

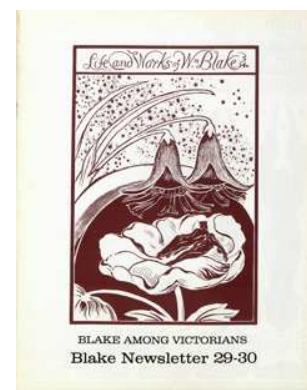
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A R T I C L E

Dialogue Between Blake and Wordsworth

Malcolm Kingsley Macmillan

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Dialogue between Blake and Wordsworth

WRITTEN IN ROME BEFORE 17 APRIL 1889 AND

BY MALCOLM KINGSLEY MACMILLAN

Notes on Blake and Wordsworth Dialogue

Nature. Taedium Elysii: Blake and Wordsworth.

Scene. A broad plain covered with high spreading plants, flowering into small blossoms of a dull rose colour. A slow black river seems to gird it round. From a sky, like the roof of a cavern, a skirt of water is pouring down.

William Wordsworth, in a white smock and gray hat, is seated a few yards from the river.



William Wordsworth (murmuring)--

"Apart from happy ghosts, that gather flowers
Of blissful quiet 'mid unfading bowers."

Such was the doom to which the gods,
Protesilaus, and I condemned the hapless Laodamia.
But here am I in the very high tide of Elysium, the
equable and utter quietude, the unfading Asphodels,
and yet I am the only ghost who seems at all happy
in it. A chorus of heroes and heroines performs
daily at noon, and there is much rhythmical and
regulated reunion. But no one seems to appreciate
the bliss except myself. A number of indignant
shades cross my path; but they shout for ichor
and blood and all kinds of unseemly revivifications.
Who can that be, walking impatiently on, and
regarding a large-leaved waterplant which he holds
in his hand? I protest it is no other than
William Blake, the mad painter and songwriter.
Most excellent shade, I prithee pause a moment!

Blake. Not an instant. This devilish
dullness is bad enough without the conversation of
the worst of all devils, a dull rascal.

Wordsworth. Rascal!

Blake. A renegade, a presumer, a blasphemer.

Wordsworth. I was always true to my
principles. I sought something which I could not
find realised in the sanguinary orgies of the
Revolution.

Blake. You sought death; you sought the
glorification of your dead self. The Revolution
was a manuscript which God wrote in an ink too
red for your liking. God heard the wail of the
children, the fettering of the captives, the
champlings of cruel giants; and He bade Freedom
unloosen with flame and steel. You fled to Nature,
the ancient enemy of God and man, and bade her
quench and blunt the flashing edges. By the side
of the blotching devil Rubens and the blearing
devil Titian I can now see the bleating devil,
Wordsworth.

Wordsworth (smiling). Strong language, Mr.
Blake.

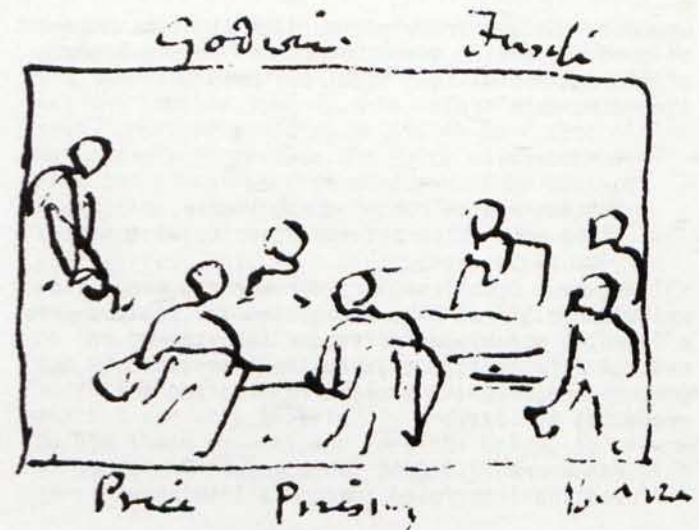
Blake. Coin of God's realm, Mr. Deputy-Stamp-
Collector.



According to Ian Fletcher, Malcolm Kingsley
Macmillan belonged to the publishing family but
published little himself, though he had a remark-
able range of knowledge of literature and art.
The privately printed edition of his *Selected
Letters* appeared in 1893. In an appendix it
contains miscellaneous literary remains. Kingsley
published anonymously a novel entitled *Dagonet the
Jester* in 1886. He disappeared 11 July 1889 while
climbing Mount Olympus--a mystery which has never
been resolved.

