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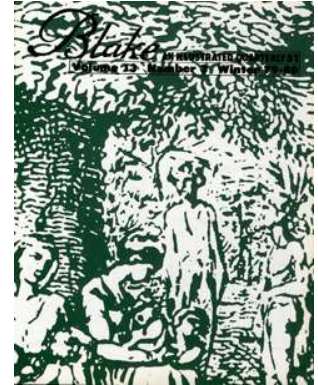
BLAKE

A R T I C L E

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BLAKE'S PASTORAL: A GENESIS FOR "THE ECCHOING GREEN"

DAVID SIMPSON

Though by no means the most "interpreted" of Blake's lyric poems, "The Ecchoing Green" has had some significant attention, and critical responses to it have arranged themselves across a wide spectrum, with varying degrees of the proper opposition. What I have to say here will offer a way of reading that spectrum as part of the "poem" Blake has left us. For the founder of Blake criticism was the poet himself, and in the recoloring process which he enacted through the various editions of his work, we have come to suspect an artistic and perhaps even a conscious purpose. I shall suggest that the designs for this poem can be seen as the vehicles of Blake's modifying imagination as it responds to and reinterprets the image of rural society and the wider vocabulary of the pastoral tradition within which it has its place. Transformations of the first plate in its later versions are of particular interest, and they may relate not just to a general ethic of renovation but also to a nexus of perceptions which could well have been at the front of the poet's mind during the last ten years or so of his life. This was a period when England, relieved at long last from making war against France, was turning again to its domestic situation. But the widespread civil discontent produced, not the new society envisaged by the radicals, but the repression typified by Peterloo and hitherto only invoked in wartime conditions by the apparent demands of national security.

It is in this historical context that Blake could have been taking a second look at Albion's guardian oak and its place in the center of the canonical village green--though this is not to say,

of course, that "The Ecchoing Green" was ever intended simply to endorse such guardianship. For it is the image of the tree, and its modifications in the later versions of the first plate of the poem, which will provide the centerpiece to this account.

First, however, it is necessary to acknowledge three extant and detailed critical readings of the poem, those of Hirsch, Gillham, and Gleckner.¹ Hirsch and Gillham, generally speaking, describe it as a vision of innocence. Gillham finds that the characters display a philosophical satisfaction with a continually developing present, accepting also "a movement of time giving significance to that present" (p. 24). There is no friction between the generations. Hirsch's account is similarly positive, but from a more symbolic perspective:

The natural harmonies of the echoing green are sacramental. Like human guardianship, the pastoral landscape is at once an occasion for and the content of prophetic vision, and just as a transcendent meaning resides within the natural world, so the realm of eternity also resides within the human breast. Eternity is both within and beyond. (p. 41)

The gathering together of the generations represents "the full spectrum of earthly existence" (p. 176), and they are identified within the image of life itself as a period of play before the sun goes down. Gleckner, on the other hand, dissents by anticipation from both these views. For him, the poem is

concerned with "the spiritual sterility of living in the past, the sterility of memory which is given such powerful voice by Har and Heva in *Tiriel*" (p. 91). Old John and the aged have become "bogged down by the cares of the natural world" (p. 92), and memory affords only "vicarious respite from the inner darkness that is symbolized by the external shade of the tree" (p. 93). For the younger generation, the onset of night represents a world of restriction and delusion; they must summon fresh energies to pierce through it, thereby questioning "earthly mother love as well" (p. 94).

