

Blake and Unappreciated Vision

Gregory Hutchinson

Introduction: The critic F.R. Leavis wrote that poetry mattered because of the kind of people who excelled in it: people who were fully alive in their age (2).⁽¹⁾ Leavis couldn't have meant that great poets were social reformers, since most of the poets (and novelists too) on Leavis's short list simply weren't. But a really remarkable grasp of the social realities of one's age—the ability to recognize them as clearly as historians from the distant future—is surely one way of being alive in that age; and it is rare enough in poets to be worth noting.

A remarkable example of this ability is the poet William Blake, who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Much has been made of Blake's originality of "vision." It is no secret that Blake had literal visions,⁽²⁾ and he attributed visions to "the Bard" ("Who Present, Past, & Future sees," 177). In this paper, I will try to show how Blake's originality of technique went with not just an originality of "vision" in the greater sense, but a remarkably clear understanding of the social problems of his age. Part I will briefly review the poetic climate that surrounded Blake, to suggest how Blake was doing something new. Part II will show how Blake used his new technique to reveal specific problems of his time that others tended to overlook.

Part I: To appreciate the kind of poetry Blake was already writing

in the eighteenth century, it is necessary to review, very briefly, what was being written in most of the eighteenth century by the major poets: satire on the one side and what would later be termed pre-Romantic poetry on the other. The satire happens to be far more important, mainly because it was the province of Alexander Pope, who was the great poet of the age—and perhaps one of the four or five greatest English poets of any age.⁽³⁾ Pope's predominant verse form, the heroic couplet, was inherited from the Restoration poet John Dryden, and for the remainder of the eighteenth century it was regarded as the ideal verse form.

The qualities that Pope offers can be seen, in microcosm, in his little-known reply to the critic Dennis, whose idea of legitimate controversy included comments on Pope's deformity (he was a hunchback due to childhood tuberculosis of the spine)—thus, incidentally, reminding us how savage the Europe of the recent past was. Here is Pope's poised and perfect answer:

Should Dennis print how once you robb'd your Brother,
Traduced your Monarch, and debauch'd your Mother;
Say what revenge on Dennis can be had;
Too dull for laughter, for reply too mad?
Of one so poor you cannot take the law;
On one so old your sword you scorn to draw.
Uncag'd then let the harmless Monster rage,
Secure in dullness, madness, want, and age. (328)

Dennis's crazy claims are summed up in one couplet: that Pope robbed his brother, slandered his king, and had unnatural relations with his

mother. Pondering aloud what revenge can be taken on such a person, Pope pretends to dismiss the idea for four reasons: Dennis is too dull to insult with humor, too crazy to defeat with reason, too poor to sue, and too old to physically attack. Therefore, he decides to leave the "harmless Monster" to his own devices.

The key word is "secure," which cuts two ways. Dennis is safe from attack, and the world at large is safe from Dennis's inventions. This gives Pope the chance to boil Dennis's inadequacies down to four words and repeat them: "dullness, madness, want, and age." The repetition is like a checklist ensuring both Dennis's security and the public's security from Dennis. The joke, of course, is that this poem is Pope's revenge. It is shorter and more readable than Dennis's diatribe, and Pope manages to tally Dennis's weak points twice while pretending, facetiously, to dismiss any reply as futile.

This minor piece is a gem in the way it showcases Pope's virtues. It is a triumph of elegance and civility, yet it is devastating in its effect. The iambic couplets proceed like a syllogism to the conclusion that Dennis isn't worth a moment's consideration, while actually bestowing more time on Dennis than the old critic could bear. No other form would have been as effective as the heroic couplet, and no other poet (with the arguable exception of Dryden) could have handled this dismissal as well. When we read the greater works of Pope such as "An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot" and *The Dunciad* (or at least the first three books), we see much more elaborate variations on these virtues, but the sense of them is the same: they demonstrate how emotion can be channeled and reinforced by reason, with the end-stopped iambic pentameter (the heroic couplets) reinforcing the sense of reasonable and witty progression.

The drawback to this kind of poetry—almost hidden by Pope's unique genius—would be that it was social and rational to the exclusion of certain spontaneous emotions that we associate with Romanticism. Furthermore, Pope's personal life is mostly forgotten today, which diminishes its interest.

