PUARL LECTURE: *O ROSE THOU ART SICK*
Reflections on *A Pattern Language*

by Murray Silverstein

Thank you, Hajo, and thanks to the University of Oregon. It's a pleasure to be here, to offer some thoughts and reflections (thirty-five years later!) on that old warhorse, *A Pattern Language*.

Two months ago, Hajo invited Sara, Max, Ingrid and me together, for what was essentially a pattern language reunion, less Chris, who was in England, and Shlomo, who was in New York. A couple of bottles of wine into the evening, talking about this conference and how we might contribute, the subject of Chris's entire body of work came up—the great arc from *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* to *The Nature of Order*—and I blurted out, "And the high point is *A Pattern Language*!" I realize this might seem self-serving, since I stepped off the Alexandrian train when "the language," was completed. But if self-serving, this positive feeling toward the book was hard-won: In the years after it came out, as Max and I launched our Bay Area practice, now JSW/D Architects, I felt a definite ambivalence toward the book.

It occurred to me that my reaction that evening might be an interesting topic to explore at the Portland gathering: Why does *A Pattern Language*—a book I've rarely picked up in the last twenty years and certainly haven't used in any methodical way in my professional life—look so good to me now? And why, in the sequence of Chris's work, does it still seem so singular?

In 1967, Chris and Sara were starting the Center for Environmental Structure and asked me to join them. From the outset, the Center, a non-profit work group independent of the University (where Chris was already a tenured-professor), defined its mission as the creation of a system of rules—we first called the pattern language "the urban rule system." We imagined an evolving system of rules that would form a share-able base of knowledge for designing at all levels of scale—from chairs, to buildings, to cities.

The early concept of a rule system soon gave way to the far more powerful idea of a language, a language made of recurring spatial relationships, which we called patterns. From 1967 to 1974, the Center grew into a small non-profit, taking on projects and research grants, all the while developing patterns, considering how they were connected, figuring out how to display the connections, and determining how such a language might be used by anyone who picked it up.

It was an exhilarating period. With each project we tried to create and use pattern languages, learning as we went, always trying to advance the concept as a whole. For an impoverished neighborhood in the Bronx, we created a language which "generated" community service centers (a building type that had emerged as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty). Camping one summer in Inverness, on the coast north of San Francisco, we hosted folks from the National Institute of Mental Health at a daily seminar on patterns, and defined good patterns as those which were required to resolve otherwise conflicted human needs. Responding to a United Nations invitation to design low-income housing in Peru, we developed the report, *Houses Generated by Patterns*. Invited to create an exhibit for the World's Fair in Osaka, Japan, we proposed a conceptual city of the future, a first draft of what became the "Towns" section of the book. Using auto seats stripped from abandoned cars, we designed an employee's lounge in a West Berkeley sleeping-bag factory, and wrote "Common Areas at the Heart." Working with an innovative public health administrator, we designed and saw built a county mental health center for a town in California's Central Valley. During this period we also completed what was perhaps the most significant project in terms of its impact on the evolving pattern language—the master plan for the University of Oregon campus in Eugene, published as, *The Oregon Experiment*.

Each project yielded unique patterns, and we began to see how this material could be generalized, made part of a language for an entire urban region. And with this framework in mind, we would step back from time to time, looking for "gaps," and this would lead to new patterns. Following our noses in this way, we stitched the whole thing together, "testing" it along the way, on friends, students, and clients.

It was a heady time in the U. S., and to be young, in Berkeley, and on a mission, was quite wonderful: all that

book; what happens when you pick it up, flip around in it, back and forth, scanning the photos, the pattern titles, the funny diagrams, the bold-faced text. It's been my experience that—without reference to the introductory material which now seems to me rather arduous—sympathetic readers begin to grasp the idea of a pattern intuitively; they see—and, indeed experience, as they're flipping back and forth—how the patterns are connected to one another, that they're a network and not a sequence. And, perhaps most important, readers quickly encounter confirmation of something they already know: some physical arrangements in the world—from kitchen window sills to downtowns—are better than others, more enjoyable to use, more enlivening, more full of feeling and meaning.

This kind of experience with an architecture book is unusual. And surprising: In the guise of an old-fashioned bookish book, *A Pattern Language* invites and rewards a meandering, non-linear, hyper-kinetic and very modern way of reading. This is due, I think, in part, to the visual structure of the book. The short pattern-chapters, each with its common form, induce, as you flip around, a kinesthetic pleasure. (Try it; it's like re-watching a favorite old black and white movie.) But it's also due to the content itself: "The Flow Through Rooms," "Sleeping to the East," "Access to Water," "Sheltering Roof," "Pools of Light"—the names of the patterns alone are engaging, and themselves unlock memories of past places ("Oh yeah, that reminds me of…"), and the names plus the headlines and diagrams inspire imaginative thinking ("Wouldn't it be great if…") about places yet to be.

