

“Sick as a Rose”: William Blake
in Leopoldo María Panero’s
Poetry of Experience

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The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (E 35)

1 WILLIAM Blake’s *Songs of Experience* found a powerful response in the Spanish author Leopoldo María Panero (1948–2014). In his work, which is crowded with echoes of the Blakean images of the sick rose and the tiger, he offers a reinterpretation of some of Blake’s most popular motifs. Panero was a major figure in modern Spanish poetry, whose literary production ranged from poetry and essays to short stories. He was one of the nine poets who featured in the anthology *Nueve novísimos poetas españoles* (*The Nine Newest Spanish Poets*), edited by José María Castellet in 1970, which served to establish a new generation of authors.¹ These authors, barely known at the time, were writing in the last years of Francisco Franco’s regime, when the decline of the dictator’s health brought some hope for a new era to come.² In this context, the *Novísimos*, although not a coherent group, shared a rejection of social realism and a common indifference to the dictatorship. Among them, the most difficult to classify is Panero. He was a complex, inde-

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1. The nine *Novísimos* were Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (1939–2003), Antonio Martínez Sarrión (b. 1939), José María Álvarez (b. 1942), Félix de Azúa (b. 1944), Pere Gimferrer (b. 1945), Vicente Molina Foix (b. 1946), Guillermo Carnero (b. 1947), Ana María Moix (1947–2014), and Panero.

2. The death of Franco in November 1975 brought the dictatorial regime to an end.

finable, self-destructive poet who said—in a clear allusion to Walt Whitman—“I celebrate and I hate myself ... while the poem is written against me.”³ As Joaquín Ruano notes, Panero’s poetry bears witness to a life that was lived by different rules, to a radical individuality that rejected established dogmas, both in life and in literature (13). Through his subversive writings Panero transmits a message of transgression and madness, infringing limits and denouncing injustices, always trying to “situate himself in the territory of excess.”⁴ In his prologue to Félix J. Caballero’s *Treinta noches* (*Thirty Nights*), he writes, “Peter Pan has died; there is nothing else but the consciousness of excess: ‘The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom’ (W. Blake),”⁵ quoting in translation the well-known line from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Panero lost his innocence and took the road of excess very early. He spent some time in prison and much of his life in different psychiatric hospitals, as he suffered from severe alcoholism, drug addiction, and insanity. His last thirty years were passed in a mental institution in Las Palmas, on the Canary Islands, where he died in 2014.

2 From his early childhood, he was haunted by visions: “The hallucinations of the madman are in the infant the natural form of perception.”⁶ He recounts one of these experiences in the preface to *Los señores del alma* (*The Lords of the Soul*): “I decided to follow someone I thought was a child. Besides alcohol I had taken some drugs and, hallucinating, I saw that the child had the wings of an angel,”⁷ an image that recalls the frontispiece to Blake’s *Songs of Experience*. In a study of Panero’s mental illness in relation to his literary production, Sergio A. Sánchez concludes that both Panero and Blake suffered from the same type of visions (87–89). Hence, it is no surprise that the Spanish poet found in Blake a kindred soul. Panero grew up in a domestic context conducive to the reception of English Romantic poetry, since his father, Leopoldo Panero (1909–62), himself a poet, translated works by William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, among others.⁸ His untamable son was nonetheless most attracted by Blake, whose works would be a pervading, lifelong presence in his thought and

3. “Me celebro y me odio a mí mismo ... mientras el poema se escribe contra mí” (*Guarida de un animal* 12). All translations are my own.

4. “busca situarse en el territorio del exceso” (*Agujero llamado Nevermore* 48).

5. “Peter Pan ha muerto; no queda sino la conciencia del exceso: ‘El camino del exceso conduce al palacio de la sabiduría’ (W. Blake)” (*Acerca de un posible testamento* 153).

6. “Las alucinaciones del loco son en el niño una forma natural de la percepción” (quoted in Blesa 9).

7. “Decidí seguir a alguien que creí un niño. Había tomado además de alcohol algo de drogas, y alucinatoriamente vi que el niño tenía alas de ángel” (*Poesía completa [2000–2010]* 166).

