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Selfhood And Redemption In Blake's Songs

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Contrary States and Their Psychological Continuum

If one reads each poem in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* for evidence of the chief character's functioning psychology in the world of the poem, one finds that a pattern of redemption emerges for the *Songs* as a whole. Though such critics as Frye, Gleckner, and Bloom are aware of a gradual progress in the *Songs* from Innocence to Experience, and with the ideal of organized Innocence beyond, they rely on a knowledge of Blake's redemptive process as it is identified in the prophecies and other works for crucial elements of their critical structure of the *Songs*.¹ In this method, Blake's universe is identified in fairly large terms derived from all of his poetry and prose, and then the *Songs* are analyzed with fairly extensive reference to that rich and suggestive context of meaning. I doubt that anyone who has read all of Blake can avoid being affected by a sense for the whole as he reads the *Songs*, and I am not about to recommend an exclusive address to the *Songs*. Nor do I wish to suggest that the readings produced by Frye, Gleckner, Bloom, and others, along with readings that adduce a special context in which to consider the *Songs*—the idea of pastoral, or the eighteenth-century debate about education and childhood²—are not accurate and extremely useful to students of Blake. I wish only to claim that reading the *Songs* from the "inside," to a much greater extent than has been usual, with an eye to the functioning psychology of the chief characters, will yield evidence for defining not only various states of Innocence and states of Experience the *Songs* have been shown to

represent but also the psychology underlying the passage from one to the other and beyond. Though it is a commonplace for criticism about the *Songs* to say that a character is in this or that degree of Innocence or Experience, no study has concerned itself with the psychological process *as* process, of movement from one state to another, a process I believe to be evidenced in the *Songs*.

The comprehensiveness of religious archetypal structures to which Blake's works have been convincingly referred, in terms so full and adequate it seems impossible to enlarge the territories of Blake's meaning, has proved a blessing. The works of Damon, Frye, Frosch, Fox, and Gallant come most immediately to mind.³ But the very excellence of this scholarship, which has guided us all, may obscure a crucial issue and mislead us to a doubtful conclusion. I believe it may be too generally assumed that the paradigm of redemption in Blake's work—Selfhood formed, Selfhood examined, Selfhood annihilated—is amply understood. But the combination of Hebrew prophetic, Christian, and psychological terms used to discuss the paradigm, though identifying it well enough, has not articulated it in terms most likely to move us so that we may be said to share in its operation rather than to observe it. I believe such terms are available and that they derive from the psychology out of which states and changing states of characters in the *Songs* are generated.

It was not until Blake wrote *Milton* that he used the terms "Selfhood," "Self-examination," "Self-annihilation." By that time he had very clear notions about the redemptive process these terms represent, notions heavily qualified by his sense for the difficulty of its success. He knew the mind to be a complex instrument, so profoundly and unconsciously committed to saving the life of the body in which it was located that its other love, eternity, seemed remote. Blake's poetical development from the *Songs* to the long poems, by way of the shorter prophecies, seems to be in part the record of his earlier recognition of this dark complexity at the same time that it is a new means of giving it shape. In the prophecies he works to characterize redemption in universal terms, making use of characters bigger than life. We understand the general psychology of their spiritual quest, but so far, at least, we understand much more abstractly than we would wish to. This is not the place to argue the precise reasons for Blake's change of poetic mode. Indeed there is probably no very solid evidence on which to base such an argument. The relevant fact for my present purpose is that his epic poems, which presumably give an appropriate magnitude to his perennial concern—humanity's redemption—also remove it from the

world of the *Songs*, in which we encounter characters who may help us to recognize it immediately. Almost as complicated as *Milton* in their totality, the *Songs* are nevertheless made up of separated elements, the individual poems, which we may at a first level regard discretely. Each one with its illustration treats a psychological state that both masks and reveals the mind passing through that state or arrested by it. Each one provides us with an opportunity for seeing such operations as the formation of Selfhood, the function of Selfhood, the reflexive regard of Selfhood, the failed attempt to circumvent Selfhood, the partial or momentary dissolution of Selfhood, the vision beyond Selfhood. The many studies of the *Songs*, accurate though they may be in their readings of individual poems, treat them with what may be too heavy an emphasis on their representation of divided entities in want of an act of union—the marriage of child and adult, lamb and tiger, world and otherworld, day and night. There can be no doubt that the *Songs* imply such unions through the juxtaposition of these and other polarities, which are essential to our understanding them. But underlying the poles of thought or being, and their implicit marriages, is a psychological continuum, important elements of which have yet to be identified. Psychologically considered, the *Songs* include their own act of union.

