

# Blake's Allegory of Tolerance

György Fogarasi

Glimpsing at the critical discourse of recent decades, one may have the impression that something has become increasingly intolerable about tolerance. The growing number of books on the subject, including surveys of the cultural diversity of related notions,<sup>1</sup> seems to suggest that a growing number of doubts surround not only the feasibility of global practices or institutions of toleration but the status of the very concept of tolerance as well. Arguments about the paradox of tolerance, its boundaries, its difficulty, its crisis, or even its dangers, to mention but a few of the multitude of concerns,<sup>2</sup> are often coupled with efforts to delineate, and thereby to limit, its scope through distinctions between, say, tolerance and forbearance, toleration and tolerance, acceptance and tolerance, recognition and tolerance, hospitality and tolerance, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> As a proponent of the latter divide, Jacques Derrida has argued that, unlike hospitality, the concept of tolerance still seems to imply a notion of power and sovereignty which should be critically superseded and replaced by a disposition that is no longer an “invitation” of the other but an openness to its unexpected and incalculable “visitation” (Derrida, “Autoimmunity” 129). For Derrida, tolerance could still be described as a conditional mode of hospitality, whereas what we would really need is an absolute opening toward alterity or futurity, one which leaves behind any attempt at calculating what is to come, and is in that sense purely unconditional. Such an openness could rightfully be called hospitality *per se*.

Indeed, tolerance appears to be a growingly controversial notion. Not that “the historical genealogy of the concept of tolerance” which Derrida urges us to trace would suggest anything crucially different. As Rainer Forst has convincingly shown, ever since its emergence in the writings of Cicero and Seneca (Forst 37), the vexed notion of tolerance has always been at the heart of related practices and arguments. What he calls the “Janus face of Christian toleration” is, for instance, an amalgam of principles which govern efforts to tolerate various forms of religious otherness as well as counter-attempts to check and eradicate them (the main example being St Augustine, see Forst 47-70). The modern reinvention of this notion

---

1 For such surveys, see Yousefi and Seubert, or Spencer.

2 For the classical formulation of the “paradox” of tolerance, see Popper 581. For its difficulty, limitations, boundaries, crisis, or even its dangers, see Delgado et al., Stepan and Taylor, Schmidt-Salomon, Pleşu, and Schirmbeck.

3 For a distinction between tolerance and forbearance, for instance, see Heyd 38 and 158. In the present analysis, I am not drawing any sharp distinctions between tolerance, toleration, patience, and forbearance, but will use these terms more or less synonymously and interchangeably, according to their colloquial sense (as registered in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, for instance).

was itself a “painstaking rebirth” (*mühsame Wiedergeburt*), as Michael Schmid-Salomon put it with reference to the influential but highly controversial writings on religious tolerance during the Enlightenment era (most importantly, Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*, his polemic exchanges with Jonas Proast, as well as Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance* and the entry “Tolerance” he wrote for his own *Philosophical Dictionary*). Kant’s critical remark, in the influential essay “What is Enlightenment?”, on how any progressive emperor should reject “the presumptuous name of *tolerance*” (*den hochmütigen Namen der Toleranz*), could be coupled with Goethe’s dissatisfaction with the term, which for him implies a gesture of “offence” or “insult” (*beleidigen*), instead of which he would rather prefer “acceptance” or “recognition” (*Anerkennung*) (Kant, “Enlightenment” 58, “Aufklärung” 491; Goethe *Maxims* 116, *Schriften* 385; see Forst 3, 269 and 328-29).<sup>4</sup> Derrida’s own reflection on Voltaire in the form of a “yes and no” (or “yes but no”) seems to indicate similar reservations (“Autoimmunity” 126).

That William Blake has not been a target of the above discussions, except for passing remarks (e. g. in Canuel 6), is hardly a surprise, even though his engagement with Voltaire (regularly coupled with Rousseau, to figure in Blake’s personal mythology as Rahab and Tirzah, respectively) could have earned him due attention in arguments concerning religious, deist, or atheist (in)toleration. Beside poetic pieces such as *The French Revolution*, or *Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau*, or *Milton*, and some prose writings (like his preface to the third chapter of *Jerusalem*), he even devoted some paintings to Voltaire’s figure, a sign perhaps no longer of sheer rejection but of a certain fascination with the figure of the French *philosophe*. The poem which I am about to reread here, “A Poison Tree” (one which he included in his *Songs of Experience*, and which seems to evoke interest even in twenty-first century pop-culture),<sup>5</sup> does not belong to this series. Neither does it mention Voltaire or any of the other representatives of the Enlightenment, nor does it openly address the problem of tolerance. And yet, it might provide us with a critical perspective on this debated topic.

