The Palgrave Macmillan William Blake

SARAH HAGGARTY and JON MEE

Songs of Innocence and of Experience

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Consultant Editor: NICOLAS TREDELL

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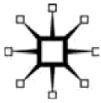

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List of Abbreviations

Anns	Annotations
BIQ	*Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*
BR	G. E. Bentley, Jr (2004) *Blake Records*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press)
D	D. Dorfman (1969) *Blake in the Nineteenth Century: His Reputation as a Poet from Gilchrist to Yeats* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press)
E	Reference to page numbers in D. V. Erdman (ed.) (1982) *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, rev. edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press). Commentary by H. Bloom
Experience	*Songs of Experience*
E-Y	E. J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats (1893) *The Works of William Blake, Poetical, Symbolic, and Critical*, 3 vols (London: B. Quaritch)
G	A. Gilchrist (1998) *The Life of William Blake*, ed. W. G. Robertson (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications)
Innocence	*Songs of Innocence*
Marriage	*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
N	Poems in Blake's manuscript notebook, as they appear in Erdman and Moore (eds) (1973)
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
Pl.	Plate
S	A. C. Swinburne (1868) *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (London: J. C. Hotten)
Urizen	*The [First] Book of Urizen*

All quotations of Blake's writings, unless otherwise indicated, refer to Erdman's edition.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Piping down the valleys wild’

‘Piping down the valleys wild’ William Blake (1757–1827) began his own ‘Introduction’, the first poem of what remains the poet, artist and engraver’s best-known work. Perhaps with the exception of the lyric that has become the hymn ‘Jerusalem’, all Blake’s most familiar poems, including ‘London’, ‘The Sick Rose’, and ‘The Tyger’, are included in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). Like many collections, Blake’s evolved over the course of his lifetime, but in ways very different from most other gatherings of poetry. *Innocence* (1789) had a few years of existence on its own, before being joined by *Experience* (1794), but the real distinction of *Songs* is that it was printed by Blake himself on his own press in the form of an illuminated book. Early responses to the poems tended be based on an encounter with the ‘composite art’ (a phrase that entered Blake criticism relatively early), but an irony of the wider dissemination of the poems from the mid- to later nineteenth century was that it required more traditional forms of typography and the sundering of the verbal and the visual. So Blake’s songs have been mainly encountered in the classroom separated from the visual aspects of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as published by their author. This situation has changed of late with the internet Blake Archive (discussed at length in Chapter 7) making the illuminated books available to the reader in something like their full glory, but the issue of teaching *Songs* with access to their original form remains a vexed one.

There is a further complication. Part of the evolution of Blake’s books was that they were reissued over the course of his life, even in its final decades, in ways that took advantage of the engraver-publisher’s freedom to alter the colouring or ordering of different plates, and even the position of individual poems within the collection. So particular songs were moved across the two sections or omitted entirely, as discussed in our first chapter. The Blake Archive can bring comparison of different copies of *Songs* to the classroom, but the collection will always evade any simple idea of authorised form.

Most readings have understood the key to the collection to be the relation between Innocence and Experience, 'the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul' as Blake put it in his sub-title, but it soon becomes apparent on any close inspection that the two states are not absolutely different (as the movement of particular poems across them suggests). Many students have embarked on a reading of poems in terms of the signifying contexts of their place in *Innocence* or *Experience*, before realising that this position was altered later in the history of the collection, although this need not mean one cannot advance a reading of a particular 'edition' of *Songs*, to use Joseph Viscomi's terms discussed in Chapter 7. In this study, we have followed a convention of using the unitalicised Innocence and Experience to indicate the state of the soul, as it were, and *Innocence* and *Experience* to indicate the part or the free-standing book (where they were published separately). Where particular poems under discussion moved, we have tried to mention the fact when germane to any particular discussion, but it would have been tedious to have done it in every case, and the reader is duly warned before erecting any interpretative edifice of their own, based on position, or for that matter the colouring of any particular illumination.

