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**Religion, Imagination and  
Revolution in William Blake's  
"The Tyger" and Percy Bysshe  
Shelley's "Mont Blanc"**

## PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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# Religion, Imagination and Revolution in William Blake's "The Tyger" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mont Blanc"

The Romantic era represented a considerable artistic and philosophical paradigm shift towards subjectivity in perceiving and portraying the world around us, and thus heavily relied on the fusion of several distinct topics: religion, politics, social matters, nature, art, etc. In the context of British Romanticism, or more precisely British Romantic poetry, one might point out the importance of the "great six" poets: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. This paper comparatively takes into consideration Blake and Shelley, and singles out two of their poems which are generally considered to represent some of their finest work – Blake's "The Tyger" and Shelley's "Mont Blanc". The comparison of the poems yields, in spite of their rarely being considered as companion pieces, great philosophical and poetic resemblances. Both authors saw nature, albeit in unique ways, as a logical extension of the poet's imagination and of religious considerations, which becomes evident upon reading the poems. The similitudes demonstrated here serve as evidence of the complex entanglement of Romantic ideologies, both on the level of a single author or a single poem and on the level of time and place (turn-of-the-nineteenth-century England). Furthermore, the paper situates the said poems in a broader European political context and delineates the possible influence of that context on their creation.

### KEYWORDS

**romanticism, religion, Blake, Shelley, imagination, revolution**

Twenty-two years and a whole generation of development in Romantic thought passed between the publication dates of William Blake's poem "The Tyger" (published as a part of his 1794 collection *Songs of Experience*) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1816 "Mont Blanc," yet they share what Bloom calls a "pattern of natural inspiration as a reciprocal process or dialogue between phenomena and the poet's imaginings" (296). Thus, both the eponymous tiger for Blake and the sublime Swiss mountain for Shelley are creations which, in conjunction with the poet's imagination, serve as a source of conception of revolutionary, or at least social, activity. Naturally, Blake and Shelley viewed England and Europe from two different contexts (pre-Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic, respectively), but the primary focus of the poems is generally the same: what is the origin of those creations, and what is their awe-inspiring power saying? At that point, further similarities between the poems, and consequently between their authors, emerge – on the level of religious convictions, for Shelley was a "religious poet whose passionate convictions are agnostic" (Bloom 282) and Blake was a "believer in the divine reality," but not "a theist in any orthodox sense" (Bloom 5). Therefore, both looked with disfavour upon religious dogma and orthodox Christianity. Still, a sense of spirituality pervades over their imaginative ponderings in the two poems, in which the triangle of religion, imagination, and urbanity is, as this paper hopes to demonstrate, the centre of poetic sensibility. It is also what propelled them both to value "poetry over all other human speech," since for them poetry is the only artistic form through which one can express that sensibility (Bloom 6), and without it, the tiger's and the mountain's metaphysical aspects would have remained largely useless. Blake opens "The Tyger" with the following, now iconic lines:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (1-4)

Immediately, the problem of the poem is two-fold: in Brennan's words, the poet both questions the "wonder [of] the tiger's existence and the tremendous power that must have been necessary to bring it about" (406). The "*immortal* hand or eye" (emphasis mine) signifies that the creator of the tiger must be of nature above that of humans – God, or at least a god. However, the tiger's "symmetry" is "fearful" – it is a creature of immense, terrible power, and therefore, the question arises: "if this creature be so frightful, so powerful, what must *he* be who 'framed' that fearful might and brought it into being?" (Brennan 406). The portentousness of that power continues to reappear throughout the later stanzas, in the shape of a "fire in [its] eyes" (6), "sinews of [its] heart" (10), its "dread grasp" (15), "deadly terrors clasp" (16), etc. However, as the poem progresses with its

