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iconic syntax in poetry:

a note

on blake's "Ah! Sun-flower"

donald c freeman

By the re-creative cognitive act of joining by reading or reflecting, we discern meaning in the joining of what have been known discretely through beginning, sequence, and ending.

-- Earl Miner ¹

The title of this paper notwithstanding, its real subject matter is the beginning of an inquiry into the nature of poetic "knowledge", based on the following hypothesis: to the extent that an account of syntactic structure is a model for our creation and understanding of that structure, just so an account of a poem's syntactic structure is a model for the poet's creation and our understanding of that poem's syntactic and artistic structure. I want to focus on understanding: my subject is what Miner calls "the reader's poem." And I want₂ to claim that, far from "do[ing] away with reified notions of literature,"² which Miner takes to be a

primary virtue of "cognitive understanding" because of the abstract (and hence unfalsifiable) character of critical constructs like structure, the approach I put forward here can, I think, give real content to those notions, in particular to the notion of poetic form.

* * *

Any theory claiming that poetic form is grounded in syntactic form must be able to explain short, syntactically simple lyric poems such as Blake's "Ah! Sun-flower":

Ah ! Sun-flower

Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done:

Where the Youth pined away with desire
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow
Arise from their graves, and aspire
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

-- William Blake, Songs of Experience

For a theory of syntactic form in poetry to be correct, units of the poem's structure must be found to be units of its syntax as well -- or, to put this postulate differently, syntactic units must determine structural units, and rhetorical progression must be mirrored in syntactic progression. I shall attempt in what follows to substantiate these claims for "Ah! Sun-flower."

The biting irony of this poem depends upon the juxtaposition of two points of view -- that of the sunflower (or, more precisely, the view attributed to the sunflower by the speaker), constrained by physical existence and mortality, and the long view, sub specie aeternitatis, of the speaker. That these points of view are different is made explicit in the change of mode from apostrophe ("Ah, Sun-flower!") to narrative ("my Sun-flower") from the first to the second stanza.

These two points of view, the temporal and the eternal, constitute the poem's major structural units. The sunflower dutifully traces the sun's steps across the sky each day; its reward for a lifetime of such devotion, in its own view, will be what it thinks is "that sweet golden clime Where the traveller's journey is done," a kind of super-sunset, analogous to the night's rest accorded the sunflower at the end of every working day.

But the first line of the second stanza, the fifth in a series of anaphoric clauses, identical in syntactic form to the fourth, dramatically reverses that point of view. Referring back to that same "golden clime",

the speaker now characterizes it in a syntactically equivalent conjoined clause as a graveyard of repressed desires, indeed, as the end of just such a life as the sunflower in its "Good Life" has been leading. Blake juxtaposes in the same syntactic frame the idealized -- and false -- view of Heaven as the earned repose following a dutiful life, and the dessicated corpses of such useless virtue, trapped in an endless cycle of repression and sterility.

But these two relative clauses constitute a pragmatic violation of ordinary-language syntax -- two incompatible propositions cannot conventionally be attached as relative clauses to the same head. Both of these propositions -- namely, that sunset-heaven is "that sweet golden clime Where the traveller's journey is done" and that it is "where the Youth pined away with desire, And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow Arise from their graves . . ." cannot be true: the poem's syntax hence is anomalous and highly foregrounded at this point. The intensity of description in the second stanza contrasted with the insipid conventionality of the first leads us to suspect that the speaker's vision of the hereafter is in reality that of the second stanza.

