The Tree of Mystery

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor:
And Mercy no more could be,
If all were as happy as we;
And mutual fear brings peace;
Till the selfish loves increase.
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,
And waters the ground with tears:
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head;
And the Catterpiller and Fly,
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

The Gods of the earth and sea,
Sought thro’ Nature to find this Tree
But their search was all in vain:
There grows one in the Human Brain

– ‘The Human Abstract’,
_Songs of Innocence and Experience_ (E27)

M. J. A. Green, _Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake_
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‘The Human Abstract’, one of two companion pieces to ‘The Divine Image’ from *Songs of Innocence*, begins by describing a moral condition in which the performance of morality depends upon systems of impoverishment and inequity, pity requires forced deprivation and mercy can only exist as long as there is suffering in the world. The first stanza consists of two couplets, in which the first lines name a Christian virtue and indicate its contingency upon the anti-Christian condition stated in the second. It ends with a semicolon after the final ‘we’, which suggests that the second stanza will continue in the same spirit as the first, describing the paradoxical position of morality in lapsarian existence. At first glance, this seems to be the case, for line 1, stanza 2 reads: ‘And mutual fear brings peace’ (l.5; E27). The conjunction ‘And’ suggests that this couplet will provide a third instance of virtue depending upon vice. The couplet does in fact do this, but it deviates from the couplets in stanza 1 by condensing its moral paradox into the first line. It does this by describing a paradoxical activity – ‘mutual fear brings peace’ – rather than presenting a contingent virtue followed by the condition upon which it paradoxically depends.

Line 2, stanza 2, introduces a temporal element to the poem – beginning with the conjunction ‘Till’, rather than with ‘If’ or ‘And’ – and from this point onwards, the poem ceases to state conditions, but rather occupies itself with the provision of a narrative. After ‘the selfish loves increase’, ‘Cruelty’ – possibly their product or progeny – creates a trap, then ‘with holy fears’, which may be the same as the mutual fear in stanza 2, ‘waters the ground with tears’ that allow ‘Humility’ to take root. From this root spreads ‘the dismal shade // Of Mystery’, which will provide food for ‘the Catterpiller and Fly’, will bear ‘the fruit of Deceit’ and will provide a home for the Raven. This tree, whose roots are humility and boughs are mystery, is an early description of the ‘Tree of Mystery’ that will reappear in *Ahania*. There we are told that the Tree’s growth is driven by the composition of Urizen’s ‘book of iron’ and it functions as a conflation of the tree of knowledge and the cross upon which Christ was crucified, with the latter all but stripped of its messianic potential as Urizen’s crucifixion of his ‘first begotten’ forges a link between the doctrines of mystery and atonement, thus parodying the twin heresies that Priestley traces to the impact of paganism on the early church (*Ahania*, 3.64, 4.5; E86; Priestley, *Corruptions*, p. 51). Although ‘The Human Abstract’ does not present itself as a narrative of the fall in quite the same way as *Ahania*, parodying specific ‘virtues’ rather than church doctrines and biblical texts, the poem’s ominous tone combined with