NEOPLATONISM IN BLAKE'S *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that William Blake's collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* (1789-1794) can be read in the light of Neoplatonism. From this perspective, Innocence and Experience are not completely opposed but, rather, intertwined in a more complex and fascinating way. As the human soul experiences a rebirth after its descent in the so-called world of generation, so man can be born again, in a higher and purer form, after his immersion in the world of Experience. According to this reading, based on the Eleusinian Mysteries and Plotinus's and Porphyry's works, Blake's aim is not to recover the world described by the *Songs of Innocence*, because the real Innocence he alludes to is the spiritual and moral wisdom man will achieve after his journey through the two stages of existence.

1. INTRODUCTION

William Blake's composite collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* is the product of a long and elaborate work that lasts several years, from 1789 to 1794. This essay is an attempt to demonstrate that the collection acquires extra value if read in the light of the Eleusinian Mysteries and of the Neoplatonic concepts Blake found in Thomas Taylor's works. As a matter of fact, it is generally assumed that Taylor

provides the poet with the translations of the most celebrated Neoplatonic writings[1].

As claimed by Harper and Raine, the first to remark Blake's indebtedness to Taylor is Damon (1969) «and no serious Blake scholar has since denied it» (Harper – Raine 1969: 3). In 1928, Pierce discovered a series of connections between Taylor's and Blake's works, stating that «the Neo Platonism of the poet so consistently develops just behind that of the scholar, that some form of influence seems almost unquestionable» (Pierce 1928: 1121)[2]. In recent years, Harper has focused on the most evident influences of Taylor's translations on the poet's so-called 'Prophetic Books': «I am convinced that Taylor is a primary source of Blake's ideas in the important formative years before and during the writing of the early Prophetic Books» (Harper 1961: vii). Since the 'Prophetic Books' are considered on the whole as a *summa* of Blake's ideas, it seems likely that the same Neoplatonic influences can be detected also in Blake's earlier works, namely in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

Among the writings by Taylor that most attract Blake's attention is the *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (Amsterdam [London] 1790-1791). It has also been claimed that Blake probably owned one of the replicas of the so-called 'Portland Vase', whose symbols might be interpreted as a representation of the Eleusinian

[1] «It was Thomas Taylor who took upon himself, at the close of the eighteenth century, the task of placing before his contemporaries the canonical Platonic writings […]. Taylor's translations were the texts, his interpretations the guide. Flaxman and probably Blake were close friends of Taylor during the formative years of all three» (Harper – Raine 1969: 8). As claimed by Raine (1970: 36), Blake might also have had the chance to attend Taylor's lectures on Neoplatonism at Flaxman's house. Furthermore, Taylor's translations might have been available to Blake even before their publication (Raine 1968: 393).

[2] «In some cases there may have been other sources available, in some there certainly were not; but for all cases under discussion Taylor was a *possible* source, sometimes, apparently, the only one. Even where Blake could have drawn from other writers, it seems improbable that he did» (Pierce 1928: 1122).

Mysteries[3]. It should be noted that Taylor seems to link Plotinus to the tradition of the Eleusinian Mysteries[4]. Indeed, Taylor might have been prompted to see a connection between Plotinus and the Eleusinian celebrations by a passage in the *Enneads* where the Greek philosopher refers to some ancient Mysteries (*Enn.* I, 6, 7). As noted by Procopio (2005: 68), Plotinus's words seem to recall the symbolism of the Eleusinian Mysteries and, in particular, their focus on the blessed and privileged condition of the initiates after the final revelation[5]. Indeed, Plotinus's claim "Any that have seen know what I have in mind: the soul takes another life as it approaches God" (Plot. *Enn.* VI, 9, 6: transl. Mackenna – Page 1952: 359) somehow recalls the *Homeric*

[3] As suggested by Raine (1970: 30-31), «It was during the early years of Blake's friendship with him that Flaxman persuaded Josiah Wedgwood to make his famous replicas of the Portland Vase, the first of his many replicas and imitations of Graeco-Roman vases. […] In 1791 Erasmus Darwin […] published in Part I of his *Botanic Garden* a long essay in which he argued, probably mistakenly, that the vase figures are emblems of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Blake made the fine set of engravings for Darwin's work, and must, therefore, have had either the original vase or one of the replicas in his workroom for some time».

[4] «That the mysteries occultly signified this sublime truth, that the soul by being merged in matter resides among the dead both here and hereafter […] yet it is indisputably confirmed, by the testimony of the great and truly divine Plotinus» (Taylor 1790-1791: 351). All quotations from the *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* are from Taylor (1790-1791) and from Taylor (1891).

[5] «È evidente che un'analoga concezione della visione finale, dell'*epopteia*, presiede tanto ai misteri quanto alla filosofia plotiniana: essa è considerata come il presagio ed al tempo stesso l'anticipo di una situazione escatologica privilegiata» (Procopio 2005: 69). The importance of visionary experience in Plotinus's thought is underlined also by Bussanich (1996: 40): «Discursive reasoning must retreat before intuitive thought and visionary experience, which for Plotinus justify the claim that 'whoever has seen, knows what I am saying' […]. To achieve this transcendent level of existence requires both philosophical reasoning and affective training». For a further study on Plotinus's philosophy of the soul, see Chiaradonna (2005).

Hymn to Demeter[6], which underlines the importance of visions as a source of knowledge of the divine:

> Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom.
> (*h. Cer.* 480-484; transl. Evelyn-White 1967: 323)

However, even though there are affinities between Plotinus's concept of the soul's final salvation and that of the rites of Eleusis, it should be pointed out that several mystery cults existed and, therefore, it is not sure whether the philosopher's reference was precisely to the rites of Eleusis[7].