What Blake’s poem seems to center around is, in fact, not the question of tolerance but clearly something else: poisoning. Written in 1794, this text is contemporaneous with Kant’s “philosophical sketch” entitled “Perpetual Peace” (1795-96), a discourse that famously urges a ban on the use of poisons, along with certain other forms of hostility, arguing that these should be expelled from the legal realm of modern warfare, if perpetual peace is to be achieved. Far-fetched as this parallel may seem, both texts focus on the shift between peace and war, friendship and adversity, and consequently, the different modes of dealing with friends and enemies. Thus, even though there is no direct philological linkage between Kant and Blake, looking at

4 For a more politically motivated critique, or even outright despoliation, of tolerance (or patience) as a “glorious virtue of sheep and donkeys [i.e., of the cowardly unthinking and the stupid]” (*a birkák s a szamarak dicső erénye*), see Hungarian romantic poet Sándor Petőfi’s poem *On Patience* (*A türelemről*, 1847).

5 While Blake seems to be the most often mentioned poet among the British romantics according to a 2018 survey on Twitter, the poem “A Poison Tree,” for instance, has made its way even into the opening scene of a videogame (see Higgs, ch. 4: “Blake Now,” no pagination available).

the former may provide a relevant context for the consideration of the latter. What Kant considers “dishonorable stratagems” are wartime practices that undermine the “mutual confidence” of the conflicting parties (their common trust in the future onset of a lasting peace), and thereby elicit an escalation of merciless violence, turning the conflict into “a war of extermination,” as Kant puts it (“Perpetual Peace” 96), or a “total war,” as it would later be called (Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan* 46). Among other impermissible acts, Kant mentions the employment of “*poisoners (venefici)*,” and proposes a prohibition on poisons within the legal boundaries of war. Modern legislation, as it has developed in the past two centuries under the heading of “international humanitarian law,” has adhered to this Kantian legacy and declared a ban on all sorts of poisoning.<sup>6</sup>

It might be useful to keep in mind this political, military and legal context while reading Blake’s “A Poison Tree,” even though, as I have said, there is no direct influence connecting Blake’s text to the (post-)Kantian discourse on poisoning as an impermissible element in the arsenal of warfare tactics.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, the poem poses the question of poisoning in the context of friendship and enmity. But Blake’s poison is not just an intoxicating chemical substance. It is also a figural vehicle, an image meant to represent something more elusive, the workings of repressed anger.<sup>8</sup> What the poem presents us is a tiny little fable of how the inhibited passion of anger, pictured as an organic development from seed to tree, becomes vengeful and brings a poisonous fruit that ultimately kills the adversary.

I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water’d it in fears,  
Night & morning with my tears;  
And I sunned it with smiles,  
And with soft deceitful wiles.

6 See Article 23 of the 1899 (or 1907) Hague Conference concerning war on land, which mentions, at the beginning of a list of prohibited means of warfare, the employment of poisons or poisonous weapons, right before mentioning violent acts committed “treacherously.” For further reference and explanation, see the database of the International Committee of the Red Cross, especially Rule 72 concerning the prohibition on poisons.

7 For a treatment of Blake in a lineage of political thought, leading from Thomas Hobbes to Carl Schmitt, see Bredekamp.

8 According to Harold Bloom, the poem is “a grisly meditation on the natural consequences of repressed anger” (144). An alternative reading that would replace the figural implications of the image by a logic of incarnation (a reading which I do not find convincing enough to rely on) has been offered by Philip J. Gallagher. For a biographical contextualization, and especially on Blake’s ambivalent friendship with William Hayley, see Beer 132, or see Blake’s related poems: *On H-ys Frienship*, and *To H- (CPP 506)*. These poems are an inspirational source for Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* 26, 72-73.

And it grew both day and night  
 Till it bore an apple bright;  
 And my foe beheld it shine,  
 And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole  
 When the night had veil'd the pole:  
 In the morning glad I see  
 My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree.  
 (*Complete Poetry and Prose* 28; hereafter: *CPP*)

For a Hungarian reader like myself, the poetic representation of anger (or wrath) as poison seems rather suggestive, as it evokes the Hungarian idiom of *méreg* (both “anger” and “poison,” or rather, extreme anger *as* poison), and in fact revives *méreg* as a dead metaphor (the designation of a violent passion by the name of a potentially lethal substance), letting loose a ghost that lurks underneath everyday speech. Ágnes Gergely’s Hungarian translation of the poem renders both “poison” and “anger” as *méreg*, making good use of the singularity of the Hungarian idiom (Blake, *Verse* 64–65). For most etymologists, the implication of this idiom is that this type of anger is one which invades the subject like a poison. To become so angry (“poisonous,” *mérges*) means to “become poisoned” with anger, as Theodore Thass-Thienemann explains (1: 233). This aspect of the poem has been pointed out even regardless of the Hungarian idiom: “It is not only the ‘foe’ who is poisoned here. The speaker’s life is soured by the results of his caution, by the suspicions and anxieties of being at secret enmity and the strain of keeping up a friendly appearance...” (Gillham 177).

