London

I wander thro’ each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear—

How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every black’ning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot’s curse
Blasts the new-born Infant’s tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

William Blake
William Blake (1757-1827)
London (1793)

Peter Cash

Introduction

In my time, I have taught Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* to both Ordinary Level and Advanced Level. On both occasions, I have taught ‘London’ by means of my own written commentary on the poem/song. What I have not done is taught the poem by explicit reference to a QCA grid of requirements, for in 1983—remember, I said ‘O-Level’—neither Assessment Objectives nor Grade Descriptions existed at any level. This much admitted, I recall that in 1989 the Oxford & Cambridge Schools Examination Board did issue *General Instructions to Examiners*. From the yellowing documentation before me, I see that OCSEB Examiners were instructed to look in ‘general’ for essays which 1 answer the question; 2 have some substance; 3 are adequate in expression; 4 show intelligence and sensibility; and 5 show some historical sense.

More specific were the ‘new guidelines’ for awarding the grades themselves. To attain Grade A, the script (produced by a candidate ‘certainly worthy of a University place’) was expected

1. to have considerable substance, including accurate quotations, references or allusions carefully used to show the way in which technique conveys and embodies meaning and feeling. Apt quotation (not necessarily lengthy) is often woven effectively into the texture of the candidate’s own prose;
2. to relate a detailed grasp of the set books to answering the question;
3. to show frequent subtlety of idea and expression;
4. to surprise or delight the reader through intelligence of idea, felicity of phrasing or unusual knowledge—anything which may lead to the perception of unexpected qualities in the work discussed;
5. to show a freshness of personal response as opposed to mere repetitions of someone else’s critical opinions, however good;
6. to have ‘flair’. 
For this long-defunct Board, I retain a high regard; at the same time, I have to admit that these guidelines are often vague and tend to overlap. Don’t you just love No 4 (that blanket willingness to recognise ‘anything’ unusual or fresh) and No 6 ‘to have flair’, an undefined beauty in the eye of the beholder by which the marker can justify his praise for, well, ‘anything’? These guidelines are not especially coherent: rather, they are informed by a Corinthian spirit which believes that there exists among gentlemen everywhere an understanding of good critical writing; you can hear in the terminology (‘sensibility’, ‘subtlety’, ‘felicity’, ‘flair’) how much they trust in that sort of shared understanding. Twenty-five years ago, neither O-Level nor A-Level English Literature scripts were being marked by an out-of-work Classics/Sociology graduate who once saw a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. In those days, you were concerned to teach *Romeo and Juliet* or ‘London’ in such a way that your candidate’s writing would impress a marker who did not need any grid of acronyms (AFs, AOs, GDs) to guide him. As for the guidelines which OCSEB produced, they constituted in practice a smorgasbord from which the candidate could pick up hints—e.g., ‘show some historical sense’, ‘apt quotation … woven effectively into the texture of [her] own prose’—and mix them into her exam-answer. This brings me to Rob Penman’s satirical criticism of Assessment for Learning:

‘I remember we had a lesson on inference and deduction,’ he or she says. ‘AF3 I think it was. It’s stayed with me ever since and I can’t see a poem without feeling the urge to infer and deduce. What was the poem that had all that inference and deduction in it?’

His scenario presents a *reductio ad absurdum*: that is, it reduces to absurdity the idea that the tail (*Assessment Focus 3*) should wag the dog (Blake’s poetry). The point is witty and well made, but of course it takes us only so far … Don’t we [teachers, students] want assessment criteria, assessment criteria clearly defined? Yes, we do. Doesn’t the Sociology graduate need guidance with his marking? Yes, he does. What, then, is the exact target of Mr Penman’s satire? I think that it is box-ticking, the sort of micro-management exercise which pretends that English Literature is like Biology, Chemistry and Physics, all by contrast precise sciences.

What, I think, Mr Penman covets is the freedom which teachers enjoyed in 1983, if not quite so much in 2006: namely, the freedom to respond to Blake’s poetry in his own way, safe in the knowledge that the marker of the exam scripts will appreciate whatever he, as an informed reader, has managed to teach his candidates in the process. This, certainly, was the
spirit in which I wrote my commentary on Blake’s ‘London’ for my O-Level class in 1983; it was this commentary which, regardless of AOs and GDs, I disinterred and revised for my OCR A-Level set in 2006. What, then, you are about to read is a commentary composed without any thought for AFs, AOs and GDs. Although I am by no means an expert on Blake’s poetry, I hold a degree in English Literature and I try to respond to the poem as if I do:

