BLAKE'S CONTRARY STATES

The Songs of Innocence and of Experience as Dramatic Poems

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CONTENTS

PREFATORY NOTE

CONSIDERABLE use has been made, in this work, of Sir Geoffrey Keynes's *Complete Writings of William Blake* (1957), and his text of the *Songs* is used throughout, together with his punctuation. Various copies and facsimile copies of the *Songs* have been examined, but the reproduction that has been most frequently consulted is the facsimile edition issued in two volumes by Benn, Ltd., in 1926 and 1927.

The author is deeply indebted for advice to Professor L. C. Knights and also to Sheila Gillham.

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.

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[1] 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[2] 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'.[3] This is a sensible approach, and Gardner's discussion of the *Songs of Experience* is particularly valuable. In R. F. Gleckner's work[4] 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'.[5] 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

[1] *Blake's Innocence and Experience* (1928).

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

[3] *Infinity on the Anvil* (1954), p. 13.

[4] *The Piper and the Bard* (Detroit, 1959).

[5] *Innocence and Experience* (New Haven, 1964), p. 7.

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

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.[1]

[1] 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).

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.

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.

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

with the accumulations of age as a legal and political and doctrinal crust covers its original impulse. Presumably, the message of the New Testament, if taken seriously, would render poverty and ill-usage quite impossible. Each man is responsible for the relief of misery. A wrong would no sooner appear than be recognized, no sooner recognized than every man's hand stretched out to right it. As things are, however, the Church is horrified at the evil of the sweeper's condition, but it is helpless to do much about it—no vigorous remedy may be undertaken because institutions are, by nature, conservative.

The sister institution of the Church, the State, shows no emotion at all. Here all is as stony and official as the exterior of an administrative building, represented by the palace. However terrible the soldier may be as the licensed bully of the administrator, he is a peculiarly unfortunate being as a person. Professionally he does what he is told, and so cannot be held responsible for his actions. The 'blood' he sheds is not on his head and so he is, morally, the epitome of weakness. Also, we cannot expect those who gave the soldier his orders to take responsibility. They are placed behind a wall of facts, statistics, precedents and regulations. The last thing that a bad administrator would think of doing, and the last thing that a good administrator could afford to do, would be to consider too minutely the effects of his work on any particular individual. He is impervious to what goes on beyond the palace walls because his is the world of affairs not of men, and he is as much in fetters as those who obey him.

The image used in the last two lines of the stanza to describe the weakness of the apparently strong may have been privately suggested to Blake by Burke's contemporaneous description of the King of France. Burke gives an account of the King as acting under the National Assembly to execute those orders which carry odium. Even as no more than a 'political executive magistrate' the King ought to have dignity, authority and consideration, but has none:

His functions of internal coercion are as odious as those which he exercises in the department of justice. If relief is to be given any municipality, the assembly gives it. If troops are to be sent to reduce them to obedience to the assembly, the King is to execute the order; and upon every occasion he is to be spattered over with the blood of his people. He has no negative; yet his name and authority is used to enforce every harsh decree.[1]

The wanderer completes Burke's picture by extending the helplessness of the King to all types of governor. Elsewhere in the *Reflections* Burke makes it clear that this is the case in France, that the Assembly which uses the King is subject to the compulsions of expediency, circumstances and the pressure of interests, and cannot be supposed to govern by 'reason'. Burke's insight is given a different twist by the wanderer. He sees that administration, good or bad, does not involve the administrator as human individual, but as officer. Institutions engage men impersonally, and this is true, even of an institution like the Church, which provides spiritual guidance. Under the control of proper institutions man is prevented from doing much harm and from coming to much hurt, but he is also prevented from being much more than a machine, prevented from doing 'good' in any sense of the word that implies personal choice or a sensitive consideration of others.

The impulses of fellow-feeling and communication, the desire to love, are referred to in the last stanza of the poem, though the wanderer does not 'believe in' such urges. In the society of 'London' the exercise even of sexual love has been replaced by a joyless and mercenary self-gratification, by recourse to the prostitute:

> 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.