Blake’s poem, however, emphatically points to another direction, suggesting a different implication, as it draws attention to the potentially fatal consequences of repressed anger, of silence as a lack of outspokenness. It describes how anger may turn into hatred, once openness is supplanted by revengeful dissimulation. Thus, the “poisonously” angry person becomes the emblem of a treacherously threatening individual: an enemy who pretends to be a friend. His being full of hatred (which is no longer just a synonym for extreme anger as a passion still openly expressed, but is much closer to the implications of *méreg* as a passion hidden from the adversary) is perhaps why he considers his opponent a “foe,” rather than just an enemy.<sup>9</sup> In a total war against a despised foe any warfare tactics may come into play and no quarter is expected to be given. The speaker of the poem does not hesitate to use any means at hand in order to annihilate his adversary. His war is indeed a war of annihilation, nourished by a camouflaged hatred, rather than an open or immediate outburst of wrath. He chooses ironic pretense in order to poisonously (that is, secretly and belatedly) take revenge for the perceived harm supposedly done by the other. The

9 For a distinction between anger and hatred, or enemy and foe, see Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (Bk 2, Pt 4) and Carl Schmitt’s *Der Begriff des Politischen*, respectively, especially the ending of Schmitt’s Foreword to the 1963 edition (18) and section 3 of the second corollary (105). These passages are not included in the English edition (Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*).

ironic behavior of the speaker as character gets transposed to his ironic tone as narrator. The shift from past to present tense at the end of the poem is not really a shift in perspective, it is rather a sign of immersion, an instance of the narrative present, whereby the narrator relives a past moment as if it were a present happening.<sup>10</sup> This ironic narrative tone has its imprint on the form of the poem as a song, with its trochaic tetrameter catalectic, from which only three lines deviate (lines 2 and 4 in the first stanza, and line 4 in the last one). Thus, the very form of the poem bears witness to the same dissimulation that we perceive in the character's treacherous behavior.

Apart from the above, the Hungarian translator's gesture of reviving a dead metaphor seems all the more justifiable, since, as we will shortly see, Blake himself does just the same throughout the poem, poetically reviving the specters of his own mother tongue. The poem offers itself to be read along a series of such revived metaphors, which form the major source both of its imagery and its conceptual scheme. At the basis of the micro-narrative one finds the re-literalization of the image of organic growth. With the transition from the first stanza to the second, the poetic imagination turns the "growth" of anger back into a literal growth, that of a plant, and leaves the image of growth in this de-metaphorized dimension for the rest of the poem, just of course to extend it into an image sequence (an allegory) used for the figural representation of the escalation of hatred. This plant is a tree which "grew" in the soul or mind, evoking the whole imagery of gardening, as the tree is "water'd" by the hidden tears of injury and "sunned" with fake smiles toward the opponent. Due to the nourishing combination of concealment and pretense, of dissimulation and simulation, the plant ultimately brings the result of "soft deceitful wiles." It brings forth a brightly shining fruit that appears to be seductively delicious and healthy, whereas in reality it is lethally poisonous. As such, it is also a mythological apple from Bible and folktale imagery.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the image of the poison tree also appears elsewhere in Blake's poetry. In his prophetic poem *The Four Zoas* (1807), it springs from the seed of "false oath" (CPP 325). Another poem—"The Human Abstract," also part of *The Songs of Experience*—, offers the same allegory of a tree growing "in the Human Brain," and calls its fruit "the fruit of Deceit" (CPP 27). What is implied here is the treachery of the one who sets up the trap, rather than the sin of the one who walks into it by eating the forbidden fruit. It is worth noting at this point that Blake's illustration for "A Poison Tree" depicts the dead thief lying on his back with arms outstretched in a Christlike position, as if he were the poor victim of the perfidious act of a divine, fatherly will.<sup>12</sup> As some readers have pointed out, the imagery of garden,

10 In this regard, my interpretation is at odds with the reading of the last two lines of the poem as a sign of temporal and critical distancing (Pack 65, see Brenkman 187).

11 Two other options have also been suggested: one about Blake's uncanny feeling about plants as beings endowed with a sentient power or latent life (Stevenson 219), and another with reference to a contemporary account by N. P. Foersch of an exotic poison tree in Java used for justice and punishment (Foersch 38, see Thompson 142). Insofar as Blake's illustration shows the tree in a barren landscape (Thompson 211), it may be seen as a prefiguration of Shelley's *Queen Mab*, which mentions "the poison-tree, / Beneath whose shade all life is withered up" (Shelley 50, see Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation* 202).