Though it is the readings that will show the limits of value of this view of the *Songs*, I believe the accidents of my own mental life which brought me to the view may have their interest too. Such attempts at revelation have their own limits and dangers, of course. But my reader may judge. What follows is a highly schematized history of my response to Blake's work, especially the *Songs*.

At the heart of my feelings about Blake's poetry is a sense for his frequent presentation of minds utterly exposed to experience—bare, sensitized minds, highly vulnerable to the people and things around them, and yet somehow not aware of what they endure. At the same time, I am also affected by a sense of Blake's power to imply or show that the uncompromised regard of this exposure to pain is possible, even necessary. His way of treasuring vulnerable characters, often ignorant of their own psychological state, is to regard them steadily. Though all poets make deep life stand still, no poet reaches deeper into life or arrests it more significantly for our scrutiny.

Closely allied is my strong sense that Blake's metaphors very often turn on the idea of death. It is the subject on which he draws to identify the basis of human vulnerability. In Blake's world it is death that limits us to

mortality, death that requires us to accommodate ourselves to the natural world or perish, death that defines the natural world in which we live. When I first read the *Songs*, I had just been exposed to the risk of death in war for some months, and though I had no doubt that Blake understood death's ubiquitous presence in many disguises—the garden of love is filled with graves; chimney sweepers are locked in black coffins; the Raven of death nests in the man-made tree of holy Mystery; the cycle of life in London begins in the marriage Hearse; man and fly are married in death; the Little Black Boy anticipates deliverance from social prejudice by leaving forever his unalterable black body; some nameless power dared to clasp the Tyger's deadly terrors—I thought I might be overreading its force for him. But as time passed, several strands of evidence served to reinforce rather than to diminish my first powerful impression.

At Thel's grave plot, the vision of life as hostile and deadly seemed to me like much of Blake's poetry, from the *Songs* through the prophecies, to combine human vulnerability and the steady regard of threatening forces. Though the two functions are often divided, so that, for example, "London's" young Harlot is vulnerable, while "London's" speaker (in some sense vulnerable himself) looks steadily at her vulnerability, Thel experiences both functions in full measure. True, she is enabled by her creator, Blake, to flee the world in which death figures prominently, but until she does, she sees death everywhere, and it promises to define the life she contemplates. Neither blaming Thel for giving up the chance for a life of natural experience nor congratulating her for turning away very sensibly from a bad scene seemed to me a reasonable way of handling her vision of things. Blake's treatment of death, viewed with an eye to her psychology, left me feeling that there was no simple resolution of the dilemma the poem represents. It also made me think of Blake's Self-examination and Self-annihilation, and of his Jesus, whose sacrificial death sets us free and yet leaves each of us struggling individually for redemption, and of Albion's repeated dying in *Jerusalem*. Obviously much in Blake's work turned on death and the perceptions of life it begets and on death and our ways of responding to it imaginatively. These conclusions were not new in Blake studies, but they seemed to me to occupy a place of much greater significance than the amount of time spent on them in the criticism implies they might have.