Unusually for books in this 'Readers' Guide' series, a whole chapter is devoted to what might be called bibliographical matters to give the student a good sense of the unusual and complicated history of the production of *Songs* as a book (and its editions). One of the consequences of its unique production history is that *Songs* initially reached only a tiny audience. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of the Guide give in some detail the early reception history of the poems, in a sense prefiguring what has been a recent important addition to criticism of *Songs* discussed in our final chapter, that is, reception history as an object of critical attention in its own right. These early chapters concentrate primarily on British responses, along with brief nods towards North America, although the question of Blake's reception in other places is starting to gain some scholarly attention, as we note at the end of Chapter 9. Chapter 2 surveys responses to *Songs* by writers during Blake's lifetime, including Benjamin Heath Malkin, Henry Crabb Robinson, William Hazlitt, William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, and S. T. Coleridge. Chapter 3 shows an awareness of *Songs* still muted, but sustained and growing from the time of Blake's death, by obituarists, biographers such as John Thomas Smith and Allan Cunningham, and the Swedenborgian John James Garth Wilkinson. In this early period, key terms for understanding Blake emerged which have retained a surprising longevity in the criticism: 'simplicity', 'pastoral', 'childlikeness', 'genius', 'madness', 'enthusiasm', 'Swedenborgianism', 'mysticism'. Such terms, and others

that emerged into prominence later but have come to play a similarly pervasive role in the criticism, like 'composite art', are registered in the index for readers to follow through the book.

With the responses in the 1860s of major literary figures such as Alexander Gilchrist and Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Songs* began to be known to a much wider public, as Chapter 4 shows. Chapter 5 picks up the tale with reference to W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, the major bibliographical work of Geoffrey Keynes, and the systematic study provided by S. Foster Damon. Yet it took time even for Damon's study to be accepted by the academy. It was only with work by critics like Jacob Bronowski, Northrop Frye, David Erdman, and Harold Bloom in the 1940s and 1950s that Blake moved into the critical mainstream and secured a place as a major canonical figure within Romanticism, as Chapter 6 describes. Chapter 7 follows the ramification of this change in status in the proliferation of different kinds of criticism: the formalist studies of the 1960s, many taking the form of books entirely devoted to *Songs*; the development of criticism building on the tradition of Bronowski and Erdman of reading Blake against the ideologies of his time, as a revolutionary poet; other studies, often with a psychoanalytical approach, which understood his revolt against repression to be primarily a question of psychology; and, finally, the emergence of feminist criticism, often questioning how far Blake was in revolt against patriarchal authority. Chapter 8 looks at the major development of a deconstructive criticism much less invested in discovering a unified system in *Songs* and more interested in the way Blake's radicalism lay in the proliferation of meaning and the corrosive questioning of received patterns of thought. At around the same time, interest in 'the composite art' resurfaced, both as a hermeneutic relationship in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, and as the material form of the book and its means of production pursued by critics such as Robert Essick, Michael Phillips, and Joseph Viscomi. Our final chapter looks at more recent developments, like gender studies, eco-criticism, reception studies, and more global perspectives, and provides some speculation as to where criticism of *Songs* might go from here. Given the complex course charted over the nine chapters of this book, it seems easier to be certain that *Songs* will remain an important text for literary studies than to be confident of what form future responses will take.

This guide is not a guide to Blake criticism in general, that is, its primary concern is with approaches to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Nevertheless, some of the most influential critical responses, including those of Frye and Erdman, for instance, were embedded in works devoted to Blake's whole career. Often such works, following Swinburne, have

tended to use the long and more obscure works usually called 'prophecies' that Blake began engraving from around the mid-1790s as providing a mythic template from which the earlier *Songs* collection is understood. These include *The Book of Urizen* (1794), *Milton* (c. 1804–11), and *Jerusalem* (c. 1804–20). The mythemes and aphorisms of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) have also had a rich part to play in criticism of *Songs*, not least because the two texts partially overlapped in their early development and first printings. Necessarily, we have had to bring these other works by Blake into the discussion when they are the basis of an interpretation of *Songs*. Chapters 2 to 4 have applied the same criteria to discussions of Blake's biography and temperament.

