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The Concrete Utopia of Poetry: Blake's "A Poison Tree"

Preliminaries

Seldom does the question of lyric and society get beyond "extra-textual" considerations, principally the role of social and political ideas in a poet's biographical and intellectual development or in the poetry's thematic content. Marxist criticism mirrors this deficit by relegating poetry to the margins of its own investigations of social and aesthetic experience. William Blake's poetry encourages us to counter the habits of Marxist and non-Marxist criticism alike by recognizing that society and politics shape the very project of a poet's work and the inner dynamics of poetic language itself, its processes of figuration, its status as a linguistic act, its forms and techniques, its effects within the reading process.

Blake was a poet of the volatile decades of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, writing at the very point when the democratic revolutions were being institutionalized as the class rule of the bourgeoisie. The claims of freedom and liberation that gave impetus to poets and novelists in this period were rapidly coming up against the necessity of establishing the new economic order of capitalism. Blake's vital contribution to our cultural heritage lies in the response that his poetry made to this changing relation of art to the evolution of bourgeois society. He was also a poet who himself constantly reflected on the political and historical possibilities of the imagination.

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The Concrete Utopia of Poetry

For Blake, poetry is the active imposing of imagination or fantasy in the struggles against dominant values and institutions. Casting the poet in the double role of visionary and voice of condemnation, he attributed both a utopian and a negative power to poetic language.

It is this interplay of the utopian and the negative, of imagination and critique, that makes Blake's poetry resonate with the social and aesthetic theories of thinkers like Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and T. W. Adorno. In this paper, I will test some broad perspectives on art that have come from this tradition of "critical Marxism" against a reading of a poem from the *Songs of Experience*. The reading owes as much to hermeneutics and poststructuralism as it does to the aesthetic writings of the Frankfurt School.¹

From Bloch I have taken the phrase "concrete utopia." Bloch meant by this that utopian possibilities are latent in the freedom and self-organization which social groups and classes possess, intermittently and fragmentedly, in their everyday existence, political experiences, myths, and artistic endeavors.² These latent tendencies have as their heritage all the unfinished or abortive efforts in history to extend justice and happiness. The heritage of utopia is thus a discontinuous history, one that must be constructed from cultural traditions and the popular struggles and revolts of the past. The question we can draw from Bloch's reflections is this: *In what ways is poetry a bearer of utopian hope, of this historical latency which is at once within and beyond society?*

From Marcuse I will borrow a thesis about art and literature that he advanced in his last published work, *The Aesthetic Dimension*: "The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions."³ The phrase "terminates in the emergence of" suggests, first, that art is utopian insofar as it anticipates new orders of reason and sensibility that can be secured only through political action and social transformation, and, second, that this utopian anticipation is nonetheless concrete insofar

1. The figures associated with the Frankfurt School have indeed produced the most important criticism of poetry that exists in the Marxist tradition. See, in particular, Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London, 1973); and Theodor W. Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," *Telos*, 20 (Summer 1974), 56-71.

2. See Ernst Bloch, "Karl Marx and Humanity: The Material of Hope" and "Upright Carriage, Concrete Utopia," in *On Karl Marx* (New York, 1971), pp. 16-45 and 159-73 respectively.

3. See Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston, 1978), p. 7.

as it stems from what is realized aesthetically in the artwork. Marcuse's thesis leads to a second question about lyric and society: *How does the "inner logic" of the poem at the same time manifest a counterlogic against the constraining interactions organized by society?*

While Bloch and Marcuse help to establish the aims of interpretation and to frame the questions that a socially critical study of poetry needs to address, their own aesthetic reflections rest on suppositions open to challenge from many directions in the recent theory of interpretation and art. Bloch maintains that great artworks are part ideology, part authentic utopia. The first task of analysis is to dissolve the ideological shell of the work by exposing the ways it serves particular rather than general interests and legitimates the forms of domination prevalent in its own society; once this ideological shell is dissolved, the utopian kernel of the work is supposed to shine through, a radiant core of meanings and images expressing the strivings and hopes of humanity. Bloch's conception of interpretation shares with the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer the insight that cultural meanings come forward only from historically situated works and are appropriated only in historically situated contexts, but he nevertheless tends to view the *valid* meanings of culture as a semantic storehouse that preserves itself intact across historical periods and epochs. Hence the questionable notion that interpretation can with assurance separate the valid and true aspect of a work from its ideological and false aspect. Contemporary criticism, in the wake of Heidegger and more recently of poststructuralist and deconstructive criticism, raises an inescapable problem concerning our own reception of the art and literature of the past, namely, that there is no ground of meaning or foothold in truth on the basis of which we can with certainty extract the valid significations of a work.

