

William Blake's "The Little Vagabond" and Organized Religion

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Abstract—This article is an analysis of William Blake's poem "The Little Vagabond" from the angle of Blake's views on organized religion. The article identifies three main themes of the poem; happiness, the sacred and the profane and assesses the tension between them. The article assesses the tension between these three in the poem to show Blake's criticism of organized religion, later developed in his prophetic books. The little vagabond unwittingly identifies a dichotomy of organized religion in its inability to combine happiness with the sacred. Its strictures against happiness make happiness profane. As happiness is exiled to only keep company with the profane, the boy innocently suggests making the sacred the profane. Blake develops these ideas in molding his character of Urizon, the cold lawgiver, father of stern and somber organized religion.

Keywords— Christianity, organized religion, Songs of Innocence and Experience, The Little Vagabond, William Blake.

I. INTRODUCTION

"The Little Vagabond" is a William Blake poem of 1794. It appears in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, a compendium of two poetry anthologies. This book appeared in two phases. At first *Songs of Innocence* appeared in 1789 on its own with Blake illuminating and printing the work himself. Five years after he combined the *Songs of Innocence* with a new poetry anthology, the *Songs of Experience* to make the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* with its subtitle: *Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. "The Little Vagabond" itself is found in the *Songs of Experience* anthology of this book.

"Innocence" and "Experience" refer to two stages in the development of consciousness. Blake's concepts of these two are a social/psychological reimagining of the biblical Christian creation myth division of the human past, which Milton characterized as "Paradise" and "Fall". "Paradise" was an age of innocence before Adam and Eve violated God's rule forbidding they eat fruit from the tree of knowledge. The "Fall" is the world humanity finds itself in after Adam and Eve have been banished from paradise for their transgression. It is the source of the Christian idea of original sin and evil in the world. Paradise corresponds to Blake's stage of Innocence, depicted as words of and for children. The poems in the *Songs of Innocence* revel in the creative and emotional power of children before the strictures of rules and habit have set in, their pleas for freedom, pleasures of the senses and comfort in love. Some

of the poems also hint at the vulnerability of Innocence and the dangerous encroachment of the world of Experience on its simple joys. These poems are usually accompanied by illustrations of bucolic harmony. Experience corresponds to the Fallen world of division and hostility, which arises in the rule-governed, cold world of scientific objectivity. The poems in the *Songs of Experience* thus have a darker tone. They cover themes of exploitation, poverty and social decay, political corruption and the oppression of State, Church and ruling classes. They are usually accompanied by sad illustrations: "almost every design sees an innocent interpretation being undercut by another conveying the more bitter accents of experience. If sheep and oxen appear by a stream, they are bowing their heads to the water, apparently in disregard of anything else. If there is a tree with light serpentine tendrils it is matched across the page by two heavy trunks, intertwining like great serpents but producing more darkness." (Beer, 2005 93) Blake wrote the *Songs of Experience* as a kind of negative counterweight to the *Songs of Innocence*. The resulting volume is that poems in the *Songs of Innocence* are mirrored by poems in the *Songs of Experience*. Often this is highlighted in the *Songs of Experience* in the direct fashion of making its titles repetitions of or slightly altered versions of corresponding titles of poems in the *Songs of Innocence*. So for example in *Songs of Innocence* there is a poem called "Infant Joy" which is mirrored by the poem from the *Songs of Experience* called "Infant Sorrow". In the *Songs of Innocence* there is a poem called "The School

boy". In it a schoolboy extols the joys of freely enjoying nature and bemoans the prison of school as depriving school children of that freedom. "The Little Vagabond", the poem here under research is the *Songs of Experience's* equivalent of "The School Boy" (Gleckner 1961, 373). Here the schoolboy has been transformed into a street urchin who thinks churches should be more like drinking establishments.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The present study has two main objectives:

1. To identify Blake's views on orthodox religion, happiness, the sacred and the profane underlying the satire expressed in the views voiced by Blake's little vagabond.
2. To examine the poem and identify and explain its main themes: Happiness, the sacred and the profane in terms of the way Blake develops these themes in his later, more sophisticated poetry, his so-called prophetic books.