The work of making sense of *Songs* has gone on for some time now in numerous individual articles and books. We do not presume to conduct an exhaustive survey here; for this, the student might consult G. E. Bentley's *Blake Bibliography* and the various updates in *Blake / An Illustrated Quarterly*. Our guide is essential in so far it covers what we regard as 'essential', but the reader should not assume that everything worthwhile said about Blake's *Songs* is covered in these pages. Furthermore, the general organisation of the guide takes a chronological form, a relatively easy decision for the criticism prior to the proliferation of academic studies from the 1950s. Thereafter, we have tried to map critical responses in terms of the emergence of key critical methodologies, many motivated by changes in the academic study of English Literature beyond Blake studies. These include, for instance, the emergence of the deconstructive and post-structuralist criticism discussed in Chapter 8, but also the powerful sway of the category of Romanticism, especially in a consolidated form from the late 1950s, more easily assumed to be simply a category of nature implicit somehow in the text, than another critical movement. The category continues to be a powerful one even now, and has played its part both in consolidating Blake's importance to English Literature more generally, but also in eliciting hostile responses that may or may not have more to do with the sins of canonicity than with anything to be found in *Songs*. Whether Blake himself would have wanted the sanctity of critical tradition is an interesting question. Certainly he tends to emerge in nineteenth-century criticism as a counter-cultural figure. In any case, the final four chapters of the guide do not rigidly adhere to the chronological structure. If some important later work seems more obviously relevant to some earlier development than the other criticism being written in its own time, then it has been discussed in relation to the earlier development, but overall we have tried to show how different responses to *Songs* have emerged in relation to each other.

In general terms, this guide is written with the idea that it will help elucidate criticism encountered by the student in the library, online, or from the bookshop, explaining the intellectual context of particular readings in terms of their own time and the development of Blake criticism. But it is not intended to replace an encounter with *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. If the reader is encouraged to seek out the criticism we discuss, furthermore, then so much the better. Governing our selection has been the idea that students will want to know why and how, for instance, the idea of 'pastoral' has been seen as relevant to Blake or in what ways 'composite art' has been used as a term of analysis in relation to *Songs*. Blake himself once suggested: that 'which is made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care'. Our aim has been to elucidate the responses of others without treating anyone as an idiot: 'The wisest of the Ancients considerd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act' (E702). *Songs* necessarily will remain inexplicit, the complexities that lie within its seeming simplicity continuing to rouse the imaginations of generations of readers. Our hope is that this guide to the criticism of the most debated of Blake's illuminated books will make future readers aware of possibilities within the responses of the past which may provide the stimuli for their own faculties in their present.

CHAPTER ONE

Producing *Songs*: 'In a Book that All May Read'

Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794) is a book of two halves. Its first edition brings together an earlier illuminated book of 1789, *Songs of Innocence*, with *Songs of Experience*, first issued as a discrete illuminated volume in 1794, slightly earlier in the year than the joint *Songs*. Two halves, then, or perhaps two wholes – for as we shall see, in the course of the next three or so decades Blake continued to issue copies of *Innocence* and *Experience* separately as well as together. Likewise some readers – for there were readers, even within Blake's lifetime – read one and not the other, and those who owned both *Innocence* and *Experience* could and did have them bound together, or have the combined *Songs* separated. Readers, including William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Hazlitt, could encounter Blake's poems and designs in other ways too, as we discuss in Chapter 2, and here our arithmetic of halves and wholes breaks down: individual lyrics or groups of lyrics from *Songs* were hived off, copied out by hand and circulated, excerpted and published in reviews and miscellanies, even sung and heard. Here we see Blake's illuminated book, a distinct, etched, hand-printed, and often hand-coloured artefact, turned to a variety of forms and uses. That said, a degree of adaptability is written into *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* itself, a collection of poems whose ordering in particular Blake was liable to change. Over the years from 1789 to 1827, working with his wife Catherine, he assembled some 25 copies of *Songs of Innocence*, 13 of *Songs of Experience* (pairing some together), and 16 copies of the joint *Songs*.[1] In the majority of copies, the order of poems varies, and as time went on some poems even migrated from one book to the other.