Marcuse's aesthetic reflections accentuate the unity of form. Throughout his work he transcribes into socially critical terms the aesthetic experience that was the basis of bourgeois aesthetics since Schiller. Marcuse attributes the utopian and negative power of art to the sharp contrast that individuals experience between the unity or harmony they apprehend in the artwork and the disharmony and conflict that characterize the social relations they encounter in everyday life. The notion of the artwork's formal harmony has been contested by an array of contemporary theories of the signifying and formal dynamics of literary texts. The transaction between writing and reading, between the poetic text and its reception, can no longer, I believe, be fruitfully described as the subject's inward appropriation of an outwardly realized harmony of sensuous and symbolic elements.

Without undertaking to solve the problem that hermeneutics and poststructuralism pose for the aesthetic thinking of critical Marxism, I have sketched the relevant problems in order to clarify the background of my reading of Blake. For my concern is to transpose the problem of lyric and society and of the negative-utopian power of poetry into a question of poetic language, of poetry as a language practice, and the interaction of writing and reading.

The reading I will present of Blake's "A Poison Tree" is guided by three sets of propositions intended to sharpen this dialogue between critical social theory and contemporary literary theory:

(1) The social dialectic of art does not come from the conflict between a divided reality and a unified work, but rather takes the form of a conflict *within* the work. By the same token, the social counterlogic that a poem manifests results from the internal contradictoriness of the poem as *text*, not from the wholeness of the poem as *beautiful appearance*. Literature is a practice that acts upon language. The text enters into a complex but determinate relation with the actual social world because language is the very ground of social interaction. The utopian power of poetry stems from its concrete connections, as a language practice, to the social and political realities of its moment rather than from any capacity to shed those connections or set itself above them.

(2) Poetic language solicits, incites, calls for a reading, a reading which at once lets the effects of poetic condensation erupt across the poem and ties those effects to the situation or act of writing itself. Reading always entails this double movement—receptivity to a language that is multivalent and overdetermined and moments of decision in which the multivalence and overdetermination are reconnected to the place or situation from which the poem has arisen. It will be my position that this site of the poem's genesis is social. An analogy might be made between the reading of poetry and psychoanalytic interpretation. The analyst listens with what Freud called a suspended or floating attention in order to hear what reverberates within the subject's discourse and its silences; on the other side of the dialogue, the subject is pressed toward what Lacan called the "moment to conclude," where he or she feels the pressure of the unconscious and integrates it into his or her actual discourse with the analyst, allowing the unconscious to interrupt the false "conclusions" that up to then have resisted it. The two sides of reading poetry are a dialectic of this kind between floating attention and the moment-to-conclude. The reader, however, is more like the patient than the analyst, in that interpretations, usually in the name of their own co-

herence, tend to resist the effects of the poetic text. This is not to argue for the indefinite postponement of interpretive decisions. Such decisions always take place, even when they are masked as in the rhetoric of deconstructive criticism. Every interpretive moment-to-conclude links the interpretation and the text as the two historically—and socially—situated sites of aesthetic experience.

(3) The transaction between writing and reading is thus an encounter between the social situation of literary production and the social situation of literary reception. The problem of ideology is best focused on this encounter and transaction. Art and literature become enmeshed in the vital ideological struggles of the present through the conflict of interpretations, the contesting efforts to understand the texts of the cultural heritage concretely and reflectively. Aesthetic experience is not a given but is *formed* in the interplay of writing and reading. The cultural heritage is not a given but is *constructed*. This heritage becomes charged with significance for the present through the conflict of interpretations.

“A Poison Tree”

Let us first quote the poem in its entirety:

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretchd beneath the tree.