The harlot is the source of disease. The third line of the stanza refers to the effects of gonorrhoea on the baby, and the fourth

[1] *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (World's Classics edn.), p. 222.

line to it entering into the home. But as well as source of this disease, she is symptom of a more serious disease, as is implied by the word 'hearse'. The city has rendered those who marry unfit to love. Marriage is a ceremony of mourning because the products of London are incapable of meeting, only of self-gratification. Love itself is withered, for if it were vigorous the harlot could have no attractions. She blasts the new-born infant with disease, but the infant cries because it knows that it is born into isolation. He will be incapable of love because he will never know what it is to be loved, and he will, in his turn, render others incapable. The harlot, who is youthful, and the infant, who is tearful, are creatures to be pitied, if the wanderer can feel pity, for their young life is made unnatural, their promise cankered before it can be shown. The wanderer sees man as too rigidly thrust into a social and institutional role ever to achieve proper humanity. He must become an isolated creature, living mechanically and unhappily. The unhappiness is felt, and the intuition that the condition of life is unfulfilment calls up the curse of the harlot and the cry of the child, though they do not have the satisfaction, even, of knowing what is missing, for they have never experienced it.

It is generally assumed that in 'London' Blake speaks in his own voice, that the wanderer is Blake himself, the lament his own, and that the condemnation of human muddle contained in the poem is that of the poet. Thus Wicksteed says:

> Men become the hedged-in victims of system . . . It is startling to reflect how far Blake was in advance of his age in attributing these tragedies (poverty, prostitution) not to the individual's own fault but to the Society which tolerated them.[1]

Wicksteed is wrong, however, in saying that the sociological content of 'London' is in advance of its age. As a criticism of the effect of society on the individual (and we shall see that the intention is not merely that), the poem is original only in

[1] *Blake's Innocence and Experience*, p. 190.

the force and particular emphasis it gives to a topic that was being much discussed at the time.

Godwin, in *Political Justice* (1793), sees man as entirely the product of circumstances:

> In the life of every human being there is a chain of causes, generated in the lap of ages which preceded his birth, and going on in regular procession through the whole period of his existence, in consequence of which it was impossible for him to act in any instance otherwise than he has acted.[1]

Social necessities conspire against the wanderer, who is miserable. The universe conspires against Godwin, but he finds, in this, a reason for elation:

> Nothing is more unreasonable than that the idea of necessity should produce a spirit of neutrality and indifference. The more certain is the connection between effects and causes, the more chearfulness should I feel in yielding to painful and laborious employments.[2]

So complete is Godwin's determinism, however, that very little choice seems possible, even in the feelings one is to have about the matter. At other times Godwin is less contented in his necessitarianism and he takes up an attitude related to the wanderer's in respect to institutions. He regards them as a tyranny and sees their modification and eventual abolition being brought about as a result of (necessary) alteration of men's opinions.[3]

Burke, also writing at about the time that 'London' was composed, is more penetrating than Godwin. He does not go to the same extremes in denying free will to man, though he does see him as a limited and imperfect creature. Man stands very much in need of his institutions to give him a stiffening of purpose, method and tradition. But he is not so helpless that he is unable to look at those institutions critically, or to attempt their gradual improvement. Burke avoids Godwin's error of making man utterly determined. On the other hand,

[1] 1796 edn. IV, viii. [2] *Loc. cit.* [3] *Political Justice*, I, v.

he avoids Paine's mistake of supposing that man can scrap his '*organized* character' in order to return to an '*original* character'. Even Paine has his doubts about the return:

> Man cannot, properly speaking, make circumstances for his purpose, but he always has it in his power to improve them when they occur, and this was the case in France.[1]

Paine's reservations, however, occur to him infrequently, and his usual attitude is one of full confidence in man's power to control his destiny:

> The progress of time and circumstances, which men assign to the accomplishment of great changes, is too mechanical to measure the force of the mind, and the rapidity of reflection by which Revolutions are generated.[2]

In opposition to Paine, Burke shows that if man supposes himself so much the master of his fate that he undertakes to destroy institutions which regulate his affairs, and which are the foundation of his rights, he will find himself without regulation and without rights. Man has no 'original character'—none that is recognizably human or that can be returned to. Burke accepts the idea of human weakness and consequent need for support as a fact seriously to be taken into account:

> We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that the stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.[3]

Paine cannot understand Burke because he works from an opposed idea of the nature of man. Burke supposes that man is man because his history and development culminate at any particular time in an organization that determines the nature of the individual. Each individual's humanity is the outcome of the history of humanity and our thoughts and our principles are related to, are an outcome of, what has been thought

[1] *The Rights of Man* (Everyman edn.), p. 78.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 133.
[3] *Reflections*, p. 95.

carries Blake's vigour as well as the gloom of the speaker and gives a new dimension of meaning to the last stanza. Without the word the stanza might be an attack on prostitution as a disease, but its addition turns the weight of the attack on to the condition of lovelessness, on to the fundamental wrong, on to prostitution as symptom. If Blake's persona is aware of love, it is as an unrealized possibility and the reader feels that he speaks the word 'hearse' without realizing its full implication—that Blake adds the vigour of the new twist at the end, emphasizing the alternative of love, but as an alternative reality and not a fiction. Blake is positively aware of the alternative while his speaker is negatively aware of it. The writer of the poem believes in love though his persona does not.