As for the pre-Romantics, suffice it to say that they tried to express the emotions that Pope's topically-based poems tended to ignore. If we include Thomas Gray with this group, there can be no doubt that they produced some memorable poetry. But even taking Gray's one great poem (by common consensus), we see where the pre-Romantics fell short. Here are two lines from "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," describing one of the deprivations of the humble people buried in the churchyard:

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll. (Gray, 75)

The periphrastic nature of these lines is not, perhaps, calculated to touch the deepest emotions, though they are certainly noble lines. A great high school teacher I had (later a Professor of English at Michigan State University) once commented that if we boil these lines down, what they say is that the forgotten inhabitants of these graves "were stupid." This comment was funny and had a point, but actually, it wasn't quite accurate. If we must reduce the statement in this way, we could say that the poor folk were illiterate, which is a very different thing. Obviously, under different circumstances most of us would be illiterate too. The point, though, is that Gray's scholarly apparatus is ill-calculated to produce what, in retrospect, we could call a truly

"Romantic" poem. The lines are too dignified and Latinate to seem quite spontaneous.

The breakthrough that the literary world soon became conscious of was Wordsworth and Coleridge's collection *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798. The ballad was a verse-form that hadn't been used for anything but songs in three hundred years. Along came Wordsworth, with his ballads (and ballad-equivalents) and Coleridge, with his long and timeless ballad "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," and the feat of evoking spontaneous emotions and the spirit of the dawning century (which, broadly, we might call "Romantic") was realized.⁽⁴⁾ The key to expressing these more primal emotions, it was demonstrated, was simplicity: a simpler language ("the real language of men," as Wordsworth called it [Wordsworth, Preface, 56]) and simpler forms—the forms that had been consigned to songs and the ballads of England's past. To take one short but perfect example, there is Wordsworth's poem on the dead Lucy, which is actually written in ballad stanza⁽⁵⁾:

A slumber did my spirit seal
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees. (328)

The difference between this and the typical offering of Pope is too obvious to need explanation. But its advantage over the pre-Romantic poems of Gray, Thompson, and the others is easily explained. The statements are of ballad-like simplicity and free from learned circumlocutions. They could not be more straightforward. The meaning and emotion derive partly from the progression from the first stanza (where the narrator's "spirit" is in a "slumber" because he "*had* no human fears," and Lucy "*seemed* a thing that could not feel/The touch of earthly years" [italics mine throughout]) to the second, where the poet is awakened into human regrets, and the dead girl really cannot "*feel* the touch of earthly years," because she is part of the earth and its cycles. But the key to the power of this poem is in its simplicity of diction. Even the apparent redundancy of "rocks and stones"⁽⁶⁾ helps to evoke the redundant cycles that the narrator is forced to accept.

It is hardly a secret in the twenty-first century that many of William Blake's poems are also written in the form of ballads, or their equivalents in simplicity, and on a similar principle, as the selections in the next section will show. As for how very early Blake wrote these poems, the volume *Songs of Innocence* was printed in 1789, almost ten years before *Lyrical Ballads*; and the combined volume *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was printed four years before *Lyrical Ballads*. (Ostriker, 12). Yet Blake remained unknown to poets, critics, and readers (with a few insignificant exceptions) until after his death, well into the nineteenth century.

Part II: A reader who started his investigation of Blake's work with *Songs of Innocence*, and no clue about his greatness and depth, would probably underestimate the first poem, entitled "Introduction" because

it serves as a preface to the other *Songs of Innocence*.⁽⁷⁾ As with so many of the songs, it is written in a manner so simple and unpretentious that it might remind the reader more of a nursery rhyme than a ballad⁽⁸⁾:

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me,

Pipe a song about a Lamb;
So I piped with merry cheer.
Piper, pipe that song again—
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy cheer.
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear

Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book, that all may read—
So he vanish'd from my sight.
And I plucked a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear (104)⁽⁹⁾

A word must be said about the meter. The incantatory effect is due to the progression of half-trochaic lines. While the witches in *Macbeth* chant, Blake's "Introduction" wavers between the full trochaic of Shakespeare's witches⁽¹⁰⁾ and iambic, with the stress on the last syllable. Thus each line begins as trochaic and ends as iambic. It is surprising what a difference one missing syllable can make. If each line began with just one more unstressed syllable—as in words like "A" or "The"—the lines would be simple iambic tetrameter, and much more sedate in tone.

