

CHRISTOPHER S. BRAIDER

APOLLONIAN EROS AND THE FRUITS OF FAILURE IN THE POETIC PURSUIT OF BEING:

Notes on the Rape of Daphne

Let me open by proposing for our collective meditations the myth relating the origin of the laurel crown — mark of poetic (and more generally literary) excellence and achievement, and insignia of the god of poetry (as god of much cognate else) himself as well.

It is said that Apollo conceived a violent passion for the wood nymph, Daphne, but that Daphne, cherishing her inviolate virginity, fled his embrace. As a god, of course, Apollo made short work of pursuit: the dark, untried interior withheld from his invasive, luminous probings was in the end to be his. Yet at the very instant in which the god overtook her, Daphne cried out to Gaia, Mother Earth, for help — and Gaia heard, and answered, transforming her on the spot into a bay or laurel tree. Weeping the loss, Apollo consoled himself by plucking a laurel branch, keeping it in remembrance of the nymph. And it is in this way that, as a sign of their divine ancestry and calling, the laurel descended to the poets — a talisman, tribal totem, and prize.¹

The myth suggests a great many things — and in the first instance the idea of poetry, glimpsed here *in the making*, as a pursuit: an ardent, a passionate, desiring. The “elemental passions of the soul”, with which we are here concerned, are not, then, merely something “in” literature in the sense of furnishing its theme or “original”. More than what comes to be figured or articulated in the space literature opens in our hearing, reading and imagining, they are what literature inherently is in itself. More than a mere depiction, expression or outpouring, literature is a modality of the passions, and in particular a mode of Eros, of desire: a way of *being* passionate — white hot — even under the cool constraint of form. And indeed, that this story should be told precisely of Apollo, god not only of poetry, but of *logos*, of language and reason, of language *as* reason, patron of both the prophetic and the therapeutic light, is important. So, too, is the fact that what he pursues here, that with which he seeks union as with his Aristophanic counterpart or alternative, his missing half, is a chthonian darkness: the womb of a

wood nymph, expression of an untamed, untainted Nature or *physis* — an incarnation of unreasoned Being itself. There is thus in Apollo, too, a darkness, to which he *succumbs*: an erotic, even Dionysiac frenzy pursuing its likeness in the concealed (and fruitful) interior of the feral girl-child of the black earth, mother of all things. That this pursuit, this compulsion, may entail the luminous discipline of numbers in no way alters its fundamental nature, its kinship with the dark earth that, at another level, lies over against it as its opposite.

But there is a second teaching, as significant as this first. For in the light of the myth that recounts its origin, the laurel crown, token of poetic prowess sealing the consummation of the pursuit, turns out to be an *ironic* symbol. It stems, after all, and thus, by direct lineal descent, recapitulates, a signal failure: Apollo does, in the end, catch *something*, but it is not Daphne; he is denied the prize in the very act of attaining it. The poet may well capture the object for which the verses reach, for which the marvellously prehensile tendrils of the linguistic web tend their snare, but it is only on condition of its turning into *something else* — that is, exactly, into some *thing*. Literature appears in Greek thought as destined most to fail when it most succeeds — as condemned to endure, in consummating the desired union with its object, a metamorphosis that robs it of the true end of its quest. Poetry, as pursuit, as living process, must always, fatally, end in the *poem*, finite, truncated, inanimate — bereft of the energy that engendered it: a heat-dead vestige, a leaving, a trace. To be sure, in the myth, the tree by which the change is rendered stands *rooted* and, *being* rooted, inscrutably lives with the life it continues to draw from the sustaining chthonian mother. And to this extent the thing stands, even, for a *sign* — bears witness, albeit of something other than what was originally, naively sought. Yet what it witnesses, as being mysteriously connected with the nymph who for ever flees the god's luminous embrace, though in one sense more pronounced for the withholding, standing out more sharply against a more visible horizon, remains ineradicably apart — buried beyond any power of direct reckoning or recall.