12 A similarly positioned figure also occurs among the series of engravings Blake prepared for John Gabriel Stedman's 1796 travelogue *Narrative, of a five years' expedition against the revolted negroes of*

forbidden fruit, theft, and punishment, also calls into mind the Book of Genesis, turning the Christlike victim into a victimized Adam, who is shown here to be doomed from the start, due to the trickery of a selfish or jealous God, called “Nobodaddy” in one of Blake’s satirical poems (*CPP* 471, see John 77, Pack 66).<sup>13</sup> The hypocritical deceitfulness on the part of the angry person who feels to have suffered an insult is of course just a response to, or a preparation for, the similarly treacherous and concealed behavior (the attempted theft) of the adversary: the poison tree is a trap with the apple as bait. Here one could again refer to “The Human Abstract,” where “Cruelty” (the faculty that induces the tree to grow) pretends to act in humility and prepares a “snare” by placing “baits” in the way of the person it wants to annihilate, and where the sophistication of this perfidious act is indicated by the image of knitting (“knits a snare”).

Concerning “A Poison Tree,” the other person is not simply the perpetrator of a past offence, he is also someone who is expected to cause further harm: a mischievous character prone to stealing, one obsessed with insensible expropriation. In the first version of the poem, the narrator himself gave the enemy the poisonous fruit (“And I gave it to my foe,” *CPP* 799), but Blake then deleted this line and chose to unfold the imagery toward the idea of theft (“And my foe beheld it shine...”). So, the fruit is a trap that is supposed to catch a thief, as shown in the fourth stanza. It is here that we arrive at the next focal point in the text, one related to theft and the peculiar motion of the thief foregrounded in the poem. When the thief goes stealing, he does so in a stealthy motion. In Blake’s text, the past tense form of the verb “steal” indicates figuratively the characteristic sneaking or slinking movement of the thief, while the context obviously foregrounds the literal sense of the same verb, the intended theft itself, which the thief plans to commit during the night, under the cover of darkness. To steal is to grab something without notice by stealthily going for it and taking it. Whatever one steals, one also always has to “steal” oneself, as it were, first sneaking into the premises of the other, then sneaking out again. In contrast to the openness of robbery, a theft is a hidden act. Paradoxically, that is exactly why it counts as a lesser crime before the law, for if the thief succeeds, the insensibility of the act makes all violence unnecessary, while robbery must turn violent precisely in consequence of its openness. As opposed to the honesty of robbery, theft is more like a deception or trick, although in this particular case it clearly differs from the latter, and falls into a less serious legal category, since the veil is provided by the circumstances (the night), rather than produced by the thief himself (as in a tricky deception). The perpetrator simply takes advantage from the circumstances. And yet, we cannot say that his crime is a mere crime of opportunity, since he patiently waits for the night and commits his

---

*Surinam, in Guiana, on the wild coast of South America; from the year 1772, to 1777*, see “The Execution of Breaking on the Rack,” plate facing 2: 296 (see other horrific images like “A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows,” or “Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave,” plates facing 1: 110 and 326).

13 From the Swedenborgian perspective of a “true” Christianity, this same figure can also be seen as a mere deviation “usurping the role of God” (Perloff 645). Apart from his deep interest, Blake is rather critical toward Swedenborg, as is clear from his sarcastic remarks and even parodistic mimicking of Swedenborg’s ideas and style in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (*CPP* 42, for instance), or his harsh annotations to Swedenborg’s works (*CPP* 601-11).

premeditated act when darkness falls. His defensive opponent, on the other hand, is a cautious figure, who himself produces the cover to hide his real feelings and intentions, and conducts a preemptive strike against his foe with the help of a baited trap. He feigns friendship in order to lure the other into the trap and strike a fatal blow on him according to the Kantian or Schmittian logic of total war. His defense is a concealed defense against a concealed attack. His tactic is to deceive a deceiver, to steal from a thief, to insensibly harm someone who wants to do harm to him without notice. This is the project of an annihilation without any warning or premonition, of a strike from ambush. What is more, he even needs to make the adversary steal. In Blake's poem, the thief is indeed not made by opportunity but by the future victim of the theft, who sets up the trap with a bait. Thus, while the installation of the trap appears to be a mere response (a defensive move), it ambivalently also generates the crime it is supposed to prevent or punish.

Beside words like "grow" or "steal" (or the Hungarian *méreg*, for that matter), there is yet another term that lives a viral life in Blake's subtle poem: the verb "bear." To see how that happens, we need to take a closer look at the title of the first version of the poem. For the original title of Blake's text was "Christian Forbearance" (*CPP* 799), a formulation that offered readers the growth of the poison tree as an allegory of tolerance. The original title does not use the word "tolerance" (or patience), instead it uses a somewhat more archaic phrase (not of Latin but of Germanic origin), one which has the verb "bear" at its root. According to the logic of the term, "forbearance" means the "carrying" of something. Actually, the word "tolerance" itself implies just the same, as it derives from the verbs *tollere* or *tolerare* meaning to "uplift" and "hold" or "carry" a burden. To bring a classical example, one could here refer to the richly illustrated 1603 edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconology*, which describes the allegory of tolerance as a woman carrying a heavy rock on her shoulder.<sup>14</sup> As for Blake and his use of "bear," the term also occurs in the text of the poem, in stanza three, which tells us how the tree finally "bore" an apple. Just as a pregnant woman, the tree in fact is burdened with its fruit, which it has to "bring forth," or "carry" until the moment of birth or fall.<sup>15</sup>