Commentary

W. H. Stevenson reminds us that Blake’s Songs of Innocence (1789) ‘is a kind of chap-book of poems in the tradition of Isaac Watts’ Divine Songs for Children (1715)’ and that each song was designed to teach the children who sang it a moral lesson. Stevenson further reminds us that, although Blake published Songs of Innocence separately both in 1789 and in subsequent years, he published Songs of Experience, completed in 1793, never separately, but always and only in conjunction with his earlier collection. The reason is that Blake became primarily concerned to dramatise the ironic contrast between ‘the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul’ (as he describes them in the sub-title of the original edition). On the one hand, there is innocence, an ideal state in which children from the countryside south of the River Thames remain capable of good and great things and to which the adjective ‘green’ is systematically applied; strangely, there is no single song in Songs of Innocence which describes this ideal place. On the other hand, there is experience, as is to be found in the real world north of the River Thames in which children have been corrupted and indoctrinated by adults and for which the adjective ‘dark’ does frequent service. The song which describes this real place is ‘London’.

Songs of Experience—in which ‘London’ was originally the eighth of twenty-one poems—are designed ‘to set the adult experience of real life against the innocent pre-suppositions of children who have not experienced it’. The pattern of juxtaposition is intended to illustrate vividly the kind of spiritual change upon which Geoffrey Keynes comments: ‘This poem is one of Blake’s most outspoken protests against the effect of industrial civilisation upon the life of the individual.’ In Songs of Innocence, the poems that best depict the pastoral idyll to be enjoyed by the innocent souls on the Surrey station are ‘Laughing Song’, ‘The Echoing Green’ and ‘Nurse’s Song’. There is also ‘Holy Thursday’ which begins:

’Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two and two in red and blue and green,
Grey-headed beadles walked before with wands as white as snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul’s they like Thames waters flow.

As Robert F. Gleckner points out, there are two levels at which this poem, a song of innocence, can be read. Ostensibly, the poor children of the parish should be grateful that the beadles (‘wise guardians of the poor’) have shown charity to them/taken ‘pity’ on them and not given them up to the nasty, brutish and short lives of chimney sweepers or prostitutes which would otherwise await them; at the same time, ‘the children clearly are disciplined, regimented, marched in formation to church in the uniforms of their respective schools—mainly to advertise the charitable souls of their supposed guardians.’ As a delicious consequence, the simile—‗like Thames waters flow’—begs a question which is of supreme importance for the city in which St Paul’s Cathedral stands: just how do Thames waters flow? In ‘London’, it is this question that Blake takes up.

During Blake’s lifetime, London was a city in a state of flux: in 1750, it had a population of 700,000, rising by 1801 to 960,000. It was a real city, a place of considerable squalor through which Blake in his poem is moving as in a nightmare. As a result, he intends a sardonic conflict between the alternate rhymes of his ballad quatrains and the grotesque experience which they describe:

I wander thro’ each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

Although in Blake’s time the River Thames was an open sewer, his concern here is not with the pungent filthiness of the waterway, but with a political and social injustice: enclosure. Between 1760 and 1820, the common land of England became ‘enclosed’: that is, taken into private ownership. In ‘London’, Blake is concerned with the capitalist alliance between George III’s Government (under the Tory Prime Minister, William Pitt) and the bankers and the merchants who profited from this nationwide re-drawing of rights, implemented by the granting of charters: indeed, research among Blake’s manuscripts reveals that he actually changed his adjective from the literal ‘dirty’ to ‘chartered’. In 1791, Thomas Paine (Rights of Man) wrote:

It is a perversion of terms to say that a charter gives rights.
It operates by a contrary effect—that of taking rights away.
Rights are inherently in all the inhabitants; but charters, by
annulling those rights in the majority, leave the right, by
exclusion, in the hands of a few…

To open his poem, Blake uses the adjective ‘chartered’ first to describe
‘each...street’ of London and then to describe the River Thames: whereas
his first use may refer plainly to the private ownership of urban properties,
his second use may not refer to riverside moorings and warehouses, but
Even stretches of the flowing river are treated as if they are commercial
commodities to be controlled and sold off: territorial waters, as it were. I
am not enough of a scholar to know whether ‘chartered Thames’ is a
satirical reduction to absurdity of the contemporary obsession with
property rights or whether, beyond satire, it is a grim description of the
lengths to which aristocratic landowners and their lawyers did go.

The style of ‘London’ is characterised by Blake’s use of repetition. The
systematic repetitions are responsible for the tone of the poem: as Blake
walks the ‘chartered streets’, he ‘marks’ the signs of suffering on the faces
of the Londoners whom he encounters and he pities them. When it is
repeated, ‘mark’—the verb ‘to notice, to take visual note of’—involves a
mournful, rueful pun; it becomes ‘marks’, the noun for the scars of a
suffering both physical (‘weakness’) and spiritual (‘woe’). In Blake’s song,
London remains the recognisable location of William Hogarth’s Gin Lane
of 1751, but portrayed with a much darker humour.