But the remarkable thing, a kind of Grace delivered, precisely, in the way in which the tree comes to *stand for a sign*, is the degree to which the metamorphosis transforms not just the object of the original desire, but the desire itself, and the space that desire inhabits (the space it engenders) in the field of our attention to the tale. Though it *ends* there, the myth does not *close* on the sealing of the failure, the inability to

name its opposite principle, its other; it points, rather, to what was not *there* before, while in the frenzied grip of the initial desire — to what was not there before for us, either, in the grip of whatever desire brought us, hearers and readers, to the tale. The failure may in fact be the condition for a subsequent, more fundamental success — for literature's real as opposed to merely apparent triumph. The tree does, after all, by synecdoche, stand as a sign for, and to this degree unveils, the chthonian mother, Gaia herself, she who *works* the metamorphosis — the mark of her autonomy, and sovereignty: her self-determined imperviousness to the god of language and light. As the proof, then, of Nature's, of Being's, resistance, yet a proof poetry itself, *by* its failure, is alone capable of eliciting, the tree, the tale, the poem stand, miraculously, for Being itself grasped in what most constitutes it: its irreducible otherness with respect to the illuminating and desiring god.

Still, this unmastered autonomy, which feels very like what Heidegger understands by the Greek *physis*, the special Greek intuition of Being betrayed, through Latin translation, in the formation of our own, domesticated concept of "nature"², is best construed, not as something *prior* to the tale, this pellucid, entirely Apollonian figuration of Apollo's defeat. It emerges, instead, as something the tale itself, as it were inadvertently, incalculably, makes room for — a being the tale *brings into* being even if, as we turn to it, we confirm that it cointends with Being as such, with what was "already there" in any case from the first. As a temporal mode, a way of framing and experiencing time, Eros — the great instigator from whom springs the action recorded in the tale — projects forward, not back. Indeed, what is most wrong, most unwholesome in the teachings of Freud, say, or Lacan, is the way in which, mesmerized by the *representational* dimension of erotic longing, they figure Eros as pure *repetition*: the automatized redoubling of what remains essentially and for ever the same.³ But the likeness at which Eros fundamentally aims is, perhaps, less mimetic than proleptic: an *issue* in which the state of the world is changed, if only arithmetically, by the addition of the form of its own reproduction. As the mother of all things, as the mother even, if not especially, of the gods, Gaia is, of course, always there before whatever Apollonian (or Erotic) determination may be given her; the role she comes to play in the erotic con-figuration, the cosmic "parlor romance", is at least in part conditioned by the form in which she *lends* herself to it. Yet who and what she is remains accessible, and meaningful, only pro-spectively, in-finitely, as

the further horizon of the failure of each fresh determination — as who and what re-forms and evolves in direct proportion to each successive act by which we labor to determine her. Our growth in the awareness of Being is growth in Being itself, if only because each fresh failure to determine Being, to circumscribe and totalize it, marking anew its abundance, reveals a face it could not otherwise have worn. There is, in short, a special lesson for us in that *other* German word for Reality — the one to which Wittgenstein was so addicted: *Wirklichkeit*, i.e., “reality” as that aspect of the world, each time new-minted and astonishing, disclosed solely in response to the given *question* that we ask. Is that *really* true — *wirklich*? Even the Ness-ness of the answer takes the shape of the question for its root.

