

Maria STAMPA

*Caterpillar – Chrysalis – Butterfly**The Terrestrial and Celestial Struggles of Opposites
in William Blake's Poems and Paintings*

William BLAKE's poems and paintings are rich in singular topics and colours. His sensitivity toward the marginalized, the forgotten and the weak on one hand is combined with a penetrative attention pointed at the great, the mighty and the transcendent on the other hand. This broadness of interests predestines him to be more than a 'centric' artist – theocentric, anthropocentric or zoocentric. BLAKE is neither a mystic nor a realist. He is the bridge(s) between the three worlds. He has ears that can hear, he has eyes that can see and he has instincts that he can rely on. These abilities make him capable of calling the lapsed soul and the turned away earth to return to the starry floor and the watery shore that is given them till the break of day. He is the Bard. He leads our steps with his songs.

TIGER, TIGER, BURNING BRIGHT

Not only tigers are burning bright in William BLAKE's colourful imagery. In his understanding *a robin red breast in a cage puts all heaven in a rage* and *a dog starved at his master's gate predicts the ruin of the state*. A forgotten suffering of an animal reaches the great Beyond in ways unknown to humans.

BLAKE's animals play their stage roles in a silent way – one is a good omen, one a nemesis, one walks proudly in display of its power, one cries hidden in a corner. Silent, silent, burning bright...

But BLAKE sees the pendulum of power swing in both directions. The fire burns in silence and spreads unnoticed across the sleeping country. A mute beast makes empires decay and cries *j'accuse* in the Council of Angels. And the heavens are compassionate... "A Skylark wounded in the wing a Cherubim does cease to sing." The heavens do not hesitate to prove the human wrong. Haughty and wrong.

And so it is at times the human's silent friend who brings the reconciliatory message of the celestial spheres and becomes the sign of the times – "the Lamb misus'd breeds public strife and yet forgives the Butcher's Knife." A wronged lamb turns its dying eye onto the butcher, and its silent mouth leaves the cry in the soul. It cannot remain unheard.

BLAKE might want to keep it in between the lines, but it resounds from his words anyway: An animal is not *just* an animal. It is a messenger. Just like in ancient myths animals are turned into angels sent by the Providence to the human with a reproach for cruelty, an impetus for creativity and a word of consolation in sadness and anxiety. A tongueless fish talks into the ears of those who are able to hear its voice.

The life of animals is an indicator for the present and a prophecy for the future. The animals, however, do not play this role alone; they are together with the children and the infants. They need to be listened to, respected and taken the utmost seriously. They play an essential role in the very revelation of the transcendence, since "we are

led to Believe a Lie when we see not Thro' the Eye". They still carry in themselves the inborn knowledge and image of Transcendence that we lost on our way of reaching adulthood.

A HUMAN RED BREAST IN A CAGE

A human gets trapped. A powerless human sees the world through the bars of her or his cage. Like the robin red breast tied with shackles to the ground. "A Harlot's cry from Street to Street shall weave old England's winding Sheet."

But in a dark side street of a metropolis the unimportant suddenly becomes important. And William BLAKE looks hard to catch these moments that evaporate so fast. The deserted becomes decisive. A lonely harlot, a hungry chimney sweeper, a slaughtered lamb, a hunted hare and a wounded lark are in the spotlight of BLAKE's visionary poems. Mothers and fathers, who do not get tired of walking and weeping day and night looking for their lost little girl, are set as examples of how to read and live with the signs of the time. How to live a life of *mercy, pity, peace and love in a human dress*.

When it comes to the "crème de la crème" of the human power pyramid, BLAKE proves to be a person with an unscrupulous conscience and a sword-like tongue. He decides deliberately not to pay the "due" respect to self-declared and self-imposed authorities. The ephemeral worldly power can become an octopus that sows the seeds of unrest and suffering in the world. "The Strongest Poison ever known came from Caesar's Laurel Crown." A human red breast gets trapped in a cage made by another human's hand. In the fiery furnace of a smith instruments of pain are forged. "Nought can deform the Human Race like the Armour's iron brace."

William BLAKE exclaims in a verse that the *armour* of the deformed human is made of *cruelty, jealousy, terror, secrecy and selfish-love*. Having gained and developed these "adult" skills one points one's high-powered attention at what gives power: gold, gems, weapons and the doubt about the Transcendence's omnipresence.

In the sharp light of BLAKE's burning vision this mighty human is dressed in *forged iron*, her or his form appears as a *fiery forge*, her or his face a *furnace sealed* and her or his heart a *hungry gorge*. This human, this forged iron tree bears the fruit of deceit, the fruit of her or his own sealed brain. The way you set your bed determines the way you rest, the ancient Phoenicians said.

THE GREAT RED DRAGON AND THE WOMAN CLOTHED IN THE SUN

The deformed human becomes a superhuman in her or his sealed brain. A dragon. This dragon is depicted by BLAKE in his Biblical illustration of the apocalyptic antiposition of the *Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in the Sun*. The armoured human is dressed in this painting in the muscular body of the Dragon. The Dragon

faces the onlooker with his back – he does not seem to be able to come closer.