The very first sentences of David Erdman's Preface to the *Blake Concordance* gave a certain palpable support to my view that the poet's interest in death was marked, and they also offered presumptive evidence for my

belief that Blake's readers make less of the fact than they might reasonably do. Erdman begins:

Each new concordance brings its particular surprises, those most immediately accessible being some of the words that come out at the top of the frequency count—or at the bottom. We may have expected to find MAN, LOVE, ETERNAL, and EARTH among Blake's most used words, but not DEATH so near the top or NIGHT so far ahead of DAY.⁴

In fact, the only words that occur more frequently than "death" in the poetry are "all," "O," "upon," "Los," "like," "as," "Albion," and "man." In short, the only words that might be reckoned words of substance ahead of "death" in frequency are "all," "Los," "Albion," and "man," and two of them are proper nouns. But how he uses the word (and those closely related to it) is the important thing. A psychologist perhaps unique in the combination of his great sensitivity and great detachment, Blake almost never uses it to refer to physical death. Without morbidity, he associates "death," "dead," and their proxies with the fallen world that imposes itself on us—the world through which we move as we live our lives, stumbling "all night over bones of the dead."⁵ They help to characterize our natural and our social context. Or he uses them to suggest a sense of ourselves or a point of view we have adopted, often unconsciously, as a result of being imposed upon by the world of death around us: "They clothed me in the clothes of death." One way or another, Blake lets us know that death does not simply mark the human terminus we cannot avoid, the time and place of our dissolution, though it is precisely the fear that it may do so, he understands, that gives death its power over us. Aware that we are unconsciously intimidated by it, he treats death dynamically, as a conditioning force variously disguised in the world around us, and as a force we incorporate into our unconscious life as we accommodate ourselves to the threats it poses in natural life, in order that we may survive.

I knew Blake was not alone in his sensitivity to death as a proximate force in our daily lives. Many of his predecessors for a hundred and fifty years or more before the publication of the *Songs* had left evidence of their preoccupation with the subject, which roughly parallels the emergence of highly individualized Protestant sects and the philosophical regard of the New Science. This long-lived and complicated interest in death may be said to have been brought to resolution in a not entirely satisfactory way with the

posthumous publication of Hume's *Essays on Suicide, and the Immortality of the Soul* in 1783.⁶ There Hume argues that we have only that control over life and death represented by our power to do away with ourselves, a power he believes we have every right to exercise. But he discounts the possibility of an afterlife, as if to settle the disturbing matter once and for all. Most others who wrote on the subject were either personally moved to reveal their sense of loneliness and uncertainty in the face of death—John Donne, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, and hundreds more.⁷ Or they sought to control death by incorporating it into a system of things that reduced its power to harass the imagination. Often, existing religious systems that had grown powerless to help the anxiety of doubt were modified to accomplish this reduction of death's disturbing presence. Or entirely secular activities, from the institution of charity hospitals and soup kitchens to the resuscitation of the apparently dead by scientific means, were undertaken to hold death back.⁸

It seemed apparent that despite Blake's interest in social reform and his invention of a psycho-Christianity (both were hallmarks of the response to death among his predecessors and contemporaries), he was decidedly unlike the others. Certainly he shared with them an inescapable heritage. Protestant man, though not every Protestant, by the logic of his religious position, might very well suppose himself individually responsible for arranging the terms of his own covenant with God—a lonely job, full of doubt. And the heirs of the New Science, unless they had religious faith, found themselves without the sure means of appraising the nature of their relationship to the physical universe they occupied. It seemed to operate in accordance with immutable mechanistic laws requiring neither God nor man for their continuance, a world of dead ratios without human meaning. Without meaning, life is uncertainty, anxiety, the threat of nonentity, death. It was in this context that Cambridge Platonism, Christian mortalism,⁹ and Humean skepticism were formulated, along with many other religious and secular structures, the net effect of each being to reduce death's power to give pain. Sensitive and introspective as he was, Blake could no more have escaped this heritage than he could have chosen to be born in a different age, or, like Thel, chosen to remove himself from the grave plot to a different place, where there was no death. But instead of locating death reductively in a new or resurrected system, or, like Hume, naturalizing the idea of death by relentlessly identifying human limitations, Blake made its effects on our mental life the chief object of his regard. As sensitive as Thel to death's disguised presences, he was also able to do what she could only

avoid—to look at it steadily, without loss of sensitivity and without loss of detachment.