But to the extent that whatever truth there may be in what I say about literature, as quest and as question, will, in accordance with my own saying, itself bear the likeness of the question, the necessity of the question as such must be faced. I have put a question to literature as itself putting a question to Being, or better, as being itself open to question in its *relation* to Being: a question on whose occasion, in the answer it gives back, Being as such may succeed in divulging something of what it is — the vast horizon that lies over against our erotic importunities. The time has come to ask, concretely, what such a question would look like; the time has come to *read*. And since, following Apollo’s lead, the fruitful moment seems to fall at the point where the original quest breaks down, what I propose to read here, as a first, approximate response, is a text — as it happens, a poem — that articulates itself precisely in the ambiguous space defined by the awareness of failure — a poem, indeed, like the myth, engendered by the consciousness of its unavoidable, yet fecund undoing. That the poem in question should be by that most passionate (even demonically so) of English poets, William Blake, is, of course, entirely appropriate. Equally appropriate, however, is the fact that it is virtually *unreadable* — the “Introduction” to a nearly unreadable sequence, the *Songs of Innocence*:

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child
And he laughing said to me

Pipe a song about a Lamb:
So I piped with merry chear.
Piper pipe that song again —
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of merry chear
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read —
So he vanish’d from my sight
And I pluck’d a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain’d the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs,
Every child may joy to hear.

Now, as I say, the interest of this poem lies in the fact of its being virtually unreadable — and “unreadable”, first of all, in the most obvious, pejorative sense: a poem whose ostensive surface, as it comes to meet us, is not just unpromising, but quite embarrassingly bad. It is, indeed, a prime example of the kind of thing that, right down to the publication of Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry*, guaranteed that Blake would go almost universally unread. But it is “unreadable”, too, in the sense that what is meant to be read, the poem Blake has truly written, is not the one its surface immediately presents — the one that so signally fails. Even today, now that we have, presumably, learned more or less how to read Blake, both in the mythographic eccentricities of the visionary and prophetic works and in the scient *naïvetés* of the *Songs of Innocence* themselves, the “Introduction” to the *Songs of Innocence* is one of the those texts we hurry past to reach the acknowledged “keys” of the series — “The Echoing Green” and “The Chimney Sweeper”, or “The Divine Image”, “Little Boy Lost” and “The Lamb”. Mind you, these “key” poems themselves largely exist for us (as, besides, Blake himself partly intended them to) to set up what we regard as the genuinely significant poems: the *Songs of Experience* — “London” and

the second "Chimney Sweeper", or "The Fly", "The Garden of Love" and "The Tyger". Yet as the poem that, introducing the *Songs of Innocence*, in a real sense initiates the entire canon understood, not as a fixed body of set texts, but as a dynamic process, the "Introduction" occupies a privileged position — and not least because, in ways that illumine everything to follow, the special nature and necessity of the process, of the *writing*, that it inaugurates, it is itself aware of and, what is more, deliberately practises those very qualities that make it unreadable.

Let us, then, on this basis, as this "song", in its capacity as a *writing*, so notably both allows and bids us do, turn back and read it again. By which, of course, I mean, as the foregoing suggests, read it as though for the first time.⁴ Where the manifest and (this point, too, is important) vocal aspects of the *poem as song* encourage us to move on to something more obviously interesting, why not look again, taking Blake's introductory song more slowly, in its *text*?

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee

The poem opens, formally and anecdotally, in what looks like immediate, organic unity with Nature. Certainly, it displays all of the more obvious *signs* of what both pre-Romantic poets and first-generation Romantics would regard as unity with Nature — the *écriture blanche* of the age.⁵ The assumption of the naive form of the Rhyme, the simplified vocabulary, the espousal of a pastoral, arcadian, Edenic content and setting, the apparent shadowless focus on the child and the Lamb — all of this bespeaks untroubled Innocence indeed. So, too, albeit more subtly, does the undifferentiated "piping" in which each of the first two lines opens. Introduced by a pair of subordinate verbal phrases in which the form of the verb, the present participle, gives us, for the moment at least, an indefinite, continuous action leaving open the question of who pipes, and when, and why, the poem begins as it were with *piping itself*, untimed and unauthored, simply *there*, "down the valleys wild". It is in fact, for a moment, in the suspension of the initial, continuous present, as though the piping existed wholly in and of itself as a kind of unpremeditated state of nature. There is, then, for the time, no subject, no Ego to whom the piping can be adduced — only this pure, unreflecting music, the direct outpouring of an emotion and a life that have, and need, no name, being altogether *in* the music that immediately expresses them.