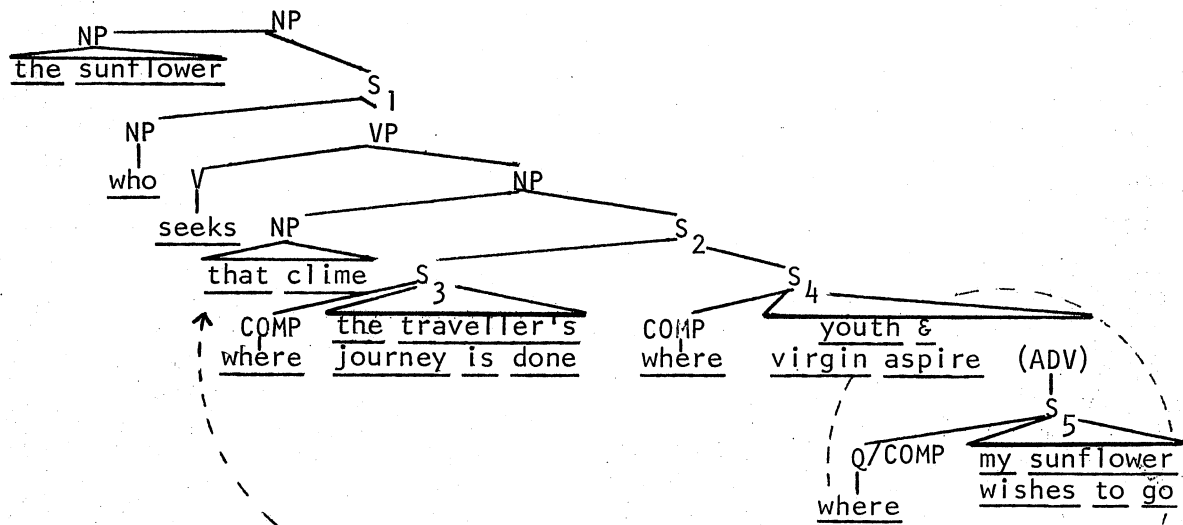
The poem's two structural units, then, are flatly contradictory descriptions of heaven -- temporal and conventionally optimistic on the one hand, mirrored in the parallelism and anaphora of the syntax ("sun-flower who . . . that sweet golden clime Where . . .") and the stock portrait of heaven as golden and at the end of life's journey; and, on the other hand, eternal and bitter, mirrored in the sharp reversal of the idealized picture in the same syntactic frame, the more vivid verbs "pined away" and "shrouded", and in the shift to a syntax of coordination ("youth . . . and . . . Virgin . . . arise . . . and aspire"). It is almost as if a second, embittered, experienced voice had intervened to undercut the idyllic cosmology of the first stanza, sardonically redefining its terms in identical syntax, and caustically, even contemptuously, redefining in the same syntactic pattern what really exists "where my Sun-flower wishes to go."

The poem's rhetorical progression depends upon these crucial where-clauses. Their status as "linguistic sames" ³ and hence as part of a poetic pattern seems clear enough. But I want to argue that there is encapsulated in the last where-clause a design which not only embraces this "terrible lyric", as Northrop Frye called it ⁴, but which is central to Blake's poetic vision.

Semantically, of course, the last where-clause takes us back to the beginning of the poem, to the sunflower dutifully counting the steps of the sun. But if we examine the referent of that final where, the entire final clause, and hence the expanded Noun Phrase which forms the poem, appear to be infinitely recursive. "Where my Sun-flower wishes to go" is "that sweet golden clime." But "that sweet golden clime" has two coordinated restrictive relative clauses attached to it -- and their restrictedness is reinforced by the cataphoric or forward-referring that which precedes "sweet golden clime." The first of these clauses is "Where

the traveller's journey is done," and the referent of this where is "that sweet golden clime." The second restrictive relative clause is the entire second stanza, and the referent of the where that begins its first line is, similarly, "that sweet golden clime." Included, not coordinated, in this second where-clause is a third, "Where my Sun-flower wishes to go." This third where is not coordinated with the first two, but is a sentence adverb with "my Sun-flower wishes to go" in an embedded sentence itself constituting the object of aspire in "the Youth pined away with desire And the pale virgin shrouded in snow Arise from their graves and aspire" The semantic referent, again, of this third where, whatever its syntax may be, is not just "that sweet golden clime," but "that sweet golden clime" with both of its relative clauses, namely "where the traveller's journey is done" and "where the Youth pined away with desire And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow Arise from their graves and aspire Where my Sun-flower wishes to go." The referent of the third where, in other words, contains itself again and again. No matter how far we pursue the semantics underlying that third where, we are never able to pin it down. Where do the Youth and the Virgin aspire? Where my Sun-flower wishes to go. Where does my Sun-flower wish to go? It seeks after that sweet golden clime where the Youth and the Virgin aspire where my Sun-flower wishes to go. Where do the Youth and the Virgin aspire? And so on.

I have attempted to characterize what I believe to be the interpretively infinite recursiveness of that final where below:



"Ah! Sun-flower" is of course an apostrophe, a complex NP with three relative clauses, the third of which is of concern to us here. S₁ contains "the Sun-Flower seeks that sweet golden clime Where the traveller's journey is done, Where the Youth . . . and the Virgin . . . aspire [to] where my Sun-flower wishes to go." S₂ consists of two coordinated embedded sentences which undergo WH-Fronting under relativization with "that sweet golden clime" -- namely, "Where the traveller's journey is done" and

"Where the Youth and the Virgin aspire Where my Sun-flower wishes to go." S_5 on one reading is adverbial. But on another it appears that S_5 is an indirect question. This ambiguity depends on the semantic interpretation of aspire -- whether we are to read it as "seek after" some real place, in which case the clause is paraphrasable as "the Youth and the Virgin aspire to the place where my Sun-flower wishes to go," or whether we are to read aspire as "long for", without committing ourselves on the question whether "where my Sun-flower wishes to go" really exists. This second sense can be read, in my view, as a syntax of indirect question. I have indicated semantic reference with dotted arrows in the diagram above.

