

TRANSMEDIATING CORRUPTIVE BEAUTY: WILLIAM BLAKE'S "THE SICK ROSE" OF MODERN TIMES¹

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RESUMO

O poema de William Blake, "The Sick Rose", que trata da oposição rosa versus verme e serve para denunciar a corrupção, é transmediado para a instalação intitulada "Sick Rose", criada por David Burrows e exposta na Cloud & Vision Exhibition de 2005, em Londres. As acusações do tempo de Blake são transpostas para as do século XX e a recuperação contemporânea da obra de Blake no Brasil nos dá pistas de que a denúncia radical do poeta contra a corrupção é ainda válida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: William Blake; "The Sick Rose"; David Burrows; corrupção.

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William Blake (1757-1827) was the third son of a London merchant of men's goods. Although he never went to school, he became a student at the *Royal Academy of Arts* as he learned the trade of engraver. Since he had a great verbal and visual talent, Blake began to combine words and images

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in a new way: engraving illustrations. He married Catherine Boucher who helped him greatly in his work, not only producing the drawings, but also colouring and printing his books with illustrations, as well as taking care of domestic finances.

His first book *Poetical Sketches*, a sophisticated work in which the poems reflect the literary interests at the end of the 18th century, already shows his dissatisfaction with poetic tradition and his endless search for new forms and new techniques. Starting with his work, Blake became, at the same time, author, sketcher, typographer and editor of his own books. The first, printed and illustrated by Blake with his new technique was *Songs of Innocence* (1789). It was made up of short poems similar to nursery rhymes and dealt with themes related to (innocent) children. In 1794, not satisfied in writing only for children and without illustrations, Blake published another book to accompany the first, *Songs of Experience*, to which "The Sick Rose" belongs. The poems in the first book are more innocent, childish, while the second book explores darker issues associated with the industrial revolution, religion and education. "The Sick Rose", for example, is not just about a rose that loses colour, but a worm (sometimes associated with the devil) that rapes the rose and destroys it with its dark and secret love. Together, the two books made up a double volume and illustrated collection with the title *Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

Although the poet thought in terms of opposites, it is not possible to fully associate innocence to goodness and experience to evil. The poems of *Songs of Innocence* appear innocent, but often become dark and complicated when carefully examined. Very often the poet shifted them from one book to another, which suggests that his vision was much more complicated than is suggested by the word "opposite". These two states - innocence and experience - are definitions of awareness that rethink the mythical states of paradise and the Fall. For Blake, they are modes of perception coordinated with something that would become a norm in Romanticism: childhood as a state of innocence, but not immune to the decadence of the world and its institutions. For Blake, this world can violate childhood itself, but becomes known through experience, a state marked by the loss of childhood vitality, through fear and inhibition, by social and political corruption and by the complex oppression of church, state and the ruling classes. The simplicity of the poems shows the

acute sensitiveness of Blake to the realities of poverty and exploitation that went with the industrial revolution. Sometimes the contrast innocence versus experience appears openly; on other occasions it is implicit. The oppositions and disconnection of two opposite states appear in confronting figures such as the sheep and the tiger and in several pairs of poems in which the poet reached the maturity of his technique, which consists in compressing metaphors and symbols that explode in a multiplicity of references.

The conflict between innocence and experience is also the theme of two of his longer works, *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughter of Albion*, which relate, to a certain point, to the descent of the soul to hell and its vicissitudes. This opposition is also the theme of the book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The latter two, *Visions* and *Marriage*, are among the works produced in the Autumn of 1790, when the poet lived in Lambeth, London. Others, called the *Lambeth Books*, make up what we call "The Bible of Hell". They are: *America*, *Europe*, *A Prophecy*, *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania* and *The Song of Los*. At the time he wrote these books, Blake no longer produced illustrations, having abandoned the implicit duality of his myth of prior creation and went on to write prophetic verses. This gave rise to the poems *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, "[a]llegory addressed to the Intellectual powers", the reading of which "makes great demand but offers great rewards" (PALEY, 1994, p. 339).

