

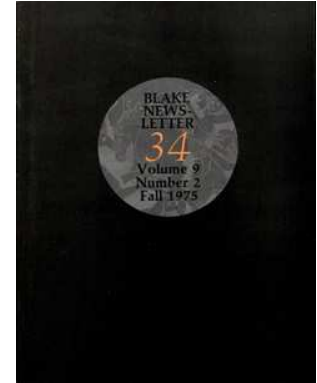
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“Poor Robin” and Blake’s “The Blossom”

Warren U. Ober

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On another part of the same sheet was a paragraph of criticism:

FINE ARTS--We have never experienced greater satisfaction than is announced to our readers, that there are now in this town, for the inspection of the lovers of the fine arts, some most beautiful designs intended to illustrate a new and elegant edition of Blair's Grave. At a period when the labours of the pencil are almost wholly directed to the production of portraits, they who dare soar in the sublime regions of fancy surely claim the patronage of men of taste and discernment; and the specimens here alluded to may, with the strictest adherence to truth, be ranked among the most vigorous and classical productions of the present age.

I do not know of any other exhibition of Blake's work having taken place anywhere outside London at this early date. The list of subscribers printed in the book gives the names of sixty-six subscribers in Birmingham and the vicinity. The list suggests that the exhibition may have been circulated to other large centres such as Liverpool, Leeds, Wakefield, Manchester, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bristol and Edinburgh.

"Poor Robin" & Blake's "The Blossom"

By Warren U. Ober

In one of his notes on "The Cool World of Samuel Taylor Coleridge" (*The Wordsworth Circle*, 5 [Winter 1974], 61) P. M. Zall quotes part of a bawdy ballad recollected by Francis Place, "the radical tailor of Charing Cross":

One night as I came from the play
I met a fair maid by the way
She had rosy cheeks and a dimpled chin
And a hole to put poor Robin in.

A bed and blanket have I got ["I have got" in Zall's source]
A dish a Kettle and a pot
Besides a charming pretty thing
A hole to put poor Robin in.

Though the context in which the ballad is quoted in part in Professor Zall's source (Place, *Autobiography*, ed. Mary Thale [Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1972], p. 58n.) does not make clear the precise date of the ballad, the evidence provided by the editor tends to confirm Zall's suggestion: "about 1780." Place, who was born in 1771, is quoted as saying that he listened to such songs at a social gathering "when a boy of 10 years of age." Certainly it is clear that the song was very popular,

since Place says of it and others (p. 58n.), "There is not one of them that I have not myself heard sung in the streets."

This popular song of the London streets is of especial interest in that it may shed some light on a long-standing problem of interpretation involving Blake's "The Blossom," one of his *Songs of Innocence* (1789):

Merry Merry Sparrow
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Sees you swift as arrow
Seek your cradle narrow
Near my Bosom.

Pretty Pretty Robin
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Hears you sobbing sobbing
Pretty Pretty Robin
Near my Bosom.

A popular reading of the poem is that of Joseph H. Wicksteed (*Blake's Innocence and Experience* [London: Dent, 1928], p. 126): "The birds are the male element as seen by the maiden. They represent the whole range of the lover's love, from the winged thought to the accomplished act." Geoffrey Keynes (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [London: Hart-Davis, 1967], pl. 11 commentary) supports Wicksteed's interpretation: "The sparrow 'swift as arrow' is a phallic symbol seeking satisfaction in the blossom of the maiden's bosom. The robin sobs perhaps with the happiness of experience." Similarly, D. G. Gillham (*Blake's Contrary States* [Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1966], pp. 164-65) sees the subject of the poem as being sexual intercourse. "The blossom, herself, despite her tenderness," Gillham says, "is rather disengaged, and tends to be aware of the male sexual organ almost as a sort of pet." E. D. Hirsch, Jr., however, comments on "The Blossom" (*Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964], p. 181) as follows: "This is the most difficult poem in the *Songs of Innocence*. The only full-dress explication I know of is by Wicksteed, whose theory that the poem symbolizes love and sexual intercourse I cannot accept." And W. H. Stevenson rather stiffly says (*The Poems of William Blake*, ed. Stevenson [London: Longman, 1971], p. 64): "The extreme simplicity of this poem has puzzled interpreters, who have had to delve deep for its symbolism. It is more than doubtful that B. would embody such symbolism so deeply in a book planned for children. . . ."