Blake seems to make a critical gesture toward religion or moral philosophy by reviving the dead metaphor at work in the concept of Christian tolerance. The reversal of the meaning of "bear" from toleration to "bringing forth" or simply "carrying" foregrounds a burden that will need to be unloaded, or put down. In this regard, being tolerant only makes sense because it has an end (a final goal, or finality). It is intimately linked to a desired future moment when it can finally free itself from its burden. Forbearance might just be another name for a hypocrisy originating in weakness or cowardice (Gillham 177). Blake's allegory sheds light on the latent vengefulness of tolerance, the secretive preparation for repayment, the structural hatred at the heart

14 Cesare Ripa, "Toleranza" (1603: 488). In the 1603 Italian edition, no illustration was prepared for the entry on tolerance. Only on occasion of the 1709 English edition were illustrations produced for all the concepts, tolerance among them (the English text renders it as "suffering," Ripa 1709: 74).

15 This double sense of the term (carriage meaning both childbirth and toleration) also appears elsewhere in Blake's poetry, see his piece on "The Little Black Boy" from the *Songs of Innocence*, for instance.

of a religion of love, something that Friedrich Nietzsche would later discuss, near the end of the nineteenth century, in his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*. As is well-known, Nietzsche held Christian love, so famously linked to patience or tolerance in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians,<sup>16</sup> to be the offspring of revenge and hatred, and discussed it as a form of *ressentiment* (resentment as a reactive passion) which can best be identified with a dissimulated vengefulness ("submerged hatred," *der zurückgetretene Hass*) (*Genealogy* 37; "Genealogie" 5: 271). With Christianity a new conceptual scheme emerges. The binary of "good" and "evil" replaces the earlier conceptual pair of "good" and "bad." It brings a culture of sublimation and asceticism which supplants pagan straightforwardness by hypocritical self-restraint. For Nietzsche, pagan or noble intolerance belongs to a world of transparent situations, straightforward behavior, instant and open reaction: "*Ressentiment* itself, if it should appear in the noble man, consummates and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction, and therefore does not poison [es vergiftet darum nicht]" (*Genealogy* 39; "Genealogie" 5: 273).<sup>17</sup>

The kinship between Blake and Nietzsche has been proposed from early on in the twentieth century. In 1902, William Butler Yeats was of the opinion that "Nietzsche completes Blake and has the same roots" (qtd. in Clark 95), while in 1929, William F. Clarke argued that "much, very much, that is of permanent value in the thought of all these outstanding moderns [Nietzsche, Bergson, and Freud] lies imbedded in his works" (228).<sup>18</sup> The importance of certain Nietzschean motifs in Blake, like the recurrent theme of reaction, resentment, or revenge, has been pointed out several times in recent decades (see Bloom 87, Woodman 117, Lau 281, Alfano 29-30). In his essays on friendship, Derrida coupled Nietzsche with Blake, by reference to the intimate relation between friendship and enmity in their works, and more specifically, by reference to the Blakean notion of true friendship as a certain form of enmity,<sup>19</sup> as well as to the distinction of true friendship from what Blake calls "half" or "deceitful" friendship (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 26, 72-73). Such notions seem to form the conceptual or tropological scheme in which "A Poison Tree" is situated.

Remarks and motifs concerning friendship and enmity are scattered all over Blake's writings closely related to his *Songs of Experience*, like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, or his annotations to Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*, but can also be found later, in his annotations to Bacon and Reynolds, or in his prophetic piece,

16 "Love is patient" (*caritas patiens*, 1 Cor. 13:4); see also his later encouragement for "patient endurance" (*tolerantia*, 2 Cor. 1:6).

17 The Nietzschean characterization of man as "an interesting animal" might also have to do with the latent vengefulness of tolerance, or, in other words, with the "poisonous" character of the tolerant person: "...it was on the soil of this *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became *an interesting animal*, [...] only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth* and become *evil*..." (*Genealogy* 33).

18 For a pairing of Blake with another classic of modern thought, Karl Marx, see Brenkman 193 (a critique of this Marxist reading is given by Perloff 643).

19 The Derridean formulation diverges somewhat from Blake's notion of this intimacy, for while the latter's conception concentrates on honesty and deceit, Derrida points to the intensity of singular attention paid by or to the enemy: "There would be more attentive friendship, singular attention and consideration in a tension full of hatred. The enemy is then my best friend" (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 72).