And yet the music does after all *express* something; and though it does not itself offer the name, the mere fact of expression opens the way for that event which, in the next two lines, interrupts the seamless flow of the initial piping, silencing it in a moment of reflection:

On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me.

Instantly, with the shift from the continuous to the narrative, "historical" form of the verb, time and place are fixed: a distinct historical configuration emerges, irreversibly singular, differentiated. And with this differentiation of the action comes a definite *subject*, an "I" whose advent marks, in turn, a decisive loss of the innocence in which, as which, the poem begins. With the combined specification of the base tense of the main verb and of the "I" who speaks it, the poem subtly breaches its initial solidarity with the ethical premise of its own form. True, what "I" saw on the cloud is a *child*, albeit, as we presently learn, a rather special one. Still, seeing the child opposite, as *not*-*"I"*, the piper already hints that he is not (or is no longer) himself quite a child. And the piper's "I" as such has in any case this structural peculiarity, unknown in third-person forms, of existing *doubly*, at a curious remove from its immediate content. As a narrative sign, here, "I" names a past. Yet as a sign whose basic meaning consists, before and apart from anything else, in denoting who actually *says* it on this present occasion of discourse, it names the past solely in the perspective of the *present* — the position, here and now, in which "I" speak. Thus, the master-sign under which this "introduction" to the *Songs of Innocence* is written proves, by virtue of its very form, saturated with a sense of a personal past over against a present itself established at that *distance* from the past in which "I" no longer simply, naively live, but sciently, reflexively recall and recount it. The *Songs of Innocence* reach us, here where we stand in the present of discourse, under cover of a sign of *experience* — an experience, moreover, colored by self-consciousness inasmuch as, in the recital, the past, even as *my* past, has become the *object* of the song. The double function of the narrative "I" presents an image of self *detached* from self, of self *turned toward* self in the effort to invoke and name what it once was, and is no more — the sometime innocent that is its shadow.

Still, the emergence of the self-narrative moment marked for the first time in line three merely explicates and clarifies something already latent in the very title of the poem: the fact that, as an "introduction" to

the *Songs of Innocence*, the poem is not itself one *with*, but is, rather, the belated product of meditation *on* innocence. It is not, then, itself a "song of innocence" in the sense of springing directly *from* it, like those songs, remotely heard now across the distance that has suddenly opened up between their past and our present, in the original "piping". It is, instead, only a "song of innocence" in the sense of being *about* it — the song, perhaps, the Serpent sings, creeping along the outer wall of the mythic Garden, seeking a point of entry to the paradise lost.⁶ This very account of the origin of the *Songs of Innocence*, this relation of the means by which the Songs come to reach us in the form in which we read them, dispels from the outset the innocence of which the piper sings — the innocence the songs themselves, in the naive form the poem bestows on them in the writing, emblematically embody.

This dispelling of the state of innocence occurs, however, not only as a consequence of the *particular* form in which the songs reach us, that is in the form of this self-conscious, self-narrating "Introduction". The change involved is more radical than that, more decisively revisionary. For the causes the poem itself points to lie not only in *this* form, but in the conditions under which *any* form is given. The poem continues, relating how the child, having heard the songs the piper pipes, from mere passive listening breaks into speech and says:

Pipe a song about a Lamb:
So I piped with merry cheer.