It is possibly by means of Taylor, then, that Plotinus's ideas and the symbolism of the Eleusinian Mysteries become somehow intertwined in Blake's thought. The habit of merging different traditions in a new, 'illuminated', way is one of Blake's characteristics, as emerges from *All Religions Are One*, whose title underlines the author's syncretic approach to philosophy and religion. All religions, as well as all philosophies and traditions, derive from the so-called 'Poetic Genius', which is universal and transcends all distinctions: «As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various), So all Religions &, all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius»

[6] The story of the Eleusinian Mysteries «was told in detail for the first time in a long epic poem that has come down to us under the title of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. Neither the author of this hymn nor the time of its composition is known, but scholars have come more and more to consider it the official story of the Eleusinian traditions, recorded in verse about the end of the seventh century B.C., perhaps around 600 B.C.» (Mylonas 1969: 3).

[7] As remarked by Ustinova (2009: 228), for instance, «Before we can attribute to the Eleusinian cult practices suggested by statements in ancient authors, we have first to be sure that they do not refer to the Orphic mysteries» or, as it has been said, to other mystery cults.

(*A.R.O.*, K. 98)[8]. It follows that Blake might have seen some links between Plotinus's theory of the descent and ascent of the soul and the Eleusinian Mysteries, two traditions that constitute, along with Porphyry's *The Cave of the Nymphs*[9], such an important key for the interpretation of Blake's ideas.

2. TRUE KNOWLEDGE COMES FROM "THE MOLE"

As claimed by Frye, the interpretation of Blake's works and, especially, of his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, presupposes an awareness of the author's complex and often obscure symbolism: «Without the system, Blake is the simplest of lyric poets and every child may joy to hear the songs» (Frye 1966 :10). I believe that a key to the correct interpretation of Blake's *Songs* is provided by the opening lines of *The Book of Thel*: «Does the Eagle know what is in the pit? / Or wilt thou go ask the Mole?» (*B.T.*, ll. 1-2, K. 127). These lines are a reflection on two different kinds of knowledge: abstract and sensuous knowledge[10]. The lyrical voice is indirectly asking the reader whether true knowledge is acquired by means of abstract definitions or if, conversely, truth is achieved only through concrete experience. As it might be expected, Blake does not provide his reader with a clear

[8] Hereafter all quotations from Blake will be quoted according to Keynes (1972) and marked as a K. followed by the page number. The following abbreviations for Blake's works are employed: *All Religions Are One*: *A.R.O*; *The Book of Thel*: *B.T.*; *Jerusalem*: *J.*; *Milton*: *M.*; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: *M.H.H.*; *There is no Natural Religion*: *N.N.R.*; *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: *V.L.J.*

[9] Blake's knowledge of Porphyry's *De Antro Nympharum* is demonstrated by the author's engraving dating from 1821. For Blake's plate *De Antro Nympharum*, see his Arlington Court Tempera, reproduced in Raine (1970).

[10] Mitchell (1978: 86) discusses the meaning of Thel's question: «Is knowledge a process and a probe, or a product and a point of view? […] Mediated, abstract 'eagle knowledge' produces a vision of the pit that is desirable, but apparently false; immediate, sensuous 'mole knowledge' discovers the apparent truth, but this truth is intolerable».

and definite answer because, as he states, the obscurity of his works is aimed at helping man to awake his faculties: «That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act» (Letter to Dr. Trusler, 23 Aug. 1799, K. 793). However, an attentive perusal of Blake's macrotext, along with a study of the influences coming from the Eleusinian Mysteries and Neoplatonism, might offer an answer to Thel's question and demonstrate that the passage through the complexities of the state of Experience is a *conditio sine qua non* for the achievement of eternity.

Blake provides an answer to Thel's obscure question in his earliest illuminated work, *All Religions Are One*, where he asserts that «As the true method of knowledge is experiment, the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences» (*A.R.O.*, K. 98). These lines recall a passage from Plotinus's *Enneads*, where the philosopher, in similar terms, praises the role of direct experience as a source of knowledge: «Where the faculty is incapable of knowing without contact, the experience of evil brings the clearer perception of Good» (Plot. *Enn.* IV, 8, 7: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 204). Both Blake and Plotinus, thus, suggest that knowledge is not provided by abstract categories but by real experience, i.e. by "the Mole"[11]. Plotinus goes even further when he claims that evil is useful for humanity in order to realize what good consists of, as if man could not really perceive the greatness of God without being immersed in the "mud" of existence first (Plot. *Enn.* I, 6, 5). This is exactly what Thel does not have the strength to do since she questions her usefulness in a world where

[11] As noted by Catapano (1996: 157), in Plotinus's times, philosophy implied a specific behaviour; the philosopher had to translate his ideas into a concrete way of life. Therefore, it might be inferred that knowledge by means of direct experience played a very important role in Plotinus's system. «Questa ricerca della verità – ricerca personale e corale, dialettica e problematica, tradizionalista e insieme originale – e lo stile di vita ad essa corrispondente sono esattamente ciò che Plotino ha in mente quando si parla di 'filosofia'».

everything inevitably perishes, but, when she is given the possibility of exploring the underworld in first person, she runs away: «The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek / Fled back unhinder'd till she came to the vales of Har» (*B.T.*, 6: 21-22, K. 130). In her representing the weaknesses of every man when facing the difficulties of life, Thel is a metaphor for man's complex journey on earth. However, Blake himself maintains that «Evil is Created into a State, that Men / May be deliver'd time after time» (*J.*, 49: 71-72, K. 680), somehow prompting his reader not to be afraid of the «Dolours and lamentations» (*B.T.*, 6: 7, K. 130) of mortal existence and not to follow Thel's example. Once more, Blake seems to be deeply influenced by Plotinus, who argues that the fall into the material world does not only have to be read in terms of a death of the soul's eternal life, but also as a positive event:

> then it [the Soul] abandons its status as whole soul with whole soul, though even thus it is always able to recover itself by turning to account the experience of what it has seen and suffered here, learning, so, the greatness of rest in the Supreme, and more clearly discerning by comparison with what is almost their direct antithesis[12].
> (Plot. *Enn.* IV, 8, 7: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 204)