It was with this reinforced sense that death is indeed a very important subject for Blake, and that he treats it not morbidly but as a conditioning force in the world around us and as a force we incorporate so that it defines us no less than the world in which we live, that I have interpreted the *Songs* in the present study. Instead of representing death primarily as the frightening power that dissolves life, Blake sees its functions and transformations at work in the minds of his characters. Death becomes the variably disguised object of his scrutiny, out of which he generates a psychology of redemption. But in keeping with the dynamic power of death and the range of meanings it may imply, Blake's redemption is not a system one may adopt "philosophically." It is rather a process one may try to make a part of one's imaginative life, a process that makes use of a disciplined introspection, working at often hidden feelings.

I will be reading the *Songs* with three ideas in mind. For the moment, it will be useful to anticipate these ideas in isolation. First, as I have stressed now in various ways, Blake often talks about both the natural and the human-made worlds in the terms of death and its hold on the imagination. Second, Blake may be said to prefer over his other characters those who have come to understand that death fills the world in many shapes (as social evil, as formal religion, as parents' education of children), who are sensitive enough to see that in their earlier lives they have been coerced by its threatening presences, and who are brave (detached) enough to survive the emotional consequences to themselves of such disturbing recognitions. And third, taken as a whole, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is primarily a record of the coercion of mental life, covering both the psychological consequences of such coercion and the possibility of getting past it.

It would be hard to overemphasize the seriousness and intensity of Blake's concern, directly expressed in "To Tirzah," that all of us have been conditioned by a threatening environment or by one of its representatives; we have been "moulded" by the Mother of our "Mortal Part," so that our "Nostrils Eyes & Ears" are bound, our senses and our beings limited. The threatening world around us determines what we see, what we feel, and what we become, a mere function of mortality's requirements for survival; but we scarcely know at all that it is so. If we did, there would be no moments of discovery of the sort we find in the speaker's obviously new recognition of his mortal mother's hold on him in "To Tirzah." We do not know that we yield to coercion, necessarily yield, it turns out, and yet yield

at great cost. And we are not in a position to know what we become as a result of our unconscious yielding, nor by what process we have been made what we are.

It is this threatening aspect of our earthly predicament that Thel identifies in her vision of the grave. Blake's poetry argues as if we are all controlled unconsciously by such a view of things, unless we can somehow discover our confinement of vision and accept the conscious threat of death such recognition includes. Imagine that Thel had accommodated herself to her own vision of the grave by rationalizing its deadly qualities into something more benign, that she had learned to live in that falsely benign context and had *become* what she had learned. What would it take for her to change? As it is, Thel escapes the threatening predicament by refusing to join life. Like the speaker of "To Tirzah," the rest of us have no such option. To survive in the world Thel sees, which is the world we see, our minds distort the terrible truth to make it bearable, as Blake implies in several of the *Songs*. Here it may be enough to point out that the emblem of humanity's need to rationalize its predicament is that shortly after the Fall "Mercy changed Death into Sleep." Death threatens, and to flee its presence nonphysically (we do not have Thel's choice, after all) our minds distort its grim reality into something we can bear. As a result, we see with blinders on, and we become what we behold. The life-preserving mechanism paradoxically reduces life.

It is generally acknowledged that very few of the *Songs of Innocence* present characters unaffected by physical and emotional dangers in the natural world.¹⁰ The child in the "Introduction" and in "The Lamb" are among the few persons in these poems to feel an unqualified sense of union with the world around them. They are in the blessed state in which people and forces outside them seem "continuous" with, not inimical to, themselves, as Robert F. Gleckner, John Holloway, David Erdman, and others have in different ways shown.¹¹ On a cloud, the child of the "Introduction" expresses a series of unself-conscious commands that are obeyed, the result being the Piper's songs that are presumably to unite all children in joy. And the child-speaker of "The Lamb" is seen to be "identical" with the lamb and with Christ—"I a child & thou a lamb, / We are called by [Christ's] name." It is worth observing that in these poems, when a wish is immediately fulfilled, the wisher feels the continuity of events outside him with himself; what is inside his mind is given shape in his environment, which for the occasion, at least, appears absolutely congenial. Similarly, when one observes others with whom one feels identical, the world of

persons besides oneself appears entirely congenial. "Laughing Song," like the "Introduction" and "The Lamb," celebrates this affinity of inside with outside and of one with another. There, laughter and song are one; so are the children and the speaker; and so are the human voices and the voices of woods, stream, air, hill, meadow, and grasshopper.