The diversity between these three accounts might be taken to signal the caution we should exercise in attributing to Blake's authoritative presence as "writer" any decisions about whether we are seeing golden discs the size of guineas or hosts of heavenly angels. Indeed, this often uncomfortable recognition of our own responsibility for what we see makes the critical ambition of "reading" Blake's plates a distinctly precarious one. Criticism operates on the assumption of or aspiration toward consensus: it hopes that what is explained will be believed. But there is a large amount of evidence, as is well known, for arguing that Blake's particular method depends for its ongoing energy on the friendship of true opposition, so that the potentially solipsistic standpoint one finds oneself adopting about his "meanings" actually comes to contain a genuinely communicative potential by way of the honesty of its exposition:

Always be ready to speak your mind, and a base man will avoid you.
Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth.²

Critical comment, in other words, becomes possible again, just as language itself remained a viable medium for Blake so long as its fallen and falling potential was never forgotten. We may make our claims for an "interpretation," but this should not involve our denying (except with the momentary and permissible blindness necessary to make any statement at all) the possibility or even credibility of other interpretations. Moreover, I am genuinely unsure about what Blake may be "meaning" by his transformations in the iconography of this poem, so that the adoption of a synoptic mode of inquiry partakes of necessity as well as virtue. I shall discuss later the obvious caveat that this posture may be merely an excuse for irresolution; for the moment, I shall merely make clear my assumption, or rather conviction, that valuable insights into Blake's creative imagination are to be obtained thereby.

I do not personally find that attention to language alone is enough to resolve the questions generated by a reading of "The Echoing Green"; for me, the poem is to be construed by observing or constructing relationships between text and design. Looking at the text alone, for example, it is hard to be sure (as with "Laughing Song") whether we are dealing with the simplicity of genuinely enacted innocence or with the facile delusions of a post-lapsarian speaker. There is little enough evidence for the latter, certainly; it would seem that the

speaker must be one of the older children, since the "little ones" are described in the third person as wearying and putting an end to the sports in which the speaker also shares. And this would account for the peculiar tension between text and design whereby, with the exception of the hypothetical "Old John" himself, the figures around the tree do not seem to be the "old folk" defined by the text, but rather young mothers or nurses. To a child speaker, anyone of adult age might be classed among the old folk, especially if there is implied a hint of resentment at the imposition of authority. Moreover, the group under the tree could also be taken to illustrate the lines in stanza three which describe the children "Round the laps of their mothers," once again implying that some children are ready for rest before others are.

Nor, it seems to me, is there much to be made of the punctuation of this poem. Blake's concept of punctuation is controversial and often clearly indeterminate, and the indeterminacies do not always contribute to a sophisticated "meaning" as I am persuaded that they do in "The Lamb."³ John Wright's enlarged reproduction of the electrotype for the first plate in *Blake Newsletter*, 36 (Spring, 1976), 102, suggests that this indeterminacy is fundamental, and not to be resolved even by the closest inspection of the plate itself. In particular, distinctions between commas and full stops are almost impossible to make. For example, to read in a comma after "Sing louder around" in the first stanza is a gesture prompted by the notion (which the syntax does seem to support) of a natural harmony between the singing of the birds and the ringing of the bells; to read in a full stop here would, conversely, argue for an ironic dislocation working against the apparent "flow" of the poem.

This situation seems worth detailing if only to point out the genuine insecurity of overdeterminate "editing" of the text. Punctuation is generally sparse in *Songs of Innocence*, perhaps for this very reason. Similarly, Hirsch's point about the capitalization of one "Sun" but not the other (p. 40) may be related to its occurrence in the first line of the poem as the first noun, as much as (or as well as) to any symbolic purpose. The one viable semantic ambiguity that I can find, the "care" which Old John laughs away, in fact contributes to the idea of a benign relation between the generations. "Care" can be read as "supervision" (of others) or as "anxiety" (in the self-referring sense); but these options support rather than conflict with one another, since the "care" is anyway being superseded by laughter.