Songs of Innocence is made up of nineteen artistically engraved poems. On the other hand, *Songs of Experience* has twenty-six poems, including "The Sick Rose", the thirty-ninth plate, where the first line is an exhortation to the rose: O Rose thou art sick .

O rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

The concisely written poem is considered one of the triumphs of thought: it is addressed to a rose which the lyrical voice alleges is sick because it has an invisible worm discovered in its bed of "crimson joy". The rose symbolizes earthly love, in opposition to spiritual love, which also becomes sick when infected by worldly materialism. But the bed of crimson joy may also suggest a sexual image with the phallic worm symbolizing both lust and jealousy. It is "the dark secret Love" that destroys the life of the flower, suggesting something simple and unmentionable.

On the first reading, the poem seems fairly simple. But this apparent simplicity deceives us, since many of its words have a double meaning or are ambiguous. What does, for example, a "bed of crimson joy" refer to? To bed, to flower bed or rose petals? What makes love "dark" and "secret"? Why is the rose sick? These ambiguities, an important part of the poem construction, go to the heart of the issues he wants to explore. The sick rose, for example, has a lot to do with the potentially destructive consequences of the dark and secret love. If the rose is a symbol of love and passion, and it is sick, maybe the poem tells us our ideas about love and passion may also be sick and infected.

In the first line, "O Rose, thou art sick!", the lyrical I alerts the rose to the fact that it is sick. The exclamation mark makes clear the lament and the alert of the speaker about the sickness of the rose. In the second verse, another "character" appears - "the invisible worm". The idea that it was the worm that corrupted the rose, making it sick, is then intensified. Its invisibility makes explicit the fact the flower does not know about its own sickness, which, imperceptible, will destroy its life.

The third and fourth lines of the first verse, "That flies in the night"/ "In the howling storm" produce a frightening image, symbolizing the danger and promiscuity of the night. The next lines "Has found out thy bed"/ "Of crimson joy" suggest the worm has lodged in the rose and is damaging it. It is then implied that the rose did not react to the worm, which is now lodged in its body.

The term "Of crimson joy" speaks of pleasure, joy, feelings which are the opposite of those of the lyrical I, that laments the sickness that was so far unknown to the rose. The last lines, "And his dark secret love"/ "Does thy life destroy" seem to confirm that there is "love", however, accompanied by

negative adjectives -- "dark secret" – making the feeling obscure, forbidden and threatening. It is understood here that the pleasurable feeling of the rose, that will lead to its death, is a deceit. In its innocence, it may not realize the consequences that can be brought about by the promiscuous, dark and secret "love".

The subtlety of some elements in the poem can lead to this interpretation: the rose is sick, the "love" of the worm is destroying its life and there is pleasure in its bed. But the worm is invisible and is the agent causing its destruction, and is linked to night and storm.

There is an antagonism between the two main elements of the poem: rose and worm. The rose, a natural object of great beauty, the symbol of love - which also means innocence, purity, life, woman and even femininity - was infected by a worm, which suggests a negative, repugnant and aggressive image. Its image, which reminds us of the biblical serpent and the phallus, symbolizes death and decadence. The bed in which it lies can be the flowerbed in the garden, but also the bed of lovers. The rose is sick and it is implicit that love is also sick, although the rose is not aware of its illness. Since it is unaware of its state, the emphasis falls on the allegorical suggestions that love does not recognize its state of infirmity because the worm does its corrupting work in secret, a secret that is part of the infection itself. It is also invisible and penetrates the bed at night. The crimson joy of the rose can suggest both sexual pleasure and shame, concepts that come together to mean that the attitude of joy of the rose is stained by the aura of shame and secret that our culture links to love.

In the same way as most of the poems in *Songs of Experience*, "The Sick Rose" is structured compactly in its two verses with alternating rhymes, which deviate from the innocent rhyme model [ABAB CDCD] and follow the ABCB DEFE model, which introduces a dissonant note, according to the damaging effects of the "secret love" the rose is hiding. "Worm" rhymes with "storm", connecting the agent of destruction to the force of nature. In the same way, "joy" rhymes with "destroy", linking what should be a positive experience to the demise of the rose (Ferreira).