The "laughing" child of the first stanza, guileless, spontaneous, now issues a command, exacting a further performance. And though, in acceding to this demand, the piper still *pipes*, producing music in its native, unmediated, pre-verbal integrity, yet he does so, this time, not at all spontaneously and unrehearsed, but, on the contrary, at the child's specific request. What is more, he pipes this time to a set theme: the unspecified "songs" of line two become, at the child's express urging, the *one* song "about a Lamb". As a "song about a Lamb", it does, of course, remain "innocent" at least in terms of its content: whatever the nature of the form in which it is sung, the song itself, like those that come after it in the book it foreshadows, is still a "Song of Innocence". Nevertheless, in setting a theme for the song, a *choice* has had to be made, and the mere fact of choice implies the possibility of another, opposite choice. To pipe about a Lamb, the piper must abstain from piping about something else — a Tyger. The Lamb only emerges as

such against the background of its alternative — against the background of *difference* in both the Saussurean and Derridean senses of the term. For the Lamb is a Lamb only insofar as it is *not* a Tyger; the decision to pipe specifically about the Lamb is a way of *not* piping about the Tyger: a way of holding the Tyger off, of deferring the moment at which the Tyger, too, must — as, in the *Songs of Experience*, it will — become the burden of the song.

Nor is it simply that, by specifying its theme, the song has already, covertly, struck the chord of its dialectical opposite: *time*, already doubled in the first-person form of the song as a narrative introduction, now steals its way into the narrated past itself. The piping as such, henceforth, moves *in* time, *with* time, toward the moment at which its theme will be converted from Lamb to Tyger. The mere fact that, at a given point in time, in the commanding presence of the child, the piper piped of the Lamb temporalizes that moment by implying the later one at which he will go on to pipe of the Tyger. The undifferentiated continuous present of the initial piping not only exists as *part* of a history, recounted in the autobiographical form of the introduction; it exists henceforth *historically* in and of itself, as caught up in, and as itself promoting, a process of irreversible historical change — a change of which, even now in this second stanza, we receive the mark in the way the poem proceeds to relate how the child issues a new command:

Piper pipe that song again —
So I piped, he wept to hear.

The child orders the piper to pipe the song again: both the spontaneous "songs" of the first and the command performance of the second stanza give way now to a repetition aimed at fending off a future that child and piper have themselves, however remotely, called into being. And though the piper does indeed pipe the song of "merry cheer" again, the formerly "laughing" child now *weeps* to hear it. The repetition is already inadequate, is charged with the pathetic sense of irrevocable difference. The effort, by repeating the original song, to preserve, if not the state of innocence itself, at least its expression, already measures the extent to which we have now fallen even from that. The "naive", as Schiller would say, has entered the domain of the "sentimental" — is doubled by, as indeed it owes its *value* to, the poignant sense of its own impossibility.

And it is just at this point that the piping, the music, is invaded by words — by language:

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy cheer
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear

To be sure, the music has itself already received a theme: the undifferentiated piping has taken on a topic, the Lamb, thereby passing into the realm of differences characteristic of language. And to this extent, indeed, it has already been estranged from its own spring as pure *expression* — as what, in the language of Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, that utopian blue-print for recovering an edenic state of words antecedent to the fall into difference enacted in Blake's poem, we should call the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."⁷ The piping, already responding to a name, now itself becomes a naming — produces meanings that, as such, introduce the possibility, the necessity even, of other, further meanings. The child orders the piper to drop his pipe, and sing; and though what he sings, as the child also demands, is "the same again", it is clearly *not* the same — pushes the song still further from its source, complicating its expression yet more: a fact registered in the oxymoronic *weeping with joy* to which the child is now reduced.

We have, then, come a long way from the unreflecting arcadian simplicity of the original piping. But we have still to reach the present of the book — that curiously "untimely" moment we ourselves inhabit as *readers*. As "songs" proper now, as musical performances in which language substitutes for, and thereby displaces, the very thing it is meant to recall, namely the piping with which the poem began, what the piper produces at the child's request has already made, even in the moment of the actual singing, a historic — and historical — difference. The live present of performance has ceased to be at one with itself — has consigned itself to a past relative to the equally alienated future toward which it already ineluctably runs. Yet in the *oral* form the poem ascribes to it, it also remains *tied* to the present — to this moment that, for us as we read, lies locked in the past, beyond all direct recovery. What is *sung* endures only *in* the singing, and only as long as it is sung; and it exists, moreover, only for those *to whom* it is sung in the immediate existential context of the singing. But the child who com-

mands the song, the child the song itself, as a song about a Lamb, evokes from the past, means for it to exist for all of us. This, in turn, requires a still further step: the resort to *writing*. Whence, accordingly, the child's next — and final — demand:

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read —
So he vanish'd from my sight.
And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

The initial piping, live, spontaneous, has now, at last, as it had to in order to reach us in the form in which we read it, arrived at the "scene of writing": the moment at which, having abandoned his pipe, the piper gives up even his song, retires from the active, communitarian present of performance, and falls silent, sitting apart to write. We are now come to the furthest possible remove from the point at which we started — and it is, of course, decisive that, just here, at the moment when the piper prepares to write, in obedience to the child whose spirit presides over them, the Songs we are at last about to read, the child *vanishes*. The very act by which the spirit of the child is rescued from the ravages of time that the child's own apparition has provoked, preserving and transmitting it in the form of a "book that all may read", drives the child as such wholly and irrevocably away. The conditions under which the *Songs of Innocence* reach us place the process by which they are indicted, communicated and conserved in a realm from which the child himself is entirely absent and excluded — the world of Experience we ourselves inhabit as readers, banished by our very ability to read from the Eden of the far-off valleys. True, the writing does, in its way, ethically and aesthetically, capture *something* of the child; its form, that of this child's rhyme, and its content as a "song about a Lamb" give us the child, or at least stand for him, here in the present, as the trace of his passage into the past. Still, the mark that minds him does so in such a way as to transform him into something other than a child — that adult to whom alone an achievement so extra-ordinarily sophisticated as this seemingly childish poem can be attributed. Which is why, at the very point at which the poem as such finally closes on the child in the recursive movement by which everything it has just related comes to be inscribed, the adult "I", now fully estranged from the innocence of which he writes, proliferates wildly throughout the remaining portion of what we henceforth explicitly perceive to be *the text*:

So he vanish'd from my sight.
And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

The "I" that first emerged at the instant when the child appeared, differentiating himself from the child even as he recognizes in him his own inception as the sign of the writing of this very poem, though *expressing* the child in what he writes, has also, now, completely supplanted him: there remains, henceforth, only the "I", reproducing himself *ad infinitum*. Nor this is all. The "hollow reed" with which the piper, now fully instated as *poet*, prepares to write is, we may assume, of just the kind that supplied the instrument with which he formerly piped. A change has, then, come not only over who sings, and how he sings, but over the instrument itself — a reshaping to suit a new and different use in an altered material culture. The poet makes, to be sure, a "rural pen" reminiscent, say, of the pastoral "Oaten reeds" that Spenser abandons in favor of the "trumpets sterner" of the heroic *Faerie Queene*.⁸ But, precisely, to conform to this pastoral use, the reed must undergo a crafting, an *art*, that implies, not the rural processes of a "husbanded", yet still natural, organic growth, but the urban work of manufacturing. We are not yet, of course, among the "dark Satanic Mills" of *Milton*, the full-blown urban landscape, the pulsating "forests of the night" through which the brightly burning Tyger stalks. But we are already engaged in the evolution that will eventually bring us there — a circumstance that lends a deeper, still more menacing resonance to the gesture by which the poet *stains* the "water clear" to make the ink he needs to write. An urban, a proto-industrial art goes into forming the "rural pen": something whose impact on the material environment in which this art evolves Blake understood more than any English writer before Dickens.

It is, then, as the "Introduction" shows, and *shows* us, significantly, far more than it actually, explicitly *tells*, even to such an intricate and far-reaching transformative process as this that we owe these "happy songs" of "merry cheer" that "every child may joy to hear" — "hear", perhaps, but certainly never *read*, that singularly private, inward, reflexive activity to which these poems, these texts *as* texts, so unmis-

takably recommend themselves. For what *child*, indeed, however great the joy in hearing, could ever read what has come, so steeply, so ironically, to be written?