As I have said, it is the iconography of the designs as they provide a context for the text which offers most food for thought. Sir Geoffrey Keynes has made some very astute observations on these designs in the notes to his popular facsimile edition. He comments on the ambivalence of the oak tree in Blake's later work (more of this later) and sees suggestions of sexual initiation in the second plate, as the boy hands down the grapes to the girl below (with the largest bunch yet to be picked), behind the back of the adult figure. It is only in the second plate that young girls appear, for the sporting figures of the first are all apparently

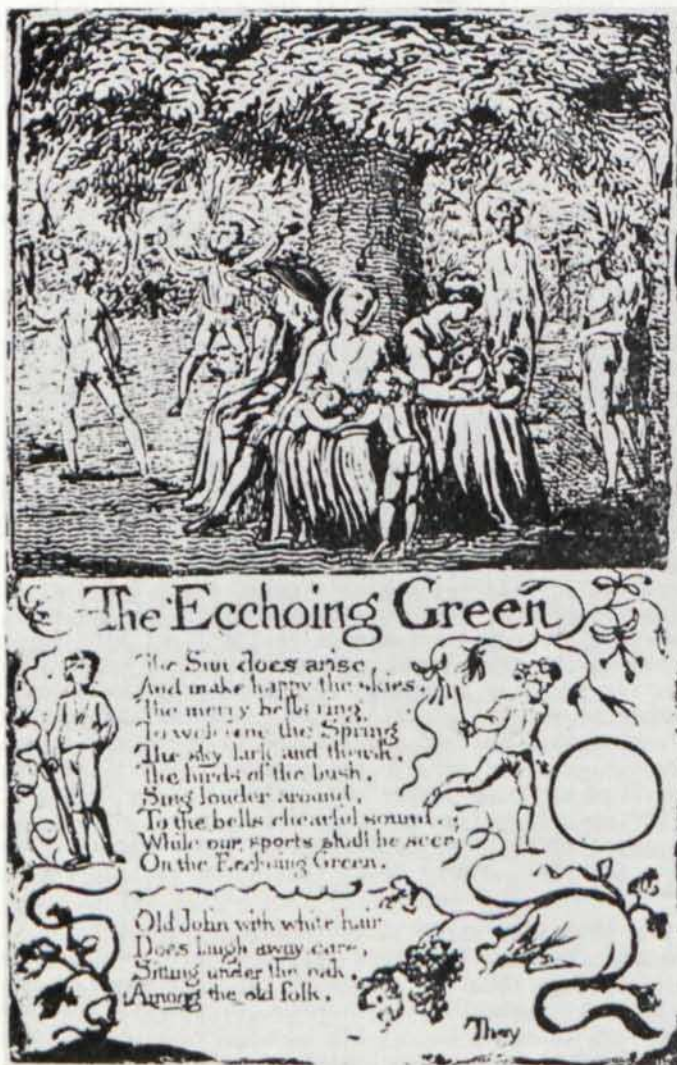
male. This exclusiveness is perhaps echoed, again in the second plate, by the motif of the two boys with bat and kite, redundant sexual symbols based for their owners on no signified experience, since they are held by members of the same sex who are themselves being ushered home. For the lingering older children, indeed, the final lines

And sport no more seen [.,]
On the darkening Green [.,]