The page of this poem (fig.1), printed after 1789, has its margins decorated with typical illustrations of the poet. Since the artist conceived his poem together with the image, we cannot consider the work as an intersemiotic

transposition, because the sketch does not translate the poem, it interprets it. The page may, therefore, be defined as an intermediatic text, since the verbal text cannot be separated from the picture text without losing its essence. The painting corroborates the interpretation of a cycle. In the sketch, three rose buds can be seen. From inside the first, still closed, the figure of a woman with open arms emerges, maybe in supplication. The second bud, already wilted, merges with the image of a kneeling woman, in pain and repentance. The third bud, totally destroyed, mixes with the dilacerated body of a woman. The three, laid out in a circle, together with the branches of the rose bush, give the idea of the cycle of sickness: penetrating the rose, lodging in it and finally destroying it. It therefore suggests a cycle that is opposite to that of life, that is, the cycle of death.



Fig. 1- William Blake. **The Sick Rose**. Hand-coloured print, issued c.1826. (Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, copy AA, Object 39 1826 (The Fitzwilliam Museum) published by The William Blake Archive. Ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi. Accessed: 16 October 2009.

However, Rose is also a woman's name and probably the poetic voice is addressing a woman and warning her there is something damaging for her life, an imperceptible infirmity that will lead her to death, whether physical or spiritual. The poem can be read in an abstract, more spiritual sense, where the worm symbolizes something that represents harm to life, as sin that threatens innocents or an evil that damages beauty. According to the Judeo-Christian concept of the poet, the poem may also be read in a less abstract way: it refers to a woman (virgin) who becomes involved in a sinful "secret and dark" love relationship with a nightly visitor, a moral worm which, associated to evil, lay in her bed, a bed which is linked not only to pleasure, but also to the red of the blood of deflowering.

The observations so far refer to elements intrinsic to the poem and its accompanying illustration. For Northrop Frye, there is no historically oriented analysis, since, for him, "The Sick Rose" speaks for itself, as a perfect affirmation of the autonomy of imagination. Some critics, as we saw, try to establish some dialogue with history, reading the poem as a parable of the pernicious effects of sexual repression or as a radical discussion celebrating sexual energy against a repressive conservative Christian doctrine.

However, in his analysis, Jon Mee extends this context suggesting a specific theme, insinuating that "The Sick Rose" is also a sign of the times, a statement about the corrupt state of the nation. This extension makes it possible to read the poem not only within the metaphorical procedures of Romanticism, but also as a reaction to Blake's specific cultural situation: a marginal voice in 1790 London which associated the rose with Englishness, since the "rose of England"-- the rose of Tudors --, had been adopted since the War of the Roses as a national emblem. It is a syncretistic symbol with which the national imaginary identifies and in which the white rose (from the House of York) and the red rose (from the House of Lancaster) come together.

Blake rarely uses the image of the rose in his poems, but in three of them ["The Sick Rose", "My Pretty Rose-tree", and "The Lilly"] and specifically in the first the rose has a negative function: it is damaged and corrupt, on the threshold of an apocalyptic transformation. In order to read "The Sick Rose" as a text that supports "historical resonance", Jon Mee had to refer to two satirical poems written for a radical pamphlet, *The Argus*. The poems —

"The London Rose" and "The Hot-House Rose"— were both a criticism to journalist George Rose, one of the Secretaries of the Treasury, in about 1790. They talked about "... subsidized newspapers, engaged writers, contracted for pamphlets (...) purchased votes (...) all with Treasury money (apud MEE, 1998, p.113)". The rose of *The Argus* poems is rotten because of corruption. According to Mee, the association rose/nation relates to the Rose episode. If for Blake London was Babylon, the (R)ose [an allusion to George Rose] would be the first sign of corruption in politics. The involvement of the journalist in electoral manipulation was seen as a cancer that mined the tradition of English freedom. The crime of the "Rose" [George Rose] was not an individual demeanour, but emblematic of a much greater corruption, an invisible poison that opened the way towards the (political) body. In the writing of the pamphlet *Corruption Exposed*, referring to the George Rose episode, the words "secret influence" and "invisible corruption" suggest the "invisible worm" and the "dark secret love" of Blake's poem.