Understood from the children's point of view, and not from Blake's or the Piper's or our own, Innocence is a condition of unself-conscious identification with the world and the people outside one.¹² Such unself-consciousness might be defined negatively as a failure on the part of the child to perceive inimical elements in the world. It has seen nothing that requires it to protect the organism that is itself, and so it has no sense of itself as a separate entity. Quite the contrary, it feels or thinks in terms of its continuity with persons, objects, and events around it. Few readers, of course, can join this world of unity, even when invited to do so by an unself-conscious speaker who lives there, as is the case in "Laughing Song": "Come live & be merry and join with me, / To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He." Self-consciousness, or the knowledge that the world is not a unity, restrains us in some degree from membership in joy's coherence. And this restraint may be said to represent part of the meaning of the poem. But we may also be able to imagine the unity, even recollect its qualities, by the exercise of selective memory from our own pasts. Certainly we can do more than simply distinguish the children of unity from ourselves; we can appreciate something of the nature of their way of seeing and being. We can both be "ourselves" and in some sense be them. Awareness of this capacity is important for an understanding of the *Songs*.

What about the other *Songs of Innocence*? Do they not, as various critics observe, register a world of sorrow and disillusion? The answer depends on whose point of view one takes. The reader may see in them a world of sorrow. Obviously the Chimney Sweeper and the Little Black Boy are both children driven very hard by a cruel society. Or Blake the man may be thought of as using irony in order to express his anger at society's treatment of the boys. The last line of "The Little Black Boy" and the last of "The Chimney Sweeper" both undercut the palliating vision earlier presented by the child of the poem. "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" may of course be read as Blake's ironic way of rendering illusory the comfort of Tom Dacre's dream. "And be like him and he will then love me" may be Blake's ironic way of rendering illusory the comfort of the Black mother's lesson; if the Black Boy would rather be loved by the white than to accept his mother's view of him as especially benefited by experience,

what good is her lesson, after all? But for the moment consider these *Songs of Innocence* from the point of view of the children who experience their action rather than from the point of view of the reader or Blake. It is the children, finally, who dwell in Innocence or leave that state, and not we or Blake. It is their point of view, in and out of Innocence, that provides a means of understanding their psychology. Let us assume both the Chimney Sweeper and the Little Black Boy to be consistent in their attitudes from first to last. The reader then would have to conclude that "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" was literally intended by the speaker. And it would follow that he was taken in by Tom Dacre's dream. That is, one would understand that the speaker accepts the rationalization the dream amounts to, masking and transforming as it does the deadly social present of the chimney sweepers with a promise of heavenly protection. A full reading offered later will provide more evidence for this way of looking at the poem.

Read with the same expectations for consistency, the Little Black Boy's "And be like him and he will then love me" underscores a similar presentation of social evil and the speaker's psychological escape from that evil. What is most important about the last line of "The Little Black Boy" is that it permits the reader to see the mind of the child working at two levels, quite self-deceivingly. At one level the boy accepts his mother's lesson so thoroughly that he recounts the occasion of its delivery to him with unself-conscious pleasure—"She took me on her lap and kissed me"—and then he repeats the lesson verbatim, surely an act of faith in its efficacy. But at another level, it turns out, he makes it something very different from what it claims to be, namely, the promise of a future state in which his spiritual superiority (which his mother tries to get him to realize he enjoys in the *present* life) will enable him to help the English boy. Instead, he finds in it a reason for believing he can become enough like the white boy for the white boy to love him. In effect, the Black Boy has both accepted his mother's lesson and repudiated it, by using it, inappropriately, to cope with the problem it was intended to transcend.¹³

If the children of other *Songs of Innocence* are similarly moved to rationalize their early recognitions of danger to themselves, their first apprehensions of mortality, then it may be appropriate to redefine Innocence so that it includes, in addition to the child's sense of unself-conscious identification with the world and the people outside him, his unself-conscious will to prolong that sense in the face of evidence that might be expected to displace it. It is precisely the weight of such evidence that has

encouraged readers to see disillusion in *Songs of Innocence*, or to see Blake's irony working to undercut the children's improbable willingness to maintain their faith, though that willingness seems not to have been well identified or understood. But the weight of evidence ought not to obscure the fact that these children *know not what they do*. Read with the child's point of view in mind, the poems reveal two crucial facts about the departure from Innocence. First, it is a departure reluctantly undertaken, and second, the forces initiating that departure seem to precipitate unconscious mental operations, ultimately self-deceiving or defensive in nature.