Blake is critical of the influence of social organization upon any man (including Blake himself), and we can associate Blake and the wanderer, but we cannot fully identify them. Blake holds off from the wanderer because he has a larger purpose, critical of the frame of mind of his speaker. The wanderer has arrived at a statement of truth, but it is not the only truth. Another truth is presented in those *Songs of Innocence* that correspond to the experienced 'London'—one which allows for self-fulfilment and expansion. The contracted and starved condition of the wanderer is a tragic state, men do become like this, but it is not the only state of the soul. In nearly all the *Songs of Experience* there is to be detected a tone of reservation on the part of the poet. The truths of Experience are widespread and they seem, sometimes, inevitable. Innocence is avid to abandon its state to embrace that of Experience. Experience seems wise and necessary. Nevertheless, Experience owes its power of control and its self-assurance, even its level-headed common sense to something it has lost, and not to something won. It has limited itself in order to gain a limited end. The bitterness of the wanderer is due to a realization of his limitations, though not due to a positive knowledge of his lost potential. The positive knowledge of love, contact and enthusiasm which counter-points

his bitterness is supplied by the reserved vigour of the poet. Blake's reservations are even more strongly felt when we set the poem against the *Songs of Innocence* where the lost faculties are possessed by the speakers.

As far as the subject of social relationships is concerned, Burke puts the case for Experience magnificently. He is self-assured, intelligent and penetrating. The case put by Paine, on the other hand, is sketchy, inconsistent, and, in its tone, often unpleasant. It may be supposed from what we know of Blake's life that he followed the argument between the two men with unusual interest, and it may be supposed that he saw the excellences of Burke's work and was conscious of the deficiencies in Paine's. The *Songs* give us the reasons why, despite this, he could always retain his radical sympathies.

Godwin, Burke and the wanderer all describe men in the experienced state only, and Burke's description is the most steadily hopeful one for that state, though Godwin is more (unduly) optimistic. Burke does see fitfully beyond the state, and talks of institutions as the 'products of enthusiasm', but he never examines this enthusiasm, and his account is, for the most part, of unenthusiastic man, patiently doing a job he is obliged to do. It is true of Burke and of the wanderer that they see, with each birth, the advent of another individual who must fashion himself to the community and its institutions. Paine, on the other hand, gives every man unlimited scope for choice and self-determination. He claims the right for every generation to refashion its institutions, and with that right goes the ability to assume a character which is, at once, developed and original. The idea is an absurd one. What Paine has seen, or sensed, however, is the need of the individual to fashion for himself. He misunderstands the manner in which individual creation is possible, his reasoning is confused and he loses his altercation with Burke. Nevertheless Blake saw something in the spirit of Paine's poor argument that went far to meet the excellences of Burke's good one.

Blake's idea of Innocence is quite different from Paine's idea of an 'original nature', but the two notions may be recognized, all the same, as having a common root. Both wish to make more of the role of the individual than Burke, who has no such ideas, would allow. Innocence implies that with each new birth the world does gain a new individual to build it up in freedom, from impulse, and by choice and discrimination. The institutions of man are created by every human being because he has the wish to do so, and is capable of the effort. Individual election and imagination are the sources of strength of institutions, and not vice versa, and a society that offered theoretically perfect institutions but was composed of supine individuals would collapse immediately. On the other hand, make-shift and imperfect institutions will work admirably where individual initiative flourishes. In the innocent 'Chimney Sweeper' Blake depicts his sweeps giving a meaningful content to catch-phrases and down-at-heel myth. They make the best of the world as they find it, not because they are helpless but because they have the vitality to do so.[1] In that poem, as in many of the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake is concerned with what is important to him: the vigorous human soul transforming shabby materials. Burke is deceived by the trappings and coverings into supposing them the substantial human reality. He sees shoddy human ability carried by institution, where Blake sees shoddy, though necessary, institution revivified by human energy. That is what happens in Innocence, at all events. Burke is not wrong in his enumeration of the factors of the human situation. There is the soul, and there is the material through which it must find expression. It must take what comes to hand. But Burke is wrong in the relationship he sees between these factors. He sees institution, not as means, but as end, and he sees the individual as the subordinate factor. Excellent though his analysis may be, it is only excellent in a situation in which individuals (and, in the best sense, institutions) do not

[1] See below, pp. 38 ff.

fully realize themselves. Unfortunately, such situations do exist. They are the commonplace of Experience.

