“O Rose thou art sick”: unravelling social implications of body and mind’s sickness in William Blake’s poems of Experience

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Abstract

William Blake lived through an intense period of historical, economic and social changes that was evolving under the machines and factories of the Industrial Revolution. By living in London his whole life, he became a witness of the transformation of the city and of what E. P. Thompson (1966: 446) defines as “the violent technological differentiation between work and life.” Indeed, he witnessed the consequences of the lack of social plans or social reforms leading to unemployment, poverty, child mortality, exploitation, wild urbanisation, precarious health conditions and the spread of diseases, STDs included (see Stevenson 2012: 229-253). Moreover, Blake used his works of art to condemn the institutions of power, which mostly acted in line with their own personal interests and forgot human needs, according to what Claudia Corti (2000: 18) describes as a radical and prophetic debate against the institutionalised churches and revealed religions. By looking closely at the poem, *The Sick Rose*, which will be compared with the last stanza of the poem *London*, this paper aims at investigating the symbolical meaning of the works with reference to the spreading of venereal diseases in 1790s London. By proceeding with a close textual analysis, and the study of the icono-texts, the paper will show that Blake’s extended metaphors, symbols and images can be read and interpreted on two different levels: the former condemns STDs, seen as a social plague and as a result of a somewhat cruel tendency of both religious and governmental institutions. The latter unravels the implications of bodily contagious infections within humankind’s capacity to interpret and live the world.

William Blake lived in London all of his life from 1757 until 1820 (apart from three years he spent by the seaside, in Felpham, in West Sussex). Therefore, he can be defined as the product of a country and of a city that was changing its aspect and organisation, which was paving the way to the modern city it is still today and which was transforming into an industrial centre, being already a commercial one. According to Porter Coy, who outlines a complete picture of the English metropolis in his study *London. A social history*, the city “became a wonder city” and it “became a European marvel too” (Porter 2000: 157). Population increased enormously, new markets opened, trade flourished and the manufacturing industry developed. The city in which Blake had all of his experiences had become “the greatest manufacturing centre of the nation,” as Jerry White clearly states (2012: 202) in his “biography” of the city. Consequence of the tremendous industrial, demographic, economic and urban growth of the English capital was that

"people were sucked into London. And those who remained in the country increasingly had their lives shaped by the demands of the metropolis" (Porter 2000: 160).

Those workers who moved to the city, which soon started to become overcrowded, were arriving from all over the country looking for jobs and, hopefully, better lives. However, what they found was often not what they were looking for, as London, despite its modernisation, had not yet enough or adequate infrastructures to accommodate them, nor to offer them a decent life. Social differences and urban inequality began to increase throughout the century. Jerry White (2012: 106) in his book, reports the words of an American soldier who was living in London at the end of the century and whose comment on the many paradoxes that the city seemed to embrace is enlightening. He claimed that "there is not perhaps another city of its size in the whole world, the streets of which display a greater contrast in the wealth and misery, the honesty and knavery, of its inhabitants than the city of London."

Blake would walk through London and see how life and work were transforming, he would observe and feel poverty and he would understand that an entire world was trying to make a living among those streets. The city he experienced "was at once a city of dramatic improvements […] and a city of great, and increasing, difficulty for many […] of its inhabitants" (Makdisi 2019: 278).

In his contribution about "Blake's London," Saree Makdisi (2019: 279) refers to Henry Mayhew's journalistic work *London's Labour and the London Poor* that was published in the 1850s. In this survey and documentation of the working people in the early Victorian London, Mayhew makes a list of several professions that people of the time would have chosen or entered and that Makdisi assumes would not be so different from those that Blake could have recorded and had to deal with during his own times. Besides others, there would have been costermongers, street performers, street artisans, chimneysweepers, working pedlars, crossing-sweepers, lamp-lighters, tinkers, dusters, street musicians, street scavengers and finders, pickers, cigar-end finders, coal finders and, obviously, prostitutes (Makdisi 2019: 280).