Much depends on the relation of the first stanza to the rest of the poem as it unfolds what happened to the wrath that was not told to

the foe. Every time one reads the poem, I believe, the first stanza has the force of a moral statement. The past tense establishes the twin perspective of Blake's action *then* and his judgment *now*. The danger or unhappiness of a wrath that grows, as against a wrath that ends, establishes a set of values or preferences that virtually goes without saying. And all of this is then confirmed in the account of the ensuing anguish that he experienced and the harm he brought on his foe. The poem reads as a kind of confessional utterance in which Blake the speaker shares with the reader a reflective judgment on the actions of Blake in the past, anchored in the view that telling one's wrath is healthy and not telling it is harmful and even self-destructive.

Another extreme, however, emerges against this reading and contradicts its every detail. The last two lines of the poem, breaking the consistent past tense of the rest, can be taken at face value: "In the morning glad I see / My foe outstretchd beneath the tree." A transcendent joy! He has gotten his satisfaction, and his wrath has finally been expressed, yielding the sheer delight of seeing an enemy destroyed. One might try to avert this reading by arguing that the phrase "glad I see" is not really in the present tense, but rather is an elliptical construction for something like "glad I was to see." But the amoral reading of the poem draws on other aspects of its total structure. First of all, there are two oppositions in the first stanza, not only telling as against not telling one's wrath, but also the difference between friend and foe, suggesting that there is no undestructive means of expressing wrath toward a foe but that it must be enacted. Secondly, the poem's words and syntax are not particularly charged with affective connotations; the tone is flat, and this second reading leaves it so by construing the first stanza not as a moral statement but as a statement of fact: wrath can be expressed and immediately dissipated with a friend, but not with a foe. Indeed, one can take this reading to its logical conclusion and say that the poem as a whole, far from being a confessional utterance, is more like a set of instructions on how to do in an enemy and feel relief, even joy.

Either of these readings can account for itself, bringing the various details of the poem into line. In this sense, the poem generates both readings. However, neither reading can account for the possibility of the other, except to declare that it is the product of misreading; they could only accuse one another of naive moralism and amorality respectively. Nor, on the other hand, is it adequate to leave off with these results and declare that the poem is formally or logically undecidable, a pure oscillation between two mutually exclusive meanings. For this undecidability also represents two contrary experiential situations, remorse and remorselessness, condemnation and coldness,

constituting an ethical impasse that the reading of the poem need not yet accept, that is, decide to affirm.

The very flatness of the poem's tone allows each reading to invest the poem with the affects appropriate to it. In the first reading, the poem acquires the solemn awe of witnessing an action that the speaker himself can hardly believe he committed. The second reading, on the other hand, takes the speaker's final joy at face value and, in turn, invests the atonal surface of the poem with the connotation of coldness. But the conjoining of coldness and joy calls into question the joy itself. The tone becomes the symptom of a joy that is derived from an altogether different emotion, namely, the wrath that has had to wend its way through elaborate detours in order to manifest itself in the fatal deception of the foe. The conceit which gives the poem its title is the image of this circuitous transformation of wrath into fear, duplicity, and finally deception:

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.

Without making reference to any moral judgment against duplicity and deception, we discover in the image of the watering and sunning of the wrath (tree) that there opened within the subject a split between his inner feeling (fear) and his outward show of fraternity (smiles, soft deceitful wiles), which from that moment on precludes any direct connection between emotion and action. This distortion of experience is not subject to a moral condemnation in the sense of a judgment against the speaker himself, for he had made no choice which could be judged. He has suffered the effects of an anger that cannot immediately express and resolve itself.

The conceit of the poison tree,⁴ its simplicity and completeness extending over the last three stanzas as a whole, nonetheless has at its center an indeterminate element—the "apple bright." All the other single elements of the image equating untold wrath with a tree easily

4. If one were immediately to draw the meaning of the image from its biblical source to supply what is missing in the conceit, the poem could be construed as a satire of the Eden myth. God would become the speaker, humankind the foe ensnared by the temptation of something enviable.

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find their appropriate equivalents. Within the logic of the conceit, the image of the apple is only vaguely motivated, as by the idea that it is the "fruit" of his wrath. The meaning of "apple bright" is otherwise unspecifiable from the standpoint of the conceit itself. It could be anything—an object, a situation, a person—so long as it fulfilled one general condition: that it be, in the eyes of the foe, an *enviable possession* of the speaker's. Here indeterminacy is an extreme instance of metaphorical condensation. A thousand and one narratives could be told which revolved around an episode in which a character's enemy, thinking he is about to deprive the protagonist of a valued possession, falls to his own ruin:

And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;

These lines resist the poem's moral reading more than any other passage, for they show that this foe could be counted on to try to rob the subject of his possession. Blake had calculated exactly what his foe's reactions and actions would be, having imputed to the other the same destructive antagonism that he had discovered within himself. This equality between protagonist and antagonist now causes the amoral reading to lose its force. The apparent difference between protagonist and antagonist has been dissolved into their essential identity with each other.