These two different interpretations of aspire, and the correspondingly different syntaxes they entail, are at the heart of the contrast in points of view in the poem. The naive, dutiful Sun-flower seeks after "that sweet golden clime" -- notice, again, the forward-pointing that -- thinking that it is really there. But the Voice of Experience knows otherwise -- knows, indeed, that to aspire after "that sweet golden clime" is to enter an endless cycle of doom, and to ask a question which can be answered only by asking it again.

The question, be it remembered, is vacuous. Nor is this the only poem in Songs of Experience where Blake plays with vacuous questions ("What immortal hand or eye Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" S_5). The only way it can be answered is to ask the question again -- the sunflower wishes to go where the sunflower wishes to go. The strongly cataphoric that in "that sweet golden clime" makes us expect some necessary qualification, only to show us that the sunflower is seeking after that sweet golden clime where the Youth and the Virgin aspire where my sunflower wishes to go.

"That sweet golden clime," in short, is a chimera, a mirage -- but a mirage that is embedded in the poem's syntax. In a virtuoso display of syntactic trompe-l'oeil, Blake first fools us into expecting a definite "filler" for the syntactic "hole" implied in that, then makes us perceive that "where my Sun-flower wishes to go" is infinitely recursive in its reference, and finally discloses a bleak and endless round of frustration and nihilism in which the objects of seeking are aspirations and the objects of aspiration are wishes and the objects of wishes are questions. The poem's syntax is a vicious circle.

These observations might be merely murdering to dissect -- were it not the case that just such a vicious circle is precisely the subject matter of this poem and an important theme in Blake's poetry. Blake wrote in "There Is No Natural Religion" that "If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again." The "dull round" of the sunflower, in bondage to the sun, is the endless natural cycle of sunrise and sunset, leading only to that final sunset of death in which the sunflower will join the

"Youth pined away in desire, And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow," who lived a life of repressed desire. The Youth and the Virgin, as Harold Bloom has shown, "are resurrected to the rewards of their holy chastity. They arise, and they still aspire to go to their heaven, but that is where they already are. They have not escaped nature,⁶ by seeking to deny it; they have become monuments to its limitations." The good life of the dutiful sunflower leads by an unforeseen turning of the tables to the endless vicious circle of frustration and repression played out more fully in Blake's "The Mental Traveller" and symbolized in those "dark Satanic mills" which dominate his prophetic works.

The syntax of "Ah! Sun-flower" is mimetic of exactly this endless cycle of repression. It forces us to link the unexamined dutifulness of the sunflower to the sterile doom of the Youth and the Virgin, and is central to the vicious turn of the last line. "Ah! Sun-flower" may⁷ be, as S Foster Damon has written, "one of Blake's most beautiful lyrics," but it is surely also,⁸ in the words of Harold Bloom, "as cruel a poem as Blake ever wrote."

The abstract patterns of English syntax clearly constitute one of the artistic media which Blake actively uses in this poem. They not only create a pattern in the poem; they control the process by which we perceive and experience it. The poem's syntax⁹ and our response to it are an important part of its subject matter.

Footnotes.

¹ Earl Miner, "That Literature is a Kind of Knowledge," Critical Quarterly, 11 (1976), 516.

² Miner, p 511.

³ In the sense used by Paul Kiparsky in "The Role of Linguistics in a Theory of Poetry," Daedalus, CII, No 3 (Summer, 1973), 255.

⁴ In Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (Princeton, 1947), p 47.

⁵ For discussion, see E.L. Epstein, "The Self-Reflexive Artefact: The Function of Mimesis in an Approach to a Theory of Value for Literature," in Style and Structure in Literature, ed R Fowler, (Oxford, 1975), pp 40-78.

⁶ Harold Bloom, Blake's Apocalypse (New York, 1973) p 140.

⁷ S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary (Providence, 1965) p 390.

8 Bloom, p 139.

9 This little essay is very much still a working paper, part of a joint study by EL Epstein and me of some of the Songs of Experience. The idea of recursiveness was first suggested to me by Timothy R Austin. The general subject of poetic syntax and poetic form is one which Samuel Jay Keyser, Muffy Siegel and I have been working on in a number of published and forthcoming papers. I am most grateful to Emmon Bach, Justine T Stillings, and Steven Lapointe for discussion and suggestions. In its present form this study is part of a larger paper I gave before the Greater Boston Stylistics Circle at Tufts University in April, 1976.