Everything the English poet observed, reflected upon, experienced and lived would successively come alive in his works. As a matter of fact, *London* is truly the name of the poem that condenses, in a few perfect lines, the artist's personal depiction of the city and in which, according to J. D. Michael (2006: 71) Blake "transforms the commonplace notion of London's superficial dirtiness into signs of deeper corruption, a corruption that threatens the same social institutions that perpetuate it." *London* represents, therefore, also the poet's contempt and condemnation for those institutions that he considered responsible for the limitations of man's original and truest nature: the State and the Church, which Blake often used to consider as a sole body that he called "State Religion" (E618).

In his annotations (where we can find the abovementioned expression) to the letters that compose *An Apology for the Bible,* written by the bishop of Llandaff Richard Watson as an answer to the radical ideas of Thomas Paine concerning religion, Blake compares the judicial system to the Old Testament laws, perpetrating further violence in the name of God.

> Penal Laws court Transgression & therefore are cruelty & Murder
> The laws of the Jews were (both ceremonial & real) the basest & most
> oppressive of human codes. & being like all other codes given under pretence

> of divine command were what Christ pronouncd them The Abomination that
> maketh desolate, i.e State Religion which is the Source of all Cruelty
> (*Annotations to An Apology for the Bible*, E618)

Laws, restrictions (including the Ten Commandments and the way they had been and continued to be used - which Blake often defines as "Moral Law") and the fear of God embody what Blake refers to as the "Fall" of humanity. The "Fall," to the English artist, implies the loss of liberties, of infinity and that of the imaginative creative power, which had been part of the primeval humanity's identity and that, he thought, had gone lost. The "Moral Law" is the result of the humankind's behaviour and decisions throughout history and it is mostly to consider the act of those very same aforementioned institutions of power, which over the times purposefully made use of the Bible as an instrument of coercion rather than a work of prophetic vision.
Saree Makdisi clarifies the function of the moral codes to the English poet as follows:

> By directing our individual actions and seeking to make us adhere to certain moral codes conveyed to us in the act of reading itself, particularly reading the Bible (…), these moral codes serve as the very backbone of state religion, and hence of the power of the state. Or in other words, the state depends for the exercise of its power not simply on armies or police forces but above all on our regulation as morally instructed individuals (Makdisi 2015: 91).

In the streets of London, William Blake, was able to see where the State Religion's actions could lead to and this is clearly exemplified in the famous poem that bears the name of the city:

> I wander thro' each charter'd street,
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe
>
> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infants cry of fear,
> In every voice: in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear
>
> How the Chimney-sweepers cry
> Every blackning Church appalls,
> And the hapless Soldiers sigh
> Runs in blood down Palace walls
>
> But most thro' midnight streets I hear
> How the youthful Harlots curse
> Blasts the new-born Infants tear
> And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse
> (*London*, E25-26)

We will therefore agree that the poem condenses Blake's denounce of the exploitation and submission of humanity, in a city, whose streets embody a whole world (which is the modern world of the 18th century but whose decay traces back to the times of old in which mankind had fallen), that is entrapped in the grip of the famous "mind-forged manacles." The consequences

of the "bans," orders and commands imposed by the economic, political and religious institutions affected the people in their entirety. Correspondingly, the "marks" of the tyranny and violence inflicted by the State and the Church became tangible and altered Londoners' bodies, voices and actions.

The last stanza of the poem is of particular interest as it depicts a distinctive picture of the time in which Blake was living and paves the way for a reflection on the theme of contagion seen as a result of political and social issues, which were real when Blake was writing, but which can also be interpreted in a more general and universal perspective.
The famous lines, which sound as follows:

> But most thro' midnight streets I hear
> How the youthful Harlots curse
> Blasts the new-born Infants tear
> And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse
> (*London,* 13-16, E26).

have been often analysed by the critics as the description of a precise social condition, whose results are more than clear. Also, the stanza contains a further condemnation of those same institutions appearing in the previous stanzas, which eventually seem to be absent and unable to find any solution to the appalling situations which are affecting the city of London.

