Traumanticism: From Blake to the Bayou

Caitlin Elizabeth Berka
Portola Valley, CA

B.A., Stanford University, 2008

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
May 2012

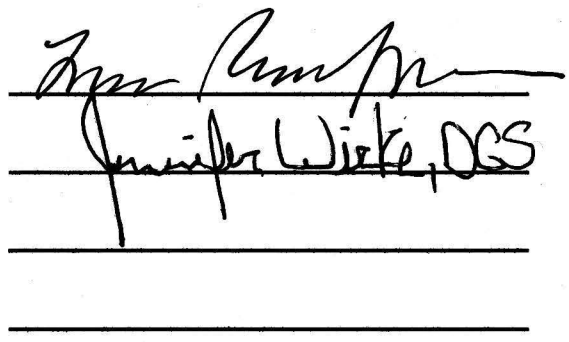

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Trauma and suffering, distinct from physical pain, require a narrative, which in turn implies a sense of a discreet if vexed self, an entity hinted at as early as the Renaissance (in relation to the classical epics and tragedies), in the essays of Montaigne, and in the soliloquies of characters like Hamlet, for example, but perhaps not fully embraced in literature until the Romantic period, with its elevation of the value of the inner life. According to psychoanalytic theory, trauma is "an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization." (LaPlanche and Pontalis, 465) The experience of trauma, then, has been the focus of much study, as theorists, psychoanalysts, and others explore its representation in an array of cultural, historical, racial, natural, and literary circumstances. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the apprehension of the workings and effects of trauma—the Holocaust, Hiroshima, a host of wars, gangs, cults, sexual abuse, genocide, natural disaster—is central to any understanding of the modern Zeitgeist.

William Blake—printer, poet, revolutionary, visionary harbinger of British Romanticism and an unsung progenitor of the traumatic narrative—helped to usher into literature a very particular poetics of trauma: a conflation of his rage at social strictures and an awareness of the crushing torment endured by the most innocent and marginal of society's denizens. Blake accomplished this traumatic "narrative" less by creating linear texts than by employing serial visual and formal ruses, a feat sharply illustrated by his

paired sequences, the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience.* A unique, obsessive spiraling effect achieved by shuttling back and forth between the two *Songs* allowed Blake to visit and revisit his nodes of ire and despair in illuminating ways. In his explication of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Zizek notes that the "scene [i]s traumatized, elevated into a traumatic Real, only retroactively, in order to help [the patient] to cope with the impasses of his symbolic universe." (73-74) The encounter with the initial "traumatic" event is merely a precursor; the real trauma is the process of its metabolism. Thomas J. Brennan, in his book *Trauma, Transcendence, and Trust*, hints at placing this notion in a poetic context when he argues that

> one of the definitive characteristics of the mourner—her ability to close with grief and thereby frame it in narrative—only comes into view after the mourning has ended. In the interim, during the time of writing and reading the poem, we confront the repetition of grief that characterizes the melancholic's utterances. (2)

The process of writing (and, for Blake, the process of printmaking) is a process of repeating; a poem about trauma, then, is not a record of trauma—it is the trauma itself.

In the summer of 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, killing or displacing many of the region's impoverished and marginalized citizens. What emerged from the wreckage—along with the bloated bodies dragged from waterlogged houses by the National Guard—was a flood of poems reacting to the disaster. Over 200 years after Blake finished the first editions of the *Innocence* and *Experience* poems, this deluge of new poems responded to the ineffable devastation of the natural disaster. The Internet brimmed with offerings, deeply felt but sometimes amateurish and with the feel of

journaling or blogging rather than of fully realized poems about them. Distinct among these outpourings, whether by professional or lay poets, are poems whose formal, spiraling and obsessive gestures are not unlike those Blake employed in the Songs; in particular, poets working in highly repetitive forms—sestinas, for instance, and villanelles—were often able to hover over the crisis in a way that "traumatized" the page, enacting Freud's "compulsion to repeat" as a means of not only describing but of (re)creating a sense of the hurricane's very particular devastations. Examining a few of these poems in the context of Blake's early Romantic experiments with the Songs may help to answer the following questions: Is there a poetics of trauma? How is it related to the tenets and impulses of Romanticism? What besides catharsis and sympathy can be evoked by such a literature? Why should we care?

CHAPTER ONE: BLAKE

There are two ways of looking at the "fallen" world: as fallen, and as a protection against worse things. —Northrop Frye

In 1795, William Blake completed a portrait of one of the vanguards of the Age of Enlightenment, Sir Isaac Newton. (See Figure 1) The scientist sits on a rock ledge covered in bright flora and bends over a scroll, protractor in hand, as he draws what appears to be a perfect equilateral triangle. Everything about Newton's posture and physique suggests a classical ideal: the porcelain flesh, the sculpted muscle definition, the flaxen curls of a Greek god. The position of his feet, one slightly in front of the other, forms a triangle, as does his right index finger, splayed at an acute angle against the scroll. The index and middle fingers of his left hand, holding the triangular protractor used to draw a triangle, bend at the knuckles to form a triangle themselves.

But one particular aspect of the portrait defies geometric perfection: the far edge of the scroll is coiled in a spiral. Set against the calculated angularity of Newton's body and drawing, it looks misshapen, imperfect, even biological, like some nebulous sea creature. Are we underwater? Are those anemones clinging to the rock and jellyfish floating by? Is the mottled indigo background the night sky or the deep sea? What seemed like representationalism now seems like a dreamscape; the mathematical precision of the scientist and his drawing now seems like a desperate stay against the chaos of the floating forms—or worse, a kind of madness itself in its inappropriateness to the environment. "What the picture really shows us," according to W.J.T. Mitchell,

FIGURE 1. William Blake, *Isaac Newton* (1795)

> is the "swerve" between two antithetical conceptions of the world—the human form and the world of nature, the body and its spaces, the hyperorganized armored self and the random flux of reality it encounters …The beholder's vision, in short, must continually "swerve" in the presence of this image, continually revising its sense of what order, coherence, and rationality consist in, and what sort of chaos and madness it is that stands over against this order, generating it and being generated by it. The figure of this swerve is the vorticular shape of the scroll that links the world of Newton's ideal forms to the material realities they address. (456)

Six years before he completed his portrait of Newton, Blake published *Songs of Innocence*, and then, five years after that, *Songs of Experience*, two collections that cannot be read except in relation to one another (in fact, they were ultimately published

as a set entitled *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.*) The frontispiece for the compilation shows two seminude forms, one male and one female. (See Figure 2) The woman, right knee bent and left leg outstretched, presses her body into the ground, her head cradled in her left arm and her serene face turned towards the viewer, while the man lunges and curves his body over hers, the triangle of his stance flowing into a curled upper torso and arms that bend to shield his face. If the first figure represents innocence, lying prone and peaceful, the second, experience, exists only in relation to her, superimposed on this Eden (and more fully fig-leafed.) Yet though he hides his face (is it a protective gesture, or one meant to hide some shame?), he bends it down towards her, signaling a return, or a desired return, to this vulnerable, prelapsarian condition. The spiral of his body enacts a swerve between the two "contrary" states— which, in reality, cannot exist without each other.