In its tone, its prose style, the book is also unusual and intriguing. It's both serious *and* playful, authoritarian *and* tentative, open-ended. Somehow it's both a bible and a first rough draft. It makes its grand pronouncements ("…high buildings make people crazy"), but streaming through the book one feels the mind at play. There is a "child in the sandbox" quality to much of the bold-face prose, inviting readers to think about the big fixed things in their lives—buildings, streets, skylines—as if they can be casually and playfully, even joyfully, manipulated. This kind of intuitive engagement, with form and content, is rare and appealing, and is one of the reasons, I think, for the books success.

In addition—and I think we see this more clearly as time passes—the book captures (or, more accurately, was captured by) a cultural moment: the anti-corporate, participatory, left-wing communitarian spirit of the 1960s. And, in particular, the West Coast 1960s—a place where the culture, the social and economic order, felt so malleable. We were

naïve, of course, but that's in the nature of youthful visions. And, for all the jokes and the clichés about the Left Coast and the sixties, the social vision that emerged from this moment, a vision partially captured by the book, is still alive and urgent: how to make of the urban region a humane and sustainable place. Whatever else it is, *A Pattern Language* is a 20th century neo-romantic, community-anarchist structuralist vision for a human city.

That's its genre: "the heavenly city." And of this sort of thing, it's a classic: a sustained and poetic vision of an alternative world, brought forth, and gathering energy from its particular historical moment. It's a utopian vision that invites you to place a cushion in a seat by a window; a picture of diversity—the "Mosaic of Subcultures"—allied to create vital neighborhoods and neighborhood boundaries; a civic harmony alive with acceptable levels of messy human conflict. And in this, I would now say, we were the unconscious children of William Blake. It's rarely been noted (perhaps never, as I think about it) that this is a book which begins,

> O Rose, thou art sick.
> The invisible worm,
> That flies in the night,
> In the howling storm:
>
> Has found out thy bed
> Of crimson joy:
> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy.

What a strange way for an architecture book to begin! It's one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and appears in the section, "The Poetry of the Language," at the front of the book. It's used to illustrate the extreme compression poetry can bring to everyday language. The reader is encouraged to use the pattern language in a similar spirit, "compressing" many patterns into a single place; finding a poetry, so to speak, in even the most everyday of spaces.

Today, looking back on the book and its time, I read the poem differently: it's an opening salvo, a Blakean epigraph blazing across the sky over a sprawling, industrialized urban region, the kind of place whose order is being challenged by the book. When Blake wrote the great song cycle which includes, "The Sick Rose," he was living on the rural edge of London, watching the industrial revolution, in its early stages, transform centuries-old patterns of the English landscape into slums. The first major factory built in England, a flour mill powered by steam engines, was built a

short distance from Blake's home. He famously named such places the "dark Satanic mills," and in his late epic-length poems tells of mythical battles fought to birth a new place, a city of the imagination. No rest, says Blake, "…til we have built Jerusalem / in England's green & pleasant land." You can see how all this resonates with *A Pattern Language*. The healthy rose brought to ruin by the worm of modern architecture was right up our alley. What else were the processes that prevented organic adaptation but invisible worms that flew in the night? "Independent Regions," the book begins, the modern polis, with "City Country Fingers," "Agricultural Valleys," and "Communities of 7000." "Webs of Public Transportation," cohere in "Density Rings," creating the "Magic of a City," a city made of "South Facing Outdoors," a "Four-Story Limit," "Old People Everywhere," and "Accessible Greens." Such patterns, implying new Jerusalems across the land, were a ringing call to arms; a call to build a city with, not against, nature; and nature included human nature. In this way, *A Pattern Language* should be viewed, I think, as a part of the birth of modern environmentalism. The first Earth Day was celebrated about the same time we were finishing and beginning to circulate the first drafts of the book. And when *APL* finally came out, and drew high praise from Stewart Brand in his "Whole Earth Catalog," word spread quickly among environmentalists, and the book gained (and still enjoys) enthusiastic readers and advocates at the grassroots of the green movement.

Another quality which made for its popularity was what I would call the robustness of the work. It's a long, overflowing and messy narrative; equal parts academic, classical, romantic and analytic; parts of it are striking, parts silly. It's both obsessive and sloppy. It tilts you toward coherence but is a minefield strewn with little bombs of inconsistency and contradiction. Made by many hands, the language is like that "crooked timber of humanity," of which, says Kant, "no straight thing can be made." Chris was the master theoretician, of course, but the ideas at that time were open and relatively fluid. Patterns were considered "falsifiable hypotheses," in the spirit of Karl Popper, so some, of course, were bound to be wrong and in need of re-formulation. Which is to say, not all of us were required to love every pattern. And this was a strength. Variety and the freedom to be wrong are strengths in an open system. The deep generic patterns could only arise, we thought,—as in Popper's "open society"—out of such a mix. The essential robustness of the pattern idea, and our ambition for the scope, allowed the book to be open to ideas from a great many sources and traditions. Ecology, mathematics, literature, anthropology, the movies, all found their way into the language. And all six of us, along with the

