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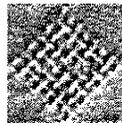
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Death and Awakening: A Meditation on William Blake's Tiger and the Concept of Rebirth in Wilson Harris's The Whole Armour



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With the centrality of the figure of the tiger both as literal and symbolic entity to *The Whole Armour*, Harris chooses to quote the opening lines of William Blake's poem "The Tyger" as an epigraph to Book Three of the novel. Much has been written about the meaning of Blake's "Tyger" and some scholars have sought linkages between aspects of Blake's poem and Harris's novel. This essay hopes to contribute to this discussion by drawing a relation between two possible demiurgic creations of the tiger in Blake's wider cosmology, which depicts the creature either as a fallen, degenerated entity that symbolises death or one that symbolises redemption. This conception of dual possibility permits a reinterpretation of the tiger's role and meaning in *The Whole Armour* with regard to the notions of death and rebirth, and the ways in which the existence of the novel's characters are determined by their subjective perception of it.

Both Blake's poems "The Lamb" and "The Tyger", particularly the latter poem, have been examined extensively in an effort to comprehend their multiple associations in Blake's cosmology and his spiritual/psychological views of human nature and existence. In one respect, perhaps the most common and most basic interpretation of the poems, they represent contrary states of the human soul and phenomenal existence: the lamb representative of a more passive, receptive and submissive energy; the tiger, the raw, primal, active energy. The poems' positioning in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* respectively, and the speaker's multiple questionings in both poems seem to infer an intrinsic duality across physical and spiritual realms which is inherent in the creator of these realms. This basic interpretation is furthered by the consideration that the rejection or diminishing of either of these aspects in the human soul can lead to a psychological and spiritual division. While this reading of the poems has its validity, it is also very limiting in light of the depth and breadth of Blake's thought and the mythology that he is to develop after the publication of these works, which serve to both complicate and elucidate this thought.

The most salient question that the poems pose is the exact nature of the subjects' creator. Does the binary nature of the creation indicate a fundamental dualism in a singular creator or does it suggest there is more than one creator of the universe? The former line of thought points to the more conventional rendering of orthodox Christian doctrine with a God that expresses both mercy

and wrath; in maintaining the perception of the ultimate benevolence of this God, this wrath is considered just, a form or manifestation of divine justice. The lamb and the tiger are therefore emblematic of these two aspects of a singular being; the seeming opposition of these aspects is due to the fallen state of human perception with which one only vaguely apprehends the spiritual and cosmic unity of these two energies. Additionally, it is because of the fallen state of humanity that these energies are corrupted and through the instrument of the human soul express themselves as the recognisable evils of jealousy, hate, and so on. On the other hand, Gnostic and Platonic schools hold that the universe is the creation of a demiurge, a lesser divinity than the Supreme God, a concept that unravels and explicates the issue of theodicy. Although there are fundamental commonalities within the Gnostic and Platonic traditions, there are variations: some schools seeing this demiurge as an extension of the Supreme God, not distinct from it, and therefore aligned with a divine order; others viewing the demiurge as a separate and distinct being from the Supreme God and whose fallen creation is in clear conflict with the Supreme.