Through the rags of Paine's argument, Blake perhaps saw a more sympathetic spirit than Burke's. No individual has the transcendent knowledge enabling him to act with god-like freedom in the assurance of absolute principles that one would suppose possible from reading Paine. But his mistake is a generous one. He assumes that anything is possible to humanity. This is not so. We must assume the second-hand tatters or the second-hand furs that society and tradition offer us. Blake's Innocents do not stand above their experience (on Paine's pattern), nor are they the tools of dead circumstances (as Burke's argument tends to suggest we are at best). They take their circumstances seriously and transform them, not wilfully, but by knowing them. There is a difference between being shaped by one's life and entering into one's life. Paine never explores this distinction and it could not occur to him to do so. Fundamentally he, too, is a creature of the world of Experience, but he does leave possibilities open that are closed by Burke. Paine's assessment of the abilities of man is muddled, but he insists on the potency of the individual. That is, perhaps, one of the reasons why we find Blake keeping republican company, and not conservative, at the time that the *Songs* were written.

A number of the *Songs of Innocence* form a contrast to 'London'. The 'Introduction', 'Nurse's Song', 'Laughing Song', 'The Shepherd', 'The Lamb', 'Spring' all have a rural setting and describe simple or young folk enjoying themselves in a spontaneous way. Blake's purpose in the *Songs of Innocence*, however, is not to enthuse over the circumstances of rustic life. Although 'London' and its innocent counterpart, 'The Ecchoing Green', illustrate psychological trends fostered by urban industrial and rural agricultural conditions, the innocent and experienced states are not necessarily associated with a particular environment.

The innocent Chimney Sweeper knows nothing but the city, and the setting for most of the *Songs* is not specified. 'The Ecchoing Green' has a rural setting, but the significance of the poem lies in the qualities of the soul that are depicted.

THE ECCHOING GREEN

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies;
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring;
The skylark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around
To the bells' chearful sound,
While our sports shall be seen
On the Ecchoing Green.

Old John, with white hair,
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk.
They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say:
'Such, such were the joys
'When we all, girls & boys,
'In our youth time were seen
'On the Ecchoing Green.'

Till the little ones, weary,
No more can be merry;
The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end.
Round the laps of their mothers
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest,
And sport no more seen
On the darkening Green.[1]

The young people who sport on the green during their Spring holiday enter wholeheartedly into their activities and are

[1] Blake takes the thread of the poem from *L'Allegro*, lines 91–9.

They cast back in the second stanza:

> 'In our youth time were seen'
> 'On the Ecchoing Green.'

In the third stanza we are given the period of twilight when time seems suspended:

> And sport no more seen
> On the darkening Green.

The rest of the poem sets off the refrains and is in the present tense. These people can be self-forgetful, and so they are free to anticipate, to recollect or to be relaxed in their sense of time, while their present is being continually encountered, though it comes as a gift and not a burden they must carry.

In 'London', the self was emphasized by the subjectivity of the poem. The cries and sights that disturbed the wanderer's musings were immediately interpreted in terms of his thought. The folk of 'The Ecchoing Green' are capable of being absorbed in their activities and of looking beyond themselves, for their mood is sensitive to times and seasons. In 'London', people impinged upon one another. They communicated nothing, merely noting each other's 'marks', signs to be arbitrarily evaluated. The young speaker in 'The Ecchoing Green' is very much engaged in the sports, but he can be sensitively aware of others. There are no 'bans' here (none that obtrude themselves) for we are presented with a community and not an organization. Institutions, in this poem, are complementary to personal relationships. They do not regulate an impersonal intercourse.

In 'London', the infant sheds tears at the feel of the world where he will not be loved. The little ones of 'The Ecchoing Green' can run off to play by themselves because their mother, their 'sisters and brothers' secure them. The persons in this community may be individual and independent and not, as is the wanderer's case, singular and isolated.