Partly because of this meter, but of course combined with the other nuances, including the meaning of the lines, this poem presents an almost absurdly happy surface. The child is "On a cloud," and the fantastic nature of this podium gives him the status to command the piper. It also dignifies the repetitions, which would otherwise seem childish and giddy. Lines like "Piper, pipe that song again" and "Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe/Sing those songs of happy cheer," along with the other repetitions, create a special diction that suggests the child's supernatural status. As do all the other nuances of the poem: aside from speaking from a cloud, the child vanishes at the end. In between, he commands "a song about Lamb," with its significant capital suggesting Christ.⁽¹¹⁾ The fact that the child weeps when he hears the song suggests a peculiarly adult sensibility. Children cry on other occasions, but seldom if ever in response to art. And finally, the supernatural status of the child's commands, from "pipe" to "sing" to "write" is endorsed by the poet, who obeys each command instantly. Significantly (we discover that this is significant when we read on), the poem ends on a note of repetitious insistence: the songs commanded are to be "*happy songs*" that "Every child may joy to hear"

(italics mine).

The dawning surprise, as anyone who has read the *Songs* knows, is that the rest of the poems, in their cumulative effect, are far from happy children's songs. Many are narrated by children, especially the *Songs of Innocence*, but they often tell stories of suffering, death, and exploitation. This is implied in perhaps half the *Songs of Innocence* and spelled out in companion pieces, often with the same title, in the *Songs of Experience*. As noted earlier, in 1794 Blake joined the two books in a single volume he entitled *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Even poems in *Innocence* that seem perfectly naive and happy are undercut in *Experience*. Thus, the little hero of "The Lamb" is gentle, evoking the child Jesus, and the poem ends on a gentle repetition of "Little lamb God bless thee." But then we discover that this poem's companion piece in *Experience* is "The Tyger"; and this tiger is not a victim (certainly not an endangered species!) but a bloodthirsty predator: Blake really empathizes with the tiger's prey as the fangs and claws sink in—which leads to Blake's famous question (to the apostrophized tiger): "Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

Similarly, "The Divine Image," a poem to "Mercy Pity Peace and Love" in *Innocence* (111), is answered by its companion piece "The Human Abstract," in *Experience*, which begins:

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor
And Mercy no more would be,
If all were as happy as we. (128; all upper cases are Blake's)

This is more than a dissection of devout assumptions. It is report on the results of the dissection. And nothing, from "Mercy" to "Love" remains sacred.

But Blake goes further. Even if *Songs of Experience* had never been written, there would be enough autonomous irony in *Songs of Innocence* to make it a damning critique of contemporary attitudes. At a time when black people were thought of as inferior human specimens, suitable only for service, if not for slavery (and in America, such genuine luminaries as Thomas Jefferson did have slaves), Blake wrote "The Little Black Boy":

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child:
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree,
And sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointed to the east began to say.

Look on the rising sun: there God does live,
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,

And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,
The cloud will vanish, we shall hear his voice,
Saying: Come out from the grove, my love & care
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Thus did my mother say, and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy.
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me. (106-7)

The poem is narrated by a child apparently born in Africa and living in England. He is a complete innocent, and his message is one of love, not protest. What must have struck such contemporaries as actually read this poem is how human, decent, and sweet the mother and son are. The myth created by the mother is a way of shielding her child from his sense of inferiority to the English child, whose whiteness he considers angelic. The child accepts his mother's myth and ends on an apparently triumphant note, in his generous imagination shading the English child from the heat so that he too can "bear the beams of love" and "joy" (here used as a verb) in the tent of God.

What, then, is the final step in this triumph? It is to "stroke [the English boy's] silver hair/And be like him." Nor does the sentence end there. The last breathless words, following a third "and," are, "he will then love me." All the black boy wants is to be loved by the English child. Clearly, in his mind he isn't loved by the English child yet, which is the import of the strong emphasis on "then" in the final words: "and he will then love me."

