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The Making of 'London'

London is one of the *Songs of Experience*, etched by Blake in 1794. He was working on it in his commonplace book during the previous year, when he was moving in the circle of Johnson the radical book-seller - a circle with which both Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecroft were associated. Here is the finished poem :

*/ wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

*In every cry of every Man,
hi every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd 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.*

In an earlier version of the poem. Blake wrote not " charter'd," but " dirty street" and " dirty Thames." Dirt led him to the cause of dirt, in the swelling commercial city, with its pollution of Nature and of men and women. " Charter'd " implies an ironic commentary on " charters " of liberty; but it was chiefly chosen as evoking the world of commerce, of the appropriation of wealth as private property - the world of the East India Company, whose monopolistic Charter was renewed for a further twenty years in 1793 and whose ships plied from Thames-side. Another entry in his commonplace book underlines the reasons for his choice :

*Why should I care for the men of thames,
Or the cheating waves of charter'd streams,
Or shrink at the little blasts of fear
That the hireling blows into my car?*

*'I ho' born on the cheating banks of Thames,
Tho' his waters bathed my infant limbs,
The Ohio shall wash his waves from me:
I was born a slave, but I go to be free.*

"Hireling" was a word with powerful associations in a time of flagrant corruption: bribery, patronage, influence, and interest. Even Johnson, in his Dictionary, had defined a "pension": "In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a State hireling for treason to his country." The Government had its hired press, its hired informers and agents, who - in 1793 - were seeking to terrorise the reformers. In this fragment Blake was one of the first to point the paradox (so often used by nineteenth century reformers) between the commercial and political slavery of "free" England, and the political liberty co-existing with slavery in the United States.

In the second verse Blake wrote "mind forg'd" to replace the words "german forged" in an earlier version. "German forged manacles" was a direct tilt at the Hanoverian monarchy; the London reformers were well aware that the Government could call German mercenaries to its aid in the event of any crisis. But Blake was concerned in this poem less with direct military repression than with the mental and moral tyranny of a society based on the ethic of buying and selling rather than of giving and creating, -- the cheating charters, the cries of the street-sellers, whose eerie almost animal cadence could be heard as a constant background to his walks through London streets. The *bans* is an enormously evocative word, conjuring up a host of associations, from the bans before marriage, the negative ethic of property at the heart of sexual love ("Thou Shalt Not" writ over the door'), to the bans of church and state against the publications and organisations of the followers of Tom Paine. But all associations are linked in the central idea of a code of morality which constricts, denies, prohibits, and punishes (the "Moral & Self Righteous Law" whose altar is the Tyburn Gallows) as opposed to Blake's revolutionary view of the true Christian code of love. An other fragment in the commonplace book underscores his meaning:

*Love to faults is always blind,
Always is to joy in din'd,
Lawless, wing'd, & unconfin'd.
And breaks all chains from every mind.*

*Deceit to secresy con fin'd.
Lawful, cautious, & refin'd,
To every thing but interest blind,
And forges fetters for the mind.*

The "mind forg'd manacles" are stronger and harder to break than the manacles of the German King and his mercenaries, since they are the fetters of self-interest, of the bourgeois ethic, which bind not only the oppressors but the oppressed.

In the third verse the only important amendment is to the second line which at first read: "Blackens o'er the churches' walls." Into the single image, when revised by Blake, is packed the full meaning of the accompanying poem, *The Chimney Sweep*. "God & his priest & King, / Who make up a heaven of our misery" are concentrated into a single symbol, the adjective "black'ning" visually attaching to the State Church complicity in maintaining a society which sells young children into slavery. Four years later Blake was to write of "The Abomination that maketh desolate, i.e., State Religion, which is the source of all Cruelty." "Appalls" is used in the active sense **of** "puts to shame" or "indicts," in the same way as the sigh **of** the dying soldier indicts (and also threatens) the Palace. "An Ancient Proverb" in the commonplace book lists the three props of an oppressive society: Church, State, and a negative, constricting code of morality:

*Remove away that black'ning church:
Remove away that marriage hearse:
Remove away that — of blood:
You'll quite remove the ancient curse.*

Blake left a blank in the third line; either "place" (Tyburn) or "palace" could fill it; perhaps he was undecided himself.

The final verse was completely re-arranged. The earlier draft read:

*But most the midnight harlot's curse
From every dismal street I hear
Weaves around the marriage hearse
And blais-ts the new born infant's tear.*

The reference is of course to venereal disease. The verse was re-written, not in order to introduce new ideas, but to express more forcefully the ideas already implicit, and to conclude the poem upon the words, "marriage hearse," the symbol which unites love with death.

One further fragment from the commonplace book is related - the verse added to the first draft of *The Human Abstract*, but not used in the published version:

*There souls of men are bought & sold,
And milk-fed infancy for gold;
And youth to slaughter houses led.
And beauty for a bit of bread.*

We can now see *London* not simply as a terrible cumulative *catalogue* of unrelated abuses and suffering; but, rather, as a poem with a clearly conceived, developing emotional logic around the central unifying theme of bourgeois morality. Blake does not only describe the *symptoms*; within the central image which underlies and unites the whole poem, there is the discovery of the *cause*. From the first introduction of the word "charter'd," Blake never loses hold of this image of buying and selling - not only of goods, but of human values, affections and vitalities. The street-cries are the cries of people buying and selling, the "mind forg'd manacles" are manacles of self-interest, childhood (the chimney sweep) is bought and sold, life itself (the soldier) is bought and sold, and to complete the poem, youth, beauty, and love, the *source* of life, is bought and sold in the figure of the diseased harlot. In a series of concrete, unified images of enormous power Blake compresses an indictment of the acquisitive ethic which divides man from man. leads him into mental and moral captivity, destroys the sources of joy. and brings, as its reward, death.



george cruikshank: from ' the right divine of kings to govern wrong
(1821).