The focus of the stanza seems to lie primarily in the figure of the "Harlot." More specifically, according to Roti and Kent (1977: 19), whose article that appeared on the *Blake Quarterly* explicitly concentrated on the last lines of the poem, the meaning of the stanza is to be found in the way – the "how" – the "Harlot's curse blasts" and "blights" both the infant and the marriage. As a matter of fact, the curse coming from the woman, which ruined the life of the child and the future of the marriage, would stand for an unspecified venereal disease and, most importantly, for what it meant to contract such an infection at that time.
In the 18th century prostitutes were widely associated with venereal disease. Most of the times they were also believed to be the source of the infection.
Jerry White (2012: 370) in his "documentary" of 18th century London, reports the verses of an English MP, Mr Charles Hanbury Williams, who used to "spend time with" prostitutes and write

> : Down each Street the Bunters flow,
> Picking Pockets as they go
> Gently they each Corner call,
> Sultry Urine scorching all […].
> All alone, yet in Her Lap,
> The Temple Beau may get a Clap,
> Where, Pox'd, & Poxing, they shall own,
> The Pains of Love, are Pains alone[1].

[1] Ch.H. Williams, MSS 69, f. 72, 'Parody of His own Song in Comus' in White (2012: 370).

In addition to this White argues that «venereal disease was more common in London than elsewhere in the country» and that Mr Hanbury Williams

> «spoke from experience. The symptoms of venereal disease were so painful and so potentially dangerous, treatment with surgery and other mechanical intervention so agonising, 'salivation' with mercury so tiring and debilitating to mind and body, it is a wonder that the power of the prostitute was sufficient to obliterate these risks from the minds of those tempted to engage with her». (White, 2012: 370).

Eventually the English politician died of syphilis complications after accusing his wife of having infected him.

As Noelle Gallagher (2018) clearly maintains in her study on the representation of venereal disease, the "poxy whore" was also a well-represented type in both art and literature, invoked as an object of ridicule, a symbol of vice, a cautionary figure and much else besides" (Gallagher 2018: 62). There exist multiple examples of these kind of women, which include, for instance, Fielding's main character of the novel *Amelia* (1752) and the numerous engravings by Hogarth (*A Harlot's Progress,* 1732). The latter, for instance, depict the story of Molly Hackabout – a lady who became a prostitute after arriving in London – and consider the consequences of getting venereal infections.

In 18th century literature, as Noelle Gallagher again has shown in her monograph, the representation of an infected prostitute had multiple associations, meanings and features. Some writers would depict prostitutes as inhuman, the embodiment of evil; some others used them as the "target to implicate wider moral or social evils" (Gallagher 2018: 63). Also, they were used as a symbol of "self-selling" and, sometimes, as an extended metaphor of the consequences of capitalism, as symbol of corruption or, more simply, they ended up representing "the other" (Gallagher 2018: 122).

Furthermore, syphilis, in the London of the 18th century, had reached the numbers of an epidemic. A recent study shows that in the 1770s "individual—of either sex—who lived in the metropolis throughout the age range 15–34 years (…) would have had above a 20 per cent chance of having submitted themselves to the ardours of residential treatment for the pox" (Szreter, Siena 2020: 3). This means that the disease had widely spread among the whole population. According to the same study an entire hospital, which had been destined only to the treatment of venereal disease (the Lock Hospital), had opened in London in 1748. Plus, three other hospitals had "foul wards" in which doctors dedicated themselves to the cure of the infections, while the workhouses' infirmaries were always full of patients who needed to be treated (Szreter, Siena 2020: 2-4).