1.2 Research Questions

With these objectives in mind the article will address itself to two main questions:

1. How do the themes of happiness, the sacred and the profane interact in this poem?
2. How do the views expressed in this poem inform Blake's later Prophetic Books?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tristranne J. Connolly cites "The Little Vagabond" as among the poems in the *Songs of Experience*, "along with 'To Tirzah'...which extol the comforts of physical life and the joys of 'the sexes' (which elsewhere do not merely 'work & weep'), deride those who deny such pleasures, and mock inattention to earthly life in expectation of eternal life. They include 'Ah! Sun- flower'(43), 'The Garden of Love' (44), 'The Little Vagabond' (45) and 'A Little Girl Lost' (51)" (2002, 226).

"The Little Vagabond" has been subjected to some of the most interesting historical speculation on the development of Blake's thinking. G. E. Bentley (1964, 8) has mooted the idea that, if Blake or one of his relations was a member of one of the secretive, nonconformist antinomian religious sects that were prevalent in his time and place they may well have conducted their meetings in public houses. These, real life experiences, Bentley supposes could have directly inspired "The Little Vagabond". Antinomianism is

an umbrella term for doctrines, which reject (or are accused of rejecting) rules in moral and social affairs. In Christianity antinomianism asserts the primacy of faith in God over the observance of the Ten Commandments, seeing virtue as only arising from personal volition and undermined by any external compulsion such as found in laws and customs. E. P. Thompson has gone the furthest in asserting the prevalence of antinomian tendencies in Blake's writings. Thompson argues for "the ubiquity and centrality of antinomian tenets to Blake's thinking, to his writing, and to his painting." Thompson notes that all of Blake's work is shot through with "radical disassociation and opposition between the Moral Law and that gospel of Christ which is known—as often in the antinomian tradition—as 'the Everlasting Gospel'" (Thompson 1993, 19). "The Little Vagabond's" explicit failure to acknowledge organized religion's rules on censure of intemperance is one such example of this antinomian tendency. Thompson, concurs with A. L. Morton's (1958) work in reporting the dissemination of antinomian literature around London in the late eighteenth century. Jon Mee (1994) has recently lent weight to this historical research (some of which was also carried out by Michael Ferber (1985) and its proposal that the extent of this dissemination of literature could reasonably be supposed to have been wide enough to reach Blake. Thompson sees Blake's work "is writing which comes out of a tradition. It has a confidence, an assured reference, very different from the speculations of an eccentric or a solitary" (Thompson 1993, 62-63). Insights like this have led Saree Makdisi (2002, 73) to claim that "The Little Vagabond" is a text written to defend antinomianism against those who accused the antinomian sects of gross depravity in mixing religious discourse with ale.

Harold Bloom suggests that although the narrator of this poem, and ones like it in the *Songs of Experience* is not Blake, "the speaker is treated with sympathy and patient understanding" (2003, 23). Furthermore the historical record does not bear out associating Blake with any particular religious sect, and the evidence Thompson cites in his attempt to associate Blake with the Muggletonian's is not credible (Beer 2005, 223, footnote 14). Nevertheless it is clear that Blake has made the narrator a child because of the naivety of the thoughts expressed. Therefore I think it is overly simplistic to suppose that Blake was here advocating that churches become alehouses, as the little vagabond does. Rather, Blake is interested in the idea that organized religion has made itself so strict and intolerant that happiness is made profane.