*Jerusalem*. In these writings, Blake develops a sharp contrast between two types of friendly behavior: one being honest even at the cost of conflict or injury, while the other avoiding confrontation through a feigned agreement. To Lavater's advice that we should "Fear the boisterous savage of passion less than the sedate grin of villany" Blake subscribes with a resolute "bravo" (CPP 586). Outright objection, even in the form of the passionate dissent of a "boisterous savage" is not nearly as dangerous as the imperceptible harmfulness of an enemy who pretends to be a friend. In the same vein, Blake later notes that "Lie, is the contrary to Passion" (CPP 590). What is implied here is again that a passionate disagreement is always preferable to a calm but dishonest assent ("lie" or "villany"), for true friendship can only be based upon honesty, even when there is no accord between friends. Such is the implication of the baffling proverb in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (CPP 38). Passions of wrath, just as those of love, must be expressed or turned into action, rather than inhibited and "nursed" inside. For Blake, "Opposition is true Friendship" (CPP 42).<sup>20</sup>

The opening lines of "A Poison Tree" describe just how the outspokenness of the speaker serves as a guarantee for friendship. His open expression of a feeling of insult or offense upholds the friendly ties even through a momentary confrontation. In contrast, an ironic peacefulness toward a foe is just a fake attitude: a "Half Friendship" or "Deceitful Friendship" (CPP 144, 149). Blake deems it despicable, for by upholding the illusion of harmony it poses a real threat, which is all the more dangerous as it cannot be perceived. Blake often mentions smiling, grinning, or sneering as gestures of disguised dissent or even hostility, and associates such behavior with ideas of cunning, softness, poison, trap, net, betrayal, or revenge. So, when in "A Poison Tree" he rhymes "smiles" with "soft deceitful wiles," the implicit association is very close to that "poison of a smile" mentioned in *TheL* (CPP 6), which presents smiling as precisely such a gesture of ironic (dis)simulation. In some of his satiric poems as well as his harshly critical commentary, Blake describes Reynolds' characteristic behavior as a "Malice in disguise" which mixes praise and blame in a way reminiscent of definitions of irony in classical rhetoric: "I consider Reynolds's Discourses to the Royal Academy as the Simulations of the Hypocrite who Smiles particularly where he means to Betray. His Praise of Rafael is like the Hysteric Smile of Revenge. His Softness & Candour, the hidden trap, & the poisoned feast. He praises Michael Angelo for Qualities which Michael Angelo Abhorrd: & He blames Rafael for the only Qualities which Rafael Valued" (CPP 642, see Williams 20). Tellingly, Blake's most often used qualifier in his annotations to Lavater's work is the word "uneasy," applied both as a sign of utmost approval and as an acknowledgement of the enormous difficulty of its admission. For instance, when Lavater speaks of the different qualities of one's friends ("cold," "half," or "fervid") as defining the equally different qualities of one's enemies, Blake comments: "very Uneasy indeed but *truth*" (CPP 595). It seems as if truth were per

20 As one commentator puts it, the highest form of friendship, for Blake, is antagonism, since "one will not want friends who merely share, echo, and reinforce one's own convictions" (Miner 61). This is why Blake stands closer to Montaigne than to Cicero, according to whom "friendship is nothing else than an accord in all things" (qtd. in Miner 60).

definition uneasy for Blake. On the other hand, a lie is always an easy solution to preserve peace by preserving at least the semblance of harmony.<sup>21</sup> All this is closely connected to Blake's notion of forgiveness (also foregrounded in his annotations to Lavater), which he links to remembrance and disclosure, rather than to the merciful veil of oblivion (John 74).<sup>22</sup>

Coming back to the poem we have been reading, we can, however, notice a significant difference. On a closer look, "A Poison Tree" does not seem to suggest quite the same chronology between friendship and honesty, as the other works mentioned in the previous paragraph. As we have seen, Blake's general view holds that friendship should be based upon honesty, for it can only come about once openness has been granted at all costs. Straightforwardness is the fundament for friendship, as friendship is corrupted by the slightest emergence of deceit. The fable of the poem, however, seems to originate in a pre-existent state of friendship or enmity, of which openness or disguise are merely consequences. The latter do not establish the former but appear as their inevitable outcome. A primary decision concerning friendship or enmity seems to precede all friendly or hostile behavior, rather than the reverse. Thus, with a radical inversion, friendship is no longer the result but the origin of honesty,<sup>23</sup> just as enmity is no longer dependent on deceit but is its primary source. To that extent, both appear baseless. Their uncertain fundament recedes into a mythical past unexplored in the text perhaps precisely because of its unfathomable nature.

