.

Tis fourfold in my supreme delight,
 And threefold in soft Beulah's night,
 And twofold Always. May God us keep
 From Single vision & Newton's sleep.

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I also inclose you some Ballads by Mr Hayley, with prints to them by Your H^{ble}. Serv^t.² I should have sent them before now, but could not get any thing done for You to please myself, for I do assure you that I have truly studied the two little pictures I now send & do not repent of the time I have spent upon them.
 God bless you.

Yours
 W B

p.s. I have taken the liberty to trouble you with a letter to my Brother, which you will be so kind as to send or give him & oblige yours, W B

To William Hayley³ (Oct. 23, 1804)

Dear Sir

I received your kind letter with the note to Mr. Payne,⁴ and have had the cash from him. I should have returned my thanks immediately on receipt of it, but hoped to be able to send, before now, proofs of the two plates, the *Head* of R[omney] and the *Shipwreck*, which you shall soon see in a much more perfect state. I write immediately because you wish I should do so, to satisfy you that I have received your kind favour.

I take the extreme pleasure of expressing my joy at our good Lady of Lavant's continued recovery: but with a mixture of sincere sorrow on account of the beloved Councillor.⁵ My wife returns her heartfelt thanks for your kind inquiry concerning her health. She is surprisingly recovered. Electricity is the wonderful cause;⁶ the swelling of her legs and knees is entirely reduced. She is very near as free from rheumatism as she was five years ago, and we have the greatest confidence in her perfect recovery.

The pleasure of seeing another poem from your hands has truly set me

2. *Designs to a Series of Ballads written by William Hayley*, with engravings by Blake, was published in 1802.

3. On William Hayley, see n. 2 for Blake's Nov. 22, 1802, letter to Thomas Butts.

4. Thomas Payne was the publisher of Hayley's *Life of George Romney*, for which Blake was preparing the engravings he goes on to mention. George Romney (1734–1802) was a noted English portrait painter.

5. Samuel Rose, who had defended Blake at his trial for treason in Jan. 1804; he died the following December. "Lady of Lavant": Harriet Poole, a friend of Hayley's, who lived in a villa at Lavant.

6. An electrical current was then used to treat rheumatism and other ailments.

longing (my wife says I ought to have said us) with desire and curiosity; but, however, “Christmas is a-coming.”

Our good and kind friend Hawkins⁷ is not yet in town—hope soon to have the pleasure of seeing him, with the courage of conscious industry, worthy of his former kindness to me. For now! O Glory! and O Delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous Fiend⁸ to his station, whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last passed twenty years of my life. He is the enemy of conjugal love and is the Jupiter of the Greeks,⁹ an iron-hearted tyrant, the ruiner of ancient Greece. I speak with perfect confidence and certainty of the fact which has passed upon me. Nebuchadnezzar had seven times passed over him;¹ I have had twenty; thank God I was not altogether a beast as he was; but I was a slave bound in a mill among beasts and devils; these beasts and these devils are now, together with myself, become children of light and liberty, and my feet and my wife’s feet are free from fetters. O lovely Felpham, parent of Immortal Friendship, to thee I am eternally indebted for my three years’ rest from perturbation and the strength I now enjoy. Suddenly, on the day after visiting the Truchsessian Gallery of pictures,² I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth, and which has for exactly twenty years been closed from me as by a door and by window-shutters. Consequently I can, with confidence, promise you ocular demonstration of my altered state on the plates I am now engraving after Romney, whose spiritual aid has not a little conduced to my restoration to the light of Art. O the distress I have undergone, and my poor wife with me. Incessantly labouring and incessantly spoiling what I had done well. Every one of my friends was astonished at my faults, and could not assign a reason; they knew my industry and abstinence from every pleasure for the sake of study, and yet—and yet—and yet there wanted the proofs of industry in my works. I thank God with entire confidence that it shall be so no longer—he is become my servant who domineered over me, he is even as a brother who was my enemy. Dear Sir, excuse my enthusiasm or rather madness, for I

7. John Hawkins, one of Blake’s patrons.

8. I.e., the rational, skeptical, anti-imaginative aspect of Blake’s mind.

9. Jupiter is the Roman name for the Greek god Zeus.

1. The Book of Daniel, chap. 4, narrates the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in which a “holy one” announces to him: “Let his heart be changed from man’s, and let a beast’s heart be given unto him: and let seven times pass over him.” Blake in his works used Nebuchadnezzar to symbolize the bestial condition of a man who believes only in the reality of material things. In the Book of Daniel the king recovered his sanity after the “seven times” (which Blake interprets as seven years) had passed over him.

2. An exhibition in London, Aug. 1803, of paintings by old masters brought to England by Joseph, Count Truchsess.

am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand, even as I used to be in my youth, and as I have not been for twenty dark, but very profitable years. I thank God that I courageously pursued my course through darkness. In a short time I shall make my assertion good that I am become suddenly as I was at first, by producing the *Head of Romney* and the *Shipwreck*, quite another thing from what you or I ever expected them to be. In short, I am now satisfied and proud of my work, which I have not been for the above long period.

If our excellent and manly friend Meyer is yet with you, please to make my wife's and my own most respectful and affectionate compliments to him, also to our kind friend at Lavant.

I remain, with my wife's joint affection,

Your sincere and obliged servant,

WILL BLAKE