Wordsworth

ND LEFT UNFINISHED



Wordsworth. Yet I have ever considered that your own early lyrics were anticipations of my own humble and proud efforts to emancipate English verse from the fetters of a "poetic diction."

Blake. Ah, hm! "Humble and proud" is pretty well. You had considerable talents, Mr. Wordsworth.

Wordsworth. How am I to understand you, Mr. Blake?

Blake. As you please, sir. For my own part I can see more clearly than I could formerly. Under the guise of a liberator you bound the human spirit to the tethering-post of blockheadism. But neither a tethering-post "under Government" nor a bribed and brief posterity can put the stamp of immortality on atheistic balderdash.

Wordsworth. The gods are good to us here. That old vagary of yours, to accuse me of atheism, is singularly out of keeping with this--

"Elysian beauty, melancholy grace."

Blake. Pah! The simper of one of Worlett's engravings! I tell you we are mere apprentices here. We are put in these lifeless fields among these watery shadows and broken colours, that we may find out afresh the divine art of living in truth and pity and justice.

Wordsworth. Excellent maxims. But surely the first step is gained here by the subduing of passion and the preparation of the heart for wisdom?

Blake. God only is wise, and before Him alone is it any merit to subdue our passion. Our passion comes from Him. He is a consuming fire.

Wordsworth. And whence comes our endurance?

Blake. From our cowardice, and very often from the devil himself, who is the most enduring of creatures, as long as the Divine Order seems able to endure him. As for you, sir, you look at a large stone, or at a sheep couched on the grass, and you say, "How enduring! how permanent! how patient!" And I tell you the very stone would smite you, if it could, and the sheep would tumble you over. I have seen and drawn sheep with their necks bowed. But it is under the mighty hand of God. And He spreads His hands over them in tenderness, and joy springs in their hearts and love. They will see their lambs skipping with the angels. But you sing of their aches and ills, and how they weigh on the earth, and soon the earth will weigh on them. Weight and weight! Blind effort and hopeless suffering! The meekness of an idiot and the self-worship of a duck-pond!

Wordsworth. I cannot help thinking, Mr. Blake, that your impatience deprives you of many sources of pure and refined pleasure.

Blake. There can be no pleasure without passion. A straw tickling one's nose may be amusing, but pleasantness comes only with dreams and desires.

Wordsworth. I choke my resentment, Mr. Blake. I have great hope we may ultimately agree. Let me ask you, as a slight diversion, what you now think of that very clever young lord, who used to speak of my humble productions much as you do. He wrote verses himself, I believe.

Blake. Lord Byron was half one of the original giants of Albion! He climbed out of this elemental Greek hell and had one foot on the Greek Parnassus. He caught the splendour of Jehovah's face, and was in the train of Satan when he asked leave to tempt Job. He worked too much in mezzo-tint, and could not draw the pure and firm lines of Dante and

Chaucer. He was troubled too much with the shadows of good and evil. Nevertheless he had the love of freedom and of the "high passions" that dwell in the reasonable soul.

Wordsworth.

"Wisdom and spirit of the universe,
Thou soul which art the eternity of thought."

Blake. Doubtless, Mr. Wordsworth, you could write noble lines. Ah! *si sic omnia!* But you were a Pagan, a worshipper of stocks and stones, of natural life and growth, with no intuition of Jehovah and Jesus, the creative Mind and the redeeming Activity.

Wordsworth. I felt those august Presences diffused and interfused through all things.

Blake. Yes, and lost in the "Elements of this world," which the apostle tells us are not "according to Christ."

Wordsworth. And Lord Byron, doubtless, was a more orthodox preacher of apostolic truth.

Blake. He never at any rate bowed before natural force, or confused it with God. His Prisoner of Chillon is surrounded with as much harsh material as one of your own gaping peasants; but he preserves his manhood and the dignity of his sufferings.

Wordsworth. I trust that his lordship's own sufferings are borne with dignity. I hear that he is at present yoked with Sisyphus, and rolling uphill that rock of offence, his very singular biography.

Blake. O Pharisee! O interminable Scribe! when will you learn that it is not by passions resisted that men inherit a glory, but by good done?

Wordsworth. I thought, Mr. Blake, that you attributed just now to the "noble poet" too much preoccupation with the "shadows of good and evil."