Blake's poem is an allegory of tolerance conceived as a disguised form of revenge. It is an ironic allegory, but it is also an allegory of irony, insofar as irony is the prime rhetorical form of dissimulated attack. The language of irony, as we have seen, is not only a language *about* poison but a language *of* poison, a poisonous language full of dead metaphors latently at work and exerting a toxic aftereffect all over everyday speech. Furthermore, Blake's grim image of tolerance can also be read as a critical commentary on the human. It can be seen as an indirect critique of the notion of human dignity, as far as, if I may return to Cesare Ripa's *Iconology* for a moment, the allegory of dignity, just like that of tolerance, is represented by a female figure carrying a heavy burden (even though there might surely be a few differences in character between these two figures, see Ripa 1603: 104-05). Insofar as dignity is considered to be one of the hallmarks of humanity in modern Western thought, the Blakean critique of tolerance can be seen as an indirect critique of the modern notion of human dignity, and consequently, a critique of modern humanism. In one of the rare cases of severe criticism, Blake opposes Lavater's admonishment to love one's enemy ("never losing sight of the man in him") by adding: "none can see the man in the enemy[;] if he is ignorantly so, he is not truly an enemy[;] if maliciously[,] not a man" (*CPP* 589).

21 For a long list of what is "easy," see Enion's wailing in the second night of *The Four Zoas*, e.g. "It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted, / To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer," or "To hear the dog howl at the wintry door, the ox in the slaughter house moan / To see a god on every wind & a blessing on every blast / To hear sounds of love in the thunder storm that destroys our enemies house" - a list that ends with a twist: "It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity / Thus could I sing & thus rejoice, but it is not so with me!" (*CPP* 325).

22 For more on Blake's reading of Lavater in terms of forgiveness, see Moskal 49ff.

23 For an example of how this initial moment of inversion can be utterly missed, see Pack 65 and 67.

This critique of humanistic discourse becomes even more emphatic if we take into consideration one of the classic texts of the modern discourse on tolerance, Voltaire's dictionary entry from 1764. Discussing religious tolerance, Voltaire makes a poignant remark on Christianity: "Of all religions the Christian is undoubtedly that which should instill the greatest toleration, although so far the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men" (Voltaire 390).<sup>24</sup> Somewhat earlier Voltaire claims that a lack of toleration produces a lack of humanity, for toleration is not only "the first law of nature," it is also "the prerogative of humanity" (387). Therefore, any indication of intolerance will lead to the realm of the inhuman: "It is clear that every individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he does not agree with him, is a monster" (Voltaire 389). Whether Blake wanted to hint at the potential monstrosity of Christian tolerance (or of toleration in general) cannot be taken for sure.<sup>25</sup> But that such a monstrosity seems to be lurking beneath our modern culture of tolerant sublimation, threatening us with the return of the repressed, seems an insight one cannot easily overlook. This is not to suggest that Blake was against tolerance in all its forms and practices. Far from it. In a note to Reynolds, he asks "What is Liberty without Universal Toleration" (*CPP* 635). One must have universal toleration, if one wants to have liberty. But can we or do we actually have toleration in the first place? Can we take the possibility of toleration for granted and only concentrate our powers on its worldwide extension in order the secure freedom? Blake seems to have sensed the difficulty, if not the outright impossibility, to accomplish that aim and grant toleration or patience without the slightest remnant of a desire for revenge. That he later abandoned the original title of the poem (the open reference to Christian forbearance), might indicate that his poetic "genealogy" of tolerance (its allegorical derivation from a feeling of unspoken anger) does not just target Christianity (or, at least, specific forms of it) in the vein of Voltaire or Nietzsche. It seems to address a more general logic at the heart even perhaps of secular culture, of enlightened humanism (even that of Goethe or Kant), and thereby seems to point to the enormous difficulties awaiting humankind in the efforts to work out a way toward friendship, hospitality, or toward a perpetual (or even just a lasting) peace.

## Works Cited

- Alfano, Mark. "The Tenacity of the Intentional Prior to the *Genealogy*." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 40 (2010): 29-46. Print.
- Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. Trans. W. Rhys Roberts. *The Internet Classics Archive*. Web. 29 Aug. 2020.
- Beer, John. *William Blake: A Literary Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005. Print.

<sup>24</sup> See also the claim that "if you have two religions in your midst they will cut each other's throats; if you have thirty, they will live in peace" (Voltaire390).

<sup>25</sup> His critique is "too idiosyncratic and too radical" for any easy application in the service of institutional reform (Ryan, "Blake and Religion" 166).

- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. New York: Anchor Books, 1988. Print.
- . *William Blake versei*. Budapest: Európa, 1977. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *Blake's Apocalypse*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963.
- Bredenkamp, Horst. "Behemoth als Partner und Feind des Leviathan: Zur Politischen Ikonologie eines Monstrums." *Leviathan* 37.3 (2009): 429-75. Print.
- Brenkman, John. "'The Concrete Utopia of Poetry: Blake's 'A Poison Tree.'" *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*. Eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. 182-93.
- Canuel, Mark. *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Clark, David L. "'The Innocence of Becoming Restored': Blake, Nietzsche, and the Disclosure of Difference." *Studies in Romanticism* 29.1 (1990): 91-113.
- Clarke, William F. "The Significance of William Blake in Modern Thought." *International Journal of Ethics* 39.2 (1929): 217-30.
- Delgado, Mariano, et al., eds. *Schwierige Toleranz: Der Umgang mit Andersdenkenden und Andersgläubigen in der Christentumsgeschichte*. Fribourg, Stuttgart: Academic Press, Kohlhammer, 2012. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides - A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida." Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 2003. 85-136. Print.
- . *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London and New York: Verso, 2005. Print.
- Foersch, N. P. "Natural History of the BOHON-UPAS, or POISON-TREE of the Island of Java." *The New Magazine of Knowledge Concerning Heaven and Hell* (1790): 36-39, 80-84, 127-31. Print.
- Forst, Rainer. *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present*. Trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Print.
- Gallagher, Philip J. "The Word Made Flesh: Blake's 'A Poison Tree' and the Book of Genesis." *Studies in Romanticism* 16.2 (1977): 237-49. Print.