rhythmic series of rhetorical questions, an alternative presents itself. It is, as Miner points out, a "Miltonic beast," but its "fearful symmetry" is framed by "Divine *as well as* Satanic forces" (emphasis mine), for "in the first line of the second stanza . . . Blake speaks of the 'distant deeps [of hell] or [of heaven]'" (484).<sup>1</sup> The contrariness of such lines from the start alludes to the possibility that the fierceness of the tiger's power ("burning bright") might not only be of diabolical, but of divine, glorious, positive origin as well. The dubious duality of the creator is further made explicit by the end of stanza five: "Did he smile his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (19–20). What is more, the context in which Blake wrote the poem must be remembered: in 1794, the violent effects of the French Revolution, generally referred to as the Reign of Terror, were beginning to make their mark on contemporary English and European society. It must have aroused complex feelings in him and made him "strengthen the myth or self-made account of reality given by his own poetry" (Bloom 2). Could it be possible, Blake asks, that if the great sinister power of the tiger has a benevolent side to it as well, it can be used for the improvement of society, for a noble cause. Can it, in Shelley's words, "repeal large codes of fraud and woe" ("Mont Blanc" 80–81)? The tiger's power may also very well have outgrown the original creator's intentions, and a key reversal of roles is intimated in the last, otherwise repeated stanza, where God must dare to create such a power:

Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (21–24)

The shift from "could" to "dare" in the poem's last line, thus, signifies a convergence of "all the terrifying implications of the questions posed with mounting intensity and deepening significance in the foregoing stanzas" (Brennan 406–407). The attempt at an answer is of course a juncture of contraries, and "the questioner who speaks the poem becomes more and more sure of the answer, and concurrently further and further away from the true answer" (Bloom 35).

Are the tiger and its power, then, a socially useful or a detrimental entity? Is the tiger a symbol of "God's Mercy" or "His Wrath" (Bloom 38)? Upon answering that question, the third part of the aforementioned religion–imagination–revolution triangle comes into play – imagination. The key point of the poem is that "The forest," as Bloom says, "is not 'in the night' but 'of the night,' and does not exist apart from it" (36). The beholder who sees the tiger's burning energy is predestined to see it as powerful, malevolent, for he inherently sees it in the night. On the other hand, if, by the use of imagination, one chooses to see it in daylight, it is an altogether

different creature, and retrospectively, the opening exclamation "Tyger Tyger" engenders a tone of alluring mystery, rather than of awe: "Blake wants us to question the questioner, rather than to attempt an answer to a question that already seeks merely to answer itself" (Bloom 36). On a side note, such reading also puts into perspective Blake's etchings of a meek, benevolent tiger on his original publication of the poem.

Shelley's poem differs from the outset from Blake's in the mere fact that it is under the influence of, and describes the sublime immensity of, a real natural creation (the subtitle of the poem is *Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni*), whereas Blake's tiger is purely metaphorical – a divine vision. However, like beholding the "fearful" tiger in "The Tyger," "'Mont Blanc' makes one of Shelley's strongest and most direct claims for the socio-political potential of the aesthetic response to nature" (Borushko 225). At the end of the third stanza, Shelley writes:

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel (80-83).

The "voice" of the alpine sublime has the potential to bring about change by "repealing large codes of fraud and woe" – codes of a modern, industrial, overly pious society. Indeed, it is, in Borushko's words, a "language of the phenomenal world" (246) which must be "felt" and "interpreted" by "the wise, and great, and good." Thus, strong emphasis is put on the subjectivity of perceiving the sublime discourse, the "phenomenal" essence projected by the mountain, and accordingly, "the poem here registers the agency of the perceiving mind" (Borushko 246). For Shelley, the poets, the cultivated, by the use of their imaginative powers, are the ones who transform that discourse into politically potent poetry. (He would, of course, write that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" in *A Defence of Poetry* only five years later [1247].) Such imaginative powers are not only needed for "interpreting" the "voice" of the "great Mountain," but also actively participate in its creation (not unlike the subjectivity of the perception of the tiger in Blake):

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142-144)

Shelley's philosophy of imagination as fuel for active involvement of the mind in perceiving and creating nature is closely akin to what Coleridge would call "Secondary Imagination" a year later in *Biographia Literaria*, and to Kant's philosophy, which argues that imagination – an intuitive tool for

cognition of external reality – is one of the core faculties of the human mind (Kneller 2–6). What is at stake in such a process is “the proper intellectual and political response to the sublime” (Borushko 247). The Romantic poet is a genius, and only he is capable of deciphering nature's transcendent voice.