Blake. I did, sir. That was his error. But he recognised at the same time that the material universe is nothing--

"The mind which is immortal makes itself
Requital of its good and evil deeds,
Is its own origin of ill and end,
And its own place and time."

That is Manichean, if you will. But it is not atheistic. For it declares the mind, which is of God, to be alive and active for the punishment of its failures and the joy of its triumphs. Lord Byron's "sense of sin" was excessive and paralysing. But it at any rate showed that his mind and reasonable faculties were awake.

Wordsworth. But have not I too said of the winds and waves that they "in themselves" are nothing?

Blake. Yes; but you keep that "in themselves" to ride off on when the winds and waves frighten you very much. How can a wave "roll Deity"? You make the Eternal a sport of chance.

Wordsworth. Of law rather--

"One control
Gave laws to them, and said that by the *soul*
Only the nations should be great and free."

Blake. Nations are great by their thoughts, and their enterprises, and their visions. Those are the expression of their soul. But your whole work ties them to the earth and the soil. You think of them as growing, and then as buried--

"Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees."

Wordsworth. Those lines are doubtless a stumbling-block. But taken in connection with the whole chain of my thought, they sin neither against Christianity nor imagination. Humility is the first of religious virtues, and nothing encourages it so much as remembering that on one side we are dust.

Blake. To the imaginative artist the most literal fact may be spiritual; but it must be used symbolically. Our five senses give the limit to the energy and fire of soul, making some embodiment seem *there*, and outside of us, and dead. That is the dust; but out of the dust we most behold the glory. Otherwise where is the contrast which art and truth demand? The prophet Ezekiel lay in the dung that he might have a vision of Jehovah, the God made human. But you lie in the dust out of a dastardly love for humility and quietness.

Wordsworth. But Lord Byron surely, infected doubtless by the prevailing poetic inspiration of his time, my own, filled his verses with mountains and seas and clouds as much as I did.

Blake. Yes, but with this difference, that he scales the Summits and rides on the waves,-- he is for ever aspiring towards something. You, sir, with an original capacity for imaginative expression infinitely greater than his, succumbed to the delusion and lie of Nature, asserting mendaciously that she

"Never did betray
The heart that loved her,"

and have done your best to leave the human spirit in the art-destroying and blind limbo of the Greek and Roman sophists.

Wordsworth.

"The Sacred laws
Framed in the schools, where wisdom dwelt retired,
Intent to trace the ideal path of right."

Are those the lines you are thinking of?

Blake. Partly; but still more of your pervading Greek spirit, servile to the two most

damnable forms of death, nature and temperance. All truly great artists see and create better when they are drunk.¹

Wordsworth. I am no advocate for excluding any simple pleasure, any touching weakness from the domain of poetic sympathy.

Blake. You can concede a great deal, doubtless; but it is all in the way of balance and moderation. The wine-cup, the strong and fiery juices are not conceded by our enemy, Nature; they are wrenched from her.

Wordsworth. Turbulence and revolt and distraction--the storm-clouds of the wine-cup--are these to be eternal? [Blake makes the gesture of drinking.] You are satiated with bliss, I see, and long for battle. Hence your assault on me. But there is one knotty point which I should like to propose to you, Mr. Blake. You speak perpetually of Nature as accursed, the enemy of God and of art, and yet advocate those forms of licence which are generally defended on the plea that they are natural.

Blake. And on that plea wrongly defended, whatever they may be. But explain yourself further.

Wordsworth. It is not generally known that I have myself had conceptions and hauntings of erotic

imagery and orgiastic poesy which would have been among the most tremendous feats of that kind which the literature of the world can show. So strong was the impulse towards this vein of composition, that, short of yielding to it, my only alternative was rigidly to exclude the voice of amatory passion from the almost perfect diapason of my poetical production. You, on the other hand, have given free expression to this side of life, not only in your lyrics, but, as I understand, still more in your "designs" and "inventions." You must justify to yourself, as best you can, this laying anew on the human race "the weight of chance desires." But my puzzle meanwhile, without the solution of which I cannot so well defend myself against charges which I can only imperfectly understand, is this: Do not these desires and impulses belong to nature? Is it not the function of imagination and religion to control them?

Blake. Sir, I am a painter and draughtsman as well as a poet. I can best explain myself by lines and images.

¹ v. "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," reprinted in the *Hobby-Horse* for October 1887.