In addition to that, a diffuse state of fear lingered all over the country since "infection seemed to be lurking around every corner" (Gallagher 2018: 1). Everybody was afraid to catch the "taint" or "the French Disease" or "Morbus Gallicus" or the "Pox", as the disease was called by many, because it was extremely widespread among all classes, genders and ages. It definitely was a "plague" that affected the whole society.

In *London*, all the characters mentioned, such as the Infant, the Chimney Sweeper, the Soldier, the chartered Thames even and, most importantly, the Prostitute (who is here, as it has

been already mentioned, defined as the "Harlot" in order to give a sense of doom by choosing a biblical term) are affected by the "plagues" of the society. In fact, they are intended as the products of the "mind-forged manacles", imposed by the capitalistic, limiting, hypocritically morally-focused society in which the English population was living in the 18th century.

However, it is the actions of the Harlot, whose curse is the protagonist of the last lines, that need to be considered as having a certain peculiarity here and need further investigation. Linked by an alliteration and almost parallel in subsequent lines, the verbs "blast" and "blight" stand out in these last lines and seem to carry with them the intrinsic meaning of the whole stanza. Therefore, it seems pertinent here to follow the path chosen by Roti and Kent (1977) again in their article, who pay considerable attention to the analysis of the meaning of the two verbs and who start by exploring their etymological significations, that can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary. Namely, according to the same dictionary, the verb "to blast" refers to "a sudden infection destructive of vegetable or animal life"; or to "a blasted bud or blossom" and, also, it seems to be synonymous of the following actions: "to wither, shrivel or arrest vegetation, to blight". Hence, the meaning of the verb substantially implies the action of destroying a plant through a disease.

As regards the verb "to blight", it would essentially present the same meaning explored so far, as it mostly refers to "any baleful of atmospheric or invisible origin that suddenly blasts, nips, or destroy plants, affects them with disease, arrest their growths, or prevents their blossoms from setting".

It seems clear that the extended meaning of both verbs, which alludes to the botanic discourse, is very important and it will be given the right space for analysis further in the study. As for now, it is necessary to take into consideration the more general signification of the verbs, that is to say, that concerning the spreading of a disease and, by extension, of a venereal disease. The disease implied in the verbs "to blast" and "to blight" carries with it the power to destroy, and in *London*, it results in destroying both the infant's eyes and the marriage.

As concerns the condition of the Infant, Blake is here probably referring to what we call today congenital syphilis, an affliction which allowed the disease to be passed over from the mother to the children and whose one of the most common symptoms would be ocular discharge, which would eventually lead to blindness.

As far as the marriage is concerned instead, here the reference to the disease is even more explicit since the verb "to blight" is used together with the term "plagues". The Prostitute, in this London society, would destroy the sacred union by insinuating, i.e., infecting, the "marriage". This would be possible as the husband, the one who had "enjoyed the favours" of the infected woman, would pass the disease to his unaware wife (and consequently, or possibly, to their children).

The miserable union between a man and a woman, which is described by Blake with the famous oxymoron "Marriage hearse", seems, apparently, to be one of the victims of the Harlot's infectious curse. However, if one pays more attention to the line, it will be clear that this syntagma's meaning does not describe the results of the infected prostitute's actions on the doomed couple, but it describes an endemic condition of the marriage itself; a disease which permanently characterises the union despite the infection. The marriage, as the poem presents it, is already "ruined" before receiving the plagues from the Prostitute. Consequently, the latter cannot be held accountable for ruining it, as she is not the cause but the result of an ill society.

Prostitution and the social consequences of venereal disease are to be considered, therefore, the outcome of the limits and the moral constrictions imposed by the institutions among which marriage is to be included. Saree Makdisi, in his studies on Blake, compares marriage to other governmental institutions such as the "institutions of commerce, state religion, and state power" (Makdisi 2015: 80). Such institutions have barred humanity into a spiral of limits, exploitation and loss of conscience and sight, which resulted in the appalling conditions that the whole society was suffering in the times of Blake.

