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978-0-521-27198-1 - Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's

Lyrical Ballads

Heather Glen

Excerpt

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Introduction

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* were written within ten years of each other by poets who, at the time of writing, almost certainly did not know of one another's existence. Yet, as one of Blake's earliest editors pointed out,¹ there are some remarkable similarities between the two collections. Both deal with the same kinds of subject matter – childhood, rural life, the poor and outcast of society. Both consist of apparently simple poems, much 'simpler' than most other serious poetry of their day. But each seems to have been regarded by its author as much more important than its form might at first suggest. Blake reissued the *Songs* in hand-coloured copies until the end of his life, changing their order and moving some poems from *Innocence* to *Experience* and back again. There are surviving drafts for only four of the *Songs of Innocence*, and these are probably fair copies; but the notebook drafts of *Songs of Experience* show how carefully he considered and revised them. Wordsworth made more explicit claims for *Lyrical Ballads*, both in the Advertisement to the 1798 volume and in the Preface to that of 1800; and like Blake he seems to have conceived of each collection not as a group of disparate pieces but as a unified whole. Both clearly saw these poems as significant works of art.

This judgment is one in which twentieth-century critics have concurred. But to their original readers, both collections were rather more puzzling. Contemporary reaction seems, in each case, to have been polarized between glowing admiration and unqualified rejection – between the declaration that these poems are works of original genius and a refusal to see them as other than ludicrous failures. Blake was not widely read, but such criticism of the *Songs* as survives from the early years of the nineteenth century suggests very much this pattern of response. On the one hand, there are the few recorded comments of Crabb Robinson's friends, such as Hazlitt – 'They are beautiful . . . & only too deep for the vulgar . . .'² – and Landon: 'A good deal of rattling on the part of W.S.L.: he maintnd. Blake to be the greatest of poets.'³ On the other, there are the earliest published criticisms, in reviews of Benjamin Heath Malkin's *A Father's Memoirs of His Child* (1806):

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He is celebrated both as an artist and as a poet; but so little judgment is shown, in our opinion, with regard to the proofs of these talents, that we much doubt whether the encomium will be at all useful to the person praised . . . As a poet, he seems chiefly inspired by that,

– Nurse of the didactic muse,
Divine Nonsensia. – ⁴

if Watts seldom rose above the level of a mere versifier, in what class must we place Mr. Blake, who is certainly very inferior to Dr. Watts?⁵

The poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, of course, were better known, and received more considered commentary. But their initial reception was equally mixed, ranging from Francis Wrangham's favourable review in the *British Critic* – 'The endeavour of the author is to recall our poetry from the fantastical excess of refinement, to simplicity and nature . . . we think that in general the author has succeeded in attaining that judicious degree of simplicity, which accomodates [*sic*] itself with ease even to the sublime'⁶ – to Dr Burney's attack in the *Monthly Review*: 'Though we have been extremely entertained with the fancy, the facility, and (in general) the sentiments, of these pieces, we cannot regard them as *poetry*, of a class to be cultivated at the expense of a higher species of versification.'⁷ It seems clear that contemporary readers were sharply divided, not merely as to the valuation to be placed on these poems, but as to whether to 'regard them as *poetry*' at all.

This divergence of critical opinion is one of the most interesting points of comparison between the two collections. Their similarities of form and subject-matter are, on one level, less surprising. There was in the late eighteenth century a fashion for 'simple' verse, and for verse on the victims of society and the objects of nature: that fashion, as Hazlitt noted in 1825, was intimately related to the complex social and political developments of the time.⁸ Yet to explain both collections thus is to flatten out precisely that which is most challenging about them. It does not begin to account for the differences between them – differences at least as striking as the similarities. And it does not explain why, if readers were beginning to be accustomed to 'simple' poems about 'humble' figures, they should have been so disconcerted by and divided about these.

What did contemporary readers expect? Other 'simple' poems on similar subjects seem to have provoked nothing like the critical dissent that Blake's *Songs* and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* did. Cowper's poems were received with almost unqualified approval by the reviewers and were immediately and lastingly popular with the

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reading public:⁹ nearly forty years after their first publication, Hazlitt was to quote 'an exquisite piece of eloquence and poetry' from them:

Yon cottager, who weaves at her own door,
Pillow and bobbins all her little store;
Content, though mean; and cheerful, if not gay;
Shuffling her threads about the live-long day,
Just earns a scanty pittance; and at night
Lies down secure, her heart and pocket light:
She, for her humble sphere by nature fit,
Has little understanding, and no wit,
Receives no praise; but though her lot be such,
(Toilsome and indigent) she renders much;
Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true –
A truth the brilliant Frenchman never knew;
And in that charter reads, with sparkling eyes,
Her title to a treasure in the skies.
Oh, happy peasant! Oh, unhappy bard!
His the mere tinsel, her's the rich reward;
He prais'd, perhaps, for ages yet to come;
She never heard of half a mile from home;
He, lost in errors his vain heart prefers;
She, safe in the simplicity of her's.¹⁰

No poem is simply a barometer of contemporary norms. But this one *was* readily accepted by late eighteenth-century readers, and it is illuminating to consider its difference from Blake's and Wordsworth's apparently much more controversial dealings with comparable subject matter.