Such is also true of the poetry of *Songs*, in which several of the *Experience* poems hark back—through their titles, content, and/or form—to predecessors in the *Innocence* collection. In many ways, *Songs of Experience* was imbued with more traumatic historical knowledge than was *Songs of Innocence.* It was published after the French Revolution, when the tyranny of Robespierre was beginning to look a lot like the tyranny of the House of Bourbon. The holistic jadedness of the *Experience* poems seems, superficially, at odds with the naiveté of the *Innocence* poems. This is not to say that a simple binary exists between the two; the continual swerving between innocence and experience necessarily links them. "Contrary states," to Blake, did not mean negating; Hazard Adams remarks that "a 'contrary' would be an opposition in which the distinction

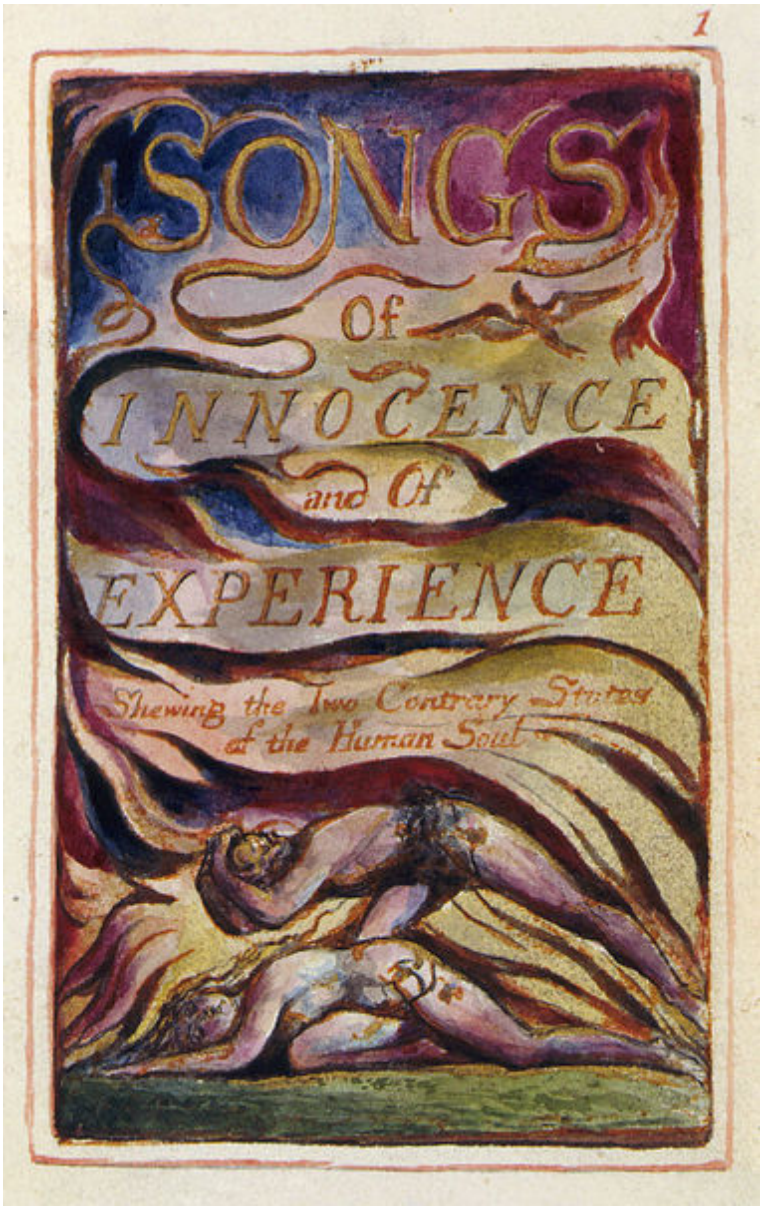

FIGURE 2. William Blake, Plate from Title Page, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794)

itself (or the reasoning that creates it) is on one side, and on the other is the denial of the distinction in favor of the identity of the two things in the term 'energy,' with neither side negated." (Pfau, 103) F.H. Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, explains that

> Blake's redemption is thus figured as a circling back of divided man to his original wholeness; he breaks out of his ceaseless round of wandering in

> what Blake calls "the circle of Destiny"—the cyclical recurrences of pagan history—into a "Resurrection to Unity" which is the full and final closure of the Christian design of history. The dynamic of this process is the energy generated by the division of unity into separate quasi-sexual contraries which strive for closure…[He] set as the goal for mankind the reachievement of a unity which has been earned by unceasing effort and which is, in Blake's term, an "organized" unity, an equilibrium of opponent forces which preserves all the products and powers of intellection and culture. (259-60)

The goal of the *Songs*, then, is a return to the joys of innocence without in-nocence. The process is Hegelian; it is the synthesis, this "equilibrium of opposing forces," and not the original thesis, that is to be desired. If *Songs of Experience* is traumatic, the trauma is a necessary element of reintegration, the achievement of those "products and powers of intellection and culture" that would make the return to innocence more than a return to sentimentalized ingenuousness. The spiral connecting *Innocence* and *Experience* is not a closed circle; the end point of a spiral exists near, but not exactly at, the point of origin. The return to innocence is, like the spiral and like the chaos of Blake's world and mind, off-kilter.

***

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud presents the case study of a young child who would occasionally play a curious game. He would take one of his toys, a wooden reel attached to a string, and instead of "drag[ging] this after him on the floor and so play[ing] horse and cart with it" (II), the child would throw the reel over the side of his bed so that it disappeared from his view, then pull it back up by the string, each time rejoicing at its reappearance. "He made it right with himself, so to speak, by dramatising the same disappearance and return with the objects he had at hand," remarked Freud. (II)

This observation is foundational to Freud's articulation of the repetition compulsion: the consistent return to, and reenactment of, painful events in order to control their psychological effects. "[T]he child repeats even the unpleasant experiences because through his own activity he gains a far more thorough mastery of the strong impression than was possible by mere passive experience. Every fresh repetition seems to strengthen this mastery for which the child strives…." (V)

Not surprisingly, children play prominent roles in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The child, as a trope of innocence, figures into an apparent binary between innocence and experience that Blake proceeds to complicate throughout the course of the poetic sequence. Children are also implicated in the repetitive nature of the *Songs*; while, as we have seen, repetition is fundamental to the definition of trauma, it can denote pleasure as well, especially for children. Freud recognized that, for adults,

> [n]ovelty is always the necessary condition of enjoyment. The child, however, never gets tired of demanding from a grown-up the repetition of a game he has played with him before…similarly if he has been told a pretty story, he wants always to hear the same story instead of a new one…it is evident that the repetition, the rediscovery of the identity, is itself a source of pleasure. (V)

The "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* recognizes this same principle of the child's wonderment at repeated stories. The child in question demands that the speaker "'Pipe a song about a lamb!' / So I piped with a merry cheer; / 'Piper, pipe that song again!' / So I piped, he wept to hear… / So I sung the same again / While he wept with joy to hear." (l. 5-12) Linguistic repetition within the poem dramatizes its own repetitiveness; the words "pipe," "piper," and "piping" occur ten times in the twenty-line poem, and the consonance of "p" (in words like "pleasant" (l. 2), "wept" (l. 8, 12), and "plucked" (l.