In *Blake and Tradition*, Kathleen Raine suggests that if both creatures, both forces, are from a single creator, the Supreme God, then “the abyss of the Father”, the dark forests of the night, “is the place of the Tyger, that mysterious hell of evil or energy which is nevertheless the ground from which the spiritual principle of the Son is eternally generated” (5). She goes on to say, quoting from Blake’s *The Four Zoas*, that “[t]he tiger is one of ‘the terrors of the Abyss,’ the ‘horrid shapes & sights of torment’” (5). However, she states that Blake was well aware of the Platonic traditions as well as the basic tenets of Gnostic thought; his knowledge of orthodox Christianity and the less conventional writings of Swedenborg and Boehme among others, all informed his imaginative corpus. One of Blake’s first major characters in his Prophetic Books is the figure of Urizen, a demiurgic being who separates himself from eternity and creates the phenomenal universe with pure aspirations. It is the rigidity of his own perception, and therefore his constructs, that causes the eventual degeneration of the universe. There is another demiurgic figure of Blake’s mythology that must be considered: Los. Blake’s conceptualisation of this character evolves over his creative life; however, one common factor in Los’s representation is his work as a blacksmith with his tools the anvil, the hammer and the furnace, the tools described or inferred in the creation or formation of creature/energy in “The Tyger”. Los is often presented as a counterpoint to Urizen: the former, a creative agent with a more protean sensibility; the latter, an agent of reason, his own creations structured within a static order. It is with this dichotomy in mind that Raine asserts that “for Blake, Urizen, ruler of destiny and of the stars, was pre-eminently the demiurge, as responsible for the fallen world, whereas Los’s task...is its recovery” (23) which suggests that if the tiger was indeed created by Los in his smithy, it is designed as an agent of redemption. Such a view of the nature of the tiger is supported by Mircea Eliade who asserts that many ancient cultures held the belief in Divine Beings who “manifest themselves in animal forms or are closely connected with an animal mythology” (24). He mentions specifically the South American jaguar as one such initiatory animal and describes its role in the ceremonial death of the novice, the clothing of the novice in the animal’s skin, and the eventual resurrection of the novice who has now assimilated the “divine essence of the initiatory animal

and hence [is] restored to life in it" (23). Such mythological antecedents, if not consciously remembered, are still lodged in the collective repositories of the unconscious. But in the fallen material universe, and densified further in the fallen human consciousness, the tiger's divine and redemptive capacity can go unrecognised and still be perceived as only an agent of terror and death.

In the Gnostic and Platonic conception, nature or the phenomenal universe is an imitation or copy of the eternal world; the tiger is therefore a base or debased form of an eternal energy or being. How this being is perceived in this temporal sphere is based both on the physical environmental context and the subjective experience and interpretation of the perceiver. For the Pomerone people in Harris's *Armour*, the tiger is a physical terror that needs to be destroyed, and it is also an unrecognised, or perhaps unconsciously recognised, embodiment of the degenerated aspects of the Pomerone village, representing their fears of self-confrontation. It is in their refusal to engage their own psychical and social identities and in an effort to subdue the stirring of their consciences that they continually seek someone upon whom to cast blame, to relinquish themselves of the responsibility of their fallen spiritual state. In the Pomerone village this responsibility is given to Peet who becomes representative of the entire community. He belongs to the older generation, an "old-school pioneer" (*Armour* 312), and is immersed in guilt, a guilt which he sees and which confronts him in his sexual desire, in his daughter and Cristo, and even in nature. This guilt binds him to the expected, to conformity; the fact that "[h]e had never leaped anywhere beyond what [the community] knew" (*Armour* 312) allows him to maintain some sense of belonging and moral shelter. It is within this community that Peet can share his guilt, and with everyone subject to the same psychical crisis, its effect or the knowledge of its presence can be accommodated with a collectively engendered stoicism. His conscience's revolt, manifested in anger, frustration, despair or helplessness, is muted to his, and by extension the community's, being "human after all" (*Armour* 312). This sense of the fragility of humanness is itself a psychological respite from their own inadequacies, their own fears. It is a thin but nevertheless present veil with which the village preserves some perceived semblance of internal and external order.

It is Peet who leads the initial search party for the tiger after a child is snatched away and it is his decision to turn back that allows the rest of the party to also give up the search; he is the one they look to during the wake to confront and exercise dominion over Magda, the "goddess of identity" (*Armour* 274) and "queen of fate" (*Armour* 278). Both ventures lead Peet to a revelation of his and the village's impotence, "a vision of buried fertility" (*Armour* 311). His expedition into the jungle which, in some ways, parallels Cristo's later flight there, is described as a journey into a netherworld where every aspect of nature appeared as a daemonic force bearing only death. In his failure to accomplish these tasks, these responsibilities, the totality of the villagers' internal burdens is placed upon Peet, and his failure is deemed his own, not theirs. Thus their collective failure, thrust upon a single individual and consequently collectively disowned, allows a perceived moral ascendancy. It is a "projection", as Harris puts it in his paper "In the Name of Liberty", that