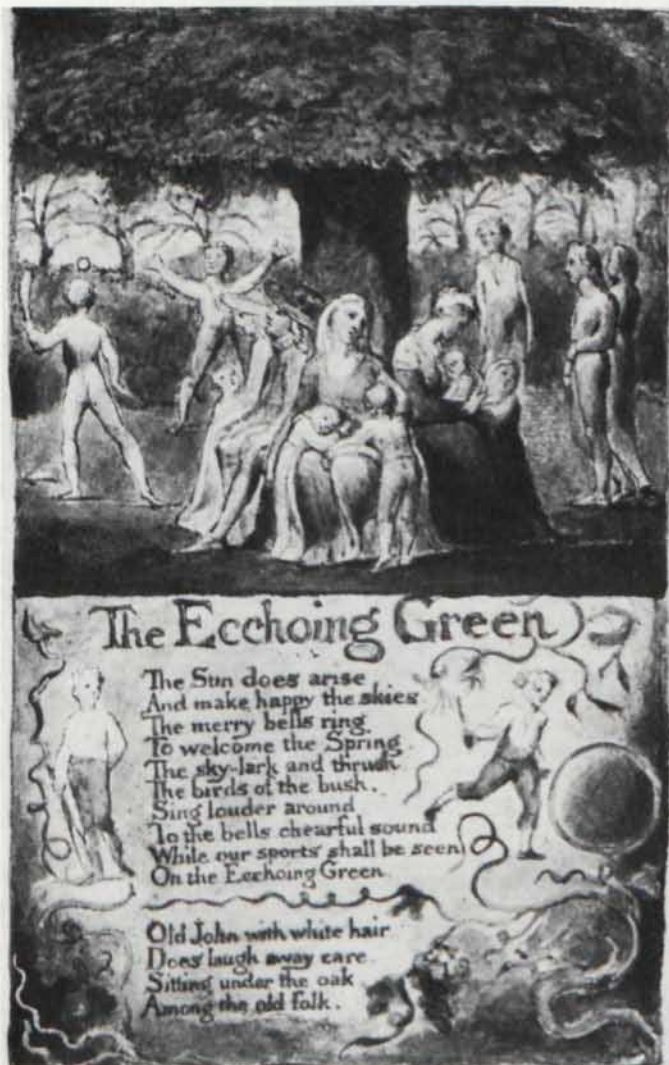
might have a meaning quite different from that which the adult of the design (or indeed of the readership) might assume. Instead of describing the end of the sport, they might describe the fact that it is no longer *seen*, though continuing nevertheless; and extending this suggestion by introducing a different audience for the last lines, they can be read as an

imperative, "don't *let* your sports be seen."

Leaving this possibility at the point where we have to decide about the pros and cons of such secrecy, if we indeed credit its presence, I want to discuss the image of the tree, which is one of the leading purposes of this essay. Gleckner finds this "tantalizingly vague" (p. 92) but, as we have seen, generally negative, a reading which he expands and qualifies in his fine account of "The Little Black Boy" (p. 106). It is certainly a forceful image, and Eben Bass has noted that "Old John" in the second plate "is in the central authoritative position of the oak tree of the first drawing,"⁴ a metonymic substitution which can be seen as either benevolent or repressive. There is indeed some connection between the two as images of age and perhaps of mutability, the tree being just as perishable as the old man, albeit on a grander time-scale.⁵



1 "The Ecchoing Green;" electrotype of the first plate, showing the tree as it appears in the earlier versions. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



2 "The Ecchoing Green," copy AA. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Indeed, the tree seems to perish somewhat in the historical time-scale of Blake's own vision, for in his recoloring of the later versions of the first plate it is presented quite differently. Early copies depict the bottom edge of what we take to be a fully canopied tree, its upper portions cut off from view by the edge of the plate itself (illus. 1). Copy B of *Songs of Innocence* and copies I and T of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (the latter watermarked 1815) all show the tree in this way, and this is in accordance with the details of the electrotpe, which shows finely articulated foliage and a naturalistically ragged edge to the bottom of the canopy. In short, there is nothing about this tree which suggests that it is not the "oak" described in stanza two.

By the time of copies V, W, Z, and AA, however, the canopy of the tree has been flattened and rounded into an umbrella shape (illus. 2), so that the whole tree is now depicted within the frame of the plate, and the bottom edge of the canopy has been straightened (most strikingly so in the Z copy).⁶ This disturbs the naturalism of the representation. If this is an oak tree then it is a very odd one, by no means the monarch of the green but a squashed and somewhat stunted relic of the tree of the earlier versions. In addition, there is in the late copies a clear gap between the bottom of the canopy and the top of the hedgerow in the distance. This is variously filled in with vegetative tracery in various copies; in the V copy, for example, the detailing is very fine, and has the effect of locating the tree firmly in the middle distance. In other copies, however, a great deal of sky is showing (yellow-pink in W, pale blue in Z and AA), and the net effect is to suggest (if no more) the image of a face, with the trunk representing a nose, the rounded canopy a forehead, and the lateral patches of sky providing the "eyes."⁷