16)) reinforces the return. There is an element of baby talk in this; children who are on the cusp of language acquisition but do not yet have the ability to form words will often repeat phonemes over and over again. The final lines constitute an extended anaphora, itself a kind of linguistic return: "And I plucked a hollow reed / And I made a rural pen, / And I stained the water clear, / And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear." (l. 16-20) This instance of anaphora is not only repetitive but also infantile. Anyone who has heard a child tell a story is familiar with this construction: "and" is the simplest way to convey narrative progression. The distinction between the speaker and the child becomes elided, enacting a spiraling back to innocence from experience.

None of the *Songs of Innocence* is truly devoid of trauma, however; each contains a darkness often unacknowledged, or not assimilated, by its youngest and most naive personages. Thomas E. Connolly and George E. Levine acknowledge the insidious presence of experience in the *Songs of Innocence*:

> [I]n this world, some individuals are maimed because they are exposed to destructive experience without the shielding protection of a guardian; others are saved when they find guardians and are led past the threatening danger to some haven in which their basic innocence is both protected and strengthened by the wisdom gained through benevolent exposure to experience; still others, failing to find an earthly protector, seek and, if they are lucky, find a heavenly guardian who shields them from harm. (258)

One of the most striking examples of this is in the poem "The Chimney Sweeper" (which has a counterpart with the same title in *Songs of Experience*.) The poem begins darkly, already indicating the potential for trauma: "When my mother died I was very young, / And my father sold me while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep, / So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep." (l. 1-4) The thrice-repeated "weep" in

line 3 acts as a kind of verbal catch or hang-up; the repetition indicates trauma from the outset of the poem. The child speaker's inability to move beyond the initial event of suffering becomes dramatized in his inability to move beyond the expression of that suffering in the word "weep." Even when the child is able to escape from this verbal loop, the repetition compulsion leaks into the following line when "weep" becomes rhymed with both "sweep" and "sleep," the internal rhyme acting as repetition. The speaker, though traumatized himself, must be a kind of "guardian" to another child, the young Tom Dacre. The poem's poignancy arises from a dream Tom has after his hair "[t]hat curled like a lamb's back" (l. 6) has been shaved, signaling a certain loss of innocence; Tom dreams of a heavenly paradise in which "the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy; / He'd have God for his father and never want joy." (l. 19-20) When he awakes, "[t]hough the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm / So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm." (l. 23-24) Whose is the voice behind these final lines? Certainly not Blake's; his gnosticism would have prevented him from taking such a pat stance on the promise of heavenly reward. Instead, these lines contain the smack of propaganda thrust upon Tom by the people who would exploit him. Though Tom appears happy, his happiness is a delusion, and his naiveté prevents him from seeing his terrible lot for what it is.

The companion poem in *Songs of Experience* again takes up the question of adult authority; this time, the speaker examines said authority with a more critical, "experienced" eye. Now, instead of Tom's white hair among the soot, we see "a little black thing among the snow," (l. 1) a sort of retinal afterimage of the original. While the

speaker in the *Innocence* poem is essentially orphaned, the parental reality is equally cruel in the *Experience* poem: "Because I was happy upon the heath / And smiled among the winter's snow, / They clothed me in the clothes of death, / And taught me to sing the notes of woe." (l. 5-8) Children are suspicious of adults in *Songs of Experience*, and rightly so. Yet even the "experienced" children retain some of the trappings of their former innocence: "And because I am happy and dance and sing, / They think they have done me no injury." (l. 9-10) There is some shuttling back and forth here, if only between the *perceptions* of innocence versus experience. Yet the shift in tense from "[b]ecause I *was* happy" in line 5 to "because I *am* happy" in line 9 (the italics are mine) indicates some kind of return to a prior joy, without a loss of knowledge incurred. Although the child of the poem has been injured, redemption has taken place.

"Holy Thursday" similarly comprises both an *Innocence* and an *Experience* iteration. While childhood poverty and exploitation is addressed on an individual level in "The Chimney Sweeper" poems, it is examined as a collective phenomenon in the "Holy Thursday" poems; as David Fairer points out in his analysis of the sociohistorical context of "Holy Thursday," "One of the recurrent themes in Blake's art is his exploration of how an impulse hardens into a system…." (538) The "impulse" here is the preservation of both innocence and the social status quo; the "system" was the network of charity schools so fashionable in late 18th century London. "[T]hey would seem to have been from the beginning a focus for society's fears more than its hopes," writes Fairer of these schools, "…its worries about social cohesion, working-class poverty and ignorance, and whether or how much to alleviate it." (539) These were institutions urgently situated at the

intersection of innocence and experience. In the *Innocence* poem, the initial descriptions of the children as docile and uniform—"their innocent faces clean, / The children walking two and two in red and blue and green" (l. 1-2); "these flowers of London town" (l. 5); "multitudes of lambs…raising their innocent hands" (l. 7-8)—give way, in the final stanza, to the threat of an uncontrollable uprising: "Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song, / Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among…" (l. 9-10) These lines seem to embody the adult fear that children are not the unremitting angels they imagine them to be, coupled with a projection of their own experience upon these largely innocent children. Fairer notes that

> …such innocence is waiting to be tainted by the voice of adult experience. In justifying their clothing, Richard Coleire told his congregation that the charity children before them were not merely the "Hands and Feet" of society, as St Paul had said, but were in fact society's "Pudenda Natura," and as such, they ought to be covered up so that "the Eye may not be offended with their indecent Wants." They needed, he said, that clothing of which "our comely Parts have no need." With this extraordinary comparison of the charity children to the genital organs, the gesture of clothing the naked loses its innocence and becomes tainted by a voice of sexual disgust from the fallen world. (548)

This tension between innocence and experience is made abundantly clear in the poem's closing lines: "Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor— / Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door" (l. 11-12) The "guardians," often problematically or inadequately present in *Songs of Innocence*, are seated beneath the children, relegated to a certain powerlessness. The poem's aphoristic closing line recalls, in some ways, the closing line in the *Innocence* version of "The Chimney Sweeper," in which poor Tom is duped into complacency by the adults whose livelihood depends on his continued naiveté. The closing line of "Holy Thursday," however, though clearly

voiced by an adult and carrying the baggage of social correctness, brims with fear and doubt. "Driv[ing] an angel from your door" is tantamount to letting the charity children slip from innocence into experience, the result of which would be chaos.

The *Experience* poem, for its part, acknowledges the traumatic experience of these charity children to which the *Innocence* poem is (perhaps willfully) blind. "Is this a holy thing to see / In a rich and fruitful land, / Babes reduced to misery, / Fed with cold and usurous hand?" (l. 1-4) asks the poem's opening stanza. Recontextualizing the *Innocence* poem in light of *Experience*, we see a new narrative emerge. Instead of reading the mere *possibility* of uprising into the final stanza of the *Innocence* poem, we see a *call*, from Blake, for that very uprising. Just as Tom in "The Chimney Sweeper" is kept low by his inability to comprehend his own privation, the children in "Holy Thursday" are unable to recognize that they are beholden to a system with its own interests. As Fairer points out,

> [t]he charity school system was an odd combination of the claims of innocence and experience. In its innocent guise its ideals and hopes were driven by thousands of individual efforts to nurture goodness and give poor children a place, however lowly, within the social structure. But the public face of the system, as expressed through sermons, rule-books, hymn sheets, reports and so on, insistently counters innocence with the claims of experience, stressing future perils, and the dangers of knowledge, aspiration, and pride (those things that caused the downfall of our first parents). Caught in this way between opportunity and limitation, hope and fear, the charity children were situated within a social force-field that celebrated innocence, while sensing how precarious and in reach of harm it was. (556)

This social fetishization of innocence did undue harm to the children it touched. What Blake propounded in "Holy Thursday" was the child's need for a shift into the state of experience in order to view the system, and its strictures, for what it really was.