If the sublime is not just actively perceived by the mind in the form of creative and political impulses, but in turn also generated, the issue of the true creator of the mountain ensues. Borushko continues: “. . . in the experience of the sublime and its violence, the human mind might imagine a power, a known deity” (247). Shelley is aware of that and imbues the poem with a dose of scepticism himself, for “The wilderness has a *mysterious tongue* / Which teaches *awful doubt* or faith so mild” (76–77, emphasis mine). The “‘awful doubt’ is of any orthodox view of nature that sees it as the direct handiwork of a benevolent God” (Bloom 295). In contrast, “the ‘faith so mild’ is the solemn and serene natural piety of Wordsworth” (Bloom 295, emphasis mine). Hence, the poem demonstrates a complex rendition of theism, which quite jarringly compares to Shelley's self-professed atheism. Shelley had earlier already asserted that “we invent [God's] general name, to conceal our ignorance of causes and essences” (*Necessity* 5) and that “the educated man ceases to be superstitious” (*Necessity* 6). In “Mont Blanc,” he struggles with the possibility of the existence of a higher deity responsible for the creation of the sublime, which is probably, as Salt points out, of Pantheistic nature, and which marks a progression in Shelley's thought from a “youthful mood of open denial and defiance” to the complexity of his “maturer years” (“Foreword” 1). If that deity exists, or if it is synonymous with nature itself, one “needs to recognize its potential malevolence. The mountain's voice, if understood, tells us that the power of good or evil is in our own wills, for we can choose how to utilize natural power” (Bloom 295). What is needed for “the mountain's voice” to be “understood” is precisely imagination, and then the mountain, like the tiger, diffuses political and revolutionary inspiration by its sheer intensity:

Fast clouds, shadows, and sunbeams; awful scene,  
Where power in likeness of the Arve comes down,  
From the ice-gulfs that gird his secret throne,  
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame  
Of lightning through the tempest,—thou dost lie,  
The giant brood of pines around thee clinging (15-20).

In conclusion, it is vital to remark that, when reading Blake's “The Tyger” and Shelley's “Mont Blanc,” religion, imagination, and revolution ought not to be viewed on their own, but as an inseparably cohesive matter of discussion. Each of them is elemental in understanding the other, and together they form a dialectic of “searching out the nature of the hidden power that governs thought and the universe” (Bloom 293). Both the tiger

and the mountain are mysterious entities standing before the eyes of the poet; in both cases, the poet questions its origin and that origin's relation to his own imaginative capacity, and both entities unquestionably herald a politically potent lesson. Such intertwining reaffirms Bloom's statement that "the outward form of the inward grace of Romantic imagination was the French Revolution, and the Revolution failed" (2). After the failure of first the Revolution, and then of Napoleon, both poets turned inwards and made social questions a matter of one's imagination. Again, it should not be understated that Blake's Tyger is imaginary and not in any sense real, yet it is still wholly comparable to Shelley's mountain, since in both cases, the emphasis is on the origin and the functional end of the force, and all (imaginative) descriptions in the middle serve to point either backwards toward the former, or forwards toward the latter.

## END NOTES

- 1 This essay takes as a given the fact that "in Milton's cosmography the upper part of the Universal Sphere relates to heaven, whereas the nadir of this sphere encompasses precincts of hell" (Miner 484).



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