According to Plotinus, the soul 'dies', putting an end to its eternal life, but is then able to be born again, in a purer and higher form. As a matter of fact, in Plotinus's theory of the descent of the soul, «what

[12] According to Fleet (2012: 177-178), in his commentary on Plotinus's *On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies*, the philosopher «is suggesting that experience of evil in the sensible world can lead us to an understanding of the Form of Good in the intelligible world. […] At root is the fundamental Platonic distinction between knowledge or understanding, whose theater is the intelligible world, and experience or suffering, whose theater is the sensible world».

appears as a fall is in fact a positive event» (Kanyororo 2003: 235)[13]. Likewise, Blake argues that the 'descent' into the evil of Experience does not have to be avoided because man has to know what sin is in order to be redeemed: «If I were Unpolluted I should never have / Glorified thy Holiness or rejoiced in thy Great Salvation» (*J.*, 61: 45-46, K. 695). It follows that both Blake and Plotinus seem to believe in the ability of the human soul to renew itself after the 'immersion' in the so-called world of generation, so that the experience of the difficulties of existence might be turned into a source of 'salvation'.

The Neoplatonic concept of the world as a cave where the human soul descends is also useful for the interpretation of Blake's *Songs*[14]. Blake actually considers the world of generation as a place of both death and rebirth, as a 'grave' and a 'womb' at the same time, as «The Habitation of the Spectres of the Dead, & the Place / Of Redemption

[13] Kanyororo (2003: 238) claims that Plotinus constantly refers to the possibility that the fallen soul has to renew itself and ascend to the world of eternity, enriched by its experience in the mortal world: «L'âme incarnée peut se retrouver. Son effort, pour retrouver la cohérence primitive de sa nature, doit aller dans le sens de l'éveil, de la concentration et peut-être du silence qui seul rend capable de garder en soi l'essentiel. […] la descente de l'âme se révèle néanmoins comme une richesse».

[14] Generally speaking, the cave is a place of spiritual death and initiatory rebirth: «L'antro è simbolo del cosmo, luogo di iniziazione e rinascita, immagine del centro e del cuore. […] In esso avviene l'iniziazione, il passaggio dalla morte (al mondo profano) alla nascita, e questo passaggio, come ogni passaggio, deve avvenire nell'oscurità» (Laura Simonini's comment on *De Antro Nympharum*, in Porfirio 2010: 94). Porphyry himself asserts that, because of their symbolism, the ancients often consecrated caves to their gods during their rituals of initiation: «the Persians, mystically signifying the descent of the soul into an inferior nature and its ascent into the intelligible world, initiate the priest or mystic in a place which they denominate cave» (Porph. *Antr.* 6: transl. Taylor 1788: 301). As claimed by Ustinova (2009: 2), this image of the cave as a source of truth and regeneration is different from Plato's depiction of the cave as a place of ignorance. Porphyry's cave actually represents «a means of acquiring ultimate, superhuman knowledge» (Ustinova 2009: 2). On the myth of the cave and its related symbolism, see also Findlay (2003).

& of awakening again into Eternity» (*J.*, 59: 8-9, K. 691). This concept is fully developed by Porphyry, Plotinus's pupil, in his work *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, where the author analyses Homer's account of a cave having two gates: «Besides this too is wonderful, that the cave should have a double entrance; one prepared for the descent of men, the other for the ascent of gods» (Porph. *Antr.* 3: transl. Taylor 1788: 299). After its first descent, the soul is able to ascend, through the second gate, in a divine form[15]. This sort of *descensus ad inferos* functions as a process of purification and expiation, during which the soul has to be cleansed from the 'filth' of existence, as a sculptor works on his statue (Plot. *Enn.* I, 6, 5: transl. Mackenna – Page 1952: 23):

> act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there […]. So do you also […] and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue.
> (Plot. *Enn.* I, 6, 9: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 25).

Once more, Blake is close to Plotinus when claiming that man has to purify himself from the vices of earthly life, as a great artist endlessly refines his work: «We are in a World of Generation & death, & this world we must cast off if we would be Painters such as Rafael, Mich. Angelo & the Ancient Sculptors» (*V. L. J.*, K. 613). While in the mortal world, then, man undergoes a spiritual and moral journey that will allow him to be born again, ascend from the 'cave' where he first fell, and be united with God, exactly as when he was «One Family, / One Man blessed forever» (*J.*, 55: 46, K. 687).

The necessity to 'die' or, in Blakean terms, to be immersed in Experience[16], in order to 'be reborn' is what the Eleusinian Mysteries symbolically intend to signify by means of a representation of the

[15] Plotinus asserts that «in the Soul's becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like God» (Plot. *Enn.* I, 6, 6: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 24).
[16] Raine (1968: 129) remarks that «*Experience*, as a whole, deals with the world of the soul that has 'died', or 'lapsed'».

story of Proserpina and Ceres[17]. Indeed, as it will be discussed below, two poems of *Songs of Experience*, *The Little Girl Lost* and *The Little Girl Found*, might be read as Blake's reinterpretation of the myth of Proserpina[18]. Lyca, the protagonist of the two songs, seems to retrace the path of Proserpina who, in the imagery of the Mysteries, is linked to the regeneration of nature, since Ceres allows the coming of spring in order to celebrate the 'rebirth' of her lost daughter[19]. Recalling the symbolism of the Eleusinian celebrations, the lyrical voice of *The Little Girl Lost* announces the world's future rebirth, thus linking Lyca to the myth of Proserpina:

> In futurity
> I prophetic see,
> That the earth from sleep,
> (Grave the sentence deep)
>
> Shall arise and seek
> For her maker meek:
> And the desart wild
> Become a garden mild.
> (*The Little Girl Lost,* 34: 1-8, K. 112)

[17] As claimed by Kerenyi (Jung – Kerenyi 1985: 117), «The basic theme of both these mysteries was the eternal coming of life from death» (Jung – Kerenyi 1985: 149). One of the symbols displayed during the rituals was «a single ear of grain» (Jung – Kerenyi 1985: 115) that represented life generating from death: «The grain figure is essentially the figure of both origin and end […]. It is always *the grain* that sinks to earth and returns». The grain, exactly like Proserpina, descends in order to ascend in a better, more complete form. For further studies on the Eleusinian Mysteries, see Clinton (1992), Eliade (1978), Kerenyi (1967), Lippolis (2006), Mylonas (1969), Scarpi (2002) and Wassoon (1978).