Such is also true of the "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*, the post-traumatic counterpart to the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*. Two voices are present in this poem: that of the speaker and that of the Bard. The speaker's tone is plaintive and, at first glance, despairing of a fallen world. The Christian overtones are apparent; the "Bard" invoked in the first line "finds himself in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets" (Frye, 59), transcriber of the word of God who calls to "the lapsed Soul" (l. 6). The speaker is a stay against confusion; his function is not generative but authoritative. Instead of imagining a world that could be, he attempts to regulate the world that is according to a prelapsarian ideal—a return to innocence. According to Northrop Frye, "The ordinary world that we see is a mindless chaos held together by automatic order: an impressive ruin, but a 'slumberous mass,' and not the world man wants to live in." (60) The repeated "fallen" in line 10 ("the fallen fallen light renew!") acts as a kind of verbal hiccup or stutter, signaling a traumatic obsession; in much the same way that the thrice-repeated "weep" in "The Chimney Sweeper" indicates an inability to move beyond the initial instance of pain, the repetition of "fallen" indicates an inability to adequately metabolize the fallen-ness of the current world. Yet the two final stanzas, spoken by the Bard, reverse this despair. The final stanza commands: "Turn away no more; / Why wilt thou turn away? / The starry floor / The wat'ry shore / Is giv'n thee till break of day." (l. 16-20) The act of turning away—itself a spiraling action, indicative of trauma—is a denial of the world's reality, a futile attempt to return to a state of innocence that no longer exists. The Bard acknowledges the beauty of the world we have, with its "starry floor" and

"wat'ry shore," and imagines, perhaps, a turning *towards* experience, not a turning away from it.

***

Having examined some of the *Innocence* poems and their *Experience* counterparts, we can now return to the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* in order to contextualize the collection. The speaker is not the child but the poet, an adult wizened by experience. Indeed, the speaker-poet can be read as a stand-in for Blake himself, and the song he pipes a synecdoche for the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (the song is about a lamb, recalling "The Lamb" of *Songs of Innocence*.) If the poem is a meta-commentary on the *Songs* as a whole, then calling the tunes piped by the speaker "songs of happy cheer" is an act inflected with irony; as we have seen, few of the *Songs* are unequivocally happy. In some ways, "Introduction" is an example of the Freudian return as mastery; the repetition of the "happy songs," which in reality are not so happy, becomes increasingly enjoyable in a kind of feedback loop of emotional response as the child moves from laughter to tears of joy. But the return also solidifies and performs the trauma inherent in the *Songs*. In the poem's final stanza, the speaker "made a rural pen, / And I stained the water clear, / And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear." (l. 17-20) The act of writing is an indelible blot, or stain, and the water is stained *only* in the act of writing. Stains are characterized both by their unsightliness and by their permanence; in committing the traumatic knowledge of the poems to writing, the speaker also commits them to eternality, creating psychic stains that are the traumas themselves.

In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth, in discussing the German Romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*, acknowledges the particular importance of the voice to trauma; it

> is paradoxically released *through the wound*. Tancred does not only repeat his act but, in repeating it, he for the first time hears a voice that cries out to him to see what he has done. The voice of his beloved addresses him and, in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated. Tancred's story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know. (2-3)

The "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* is, in many ways, about the voice by which trauma becomes embodied. In shuttling back and forth between speakers—the poet and the child—the poem makes such a voice difficult to pin down. Yet the permeable membrane between these two characters illustrates something else about the voice of trauma—its dissociation, to an extent, from the person experiencing the trauma. The psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell notes that "[t]he trauma sufferer will speak (and sometimes write) nonreflectively, wearing the mantle of someone else." (132) Indeed, recent work on trauma and memory indicates that "[b]y adopting an observer vantage point, people with PTSD may be able to mentally distance themselves from the actual traumatic event—in effect becoming spectators rather than experiencers of the event" (McIsaac and Eich, 249), and that "people who recalled their trauma from the observer vantage point tended to use a rather journalistic style of reporting their experience: their tone was unemotional and flat, as if they were just reporting the 'facts.'" (251) The tone of "Introduction" is similarly journalistic; it is presented as a straightforward narrative, the most common conjunction being "and." And though it's obvious that the child is happy,

we are given no real indication of the poet's internal state. Yet while dissociating oneself from the trauma by using distancing language may provide a temporary stopgap to one's pain, "the short-term relief from emotional distress that is gained by adopting an observer vantage point may actually impede long-term recovery." (McIsaac and Eich, 252) Hence the *Songs of Experience*—there is more work to be done.

This evokes another related component of traumatic language—positioning the self in relation to another. Mitchell argues that

> [t]here are two stages to writing: the making present of the trace described by Derrida…and the later writing, which is what we more commonly understand by the term. In its development as a talking cure, psychoanalysis has forgotten that its founder "cured" his own hysteria not through talking but through writing. Freud wrote letters to Fliess as well as his books. The letter may not arrive, but insofar as it is sent, the writer presents himself to another and thus sets up a position from which to perceive himself. (131)

First of all, it is telling that Mitchell refers to Derrida's idea of "trace," which recognizes the inherent *repeatability* of experience and language. The present event, by virtue of the fact that it is complicated by memories of the past and anticipation of the future, is bound by repetition—just as language, as a system of signifiers, is always imbued both with past connotations and with the inevitability of being invoked again. The bifurcated writing process of which Mitchell writes is dramatized in "Introduction"; the poet interacts with the child first through speech and song—while "piping"—and only later through writing. We have already explored the ways in which the trauma is performed by, and therefore part and parcel of, the writing process, and so the act of writing is paradoxically both the disease and the cure, both the traumatic event itself and the means to overcoming it. One of the ways in which writing accomplishes this is in imagining a listener outside the self,

which eventually becomes the self. “To be able to write in a sustained, active way necessitates a new positioning,” says Mitchell. “Or, in reverse, trying to write may facilitate this positioning. The imaginary receiver of one's written communication recognizes one.” (131) An example of this recognition of the self in a perceived other—or rather, recognition of the other *as* the self—becomes evident in “The Tyger.” “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (l. 20), asks the speaker, recalling, of course, the poem “The Lamb” in *Songs of Innocence*. The question is a rhetorical one (the answer is clearly “yes”) and the “he” of the poem, while certainly referring to God on one level, refers to the poet on another. Contained within this question is the simultaneous wonderment at and recognition of the fact that the same artist-poet was capable of creating both a song of innocence and one of experience (just as the same artist-God was able to sculpt both lamb and tiger). This is a moment of revelation and reconnection, a reintegration of the past innocent self with the present experienced one to form a more complete concept of the poet’s identity, and this moment is achieved only because of the act of writing the two poems in question. The same can be said of the final stanza of the “Introduction” of *Songs of Innocence*; while it concretizes the trauma of the *Songs*, it also holds the key to the trauma’s own mastery.

