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The Marriage of Contraries in "To Tirzah"

by THOMAS F. BERNINGHAUSEN

OF ALL the poems in Songs of Innocence and of Experience it is perhaps "To Tirzah" that has caused critics most difficulty. Geoffrey Keynes labels the poem "obscure," but the question remains as to whether this obscurity is intrinsic to the poem or a product of misguided interpretive strategies. Much of the poem's supposed obscurity is due to a misconception about the lyric genre. The notion that a lyric gives direct expression to "the poet's thought or feeling" has been widely attacked in Blake criticism, but as Leopold Damrosch, Jr., comments, "such assumptions die hard." While this theory is generally misleading as an approach to the lyrics of "Songs," the depth of irony and allusion in "To Tirzah" renders the assumption of "direct expression" especially absurd. Added nearly ten years after the first edition of "Songs," "To Tirzah" is a bridge between Blake's early, more direct style and the later style which depends heavily on symbolism and mythology. Nonetheless, though it is a late addition to "Songs," "To Tirzah" is consistent with the collection as a whole. In fact, to the extent that "Songs" forms a coherent whole, I suggest that "To Tirzah," when properly read, becomes a gloss on the collection.

A correct understanding of "To Tirzah" and its role in "Songs" hinges on consideration of its allusions and identification of its persona. Ultimately the persona is the jaded youth lying in the arms of the two women of the illustration. His questioning of his connection to his mother, Tirzah, has an answer in the allusions of the poem.

Before moving to a reading of "To Tirzah," it is useful to consider a sampling of the prevailing criticism. The two most interesting reactions come from E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and David Erdman. Both interpreters see significance in Blake's placement of "To Tirzah" near the end of "Experience." (In four copies it terminates the collection; in seven others it is third from the end.)
Blake, "To Tirzah," from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy C. Library of Congress.
In *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake*, Hirsch offers this view:

Blake's addition of "To Tirzah" to the "Songs of Experience" is to be explained as an act of penitential self-correction. It is a repudiation, ... of the false vegetated tongue that had celebrated the natural world. ... It stands to "Experience" as "Experience" stands to "Innocence." ... When Blake composed the poem and placed it at the end of "Songs," he implied a sweeping repudiation of all the previous poems of "Experience." 8

Though "To Tirzah" does in a sense repudiate "Experience," there is, as we shall see later on, an underlying irony in the poem's allusions which runs contrary to this interpretation. Nearer to the point are the remarks of David Erdman. Taking the final three poems of "Experience" as a unit, he says that they "imply an apocalyptic metamorphosis at the end of a series of emblems, beyond Innocence and Experience." Though Erdman does not pay close attention to the poem's allusions, I believe that they reinforce his reading. The notion of "apocalyptic metamorphosis"9 is especially appropriate for the speaker of "To Tirzah." He must escape from the prostrate position depicted in the illustration through some movement beyond "Experience," but the movement is one of metamorphosis, not of simple repudiation as suggested by Hirsch.

The identity of the persona has been much debated. Some critics believe that the speaker of the poem is the Bard of Experience. 10 Though the Bard is an important figure in "Experience," the text does not imply a direct association between the Bard and the persona of "To Tirzah." Nor is the speaker Blake, as is implied by reading the lyric as a "direct" expression of the poet.11 Hirsch, for instance, seems to read the speaker's repudiation of all things earthly as Blake's repudiation of "Experience." This assumption is necessarily blind to the ironic countercurrents of the poem's allusions.12 The illustration gives credence to a much more obvious identification of the speaker with the young man. It is he who addresses the ultimate question to his mother, Tirzah.

As a first reading, let us look at "To Tirzah" from the perspective of the speaker. In the first lines, the young man summarizes the path to redemption.