- Gillham, D. G. *Blake's Contrary States: The 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' as Dramatic Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966. Print.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Maxims and Reflections*. Ed. Peter Hutchinson. Trans. Elisabeth Stopp. London: Penguin, 1998. Print.
- . *Schriften zur Kunst, Schriften zur Literatur, Maximen und Reflexionen*. Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1963 (1953). Print.
- Heyd, David, ed. *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. Print.
- Higgs, John. *William Blake Now: Why He Matters More Than Ever*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2019. E-book.
- International Committee of the Red Cross. "Rule 72. Poison and Poisoned Weapons." *IHL Database*. Web. 29 Aug. 2020.
- John, Donald. "Blake and Forgiveness." *The Wordsworth Circle* 17.2 (1986): 74-80. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" *Political Writings*. Ed. Hans Reiss. Trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 54-60. Print.
- . "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" *Berlinische Monatschrift* (Dezember 1784): 481-94. Print.
- . "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch." *Political Writings*. Ed. Hans Reiss. Trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 93-130. Print.
- Lau, Beth. "Review." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 96.2 (1997): 280-83. Print.
- Miner, Robert C. "Nietzsche on Friendship." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 40 (2010): 47-69. Print.
- Moskal, Jeanne. *Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness*. Tuscaloosa and London: The U of Alabama P, 1994. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Zur Genealogie der Moral." *Kritische Studienausgabe*. Ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988.5: 245-412. Print.
- . *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1969. Print.

- Pack, Robert. "Lyric Narration: The Chameleon Poet." *The Hudson Review* 37.1 (1984): 54-70. Print.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Ca(n)non to the Right of Us, Ca(n)non to the Left of Us: A Plea for Difference." *New Literary History* 18.3 (1987): 633-56. Print.
- Pleșu, Andrei. *Toleranța și intolerabilul: criza unui concept*. București: LiterNet, 2005. Print.
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies: New One-Volume Edition*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013. Print.
- Ripa, Cesare. *Iconologia*. Roma: Appresso Lepido Facij, 1603. Print.
- . *Iconologia: or, Moral Emblems*. London: Benj. Motte, 1709. Print.
- Ryan, Robert M. "Blake and Religion." *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*. Ed. Morris Eaves. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 150-68. Print.
- . *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- Schirmbeck, Samuel. *Gefährliche Toleranz: Der fatale Umgang der Linken mit dem Islam*. Zürich: Orell Füssli Verlag, 2018. Print.
- Schmidt-Salomon, Michael. *Die Grenzen der Toleranz: Warum Wir die offene Gesellschaft verteidigen müssen*. EPUB. ed. München, Berlin, Zürich: Piper, 2016.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1979. Print.
- . *The Concept of the Political*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 2007. Print.
- . *The Theory of the Partisan*. Trans. A. C. Goodson. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2004. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers. New York and London: Norton, 1977. Print.
- Spencer, Vicki A., ed. *Toleration in Comparative Perspective*. London: Lexington, 2018. Print.
- Stedman, John Gabriel. *Narrative, of a five years' expedition against the revolted negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the wild coast of South America; from the year 1772, to 1777*. 2 vols. London: Johnson, 1796. Print.

- Stepan, Alfred, and Charles Taylor, eds. *Boundaries of Toleration*. New York: Columbia UP, 2014. Print.
- Stevenson, W. H. "Notes." William Blake, *The Complete Poems*. Ed. W. H. Stevenson. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Thass-Thienemann, Theodore. *The Interpretation of Language*. 2 vols. New York: Jason Aronson, 1973. Print.
- Thompson, Edward Palmer. *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. New York: The New Press: 1993. Print.
- Voltaire, "Toleration." *Philosophical Dictionary*. Ed. and trans. Theodore Besterman. London: Penguin, 1972. Print.
- Williams, Nicholas M. *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Woodman, Ross. "Nietzsche, Blake, Keats and Shelley: The Making of a Metaphorical Body." *Studies in Romanticism* 29.1 (1990): 115-49. Print.
- Yousefi, Hamid Reza, and Harald Seubert, eds. *Toleranz im Weltkontext: Geschichten - Erscheinungsformen - Neue Entwicklungen*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013. Print.