Title: Critical Essay on "The Lamb"

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It is easy to dismiss **"The Lamb"** as a sentimental or naive poem. Simple in its structure and vocabulary, it leaves no difficulties of interpretation. Unlike some of the ***Songs of Innocence***, it does not force the reader to consider ironies or ambiguities involved in the state of innocence. The only question the child speaker asks ("Little Lamb, who made thee?") is immediately dissolved, since the child already knows the answer ("Little Lamb, I'll tell thee"). In light of this disarming simplicity, commentators have had little to say about **"The Lamb."** They have preferred to dwell on the complexities of **"The Tyger,"** Blake's companion poem in ***Songs of Experience***, with its unanswered question about the darker side of life: "Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

Blake's belief in the validity of visionary, childlike perception that is everywhere present in ***Songs of Innocence*** was for him not a theory but a living truth.

The real problem in discussing **"The Lamb"** is not that it lacks depth, but that the kind of depth it possesses demands a visionary leap from the reader, who must attempt to feel the uncommon (for the adult) reality that the child speaker lives so naturally.

For Blake, childhood was a state not of dependency or ignorance but of spiritual vision. In "innocent" perception, everything in creation is embraced by the tenderness of the divine, and there is no separation between the human self, the natural world, and the divine kingdom. Everything is oneness, or unity, which spreads itself through all the phenomena of nature. In **"The Lamb,"** the focal point of this unity, the creator, source, and sustainer of it, is the Lamb. The Lamb is Christ, whose loving generosity flows out endlessly into the world. This generosity is emphasized by the threefold repetition of "gave" or "give" in the first stanza, in reference to the gifts bestowed by the Lamb of God on the lamb, the creature that bears his name. The child is spontaneously aware of all these realities, at all times, and it saturates him with serenity and happiness that he simply wants to express.

As a consequence of the child's innocent wisdom, there is no drama in this poem; it conveys a sense of bliss at play with itself. In play, there are no real questions, since questions are the result of uncertainty or lack. In the world inhabited by the child in **"The Lamb,"** questions are just a playful pretense. The purpose of these questions is to get the knowledge of the nature of life circulating, so it can make "all the vales rejoice."

As another way of putting it, in the state of Innocence, there is no gap between what the soul loves and desires most deeply, and what it experiences, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, in the world. Needless to say, this is not the average world in which the average adult lives, which is why, paradoxically, the simple poems in ***Songs of Innocence*** may sometimes be trickier to fully grasp than ***Songs of Experience***, many of which are situated in the gritty, distressed world that people usually think of as being more expressive of the human condition.

But Blake says time and time again that there is no reason why this should be so, since it is the inherent ability of what he later called the "Divine Humanity" to see the "Divine Vision" in everything. For Blake there was no sound reason to believe that there must always be a gap between human desire and human achievement. About the same time as he was writing the ***Songs of Innocence***, he wrote in ***There is No Natural Religion*** (1788): "If any could desire what he is incapable of possessing, despair must be his eternal lot." If there was one thing that Blake believed, it certainly was not the eternity of despair. Despair can only be caused by an error in the perception of the way things truly are, always. As Blake scholar Kathleen Raine, in *Blake and the New Age*, remarked of **"Infant Joy,"** another poem in ***Songs of Innocence***: "Being--consciousness--bliss . . . such was Blake's understanding of the essence of life. Joy is not something that happens to the soul, it is the essential nature of every soul."

The joy world that shines out in **"The Lamb"** is apparent in ***Songs of Innocence***. "Every thing that lives is Holy" announced Blake in ***The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*** (1790-93), and the phrase could almost be a motto for the world depicted in ***Songs of Innocence***, in which life is a continuum of delight and everything is under the divine protection. Take the first stanzas of **"Night,"** for example:

The sun descending in the west,

The evening star does shine;

The birds are silent in their nest,

And I must seek for mine.

The moon like a flower

In heaven's high bower,

With silent delight

Sits and smiles on the night.

Farewell, green fields and happy groves,

Where flocks have took delight.

Where lambs have nibbled, silent moves

The feet of angels bright;

Unseen they pour blessing

And joy without ceasing,

On each bud and blossom,

And each sleeping bosom.

It should be noted that the moon does not merely shine; it "smiles," it revels in "delight," as do the flocks of sheep in the "happy" groves. Technically these figures of speech are known as the pathetic fallacy, the attribution to inanimate objects of human feelings or qualities. But for Blake they are far more than mere literary ornaments; they are fundamental to his understanding of how bliss, emanating from the divine Lamb, permeates the natural world. Natural processes and cycles are set in motion in order to multiply happiness, just as in **"The Lamb,"** it is the bleating of the lamb that causes the vales to rejoice, to spread joy.