III. THE SACRED, THE PROFANE AND HAPPINESS

The central tension of the poem revolves around the triad of the Sacred, the Profane and Happiness. The problem the little vagabond's speech is alluding to is of the necessity of happiness in life. The pursuit and enjoyment of physical pleasure is a natural, animal impulse. Yet austere organized religion has deemed happiness profane. On the other hand the degradation of the boy's social condition has impoverished his outlets for enjoyment and narrowed his horizons to the extent that the only opportunity afforded him for enjoyment comes in the place the church inveighs most against. Because of the incompatibility of religious strictures with life's necessities the boy finds no life in the church except insofar as it compromises itself into becoming the thing its preachers rail against, namely a house of "sin". The demands of the prohibitions on alcohol of the ascetics are so divorced from the daily grind of the city's poor that their pleas for sanctimonious self-torture places an intolerable burden upon the poor. These demands seem, to those whose minds are numbed by the grueling labor that earns their crusts of bread, incomprehensible and absurd. The suffering poor needed some release to get them through their toils. The most readily available release, perhaps the only available release, was the alcohol at the alehouse. The church would deny them even this slight pleasure in the name of a God who has given them the senses and organs of pleasure but forbidden their joyful use. The boy's innocent plea to his mother alludes to this critique of both religious doctrine and social conditions.

IV. THE FIRST STANZA

Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,
But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm;
Besides I can tell where I am use'd well,
Such usage in heaven will never do well.

It is worth noting that this stanza has an ABCC rhyme scheme, whereas all the rest of the stanzas have an AABB rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme is different in this first stanza because it introduces the poem's central theme as well as directly addresses the narrator's interlocutor, his mother. ABCC is a fairly uncommon rhyme scheme but it has no special significance or connotations with other ABCC rhyme scheme poems. A reason for this choice of rhyme scheme for the first stanza is that it allows it to stand on its own within the poem, to distinguish it from the rest and so to frame the rest of the poem. In Blake's illustration of the poem the space formed in between the shorter CC lines and the stanza below them is filled with a leaf from a

vine which descends from the poem's title. This visually frames the rest of the words. The boy's repetition of his call to his mother first calls attention to the fact that the narrator is young. This is a lyrical but also childish way to address someone. Using a separate rhyme scheme in this way enables Blake to anticipate and squash the various charges leveled against his poem by Galia Benziman (2007). Benziman ignores the rhyme scheme and the boy's interlocutor. Benziman's unsympathetic reading charges that this child narrator should be charged with either hypocrisy or dishonesty because of the undisguised hate his words display for the church. Why would the boy be concerned at all with his use in heaven when he only has earthly wants on his mind? Benziman also charges that the boy is impertinent and obtuse in simply announcing his opinions where they can have no practical effect rather than sharing his thoughts with the priest, the person who could make changes to the boy's church. These charges are unfair. This boy is addressing his mother. The reader is thus being made privy to an intimate discussion where the parties involved have more freedom of speech with each other than in most kinds of conversations. The idea that the boy should come out with his views in front of the priest is to make absurd assumptions about the (largely unwritten) rules of conversation between the classes, age groups and social status arrangements that limited the very possibility of conversation between street urchins and priests in London in the late eighteenth century. This is the land of *Oliver Twist*, where starving children can be beaten in public for asking an adult for food. The boy has charged the church with being a cold and forbidding place where his opinions and any kind of freedom of speech and expression are not welcome. The boy likes the alehouse precisely because it affords him the freedom to say and do things he knows to be impossible in church. His problem is that the taboos of the church, including those against him expressing himself, are rigorously enforced there. If he did have the freedom to simply talk to the priest about his views and expect a fair hearing he would not be complaining about the church in the first place.