many who passed through the Center during that period— including staff members Denny Abrams, Ron Walkey, and Christie Coffin, friends of the Center, Sim Van der Ryn, Sandy Hirshen and Rosalyn Lindheim, along with architects, engineers, carpenters—all poured their favorite material into the pattern language stew. And this made for a healthy ecology of thought; things and ideas could be "alive," that is to say, "correct," in different ways and to different degrees. Again, this is quite unusual in a book, and conveys something of a populist, Farmer's Almanac-type feeling. The pattern language was good for what ails ya'.

Along with the relentless logic of its IF/THEN reasoning, the book also contained more than a dash of mystery and ambiguity. There were conflicts between patterns and always would be. Sacred Places create parking problems. You can make things more coherent, but you cannot make it all cohere. Not at least in this world. In the review I mentioned above, Saunders notes, and I love this quote, "Both the intelligence and the foolishness of *A Pattern Language* are inseparable from its radical utopianism." It reminds me of that great American moment, toward the end of Whitman's long and equally messy, "Song of Myself," when he says, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. I contain multitudes."

Our aim was not reductive. We weren't looking for the short list of patterns, or patterns within patterns. Quite the opposite: we were trying to be expansive, inclusive, throwing in the kitchen sink. From "Ring Roads," to "Waist-High Shelves," one continuous fabric; from "Small Panes" to "Lace of Country Streets," paseos and half-wild gardens, thick walls, Zen views, ornament and Shaker pegs, and on and on. The discipline of the pattern idea, combined with the raggedy likable strangeness of the patterns themselves, made for a concoction that won over many readers. A woman I know, a practicing physician, entirely outside my architectural circles, realizing I was among its authors, said to me, "That book? I love it! I keep it by my bed—it's like a fairy tale for adults." In other words, among other things, *A Pattern Language* is a great yarn. It's the Moby Dick of architectural treatises, and wholeness, or alive-ness, is its white whale.

Let me illustrate some of this with a story from our practice. About fifteen years ago, Max and I crossed professional paths with a woman who had become a big fan of the book. Anita Olds was a pre-school educator and had started several landmark child-care centers. The book gave her a way of thinking, she told us, about human needs and buildings and space. She began a rigorous study of child-care environments,

noting patterns which worked, and after years of experiment and teaching and designing programs, she published, a guidebook of patterns for child-care centers. We teamed up with her to do a few projects, including an unusual center for the children of employees of a large corporation in Canada, a project that led, years later, after Anita had passed away, to our firm designing the Early Childhood Education Center for the University of California, Berkeley (with Barbara Winslow, the partner-in-charge). Built in 2006, ECEC is a few blocks away from the South Berkeley house in which we wrote the original patterns, in the early 1970s. In our design for the building, we were following Anita's patterns; patterns which had been triggered by her feeling for the original patterns. Our book enabled her book which enabled us to design. With patterns as our vocabulary, we had, in effect, developed a dialogue over many years, one that branched in many directions. (At Anita's "children and environments" summer program at Harvard, educators from across the country, studied child-care versions of "Light on Two Sides," "Alcoves" and "Window Place.") It's a case where the book went out in the world, was used, and eventually circled back to teach us, giving us new ways to imagine and to build.

There have been many encounters of this sort, inside and outside the practice. Last summer, my wife and I visited the Tofino Botanical Gardens, an astonishing place, a retreat center, with gardens, restaurant, staff housing, on the west side of Vancouver Island. The founder explained with delight how he'd used the book, at every step, to design and build. He'd bought copies, he told us, for every member of the town council, to support his presentations for development permits.

The patterns of *A Pattern Language*, it seems to me, have a power and utility quite different than anything else in Chris's oeuvre. And while I have enormous respect for the later work—*The Nature of Order* is certainly his masterpiece—it's less immediate and intuitively appealing to the common reader, and does not, I suggest, convey the sense of discovery and play, serious play, that readers find in *A Pattern Language*.