**"The Echoing Green"** begins with a similar vision: "The sun does arise / And make happy the skies." And in the first stanza of **"Laughing Song,"** human joy interacts with the joy that runs through nature:

When the green woods laugh with the voice of joy

And the dimpling stream runs laughing by;

When the air does laugh with our merry wit.

And the green hill laughs with the noise of it.

The poem gives the impression that the entire scene is bubbling over with bliss that leaves no corner untouched.

It might be objected that this is merely a child's view, or an attempt to appeal to the naivete of a child. A laughing world is, after all, not the kind of world most adults live in. But to this objection, Blake in effect responded, Why not? He often liked to challenge the limited nature of what "everyone knows," especially as far as perception was concerned, as in the following two lines from ***The Marriage of Heaven and Hell***: "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?"

In other words, if humans learned to liberate their five senses from the dullness of habit and blunted expectations, they might see the world as it really is, or at least as it is according to Blake. Blake never tired of explaining this, trying to coax his reader into seeing the Divine Vision. In ***Europe*** (1794), for example, the poet spots a fairy sitting on a tulip, and he asks it a question: "Tell me, what is the material world and is it dead?" The fairy replies, "I'll sing to you to this soft lute; And shew you all alive / The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy."

As has been shown, the ***Songs of Innocence*** bears ample testimony to this perception of the universe as consciousness alive with joy. And the image of the lamb is central to the vision, since Christ, the Lamb of God, is the source and informing essence of the joy that animates everything in the universe. Lambs appear in other poems in ***Songs of Innocence***. The very firstpoem, **"Introduction,"** features a piper, who is also the poet, who encounters a child. "Pipe a song about a Lamb," the child asks, and the poet replies: "So I piped with merry chear." At the child's request, he then sings the same song, and the child weeps with joy to hear it.

The merry piper who sings about a lamb is a clear reference to the poem **"The Lamb,"** and the song he sings is the eternal reality of the Lamb who is also a child--the very child who is listening to the song. As in **"The Lamb,"** the poet creates a self-referential loop, in which distinctions of subject and object break down in the fluid intimacy of entwining interrelation.

Seen in this light, another poem in ***Songs of Innocence***, **"Spring,"** becomes a celebration not only of the seasonal renewal of life but also of the lamb / Lamb / child intimacy. The last stanza reads:

Little lamb

Here I am.

Come and lick

My white neck:

Let me pull

Your soft Wool.

Let me kiss

Your soft face.

Merrily Merrily we welcome in the Year.

Given that this is the vision that animates ***Songs of Innocence***, several details of **"The Lamb"** become more significant than they might at first appear. The word "bright," for example, that the child uses to describe the lamb's coat, seems at first a rather odd adjective to use in this context (even though it provides a rhyme for "delight" in the previous line). However, the word occurs very frequently in Blake and is often used to suggest a kind of radiance that Blake associated with heightened perception, or a fully alive, even divine quality, as in "The feet of angels bright" quoted earlier. Wordsworth, another English Romantic poet who celebrated the purity of childhood perception, also used the word "bright" in this context.

Another detail concerns the illustration to the poem. Since Blake intended his books to be read in the form in which he printed them, in which each poem was accompanied by an illustration, it is always worth examining a poem's visual aspect. The illustration for **"The Lamb"** shows a child reaching out to touch a lamb, while sheep graze behind them. There is also a cottage, an oak tree and a stream. But what catches the eye are the two saplings on either side of the illustration, both of which are entwined with vines. The saplings reach up to the top of the frame, and then arch over the entire scene, intertwining with each other in what looks like a riot of jubilation. The cooperative interfusing of nature that is part of the theme of the poem thus receives visual representation.

Blake's belief in the validity of visionary, childlike perception that is everywhere present in ***Songs of Innocence*** was for him not a theory but a living truth. Recent research into childhood gives some support to Blake's view. In *Visions of Innocence: Spiritual and Inspirational Experiences of Childhood* (1993), Edward Hoffman, a psychologist, describes hundreds of accounts of "peak experiences" during childhood, as recollected by adults. These include spontaneous moments of bliss, insights about self-identity, life and death, and startling changes in the way ordinary things are perceived. One woman recalls a vacation at Lake Michigan when she was eight years old:

Open-eyed in the cool water, I lay watching the sunlight reflect and sparkle off the tiny, water-polished stones. I continued gazing and began to notice how the pebbles washed back and forth, right below me, at the shallow edge where the water met the land. . . . Suddenly, I shifted into a state of awareness that was far more acute than usual. I experienced a powerful sense of the beauty of the stones, the sparkling light, the fluid motion of the water, which became so overwhelmingly joyful that I could hardly endure it.

Here, in a real experience, is the joy that underlies **"The Lamb"** and which Blake called simply "Vision."

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