In 'London', the sounds that are heard break painfully into the poem to interrupt the reverie. 'The Ecchoing Green'

describes activities, not a brooding inward condition, and we are out among the sounds, which do not force themselves, therefore, but reverberate and connect in an echo. The sound of the bells is responded to by the songs of the birds. The merriment of the first stanza is continued by the laughter in the second. The refrain at the end of each stanza partially repeats the others. Words, phrases and whole lines are picked up again later in the poem, perhaps in an altered form. In the two poems Blake makes us hear two quite different worlds of sound to correspond with the modes of attention of his different persons.

The illustrations to the poems demonstrate these mental states in a more obvious way. One of the illustrations to 'London' shows an old man, blind and on crutches, being guided along the street by a child. His senses, his avenues of communication, are gone. The wanderer is not blind but one notices that the evidence of his ears comes to him with a shock as to a blind man, particularly in the second stanza. In the first stanza, the sights that the wanderer sees come to him without depth as would the evidence of his eyes to a deaf man. The second illustration to the poem shows a child kneeling before a fire in the open with hands stretched out to take the warmth. The gratification being taken in a cold world is, necessarily, a private one. The gratifications depicted in the illustrations to 'The Ecchoing Green' are not secret. There are boys with hoops, bats and kites. Some play a game together. A group of young persons listens to directions being given by a man. Children cluster about their mothers. Here is a world of affections and shared activities.

CHAPTER 2

THE POET'S DETACHMENT

IN writing the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake answers, in his own way, the question: what is man? The answer he gives is a complex one, embraces the simpler answers of Paine and Burke that we have examined, and attempts to show that these simpler answers are partially true. Paine suggests that right reasoning is inherent in man, who needs only consult his consciousness and apply the faculty he finds there to circumstances. Burke, on the other hand, suggests that, to reason rightly, man must appeal to precedent and tradition. Blake, as we shall see, could adopt neither of these positions, which were being advanced in opposition to each other at the time that the *Songs* were being written, although in order to appreciate the poet's resolution of the problem we shall have to go more deeply into the genesis of the controversy. We will defer the main discussion of this, the historical aspect, to the next chapter, however, concentrating attention in the present chapter on certain crucial characteristics of Blake's manner of writing. In order to appreciate what Blake achieves in the *Songs* it is necessary to understand his attitude towards the persons he creates in composing them.

Blake's own ideas about the capacities of the human mind find their expression through the *Songs*. Indeed, it would seem at a first glance, that the verses are far too theoretical to succeed as poetry at all. This is to be observed not only in poems like 'The Divine Image' or 'The Human Abstract', which present us with the conceptual ingredients of human nature (Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love; Fear, Cruelty, Mystery and Deceit), but in those which purport to give a description of a place or of persons, such as 'London' or 'The

Ecchoing Green'. Lyrical poetry is frequently the vehicle for a state of mind or of feeling in the writer called up by a particular circumstance or by a particular person. In judging the poem it is usual to take into consideration the adequacy of the writer's feeling, and the liveliness with which we are made to realize the cause of that feeling. In Wordsworth's 'Upon Westminster Bridge' we are attentive simultaneously to the emotion and to the scene depicted when we read: 'And all that mighty heart is lying still!' Those of Blake's *Songs* which come closest to fulfilling this sort of expectation of lyrical verse are the most popular. People look for what they are used to, and 'The Tyger' is Blake's best known poem because Blake seems carried away by a subject that is vividly portrayed. None of Blake's poems fulfils the expectation very well, however. 'London' as we saw, is partly dramatic monologue, partly a revelation of the poet's mind. But the thing described in the poem, the world of the wanderer, is a less substantial and less specific thing than lyric poetry often presents. It is a state of mind, and it is not a state of mind appertaining to a particular man but to all men. It is a possible mentality, and so the poem has, as its subject, something hypothetical. And in describing his hypothesis Blake does not reveal himself openly, but must be 'discovered' as the strategist behind the poem. 'The Ecchoing Green' too, invites the reader to look further than the details of the poem to the intention of the writer. As in 'London' Blake does not attempt to describe a particular scene or particular persons, or attempt to create the illusion that he is doing so. The Green itself and the villagers gathered there (Old John, the young folk and the old folk) are types of place or person. Even the day and the season, with their conventional birds, bells and sunshine, are generalized in the same way. It would not be too much to say, indeed, that the poem is composed of stereotypes, though one must immediately add that the poem as a whole combines those elements into a whole that is highly original.