It is assumed that the language involving the controversy of the journalist must have caught Blake's attention, although the parallels with the language of the poem are even more extraordinary on the last page of the pamphlet, in which the author refers to the fact that government sent "Treasury Agents, with poison in their purses, to destroy every spark of freedom they may meet, and to blast the opening blossoms of integrity" (apud MEE, 1998, p. 116).

Therefore "The Sick Rose" is part of the republican discourse about political corruption and other types of corruption and emphasizes the continuing nature of the danger. The woman that escapes from the rose in Blake's sketch can be seen as the figure of "freedom" who abandons the "rose of England". The poem is thus a full and profound view of the contemporary corruption of society.

Two-hundred and fifty years after the birth of William Blake, his work continues to have a great influence. In 2005, in the *Museum of Garden History*, Lambeth, London, where the artist lived for 10 years, there was an exhibition with the title *Cloud & Vision*, which invited the contribution of four writers and eight artists interested in Blake. The purpose of the exhibition was to reinterpret the vision of the artist for a contemporary audience, illustrating his ongoing relevance. All of them created unique works that explored Blake's

years in Lambeth. Some reflected specific images or texts; others examined themes and issues around Blake's life and work. The objective was to present a taste of Blake's fascination with opposition and dualism through the lenses of different artists, each one with his own idea of Blake's relevance in contemporary culture. According to one of the curators, Daniella Arnaud the objective was to "present these different voices in a harmonious celebration of Opposition" (ARNAUD, 2005, p. 2).

Among the different works, David Burrow's installation, *The Sick Rose*, stands out (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2- David Burrows, **Sick Rose**, 2005, polyethylene foam.
(<http://www.parabolatrust.org/exhibitions/cloudvision-installation.html>)

As in the other works of the exhibition, the issue of transformation is central, but this installation can be seen as the only one that had some characteristics of Blake's contemporary work.

From the middle of several intertwined felt roses emerge fine threads of cloths, as if the flowers were vomiting. The roses are artificial, manufactured, pointing to a culture that sponsors the exploration of beauty and the abuse of

synthetic substances. In the hands of the artist, the poem becomes a critique to contemporary global capital and its effects on all aspects of life. The sickness of the rose becomes an auto-immune sickness. It is sick in the same way that we all are. Because of the superficiality of the conquests of our civilization and the clear triumph of the modern capitalist state, we have become isolated with our tablets and laptops and, afraid of possible biological, chemical or nuclear weapons, we have built fortresses. Plastic and felt replace the living matter and the perfume of a natural rose, meaning that matter is the only interest of our society.

The installation may not be a direct visual representation of the poem. However, it transmediates some elements that can be found in Blake's work, especially the idea that there is something evil that needs to be expelled, torn out—such as “borrowings” by political parties to help fund their election—represented by the threads emerging from the flower. But most important than the transmediation of Blake's ideas is the demonstration of the adaptability of his works: Burrows brings Blake into today's world, moulding it and giving it new life.

A radical artist in his denouncing of poverty, child labour and political corruption, William Blake's vision can be reinterpreted today, as was done in the 2005 exhibition. The rereading of his work in Brazil now is even more current, given the political events experienced by Brazilians in recent times, when corruption floods the newscasts. Among those who are under investigation in Brazil is the former personal secretary of our ex-president, Rosemary de Noronha, another “Rose” who has headed the regional office of the presidency since 2005. Unfortunately, we have to associate Blake's sick rose not only to one member, but to most of our Parliament.

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ABSTRACT

William Blake's poem, "The Sick Rose," which deals with the opposition against pink versus worm and serves to denounce corruption, is passed on to the installation entitled "Sick Rose", created by David Burrows and exhibited at the Cloud & Vision Exhibition 2005, in London. The accusations of Blake's time are transposed into those of the twentieth century and the contemporary recovery of Blake's work in Brazil gives us clues that the poet's radical denunciation of corruption is still valid.

KEYWORDS: William Blake; "The Sick Rose"; David Burrows; corruption.