[18] «*The Little Girl Lost* and *The Little Girl Found* tell the story that Blake first learned from the Portland vase; Lyca is the Kore, whose death – or, as Blake says, 'sleep' – is watched with such grave wonder by the man and woman on the urn» (Raine 1968: 127).

[19] «After recovering her daughter, Demeter consented to rejoin the gods, and the earth was miraculously covered with verdure» (Eliade 1978: 291).

Moreover, Lyca's sleep, a metaphor for her physical death, might be read as a reinterpretation of Proserpina's descent into the underworld[20]. As a matter of fact, Proserpina's imprisonment in Hades also symbolizes «the mighty descent into sleep, into the realm of dreams» (Keller 1988: 50). However, Lyca knows that man's 'sleep' is nothing but a rebirth into a higher reality, exactly as the soul's descent into generation turns out to be a source of salvation. By his indirect reference to the story of Proserpina, Blake is once more suggesting that true knowledge can be acquired only by means of direct experience, i.e. by a descent into the 'cave' of earthly life.

The Eleusinian Mysteries, along with the Neoplatonic concepts of the cosmos as a cave and of the descent of the soul into matter, seem to support the idea that knowledge comes from "the Mole". Thel, differently from Proserpina and Lyca, is not strong enough to accomplish her *descensus ad inferos* and chooses a form of incomplete knowledge, the one provided by "the Eagle". Blake does not want his reader to be entrapped, like Thel, in a world of illusory perfection; man, like the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries, has to face the pains of existence in first person in order to be redeemed.

[20] «Sweet sleep come to me / Underneath this tree» (*The Little Girl Lost*, 34:17-18, K. 112). According to Raine (1968: 136), there are several hints suggesting that 'sleeping' is here a metaphor for dying. First of all, the text suggests that Lyca's parents weep because their daughter sleeps, which sounds very unusual: «Do father, mother weep, / 'Where can Lyca sleep'. / […] How can Lyca sleep, / If her mother weep» (*The Little Girl Lost*, 34:19-20/23-24, K. 112). The only possible explanation is, thus, that Lyca's sleep symbolizes her physical death. Moreover, Lyca ambiguously states that she will not weep if her mother 'sleeps': «If my mother sleep, / Lyca shall not weep» (*The Little Girl Lost*, 34: 27-28, K. 113). Once more, Lyca shows that death is to her a rebirth into a higher and better reality and the consequent end of the darkness of the Fallen world.

3. INNOCENCE: AN AMBIGUOUS REALITY

Blake's claim that «Understanding […] is acquir'd by means of […] Experience» (*Annotations to Swedenborg*, K. 89) seems to suggest that the world of Innocence has to be gradually abandoned. Indeed, the *Songs of Innocence*, if carefully perused, depict a dimension where human imagination is restrained by different forms of authority and visually represent the necessity to overcome this oppressive world by means of some flying creatures that appear in several plates of the collection[21]: as claimed by Erdman (1974: 50), these birds flying towards the sky, in a sort of attempt of escape, remind the reader that «this life of sheltered innocence is but a 'little space' which must be pierced to prevent its becoming a prison».

The very title-page to *Songs of Innocence*, showing a woman instructing two children with a book on her lap, visually represents the stifling sides of the seemingly idyllic world of Innocence. The scene actually embodies that form of ruled education considered by Blake as the death of man's creative energy[22], as suggested by one of the most praised principles of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: «The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction» (*M.H.H.*, pl. 9, K. 152). Several other plates of *Songs of Innocence*, among which is *A Cradle Song*, highlight the ambiguities of this state and, in particular,

[21] The plates of *Songs of Innocence* in which flying birds appear are the following: Title-page to *Songs of Innocence*, *The Shepherd* and *The Little Black Boy* (plate II). As Blake produced several versions of each plate, with single illustrations considerably varying in colour, thus affecting their interpretation, it is important to note that the edition here considered for the plates of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is Keynes (1970).

[22] As is well-known, Blake is self-educated and often expresses his contempt for every form of forced instruction. His outstanding culture is due to his being a voracious reader: «In my Brain are studies & Chambers fill'd with books & pictures of old, which I wrote & painted in ages of Eternity before my mortal life» (Letter to John Flaxman, 21 Sept. 1800, K. 802).

the oppressive features of maternal love[23]. Throughout *Songs of Innocence*, mothers are, most of the times, those who entrap their children in a limiting dimension.

In the Eleusinian Mysteries, Proserpina's separation from her mother's cares is one of the basic steps of the ritual, the cause of her descent into Hades: «Here, then, we see the first cause of the soul's descent, […] occultly signified by the separation of Proserpine from Ceres» (Taylor 1790-1791: 387). Unlike Thel, Proserpina abandons the cave where she has been hidden by her mother, «lest some violence should be offered to Proserpine» (Taylor 1790-1791: 386), and undertakes her journey alone. In the celebrations of the Mysteries, as in most rituals of initiation, the separation from the mother represents a definite break from the previous state and a rebirth into a new condition[24]. In similar terms, Blake encourages humanity to leave all forms of moral and motherly constraints and find the strength to begin the 'descent' into Experience, since «none by travelling over known lands can find out the unknown, So from already acquired knowledge Man could not acquire more» (*A.R.O.*, K. 98).

