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978-0-521-12986-2 - Blake's Contrary States: The 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience' as Dramatic Poems

D. G. Gillham

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

MOST Blake studies are based on the assumption that the poet requires allowances to be made for his unusual manner of writing. The *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* most decidedly do not require a special critical technique, and this study is made according to the most conservative and orthodox principles. No attempt has been made to go far afield for material to assist the study of the *Songs*—quite the contrary. It has been assumed that Blake's intention may best be discovered by a patient reading of the poems themselves without forcing on to them assistance that only a specialized knowledge can give. The purpose of the following pages is to present the outcome of a reading of the *Songs* which assumes that they explain themselves if they are read together. Each poem must be read for its own sake, but it may most adequately be read by a mind that is informed by the remainder of the poems.

No period of history is very remote when seen through the eyes of a poet, and Blake is very much our contemporary because we are still attempting to come to terms with the rationalism that, by stimulating his antagonism, provoked his complex insight. Though we do not need the help of a special knowledge in order to understand the problems of our poet, reference is made, throughout this study, to thinkers of Blake's own time. This is not done on the supposition that the poetry can be explained in terms of influences that were brought to bear upon Blake, but in order to remind us of our own problems, and to throw into relief the qualities of Blake's peculiar genius in meeting those problems.

During the twentieth century a great deal has been written about Blake; most commentators have had something to say about the *Songs*, but for a number of reasons the commentaries on these short poems have been disappointing.

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Perhaps Blake is, himself, partly to blame for this. His 'Prophetic Books', by their obscure and involved construction, invite a ponderous and mysterious explanation, and the *Songs*, regarded as an adjunct of the 'Prophecies', are crushed beneath the weight of an exegesis they cannot bear. This is true even of Joseph Wicksteed's work<sup>1</sup> on the *Songs*, which sets out to make a restrained and unpretentious examination of the poems, which succeeds in making many valuable observations, but cannot sustain its moderation. Wicksteed falls often into sentimentality<sup>2</sup> and sometimes overloads the poems with 'symbolic' significances culled from his knowledge of the 'Prophetic Works'.

Since the publication of Wicksteed's book three others have appeared which concentrate their attention on Blake's earlier and shorter writings. Stanley Gardner insists, in his work, that 'We cannot find the key to the meaning of the early books by reading the final books'; we must 'interpret the symbolism in its interrelationship, each symbol in its context'.<sup>3</sup> This is a sensible approach, and Gardner's discussion of the *Songs of Experience* is particularly valuable. In R. F. Gleckner's work<sup>4</sup> the *Songs* are forced into a rigid framework of 'symbolic' meanings derived from the 'Prophecies', and the analysis distorts the poetry. In the most recent work, E. D. Hirsch discusses the two sets of songs on the assumption that they 'express two distinct outlooks that Blake in each case held with an unqualified vigor and fervor of belief'.<sup>5</sup> This assumption seems wrong, but the critical insights of the writer are good, especially in discussion of *The Songs of Innocence*.

The reader's attention is beckoned away from the *Songs* by Blake's eccentric manner of composing his poetry as well as by

<sup>1</sup> *Blake's Innocence and Experience* (1928).

<sup>2</sup> See D. W. Harding's remarks on Wicksteed in his fine essay: 'William Blake', *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, v (1957).

<sup>3</sup> *Infinity on the Anvil* (1954), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> *The Piper and the Bard* (Detroit, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> *Innocence and Experience* (New Haven, 1964), p. 7.

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the 'mythology' of the 'Prophetic Books'. In putting together his verse he was in the habit of using fragments ('odds and ends', as Eliot calls them) from his wide and unusual reading. Much careful research has gone into tracing the influence on Blake's verse of various philosophers,<sup>1</sup> of writers in the Hermetic tradition,<sup>2</sup> and of the tensions and events of his day.<sup>3</sup> For the reader of the *Songs*, however, the fruits of this research are not very helpful, and may even obscure the poetry by demanding a kind of attention that is not warranted. Blake so radically transformed the material he used, it became so very much subordinated to his own way of looking at things, that a knowledge of its origins usually seems irrelevant.

The complicated 'mythology' of Blake's later works and the idiosyncratic manner in which he chose to write them have both militated against the *Songs* receiving what they most need: a careful appreciation of their tone. Overwhelmed by the apparent need for a special exegetical apparatus, the reader is distracted from applying to the poems the sort of sensitivity that would be given poetry found in a less unusual setting. The *Songs* themselves are not idiosyncratic, but it is supposed that they should be, and the accepted tools of the reader are abandoned. Normally, we realize very soon whether a poet is speaking on his own behalf (through the mouth of an imagined character, perhaps) or is presenting us with a persona (with some character whom we cannot take as being the poet's direct representative). In lyrical poetry, it is true, we may very often take the sentiments offered as being the poet's very own, but this is not always so. In the *Songs* this decidedly cannot be the case, certainly not always—there is too marked a diversity in the attitudes presented.