“eclipses all thought of duality or a possible reversal in the judgements one exercises under pressure or fear” (Harris 203). Self-knowledge and self-judgement are two of the principle concepts discussed in Harris’s paper as well as the notion of an illusory and deceptive form of liberty that nevertheless imprisons the conscience and impedes any authentic development of spiritual, moral and social networks in a localised or global society. The tiger is their own elusive fears roaming their own forested consciousness which they lack the nerve, the tenacity, and the humility to confront. In their reluctance, their indifference, their self-vindication or fright, this unresolved aspect of their individual and communal self snatches away and consumes their young, their future. The terror that the physical creature imposes remains; the terror of their own destructive potential remains.

However Cristo, though initially imbued with the same fears of the tiger that the villagers hold, comes to understand that to kill that tiger is “the purest victory and self-conquest of ancient youth” (346), the oxymoronic twinning in this statement bridging the temporal and spiritual poles and suggesting the collective completeness of this triumph. The destruction or consuming or consummation of the tiger is a destruction of himself, his self. This is exemplified through the process of the initiation rite where Cristo becomes lost spatially and internally, he dies, and becomes at once every tribe that existed on the land; he becomes all. In light of the Blakean conception of the possible meaning of the tiger discussed above, in this fallen world, a divine or spiritual figure of death is in truth an agent of life. It is not coincidental that Cristo, in complete fear, hoping to preserve his life, flees into the forest, directly into the abyss, confronts the agent of the village’s terror, an ancient agent of death that predates his own existence, loses his life and is reborn, fearless. Such a construction of motive and event shakes the more immediate and literal apprehension of the tiger as a merely daemonic force or a literal “jaguar of death” (*Armour* 308). It opens another perspective that what the village considers as an agent of death, is in fact their agent of redemption, if only they were able or willing to recognise it as such. But the extent of their psychical and perceptive decline is profound. In the minds of the villagers, truth is equated to hell (*Armour* 332). Cristo’s venturing into a psychical underworld, a hell, is also his venturing into truth. It is in truth—in the realm of truth—that he dies and is reborn. The tiger, this symbol of death, of terror, was also a vessel or instrument of truth. To confront it was to confront the truth about oneself; to conquer it, destroy it, was to become reconciled with it, to be possessed of it. Yet for those incapable of recognising the sacredness and life-giving necessity of Cristo’s rebirth, both he and the tiger remain alien and daemonic beings. Peet, for example, in his vision of Cristo, sees him with a “sulphuric face in truth, burnt by the fumes of hell and reality” (283).

Both perspectives of the tiger—as Urizenic creation (Urizen’s own rigid approach to creation mirroring the rigidity and stasis of the villagers’ self-conditioning), or as Losian creation, designed as a harmonisation of contrary states—can provide clearer glimpses into the creature’s meaning in Harris’s novel. The tiger becomes either an emblem and vessel of fear and division or one of hope and reconciliation, death and life. From both perspectives, the confrontation of the creature or force will lead to awakening. Glimpses of the tiger are seen numerous times, for example in

the moon, in the river, in individuals, in actions, in visions. In either perspective, these glimpses or encounters can be a confrontation or recognition of deeply ingrained fear or a glimpse of a divine potential that penetrates their own veils of terror, hypocrisy or apathy. Peet's vision of the tiger in an incorporeal manifestation of Cristo while fighting the corporeal Magda is one such dual possibility, and it provides a new meaning to the possession of Peet by the tiger after his humiliating defeat at the hands of Magda. It can represent the confirmation and conscious recognition of the fear that now overwhelms him, a fear that includes his individuality, his masculinity, and his position and role in the village. On the other hand, it is in this defeat, this humbling that he begins to perceive (although, not understanding, he rejects) that divine spark within him. It is in the acceptance of personal and communal lack of control, in the relinquishing of their sense of domination, that Peet and the village at large can begin the process of psychical and spiritual reconciliation with their ancestral past, renew the understanding of their participation with the surrounding environment, and embrace presence of the living divine force which Cristo comes to embody.