This view of the subject as a reconcilliation of past and present is an intrinsically Romantic one. Thomas Pfau writes that

> [i]n appealing to a deep interiority that springs from the modern subject’s abrupt encounter with archaic memories...romantic writing claims a strong hermeneutic role for itself. Not surprisingly, Freud was quick to acknowledge and capitalize on the apparent correlation between the inscrutable efficacy of romanticism’s articulate forms and his own theory of the unconscious’s “deferred” (*nachträglich*) efficacy. (232)

Blake, who existed on the first cusp of the movement, presaged this view of the self in his "acute distrust of narrative insofar as...conceiving time as linear, progressive, and strictly chronological matter...The moment of deliverance is located in the gap, the no-time in which repetition slides into interruption..." (102) In a sense, his use of the spiral as a formal ruse was a way of reclaiming language (and art) as a valid means of describing the self, wholly separate from Newtonian science. Enlightenment thinking, according to Cathy Caruth, signalled a new and troubling way of explaining reality: "the only thing that was adequate to the world was, paradoxically, that which didn't refer (mathematics); and what did refer, language, could no longer describe the world." (76) Interior states, though, seemed to exist outside mathematical comprehension, and this is where the Romantic notion of the self and the origin of the concept of trauma converge; according to Pfau, "the dynamics of trauma involve precisely the belated 'calling' of a past never before consciously experienced, and precisely for that reason capable of exposing the symbolic order of our conscious present as intrinsically unreal." (212) Trauma, then, exposes the sham that is an "order"ed consciousness. If the self is inherently referential, constantly spiraling back to past experience, the only adequate means of describing the self must be language ("what did refer") and not mathematics ("that which didn't refer.")

There is a tension, then, between the speaker's desired return to innocence in the "Introduction," as exemplified by his regressive phonemic babbling and the self-infantilizing sentence construction at the poem's end, and his understanding that such innocence is no longer possible. He acknowledges that "Every *child* may joy to hear" (l. 20) his songs (the italics are mine). Perhaps we, as adult readers, have moved beyond the

simple enjoyment of hearing stories repeated; repetition for the "experienced" means trauma, not pleasure. "Introduction" is paradoxical in that it can be read both as the poet's ultimate return to innocence and as his self-conscious acknowledgment of his own inability to return to it; just as the speaker shuttles between the states of innocence and experience, the reader must shuttle between two conflicting interpretations. But herein lies the synthesis; the true reading may lie somewhere in between, in the understanding that out of traumatic knowledge, or "experience," comes the wisdom necessary to defeating its devastations. We can never return exactly to a previous state of innocence (nor would we want to), but the traumatic process enacts, in the words of F.H. Abrahams, a "circling back of divided man to his original wholeness," (259), a reconnection of the experienced with the innocent in such a manner that preserves joy while preventing exploitation.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BAYOU

Lord, with the water, it's all stripped away.
—Dr. John

The Gulf Coast is a region beset by crisis. From the Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900 to Hurricane Camille in 1969 to Katrina itself, tropical storms have been an indelible part of the lives and histories of Gulf Coast residents for over a century. The poet Natasha Trethewey, in her memoir *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, writes of how they "are haunted—even at the edges of consciousness—by the possibility of natural disaster." (1) And yet, these crises continue to find new and increasingly barbarous ways to shock us. Who can forget, for instance, the images of bodies moldering in the streets of New Orleans, or of National Guardsmen spray-painting a gruesome lattice on each house to mark the number dead?

There is a reason the most turned-to description of these images is "haunting." Cathy Caruth calls the traumatic narrative a "narrative of a belated experience," recognizing its "…oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival." (7) To write trauma is to be undead, to inhabit the ghost of what happened.

What can Romanticism tell us about how to read the poems that arose from Hurricane Katrina? Its impact lies in the notions of psychological subjectivity, and the role of poetry itself, that began to shift during the Romantic era. Joel Faflak, in his book *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery*, argues that "...Romanticism's

concern with the trauma of self-identity is one of the ways it coheres as an historical entity...” (5) This self-identity is inextricably bound with the act of writing as a psychological release, just as Freud would contend nearly a century later. “Always a projection of its own symbolic nature onto the real, subjectivity is always at some level implicitly pathological,” says Faflak. “The work of writing and the Symbolic, where the human meets the real and reason meets its phantasy, is thus the cure of writing’s pathology, the pathology of writing’s cure...” (34) To write, as we have seen with Blake, is both to pathologize and to cure, to both perform the trauma and to provide the means for overcoming it.

The term “psycho-analytical” was first coined by Coleridge in an 1805 notebook entry in which he describes his classical education; Faflak notes that “[i]t seems apt that the first appearance of the term ‘psycho-analytical’ in the English language should come in a passage concerned with two issues: faith and the present’s ability to read the past.…” (32) Coleridge saw in the Renaissance and Enlightenment a schism between the scientific and the literary, the rational and the emotive, the external and the internal, that aligned poetry with faith and with “‘willing suspension of disbelief’” and drove it underground into “a shadow economy within reason, the unseen part of its operations.” (33) “Poetry speaks of and from this Hades (in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ Keats will say that the work of poetry is always borne ‘Lethe-wards’),” says Faflak, “where the dead, never really dead, continue to wander in a forgetting that, as Freud will remind us, is its own form of remembering.” (33)

So, too, is much post-Katrina poetry concerned with the act of writing as representation and with the hauntingness of the past. Poetry is perhaps the perfect medium by which to grapple with the paradoxes (or shuttlings) of trauma: between the event and its representation, between the impulse to memorialize and the impulse to forget. It is the site of "the uncanny meeting of the past and present in the present's understanding of a past it *feels* but cannot *know* definitively...Whereas the scientific mind moves consciously, progressively, deliberately, the literary mind moves intuitively, repetitively..." (Faflak, 35) Such is a distinction only recognized, perhaps, with the dawn of Romanticism; the Romantic subject is, for all intents and purposes, present in all contemporary lyric poetry and is uniquely situated as the metabolizer of trauma through writing.

***

Patricia Smith's "Ethel's Sestina," included in her collection *Blood Dazzler*, presents perhaps the closest poetic formal approximation of a hurricane. In a sestina, the order of repetition of the last word of each line in each stanza follows a spiral pattern. (See Figure 3) If one were to draw a picture of a sestina, it would look something like this:

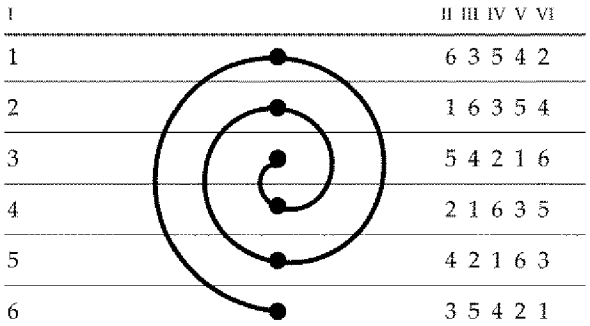

FIGURE 3.