<sup>1</sup> For example: Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Boston, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> For example: S. Foster Damon, *Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (Boston, 1924).

<sup>3</sup> For example: J. Bronowski, *William Blake, A Man Without a Mask* (1944); Mark Schorer, *William Blake* (New York, 1946); D. V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire* (Princeton, 1954).

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One would expect the reader of the *Songs*, on making this discovery, to take all the poems with some caution; to wonder, when reading every one of them, if Blake is speaking in his own voice, or if he is presenting a possible attitude for our inspection. The outcome of such an examination should be the realization that none of the *Songs* can be taken simply as a direct personal utterance. Innocence is not self-aware in a way that allows it to describe itself, and the poet must stand outside the state. From the mocking tone of many of the *Songs of Experience* it is clear that the poet does not suffer from the delusions he associates with that condition. Again, the poet stands beyond the state depicted. Blake, in short, is detached from the conditions of awareness imposed on the speakers of his poems.

Blake's critics do not follow the clue given by his tone, however, and, although the best commentaries all have glimpses of the detachment, the insight is sporadic and soon set aside. The poet is identified with one selection from the *Songs* or another, or, in an attempt to make them all emanate from the poet, it is stated that we may take the *Songs of Innocence* to belong to an earlier and hopeful period while the *Songs of Experience* belong to a later condition of disillusionment. The critics have been determined that Blake should commit himself in some part of the *Songs*, and this determination is understandable. The poems are obviously the work of a thinker, and this thinker identifies himself, sometimes, with the prophet, which suggests that he might wish to lay down some definite guide to conduct. The philosopher and the prophet are usually men with a message, are men with formed and finalized ideas, and the poet appears to resemble them, particularly a poet with the decided manner of speaking shown by Blake. Wicksteed, for example, will sometimes find Blake's commitment in such songs as 'London' or 'The Garden of Love', which show natural human propensities being smothered by institution. But Blake is too good a thinker to be putting forward the Godwinian idea as an

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explanation of man, though he does put it forward as being indicative of one of the shoals on which the human vessel may run itself aground. The idea may chart a point in Blake's psychology but it does not define his 'philosophy'. In 'London' Blake does not express his despair of the human condition, but depicts a condition of despair, not necessarily his own. All the songs depict 'states of the soul', as the title-page tells us, and Blake's own voice is detected in the purpose that governs the assembly of the *Songs* rather than in any particular utterance.

Blake has no message, or 'philosophy', and would not be more worth reading as a poet if he had. He offers something better: a serious and responsible consideration of the ways in which human energy may manifest itself. In the course of his study he touches on various ideas of the nature of man, but not because he regards any of them as absolutely true, as saying the last word on what we are. His concern is a moral one and he makes (or implies) a judgement of the positions he describes, though he does not dispute their truth. Any -ism is true for the person who believes it to be so, though it does not follow that all such truths may be said to reflect a decent condition of the mind. They are to be judged according to the fullness of the life that (it may be inferred) supports them. Although he refers us to various dogmas in his description of the states, Blake subscribes to no one of them, he presents no ultimate truths but leaves us to forge our own. He does attempt to awaken us to the responsibility of becoming alive to the best truths of which we are capable, but the poet detaches himself from the task of saying what those truths should be.

There was a strong tendency during the eighteenth century to view man simply as the outcome of education and conditioning. He was seen as an intelligent animal, but the intelligence itself was conceived as a calculating faculty, enabling him to make use of his experience to civilize himself. There were no fundamental impulses in the individual that could properly be called moral, but men could estimate that it

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would serve them well to behave according to an accepted morality. In the course of the *Songs of Experience* Blake often presents us with this conception of human nature, and implies that it may appear true to those who have lost their benign impulses. They need control from without and the restraint of self-interested conformity if they are to behave well. In the *Songs of Innocence*, however, Blake presents us with beings who cannot be accounted for on this explanation. These songs do not present us with persons equipped with premeditated or formulated moral notions, it is true, but we are shown individuals with affectionate and sympathetic impulses that dispose them to benign forms of conduct.

In *The Songs of Experience* Blake allows some of his characters to affirm the values and theories of rationalism, but he emphasizes that these are valid for the mind working in a superficial way only, and he describes the alternative mentality of Innocence. This alternative is not put forward as an original character or as a stage in the development of man, but as a condition of perfection, a completeness and harmony of being. Because we usually recognize this in children, we associate it with ignorance—the child shows its simple faith and wholehearted vitality because it knows so little, has not entered into the cares of a more responsible time of life. Blake is not setting up an ideal of childishness, however, and his Innocents are not all children. All men have their innocent moments, though what constitutes an innocent poise at one time of life will not be proper at another, and what will indicate perfection of balance for one person will not do so for some other. What is important is that we have known the perfection of Innocence, and though we can no more induce a state of perfection in ourselves than we can return to childhood, we are provided, by this knowledge, with a measure of the success of our more deliberate activities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Blake explores the distinction between different qualities of experience. A similar distinction is examined, philosophically, in our own time by such writers as Martin Buber (*I and Thou*, 1937) and Martin Foss (*Symbol and Metaphor in Human Experience*, 1949).