8. Some of his translations can be found in the best-known anthology of English Romantic verse in Spain, edited by Valverde (1989).



Leopoldo María Panero. Photo by Thomas Canet.

verse. In the preface to *El último hombre* (*The Last Man*), Panero points to Blake, Gérard de Nerval, and Edgar Allan Poe as his main influences:

Blake, Nerval, and Poe are my main sources, as they are supreme epitomes of *disturbing strangeness*, of madness made verse: because art, after all, as Deleuze would say, only consists in giving madness a *third sense*: pushing the limits of madness, standing on its borders, playing with it ...: a dangerous profession, delightfully dangerous.⁹

- 3 Some scholars (Quinto, Saldaña Sagredo) have underlined the Romantic character of Panero's personality and work, grounded in his rebelliousness and marginality, his cult of the self, and the dreams and nightmares that populate his poetry. He seems to have felt a connection to some authors on the basis of shared biographical experiences and related literary production, identifying more with Blake, Poe, Ner-

9. "Blake, Nerval o Poe serán mis fuentes, como emblemas que son al máximo de la *inquietante extrañeza*, de la locura llevada al verso: porque el arte en definitiva, como diría Deleuze, no consiste sino en dar a la locura un *tercer sentido*: en rozar la locura, ubicarse en sus bordes, jugar con ella ...: un oficio peligroso, deliciosamente peligroso" (*Poesía completa* [1970–2000] 287).

val, Thomas De Quincey, and Scardanelli (the alter ego created by Friedrich Hölderlin after a severe mental breakdown) than with the rest of the Romantic authors. He aligned himself with *les poètes maudits* and became a reference point for contemporary literary *malditismo*. Darkness, madness, and hallucinations are the main elements of his poetry, which is at times fragmentary and incoherent, and always provocative. In addition, Panero's work is highly intertextual; it is itself a literary ecosystem, in a permanent dialogue with literary texts from the past (see Rodríguez de Arce). His literary discourse is not, however, merely an amalgam of quotations; rather, he appropriates, re-creates, and elaborates. Ruano notes that Panero's work is a sort of library where "poisonous texts" are preserved, reworked, and pondered over again and again in an endless process of work in progress (10). According to Panero,

Literature ... takes its referent not from reality but within literature itself—that is, in Itself, its past Posthumous literature ... that literature that will not account either for any reality or epistemological statute external to itself that is not given in the game ... of literature, multiplied only by itself.¹⁰

10. "La literatura ... tome su referente no en la realidad sino en la literatura misma—es decir, en su Ser, su pasado La literatura póstuma

- 4 His work is thus riddled with names of authors and allusions to and quotations from previous literary discourses. A good number of referents have been identified and listed, Blake among them.¹¹ Panero was a polyglot, who mastered both English and French. His linguistic competence allowed him to enjoy English literary works and thus gain an unmediated knowledge of the texts. Moreover, he wrote some original poems in English and translated into his mother tongue James M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan*, as well as poems by John Clare, Robert Browning, Edward Lear, and Lewis Carroll.¹² He got acquainted with Blake's verse early. In 1972, while living for some months in Tangier, Panero wrote to ask his mother to send him a volume of Blake's poetry. In the letter he emulates Blake's Proverbs of Hell:

You could send me ... the edition of Blake by Plaza Janés (which is also bilingual). I send you the two first aphorisms.

I

"The man is son of a dead god"

Variant

"The Man is a dead god"

II

"Law, limit, morality and justice are epithets of the devil. Seth's chains are the laws (modifiable by his suicide) of matter."

They could be entitled, in remembrance of Blake, Hellish Proverbs.¹³

- 5 He is referring to the 1971 bilingual edition of *Poemas*, translated by Agustí Bartra and published in Barcelona by Plaza and Janés. It includes "The Lamb," "The Blossom," "Infant Joy," "Spring," and "Laughing Song" from *Songs of Innocence*; "Introduction," "Earth's Answer," "The Sick Rose," "The Fly," "The Tyger," and "London" from *Songs of Experience*.