So the black boy is fully human and decent, and the real harm being done to him is not to his body, which is perfectly healthy, but to his soul. The assumption of superiority cultivated by the average English person is the ultimate wrong.

We can be sure Blake's view of the black boy and his mother as truly "like" the English—and compelled by exactly the same emotions—was not a commonly-held view in Blake's day. It is a safe bet that most of Blake's English contemporaries couldn't even conceive of "dark" people in this way. There was no outcry against the portrait of the buffoonish West Indian in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, written a half-century later, and even in the twentieth century, at least when the movie came out, no one seemed to notice that the young Ingrid Bergman, in the popular movie *Casablanca*, refers to the much older black piano player Sam as "the boy"; and comes very close to not acknowledging Sam at all in the French bar, when he toasts her from a racially-respectable distance. She gives him a bow so slight, a samurai lord might have envied her. But for Blake, with his seeming immunity to herd opinions and perceptions, it was obvious that there was no essential difference in the races. And this can be gleaned from the poem, without consulting *Songs of Experience*.

Another poem from the *Songs of Innocence* that stands by itself,

with no need for help from *Songs of Experience*, is "The Chimney-Sweeper." In fact, the explicit statement of the theme in the answering poem, with the same name, from *Experience* is much less effective. One is led to respect Blake's direct outrage, because it really is the voice of a prophet rebuking the folkways of his people, and it is therefore a little presumptuous to dwell on the inferiority of the latter poem. There can be no question, though, that the *Innocence* poem is both more moving and more devastating. It may, line-for-line, be as good as anything Blake ever wrote.

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue,
Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd, so I said.
Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe Ned & Jack
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black

And by came an Angel, who had a bright key,
And he open'd the coffins & let them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run

And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.
Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father, & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm,
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm. (108)

Blake is the only major writer I am aware of to attack the practice of buying children from poor parents and orphanages to sweep chimneys. The children were small enough to fit down the chimneys, so they were quite useful. Of course there were no child-labor laws in Blake's day, but this work was more than just exploitation—it was murder, since the children were not expected to live into adulthood. Yet no one seemed to notice or protest this except Blake. Even Shakespeare (albeit two hundred years earlier, in a rougher age) mentioned the practice with no indication of concern. But Blake saw exactly what was going on, and this monologue puts a human face on the travesty.

Like the little African boy, the sweep is quite innocent. He not only accepts the cant used to justify his state in life, but spreads the word and tries to convert little Tom, who is too young to be philosophical about the loss of his hair. Blake's devastating stroke here is to use the actual reason for Tom's shearing—to minimize the coal dust—as the little narrator's justification. When it is stated, it is

contradictory: this way the coal dust won't spoil the boy's white hair. But, of course, if the hair has disappeared, there is no advantage to Tom in that—or rather, there is no advantage unless Tom is allowed to grow it back at some future date. But what, we naturally ask, are the odds of that happening? The clue is in Tom's state in the morning: though the morning is "cold" (no doubt due to inadequate heating), Tom is "happy and warm." How could this be, we ask? The answer, surely, is through fever. And the last words of the poem, using this incident as exemplum, are the innocent little narrator's repetition of the pious assurances he has been fed:

So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

Well, we might say, death is deliverance, after all. But that is the only real satisfaction. That the Christian myth is exploited in order to perpetuate the chimney-sweep trade is clear from Tom's dream. The "coffins of black" remind us of the chimneys the sweeps are sent down (leading inexorably to their early visit to literal coffins). And the Angel that sets them free is clearly the Angel of Death. Only after they are dead can these children escape from their coffins and play in the sun like normal children. The "bright key" is death itself. So Tom's happy dream is a dream of death.

As frightening as it is, this picture is no hypersensitive fable but the reality that abounded in the England of Blake's time, and only Blake acknowledged it. To belabor a point, this poem achieves far more through irony than its companion poem in *Songs of Experience* does through explicit protest.