So what finally does all of this bring us? One thing, clearly, is the fact that, in trying to grasp what poetry is and aims at, the trajectory down whose range its primitive, essential passion sets in motion, we cannot take for granted the process by which it takes place, and time, and form. While we may want to agree, as Blake does, and as the Romantics will after him, that poetry begins in a special sensibility and a special openness, a peculiar gift of "powerful feeling" and imaginative awareness, if it is to become something more than mere vibration in order to exist in a guise capable of surviving its immediate present and communicating what it gives to someone other than the vibrating poet, poetry must become *the poem* — must commit itself to writing, and to the belated mediations that writing entails. What is more, does not the very uniqueness of the authorizing experience, coupled with the sense of the need to communicate it to a world that seems, in the light of that very need, *closed* to it, presuppose that the experience itself is already compromised and lost? Though at no point, literally, *about* this inevitable loss, Blake's reenactment of the lesson mythographically endorsed in the tale of the Rape of Daphne attests in every twist and turn of its texture both to its necessity and to the signal, exemplary inadequacy of the means with which we seek to make it good. Indeed, even as, in their bucolic refuge in the fastnesses of the Lake District, the first-generation Romantics prepare the revolution in poetic language shortly to crystallize around the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Blake, though technically, as we define these things in our literary histories, a pre-Romantic, has already seen through to the inevitable failure of the Romantic enterprise. Nor is it simply that, to a remarkable degree at a remarkably early date, in writing this curious history of the invention of writing and history both, Blake saw the *historical* impossibility of retrieving what Wordsworth's preface calls "the real language of men" — a language in which Nature could be restored to human speech and human writing, to human writing *converted back* into human speech, divulging her secrets directly and immediately, with the self-evidence of concrete perception. As the preeminently visual and graphic character of the medium in which he wrote, namely engraving, unusually predisposed him to, Blake measures the extent to which the ultimate source of our predicament lies in the very nature of the

element in which we think and work, that is writing. It is writing, after all, the gesture by which the poet abandons even the *fiction* of song and, falling silent, sits down to write, that finally and forever banishes the child as such. Writing, too, as the temporal trace of an historical past itself doomed to look back on a yet deeper past already vanishing even as the poet sings of it, focuses for us, by its incidence in Blake's text, the essentially *paleontological* character of our relation to our *own* history, our *own* origins, our *own truth*. We are reduced to reading a kind of fossil record, the body of texts the past has left behind, and to adding to it in our turn, as the only means of discovering who and what we are.

And yet the simple fact that, by this deliberate practice of the inadequacy of his medium, Blake has been able to transcend it at least to the extent of raising to full consciousness what, in the Romantics, for instance, remains so thoroughly mystified already hints that some real boon has been won. Nor is it simply, as Deconstruction sometimes persuades itself to argue, that we achieved the negative knowledge of literature's inevitable failure. What shines through Blake's practice of writing is the awareness that we have desired the wrong thing — looked for truth as literature *can* give it both in the wrong place and in the wrong form. When the "mighty Devil" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* writes with "corroding fires" on the "flat sided steep" that "frowns over the present world":

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?⁹

one of the things he shows us, *in* his writing, and *by* writing it, is that truth, Being, "reality" is less what we *fail* to encompass than what infinitely *exceeds* all encompassing — what for ever, like Blake's own writing, properly revolutionary and prophetic, lies ahead of us as foreshadowed in the traces to which it reduces. Hence it is that the truth of the *Songs of Innocence* lies in the *Songs of Experience*, the truth of the *Songs of Experience* (as, by the way, their *own* antithetical "Introduction" signals) in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and the truth of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in the whole series of evolving, metamorphic visionary works that arises from *its* ashes, *its* corpse. Put a slightly different way, truth, Being, "reality" is what is for ever, in its essence, Other than what we imagine or construct, and most shows itself just where the forms of our imaginative constructions most

open themselves, in all lucidity, to the imminent risk of their undoing. The greatest works of literature, the greatest *texts*, seem to be those that found the presence at which they ultimately arrive by cancelling themselves out — or, more accurately, by cancelling out the conception, the conceit, the poetic fallacy on which they must nevertheless hazard themselves in order to be written at all. At the close of the *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust actually *gives* us the very form of Time itself — but only because this is what his narrator, running out of pages, out of time, tells us he *will* do, only because the *Remembrance*, the *Recherche*, ends at the point where, in the history of its writing, it has just begun.¹⁰

