'O Rose Thou Art Sick': Floral Symbolism in William Blake's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this paper is to analyse the symbolic implications of floral imagery in William Blake's poetry. More specifically, this study explores the process of floral (re)signification of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) as case studies. Since "Without contraries [there] is no progression" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 3), it can be argued that the *Songs* represent contrary aspects of the human condition that far from contradicting each other, establish a static contrast of shifting tensions and revaluation of the flower-image not only as a perfect symbol of the "vegetable" life rooted to the Earth but also as a figure longing to be free. In some sense at some level, the poetic-prophetic voice asserts in the *Songs of Experience* the state of corruption where man has fallen into. Ultimately, this study will explore how the failure to overcome the contrast that is suggested in the *Songs* will be deepened by the tragedy of Thel, which is symbolized by all unborn forces of life, all sterile seeds as an ultimate means of metaphorical regeneration throughout Poetry which constitutes in itself the Poet Prophet's own means of transcending through art.

William Blake (1757-1827) was the first English poet to work out the revolutionary structure of imagery that (re)signifies through the Romantic poetry. What makes him a unique figure is his ability to design with great formal inventiveness his own visions not only in his celebrated engravings but also in his poetry. In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789, 1794), he designed his poems making the words on the line seem to grow "like flower heads out of a thicket" (Kazin 1976: 20). Indeed, each page of "illuminated" engraving represented by him was a unique world, in which the structure of the poem, the designs on the border, the accompanying figures on the page, the tints on the colour, "were joined together into the supreme metaphor" (Kazin 19) of art forming a complete artistic unity.

What seems to have been defiant in Blake for the academy is that he is not creating after any established artistic symbols but his own. In this regard, Eric Bentley states that it is a common condition between the romanticists that "the artist is both solitary and superior, a hero apart from the herd" (Bentley 1948: 41). Thus, William Blake's visions are entirely personal, in theme and in the logic that sustains them. At the centre of Blake's thought can be found the two conceptions of innocence and experience, the two contraries of the human soul. Innocence is characteristic of the child, experience of the adult. The symbolic process that takes place in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* would be, as Northrop Frye explains in his essay "The Keys to the Gates":

> As the child grows up, his conscious mind accepts 'experience', or reality without any human shape or meaning, and his childhood innocent vision, having nowhere else to go, is driven underground into what we should call the subconscious, where it takes an essentially sexual form. The original innocent vision becomes a melancholy dream of how man once possessed a happy garden, but lost it for ever, though he may regain it after he dies (Frye 47).

In consequence, Innocence could not redeem experience - but only create a state of remorse (Beer 86). In *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* it can be interpreted a process of (re)signification of floral symbolism. In the poem "My Pretty Rose Tree"[2], the poetic voice refuses "such a flower as May never bore" in favour of his own rose tree, only to find in the end that his Rose "turned away with jealousy: / And her thorns were my only delight" (vv. 7 – 8).

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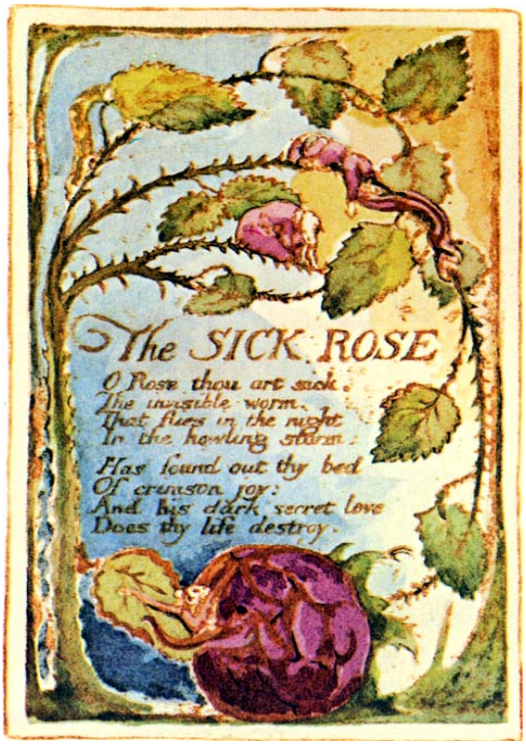
2 "A flower was offerd to me: / Such a flower as May never bore. / But I said I've a Pretty Rose-tree, / And I passed the sweet flower o'er. (vv. 1- 4) – Then I went to my Pretty Rose-tree, / To tend her by day and by night. / But my Rose turned away with jealousy, / And her thorns were my only delight" (5 – 8).

In the poem "The Garden of Love", the poetic voice goes to the Garden, only to find out that a chapel has been built on the green and the warning' "Thou shalt not' writ over the door" (v. 6). Following this, the poetic voice "(...) turn'd to the Garden of Love, / That so many sweet flowers bore." (vv. 7 – 8) but instead of the garden itself there are tombstones and graves, "And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds, / And binding with briars, my joys and desires" (vv. 11 – 12).