Blake never used anything but stereotypes and is the only major English poet always to have limited himself in so stringent a way. The success of the *Songs* does not depend on the liveliness of the particulars depicted—they are rather artificial—but on the liveliness of the organization to which they are subordinated. We are not presented with the emotions of a poet responding delicately to a given situation but with an atmosphere of judicious arrangement and contrivance directed by a conscious intention, and this gives the poems their theoretical air. 'London' and 'The Ecchoing Green', for instance, illustrate the place of man in society as considered from different viewpoints. But while the word 'theoretical' stresses the feeling of conscious purpose and calculated effect in the *Songs*, it is inadequate to represent the nature of that purpose. They appear theoretical in that they present us with a jig-saw in which each piece gives some view of man's situation. Although many of these views contradict each other we have the sense that all the pieces fit together. But if Blake had some master theory that resolved the contradictions, and that was capable of abstract statement, he would, presumably, have given it. He was a man with a fine logical mind, and he falls naturally into an aphoristic and dialectic manner. Nevertheless, he expresses contempt for abstract systems, using them only as counters indicative of some facet of the mind or some aspect of human possibility. One feels very strongly that Blake had an integrated purpose in writing the *Songs* and was conscious of what that purpose was, but that it resisted abstract modes of statement. For our part, we would be unwise to attempt to find any easy formula for it, though we are invited to become consciously aware of what Blake is doing.

Blake denies himself the use of 'characters' and 'realism' in his verse, and relies heavily, for depth of meaning, on the resources of poetry. In 'London', for instance, we are forced to attend to the controlled meanings given to such words as 'mark' or 'black'ning', and the single word 'hearse' guides

Blake limits himself in the *Songs* to a very restricted vocabulary, and the reader is struck by the commonplace words that are used, by the preponderance of monosyllabic and disyllabic words, and by the frequent repetitions. The 'Nurse's Songs' have lines 1, 5 and 6 in common, and this suggests a degree of identification between the situation of the two nurses, but emphasizes simultaneously the radical dissimilarity of the two states depicted, as the lines held in common have very different meanings. The comment on language is implicit: words, no less than human beings, derive their only true life from what they are in association with others, which is not to deny their individual force in that association. This is most apparent in lines 5 and 6:

> Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
> And the dews of night arise . . .

In one poem the dews are life-giving, similar to the silver dew scattered by the Evening Star in the *Poetical Sketches*:

> On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes
> In timely sleep.

The dew in the experienced poem, on the other hand, is dank and detrimental to health. In the one poem there is a promise that the sun which has gone down will rise again, but in the other it has worn quite away, just as youth has worn away from the nurse. Her spring and her day are gone.

The common first line is taken differently into the two poems. The innocent poem repeats the word 'heard':

> When the voices of children are heard on the green
> And laughing is heard on the hill . . .

What is to be heard clearly, what is bold and honest presents itself to the nurse, who receives the sounds as unpremeditated laughter from the open hill. The same sounds come to the experienced nurse as 'whisperings' from the 'dale'. They are hidden, signs of furtive and indecent 'goings on'. She immediately thinks with sick disgust of the 'goings on' of her

own past, though she has, presumably, a history very like that of her innocent counterpart. She is bound by her suspicions and misgivings and sense of futility. She believes that no satisfaction may be found in life, for in childhood one is incapable of being serious about important things, and in mature life one is so twisted by making pretences to other persons and by hiding things from oneself that one's notions of seriousness and importance are wrong. Life is an aimless wearing away in which the seasons ('spring and day', 'winter and night') are opposed and empty, unlike the seasons and times of 'The Ecchoing Green' which are full-bodied but integrated. She regards man as an unpleasant creature who doesn't know what is good for him at any stage of his life and who must be kept in order. She probably does her job as nurse very well, as she understands it, and her charges are sent off to bed without argument, for like all bad administrators she must have continuous control. Blake's illustration to the poem shows her being very conscientious. Her charges are under her eye, and the boy is having his hair put into place.

The innocent nurse has much more freedom. Blake's illustration shows her sitting aside reading a book while her charges play their game. She does not fret them or herself, and she is content:

> My heart is at rest within my breast
> And everything else is still.

The lines convey the sense of the quiet time of day, the peace of the 'darkening Green', but also her capacity to take pleasure in the present moment and to let be. She describes the state, not of a 'mind' sickened by regrets and anxieties, but of a 'heart', a complete being, at peace and in balance. She assumes that the children, like the birds and sheep of the third stanza, know what is best for them, and that if they are left alone they will seek their own good. The children are free to make their wishes known, and are to '*go* home to bed'