All of the other *Songs of Innocence* do not as explicitly support the thesis I have proposed as do the two I have so far considered. But the others fall readily into one of the two categories I have identified, or they include elements of both in a special equilibrium. That is, they present characters who feel unself-consciously united with the world, or characters who unself-consciously prolong that feeling in the face of adverse evidence, or they join the two. Along with the "Introduction," "The Lamb," and "Laughing Song," the first group includes "The Shepherd," "Spring," and "Infant Joy." In addition to "The Little Black Boy" and "The Chimney Sweeper," the second includes "A Cradle Song," "Night," "A Dream," "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found" considered as a unified pair, and "On Another's Sorrow." "The Echoing Green" and "Nurses Song," both of which include grown-ups sympathetic to innocents who feel unself-consciously at home in the world, but grown-ups who do not unself-consciously share the innocents' vision, provide a psychological bridge to the third group, in which a firm and realistic adult view seems to correct the vision of congenial innocence or to admonish adults who may misunderstand that innocence—"The Blossom," "Holy Thursday," and "The Divine Image."

These three last-named poems are themselves a bridge to *Songs of Experience*, which present characters who of their own accord address or who are made to address the forces of death in the world outside them. Self-conscious of danger, or somehow urged or otherwise moved to become conscious of it, they confront their trouble or they feel the pain of it. If they try to rationalize or otherwise dispose of their difficulties, as in different ways Ona and the Sick Rose seem to do, they are brought up short by editorial indictment or in a confrontation with another character, so that, unlike the Little Black Boy or The Chimney Sweeper of Innocence, no comfort is available to them. Psychologically the "obverse" of his counterpart in Innocence, the Chimney Sweeper of Experience knows he has been

imposed upon, and he resents it: "because I am happy, & dance & sing, / They think they have done me no injury." His words make it clear that he has an unvarnished view of his own predicament, but they also reveal that he has begun to appraise the mental operations of his mother and father, who, as he sees it, are able to believe, somehow, that they have done him no harm, when of course they have "clothed [him] in the clothes of death." And beyond that knowledge, he shows a further psychological sophistication by associating his parents with other creators of a false heaven: "God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery." Though the Sweeper's association has social and religious levels of meaning, I wish here to stress only the acute psychological consciousness with which it shows this child of Experience to be endowed. Unlike the Chimney Sweeper of Innocence, he is fooled neither by himself nor by others, at one level of consciousness, at least. Somehow he has begun to see things "for what they are." What he sees is only a beginning, of course, but it marks a crucial difference between the children of Innocence and of Experience.

Among the other characters in *Songs of Experience* who see into their manipulation by persons, ideas, and institutions that make up their world, or who see into the manipulation of others, are the Little Vagabond, the School Boy, Lyca, and the speakers of "The Clod & the Pebble," "Holy Thursday," "The Little Girl Lost," "The Little Girl Found," "The Sick Rose," "The Angel," "My Pretty Rose Tree," "Ah! Sun-Flower," "The Garden of Love," "London," "The Human Abstract," "A Poison Tree," "A Little Girl Lost," "A Little Boy Lost," and "To Tirzah." In fact, the discovery of destructive psychological coercion to oneself is the chief subject of *Songs of Experience*, though needless to say the subject has many facets and gradations. It brings some of the characters in the poems to the threshold of control over their own lives through a new consciousness of their predicament, or it reveals through the speakers' observations to the reader the heavy failure of such visionary control.