Albeit *A Cradle Song* is usually considered as conforming «in its simplicity to the general pattern of all lullabies» (Keynes 1970: 137), in my opinion it functions as an example of how the protection of the state of Innocence, if excessive, might become a prison. The mother of the poem is worried about her child's future, as every mother would be but, at the same time, her 'moans' stress her oppressive role:

[23] Analyzing each of the *Songs of Innocence* would go beyond the scope of this study: in this discussion it is worth considering how *A Cradle Song* highlights some of the more ambiguous aspects of the state of Innocence.

[24] As claimed by Eliade (1994: 9), «The maternal universe was that of the profane world. The universe that the novices now enter is that of the sacred world. Between the two, there is a break, a rupture of continuity». As pointed out also by Lippolis (2006: 7-8), Proserpina's separation from Ceres played a basic role in the symbolism of the Mysteries: «La 'storia sacra' inizia con il rapimento della figlia […]; il suo destino femminile, infatti, non può prescindere dal matrimonio, che implica l'abbandono della madre e l'inizio di una nuova vita, esperienza temuta e allontanata da Demetra».

Sleep sleep happy child.
All creation slept and smil'd.
Sleep sleep, happy sleep,
While o'er thee thy mother weep.
(*A Cradle Song*, 16: 17-20, K. 120).

The fact that the sweet sleep of the child is contrasted by the crying of the mother clearly alludes to Blake's negative conception of maternal protection which, in *Jerusalem*, he defines as the «anguish of maternal love» (*J.*, 5: 46-47, K. 624). Since it is strange that a mother should cry if her child is quietly sleeping, the whole scene calls the idyllic atmosphere of Innocence into question. The adverb *while* actually focuses on the opposition between the child's serenity, on the one hand, and the mother's lamentations, on the other. The illustration of *A Cradle Song*, the only indoor-scene of *Songs of Innocence*, further contributes to highlight the ambiguities emerging from the poem. First of all, the picture of *A Cradle Song* evidently contrasts with the open settings of songs like *The Shepherd*, *The Lamb* and *Spring*, thus suggesting that the state of Innocence is not just a place where man can spend his time happily «Piping down the valleys wild» (Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, 4: 1, K. 111); secondly, indoor-settings often function, in Blake's system, as a symbol of the domination of reason over imagination. As a matter of fact, the child represented in the plate of *A Cradle Song* seems to have no way out from the different layers that prevent him from escaping: the bands which envelop him, the relatively big cradle where he lies and the heavy curtains that enclose the whole scene. As claimed by Warner (1989: 85), Blake's designs have to be meticulously analyzed in order to grasp the full meaning of the author's works: «Like his poetic archetypes, Blake's visual images are indicative primarily of *states* of man, which is one reason the human figure in various attitudes is so central to his designs». Therefore, every detail of the poet's illustrations has to be perused, since his drawings are never simple

translations of the songs they refer to[25]. The very Blake actually prompts his reader never to overlook the visual details provided by the plates: «As Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant, so Painting admits not a Grain of Sand or a Blade of Grass Insignificant – much less an Insignificant Blur or Mark» (*V.L.J*, K. 611).

The ambiguities coming to light from *A Cradle Song* seem to be confirmed by a comparison with the illustration of *Infant Sorrow*, a poem included in *Songs of Experience*. Mitchell (1978: 5) argues that Blake's plates have to be studied as «a picture in a world of pictures», since they are all somehow interrelated, as if they were part of a story. It is no coincidence, then, that the two plates of *A Cradle Song* and *Infant Sorrow* show two mothers, both red-dressed and bent over their children, in a particularly stifling setting. As suggested by Warner (1989: 107), the position of the two women might be considered as part of the body language used by Blake to symbolize negative feelings: «This figure and its related form, the bent-over, kneeling figure […] are recognized by most readers to be Blake's primary visual symbols for mankind in the state of despair». The undeniable similarities between the two plates might be read as an evidence that they should be connected and that they acquire a clearer significance if studied one in the light of the other. The lyrical voice of *Infant Sorrow* mentions some heavy bands against which he has to struggle:

> Struggling in my fathers hands:
> Striving against my swadling bands:

[25] «The aesthetic and iconographic independence of Blake's designs from their texts can thus be seen as having two functions. First, it serves a mimetic purpose, in that it reflects Blake's vision of the fallen world as a place of apparent separation between temporal and spatial, mental and physical phenomena. Second, it has a rhetorical or hermeneutic function, in that the contrariety of poem and picture entices the reader to supply the missing connections» (Mitchell 1978: 33). For further studies on Blake's 'illuminated' art, see Hagstrum (1964) and Lister (1975). It should also be noticed that, in the eighteenth century, the concept of the so-called *ut pictura poesis* was particularly widespread and necessarily influenced Blake's art. For a complete study on the *ut pictura poesis*, see Lee (1967).

> Bound and weary I thought best
> To sulk upon my mothers breast.
> (*Infant Sorrow*, 48: 5-8, K. 217)

However, it should be noted that these *swadling bands* are not present in the illustration of *Infant Sorrow*, where the little child is depicted with outstretched arms and as completely free from all physical constraints[26]. Conversely, the little protagonist of *A Cradle Song* is still wrapped in the tight bands that symbolize how the protection offered to the characters in the state of Innocence does not allow humanity to grow up. Given that *Infant Sorrow* is part of *Songs of Experience*, it follows that the child with no bands and outstretched arms, represented in the corresponding illustration, symbolizes the possibility man has to be set free from the bonds of mortal life only after passing through the suffering of the state of Experience.