Under these circumstances, marriage cannot but be compared to a carriage leading to a funeral because, primarily, to get married deprives human beings of their liberties. In the 18th century, as everyone knows, most of the times marriage didn't epitomize a matter of love, but it resulted into an act that was almost always conditioned by economic and social pressure. Moreover, marriage can definitely be compared to a "hearse" also because, representing an institution of power, it could lead humankind straight to what Blake called the "Eternal Death". With these two words Blake would represent the fallen state of Man; a state in which humanity had lost its imaginative conscience. Consequently, marriage in the corrupted, hypocritical and constrictive society of the 18th century, seems to only lead towards that final state of the human consciousness, as well as other institutions of power do.

Accordingly, marriage, in this appalling and infected society, and the same act of reproduction, which should have been the natural result of the life of a couple, can only be seen, as Saree Makdisi clearly points out, as "just another form of labor, just as entrapping, just as exploitative, as other forms of exploitation that sustain the wider economy of extraction and abuse of power that is ruled over by kings and priests in their castles and high spires" (Makdisi 2015: 80). Therefore, the "Infant's tear" and the "Harlot's curse" turn up to be not the source of the infection but the outcome and almost the product of the society.

However, society, to Blake, is not only a historical concept. The society he usually refers to in his poems is both modern and ancient at the same time. What the English poet would like his readers to realise is that humanity is experiencing a fallen society that had forgotten its origin and that had lost conscience of its divinity and its creative powers. The fallen society in which humanity has been living since the moment it has lost its grip on imagination, it is the same in which Albion (Blake's mythological character embodying the whole mankind) would declare "here will I build my Laws of Moral Virtue! / Humanity shall be no more: but war & princedom & victory"! (*Jerusalem*, 1:31-32, E147), meaning that society is doomed to be subjected to an infectious tyranny until it decides to act and change.

What infection represents, the way it spreads and is able to ruin something which is as natural as the human being, is the theme of another very famous poem by Blake: *The Sick Rose*.

> 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 Sick Rose*, E23)

This poem has been interpreted in so many ways over the centuries, but what this study will try to demonstrate is that the meaning of *The Sick Rose* can also pertain to Blake's enlarged reflection on the consequences of venereal disease. Also, it will be shown that this new understanding of the poem is tightly bound to and somehow moves from the last stanza of the poem *London* that has just been analysed. Furthermore, the following analysis would try to show that there is a strong intratextual and icono-textual dialogue between the two poems (Heidmann: 2015, 2017); through words and images the two writings clearly communicate.

To begin with, it is fundamental to remember that, Blake's copies of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in which both poems are inscribed, are all different from one another. Blake changed the order of the poems and each one of the copies the artist personally composed and engraved is to be considered as an original. Nonetheless, there is the copy A of the volume, stored at the British Museum, dated 1795, in which the poem *London* and the *The Sick Rose* come one after the other. We can therefore assume that Blake had in mind, and in those years, a certain sequentiality as regards the two poems.

Many of the interpretations of *The Sick Rose* tend to give to the symbol of the rose and the worm the meaning of "Life" and "Death," or "Innocence and Experience," seeing the action of the worm as the "cruder deceptions of Experience," as Harold Bloom (1963: 135) defines it. Most of the same interpretations also agree on the sexual symbolism, reading the two images more specifically as the equivalent male and female genitalia or the embodiment of a more general feeling such as love being destroyed by selfishness. However, by looking at the two poems synoptically, the symbolism could also be read as the representation of the causes and consequences of a venereal disease infection together with a more general depiction of what it means to be infected in the world of Experience; i.e. to be part of the "fallen world" of Eternal Death and Moral Law which has been dealt with earlier in this study.

In order to do that, the verbs "blight" and "blast," as they appeared in the poem *London,* will be here analysed further, taking into account their extended meaning, that is to say, the one highlighting the effect of the verbs as describing an infection ruining vegetation and, mainly, the bud of a flower. I would argue that through an intratextual and icono-textual dialogue (Heidmann 2015; 2017), the meaning of these verbs, appearing in the poem *London*, has been transferred into a new "scenography," which is that of the images – developing into both words and images - building up the structure of *The Sick Rose*.