The concept of rebirth which the novel explores also involves the union or reconciliation of feminine and masculine principles. The biblical references in Harris's naming of the novel's characters are unmistakable but three names in particular are significant to this study. Cristo's name is more obvious with its association to Christ, the Anointed One. While Peet brings to mind Jesus's apostle Peter, as Gregory Shaw observes, it is also associated with the word *peat*, the partly decomposed elements of soil used for fertilisation of the earth. In this sense, Peet represents the earth, nature, but a decomposing aspect of itself. Such an interpretation is strengthened when considering his daughter, Sharon. The biblical name means a plain, and more specifically a fertile plain, pointing to a region on the coast of Israel. Within the framework of *Armour*, this is particularly poignant. Sharon, as daughter to the symbolic earth element, Peet, is the potential that Peet could never realise. She is fertile earth, the future possibility. The fact that the biblical Sharon also refers to coastal land brings into focus the dual scape that *Armour's* Sharon symbolises, both land and sea, the two spaces or forces that contain and are so much a part of the material and spiritual existence of the Pomeroun village, "aboriginal body of the sea and of the forest that breaks through subconscious terrain into the conscious host native" (Bundy 205). Although Cristo has undergone death and rebirth, his union with Sharon can also be considered one aspect of the physical fulfilment or completion of this rebirth, for it is in their union—Cristo as symbol of spirit, Sharon as symbol of earth—that this spiritual resurrection is manifested on the physical plane. Both their ancestries, "a conjunction of a white and a black face" (332), open another dimension to the meaning of this union for the village, signifying a harmony that includes historical relationships and the present fruit of previous unions.

As physical and spiritual companion to Cristo, Sharon shares in this experience of rebirth. Her essence has changed and she is now capable of a relationship with him that transcends the established roles of her society, becoming both wife and mother to Cristo. She replaces Magda not only in her relationship with Cristo but also in her role in the village as the "goddess of

identity" (*Armour* 274) and "queen of fate" (*Armour* 278). Whereas, in Magda, this is "a wholly illusory strength, the fruit of mere primitive self-assertion rather than knowledge or consciousness" (Maes-Jelinek 104), within Sharon it is the realisation, the manifestation of a *essentially* new being, and an authority that is not wielded through aggression, sexual desire and psychological imprisonment but an open receptivity, a harmony that reconciles every diverse aspect of the village. Part of this rebirth is due to the fact that Sharon, unlike the other villagers, wants change. She states emphatically to Cristo, "I held you and it was only then I knew what I had always wanted to be. I wanted to make myself *new*" (*Armour* 328, italics in Harris). It is this desire, genuine and utterable, that signals the avenue to the potential change of the villagers with a new awareness of the environment and themselves to which the villagers had become indifferent.

This bridging of feminine and masculine principles is an important feature of the initiation process itself. No one in the village can determine with certainty the gender of the tiger; on some occasions, it is described as hermaphroditic or possessing hermaphroditic qualities. In "Time of the Tiger" Gregory Shaw references Laurette Sejourné and Mircea Eliade in their research of ancient initiation rites, stating the importance of scarification and dismemberment as part of the subject's transition into a new shamanistic identity. However, Harris's choice of scarification bears even further significance. The mark made by the tiger is on the left side of Cristo's face; the left is traditionally attributed to the feminine aspect of being, and a quality of receptivity that is a symbolic counterpoint to the Pomeroon community's aggressive attempt to assert their will and domination over the environment and over each other. This positioning deepens Sejourné's proposition that the initiate, the singular representative of a collective self, conventionally male, must reconcile himself to this feminine energy in order to realise the wholeness of human capacity. Further, the mark extends from Cristo's eye to his mouth. The eye itself, as Sejourné points out, symbolically indicates the inner illumination that the initiate attains, a renewed perception that is critical for the Pomeroon people who have developed an apathy toward the potentials of advancement in themselves and in their connection to their environment and veiled their eyes with a mask of hypocrisy that allows them to carry on in an illusion of social, moral and spiritual order. Harris's choice of extending the mark to the mouth is also a potent attribution, for the mouth is the instrument of voice and the vessel of breath from inner being to the outer world. The scar then emblematises the renewal of Cristo's spirit and even more importantly, in the scheme of the enlightened bearing an impact on phenomenal existence, Cristo's voice becomes a renewed form of expression. The significance of this particular aspect of rebirth or recognition of the redemptive capacity of the tiger, is brought into focus in three instances with Mattias, Peet and Cristo. In each case there is both success and failure in this internal and externalised expression.