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The measure is an inarticulate one, is an intuition of the sort of thing we can hope for and not a programme we can follow, but it does provide us with a more fundamental and constant guide than convention or rational argument can offer. One convention can drive out another and arguments are subject to endless amendment, but as they pass into the mind they come under the control of a being who has known affection, sympathy, fascination and delight, and who, therefore, has a touchstone (a sort of conscience) which, without our being able to give a detailed and explicit account of what it is, directs our more articulate and deliberate impulses. By introducing us, in the *Songs*, to the concept of Innocence Blake shows a dimension of the mind which the eighteenth century chose to ignore because there was no formula for it.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE POET AS SOCIAL CRITIC

BLAKE'S 'London', one of the *Songs of Experience*, was written in the early 1790s, but expresses a state of mind that may easily be recognized in our own time. The poem presents us with a series of allusions to regulation, law and institution, set against the distressed cries of individuals. The speaker is kept at a curious distance from those who surround him in the streets, encountering them as marks, faces, cries and voices. All takes place at a level of signs, signs that others carry the same feeling of forlorn incapacity as himself, though he has no intimate knowledge of their weakness or woe. It is a poem of façades, solid ones in the third stanza, and no less impenetrable human façades in the rest of the poem.

#### LONDON

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every black'ning Church appalls;  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot's curse  
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.



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The highly personal and interpretative cast of the meditation of the man who wanders through the streets of the city is emphasized by the superficial nature of the encounters he makes. There is a vague bustle in the poem interrupted by the calls of tradesmen, of the sweeper, by the bawl of a child. The speaker idly picks up these sounds but they have a subjective meaning upon which he ruminates until a new sight or a new sound breaks in to add itself to his impressions. He hardly notices the persons about him. They are not seen, but 'marked'. What the faces reveal are: 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe'—the speaker finds what he expected, but the emotions are not shared or felt, though they might be a replica of the speaker's own. The evidence of emotion is noted but nothing further can be glimpsed, and no closer knowledge is desired or attempted. The repetitions and alliterations of the first two stanzas stress the indwelling melancholy of the speaker. But though he is used to this condition and regards it as inevitable, he is not so accustomed that he is indifferent. There is no resignation, particularly in the last two stanzas where the words used are bitter: 'black'ning', 'blood', 'curse', 'blasts', 'blights' and 'hearse'.

The thoughts of this lonely monad centre chiefly about the 'pre-established harmony' that keeps in order the strangers who inhabit the city. The first line of the poem contrasts the aimlessness of the individual with the organization that surrounds him: 'I wander thro' each charter'd street'. He has no direction of his own but is led along ways that are obligatory. In the city, order is imposed by institutions. The Law, the Church, the State, the family are all mentioned in the poem, and even the streets are presented, in the first stanza, in their institutional aspect. Against the background of this organization the individual wanders, his life so regimented that it has lost its own purpose and he is helpless and insignificant. Man appears to be in control of the city he has made. The streets have been 'charter'd', permitted to be just so, but, in fact, the orderly arrangement of streets which

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seems the result of planning and directing is the outcome of accretion. The streets of London are like all the institutions of man. There appears to be a deliberate control over their development, but they display an independent life of their own, growing up next to the men, or despite the men who must 'direct' them. The word 'charter'd', implying freedom, is ironical, and the irony is pointed by its application to the Thames. The river is given a mandate to flow within such and such bounds, but the act of will apparently exerted over the river is, in reality, an acceptance of its inevitable presence.

The cries of men and infants that break into the silence of the reverie are the abrupt utterances of beings suffering under the controls that man has imposed upon himself:

In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

Man is isolated, has no sensitive knowledge of the feelings of others, and must control his relationships by means of the 'thou shalt nots' of formally and informally imposed prohibitions. Law, regulation and code direct the commerce of the men who impinge upon each other and the inhabitants of the city are in the position of a man who has never learned to walk because he has always used a crutch. They cannot love because they have never had an opportunity to exercise love in a world of perfected institutions. For love to grow it must have an opportunity to exercise resource; it must make its own decisions.

Man has built himself an amazingly elaborate prison by the use of his mind. Too faithless or too clever to rely on the impulse of the moment, he has evolved a system of controls that manage every part of life. But these controls *are* the mind. The wanderer refers directly to no spontaneous impulse that might be an alternative to restraint. He regards the manacles as inescapable, an iron law of our condition. They are 'mind-forg'd', the result of intelligence and industry and not of stupidity and laziness. The cruelty of our