**Whate'er is Born of Mortal Birth,**
**Must be consumed with the Earth**
**To rise from Generation free:**13

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11. This association is implied by many critics. Bloom is explicit about the relationship in *Blake's Apocalypse* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1963), p. 132): "Blake's own songs, in which he allows himself a full Reprobate awareness, are 'Holy Thursday,' 'Ah! Sunflower,' 'London,' 'The Human Abstract,' and the defiant 'To Tirzah.' "
12. D. G. Gillham is one of the few critics sensitive to Blake's irony in "To Tirzah." His comments in *Blake's Contrary States: The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as Dramatic Poems give a sense of the disparity between Blake and the speaker of "To Tirzah": "The idea of resurrection and an after life may encourage any one of a great variety of attitudes 'taken towards' life itself. Life is often looked upon as a period of probation for heaven. The speaker in "To Tirzah" seems to look upon it as a nuisance to be got out of the way, and rests on the assurance that Christ has ensured his passage to heaven. This is obviously not a trust placed in Christ but rather a stupid form of conceit which does not even suppose probation necessary" (p. 235).
The implication is that life on earth is futile. He concludes with the question, “Then what have I to do with thee?” In Hirsch’s terms, the young man repudiates “the natural world.” Seeing life on earth as both painful and meaningless, he rejects his mother, the person who brought him into this world. He would prefer to ignore all the affairs of this world, concerning himself solely with redemption.

In the second stanza the speaker reviews the fall of man and the succeeding events that “changed Death into Sleep.”

The Sexes sprung from Shame & Pride
Blowd in the morn; in evening died
But Mercy changd Death into Sleep;
The Sexes rose to work & weep.

In the next six lines the young man grows bolder and he openly accuses Tirzah of having betrayed him.

Thou Mother of my Mortal part,
With cruelty didst mould my Heart.
And with false self-decieving tears,
Didst bind my Nostrils Eyes & Ears.

Didst close my Tongue in senseless Clay
And me to Mortal Life betray:

He claims that her birth pangs gave rise to “false self-decieving tears.” She gave him life, but it is a life of pain, a life that must necessarily end in death. Again, he repudiates life on earth and its attendant pains. He prefers rather to concentrate on redemption, saying next, “The Death of Jesus set me free.” The speaker ends the poem with the question which now can only be seen as rhetorical. He concludes, “Then what have I to do with thee?”—clearly implying that he need have nothing to do with Tirzah.

If we identify the young man’s attitude with that of Blake, then we are forced into an interpretation like that of Hirsch. The problem here is that, while for the young man the question is rhetorical, for the reader it need not be. Although the speaker of the poem has already made up his mind on the issue, the poem itself invites the reader to consider the question seriously. What is the relationship between generation/life on earth given by his mother Tirzah and redemption/life in heaven given by Jesus? The young man answers these questions by rejecting his mother and the earthly existence that she has given him. Blake, I believe, suggests another resolution through the poem’s allusions.

The poem’s title is itself a biblical allusion. Keynes comments that “the mother’s name, Tirzah, is derived from ‘The Song of Solomon’ (6.4), and signifies physical beauty, that is, sex.”

14. Keynes, Songs, Pl. 52.
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27.1; 26.11; Josh. 17.3), I think that Keynes’ assertion is more to the point, especially because it connects “To Tirzah” with “The Song of Solomon.”

“The Song of Solomon” is “a collection of about twenty-five lyric poems of human love and courtship as would be appropriately sung at weddings.”16 Taking the poem’s title from this book of the Bible, Blake initiates a marriage theme, which places Tirzah in a much different light from that suggested by the speaker. In “To Tirzah,” the young man feels betrayed; he scorns his mother Tirzah and his life on earth. On the other hand, “The Song of Solomon” revels in the pleasures of earthly existence. It is a celebration of regeneration, and in this sense it casts Tirzah in a positive light. The two ways of seeing Tirzah give some indication of the contrary views that are to be found just beneath the surface of the poem. Moreover, the passage from “The Song of Solomon” goes further in establishing these oppositions.