Peet, Cristo's psychical antithesis, turns to alcohol or sinks into fits of emotion and accusation to temporarily free himself of or blind himself to the burden, the responsibility, that any genuine encounter with himself imposes; fear and need for belonging preventing him from pursuing

anything beyond the accepted boundaries of the community's desire. His response to deeply embedded yearnings and wonderings are encapsulated in the description of him during the wake after leaving Magda's room, rejected and beaten: "Peet, half-vomited, half-laughed, hearing himself utter many things in his mind he had no words to whisper aloud" (*Armour* 313). He is aware of what he needs to do, he is aware of the presence of the tiger within him, be this tiger a force of fear or a force of life. It is an awareness that erupts in his own potentially initiatory experience when he led the first expedition for the tiger. There, his own psyche perceives a revealing mirrored image of nature: "The swamp already opened a rotting extension and mouth leading to an old clotted stream and impenetrable jungle. Old roots and trunks stood above every stagnant tongue of water" (*Armour* 310). Although he is cognizant, even at the very moment of his failure, that "[an]other day perhaps, and another time someone else might follow the tiger into the darkest bosom of lost life" (*Armour* 311), the weight of his impotence pushes him to an externalised confrontation in lieu of an internalised one. Like the Pomeroun community at large, Peet, a product of this community, projects his rage, his humiliation, his disappointment, his guilt, his burden upon someone else. And so, at the wake, when he does speak, he shouts at Mattias "you devil—you beast—I shall kill you" (*Armour* 313). He corrupts the potential of salvation in this denial of responsibility. Yet even then, "his eyes", the narrator states, are "seeming to look inward on himself" (*Armour* 313). Peet reveals the spiritual impotence of the community even as he leaves Magda's room with the reminder of his sexual impotence. Whether their awareness is instinctive or intuitive, it is their deliberate and constant rejection of self-confrontation that keeps them in this psychical and spiritual stasis. Having corrupted that force of fear or of life emblemized in the tiger, it overwhelms him and "[a]ll hunted and hunting sensation was draining from Peet's creaturely face so that it turned half-woman, half-man, turning instantly again on itself in order to bite itself" (*Armour* 314) and, in the end, having killed Mattias, the tiger is perceived and thus becomes in Peet's consciousness "his own monster of deception" (*Armour* 315).

Before his death, it is Mattias, whose awakening Maes-Jelinek describes as more intuitive than that of Cristo's, who is able to articulate directly to the village the nature of their internal death: "He felt himself summoned—as if he had been challenged by the wake—to discern a deep, ancient, irrational logic on the most troubling question of all mankind—the meaning of individual innocence and guilt" (*Armour* 291). The difference between Mattias and Cristo is that Mattias stands aloof from the rest of the village, his socio-economic standing and his education distancing him. During the wake, he would cast "a disgusted eye upon the crowd" (*Armour* 289), speak to and regard them "in a disparaging way" (*Armour* 291). But in his experience of awakening he recognises the disdain that he has held for the Pomeroun village and the folly of disinterest, of distancing himself from any form of responsibility for the deteriorating lives of the villagers and "[w]ords formed upon his lips with an import and utterance he had never felt and believed mere sounds to possess" (*Armour* 292). But his words, though found, though uttered, have no impact on either Peet or the other villagers. His final declaration produces only a delay in the hurried accusatory tendency of the village.