Referring to his mother at all is perhaps an odd way to start a poem called "The Little Vagabond" because vagabonds are usually thought of as isolated figures. Homeless families were very common in the times when Blake lived in London (also all too common now) but their extremely vulnerable living arrangements mean that broken families were the norm amongst vagabonds and thus child vagabonds were, perhaps more often than not, orphans, or at least treated as if they were orphans. So the following lines of this stanza immediately, helpfully dispel the puzzle in alluding to this particular vagabond's living

arrangements, in a way which makes sense of both his fortune in having a mother to address and undermines accusations of impertinence from the boy. The boy first compares the “cold” church and the “healthy”, “pleasant” and “warm” alehouse. Perhaps the boy finds the, notoriously unhygienic, alehouse “healthy” in the sense that this is the only place where he can get something to eat and drink. The following line explains how that could be. “Besides I can tell where I am use'd well”. This line indicates that the boy is employed in the alehouse somehow. Perhaps he is a porter or waiter there. In this way perhaps he is “use'd” by the alehouse patrons. This might be the closest thing the boy has to a place to live. If his mother is also frequenting the alehouse but does not live there it is also very probable that she works there. Vagabonds do not have enough money to be frequent customers in an alehouse. If the boy's mother works around there she is either a barmaid or, more probably, a prostitute. However it is also possible that the boy thinks that he is used well in the alehouse in the simple sense that he feels he makes a good use of his body when he is drunk. That is, perhaps “use'd well” just means happy. There was no age limit for alcohol consumption in those times in London. Either way the boy recognizes that whatever happens to him in the alehouse, he likes it but thinks “such usage in heaven will never do well”. Heaven is not the place for whatever makes this boy happy. This is because the boy has heard things about heaven and all the angels and saints up there and the chaste, ascetic lives they have led to get there. The boy seems indifferent to this heaven the church has taught him about because the eternal bliss it promises is too remote from the only sort he knows, the earthy, ebullient sort. While vagabonds were not treated sympathetically in Blake's day and attracted lots of negative associations this boy should be read as having the directness of speech that comes with a greater exposure to the harshness of life and its necessities. In choosing a vagabond to be his spokesman in this poem Blake could be said to have attempted something similar to William Wordsworth in his Lyrical Ballads: “Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language... because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” (Wordsworth 2005, 3-4).

V. THE SECOND STANZA

In the second stanza the boy wishes the church has the comforts of his alehouse and promises that if the church were made more like the alehouse church attendance would not seem so odious, and indeed would be enjoyed.

But if at the Church they would give us some Ale.

And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale;

We'd sing and we'd pray, all the live-long day;

Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray,

The boy's reference to fire in connection with regaling souls in this poem has great significance for Blake's symbolism and Christian metaphor. It recalls Blake's association of fire with, energy, vibrancy, creativity and life. This poem has identified the flames with the fire of excitement inside the rambunctious boy when he thinks of his happiness. The picture at the bottom of the poem depicts an outdoor scene of several indistinct children and parents embracing each other and congregating around a white-hot fire in the middle. Perhaps the people in the picture are a family of vagrants warming themselves around the fire outside because they have no home in which to warm themselves. The association between fire and creativity in Blake is vividly brought to life in his most famous poem “The Tyger” in which the narrator uses the metaphor of the flames of the blacksmith's forge to speculate on the creation of the magnificent beast. The connection between fire and hell was exploited extensively in the major literary epics of the western cannon that influenced Blake the most; Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Blake adopts this imagery in his own depictions of hell. The complicated image on the title page of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* shows a woman leaning over from hellish flames on the left and embracing a man on dark heavenly clouds on the right whilst couples (possibly souls or angels) fly up from the flames to a vista at the top of the page of serpent-like trees where one couple promenades and a male serenades a reclining female. Interestingly this image shows movement, the movement of the flying couples, from bottom left to top right, which gives the feeling the creative energy of the picture is arising from the fires of the energy from hell. This work lists numerous so-called Proverbs of Hell, which reflect aphorisms that form mature versions of the infantile opinions in “The Little Vagabond”. I will cite a few examples and make connections here: “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.” Here Blake blames rules and their enforcement for the violence that creates crime and provokes the construction of prisons, as if they are built by a self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition organized religion makes sex into a taboo,

which relegates sexual fulfillment to the deviant culture of brothels. Prostitution is the result of constraints on free love. This is related to “The Little Vagabond” in the way that the boy sees enjoyment of the alehouse can only be had illicitly through the church’s taboos against self-expression. Another Proverb of Hell says: “As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys (8.21, 9.55, E36)”. In its demand for order at the expense of happiness the priest makes all enjoyment into a sin and this debases enjoyment so that it can only be had in seedy locations, like the alehouse. When laws and organized religion use violence to curb pleasure they pervert it.