This chapter aims to give as neutral an account of Blake's productive processes as possible, albeit informed and mediated by the pioneering work of two recent studies, Joseph Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book*

(1993) and Michael Phillips's *The Creation of the Songs* (2000), whose approaches are discussed in Chapter 8. The chapter is in two parts. The first examines Blake's composition and drafting of some of the poems in manuscript in his first collection, *Poetical Sketches* (1783), an unpublished satire, *An Island in the Moon* (c. 1784–5), and his notebook (in 1793). The second describes the distinctive method of printing by which Blake produced *Songs* as an illuminated book, and also takes an overview of the run of copies that he produced throughout his life, noting some of the differences and similarities between them, and explaining how these might shape our interpretations of individual poems.

THE GENESIS OF *SONGS* IN MANUSCRIPT

Songs of Innocence, Poetical Sketches and *An Island in the Moon*

Before Blake's piper made a rural pen, before he sang, before he piped, even, the *Songs of Innocence* had begun. For four of the poems of *Innocence* had already appeared in earlier works by Blake. In 1783, Blake's first collection of writings, *Poetical Sketches*, was privately printed in conventional letterpress (and without illustrations). Handwritten in one copy is a version of 'Laughing Song'. Versions of 'Holy Thursday', 'Nurses Song', and 'The Little Boy Lost' appeared shortly afterwards in about 1784, in a manuscript satire by Blake, again unillustrated, known as *An Island in the Moon*. So remarkable and unusual is *Songs of Innocence* as a material artefact, and so celebrated, nowadays, are its poems that it is easy to chart its development only from 1789, the date that appears on its illuminated title page. To begin the story of its material composition earlier, though, in 1783, reminds us that despite the piper's spontaneity, and indeed Blake's own claims later in life that he raised up entire sequences of lines 'without Labour or Study', *Songs* was subject to drafting and revision (E729).

Relative to *Songs* and later illuminated books such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), *America: A Prophecy* (1793) and *Jerusalem* (1804–20), *Poetical Sketches* and *An Island in the Moon* are little commented on today. Within Blake's lifetime the former was mentioned but seldom and there is no record of the latter being read – indeed *Island* was not printed and so not widely accessible until the early twentieth century (although its songs may have been sung by Blake at informal intellectual gatherings called 'salons'). Present neglect is egregious; the bold formal experiments of *Poetical Sketches*, the exuberant, carnivalesque

dialogue of *An Island in the Moon*: both deserve attention in their own right, as well as for how they make sound strains of sensibility and satire, and an affinity to popular culture, that run throughout Blake's writings.[2] They are also, of course, significant as precursors to *Songs*.

Poetical Sketches comprises an array of materials – 'lyrics, seasons poems, dramatic sketches, created mythology, and experimental prose just one step removed from blank verse' (Bentley 2001, 79) – that according to the volume's 'Advertisement', written by Blake's friend and sponsor the Reverend Anthony Stephen Mathew, were composed by Blake between his twelfth and his twentieth year. Noteworthy for our purposes are the poems that show Blake 'working out his own voice within the English pastoral tradition' (Phillips 2000, 6), including two songs ('How sweet I roamed from field to field' and 'I love the jocund dance') quoted admiringly by Benjamin Heath Malkin in 1806 alongside, and indeed undistinguished from, poems from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (*BR* 569–70). These two songs belong to the printed text of *Poetical Sketches*; however, the 'Song 2d by a young Shepherd' that was to be adapted by Blake into 'Laughing Song' appears as one of three 'Songs by M^{r} Blake' 'transcribed in an unknown contemporary hand' in a copy of the *Sketches*, on the blank pages preceding the text. In the most comprehensive study to date of the genesis of *Songs* in manuscript, Michael Phillips calls Blake's 'choice of language' in both 'Song 2d' and 'Laughing Song' 'simple, native and unaffected in relation to the still prevailing fashion for a Latinate poetic diction'. While the names in 'Song 2d' of *Poetical Sketches* are classical (Edessa, Lyca, and Emilie), though, they are translated in *Innocence*'s 'Laughing Song' into the vernacular (Mary, Susan, and Emily). In using native English names, Blake makes the same 'signal departure from convention' in *Songs of Innocence* as Edmund Spenser made in *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) (Phillips 2000, 6–7).