I think that we should consider at least three possibilities here: (1) that the tree in its later versions is not an oak at all, but some other species; (2) that it is an oak in some way modified or distorted; (3) that no particular species of tree is signified, or, to put the case in a more inclusive way, that the image is not to be exhausted by any specific signification, but is intended to reflect back upon the observer, challenging him or her to substitute spiritual for corporeal vision (the suggestion that the tree images a face could obviously have a place in such a challenge).

The appeal of the third option is that it offers to include all others, and I do believe that there is evidence for it. But the inclusion is an active process, in which Blake (as I read him) was able to maintain both the particularity of response to a historical situation and the wider awareness of an eternal vision. The vehicle for this inclusiveness is the ambivalence of the image. Thus it is important that we build toward a case for the third of the above options, since everything invoked along the way is part of that achieved statement. Blake's aesthetic vocabulary locates the responsibility for *choices* firmly with the observer; criticism thus has something of an obligation to try to identify the *range* of choices he might have foreseen.

First, we may consider the possibility that the tree of the late copies is not an oak but some other species. There is not much evidence for this, as I see it, but there is one interesting possibility. Blake's tree looks nothing like the standard form of the cedar of Lebanon, *cedrus libani*, which has its branches spreading out very close to the ground, each of which is topped by dense, flat canopies, the whole looking something like a candelabrum. But there were two very famous cedars in the Chelsea gardens, which Blake would probably have seen. They were the first trees of this species planted in Britain, and Loudon notes that both of them "have lost all their lower branches and have a miserable and stunted appearance."⁸ He further describes the tops as being "blunt or flattened" (p. 194). Given this feature of the London landscape, it is not impossible that Blake may be meaning to depict one of the Chelsea cedars. What might he have meant to signify thereby?

The cedar of Lebanon is a tree which scarcely occurs in Blake's work, though it is mentioned as a feature of the idyllic landscape recalled in Enion's lament in *The Four Zoas* (E 369, K 354). It is of course the tree of the Bible, the image of perpetuity and the tree from which temples were built and idols carved—probably not a positive implication for Blake.⁹ But as the tree of the Holy Land introduced into a foreign country, as it was into England in 1683 (Loudon, p. 2405), it would suggest obvious analogues with the message of Christ supervening, or failing to supervene, upon the pagan practices of oak-worshipping Druid forefathers, and perhaps contemporaries. The distorted shape of the Chelsea cedars would thus ask to be considered as an emblem of the fate of the divine message in an inhospitable context.

Leaving the case for or against the cedar of Lebanon—and my own sense is that it is a slim one—I shall pass on to the second possibility, that Blake means us to recognize a different kind of "oak" from the standard guardian of the green, as indeed of Augustan civilization in general. Once again, he could have had in mind a particular oak tree. Strutt describes the "Chandos Oak" at Michendon House, Southgate, Middlesex, in some detail, and includes an illustration (illus. 3):

When it is in the full luxuriance of its foliage, it strikes the spectator with sensations similar to those inspired by the magnificent Banyan trees of the East. Its boughs bending to the earth, with almost artificial regularity of form and equidistance from each other, give it the appearance of a gigantic tent, its verdant draperies drawn up to admit the refreshing breezes that curl the myriads of leaves, which form altogether, what may be called a living mass of vegetable beauty and grandeur, scarcely to be equalled by any other production of the same nature in the kingdom. (*Sylva Britannica*, p. 11)

This was a famous tree (described also by Loudon, p. 1763), and one not too far from Blake's haunts; notice particularly the reference to its "artificial regularity of form." If Blake is indeed mirroring the Chandos Oak there cannot but be an ironic purpose;



the stately icon of free-standing aristocracy has been reduced to a shrunken backrest for the denizens of village greens.