As close readings of the *Songs* in the following chapters will make clear, the roots of psychological coercion run deep. For example, the parents who join God, Priest, and King in delivering their own son to the deadly life of a chimney sweeper, along with Ona's and Lyca's parents and with Tirzah, are themselves unconscious agents of institutions and attitudes long since invented to protect life against dangers that life fears without understanding. It would be simple indeed to think that Ona's complex guilt, related as it is in a dozen ways to the expectations for civilized living buried in the mind of a whole society, could be remedied by an enlight-

ened father. Though it is true that things might have been better at home for Ona—Lyca's parents are "better" in the matter of coercive conditioning, it seems; Tirzah is worse—no simple solution is available for her, any more than for her father, who is a product, with his daughter, of the same deadly heritage. His mother was a Tirzah of some sort, too.

Other *Songs of Experience*, by their very subject and tone, imply both a complexity of cautionary restraint in the mind's contours and the mind's occasional releases from such complexity. "The Fly," for all its mischievous paradox, raises clear questions about the uncertainties of the borderline between one being and another, and between one's own species of being and another. The speaker's recognition is not that he has been painfully imposed upon by another person or by some institutional system of things but that his conditioned sense of himself as "finite" and "identifiable" has been put into doubt or nullified. Here he is, and there is the fly, and then suddenly *he* is the fly, or at least he can no longer see a real difference between the fly and himself. Though this self-reflexive behavior may not be referred to the speaker's recognition and overthrow of coercive conditioning, it does mark the overthrow of his conventionally induced perception. He has experienced a minor vision of the truth of things beyond himself and yet including him. For reasons one can only guess at, he treats the vision comically. Similar and yet more portentous for self-discovery is the experience of "The Tyger's" speaker, whose vision results in his redefinition of God the Creator, and of his relationship with Him, the lamb, the Tyger, and with himself as well. Among the realizations thrust upon him is this one: that quite beyond what man may do to man, there are natural forces of destruction woven into the very fabric of the physical universe. These forces also need psychological management by those who want to be saved.

A few characters in *Songs of Experience*, far from being on the verge of some productive discovery about themselves or in the midst of discovery, seemed closed off from such a blessing altogether. The Nurse and the Sick Rose are two of these. Their presence in *Songs of Experience* reinforces the idea and the value of Self-examination nevertheless, for both of them are identified dramatically as psychologically wanting. The Nurse, contrasted with the Nurse of Innocence, identifies herself not only as confining in her treatment of the children who are her charges but as defeated in her view of life and of herself. She uses the knowledge that her adulthood is spent in "disguise"—that is, controlled by suppressed desire, which she seems to have no real means of handling—not as the beginning of Self-examination

but as a general indictment of life and as a threat about their own adult-hoods to the children. The Sick Rose is treated by the speaker as if it were a clinical case in need of diagnosis. Whatever its state may be, the Rose seems incapable of understanding and commenting on its own predicament. The most passive of Blake's characters in Experience (even the Sunflower and the Clod have a point of view), the Sick Rose endures defeat through an incapacity to engage life reciprocally. For the moment it will be enough to say that both of these characters, Nurse and Sick Rose, face serious unpleasantness, but unlike those on hard times in Innocence, they do not promote a happy delusion about their bad predicaments, and unlike most characters in Experience, their speech or other responsive behavior implies no constructive course of action. Their pasts control them. Indeed, they are their pasts.

It may be important to ask whether the voices of speakers, which I have understood to represent "characters," are not after all disembodied, so that I have invented an implausible critical fiction. I think the answer to the question is not to be found in a completely characterized mind available through any single voice in the *Songs*—no such completeness obtains. Nor is it to be found in a simple compositing of all the voices to build the "one mind" of the *Songs*. The voices vary enormously in emotional strength, intelligence, sensitivity, and temperament. But they all collect to suggest a continuing mental process, which, if not complete, is certainly full. It seems reasonable, finally, to think of the voices as speaking for characters, because so viewed, they contribute to a full sense of Blake's vision of the human predicament. And its representation, dynamic as it is, invites us as much to participate in the process it identifies as to consider it analytically.