The differences do not seem to be centrally those of ideological stance. Cowper is fairly conservative: his 'happy peasant' is, of course, sentimentalized, and her 'humble' place is seen as ordained by 'nature'. But he does attempt to portray some actual details of her life and to suggest the challenge she offers to the values of the polite world: 'understanding' and 'wit' are being given a serious, if rather heavy-handed, ironic redefinition. Beside this 'realistic' late eighteenth-century version of pastoral, Blake's 'The Shepherd' might well at first seem trivial:

How sweet is the Shepherds sweet lot,
From the morn to the evening he strays:
He shall follow his sheep all the day
And his tongue shall be filled with praise:

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For he hears the lambs innocent call.
 And he hears the ewes tender reply.
 He is watchful while they are in peace,
 For they know when their Shepherd is nigh.

Cowper's readers would have been in no doubt as to the point he was making: his responses and evaluations – 'Oh, happy peasant!'; 'his vain heart' – are prominent throughout. But here, Blake is notably absent. Beyond the tautological first line, he offers no reflection on his Shepherd's life at all.

A contemporary reader might well have slid over this difficulty, simply by reading the customary moral lesson *into* the poem. Indeed, 'The Shepherd' seems to court such conventionalization. It opens with a pastoral celebration which might have been expected to lead to a catalogue of the virtues of the Shepherd's way of life:

How sweet is the Shepherds sweet lot,
 From the morn to the evening he strays . . .

But this implicit promise is not fulfilled. Instead, the stanza is closed off by the prescriptive future tense of the following lines, whose suggestion is Biblical rather than pastoral:

He shall follow his sheep all the day
 And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

Against the natural freedom of 'strays' Blake is counterpointing a sense of a more ordered and contained joy: a sense which informs the second stanza. Here, the 'tongue' that is 'filled with praise' is echoed in a world of chiming voices, which 'call' and 'reply'. Yet simple as the stanza seems, it is far from simply conceived. In the first two lines, the Shepherd merely 'hears' the voices of his flock: in the last he plays his own active part. As in the first stanza, suggestions of spontaneity and restraint are intermingled rather than simply juxtaposed. The verse presents a harmonious balance between freedom and acceptance: a balance maintained by the use of an adjectival ('He is watchful') rather than active verb form to describe the Shepherd's employment; and by the way in which, within the Biblical cadence of 'He shall follow his sheep all the day' (suggesting a larger order within which human actions are contained), the Shepherd is portrayed not in his Biblical capacity as guide, but as a follower of his sheep. If 'The Shepherd' offers none of the evaluative pointers that contemporary readers might have expected, it is, in its own way, very carefully structured: far more carefully, indeed, than

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Cowper's poem, where the slack couplets and easy rhymes give the impression that they could be indefinitely prolonged.

Yet it is structured in a way which would have been subtly disconcerting to the late eighteenth-century reader. It is not simply that it presents a vision at odds with what he would expect (the Shepherd *following* his sheep, the traditional pastoral *opposition* between spontaneity and restraint made to seem irrelevant); it refuses to engage with him in the expected way. Cowper's moralistic purpose is clear, but Blake offers a vision that could not without distortion be assimilated to a moral lesson at all – a vision of a self-sufficient, reciprocally satisfying way of life in which expressive freedom and ordered security are held in perfect balance. Where readers accustomed to poems such as Cowper's would have expected the poet's controlling voice to direct their attitudes to the material presented, here there is no obvious controlling voice and no such direction.

We are perhaps beginning to approach some explanation for the curiously mixed critical reception of Blake's *Songs*. We are also, I think, beginning to approach their really significant point of comparison with *Lyrical Ballads* – though at first sight this poem from the 1798 volume may seem closer to Cowper than to Blake:

Old Man Travelling;

Animal Tranquillity and Decay,

A Sketch

The little hedge-row birds,
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought – He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect, that the young behold
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.
– I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied
'Sir! I am going many miles to take

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'A last leave of my son, a mariner,
 'Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
 'And there is dying in an hospital.'