... esa literatura ya no dará cuenta de ninguna realidad ni de ningún estatuto epistemológico exterior a ella que no sea el dado en el juego ... de la literatura, multiplicada sólo por sí misma" (*Visión de la literatura* 23).

11. For a full list, see Blesa 13-14. For an introductory note on Blake's presence in Panero's work, see Flores 175-76, of which this article is a continuation.

12. All of Panero's translations of English poetry have been gathered in the collection *Traducciones/Persiones*.

13. Podrías mandarme ... la edición de Plaza Janés de Blake (que es también bilingüe). Te mando los dos primeros aforismos.

I

"El hombre es hijo de un dios muerto"

Variante

"El Hombre es un dios muerto"

II

"La ley, el límite, la moral y la justicia son epítetos del diablo. Las cadenas de Seth son las leyes (modificables por su suicidio) de la materia."

Se podrían llamar, en recuerdo de Blake, Proverbios infernales.

(Quoted in Benito Fernández 166)

ence; The Book of Thel; The Marriage of Heaven and Hell; Visions of the Daughters of Albion; America; and The [First] Book of Urizen. Even though Panero would be a lifelong reader of Blake's poetry, and his knowledge of Blake's work was by no means limited to this selection, the early and powerful influence of this group of poems, especially those from *Songs of Experience*, was remarkable. Panero's verse has been described by Antonio M. Albalade, in his introduction to *Rosa enferma* (9), as poetry of experience. To this I would add that his is a poetry of experience in the Blakean sense. Paley rightly notes that Blake's innocence and experience are two "perennial ways of looking at the world" (2), the childlike and the experienced conceptions of reality. Panero adopts the experienced perspective, in which innocence is lost, corrupted by institutions. References to Blake and motifs from *Songs of Experience* are numerous: the idea of childhood's destroyed innocence and imagery of the sick rose and the tiger populate his work.

They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

"The Chimney Sweeper" (E 23)

- 6 A recurrent and central topic in Panero's work is childhood. Far from presenting infancy as a state of innocence, he conceives it from the viewpoint of experience: "A whole human rhetoric exists that considers the child as sweet, soft, paradisiac Nobody knows that the child is friend to the animals and the ... devil."¹⁴ This statement is arguably inspired by Blake's "The Little Girl Lost," where the child lives with predatory animals in the wild: "Leopards, tygers play, / Round her as she lay" (E 21). Among the animals she befriends is the tiger, which Panero identifies with the devil, as we will see. He explores infancy from different perspectives, but always considering childhood as a lost paradise, destroyed by institutions; all children are little girls and boys lost. For him, "school is a penal institution where we are taught to forget infancy" by means of "the cruel words of schooling"¹⁵—an idea that recalls "The School Boy" or even "Nurse's Song" in *Songs of Experience*. His images of infancy are shadowed by bad omens and cruelty. Suffering and weeping boys abound in Panero's verse, where the reader can hear "the sobbing of a boy / wounded by the shadows."¹⁶ "The child," he writes, "is the slave of the man /

14. "Existe, en efecto, toda una retórica humana que considera al niño como dulce, suave, paradisiaco Nadie sabe que el niño es amigo de los animales y del ... diablo" (*Acerca de un posible testamento* 91-92).

15. "El colegio es una institución penal en la que lo que nos enseñan es a olvidar la infancia" (*El Desencanto*); "las palabras crueles del colegio" (*Poesía completa [1970-2000]* 184).