Note its similarity to this satellite image of Hurricane Katrina, taken by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on August 28, 2005 (See Figure 4):

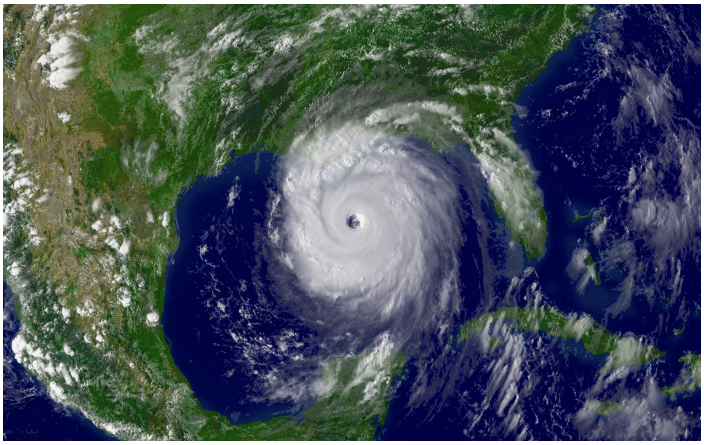

FIGURE 4.

The spiraling sestina also approximates the psychological response to trauma in two ways: first, in its disorientation, and second, in its circularity, its constant return to words and images of the past. Mary Jean Larrabee contends that

> [t]oday post-traumatic stress disorder, while still not completely understood, can be viewed as a particularly strong variety of memory, not usually (at least at first) called up *actively* by the traumatized person but itself often *very active* in its being able to overwhelm the physiological triggering of bodily and emotive "activity." (352)

In post-traumatic patients, memory has its own agency that often usurps that of the patient herself. So, too, is this the case in "Ethel's Sestina," which begins: "Gon' be obedient in this here chair, / gon' bide my time, fanning against this sun. / I ask my boy, and all he says is Wait." (l. 1-3) Ethel is "obedient," or paralyzed, in the face of trauma; the memory of her experience of the hurricane is as oppressive as the sun that beats down on her. Later, Ethel is "'bout to get out of this chair, / but the ghost in my legs tells me to

wait…" (l. 27-28) Ghosts are shades of past creatures—this ghost is memory, the shade of a past event. Memory has overtaken her body and made it subservient.

This is a new kind of response to trauma. Unlike a war veteran, who is likely to react violently and, more importantly, is absolutely compelled to bodily action—"he runs to find cover and falls behind 'hillocks,' she protects the patient from falling plaster in the MASH unit or moves quickly to evade incoming mortars" (Larrabee, 352)—Ethel cannot act at all. The returned soldier relives the events of the war he has experienced and does his best to protect himself and his comrades; the Katrina victim knows that no such self-protection is possible. Help can only come from outside, and it is unlikely to come at all. Ethel laments: "Been so long since all these suffrin' folks come / to this place. Now on the ground 'round my chair, / they sweat in my shade, keep asking my son / could that be a bus they see. It's the sun / foolin' them, shining much too loud for sleep, / making us hear engines, wheels. Not yet. Wait." (l. 7-12) Bodily states are altered in the heat and people become susceptible to hallucination. Much as the post-traumatic veteran may mistake the sound of a car engine backfiring for the report of a gun, the denizens of Ethel's world believe they hear the wheels of a bus coming to save them. Again, this is a new kind of response to trauma; the hallucination is hopeful, forward-looking, and redemptive, not horrifically memorial. We can return to Derrida's idea of "trace" here, in which the present moment is tinged with both memories of the past and anticipation of the future; Ethel's traumatic experience shifts her temporal perception so that the future, not the past, becomes paramount.

The sestina is necessarily backward looking, though, in that the final word of each line is predetermined and points back to an earlier stanza. More than that, each ending word in "Ethel's Sestina" evokes stasis, the inability to escape from the spiral: the "chair" in which Ethel sits, paralyzed; the "sun" in which all one can do is sit and sweat; the command to "wait"; the "sleep" that symbolizes a life lacking agency; the "son" who tethers Ethel to an earthly life; the hope that the bus will "come" to them, as opposed to going themselves. This effect is further heightened by the homonyms "sun" and "son"; even the poem's phonemes seem stuck in a feedback loop (recalling the stuttering of the "eep" phoneme in "The Chimney Sweeper.") Looking backward entails a delicate balance between remembering and failing to remember, and though memory is a dangerous force, forgetting is equally dangerous: "Lawd, some folks prayin' for rain while they wait, / forgetting what rain can do. When it come, / it smashes living flat, wakes you from sleep, / eats streets, washes you clean out of the chair / you be sittin' in. Best to praise this sun, / shinin' its dry shine…" (l. 13-18) Memory of traumatic events allows for vigilance and for adaptive responses; the post-traumatic response carries this through to an extreme. Forgetting, while protective in that it allows the forgetter to evade relived trauma, ensures that no adaptive response will occur. Even Ethel, who in this stanza is a consummate rememberer, remarks, several lines later, "…Wish some trees would block this sun. / We wait. Ain't no white men or buses come, / but look—see that there? Get me out of this chair, / help me stand up. No time for sleepin', // cause look what's rumbling this way. If you sleep / you gon' miss it…" (l. 21) The sun that was once

praised is now a nuisance; the sight of the bus, which was once dismissed as a hallucination, now seems a reality.

At the poem's end, Ethel does, in a sense, break the spiral. Formally, the sestina "breaks" in the third line of the sixth stanza, when what should be a single line becomes seven: "They don't hear Come. / Come. / Come. / Come. / Come. / Come. / Come." (l. 33-39) This coincides with the breaking of Ethel's paralysis a few lines earlier: "Nobody sees me running toward the sun. / …Ain't but one power can make me leave my son. / I can't wait, Herbert. Lawd knows I can't wait. / Don't cry, boy, I ain't in that chair no more." (l. 31-42) Ethel's "running toward the sun" is a paradoxical movement, as it symbolizes her death, which may be the ultimate stasis. However, death for the spiritual Ethel is release from what has become a purgatorial life of waiting: "Wish you coulda come on this journey, son, / seen that ol' sweet sun lift me out of sleep. / Didn't have to wait. And see my golden chair?" (l. 43-45) The images of the sun, sleep, and chair become transfigured in the envoi, transmuted from brass into gold. The sun, once oppressive, becomes liberating. The sleepiness of Ethel's life is overcome in her death. The chair, once the (literal) seat of Ethel's paralysis, becomes a heavenly throne. Breaking the cycle of the sestina, and of life, entails breaking the traumatic mindset of disorientation and circularity.

***

Audre Lorde's "Afterimages," written in 1981, looks back even further: the event in question is the 1979 Easter flood of the Pearl River that devastated Jackson, Mississippi, but the event behind the event is the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-

year-old black boy who was beaten, shot, and disposed of in the Tallahatchie River for allegedly whistling at a white woman. According to Freud, "historical memory…is always a matter of distortion, a filtering of the original event through the fictions of traumatic repression, which makes the event available at best indirectly." (Caruth, 16) "Afterimages" recognizes this immediately in its title, which evokes both distance from the event and a kind of distortion of the event. A retinal afterimage is the product of visual exhaustion. It is what happens when the rods and cones in the eye have been saturated with color for too long; it is an equal and opposite image.