Like Cowper, Wordsworth seems, at least in the opening section of his poem, to be trying to draw an edifying lesson from the rustic subject he presents. His contemporary readers certainly tried – with some perplexity – to do so.¹¹ Yet the poem as a whole (reproduced here in its original 1798 version) is more 'awkward'¹² and more resistant to conventional moral interpretations than might at first appear. The reader is not, as in Cowper's poem, presented with a series of definite judgments. At first, the old man is enigmatically opaque, a 'figure' whose feelings must be inferred rather than assumed:

... every limb
 His look and bending figure, all *bespeak*
 A man who does not move with pain, but moves
 With thought.

[my italics]

But the lines which follow dramatize a meditation which gradually, insidiously, transmutes this intractable other into an image – like that of Cowper's old woman – undisturbingly attractive to the polite observer: an image of a perfect peace beyond the reach of pain. It is a meditation which is abruptly terminated by another voice: that of the old man himself, baldly stating the purpose of his journey. An image of peace, of natural 'animal tranquillity and decay' is suddenly replaced by an account of a life cut violently, unnaturally short.¹³ And on this the polite speaker offers no reflection at all.

Readers expecting easy reflections on the virtues and blessings of humble life might well have had reason to be disconcerted by this poem. The scores of late eighteenth-century poets who concerned themselves with 'the poor' tended, like Cowper, to assume without question that they could know and evaluate their subjects' thoughts and feelings, even thoughts and feelings which those subjects might not have been able to articulate to themselves. But here Wordsworth explores that assumption in the process of its development – and offers the direct statement of the old man himself as an ironic comment upon it. And in doing so he suggests something of the shock with which the otherness of even the least articulate can assert itself. This old man is not an edifying object: he is a separate individual, with his own voice and history and point of view. The

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'peace' which he has been supposed to represent is simply a product of the mind of the observer: *his* feelings remain mysterious. Far from offering a confident meditation upon him, the poem dramatically questions the whole habit of depicting others as objects of meditation at all.

And it does so not argumentatively, but poetically. Contemporary readers would have understood – though they might have disagreed with – a message: 'it is wrong to try to reduce others to one's own frame of reference'. But Wordsworth offers no such message: he simply presents an experience of unresolved confrontation. And in thus refusing to assume what eighteenth-century readers would most fundamentally have expected – the central controlling viewpoint which would direct their responses and draw general conclusions – his whole poem questions the validity of such a viewpoint. In this it is very much closer to 'The Shepherd' than it is to Cowper's lines.

The similarity is not one of subject-matter, or even of attitude to that subject-matter. It lies, rather, in the kind of challenge that each of these poems seems to have offered to readers implicitly expecting verses like Cowper's – and trying, as much early criticism suggests, to assimilate these to familiar patterns. It is here that one can begin to trace the real originality of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and of *Lyrical Ballads*. Neither collection simply gives expression to a new way of feeling. Each actively refuses to confirm some of its readers' most basic expectations, expectations which those readers almost certainly would not have articulated even to themselves. And that refusal constitutes a fundamental poetic questioning of some of the most deep-rooted of polite eighteenth-century assumptions.

For the inarticulate expectations which a reader brings to a poem are not peculiar to a specifically literary context. They are more pervasive than this: indications of his whole mode of being in and making sense of the world, pointers to the way in which he structures all his experience, not merely literary experience. They may well come to be so taken for granted, so unconscious, that no other way of conceiving of or ordering experience seems possible. They can hardly be challenged merely on the level of argument: to change them requires an imaginative revolution. And this seems to have been what Blake and Wordsworth, each in a very different way, were attempting in these collections. The implications of the attempt extend, as we shall see, beyond the merely literary.

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1 Poetic 'Simplicity': Blake's *Songs* and Eighteenth-Century Children's Verse

Those who are offended with any thing in this book would be offended with the innocence of a child & for the same reason, because it reproaches him with the errors of acquired folly.

(Blake, annotations to Lavater, K87)

In one sense, neither *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* nor *Lyrical Ballads* are 'experimental' collections at all. In their earlier writings, both Blake and Wordsworth *had* experimented widely with contemporary literary forms – ranging in the one case from the Ossianic prose of some of the *Poetical Sketches* to the sharp satire of *An Island in the Moon*, in the other from the meditative-descriptive verse of *An Evening Walk* to the Gothic melodrama of parts of *The Borderers*. Yet in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *Lyrical Ballads* each turned away from such experiments towards what had hitherto been a minor and not very ambitious genre. In presentation and subject-matter, Blake's *Songs* are closer to late eighteenth-century children's verse than to anything else in the period,¹ while the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* most closely resemble those which were appearing in popular middle-class magazines. The two genres are very different, but there are some significant similarities between them.