At this point, the indeterminacy of the apple and the prototypical nature of the narrative yield a significance that exceeds the grasp of either the moral or the amoral reading. The poem's story is abstract, but not in the sense that it *is* an abstraction. Rather, it unveils the form of abstraction that is historically specific to capitalist society. The prototype narrative and the image of the "apple bright" are like a vortex that pulls everything into itself. Anything could be the enviable possession around which the deadly struggle between Blake and the foe revolves. Possessiveness is not merely an element of their antagonism but its cause; possessiveness pre-forms, socially, their relation to one another as a relation of equality and envy, their mirroring of one another being so complete that the protagonist need only calculatively impute his own aims and motives to the other in order to make his scheme a success. The conditions of the central image-narrative, in other words, are in fact met only in the social conditions of capitalism,

where possessive individualism is but the ideological and characterological manifestation of a practice of exchange in which every, that is, *any* object or situation or person is susceptible to an economic designation of value which is then the same for all individuals and becomes something to be possessed. Only under these conditions does the equality of individuals necessarily take the form of antagonism between individuals. Envy, a term borrowed from the ethics of pre-capitalist societies, is but a name for the fundamental law of interactions in capitalist society as a whole.

The unusual power of this simple poem derives from the play of the image of the "apple bright," which is at once the poem's most abstractly indeterminate and its most concretely, socially determined image. The figurative movement of the image has three distinct moments. First, as an element in the conceit, the "apple bright" stands for the *effect of unexpressed wrath*, a result arrived at in the course of the narrated events. Second, and to the contrary, as a metaphor of the social process of abstraction that forms the very interrelation and interactions of individuals, the "apple bright" stands for the *cause of the antagonism* from which the narrative originated. The conceit substitutes effect for cause. The "apple bright" is thus, at the third moment of its figuration, the trope called a metalepsis. The metalepsis here takes the form of a contradiction between *what is narrated* and *the narrative* itself, for we have discovered the social cause of the poem's narrative in the image that initially stood for the psychological effect of what was narrated, namely, the speaker's unexpressed wrath. In order to have followed this figurative swerve in the poem's language, we have made a break with the two readings, the moral and the amoral, that the text has engendered.

In "A Poison Tree," the critique of bourgeois society is expressed not thematically but in the very articulation of the text and in the dynamic that it provokes. Linguistic theory has distinguished between a text's *énoncé* ("statement") and its *énonciation* ("utterance"), that is, between what is said and the saying of it. In our context, Roman Jakobson's original terminology suffices, distinguishing the *narrated event* and the *speech event*. At the level of the narrated event of "A Poison Tree," an unexpressed wrath results in the destruction of an antagonist by ensnaring him with an enviable possession. The speech event of the poem, I am urging, should be grasped in social and indeed political terms. The text has generated two conflicting and irreconcilable readings, each of which apprehends the poem's status as speech event in a particular way, as a confession or moral judgment on the one hand, and as a cold statement of fact or scenario for

destructive action on the other. Neither of these readings can be a true understanding of the text, because neither can explain or cancel the other. Our interpretation has been forced beyond the moral and the amoral reading. The poem must rather be interpreted in terms of its generation of these two partial, blind readings. It generates these readings because they correspond to the two poles of ethical consciousness through which individuals actually live the social relations of capitalist society. The moral reading corresponds to a false morality of goodwill and honesty—which would have been, by the way, the simple object of a satire had Blake kept the poem's notebook title: "Christian Forebearance"! The amoral reading, on the other hand, corresponds to that form of individualism in which individuals, having been made interchangeable with one another, are deprived of the very individuality in the name of which they act.

The dialectic of the text consists in imposing the moral and the amoral readings, which represent the two poles of ethical experience in bourgeois society, and then forcing these two readings back to the figure of the "apple bright" in order for the reader to understand the poem. Both readings are doomed to fail, since they take the "apple bright" as the effect of wrath rather than as the social cause of the antagonism between individuals. The metalepsis, in breaking our interpretation from the two readings, gives form—or figure—to the difference between this act of poetic speech and the lived ethics of bourgeois society.