His face is indeterminable. It looks like a face of an infernal being in part, but one is unable to see the Dragon's entire countenance. His mighty tail symbolises his degenerated and tyrannical masculinity, and his whole appearance radiates power and dominance. He is in a combat position, ready to fight, ready to subdue.

The composition of the painting, however, leaves the observer with the impression that a substantial part of the story of the Dragon is not included in the image. The painting itself depicts the Dragon in a position that conceals rather than reveals. It looks as if the Dragon was hiding something crucial through the way he appears to the eye of the observer. As if his heart was outside the painting.

Fear and shame are present in the colours of the Dragon's fluidum in an encrypted way. They envelop him silently. They are intrinsically mingled with the colours of power, determination and superiority. They are part of the Dragon's nature. In spite of being frightening, the Dragon remains frightened himself. Afraid to show the whole of his being. Much rather, he turns the attention away from himself and aims it at the Woman, whom he is trying to subjugate.

William BLAKE suggests the shift from introspection to violence. The Dragon, shying away from the possibility of shedding light on his own wounded inside, ashamed of himself, bursts out in violence in the hope of attaining the missing part of himself.

The Woman Clothed in the Sun is neither a loser nor a winner at the present stage. It would be too early to determine the result of this celestial fight. Stars are sporadically depicted around them leading the eyes of the observer beyond the scene to realize that nothing can avoid the attention and presence of the Creator of all. Whether they realise it or not both the Dragon and the Woman remain contingent beings, dependent on the Beyond of the image.

The Woman is Clothed in the Sun. Her fighting style is singular. Strategically she is in defence, but her sun dress embodies her mighty weakness. She has learnt the art of warfare from the pigeon, from the red robin, from the lamb and from the wild deer. She can be captured, subjugated, ridiculed for some time, but she knows the two principles of life that make her capable of going through the world and through her days safely. The first one being that *human was made for joy and woe and these two are woven fine for one's soul*. These are the necessary materials for every truly human dress. Be it the dress of a woman or of a dragon. The



second is that *God appears and God is light to those poor souls who dwell in the night*.

The woman keeps one eye on the starry floor and the other one on the Sun that she is clothed in. Her power is that she is in the battlefield without doubts. She fights, she escapes, and she defends herself according to the necessity, according to the signs of the times. She is pictured in the painting not only as the female symbol but also as a symbol of the divine soul that is deep inside everyone who comes in touch with the painting. William BLAKE takes a side and expresses his faith that everyone is given the divine image and it is in a very special way present amongst the innocent ones, who need a safe shelter against the *dragon of power* – the animals, the infants, the weak, the outcasts and the poor.

BLAKE shouts into our partially deaf ears that often can hear only the sweet and frightening cry of the Red Dragon after having chosen adulthood, the timeless song of the Bard – *turn away no more from the starry floor that is given you till the break of day*.

EACH OUTCRY OF THE HUNTED HARE A FIBRE FROM THE BRAIN DOES TEAR

It is in one's brain that one forges the armour of the dragon. And it is again in the fiery furnace of the brain that one can melt the very same armour. Brain as the instrument of torture and brain as the instrument of mercy and pity.

Every human brain carries in itself the encoded potentialities of the Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in the Sun, of the laurel crown and the starry night. The child's faith and the adult's doubt.

Becoming is a common human vocation. The first step is the consideration of options, the second the taking of sides. BLAKE depicted the mighty signs and the mighty fights to learn from them. He brought together the whole animal world and the human world with the Apocalypse to stop our breathing and make us wonder about the divine images we carry in our mind, blood and skin. And in our self-made real world.

William BLAKE is standing on a bridge like a minstrel playing a song about the Great Divine Image that has a human form. And let us not be misled too often by our pre-concepts. Why should the human form not be embodied most perfectly in children and in all those who are ready to lose in order to gain, who are ready to die and sacrifice in order to save?

Becoming can in fact mean returning. Finding the source, the bridge and the *other dimension* that is in and beyond everything. Then the caterpillar can peacefully become a chrysalis, which in its due time shows the world its true beauty that for so long has been left unnoticed.

The Caterpillar on the Leaf

Repeats to thee thy Mother's grief.
Kill not the Moth nor Butterfly,
For the Last Judgement draweth nigh.
(William BLAKE: *Auguries of Innocence*)

Suggested Reading

BLAKE William, *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

BLAKE William, *Songs of Experience* (1794).

BLAKE William, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun* (1809).

Watercolour, 34.5 x 42 cm., Brooklyn Museum, New York.

<http://www.artcyclopedia.com/red-dragon-william-blake.html>.

Maria STAMPA was born in Porto, Portugal. She received her BA in History of Arts in her home town. Afterwards she moved to Barcelona, Catalunya to study literature and she graduated in 2003. Her Master Thesis focused on female images in the XVIIIth century mystical poetry. Recently she has been working as a free-lance illustrator. Her email address is maria_stampa@yahoo.com.