One of the aspects of the initiation rite that Eliade outlines is instruction in a secret language (87) and the responsibility of the initiate to transmit these spiritual truths out into the physical world. Cristo indeed hears the medicine men “talking in a strange tongue” (*Armour* 345); however even in his experience of rebirth, Cristo must still contend with realising—bringing to reality—this rebirth in the material world. Thus, when he tries to explain to Sharon the shell of the mortal body as “pregnant fortress” of the living sprit,

his body began to shake uncontrollably as he spoke, tense, overwound, fraught with emotional heredity and destiny, though he was trying desperately still to utter a stubborn miracle of protest, but the words stood too deep as yet to be shaped by the material tongue. They were words one must struggle to bring to birth in one’s lived life, like offspring of being. (*Armour* 330)

That extensive monologue that critics consider as overly didactic or an overtly authorial intrusion (Maes-Jelinek 113; Adler 5) may well be testament to the fact that Cristo must still wrestle with the role of expressing what need be expressed to both Sharon and the Pomeroneo people in a way that touches or engages them intimately, that does not carry the taint of intellectual declamation or accusation, but reaches into the core of their experience. It is possible that Cristo’s rebirth is more a renewal of his being as a vessel of atonement, a medium upon which the community can lay their blame and guilt in order to continue their existence without, or at least with a lessened weight of, the burden of conscience. Cristo’s rebirth is possibly a purely symbolic event, the change that such a renewal inherently possesses, never realised in any practical sense. Cristo’s shamanic message is therefore not explicit. Although as an initiation rite, Cristo’s rebirth is “the occasion for a total regeneration of the cosmos and the collectivity” (Eliade 19); it is an event that unfolds in secrecy, known only to him and to Sharon with whom he shares the experience. It is not a public rite, as in some initiation ceremonies, and therefore the import of the initiation is not extended in an explicitly public way. It exists and is preserved as a numinous experience, one that occurs so deeply in the communal psyche that Cristo embodies, that its effects may only be recognised and realised over time. It is a spiritual transformation that affects the phenomenal world as well as the psychical.

One of the most significant thrusts of *The Whole Armour* is how the Pomeroneo villagers see themselves; how one of their own, who becomes a vessel and shelter of their ancestral, psychical and spiritual selves, is reduced to a mere scapegoat upon and through whom they abdicate their personal and collective responsibility of re-finding their ancient and present identity, reshaping their present roles in their society and the cosmos, and absolving themselves of any guilt in this abdication. It is an idea that Harris furthers in his paper “In the Name of Liberty”, the unawareness and diminishing of the sacred in the name of an illusory justice that balms consciences and buttresses a collective stasis. Cristo’s sacrifice of his body to the custodians and executors of the law, his voluntary offering of himself for execution as a medium of atonement will likely be relegated to some skewed sense of fulfilled justice, and in the effort to preserve their masked conscience, quickly forgotten by the Pomeroneo people. The child that he and Sharon share is a

symbol of the possible future of the village—a reversal of the child that is taken away by the tiger—if only the village is willing to recognise it as such. But there is little indication that such a willingness, a willingness that requires humility, honesty and courage, will be exercised.

In Blake's configuration of Los, the character is also an aspect of a whole being, Albion. Just as Los, element of creative imagination, must be reintegrated into the whole for the fullness of change to occur, it is necessary that Cristo be reintegrated with the society from which he comes. Necessary, but in the world of the novel, unlikely. Though from a cosmic perspective, a movement, a progression has occurred, from a social standpoint very little has; Cristo is unable to inspire or invoke a wider rebirth; his society remains in a psychical death or stagnation. However, Eliade asserts that although a society may live "a desacralized existence in a desacralized world... attentive analysis of their behaviour, beliefs, and ideals could reveal a whole camouflaged mythology and fragments of a forgotten or degraded religion" (127). Elements or resonances still pervade festivals and celebrations, not unlike the wake that is the central communal event of *Armour*. Despite the Pomeroon people's conscious rejection or conscious disregard of the divine potentialities of the tiger, the creature and the energies it embodies continually usurp their attention in diverse ways. Thus, even in "desacralized societies," it can still be said that "religion has become 'unconscious'; it lies buried in the deepest strata of [the society's] being; but this by no means implies that it does not continue to perform an essential function in the economy of [its] psyche" (Eliade 128).

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