Let me explain this formulation on poetic form by contrasting the results of the analysis with the position that Marcuse held. For Marcuse, aesthetic experience marks the difference between the real and the possible by presenting an image or appearance whose completeness separates it from the existing conditions and prevalent experiences of social life. Art is sublimation in the sense that it transforms the real into the beautiful appearance; accompanying this aesthetic sublimation, Marcuse argues, is a process of desublimation that occurs in aesthetic perception: "The transcendence of immediate reality shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: the rebirth of rebellious subjectivity. Thus, on the basis of aesthetic sublimation, a *desublimation* takes place in the perceptions of individuals—in their feelings, judgments, thoughts; an invalidation of dominant norms, needs, and values."⁵ Now, Blake's "A Poison Tree" does indeed invalidate dominant forms of experience and of ethical consciousness, those which are

5. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 7–8.

embedded in the socially organized practices and interactions of bourgeois society. But the poem accomplishes this not by means of the beautiful appearance of aesthetic wholeness but rather in the contradiction within the text between the readings it generates and its genesis of the readings. The "dominant norms, needs, and values" the poem negates are as integral to the inner workings of the text as they are inherent in actual social life. What is felt, thought, judged within the historical forms of ethical consciousness that the bourgeois subject must live are themselves a part of the poem's aesthetic dimension, here as the dynamic of the readings which corresponds to the polarity in that ethical consciousness. It is not the unity but the active division of the text which invalidates these social-ethical forms.

So, too, the utopian power of the poem lies not in its protection of an aesthetic appearance of wholeness but in its concrete act of speaking. The concreteness of utopia does not, however, as Bloch would have it, reside in the semantic storehouse of images of happiness and freedom. The utopian is more thoroughly tied to the negative. The poem announces the necessity of an ethical consciousness that cannot yet be lived or represented, but it does so in the fracture between the *énoncé* and *énonciation*. The utopian dimension of the poem is enacted in a poetic speaking which manifests the struggle between the social conditions of the poet's speech and the latent possibilities of speech. The movement of figuration, through the three moments of the trope of the "apple bright," invalidates the two readings capable of giving the narrated event (*énoncé*) and the conceit (tree=wrath) consistency and in this way negates those forms of ethical experience that can be lived in the social context of the poem. What the poem says is negated in the saying of it. What I have called poetic form or figure is here just this difference between *énoncé* and *énonciation*, an enactment of the divergence between the real and the possible, the lived and the utopian. "A Poison Tree" points toward a future in which its own story and its mode of telling would no longer be necessary.

The inner logic of Blake's writing is not that of a cultural monument separated from time and change. By the same token, a historicist reading of Blake, intent only on "placing" him "in his own time," would forget that the future is an indispensable dimension of Blake's poetic dialogue with time and history. The socially critical construction of the cultural heritage eschews both the idea that art is above history and the idea that art is merely bound to its own time. When Marx contrasted the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century with the proletarian revolutions of the nineteenth century, he saw in each a specific disharmony of form and content:

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The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase goes beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.⁶

Blake stands between the realities of the bourgeois revolutions and the possibilities of socialist revolution. Historically, he is a poet of the American and French Revolutions. Unlike the revolutions that stirred his imagination, his poetic practice does not stop short of the goal, rigidifying the forms of freedom and destroying the contents of freedom. Blake was *not* of his time. His poetry demanded a future which the bourgeois revolutions had to resist. I conclude with this juxtaposition of Blake and Marx, of the politics of poetry and the poetics of history, not in order to place Blake within Marx's frame of reference but to situate Marx within a political and cultural process that includes, as a productive and prophetic moment, the poetry of Blake. This becomes all the more necessary in our own historical moment. What for Blake was a future that promised to free him from his present has disappeared within the fabric of our own political and cultural inheritance. We look back at Blake across a wide gap, in that we live a reality that exists because the proletarian revolutions of the nineteenth century did not succeed. We are more the heirs of Blake's restraining reality than of his imagined future. Put another way, his poetry still speaks to us because we have not yet been freed to hear it.

6. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), p. 18.