We can also compare the poems "The Blossom" (*Songs of Innocence*) and "My Pretty Rose Tree" (*Songs of Experience*). The first is a two stanza poem, more specifically, sestets following an irregular ABCAAC rhyme scheme. "The Blossom" represents a pastoral image of nature where "A happy Blossom" (3) "sees" (4) a "Sparrow" (1) and "hears" (10) a "Robin" (7) "sobbing" (10) near the poetic voice's "Bosom" (6, 12). The poetic voice appeals to the sense of sight in the first stanza of the poem and the ear in the second. It emphasizes some words in capital letters such as "Blossom" (3), "Merry," (1) and "Pretty" (7). The combination of antithetical elements facilitates the memorization of this song.

On the other hand, in the poem "My Pretty Rose Tree" (*Songs of Experience*), the rhyme follows the ABAB ACAC pattern. There are two stanzas and four lines in this poem. The flower and the rose tree symbolize a feminine figure. The poetic voice could be interpreted as a man who is "offered" (1) a flower "as May never bore" (2), but he rejects her because he already has a "Pretty Rose-tree" (3), a Rose-tree that may be presumed to be loved more than anything by the poetic voice. In the second stanza, the poetic voice tells the female figure of the "Pretty Rose-tree" about the incident described in the first stanza, but she apparently becomes jealous and leaves him: "But my Rose turn'd away with jealousy, / And her thorns were my only delight" (7-8). Such an ending may not be expected after the first stanza, where he chooses his "Pretty Rose-tree" (3), rather than the "flower" which was offered to him. It could be argued then, that the poem goes from a seemingly happy-ending to a tragic poem about lost love. It is prominent the symbolism and personification of the flowers in the poem. The flowers are given human abilities such as "but my rose turned away with jealousy" (7), and they are also major symbolical elements. The beauty of the Rose-tree is opposed to the thorns which turn out to be the poetic voice's "only delight" (8) after his confession. The poem "My Pretty Rose Tree" can also be compared with the celebrated poem "The Sick Rose" (*Songs of Experience*), which represents a profound dimension of love and a fall from the state of innocence:



Blake, William. Songs of Innocence and of Experience, copy AA, 1826 (The Fitzwilliam Museum). Ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi.

The poem's form consists of two quatrains with a rhyming scheme of ABCB. The poetic voice appeals the Rose setting a tone of despair which if intensified by the epithet of "sick".

The worm, which could be interpreted as a symbol of innocent sexual love is here an emblem of corruption. It is an "invisible" (2) worm, impregnated with "dark secret love" (7), both elements are responsible of the destructive lust that destroys true love instead of nourishing it since the rose's life is finally destroyed.

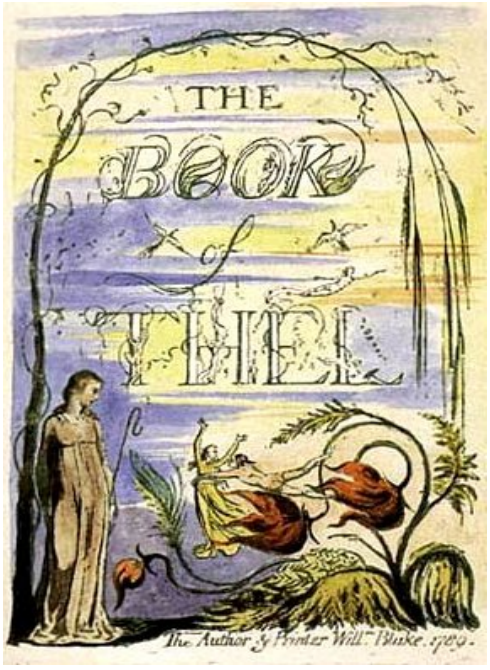
It could be argued, then, that the poem "The Sick Rose" contains a slight version of Blake's vision of the proper relationship of the sexes which he finally names in *Jerusalem* the "Female Will". This concept of the "Female Will," may represent for the poet the material world, nature as destructive necessity, and the domination of forces that have been styled feminine over forces that have been styled masculine. The "female" is a "form" in Blake, and thus a symbolic image in the poem, that is the Rose.

What can be found in the first line of the poem "O Rose, thou art sick" implies an oppressive condition of the rose —who is being addressed and personified in the treatment of "thou"(1)— and, indeed, the entire meaning of the poem seems to be included in the first line. The poetic voice directs his attention to the Rose, which is "sick", but in a previous state "He found out thy bed of crimson joy". It could be inferred then that the Rose is sick of "dark secret love" which is destroying her life unable to do anything to prevent it.