"Afterimages" is a highly personal poem, and as such it is highly performative of the trauma(s) with which it contends. In his article "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form," Greg Forter acknowledges the

> power of texts that seek less to represent traumatizing events— since representation risks, on this view, betraying the bewildering, imperfectly representational character of traumatic memory—than to transmit directly to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption. Here the study of trauma joins a more general contemporary interest in writing that performs or enacts what it has to say rather than (or in addition to) conveying it representationally. (Forter, 260)

"I inherited Jackson, Mississippi" (II), the speaker of "Afterimages" tells us, and it is not a stretch to imagine that the speaker is indeed Lorde, who spent a year, in 1968, as writer-in-residence at Tougaloo College in Jackson. The writing of the poem is the metabolism of Lorde's own trauma as experienced through traumas of the past. The conflation of poem with trauma is apparent from the outset, when, in the first lines of the poem, the speaker utilizes the vocabulary of rape to talk about the effects of trauma: "However the image enters / its force remains within / my eyes.…" (I) The notion of unwanted entry,

and entry into the body no less, coupled with the idea of force spirals back to the initial, catalyzing event of the poem: the accusation of sexual impropriety made against Emmett Till. Till's murder is described as a sexual assault as well: his violators "ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue... / they took their aroused honor / back to Jackson / and celebrated in a whorehouse..." (III) The woman after the flood has "a microphone / thrust up against her flat bewildered words," (II) a violent intrusion in the hopes of extracting a narrative; to speak the trauma necessitates another violation. And just as the speaker's remembered experience of the events is similarly forced ("[h]owever the image enters"), so too is the reader's experience of the poem, which begins with the acknowledgement of the unwanted entry of an image. In this way, "Afterimages" performs the trauma it addresses, and because all trauma in the poem is experienced as a kind of rape, it also enacts a spiral of repetition.

This return to history is perhaps the only way in which the traumatized can adequately grasp the initial event—not only because the trauma itself is actually the afterimage of what has occurred, but also because, according to Juliet Mitchell,

> [t]he event that breaches constitutes an erasure of the self, which then survives by following old patterns in which recognition is both essential and elusive. The old pattern can only repeat and reinstate itself; it cannot change because it cannot be historicized—it cannot become part of the past which it is, because it is being used as the present which would otherwise be empty without it. But this past-used-as-present is a concretization of the erasure of the self as a victim: where a person is blasted by an event, they have to represent their presence by a previous experience in which they were a victim; victimhood is the only way in which this absence can be actualized. (131)

In "Afterimages," that previous experience is the murder of Emmett Till. Bound by common geography, the flood and the murder each inform the way we read the other,

enacting the kind of shuttling that exists in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Memory is superimposed upon memory in a series of "fused images" (I); the speaker imagines the white woman in the flood as Carolyn Bryant (Till's accuser) and further imagines Bryant as Helen of Troy, the woman as prize and insignia of honor: "Her face is flat with resignation and despair / with ancient and familiar sorrows / a woman surveying her crumpled future… / she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor..." (IV) The two-dimensionality of her portrayal—her "flat" face and "crumpled" future like a sheet of writing paper or a page from a newspaper—simultaneously makes the trauma feel undigested and connects it with the act of representation. What we have in the poem is a series of two-dimensional images of the events, not the events themselves. Speaking of Emmett Till, the speaker acknowledges that "[h]is broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year / when I walked through a northern summer / my eyes averted / from each corner's photographies / newspapers protest posters magazines / Police Story, Confidential, True / the avid insistence of detail / pretending insight or information...." (III) How close can any story, whether an act of poetry or of journalism, get to the initial event? And is that less important than the act of working through that event with the images we *can* access?

The poem's ending may provide some kind of an answer. "A woman measures her life's damage..." the final stanza begins; "her tow-headed children cluster / like little mirrors of despair / their father's hands upon them / and soundlessly / a woman begins to weep." (IV) The woman's weeping is soundless and therefore wordless, indicative of a pain that cannot be articulated; this poem is still in the process of metabolizing the

trauma. It has not yet been, and perhaps cannot ever be, put to rest. The children are inheritors of this trauma who, "mirror"-like, must refract it in a cycle of repetition, just as the reader, in internalizing the poem, becomes bound up in the unwanted and uncontrollable intrusion of images that constitutes traumatic knowledge. If the poem has any agency, it lies in this involvement of the reader in the trauma, re-rendering the two-dimensional text a three-dimensional experience. It is important not only to bear witness to trauma but also to bear experience, keeping in mind Caruth's assertion "that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas." (24)

***

Yusef Komunyakaa's "Requiem" approaches the trauma of Katrina historically as well, recalling (as does "Afterimages") classical mythology and epic; this time, though, the epic is infused with the Anglo-Saxon. The poem opens with "So," (l. 1); like *Beowulf*'s "Hwaet!", it is an invitation to listen. Like an epic poem, "Requiem" begs to be read aloud or sung; it is a single, unfinished sentence, the only punctuation being commas, dashes, ampersands, quotation marks and, finally, an ellipsis at the end. Such punctuation is illustrative of the pauses—the ebbs and flows, as it were—of human speech. A makeshift chorus appears, "while the believers hummed / 'Precious Lord' & 'Deep River'" (l. 27-28), the poem's performative aspects being enacted in its narrative. The poem's diction connects it with the epic as well; "Requiem" is peppered with compound words: "whiplashed," "sold-off," "marshlands," "postmodern," "waterlogged," etc. These recall both the Homeric epithet and the Anglo-Saxon kenning,

which Chris Jones defines as "a compressed metaphoric periphrasis, typically in the form of a compound word." (67) Komunyakaa immediately conceives of New Orleans as a ship: "the Crescent City was already shook down to her pilings, / her floating ribs, her spleen & backbone…" (l. 5-6) If "Afterimages" reimagines the Trojan War, "Requiem" is its sequel, a reimagining of *The Odyssey*, with the city as a ship blown off course.

Memory in "Ethel's Sestina" is a spiral; memory in "Afterimages" is a retinal imprint; memory in "Requiem" is an excavation. Katrina has stripped New Orleans down to its skeleton, exposing the "plumb-line / & heartthrob, ballast & watertable" like an indiscriminate archaeologist; what is also laid bare, as in "Afterimages," too, is the shameful history of the Gulf Coast, a history that is racially charged. The city becomes a graveyard for "the last ghost song / of the Choctaw & the Chickasaw / …long gone, no more than a drunken curse / among the oak & sweet gum leaves, a tally / of broken treaties & absences…" (l. 13-17) Post-Civil War Reconstruction is evoked, in the next few lines, in "the barrier islands / inherited by the remittance man, scalawag, / & King Cotton…" (l. 18-20) The atrocities perpetrated against Native Louisianans are not a far cry from the atrocities perpetrated against blacks in the Jim Crow South; the transition from one to the other within the poem is seamless, moving across centuries with ease. In a sense, all of history was laid bare by the flooding. Fittingly, the cemeteries of New Orleans hold only above-ground tombs; a buried coffin would become waterlogged and float because of the high water table, and instances of extreme flooding can still pry coffins loose. Nothing is truly buried in New Orleans; the storm reminds us of this:

"already the folklore began to rise up / from the buried lallygag & sluice / pulsing beneath the Big Easy…." (l. 31-33)