16. "el llanto de un niño / herido por las sombras" (*Poesía completa [2000-2010]* 401).

and infancy is only / a ruin on my lips / on my lips that are closed to life.”¹⁷ The world of Panero’s children is much like that depicted in “Holy Thursday,” an “eternal winter” (E 19) marked by pain—“Oh boy who wakes, boy / used to pain / as if life were made up / only of pain”—and death—“Life is an incurable disease, as is infancy.”¹⁸ Infancy anticipates and participates in death in both *Songs of Experience* and Panero’s poetry. This dialectical relationship between childhood and death can be seen in Panero’s “Pavane pour un enfant défunt” (“Pavane for a Dead Child”): “Even on earth, you are a dead child / ... / We are all / dead children / ... / we all carry inside a dead child, crying.”¹⁹ They attain total identification in “El beso de buenas noches” (“Goodnight Kiss”), where a dead child addresses his father: “Father, I am dead, and the tomb is / a much better cradle.”²⁰

O Rose thou art sick.
“The Sick Rose” (E 23)

7 Panero, who claimed to feel “sick as a rose,”²¹ found in Blake’s “The Sick Rose” a powerful metaphor for mental illness, another of the central concerns in his poetry. From his early youth to his death, this image helped him depict his own madness and drug addiction. In 1998, he wrote an essay entitled “Mi cerebro es una rosa” (“My Brain Is a Rose”), and his last collection of poems, published posthumously in 2014, is *Rosa enferma* (*Sick Rose*). Its preface opens with a full transcription of Blake’s poem (9) and continues with the famous lines from Panero’s 1992 poem “Heroína” (“Heroin”): “When the venom enters my blood / my brain is a rose.”²²

8 The rose appears frequently in his verse as a symbol of hopelessness—the recognition that his life is in ruins: “The rose is withering today / ... / you are a rose / you are less than nothing.”²³ The image is always related to sickness, madness, emptiness, hell, and fear, as can be seen in the

17. “El niño es el esclavo del hombre / y la infancia es sólo / una ruina en mis labios / en mis labios cerrados a la vida” (*El ciervo aplaudido* 33).

18. “Oh niño que despierta, niño / acostumbrado al dolor / como si la vida fuera inventada / sólo por el dolor” (*Poesía completa [2000–2010]* 220); “la vida que es también una enfermedad incurable, lo mismo que la infancia” (*Acerca de un posible testamento* 169).

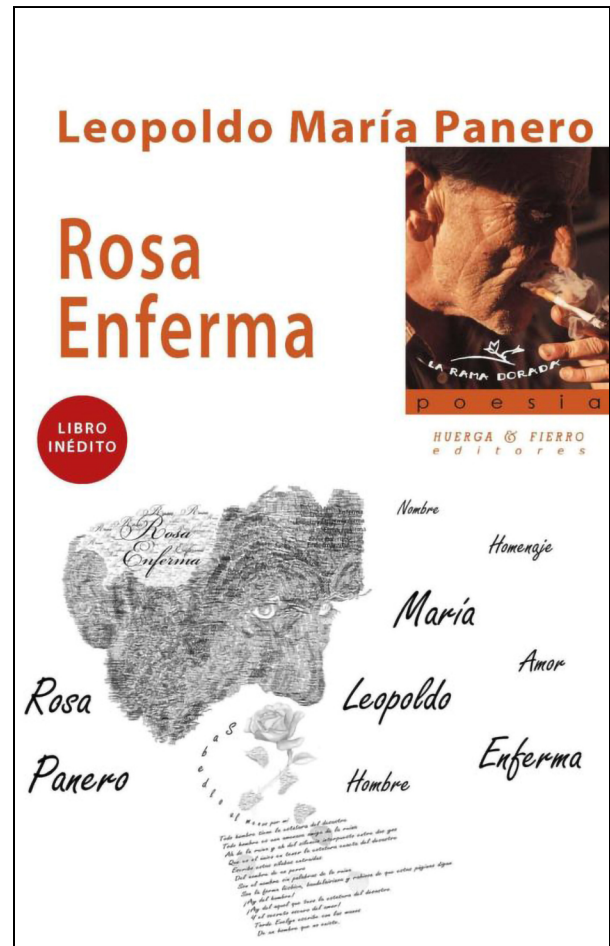
19. “eres aún en la tierra un niño difunto / ... / Todos nosotros somos / niños muertos / ... / todos llevamos dentro un niño muerto, llorando” (*Poesía completa [1970–2000]* 144, 146).

20. “Padre, estoy muerto, y es la tumba / una cuna mucho mejor” (*Poesía completa [1970–2000]* 260).