It is important to point out that children are, in Blake's system, a symbol of the «fecundity of imagination» (Damon 1973: 81), as opposed to the so-called «Reasoning Power, / An Abstract objecting power that Negatives every thing» (*J.*, 10: 13-14, K. 629). Blake often praises the ability of children, led by their imagination, to understand the meaning of his 'illuminated' works:

> I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions, & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children, who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped. Neither Youth nor Childhood is Folly or Incapacity.
> (Letter to Dr. Trusler, 23 Aug. 1799, K. 794)

After the passage through all the stages of existence, man is like a new-born child, able to show to the 'inexperienced' ones the way to

[26] For a study of the symbolism of the outstretched arms in Blake's plates, see Warner (1989: 87-105).

God. As suggested by Eliade[27], many rituals of initiation are symbolically considered as a *regressus ad uterum*, as if man were returning into the motherly womb. This concept recalls Wordsworth's line «The Child is father of Man» (*My Heart leaps up*, l. 7), where the child stands, in Blakean and Platonic terms, for the new man who is born again, after being immersed into Experience. Given the great importance childhood has for Blake, the child of *A Cradle Song*, forced in a closed setting, suggests that the state of Innocence hides several controversial sides; what seems to be an idyllic setting, «where joy doth sit on every bough» (*Song 1st by a Shepherd*, l. 1, K. 63), turns out to be a place where human imagination is restrained. In the light of the deceptive features of Innocence, one might think that Blake's aim is not to recover the condition described in *Songs of Innocence*: actually, his aim is to show that a higher reality can be achieved at the end of the passage through Experience, as suggested by the opening lines of *Jerusalem*, the *summa* of Blake's thought, «of the passage through / Eternal Death! And of the awakening to Eternal Life» (*J*., 4: 1-2, K. 622).

4. FROM EXPERIENCE TO ETERNITY

The previous section has dwelled on the idea that the state of Innocence is a deceptive world and that man has to overcome its flaws and abandon its false securities, thus becoming gradually aware of the necessity to pass through the more complex state of Experience. *Songs of Experience* actually end in a positive way, showing that the journey through the two 'contrary states' of the human soul will lead humanity to a better reality. In *The Voice of the Ancient Bard*, the closing poem

[27] «Initiatory death is often symbolized, for example, by darkness, by cosmic night, by the telluric womb, the hut, the belly of a monster. […] These images and symbols of ritual death are inextricably connected with germination, with embryology; they already indicate a new life in course of preparation» (Eliade 1994: xiv).

of the *Experience* collection, the Bard announces the coming of a new morn, suggesting that humanity's spiritual darkness has been replaced by the light of God:

> Youth of delight come hither,
> And see the opening morn,
> Image of truth new born.
> Doubt is fled & clouds of reason,
> Dark disputes & artful teazing.
> (*The Voice of the Ancient Bard*, 54: 1-5, K. 126).

However, the 'pilgrimage' through the sorrow of existence is not an easy one and humanity needs a guide not to get irremediably lost. The Bard, the guide of man in the state of Experience[28], is a 'seer', a wise prophet who knows what is the end of earthly life and, thus, summons humanity to wake up:

> Hear the voice of the Bard!
> Who Present, Past, & Future sees
> Whose ears have heard,
> The Holy Word,
> That walk'd among the ancient trees.
>
> Calling the lapsed Soul
> And weeping in the evening dew:
> That might controll
> The starry pole:
> And fallen fallen light renew!
> (Introduction to *Songs of Experience*, 30: 1-10, K. 210).

[28] «Blake makes clear, then, what he conceives the function of the poet, the Bard, to be. He must break the heavy chain of Night which threatens to strangle fertility» (Bottrall 1970: 126). Indeed, Prophets «are not foretellers of future facts; they are revealers of eternal truths» (Damon 1973: 335). The very Plotinus, as asserted by Kanyororo (2003: 255), bestows great importance to those who, having experienced the greatness of the divine, have to guide fallen humanity: «La pensée de Plotin donne de la place au témoignage dévolu au sage et à 'celui qui a vu': ils ont la charge d'annoncer aux autres la vérité […]. Ils dévront être des éducateurs et des éveilleurs».

The task of the Bard is to help man to clean the «doors of perception» (*M.H.H.*, pl. 14, K. 154) and find the light of God within himself: «I rest not from my great task! / To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes / Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity» (*J.*, 5: 17-19, K. 623). Without the Bard leading him, man is just a «wanderer lost in dreary night» (*M.*, 15: 16, K. 496) because of his inability to find the light of God on his path. In similar terms, Plotinus claims that the human soul has to be helped and 'trained' to goodness in order to ascend to the world of eternity: «the Soul must be trained – to the habit of remarking, first, all noble pursuits, then the works of beauty produced not by the labour of the arts but by the virtue of men known for their goodness» (Plot. *Enn.* I, 6, 9: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 25).

In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the role of the guide is played by the Hierophant, who initiates the candidates, the so-called *mystae*[29], to the symbolism of Eleusis. Like Blake's Bard, the Hierophant's task is to symbolically 'open' man's eyes by means of visions of eternity[30]: «Crowned with myrtle, we enter with the other initiates into the vestibule of the temple, – blind as yet, but the Hierophant within will soon open our eyes» (Taylor 1891: 17). Indeed, at the basis of these ancient celebrations are the visions experienced by the *mystae* during the phase called *epopteia* or, in other words, during the final revelation (Taylor 1891: 81). Since the *epopteia* is, according to

[29] «The first initiations of the Eleusinia were called *Teletae* or terminations, as denoting that the imperfect and rudimentary period of generated life was ended and purged off; and the candidate was denominated a *mysta*» (Taylor 1891: 25).

[30] What is known is that «the initiates experienced a special seeing, the 'opening of the eyes'» (Keller 1988: 53). However, «In all the years of their celebration, the central experience of the initiation was never revealed – perhaps because the mystical insight itself was beyond naming, ineffable» (Keller 1988: 53). What is sure, as remarked by Clinton (2004: 85), is that «the hierophant's task was […] 'to show sacred objects' or 'to make the gods appear'. In the latter case he did more than show sacred objects, i.e. made gods appear in addition to objects, or perhaps was mainly associated with an appearance of the gods. Making gods appear was a feature of the Mysteries».