But the hurricane in "Requiem" may ultimately be redemptive. This sentiment was echoed, for both good and ill, in the years following Katrina by those who bemoaned New Orleans' problems. There was hope that the city's storm-flattened infrastructure would give way to reconstruction, not only of the "Old World facades" ("Requiem," l. 7) of the crumbling tenements but also of the failed institutions themselves—the broken educational system, the housing inequities, the racial divides, the astronomical crime rates. Indeed, many positive changes did come to pass in the aftermath of the storm; but there was also the insidious implication that, thankfully, the storm had driven out many of the "undesirable" residents: the poor, the minorities, the mentally ill, the criminals. "Requiem," rather than addressing the rebirth of infrastructure, addresses the rebirth of culture and celebration: "the great turbulent eye / lingered on a primordial question, / then turned—the gauzy genitalia of Bacchus / & Zulu left dangling from magnolias & raintrees, / already…" (l. 46-50) The "great turbulent eye" is, of course, the hurricane, but it is also god-like, creative in its "primordial" questioning, fixed on the reproductive "genitalia" in the trees. Bacchus, a Greek god, and Zulu, an African ethnic group, are both also Mardi Gras Krewes, and their "gauzy genitalia" are the beads thrown from the parade floats. The end of "Requiem" is not only regenerative but also celebratory, imagining the best, indestructible part of the city—its distinctive ritual culture—rising from the destruction. The ending ellipsis is generative, too, in that it refuses an ending and leaves room for continuation.

Freud, in his historical account of Judaism entitled *Moses and Monotheism*, read the history of the Jews as necessarily one of departure—departure from, and eventual return to, the homeland. Caruth reads the return as "not so much a return to a freedom of the past as a departure into a newly established future…" (14) "It is the trauma," she argues, "the forgetting (and return) of the deeds of Moses, that constitutes the link uniting the old with the new god, the people that leave Egypt with the people that ultimately make up the nation of the Jews." (15) Blake saw redemption not in past innocence or in present experience but in a future in which the best qualities of each became synthesized, and that the traumatic knowledge of experience was a necessary catalyst for that synthesis. So too does the storm in "Requiem," in excavating the largely forgotten history of a city, make possible a future of celebration informed by the traditions of the past.

CONCLUSION

Assuming the existence of a particular poetics of trauma, why should we care? This essay has thus far concerned itself mostly with the place of writing within the traumatic process, and to answer this question entails teasing out what differentiates a poem (which is meant to be read by others) from other kinds of written self-expression, as well as elucidating what makes that act of reading critical to the traumatic process. In their essay "The Wordless Nothing," Larrabee, Weine, and Wolcott discuss the importance of differing Bakhtinian speech genres to clinical trauma narratives. Primary speech genres—the kind of everyday, conversational language used for basic communication—can be synthesized into secondary speech genres, which are more highly mediated, culturally advanced, and usually written. These include works of literature, scientific papers, and political treatises—works meant to advance larger ideas or theories. The authors propose that

> [t]he question then becomes the extent to which any one speech genre concerning some one aspect of human existence, such as the experiencing of psychological trauma, can be prioritized over another, the extent to which any speech genre can be validated as congruent with, in our case, the experience of trauma and the trauma experiencers' narratives, and the degree to which the dialogic nature of utterances relates to recovery from trauma experience. (366)

Journaling, for instance, might be considered a primary speech genre; it is free-form, unedited, and conversational, even if the intended recipient of the conversation is oneself. Poetry is a secondary speech genre, employing more complex diction and syntax. Most importantly, it is meant to be read. This engagement with others is particularly crucial in

trauma narratives. “We can find in the person in extremity the experience of a twoness or bondedness with an other, rather than finding the self as a singularity,” Larrabee, Weine, and Wolcott write. “This experience expresses itself not just as an aspect of the self, but also interactively in communication with other people...” (370) For the trauma experiencer, the ability to be heard and understood by others is of the utmost importance.

And what of the non-experiencer? What does he or she gain from the act of reading traumatic poetry? This is where the line between writer and reader, between person telling and person being told, begins to blur. According to Larrabee, Weine, and Wolcott,

> [m]eaning is established between speakers, who all have many voices or speech genres embedded within them, rather than the singularity usually assumed in everyday life. The experience of trauma brings out this characteristic of utterance in the trauma survivor and reminds non-experiencers, the persons listening to the story or to the silence, that these many voices might also be in them. (371)

If the heteroglossia of the traumatic narrative is a microcosm of the heteroglossia of the individual, the reader will find linguistic footholds within a traumatic poem, recognizing him or herself in a kind of Lacanian mirror-stage moment. Romanticism specifically has allowed for a notion of interior states as recursive—just as language is—making the reading (and writing) of traumatic poetry a particularly potent analog to the traumatic process. Juliet Mitchell criticizes Otto Rank’s proposition that “the trauma of birth [is] the origin of mankind's neurosis,” arguing that, in this view, “[t]rauma is the great equalizer. What differentiates us, since we were all born?” (121) While we may indeed all experience trauma differently, and experience different events as traumatic, what we recognize in the poetry of trauma is our *ability* to experience it, whether or not we have.

We see our own voices represented in the text and come to two conclusions: first, that the psyche is unbearably fragile and vulnerable to being stripped of its protective covering; and second, that though this is the case, it can be survived.

WORKS CITED

Abrams, F.H. *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: Norton, 1971.

Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Ed. Andrew Lincoln. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Brennan, Thomas J. *Trauma, Transcendence, and Trust: Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Eliot Thinking Loss.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Connolly, Thomas E. and George E. Levine. "Pictorial and Poetic Design in Two Songs of Innocence." *PMLA* 82.2 (1967): 257-264.

Faflak, Joel. *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008.

Fairer, David. "Experience Reading Innocence: Contextualizing Blake's 'Holy Thursday.'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35.4 (2002): 535-562.

Forter, Greg. "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form." *Narrative* 15. 3 (2007): 259-285.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. C.J.M. Hubback. London: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922.

Frye, Northrop. "Blake's 'Introduction' to 'Experience.'" *Blake Bicentennial*. Spec. issue of *Huntington Library Quarterly* 21.1 (1957): 57-67.

Jones, Chris. *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Requiem." *Callaloo* 31.2 (2008): 484-485.

Laplanche, Jean and J. B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1973.

Larrabee, Mary Jeanne. "The Time of Trauma: Husserl's Phenomenology and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." *Human Studies* 18.4 (1995): 351-366.

Larrabee, M.J., S. Weine, and P. Woollcott. "'The Wordless Nothing': Narratives of Trauma and Extremity." *Human Studies* 26.3 (2003): 353-382.

Lorde, Audre. "Afterimages." *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: Norton, 1997.

McIsaac, Heather K. and Eric Eich. "Vantage Point in Traumatic Memory." *Psychological Science* 15.4 (2004): 248-253.

Mitchell, Juliet. "Trauma, Recognition, and the Place of Language." *Diacritics* 28.4 (1998): 121-133.

Mitchell, W.J.T. "Chaosthetics: Blake's Sense of Form." *William Blake: Images and Texts*. Spec. issue of *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58.3/4 (1995): 441-458.

Pfau, Thomas. *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Smith, Patricia. "Ethel's Sestina." *Blood Dazzler*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2008.

Trethewey, Natasha. *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2010.

Zizek, Slavoj. *How to Read Lacan*. New York: Norton, 2006.