21. “enfermo como una rosa” (*Rosa enferma* 81).

22. “cuando el veneno entra en sangre / mi cerebro es una rosa” (*Poesía completa [1970–2000]* 415).

23. “La rosa hoy se marchita / ... / tú eres una rosa / tú eres menos que nada” (*Poesía completa [2000–2010]* 106).



Rosa enferma (Madrid: Huerga y Fierro, 2014), cover.

following phrases: “perfect rose of delirium,” “weeping rose,” “rose of emptiness,” “rose of hell,” “rose of mental hospital,” “rose of death,” “cannibal rose,” “rose of terror,” “sick rose,” “rose in the shadow of tears.”²⁴ It is a symbol of decay and death: “Now that you ask about the future, you must understand / That life is a rose burnt / ... / By the mortal wound that does not heal / By the endless evil in life.”²⁵ In a powerful transformation of Blake’s idea, Panero goes beyond the symbolic relation of the rose with death, only suggested in “The Sick Rose,” to identify them overtly. This is clearly seen in “La rosa descende hasta mi nombre”

24. “rosa perfecta del delirio,” “rosa húmeda del llanto,” “rosa de la nada,” “rosa del infierno,” “rosa de sanatorio,” “la rosa de la muerte,” “rosa canibal,” “rosa del espanto,” “rosa enferma,” “la rosa en tinieblas del llanto” (*Poesía completa [2000–2010]* 313 [2], 264, 352, 351, 199, 152, 151, 430, 441).

25. “Ya que preguntas por el futuro, comprende / Que la vida es una rosa quemada / ... / De la herida vital que no se cura / Del mal incansable de la vida” (*Rosa enferma* 43).

("The Rose Descends to My Name")—which opens with a translation of the closing line of "I saw a chapel all of gold" ("And laid me down among the swine," E 468)—where the "macabre" and "sad" rose is said to be "like death."²⁶ The total identification of the rose with death is attained in the poem "Dead Flower to a Worm," which he wrote in English:

Blind worm that slips in the desert
that I am
thinking of green meadows
in which disappear
thinking of merry fields
whilst I am dead
Blind worm that is like water
falling on my skull
Who knows, who knows if you
must move forever through my bones
Who knows, who knows if you
will move forever through my bones, forever
disbelieving of the dead flowers
falling over you.

(*Poesía completa* [1970–2000] 153–54)

This poem can be read as a clever response to Blake's "The Sick Rose," in which the Spanish poet places the focus on the worm instead of the flower. The invisible worm that kills the rose from inside in Blake is in Panero a blind worm that enters a flower that is already dead. Panero's poem represents the certainty of the flower's death, the inevitable destiny of the sick rose—only implied in the closing line of Blake's poem—and, by extension, the fatal destruction of his self: "The rose, the rose, the rose / that I am."²⁷

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
"The Tyger" (E 24)

- 9 In Panero's imagery the rose and the tiger are often associated—"Febrile rose of the devil, / tiger carved on steel"—as the tiger also represents his insanity: "Perfect symmetry of the poem where the tiger stalks, / The tiger of madness that

26. "Y me tendí entre los cerdos"
WILLIAM BLAKE

.....
Rosa macabra del poema
rosa triste de la tarde
.....
La rosa es el símbolo del poema
rosa cúbica que es como la muerte

(*Poesía completa* [2000–2010] 44–45)

27. "La rosa, la rosa, la rosa / que soy yo" (*Poesía completa* [1970–2000] 471).

still roars against thought."²⁸ Panero lived in a personal hell and recognized himself to be on the devil's side. In *Sombra* (*Shadow*) he writes, "And only the devil is the lord of the page 'Every real poet is in love with the devil,' Blake said, worshipping the wind."²⁹ Here the poet is probably recalling Blake's comment on Milton in *Marriage*: "He was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it" (E 35). Moreover, Panero identifies himself with the devil and the tiger simultaneously, as in "Al Infierno" ("To Hell"): "I am the tiger / the most beautiful animal in the night: I am the Devil."³⁰ He adopts the widespread interpretation of Blake's poem according to which the tiger is made in the likeness of his creator and both are identified as the devil. This he clearly expresses in the following poem, which opens with a quotation in translation from "The Tyger":