In the *The Sick Rose*, the action of "blighting" is taken over by the worm that, as the symbol of infection and destruction – which happens concretely through male genitalia and ideally through an "invisible" force – insinuates into the core of a rose and destroys its life. Consequently, the rose is to be interpreted as the infected partner, as well as "Life" itself. From the poem *London* we assist to a sort of an overturning of the sexual forces which take part into this infectious cycle. While in *London* the infection was ignited by the "Harlot" (though the Harlot is not to be considered guilty for that), here it is perpetrated by the worm, which clearly indicates a male force. I would argue, therefore, that infection, to Blake, is something that involves everybody indistinctively. Moreover, the social plague concerning STDs is clearly an issue whose solution

lies not with the hunt of the "plague spreader," but with the awareness of the social, political, economic and cultural reasons of the contagion.

Another linguistic element that indicates the connection with the venereal disease discourse in *The Sick Rose* is the adjective "secret" in the line mentioning the "dark secret love." What gets the rose sick is a "dark secret love," indeed.

In the 18th century, it was common to define syphilis as the "secret malady" because, even though the features and the consequences of the disease started to be publicly debated (in newspapers, novels, medical treatises etc), the contraction of the illness was still considered a dishonour. To suffer from syphilis was believed to be a disgrace, above all among women, as the whole issue was linked to the sexual life of a person. What's more, becoming infected with syphilis was also a shame as the supposed reasons of contagion totally overturned the standards of prudery and morality which society demanded.

Secrecy, in the poem, is the cause of destruction; notably, of the destruction of "Life," which is epitomized by "the crimson Joy" of the rose.

To Blake, "joy" is another extremely important term. Joy represents the ultimate state in Blake's poetic and thought, it embodies the state of total awareness of the human being's divinity and infinity; the state which recognises unity into multiplicity and difference, a condition which is achieved through "an expansive flourishing of being and desire" (Makdisi 2015: 71). Therefore, joy is infinite energy, even sexual energy, which cannot be restricted or limited. Also, joy is the force that allows humanity to go beyond the restrictions of the five senses and enable them to see there is no difference between the world of imagination and the phenomenological world or, as this case epitomizes, between the world of nature and the human world. Nevertheless, joy can be destroyed if the system is infected.

However, there is a way, according to Blake, to awake in the humankind the awareness of what joy really is and represents. To the English poet the only path accessible to get back to joy is to create and enjoy art. In other words, this is possible by way of the very poems that Blake is offering to his readers. Namely, it is through the juxtaposition of abstract and concrete terms, which represents the core of his writings, that Blake manages to reconfigure the capacity of seeing unity into multiplicity (as is the case of the rose's joy here or the worm's flying in the storm, or the worm's love). In other words, what interests Blake more and what guides his reader through his poems, is the discovery and the consequent analysis of mental associations and analogies (D'Agata D'Ottavi 2001: 57) existing between the objects he describes and depicts.

The same juxtaposition is reflected into the double language of Blake's art, which is figurative and literary at the same time: a "composite art," like Mitchell (1978) has notoriously defined it.

Blake's art can be seen as the poet's own linguistic and concrete attempt to materialise what he called his "double vision" and to give a voice to his inward eye[2], which is the manifestation of the human imagination.

In *The Sick Rose* the juxtaposition as the only path to essence and complexity is achieved through the dialogue existing between text and images, because even though the story of the

[2] "For double the vision my Eyes do see / And a double vision is always with me / With my inward Eye 'tis an old Man grey / With my outward a Thistle across my way" (Letter to Thomas Butt, 27-30; E721).

infected rose is that of a destruction, the drawing in which the poem is inscribed tells the readers and the viewers another story.