Finally, let me return to my sick rose. While we were writing the book, I recall, Allen Ginsberg had come to the Berkeley campus, and, before a large crowd on the central plaza, he sang-chanted, very, very slowly, *"O Rose thou art sick…."* He had learned something about chanting, he told us, from Gary Snyder studying Zen in Japan. And I remember thinking that he was using the form of the Buddhist chant to "contain" the demon, the worm-destroyer, that Blake had found at the heart of our Western ways. In a sense, I think we were trying to do the same. The pattern language may be seen as a long chant, to combat the forces that were undermining the culture and destroying our cities. Over the course of the seven years it took to birth the book, there was hardly a moment not marked by societal crisis. Summer after summer major cities were in flame. Berkeley itself, in the course of our work, had been tear-gassed by helicopters, occupied by the National Guard, and one man shot to death, all to stop citizens who had taken it upon themselves to build a small city park. *A Pattern Language* was made, at a transformational moment in our history, by a group of young men and women, led by Chris, pushing back against such forces. If, *O Rose thou art sick*, then, the pattern language said, "Sunny Counters!" "Web of Public Transportation!" If, *the invisible worm flies in the night*, then, "Half-Hidden Gardens," "Communal Eating," "Courtyards Which Live." And if, *his dark secret love does thy life destroy*, then, we said, "Children in the City," "Independent Regions," "Warm Colors" and "Things from Your Life."

Thank you.
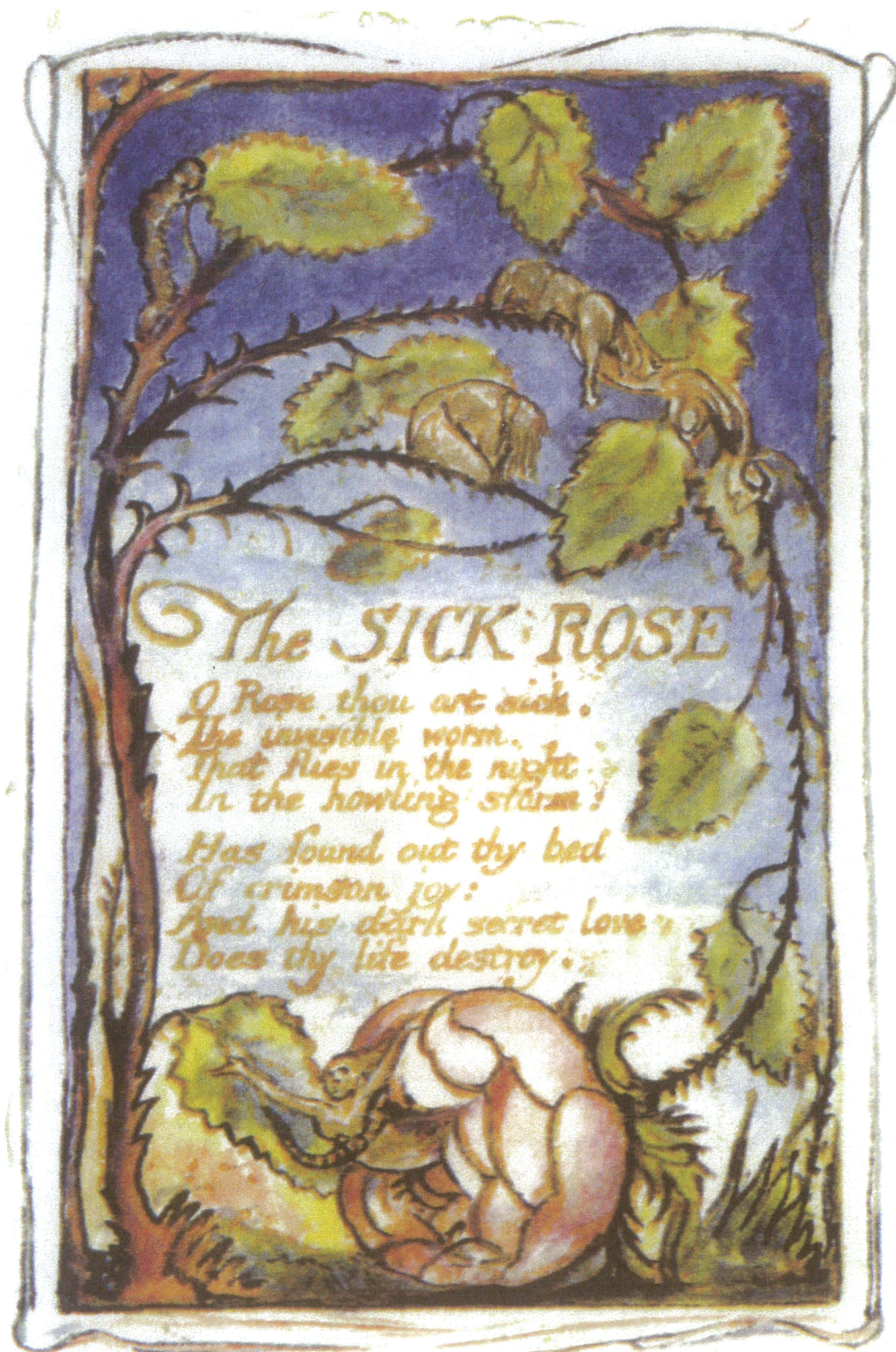
The SICK·ROSE

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