Blake’s account of London gains momentum by moving from one
repetition to another. In the second quatrain, he leaves behind ‘marks’
only to pick up from ‘every face’ the adjectival ‘every’:

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear—

By his sixth use of ‘every’, he has established the comprehensive scale of
the misery; by means of iambic tetrameter, repeatedly placing a stress on
the first syllable of the word, he has conveyed a dynamic sense of the
ubiquitous wretchedness, a condition engulfing and oppressing an entire
community of city-dwellers. It is instructive that this experience of the
city should be auditory: that every human ‘cry’ should in the end equate in
Blake’s imagination to the sound of rattled chains. Research reveals that
Blake’s original phrase was ‘German -forged’: presumably, this compound
coinage is designed to indict the Hanoverian dynasty for having imported
such torments into England’s rich and fruitful/green and pleasant land. Very significantly, the change to ‘mind-forged’ implicates Londoners in their own plight; radically, ‘mind-forged’ implies that the ‘manacles’ on the wretches are not metal, but mental—and that London’s oppressed citizens, contemporaries of Victor Hugo’s miserable Parisians, are partly to blame for accepting Hanoverian tyranny and Tory exploitation.

For the rest of the poem, Blake continues to ‘hear’ alarming things. By means of a dash, his second quatrain segues grammatically into his third where the conjunction (‘how’) relies for its meaning upon the verb of the previous sentence:

How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every black’ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

The elliptical grammar and the repeated words (a seventh ‘every’, a third ‘cry’) account for the cumulative forcefulness of Blake’s indictment. Furthermore, they bring about a change of Blake’s tone—from a compassion for the marked faces that he meets to an exasperation with the many manifestations of social horror: e.g., boys sold into seven-year apprenticeships as chimney sweepers, girls sold into brothels as prostitutes. The function of this third quatrain is to condemn the complacent attitude of British institutions to such abuses: the respective treatments of children by the Church, of soldiers by the State. In this context, the first sentence of the quatrain requires exegesis: in what sense does the boy’s cry ‘appall’? Until The Chimney Sweepers Act of 1834, there was no effective legislation to protect children from this dangerous and dirty work. Surely, Blake’s point is that the Church of 1790, represented by every church building, is not appalled [disgusted] by child labour and that it ought to be? Doesn’t he therefore mean that every cry from a chimney sweeper, burnt at work, disgraces every churchman whose building has been turned soot-black, a visible sign of this disgrace? Isn’t there a subtle conflict between ‘black’ning’ and ‘appalls’ [literally, ‘turns pale’]? Isn’t Blake implying that hypocritical clergymen should be literally ‘pale’ [appalled] with shame? The second sentence requires even more conjectural exegesis: in what sense does a ‘sigh’ run ‘in blood’ down a wall? Here, the reference may be to political slogans which—in red paint, symbolic of the blood of fallen soldiers—had been daubed on the walls of Hampton Court Palace.

It is on his nocturnal ramblings through the metropolis (‘midnight streets’) that Blake’s vision becomes almost apocalyptic. At the start of the fourth
quatrain, there is another modulation of tone. He lowers his voice (‘But most...’) and explains that the sound which ultimately horrifies him is the ‘curse’ of the ‘youthful harlot’, the post-pubescent child whom her impoverished parents have sold into prostitution at Spitalfields Market. Her expletive

Blasts the new-born Infant’s tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

London is a place in which there is no innocence, not even for ‘new-born’ babes; rather, it is a system in which innocent bodies-and-souls are immediately entrapped, duly exploited and finally infected. As Blake moves on to his final line, his verbs alliterate (‘blasts’/’blights’) and express his rising anger that the procreative process is diseased to a critical extent. According to his analysis, the thirteen-year-old prostitute ‘blights with plagues the Marriage hearse’ because the client who impregnated her will have returned to his respectable wife and passed on to her a venereal disease from which she too will die. In a closing crescendo, the powerful oxymoron ‘marriage hearse’ suggests that nobody is immune to the bubonic blight that pervades this society, for, by the stage that the poem describes, it is a society in which even virtue (‘marriage’) does no good.

If ‘London’ has a companion-poem, then it is not to be found in *Songs of Innocence* (1789) which precede *Songs of Experience* (1793). It pleases me to imagine that, for a possible companion-piece, we must wait until 1804 when Blake declares that he ‘will not cease from mental fight’ until, in place of London, he has built an altogether different kind of city.

References

2. *Ibid*.