Taylor, «the beholding of the most stupenduous visions» (Taylor 1891: 81), the condition of the initiate at the end of the sacred rituals is completely changed; he is now a 'seer'[31].

Before reaching the *epopteia*, the *mystae* undergo a series of purifying activities, among which is the immersion in water[32]: «the second was the day of purification, called also *aladé mystai*, from the proclamation: 'to the sea, initiated ones!'» (Taylor 1891: 14). This same symbolism recurs also in Blake's *The Chimney Sweeper*, where the protagonist sees, in a vision, an angel releasing all the children who, once free, wash in a river:

> And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
> And he open'd the coffins & set them all free.
> Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run
> And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.
> (*The Chimney Sweeper*, 12: 13-16, K. 117).

The image of the chimney sweepers washing themselves in water, along with the imagery related to the sun as a symbol of God's mercy that saves humanity, might function as a further evidence of Blake's knowledge of all the phases of the Eleusinian celebrations.

After appointed rituals and sacrifices, the fifth day, «denominated the day of torches» (Taylor 1891: 14), is consecrated to torchlight processions, symbolizing Ceres's search for her lost daughter. Blake himself, in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, mentions the symbolism of

[31] Eliade (1978: 295-296) actually claims that, after suffering all sorts of troubles, the initiate, like the human soul, finally discovers a better world: «the experiences of the soul immediately after death are compared to the ordeals of the initiate in the Greater Mysteries: at first, he wanders in darkness and undergoes all sorts of terrors; then, suddenly, he is struck by a marvelous light and discovers pure regions and meadows».

[32] «Early in the morning the heralds would order all participants to cleanse themselves in the sea and the shout 'to the sea, oh mystai' would fill the city. […] The sea was considered immaculate; it cleansed and purified man from all evil. The initiates probably went to the nearest shore, to the Phaleron coast on the east side, or to the peninsula of Peiraeus, the port town of Athens» (Mylonas 1969: 249).

torches, thus further suggesting that he is close to the significance of the Mysteries: «The wreathed Torches in their hands represents Eternal Fire which is the fire of Generation or Vegetation» (*V.L.J.*, K. 609). Moreover, the song *A Dream*, included in *Songs of Innocence*, recalls the idea of Ceres searching for her daughter. A lost mother-ant, desperately looking for her family, is finally guided home by a glow-worm, exactly as Ceres is reunited with Proserpina after wandering alone for several days:

> Pitying I drop'd a tear:
> But I saw a glow-worm near:
> Who replied, What wailing wight
> Calls the watchman of the night.
>
> I am set to light the ground,
> While the beetle goes his round:
> Follow now the beetles hum.
> Little wanderer hie thee home.
> (*A Dream*, 26: 13-20, K. 112)

Like the mother-ant, «Troubled wilderd and forlorn» (*A Dream*, 26: 5, K. 111), and like Ceres, the *mystae* are finally able to be united with the divine dimension and leave behind their dark existence[33], since «God appears & God is light / To those poor Souls who dwell in Night» (*Auguries of Innocence*, ll. 129-130, K. 434).

In Plotinus's terms, the soul's ascent to the world of eternity is like a journey, at the end of which man learns how to awake a new way of 'seeing':

> What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see; you

[33] As claimed by Taylor (1790-1791: 356), darkness symbolically represented the mortal world as opposed to the divine realm: «the mysteries, as is well known, were celebrated by night […]; this period being peculiarly accomodated to the darkness and oblivion of a corporeal nature».

must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision.
(Plot. *Enn.* I, 6, 8: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 25)

The idea of the journey is perfectly represented by Blake's songs *The Little Girl Lost* and *The Little Girl Found* which, as already anticipated, are re-elaborated versions of the myth of Proserpina (Raine 1968: 130). The protagonist of the two songs, Lyca, demonstrates that humanity, like the human soul, can be saved only after being lost in the «desart wild» (*The Little Girl Lost*, 34: 7, K. 112) of mortal existence. As a matter of fact, Lyca first enters the cave where she is brought by the beasts of the forest and is there initiated to a greater life, since her death is nothing but a rebirth into a higher dimension:

While the lioness
Loos'd her slender dress,
And naked they convey'd
To caves the sleeping maid[34].
(*The Little Girl Lost,* 34: 53-56, K. 113).

In the light of the symbolism of Eleusis, as much as Proserpina ascends from her sleep in Hades, allowing the regeneration of nature, so Lyca is initiated to a new life after entering the cave, both 'grave' and 'womb'. Furthermore, the wanderings of Lyca's parents might be

[34] The removal of the garments, to which the poem alludes, is a Neoplatonic symbol of the soul's rebirth. As claimed by Porphyry, once the soul descends into the world of generation, it assumes the garment of the body: «the body is a garment with which the soul is invested […]. Thus according to Orpheus, Proserpine, who presides over every thing generated from seed, is represented weaving a web» (Porph. *Antr.* 14: transl. Taylor 1788: 305). Conversely, the souls «dying from this world discard a garment» (Raine 1968: 141). It follows that the removal of Lyca's dress is a representation of the process of the soul's ascent to the divine realm, after being set free from the constrictions of physical reality. Blake often alludes to the concept of the removal of the 'garments' as a symbol of the purification of the human soul: «For God himself enters Death's Door always with those that enter / And lays down in the Grave with them, in Visions of Eternity, / Till they awake & see Jesus & the Linen Clothes lying / That the Females had Woven for them» (*M.*, 32: 42-43, K. 522).

read as an allusion to the purifying disciplines of the Eleusinian Mysteries[35] and to the sufferings of the soul previous to its final ascent (Raine 1968: 143). Indeed, the *mystae*'s wanderings represented a training of the soul, symbolically retracing the steps of Proserpina and Ceres, «from the happiness of the early bonding, through the period of separation and suffering, to their joyful reunion» (Keller 1988: 53). In a similar way, the girl's parents search for their daughter several days and nights:

> Tired and woe-begone,
> Hoarse with making moan:
> Arm in arm seven days,
> They trac'd the desart ways.
> (*The Little Girl Found*, 35: 5-8, K. 113)

The road that brings to eternity is a long and difficult one but, if the just man keeps his right course through this land of pain and sorrow, he will finally rejoice in eternity. Blake himself states that he had fought like a 'champion' against the complexities of existence:

> I am again Emerged into the light of day; I still & shall to Eternity Embrace Christianity and Adore him who is the Express image of God; but I have travel'd thro' Perils & Darkness not unlike a Champion.
> (Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 Nov. 1802, K. 815-816)

Likewise, Lyca's parents finally realize that their daughter's physical death is not an end but a rebirth:

> Then they followed,
> Where the vision led:
> And saw their sleeping child,
> Among tygers wild.

[35] Ustinova (2009: 233) remarks how the pilgrimage of the initiates of Eleusis was a long and difficult one: «The effect of the awe-inspiring environment was enhanced by the two days of fasting and the exhausting march of more than 30 kilometres from Athens to Eleusis».

To this day they dwell
In a lonely dell
Nor fear the wolvish howl,
Nor the lions growl.
(*The Little Girl Found*, 36: 45-48, K. 115)

The harmonious union with the *tygers wild* refers to the state of peace reached by man after his long journey through this land of «Suffering & Distress» (*Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom*, K. 89). Once the *doors of perception* (*M.H.H.*, pl. 14, K. 154) have been cleansed, humanity does not need a guide any longer, as suggested by Plotinus: «when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step – you need a guide no longer – strain, and see» (Plot. *Enn.* I. 6, 9: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 25).

The positive ending of Blake's *Songs of Experience* suggests that if man comes out from his dark 'cave', he will find the light of God[36]. As claimed by Blake, «Albion must Sleep / The Sleep of Death till the Man of Sin & Repentance be reveal'd» (*J.*, 29: 11-12, K. 653), where Albion stands for humanity. The very title-page to *Songs of Experience* actually alludes to the ascent of the human soul, resulting from a difficult process of suffering: the lowest part of the plate shows two young people mourning before their dead parents' bodies, somehow evoking the loneliness of man facing the darkness of the state of Experience. However, the higher part of the illustration symbolizes the joys following the passage through Experience: the two flying creatures «with arms outstretched» (Keynes 1970: 143)

[36] Blake believes that God is everywhere on earth but man, blinded by the negativity of the 'reasoning power', does not perceive it: «God is in the lowest effects as well as in the highest causes; for he is become a worm that he may nourish the weak. For let it be remember'd that creation is God descending according to the weaknesses of man, for our Lord is the word of God & every thing on earth is the word of God & in its essence is God» (*Annotations to Lavater*, K. 87).

might legitimately be read as representing humanity's final rebirth and the soul's ascent to eternity.

5. CONCLUSION

Blake himself, despite the obscure and intricate symbolism of his writings, provides the reader with a definition of Innocence in one of the songs of his first collection, *Poetical Sketches*:

> Whilst Virtue is our walking-staff
> And Truth a Lantern to our path,
> We can abide life's pelting storm
> That makes our limbs quake, if our hearts be warm.
>
> Blow, boisterous wind, stern winter frown,
> Innocence is a winter's gown;
> So clad, we'll abide life's pelting storm
> That makes our limbs quake, if our hearts be warm.
> (*Song by an Old Shepherd*, ll. 5-12, K. 64).

The real Innocence Blake alludes to, «a winter's gown», is not the limiting and oppressive world described in *Songs of Innocence* but, rather, that combination of virtues that will help man to keep the right way through the state of Experience, the «stern winter frown». The very Plotinus maintains that evil has to be defeated by means of virtue: «Remember that the good of life […] is not due to anything in the partnership but to the repelling of evil by virtue» (Plot. *Enn.* I, 7, 3: transl. MacKenna – Page 1952: 27). As already discussed, also in the Eleusinian Mysteries the *mystae* had to undertake a complex process of purification and expiation before reaching the revelation of the *epopteia*; the initiate «was freed from the bondage of matter» only after «purifying himself by practice of the cathartic virtues, of which certain purifications in the mystic ceremonies were symbolic» (Taylor 1790-1791: 363). Indeed, one of the main precepts of the Eleusinian celebrations was self-knowledge, since the purifying activities of the

rites represented a process of inner growth[37]. In similar terms, man, after passing through both Innocence and Experience, becomes able to perceive the divinity of his soul and, thus, rejoices in the greatness of the divine dimension.

Blake clearly maintains that man can face the suffering of mortal life only if his heart is «warm» or, in other words, if he keeps following the true values of Innocence, that is «a Lantern to our path». Blake is not assuming that the state of Experience has to be avoided; since true knowledge comes from "the Mole", man has to experience evil in order to be redeemed and enlightened, so that «the Divine Mercy / Steps beyond and Redeems Man in the Body of Jesus» (J., 36: 54-55, K. 663-664).

As pointed out in the present study, Blake's thought, complex and highly symbolical, presupposes a constant dialogue with both the Eleusinian Mysteries and Plotinus's and Porphyry's Neoplatonist theories. In particular, the juxtaposition, suggested in this essay, with some extracts from the *Enneads* seems to throw further light on some of Blake's most puzzling lines. Indeed, if read in the light of Neoplatonism, Blake's works seem to revolve around the same, fundamental, concept: the soul's eternal life and the human ability to renew after the passage through mortal existence.

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[37] «One of the central precepts of the ancient Mysteries was 'know thyself'. According to Socrates, 'self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom'. […] The sometimes willing, sometimes involuntary passages into underworlds of unacknowledged experience provide opportunities for attaining deeper self-knowledge to be used in self-healing» (Keller 1988: 49-50).

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