Each was enjoying a boom at the end of the eighteenth century. The readers of the magazines had a seemingly limitless appetite for poetry:² children's books were the most rapidly expanding branch of publishing.³ Each was addressed to a fast-growing polite middle-class reading public. And each bore a clear relation to a much less polite cultural tradition. Indeed, children's books had originally been produced by the Puritans in an attempt to counteract what they saw as the pernicious influence of popular chap-books. Throughout the history of eighteenth-century children's publishing one can trace the pressure of that competition: material from chap-books – especially nursery rhymes and riddles – is often to be found enlivening the more expensively produced little books of the polite publishing firms. In a similar way, popular ballads – usually conventionalized to suit contemporary taste – appear alongside modern imitations in the

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poetry pages of the magazines. Children's books and magazine verse were not, however, necessarily backward-looking in spirit: in fact, both were increasingly used for the expression of 'progressive' ideas. As J. H. Plumb suggests, the parent who bought books for his children was likely to be liberal in his views:

This gentle and more sensitive approach to children was but part of a wider change in social attitudes; a part of that belief that nature was inherently good, not evil, and what evil there was derived from man and his institutions; an attitude which was also reflected among a growing elite in a greater sensitivity towards women, slaves and animals.⁴

Late eighteenth-century children's books contain poems and stories on such subjects as the distresses of poverty, the evils of the slave trade and the need for kindness to animals: most seek to inculcate a mildly progressive humanitarianism. And magazine verse addressed to adult readers could be much more subversive. Sometimes it traced social evils to their causes in a way which provoked alarmed reaction from the Establishment: if the proportion of such poems was small, the fact that the *Anti-Jacobin* found it necessary to parody them so extensively suggests that it was significant. But despite their sometimes innovatory subject-matter, neither magazine verse nor children's poetry were exciting literary forms. Why did Blake and Wordsworth each choose to turn to them? Did they, in doing so, hope to regain some of the vitality of the popular chap-books and ballads? Or does their choice suggest a rather more sophisticated interest in the expectations of the polite readers to whom such books were addressed?

In 1789–90, when *Songs of Innocence* was engraved, the children's book trade was a flourishing one. John Newbery, the most prolific of eighteenth-century children's publishers, had produced over two hundred titles between 1745 and 1770 – and thereby made a fortune.⁵ It was a trade which Blake seems to have known well.⁶ Not only do the Songs offer internal evidence of his familiarity with eighteenth-century verse for children: in the period between 1780 and 1791 the radical publisher Joseph Johnson commissioned him three times to engrave illustrations for children's books – books which in these years were beginning to be more and more attractively produced. It seems clear that *Songs of Innocence*, with its colourful designs and its introductory promise that 'Every child may joy to hear', was aimed at a known (and growing) market of parents from the polite classes.

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I say parents rather than children, for the formally published children's books, priced at two shillings and sixpence or more, could hardly have been bought by children. *Songs of Innocence* itself cost five shillings.⁷ As Plumb points out: 'Children do not buy books, adults do . . . So the new children's literature was designed to attract adults, to project an image of those virtues which parents wished to inculcate in their offspring, as well as to beguile the child.'⁸ And, as we know from the reminiscences of such readers as Holcroft and Coleridge, who were boys in the 1780s, the books children *chose* were the penny chap-books, with their sensational stories and doggerel rhymes and riddles, rather than refined collections of verse. But refined collections there were, in plenty. Some were simply reading-exercises, teaching spelling and pronunciation in words of one syllable; sometimes, as in this early (1712) example, by the careful use of half-rhyme:

Hear you a lark?
Tell me what clerk
Can match her! He that beats
The next thorn bush,
May raise a thrush
Would put down all our waits.⁹

Perhaps the childish monosyllables and half-rhymes of Blake's 'Spring' were originally intended to offer similar practice in reading and pronunciation:

Little Lamb,
Here I am;
Come and lick
My white neck;
Let me pull
Your soft Wool;
Let me kiss
Your soft face:
Merrily, Merrily, we welcome in the Year.

But a large amount of verse for children was more substantial in content. The earliest and most attractive of such collections was Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls*, first published in 1686 and republished (after 1724 with the title *Divine Emblems*) until well into the Victorian period: a volume which illustrates very clearly that ambivalence of aim which was to inform books for children throughout the eighteenth century. Its effort to compete with the