Much more likely, to my mind, is the notion that Blake means to suggest, not a specific tree but a "different" kind of oak, the pollard oak. The process of pollarding involved cutting down the growth of the main trunk, and was carried out either to provide shade (by encouraging an early growth outward instead of upward)--and in this context such trees were and still are common on English village greens--or to yield a regular crop of poles for the rural economy. Bruegel's *The Gloomy Day (February)* shows in the right foreground of its landscape a peasant harvesting poles from a pollard willow (illus. 4). Oak poles

3 The Chandos Oak.

4 Bruegel's "The Gloomy Day (February)," 1565 (detail). Reproduced by permission of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

5 John Crome's "Pollard Tree Study" (post 1810). Reproduced by permission of the Ipswich Museums.



would have been useful for fencing, but in the southern counties they seem to have been used principally for hop poles. Marshall's *County Reports* notes that

the oak and willow furnish poles for hops, and materials for laths; whilst what are termed *black poles*, which are those of larger size, and confined to oak, are applied in rafters and other purposes in building.¹⁰

If the pollard oak is indeed Blake's intended image, this still does not tell us how to "read" it. On the one hand, the business of pollarding is a suggestive emblem of man's aggressive interference in nature, and a possible image of castration. The fact that the thick vegetation embellishing the early versions of the first plate of "The Ecchoing Green" seems to have been considerably thinned out in the later versions may be Blake's corollary to a general outcry against the gradual deforestation of the English landscape (see, e. g., *County Reports*, V, 78-79). On the other hand, the pollarding of the tree renders its wood useful for the rural and peacetime economy only, and not at all fit to provide the timber required for the building of England's navy. It was precisely the long, curved, fully grown branches which were essential for shipbuilding.

As Evelyn has put the case in *Sylva*, a treatise reprinted at least four times in the eighteenth century:

if you would propagate *Trees for Timber*, cut not off their *heads* at all, nor be too busy with lopping; but if you desire *Shade*, and *Fuel*, or bearing of *Mast* alone, lop off their *Tops*. . . .¹¹

Evelyn, for whom oak trees are "the truest *Oracles* of the *perpetuity* of our *happiness*" (p. 111), indeed argues against the habit of pollarding because "it makes so many *scrags* and *dwarfs* of many *Trees* which would else be good *Timber*" (p. 77).

Thus, on the positive side, the pollard oak might suggest itself as a happy icon of the integration of nature and nurture. The tree remains alive, and yet produces some contribution toward "civilization," whereas its use in shipbuilding would destroy it entirely. I have not been able to discover much evidence in eighteenth century landscape poetry for this use of the image of the pollard, though of course Blake was not an artist constrained by precedent or tradition.¹² Moreover, as I have said, the pollard tree was a very common feature of the English landscape, and this is all the stimulus Blake might have

needed. We can see them dotted around the landscapes of the Norwich School, for example in the work of John Crome, whose *Pollard--Tree Study* is not unlike a younger specimen of Blake's tree (illus. 5). Some of Constable's paintings also feature pollards, for example *Parham Mill, Gillingham* (1826) and *The Valley Farm* (exhibited 1835). In none of these cases does there seem to be any suggestion of a conscious iconography, and Craig's *Lectures on Drawing* seems to consider the pollard aesthetically ambivalent:

Lopping and pollarding also produce wonderful changes on the aspect of trees, sometimes rendering them highly picturesque, and sometimes disgusting; but always disproportioned from their natural character.¹³

Nor does the rest of Blake's work offer any sure clues. There may be a reference to a pollarded oak in the reply of Albion's angel to Orc and the American Revolution in *America*. The angel describes the inhibition of the governors of the States before the courageous stand of Washington and the "rebels," and tells us what his "punishing Demons" cannot do:

They cannot smite with sorrows, nor subdue
the plow and spade.
They cannot wall the city, nor moat round the
castle of princes.
They cannot bring the stubbed oak to overgrow
the hills.