"What immortal hand or eye
could frame thy fearful symmetry?"
Hymn to the Devil by William Blake

How perfect is the symmetry of disaster
hand of the devil and of ruin

.....
Oh ivory of cruelty
perfect cruelty of the shadow
in which man disappears³¹

- 10 "The Tyger" is the poem most often quoted by Panero, and the tiger is a motif in his verse, as can be seen in "En el ojo del huracán" ("In the Eye of the Storm")—"The rainforest, trapped in the tiger's eye, / shines in the perfect symmetry of the poem / —in the tiger of my eyes"³²—or in "Abra Cadavre" ("Abracadaver")—"Oh you, feline animal / ... / perfect tiger, I don't know whether hand or foot / 'what a hand

28. "rosa febril del diablo, / tigre sobre el acero inscrito"; "Perfecta simetría del poema donde acecha el tigre, / El tigre de la locura que ruge aún contra el pensamiento" (*Poesía completa* [2000–2010] 264, 187).

29. "Y sólo el diablo es el señor de la página 'Todo verdadero poeta está enamorado del diablo' Blake lo dijo adorándole al viento" (quoted in Sánchez 87).

30. "yo soy el tigre / el animal más bello de la noche: yo soy el Diablo" (*Guarida de un animal* 39).

31. "Qué inmortal mano o qué ojo
pudo crear tu aterradora simetría"
Himno al diablo de William Blake

Cuán perfecta es la silueta del desastre
mano del diablo y de la ruina
.....
Oh marfil de la crueldad
perfecta crueldad de la sombra
en que desaparece el hombre

(*Poesía completa* [2000–2010] 194–95)

32. "La selva, atrapada en el ojo del tigre, / resplandece en la perfecta simetría del poema / —en el tigre de mis ojos" (*Guarida de un animal* 13).

or what an eye?”³³ It is also the central image in “Cantata del Miedo” (“Cantata of Fear”), dedicated to the poet Claudio Rodríguez:

I searched his name, his name
of dread and perdition
his name
that makes a man go pale
that is the dark name of the Tiger
—tiger, tiger burning bright
in the forests of the sky—
who, what word, or what hand created
your fearful symmetry
.....
for only
evil is a mystery, and the dark
enigma of life, which was always dark
because the Devil created it, and made it
similar to the word life.³⁴

- 11 Leopoldo María Panero, who has been described as a Blakean angel (“ángel blakeano” [Arnao]), found in Blake images that perfectly matched his life and embodied his most profound feelings and disturbing thoughts. Growing as a poet in the 1970s, at the very end of Franco’s dictatorship, he broke with the rules and the limits imposed by conservatism and censorship. He didn’t conform to the “mind-forg’d manacles,” to the external suppression and repression; he conceived a reality different from that universally established. Early in his life Panero took the road of excess and never left it; he always looked at reality from the perspective of experience, Blakean experience, as his poetry shows. Unlike Blake’s *Songs of Experience*, in Panero’s literary realm there is no room for the potential triumph of innocence. The Spanish poet does not confront experience, but admits, fully conscious of his madness and mortality, “I carry / a secret rose in my bosom.”³⁵

33. “Oh tú, animal felino / ... / tigre perfecto, no sé si mano o pie / ‘what a hand or what an eye?’” (*Poesía completa [2000–2010]* 153).

34. busque su nombre, su nombre
de miedo y de perdición
su nombre
que hace palidecer al hombre
que es el tenebroso nombre del Tigre
—tiger, tiger burning bright
in the forests of the sky—
quién creó, qué palabra o qué mano
tu aterradora simetría
.....
porque sólo
el mal es un misterio, y el oscuro
enigma de la vida, que fue siempre oscura
porque el Diablo la creó, y la hizo
parecerse a la palabra vida.

(*Poesía completa [2000–2010]* 238-39)

35. “llevo/ una rosa secreta en el pecho” (*Poesía completa [2000–2010]* 42).

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