By contrast, as a primary site of the largely pastoral songs of *Innocence*, the urban, domestic setting of *An Island in the Moon* is initially incongruous. In the manner of contemporary semi-scripted popular dramatic entertainments and witty literary magazines (see England 1970, 3–29, and Hecimovich 2008, 32–5), Blake's manuscript stages a skewed dialogue between a number of punningly-named characters (Quid the Cynic, Etruscan Column the Antiquarian, Obtuse Angle, Mrs Nannicantipot), variously interpreted by twentieth-century critics either as analogues of individuals known to Blake, or as caricatured social or intellectual types, examples of which, says the narrator of *Island*, would have been so familiar 'you would think you was among your friends' (E449). *An Island in the Moon* is part of a tradition of writing

and Yeats's *The Works of William Blake, Poetical, Symbolic, and Critical* in 1893. The chief value of the *Works*, as we have seen, was in some of their interpretations rather than the accuracy of their quotation, and it is of little surprise that it did not challenge the hegemony of the slimmed-down Aldine. Yeats's smaller Muses' Library edition, of 1893, did not do this either (D 224) – although, as Sampson notes, its text of *Songs* was 'different and more accurate' than that in the Quaritch (Sampson 1905, 79). Ellis and Yeats's Blake has even less conscious agency than the Rossettis'. Albeit that 'a unity of significance' underlies Blake's myth, and albeit that 'the un-visionary or purely intellectual part of Blake's mind' was able 'to have caught the idea of the language which the visionary portion was talking, and talks it too', the upshot was that Blake's verses were 'dictated' (E-Y 1.95). '[W]ithin twenty-four hours' of composition, he 'would not have known' what he had written (E-Y, quoted by Symons 1907, 68).[6] Such talk, whether of childlikeness or of automatism, was grist to the mill of Blake's detractors. '[Blake's] use of single words is often so strained and unnatural as to rouse a suspicion that really he did not know the precise meaning of some word employed,' writes Arthur Christopher Benson in *Essays* (1896). Picking on the word 'chartered', for instance, a word that occurs in the 'childish' poem 'London', Benson wonders:

> ■ Is it possible that Blake confused it with 'chart', and meant 'mapped out' or 'defined'? Conjecture is really idle in the case of a man who maintained that many of his poems were merely dictated to him, and that he exercised no volition of his own with regard to them. □
>
> (Benson 1896, 151–2)

On into the twentieth century, then, Blake continued to stand in need of a good editor. One finally arrived in 1905 in the shape of John Sampson (1862–1931), scholar and librarian at the University of Liverpool. Sampson arguably did more than any other to deliver Blake's *Songs* into the hands of tradition – he is used, for example, by T. S. Eliot to rebut Berger's mystical claims about Blake's automatic writing (Eliot 1997a, 130fn). We focus here on his first edition, primarily of Blake's early writings, published by the Clarendon Press, which carries the full weight of its scholarliness in its title: *The Poetical Works of William Blake: A New and Verbatim Text from the Manuscript Engraved and Letterpress Originals, with Variorum Readings and Bibliographical Notes and Prefaces*. This was succeeded in 1913 by Sampson's expanded edition (the Oxford edition proper) of Blake's poems, which included the minor prophetic books as well as selections from *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and