In the passage from “The Song of Solomon” we hear a young man speaking to his lover: “Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners.” There are several oppositions that we can draw from this line. First of all, this persona is praising his lover, seeing that as she is like Tirzah, she is good. The speaker, in his concern for sensual, earthly existence, is a mirror image of the speaker in “To Tirzah.” He offers the reader an alternate response to the question posed in “To Tirzah.” A second opposition can be seen in the description of the lover. The young man sees in her both beauty and terror. This pair of qualities is reminiscent of the theme of productive contraries that Blake developed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In fact, while “To Tirzah” has been seen as a radical shift in view for Blake,17 I think that what he read in “The Song of Solomon” inspired an expression of this older theme. The full title of the “Songs” is *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. What the poet Blake intended in “To Tirzah” was a convergence, a marriage of contrary elements. Though the persona remains ignorant of the need for convergence, the poet is fully aware of this need. Erdman’s “apocalyptic metamorphosis” is in effect a balancing of contrary states. This is borne out in a final opposition from the “Song of Solomon” quotation.

At the heart of the quotation we find parallel images of Tirzah and

15. Northrop Frye bases his interpretation of “To Tirzah” largely on the apparent allusion to Tirzah, daughter of Zelophehad. In *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* ([Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947], p. 127), he gives this analysis: “More important than any of these (Eve, Delilah, Pandora, etc.) in Blake’s symbolism are those five curious “daughters of Zelophehad” who wander in and out of Hexateuch looking for a separate female inheritance. One of these is named Tirzah, also the name of an Israelite capital of the Ten Tribes, and therefore a symbol of opposition to Jerusalem, the City of God. This Tirzah is associated with a beautiful woman in the Song of Songs. The five daughters represent the five senses and imply the passive dependence on sense experience which is symbolized in our being born from a mother. This is the meaning of the little poem ‘To Tirzah’ which ends the ‘Songs of Experience.’ ” The suggestion that the five sisters are symbols for the five senses does not seem to be borne out in any explicit fashion by “To Tirzah,” although the notion of a “separate female inheritance” is interesting. At the core of “To Tirzah” is a separation of the sexes which is underscored by this allusion. On the whole, however, it seems that the reference to “The Song of Solomon” is of greater significance.


Jerusalem. In the coincidence of this pair we see a balance of opposing elements. Tirzah was a capital of the ten tribes during the reign of Baasha, approximately 900-871 B.C. Jerusalem, on the other hand, would have been seen by Blake as the seat of Christendom. In Tirzah we have an emblem of the Old Testament, a view of life as life on earth. In Jerusalem we have an emblem of the New Testament, a view of life that is centered on the afterlife. While these two views are kept apart by the young man in “To Tirzah,” Blake, the poet and illustrator, actually draws them together, thereby creating a balance of contrary forces. In the poet’s union lies the solution to the question posed by the speaker of “To Tirzah.”

As with the allusion in the title, the illustration for “To Tirzah” also depicts the meeting of contraries. At the center of the illustration is the young man. He is supported on the left by two women, while on the right an old man holds a pitcher over him. All four figures are underneath the branch of an apple tree. On the branch there are seven yellow apples. Keynes argues that the two women represent mother-love and sex-love. This seems to be a reasonable interpretation, one in which the two figures can be seen as aspects of Tirzah. The figure in red, with her hair tied back, represents the mother who brought the young man into this world. The younger woman in gold, with her free flowing hair, is the beloved. Excluding the man on the right, the scene is an illustration from “The Song of Solomon” (8.5). There a young woman says to her lover, “I raised thee up under the apple tree: there thy mother brought thee forth: there she brought thee forth that bare thee.” The two women of the illustration, who have been identified by the quotation as the young man’s wife and his mother, offer him physical support; they bare him up “under the apple tree.” They support the physical, mortal self and are thus identified with the Old Testament view of life as life on earth.