And it is, finally, a similar feat that Blake performs in the poem we have been reading here — in the registration of the self-destructive irony with which it speaks, at its close, of the "happy songs / Every child may joy to hear". And is not this what Heidegger has in view when, writing of the "origin of the work of art", he identifies art's "workly nature" as lying, not in the self-sufficient closure of the form of the artist's *making*, but rather in its self-emptying openness?

The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this deconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work.¹¹

Once we empty it of its ostensive, lyric form in favor of the peculiar witness left behind as its lyric *script*, so many things set themselves to work in Blake's text that there is room to hope, at least, that even truth may be among them.

Harvard University

NOTES

¹ This is the version of the myth given in Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths* (21. k), citing Apollodorus (i. 7. 9) and Plutarch (*Agis*, 9). Ovid's version is, of course, quite different, attributing the metamorphosis to Daphne's father, the river god, Peneius. (By the bye, Graves refers to Daphne as a mountain nymph, but I have taken the liberty of following Ovid on this point, for aesthetic reasons. I do not, however, think this changes anything substantial, at least so far as my reading of the tale goes.) Graves notes that, in the older, Greek versions, Gaia does not actually transform Daphne into a tree, but spirits her off to Crete, leaving the tree behind in her place. On Crete, Daphne became known as Pasiphaë, "she who shines for all": something of Apollo would seem to have

stuck after all. Moreover, on Crete, she was compelled to couple with the Bull of King Minos, giving birth to the Minotaur and setting the stage for yet further ramifications and complications — a labyrinth of allusions, cross-references, versions and reversions.

² Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, New Haven, 1959 (Yale UP paper ed.), p. 13.

³ Let me stress, here, that I believe Freud's discovery of the representational (because symbolic, symptomatic, sign-bearing) dimension of Eros to be real and important, as is its temporal corollary, the moment of "repetition". But I think the signing, and thus also the temporality of the signing, more complex and more open-ended than that — the point I try to make in the text.

⁴ This echoes — deliberately — Jacques Derrida's opening remarks on reading Plato in "La pharmacie de Platon", *La dissémination*, Paris, 1972, p. 74, where he observes that it has taken us nearly twenty-five centuries to begin to see how Plato's *Phaedrus*, for instance, is to be read — a circumstance that suggests that we yet have to read it *even now*.

⁵ I refer here to Roland Barthes's *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, where "white writing" is discussed as an option for twentieth-century writers like Camus and Sartre eager to sanitize their writings of the overdetermined "literariness" of the idiom they inherit.

⁶ As we learn in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, such a gnostic emphasis on the creative power of the edenic serpent is wholly in keeping with Blake's own revisionary understanding both of *Genesis* itself and of the Miltonic amplification (or apology).

⁷ William Wordsworth, preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. W. J. B. Owen, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1969, p. 157. Wordsworth himself notoriously adds, however, that these "powerful feelings" become *poetry* only belatedly — as "recollected in tranquillity", p. 173.

⁸ Edmund Spenser, stanza 1 of the poem to "The Legende of the Knight of the Red Crosse, or of Holinesse", *The Faerie Queene*, Yale UP paper ed., p. 39.

⁹ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Penguin paper ed., p. 183.

¹⁰ I owe this thought about Proust to Roland Barthes's preface to his own *Essais critiques* of 1964.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, 1971 (Harper & Row paper ed.), p. 39.