Jerusalem (some of these last included in the 1905 edition) – although a portion of the notes which buttress the earlier edition are stripped away. The 'primary object' of the 1905 *Poetical Works of William Blake* was 'to recover and present Blake's own version of his poetry without the customary attempts of emendation' (Sampson 1905, v). Lists, tables, lengthy prefaces and footnotes to Blake's early poetical writings (Sampson takes only snippets from the prophecies) raise for the first time before the eyes of readers of *Songs* the kinds of bibliographical issues that we discussed in Chapter 1 of this guide. Going back to the copperplates and comparing multiple copies of *Songs*, Sampson notes how deliberate is Blake's spelling. Words like 'tyger' and 'lilly', for example, are not misspellings, but 'pleasant archaisms'; Blake 'system[atically]' spells out the ending of 'ed' (rather than the elided ''d') in the participle or preterite 'only when he intended the final syllable to be separately pronounced' (Sampson 1905, viii). Sampson also makes extensive reference to Blake's manuscripts, including his drafting of poems from *Experience* in the notebook and their inclusion in *An Island in the Moon* (see Chapter 1). This led readers such as Symons to conclude that 'Blake was as great a corrector as he was an originator' (Symons 1907, 68–9), although we should remember that no such drafts have been found for the bulk of Blake's poetry.

What Sampson had begun with *Songs* and some others of Blake's early writings, Geoffrey Keynes amplified and brought to near-completion in *The Writings of William Blake*, published in three volumes by the Nonesuch Press in 1925. Keynes (1887–1982) was a surgeon and literary scholar; in 1921 he produced *A Bibliography of William Blake*, and his edition of the *Writings* was succeeded by a series of editions 'culminating in that for the Oxford Standard Authors in 1966. These in turn were supplemented by editions of the drawings, studies of plates, a new census of the illuminated books [...], an edition of the letters [...], and an iconography of Blake and his wife' (*ODNB*). The 1925 Nonesuch edition includes the prophecies, and indeed all of Blake's writings that were then known. Eschewing Sampson's cumbersome editorial apparatus, Keynes cleared all but indications of Blake's own additions and deletions from the pages of his folio text, so best displaying, he thinks, Blake's 'real meaning' (Keynes 1925, I.xi). Archaic spellings, capital letters, and ampersands were there because Blake intended them to be. Only Blake's practice of punctuation remained perplexing, 'often with the effect of rendering passages unintelligible'. Keynes therefore exercised 'editorial discretion' (Keynes 1925, I.xvi).

Something as simple as the Nonesuch page of contents marks Blake's entrance into history. In its list of Blake's writings, printed in an

CHAPTER SIX

The Post-War Foundations: System, Myth, and History

Damon's *Philosophy and Symbols* was a major turning point in Blake criticism. At a time when English Literature was establishing itself fully as a subject in Anglo-American universities, the book offered Blake's poetry as a corpus that merited serious academic study. Damon's account of Blake's work as a coherent structure may have foregrounded his mysticism, but it also provided a sense of a complex philosophical system, not easily dismissed as insane ramblings. This systemic approach proved very influential on post-war criticism, most notably Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), a book that remains a key text on any reading list for *Songs*. The other major development was the emergence of a historical school of criticism, concerned especially with placing Blake in the context of the reaction to the French Revolution. For this tradition, most obviously represented early on by Jacob Bronowski, Mark Schorer, and later David V. Erdman, historicising Blake was part of a political programme that was as enthused by the continuing visionary potentiality found in the poetry as by its relation to Blake's lifetime. In terms of the *Songs*, this critical tradition was obviously drawn to the social criticism apparent in a poem like 'London', but also to the utopian possibilities of 'Innocence'. Although there was a great deal of communication between the two traditions, the idea of Blake as a political poet was distinct from Frye's emphasis on the human imagination and, especially, Harold Bloom's account of Blake as part of a visionary company for whom apocalypse within the individual consciousness was the primary site of romantic revelation.

SONGS AND THE POST-WAR POLITICS OF HOPE

The context of global crisis in the 1930s and 1940s added urgency to the reception of Blake in those decades. Jacob Bronowski's work was

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