It must be stressed, though, that Blake is also incalculably great

in his explicit mode, as the voice of "experience." We have only to read the great poem "London" to assure ourselves of this. I have already devoted a paper to this poem, and see no need to repeat myself, other than to say that "London" links the various tragedies of Blake's age to one general condition of exploitation and hypocrisy. The plight of chimney-sweeps and soldiers is traced to what the Abbe Sieyes, before the French Revolution, termed the First and Second Estates (the clergy and the nobility):

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh,
Runs in blood down Palace walls (128)

And prostitution and venereal disease are all part of the same secret pattern:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse

Clearly the prostitute's "curse" consists in calling down a plague (syphilis) on a former client and his bride. Not so obviously, the tear of the baby may suggest blindness, a bi-product of syphilis, and the culprit is the same client, a respectable married man, perhaps carrying the disease himself, making his marriage wagon a "hearse." This is prophecy in the biblical sense, and suggests why, both by virtue of his vision and the realization of it in his poetry, Blake deserves a

very high place in the hierarchy of English poets.

Notes

- (1) This statement, given Leavis's view of the novel, would apply to novelists as well. Leavis devoted a great deal of time to trying to demonstrate that the novel at its best was a kind of poem—and that since the nineteenth century, the novelists have been the greatest heirs of Shakespeare.
- (2) Henry Crabb Robinson, one of the few members of the elite class who knew Blake, gives us enough examples of Blake's literal visions to make us question his sanity. Blake claimed, for one thing, to have been visited the day before by the (long-dead) poet Milton. While I have read these entries, the diary must be out of print, and I am unable to find it. My memory is quite clear about Robinson's report, though.
- (3) Such statements are impossible to prove. Some important critics, including Matthew Arnold and Robert Graves, remained unimpressed by Pope. Arnold felt he lacked "high seriousness" (like Chaucer, whom Arnold, unlike his predecessors, could at least read correctly, thanks to the great gift of nineteenth-century scholarship; and Graves had a romantic view of poetry that almost defined Pope's verse out of the select circle). All I can say is that these critics are in the minority, and I would note that Pope is Number 2 after Shakespeare in entrees to *Bartlett's*

Quotations, which suggests that he at least had a singular gift for the apt phrase. This is worth mentioning because it refutes the ignorant assumption of so many Pope detractors that he wrote by the numbers. One doesn't add more proverbs and aphorisms to the language than anyone but Shakespeare by being dull and formulaic.

- (4) An exception might be the poems of Robert Burns, but his ballads were mainly written to be sung. Burns's songs do make fine poems (and some readers would go farther than that), but his intended poems—written to be read and not sung—were not the ballads but narratives like "Tam O'Shanter" and satires like "Holy Willie's Prayer."
- (5) Ballad stanza is alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter (4-foot, 3-foot) lines with alternating rhymes (abab, cdcd, etc.). Anything written in strict ballad stanza can be sung to the old hit "Ghost Riders in the Sky": a tip that was more timely in the 60's than it is today.
- (6) The two words could indicate a difference in size, but they have been used interchangeably at least since the seventeenth-century translations of the Bible; for a simple example, in Psalm 137, the last line of the King James version says "Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the *stones*," while the Douay-Rheims version (in which it is Psalm 136) runs "Blessed be he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the *rock*" (italics mine). So, in practice, the terms have been interchange-

able for a long time.

- (7) There is an equally famous "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*.
- (8) In the poems of Blake only, I have used an edition that sticks to the author's original punctuation and capitalization. Blake often capitalized for emphasis, and left out punctuation to enhance ambiguity, so I feel that this should be preserved.
- (9) All Blake quotations refer to the Ostriker edition, which preserves Blake's somewhat odd punctuation and capitalization.
- (10) The witches in *Macbeth* chant:
 - Double, double toil and trouble;
 - Fire burn, and cauldron bubble. (1116; Act 4, sc. 1: 11-12)

This is perfectly trochaic, as magic spells and curses often are.

- (11) Blake's punctuation is minimal. In this poem he leaves out most ending punctuation, as well as quotation marks. The capital *L* is therefore significant and prefigures the subsequent poem entitled "The Lamb," with its explicit, "He is called by thy name/For he calls himself a Lamb," referring to Jesus, the Lamb of God.

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