Dante and Milton were attracted to using fire in their depictions of hell because fire is so frightening, painful and destructive and thus graphically displayed a means of agonizing torture, which they supposed the devils and sinners endured there. Blake’s use of fire was more inspired by Heraclitus’ idea of fire as creative energy. For Blake heaven and hell do not exist in a Manichean struggle of good versus evil, but instead are engaged in an eternal exchange of order and chaos, death and life, stasis and motion. It is important to note that while Christian imagery routinely associates the devil and hell with fire, the Bible associates God with fire a few times. In Hebrews 12:29 English Standard Version (ESV) directly identifies God with fire: “for our God is a consuming fire.” Blake, who knew the bible very well and deliberately set himself against the fear mongering ‘firebrand’ preachers was no doubt attracted to citations from the bible that subverted tropes of Christian popular consciousness.

Another Proverb of Hell states that it is an error deriving from readings of the bible “[t]hat God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies”, but on the contrary “Energy is Eternal Delight” (Plate 4, E34). The little vagabond denies that there is anything inherently sinful about his happiness and rather thinks it should be conceived as sacred.

It is perhaps worth noting that some churches did have fires in county parishes but these fires were reserved for the comfort of the local gentry. Therefore the boy’s plea in the second stanza hints at the class inequalities at church. Such unequal practices directly contravene many Bible passages but perhaps they most clearly run counter to words in the Epistle of James in the Bible:

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing

and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1, 1983, 1266, Or brothers and sisters; also verses 5, 14.)

Maybe the boy noticed the fire burning in church for someone else and wanted to see it enjoyed communally by all the parishioners. This would be more in keeping with Christian sentiments found in Bible passages like the one above.

VI. THE THIRD STANZA

Then the Parson might preach & drink & sing.

And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring:

And modest dame Lurch, who is always at Church,

Would not have bandy children nor fasting nor birch.

The first two lines of this stanza link “The Little Vagabond” with the poem from the Songs of Innocence “The School boy”. The first stanza of “The School Boy” exalts the freedom of the bird singing in its tree and the fourth stanza bemoans its loss when caged. The boy in that poem compares the free bird with the boy enjoying nature and the caged bird with the boy at school. Birds sing in spring in the manner that the little vagabond feels the parson should in church. Just below this stanza Blake has sketched a bird in flight.

The last two lines of the third stanza refer to the violence the church uses to enforce its taboos and degrade pleasure: Dame Lurch is the name of a schoolmistress that Blake has contrived for the poem. Her name is chosen apparently because it rhymes with the word “church”. Lurch is an English family name. It is not very common but it shares its spelling with the word “lurch”, a sort of sudden unbalanced movement, not a very complementary word, but it also rhymes with the word “birch”, which was commonly used as a cane for administering corporal punishment. The use of rhyme with these three words poetically links them together. Dame Lurch, the disciplinarian, is associated with both church doctrine and the violence of a kind of child abuse, which was called corporal punishment in the old days. Dame Lurch does not have a very nice name. It rhymes with an unpleasant tool and this is also linked to church. As a personification of the evils of the enforcement of the rules of religious orthodoxy dame Lurch is actually blamed for “bandy children”. Bandy here is Blake’s archaic word for disagreeable and unruly. It is related to the expression to bandy words back and forth as in to argue. The very measures that the church takes to make joy profane are the measures, which create

the unruly behaviour that prompts violent and oppressive disciplinary measures, like fasting or resort to the birch. It is perhaps strange that this little vagabond has access to a schoolmistress because the homeless were rarely given the opportunity to go to school but some churches did operate charity funded schools so it is not beyond the realms of plausibility that this boy is lucky or unlucky enough to attend one.