It has been argued so far that contagion as a form of restricted liberty – and venereal disease as the modern societal manifestation of it – was an issue that affected a society which had substituted "Imagination" and "Vision" with "Moral Law" and which had not recovered them yet. Such society is for Blake part of the past and the present of humanity, as humans, who have lost their grip on imagination and creativity as a form of knowledge, are doomed to experience the "Fall" at every stage of their lives (and that's also the reason why past and present often overlap and fuse into one another in Blake's writings).

In addition to that, however, Blake considered the limits (the world of "Experience," the "Error" of mankind and, in other words, the "Fall") not as something totally negative, but as the point of departure for a renewal that should have, hopefully, been the apocalyptic event of an indeterminate future. Blake believed the world of "Experience" to be a bundle of energy that would have eventually reached out and embraced the world of Innocence. This process leading to change should have involved the hermeneutic skills of an active audience. Consequently, Blake engraved his poems with images and texts that create on the page a material and manifested world, which will eventually guide the readers and the viewers to imagine and recover that same condition that humankind had lost and from which it had fallen. This would happen because readers and viewers need to activate their creative powers in order to give a sense to what they are dealing with.

In *The Sick Rose* the icono-textual dynamic, that is to say the dialogue between the text and the image, is what triggers the audience's imaginative and creative powers. Specifically, the drawing in which the text of the poem is inscribed, doesn't only depict the bud of the rose in which a worm is insinuating and from which the figure of a woman is getting out with her arms stretched in the air. It shows much more.

The whole page is framed by thorny stems coming from the same infected rose plant, which, as Jessica Schwartz (2012) has demonstrated in her study on the worm trope in Blake's works, accommodate other forms of life. For instance, on the vines there is another worm, which looks like a caterpillar, and two other figures, which seem in-between the world of nature and the human world, coming out from their cocoons. These creatures basically make "the site of decay in the poem also that of generation" (Schwartz 2012: 137) and, one could add, renewal.

The dialogue between the text and the images, therefore, helps the readers construct and give way to their own "double vision" regarding the idea of contagion in general (and of the venereal disease as its most evident and societal consequence). On the one hand, contagion will eventually be seen as a human condition following mankind's deviation from its original being and identity, its departing from its own imaginative nature and its embracing of the hypocritical vision of the Moral Law that corrupted and swallowed any kind of social, political and economic construction. On the other hand, the destruction happening in this world of Experience, is to be interpreted as the basest point from which man cannot but start reflecting and acquiring new awareness of the world and of what it has become. Yet, the new form of knowledge acquired by people, as well as the energy originating from the discontent and the dissatisfaction of the human condition, can be

used by people themselves to move on and act in order to bring about change, just as a caterpillar's natural metamorphosis into a butterfly shows.
Furthermore, the image of the transforming worm, or the worm that brings about renewal and regeneration, will continue to translate Blake's hope for change as we can read from another extract belonging to a later long narrative poem: *Vala or the Four Zoas*

> For every thing that lives is holy for the source of life
> Descends to be a weeping babe
> For the Earthworm renews the moisture of the sandy plain
> (FZ, 2, 34 ll. 28-82 E324)

To conclude therefore, Blake's depiction of contagion and disease is not to be considered only as something negative, catastrophic or accusatory but, on the contrary, as something whose knowledge and comprehension can bring about awareness, action and, eventually, change.

This attitude might even be more important today in a world that is living through and hopefully overcoming a pandemic of such considerable dimensions. We should bear in mind that it is fundamental to start from the "Experience" (in a literal sense) we have had of a phenomenon to embed it in our conscience and, successively, use the knowledge acquired by dealing and coping with it, in order to start a change, which should always be for the better, and should set as an objective the well-being and protection of every single living being on earth.

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In the paper the abbreviation "E" is used for citations of works by Blake. It stands for *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, D. V. Erdman (edited by), New York, Anchor Books, 1988 and is followed by the number of the page of the volume in which Blake's work/poem can be found. (i.e. E25).

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