Regarding the "invisible worm", it could be argued that it is a negative love. It implies secrecy and physical love. Consider the lines "Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy" (5 - 6) and its main weapon is "dark, secret love" (7). Hence, the "Rose" and "the invisible worm" (2) are two antithetical forces: the first one implies social love, while "the invisible worm" (2) is out of the collective conscience since uses "his dark, secret love" (7) which connotes decadence and provokes the rose's decay.

The rhyme scheme would be on the first quatrain "worm" (2) and "storm" (4), while on the second quatrain rhymes "joy" (6) and "destroy" (8). These two elements —"Joy" and "destroy"— form a sort of antithesis; they signify two different realities but are, at the same time, pervade in "the invisible worm". However, the symbolic importance of the rose is highlighted again in "crimson joy" (6). It is in its dynamic destruction where life pervades, since life is made up of experience.

The contrast that is suggested in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* will be deepened by the tragedy of Thel *(The Book of Thel*, 1789). The book opens with "Thel's Motto" (see color plate 4 below), where Thel, a shepherdess, observes an erotic encounter between two human figures springing out of flamelike flowers.



William Blake: *The Book of Thel*, copy O, plate 1. Copy O.

"The Book of Thel" narrates the tale of a girl's first infatuation with an unworthy being, whose true character she discovers only after she has succumbed to his charms. Sabrina, who finally releases her, represents the healing power of Nature. Thel is the girl on the verge of womanhood who dwells in the Vales of Har. She is beginning to ponder the mysteries of life and death and questions the value of her own virginity (the Lily). According to Prof. Foster Damon, Thel considers impregnation (represented by the Cloud) and motherhood (the Clod). The first element —the Cloud— may represent the non-moral principle of the fertilizing male; his moisture seeks the dew of the flower. As she questions the natural objects around her about the meaning of life, the creatures she addresses take on human form and speak about their situation in the natural world. Thel asks why the flowers must wither and die: "O life of this our spring! Why fades the lotus of the water? / Why fade these children of the spring? Born but to smile & fall." (I, 6-7). A lily of the valley speaks to Thel and tells her that even a little flower is "visited from heaven" (I, 19), that is, protected from God, and in the summer when the lily dies, she will have a happier life and "flourish in eternal vales" (I, 25). The poem comes to a climax when Thel hears the voices of her awakening senses:

> For I walk through the vales of Har, and smell the sweetest flowers;
> But I feed not the little flowes: I hear the warbling birds,
> But I feed not the warbling birds; they fly and seek their food:
> But Thel delights in these no more because I fade away,
> And all shall say, without a use this shining woman liv'd,
> Or did she only live, to be at death the food of worms? (II, 17-23)

In the last part of the first stanza, Thel wonders about the evanescence of her own life: "I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place?" (I, 37). The Lily directs her to a "tender cloud" (I, 38) and Thel asks the cloud why is it not troubled by its evanescence. The cloud answers that life is about regeneration: "Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies, / How great thy use, how great thy blessing; every thing that lives, / Lives not alone, nor for itself." (II, 25-27). The cloud also asserts that after it has vanished, it will bring life to flowers: "when I pass away, / It is to tenfold life, to love to peace: and raptures holy: / Unseen descending, weigh my light wings upon balmy flowers" (II, 10 – 12). Thel answers that her life might not be of the same use but only to feed worms:

> For I walk through the vales of Har, and smell the sweetest flowers;
> But I feed not the little flowers: I hear the warbling birds,
> But I feed not the warbling birds; they fly and seek their food:
> But Thel delights in these no more because I fade away,
> And all shall say, without a use this shining woman liv'd
> Or did she only live, to be at death the food of worms? (II, 18 – 23)

In this regard, the cloud replies that such a purpose —that of feeding worms— is a wonderful purpose since "every thing that lives, / Lives not alone, nor for itself" (II, 26 – 27), even if that thing which lives is a worm. In the final part of the poem, Thel enters the "eternal gates" (IV, 1) and sees "the secrets of the land unknown" (IV, 2) where "the fibrous roots of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists." (IV, 3-4).Then Thel sits on her own grave and hears a voice enumerating the sensual organs and the suffering they imply.

If we consider again the frontispiece of the book, there appears Thel, holding the sheep hook of Innocence, standing beneath a weeping willow with light spring foliage. She watches the fertilization of womblike flowers —a tiny male (the Cloud) reaches to embrace a tiny female. A bud ready to open is lifting itself at Thel's feet. A girl with a light bridle, guides the Serpent of Nature; behind her, two baby boys climb on for the ride (Foster Damon 52).

To conclude, as this communication argues, the failure to overcome the contrast that is suggested in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and which is deepened in *The Book of Thel* is symbolized by all unborn forces of life, all sterile seeds as an ultimate means of metaphorical regeneration through Poetry which constitutes in itself the Poet Prophet's own means of transcending through art.

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