VII. THE FOURTH STANZA

And God like a father rejoicing to see,

His children as pleasant and happy as he:

Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the Barrel

But kiss him & give him both drink and apparel.

The fourth stanza introduces God to the boy's plea. He suggests that if church were a happy, lively and convivial place like the alehouse then God himself would be made into a happier being. God would no longer have any enemy in hell. Even the amity between God and the devil would be healed and there would only be friendship in the world. Now, while this stanza is slightly comical in the way it innocently projects theological insights onto the bold child, Blake is still using this stanza making a valuable and even religious point. The illustration at the top of the page is unusual in its depiction of a character with a halo, not many of Blake's pictures use the imagery of the halo. When Blake uses the halo it is always to depict God or an Angel. Here the aged, bearded figure engaged in a kneeling embrace with a child is, presumably, God himself whose love of the boy is either to be interpreted as the approval of his words or the love of his innocence. Either way it seems God is on the vagabond's side in this poem. But such a God, who is either a lover of mirth or lover of innocence, is not the God that Blake thought he found preached from the pulpits of organised religion.

As Blake's thought progressed his antinomian thinking increasingly came to identify organised religion, state and class rulers as not entirely to blame for the oppression and exploitation that he saw resulting from overbearing, dogmatic and intolerant rules and obligations. Certainly, he felt "the eighteenth-century church was lending supernatural backing to the authority of a law that amounted to nothing more than the will of an entrenched ruling class trying to secure its power more firmly" (Beer 2005, 96). Yet he felt that for their oppression to have continued for so long and even succeeded in perverting revolutionary ideals, they must be operating as accomplices to a force more deeply ingrained in the psyche of the human race. Only this way could they enjoy the

complicity of the toiling masses. Thoughts like this prompted Blake to create the most central character of his vast mythos Urizen. An important remark in the aforementioned *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* goes "men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast". Urizen's name comes from the expression "Your Horizon", as if to point to his dwelling place in the minds of his readers, our minds, and setting our horizons/boundaries for us. Urizen is another such deity. Urizen is a cold God. His tools/weapons were snow, ice and cold plagues. His cold was the church's cold in "The Little Vagabond" and he was a stern lawgiver.

[T]he 1794 First Book of Urizen....one of the darkest of the prophetic books and evidently written as a conscious pastiche of the biblical book of Genesis. Creation is seen here as the result not of a sublime process, translating darkness and chaos into beautiful forms, but of a deliberate turning away from the true state of eternity. That withdrawal is the result of a monumental failure of perception in which all faith in movement, development, even change itself, has been lost. (Beer 2005, 94)

This cruel and jealous God is nevertheless beguiling because he offers people a semblance of order in the frightening chaos of life. But "The Little Vagabond" only presages thoughts contained in Blake's Urizen mythos in an indirect way. From a reading of that poem alone it is not possible to get to the complex universe of Urizen, nevertheless Blake employs many ideas contained in "The Little Vagabond" in the prophetic books.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has explained the Blake poem "The Little Vagabond" in terms of the tension in the triad of the sacred, the profane and happiness as well as exploring how this poem has influenced Blake's prophetic books. It was argued that the tension in the aforementioned triad is created by the church in the way it banishes happiness to the world of the profane. Blake has used the little vagabond as a spokesman for happiness and thus an advocate for the sacredness of what the church has designated profane. This thought has been shown to influence Blake's prophetic books in myriad ways, most importantly in the way Blake has developed the character of Urizen as the personification of a social psychological complex, a sickness embedded in ideology.

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