The suggestion that the ballad recalled by Francis Place is a part of the context within which "The Blossom" was created, if not an actual source for it, should shock no one familiar with the scatology and robust satire of *An Island in the Moon*, in the manuscript of which appear the "Nurse's Song," "The Little Boy Lost," and "Holy Thursday" of the later *Songs of Innocence*. The facts that in the London street song recollected by Place the penis is called Robin and that Blake could reasonably have been expected to know the song and

to have assumed that his audience was aware of it are, I believe, evidence in support of Wicksteed's reading of "The Blossom." Other less significant supporting details are the repetition of the word "pretty," the substitution of "blossom" for "rosy cheeks and dimpled chin," and the fact that "poor" Robin becomes the "sobbing" Robin of Blake's poem. Finally, the OED records a use of the phrase "merry-bout" in the *Newgate Calendar* of 1780 as slang for "an act of sexual intercourse." Hence the appropriateness of Blake's "merry, merry sparrow."

If this widely known street song was in fact in Blake's mind when he composed "The Blossom" and in the minds of Blake's readers as well, perhaps the poem is more complex and ironic than Stevenson is prepared to admit, even if it was destined to appear "in a book planned for children."

An Early Allusion to Blake

By G. P. Tyson

Among William Blake's first engravings for the booksellers was his head of Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777), which was used as a frontispiece for Thomas Henry's *Memoirs of Albert de Haller, M.D.* (1783). Of Henry's extant letters there is one at the Bodleian to his bookseller, Joseph Johnson, containing a brief allusion to Blake; the letter (Ms. Engl. theol. C.50, f. 182) is dated 13 April 1783, making it one of the earliest known references to the engraver.

Manchester

Dear Sir

The Author of the Sermons which come to you with this letter is a very worthy Clergyman, and the particular Friend of all your Friends here. You will agree with me that the Discourse is an excellent one, and written in a good cause. It will be of some importance to him to have it more known, and you are desired to advertise it in some of the papers and, if you can, introduce it to the London [Unitarian] Association. You will oblige us all by attending to it, and forwarding the Sale.

I hope the Magnesia [Alba] arrived----There had been some accident to one of the Waggon's which delayed it-----

Pray hasten the Head of Haller----
The Book is finished, and very neat, and the Season is advancing rapidly. The heads might come in Clerk's parcel, or in Newton's. The One deals with Bew, the other with Rivington-----¹

I have got Memoires de P. Acad:
from the R[oyal] S[ociety] by Dr.
Simmons²----Yr's very truly
Tho^s Henry

It is conceivable that Henry was familiar with Blake. In 1780 he had engraved a plate for William Enfield's *The Speaker* which Johnson published. At this time Enfield was a tutor at the Warrington Academy, and along with the other teachers there, was certainly known to Henry through their mutual religious, scientific, and literary interests. Concerning the delay in sending the head to Henry, only inference can offer assistance. Johnson had a reputation for being dilatory, but only after about 1795 when his health began to fail. Earlier he enjoyed the confidence of authors and customers for being attentive and honest. Blake's work on the plate, though, falls between his marriage in 1782 and the setting up of his print shop in 1784. So possibly he had other matters on his mind than finishing a small engraving for a bookseller.

1 According to Pendred's *Directory* both Clerk or Clark and Newton were Manchester booksellers.

2 Simmons was Henry's collaborator on the *Memoirs*. The work referred to is Henry's English edition of Lavoisier's essays addressed to the Paris Academy.

A Possible Source for "Thel's Motto"

By Michael Ferber

Several Biblical sources have been offered for the second half of Thel's mysterious "motto:"

Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?

Northrop Frye (*Fearful Symmetry*, p. 446, n. 55) connects the golden bowl with the golden cup of Babylon mentioned in Jeremiah 51.7 and Revelation 17.4. He also cites Ecclesiastes 12.6 as a source of both lines: "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken . . ." Though this verse is almost as cryptic as the "motto" itself, it is no doubt generally relevant to *Thel*, for in its context it seems to refer to the death of the body, which Thel shrinks from at the end of the poem. But the context has little about love or wisdom, and of course a cord is not a rod.

Robert Gleckner, in "Blake's *Thel* and the Bible," *BNYPL*, 64 (1960), 573-80, suggests Job 28.12-15:

But where shall wisdom be found? and
where is the place of understanding?
Man knoweth not the price thereof;
neither is it found in the land of the
living.