The old man shown on the right is a counterbalance to the women. If nothing else, we can see that this balancing is graphically represented in the symmetrical placement of the figures. As to the identity of the old man, we are given a clue by the printing on his gown. The line reads, “It is raised a Spiritual Body.” This quotation, from 1 Corinthians (15.44), reveals that the old man is a representative of the spiritual life. He offers the spiritual support which the speaker of “To Tirzah” desires. The old man may be taken to be St.
Paul, the author of Corinthians, and Keynes offers the suggestion that the pitcher contains "the water of life"22 spoken of in Revelations (21.6). In the opposing figures that stand over the young man we see a pairing not unlike that of the cities, Tirzah and Jerusalem. The speaker of "To Tirzah" is clearly interested in the support offered by St. Paul. Yet, as Zachary Leader suggests in Reading Blake's Songs, the old man does not represent the final answer to the young man's question.23 He compares the old man to the father of Ona in "A Little Girl Lost." There we read of Ona's experience:

To her father white
Came the maiden bright:
But his loving look,
Like the holy book,
All her tender limbs with terror shook.24

The whiteness, the austerity of the two old men does not make for a very Blakean image of redemption. Leader's comparison seems apt; we are not meant to see the Pauline figure as sufficient to the task of leading the young man to redemption. The women, if they are taken as representing earthly existence, are also unable to provide a means to redemption. I think that the two forces, insufficient separately, must be brought together.25 Only through this marriage of contraries is the progression from "Innocence," through "Experience," to transcendence possible. To solidify this notion Blake provides a final allusion.

In the final two lines of the poem the speaker remarks, "The Death of Jesus set me free," and then concludes with the question from the first stanza, "Then what have I to do with thee?" The question comes from St. John's gospel. The words are spoken by Jesus to Mary during the wedding at Cana. Blake purposefully draws on this passage aligning the wedding at Cana with the reference to "The Song of Solomon," another celebration of human love and the regeneration of physical existence. Our attitude towards Tirzah and the earthly existence she represents is to be shaped by Jesus' response to the wed-

22. Keynes, Songs, Pl. 52.
23. Leader, Songs, p. 199.
24. Keynes, Songs, Pl. 51.
25. Erdman includes in The Illuminated Blake (p. 388) a plate from copies E, C, and D which was replaced in other copies by "To Tirzah." The illustration is described by Keynes and Raine as "a majestic androgynous figure upborne by six winged cherubs." Interestingly Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant see in line five of "To Tirzah," "The Sexes sprung from Shame & Pride," an allusion to a pre-fall androgynous state. In Blake's Poetry and Designs (Norton Critical Edition [New York: Norton, 1949], p. 58) they supply this note: "In Platonic myth, the change from a primordial androgynous state to one of sexual distinction is an aspect of the fall." Much has been made of the status of androgyiny in Blake, but without going deeply into that controversy I think that we can see a correlation between "To Tirzah" and the plate which it replaced. Reading the androgynous figure symbolically, we see a union of the male and female natures depicted in "To Tirzah." "To Tirzah" argues for a wedding of the contrary states represented by the women on the left and the old man on the right. The original illustration depicts this union and the resultant rising to heaven.

Another point of interest is the correlation between the seven apples of "To Tirzah" with the seven figures in the earlier illustration. The number seven has many meanings, but in this context I think that it is to be seen as a symbol of apocalypse. This usage is recurrent in Revelations. For instance, "And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" (21.9). As with the interaction of Jesus and Mary at Cana, John's reporting of the apocalyptic marriage of Jesus and Jerusalem is a powerful analogy for the proper relationship between the young man and the composite mother/wife figure, Tirzah.
At first Jesus responds harshly to Mary’s request. He and the speaker of “To Tirzah” are momentarily joined in the question, “what have I to do with thee?” but the final answer to the question is to be seen in Jesus’ first miracle. By relenting and turning the water into wine, by performing his first miracle in support of a wedding celebration, the bond between the spiritual world and the physical world is confirmed.

The young man of “To Tirzah” tries to separate the spiritual from the physical, and thus he rejects Tirzah; but in Jesus’ act, in his acceptance of Mary and acquiescence to her request, we see the joining of contraries. Though he does not realize it, the young man of “To Tirzah” is equally bound to the physical and the spiritual, and in order to transcend “Experience” he must seek a balance of the two.