Innocence and Experience, as I have so far treated them, imply a transition between the one and the other, during which the reluctance to acknowledge threats to life in Innocence (The Chimney Sweeper's rationalization, for example) gives way to the willingness to admit that something is very wrong, and perhaps to indict and correct the trouble. In fact, the *Songs* may be thought of as representing a continuous psychological process, an inevitable movement from the state of Innocence, in which (from the child's point of view) one enjoys an unself-conscious unity with one's surroundings, to an encounter with evidence that threatens life, such evidence being for a time displaced by rationalization, but later intruding into the conscious mind. At this point the mind may be thought of as in Experience by virtue of its inability to rationalize the threatening evidence (the Nurse), or a distinctly different matter, by virtue of its willingness to accept

it (the second Chimney Sweeper). Where the mind can no longer rationalize the evidence and yet cannot deal with the problem it represents, the evidence is likely to register as fear, pain, or the sense of defeat. Where the mind receives the evidence with knowledge enough to give it "meaning," the evidence becomes a problem that is understood to need a solution or a problem for which a solution is sought and sometimes found. For example, the speaker of "To Tirzah" believes he can explain the reasons for his circumscribed perception and the way to escape domination by his mother.

As I have already indicated, one ought probably to avoid expecting the "mind" of the foregoing model to reveal itself throughout the poems as a single human psychology or as consistently intelligent or consistently sensitive. Lyca seems to be healthy, whereas the Sick Rose is not; the speaker of "The Fly" is a metaphysician who makes and breaks analogies, whereas Ona seems hardly to know the most obvious implications of her actions; the speaker of "The Tyger" is struck deep by an aspect of creation, whereas the Sun-flower is weary of time. Individual though they are, these characters help to illuminate the psychological process that is the movement from Innocence through Experience, control of which is ultimately required by Blake's Self-annihilation, his remedy for death in the world and for the vision it generates. The alternative to such emotional "dying" into new life is to survive behind a wall of self-delusion, narrowly defined by the very threats to life one refuses unconsciously to acknowledge and to assimilate.

In the *Songs*, Blake tells us a good deal about the formation of the vision of death, the Selfhood that needs annihilation. Unless this accumulation of largely unconscious experience is recognized in some detail, the process of redemption—one's liberation from that accumulation—is likely to be understood more as an idea than as a deeply felt realization. It seems obviously in the spirit of Blake's way of writing and thinking to prefer the second to the first. The following chapter is based on this assumption. But before beginning it, I should like to say one more word about redemption here, a point reinforced, I believe, by much of what follows.

Blake's insistent treatment of redemption throughout his work results in the close reader's increasing sense of enrichment and complexity. But certain difficulties stand in the way of our appreciating this accretion. In the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* the psychology of redemption is detailed. Yet, as I have said, no single mind is a vehicle for its entire display. We see bits and pieces of the process implied by a wide range of quite

different kinds of characters in various predicaments, though of course the broad outlines of the process are implied by the psychological principle distinguishing (and uniting) the two sets of *Songs*. In the major prophecies, single characters do in fact annihilate the Selfhood, but it is not easy to infer in very full detail the psychology that sponsors the redemption. Certainly more evidence is given to us there than we can handle critically. At times the Self-annihilation seems an act of individual will and at times a gift of grace.¹⁴ In one sense these redemptions are individual; in another, universal. They may be understood to take place over great stretches of time and space, and yet they may be accomplished very locally, in a single pulsation of the artery. And finally, Blake's practical expectations for himself and others who attempt such redemption seem complicated. To leave off is to die; on the other hand, it seems there is no completing the process. According to Henry Crabb Robinson, Blake said as late as February 1826, "Every man has a Devil in himself, and the conflict between his *Self* and God is perpetually going on."¹⁵ Blake also tells us in the late Inscription in the Autograph Album of William Upcott (1826) that he was "Born 28 Novr 1757 in London and has died several times since."¹⁶ Apparently he realized in looking at himself that no complete annihilation of the Selfhood is possible. The mind is far too complicated for one to search deep enough into its dark pits and turns, or always to hold on to the burst or flicker of new vision one may experience there. Perhaps no consciousness is so penetrant as to keep the mind from protecting itself from more life than it can bear.¹⁷ Though these and other complications in Blake's redemptive world are unlikely to be reduced to easy symmetries, some of them, at least, may be clarified by enlargement.