(E 53, K 199)¹⁴

The term "stubbing" here may also mean something like "cut down to a stump," but it certainly reads as a gesture of aggressive interference and may relate to the use of foreign timbers for Albion's navies.

The tree of the late copies of "The Ecchoing Green" is itself echoed in an interesting way by Samuel Palmer, whose *Early Morning* of 1825 (now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) repeats almost exactly the shape and proportion of Blake's tree. There is tantalizingly implicit evidence that Palmer could have taken the image straight from Blake. We know that the two men met, probably in 1824, at a time when Blake was working on the *Job* designs. The first and last of these uses the image of the tree in the center of the composition, and the first, "Thus did Job continually," was lying on the table when Palmer arrived.¹⁵ Blake was also working on the Dante designs, being bedridden and unable to complete *Job* (*Blake Records*, p. 291), during one of Palmer's visits, and the Dante designs are full of images of trees, mostly with the implication of materiality. But none of these hints does more than suggest that

6 Samuel Palmer's "Early Morning." Reproduced by permission of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

7 Dancing around the "liberty tree." Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.





REFRAINS PATRIOTIQUES

*Si vous aimez la Danse,
Venez accourir tous,
Boire du Vin de France, (bis)
Et danser avec nous.*

*Dansons la carmagnole
Vive le son vive le son,
Dansons la carmagnole
Vive le son du canon.*

*Ah! ça ira ça ira ça ira,
Le Peuple en ce jour sans cesse repète
Ah! ça ira ça ira ça ira,
Rejoûssons nous le bon temps quand ira.*

A Paris Rue du Théâtre Français, 91^e f.

Palmer was exposed to a range of tree motifs in Blake's work, and we do not need them to claim that the tree of *Early Morning* might have come straight from Blake's village green. Palmer's intention behind the choice of image (illus. 6) is not to my mind explicit, but it is not dissimilar from some of the implications in Blake. Palmer's landscapes are usually reckoned to be consciously sexualized; we note the phallic log in the left foreground, and the stem from which it came standing behind it. The larger tree may then well be a pollard, imaging a less catastrophic but nevertheless sinister element of human interference. Yet I cannot find in this picture any evidence of a coherent onslaught on husbandry, and the "mushroom" shape of the tree could just as credibly be read as an image of surfaced energy and growth. Ultimately, the comparison is interesting for its suggestion that Palmer might have noticed and interpreted for himself the redesigned form of Blake's monarch oak.

In the context of the scene depicted in "The Echoing Green" the most obvious purpose of the pollarding (if that is indeed what it is) would have been to provide shade and shelter. We shall see later that this could well have been seen as a negative function by Blake. For the moment, I wish to point out another "touchstone" which he might have meant to suggest in his modification of the image of the tree.

An important element in the highly self-conscious iconography of the French Revolution had been the so-called "liberty trees." The flattened site of the Bastille had been planted with 86 trees, one for each province of the new federation, and this was the signal for a national campaign in tree planting (illus. 7). It seems likely that oak and laurel were the species most commonly used. There is a letter by Grimm containing an account of a comic opera called *Le Chêne patriotique*:

The idea of this piece is as simple as its title. In the first act, an oak tree is chosen from the forest; in the second, it is transplanted into the village square to serve as a monument to the liberty regained on the fourteenth of July.¹⁶

The oak thus signified the new growth of political freedom incumbent upon the fall of the Bastille and implicitly suggested the new harmony of man and nature which would characterize the new society. Wordsworth recalls this as part of the Solitary's recollections of the early days of the Revolution in *The Excursion*:

Meanwhile, prophetic harps
In every grove were ringing, 'War shall cease;
Did ye not hear that conquest is abjured?

Bring garlands, bring forth choicest flowers,
to deck
The tree of Liberty. '--My heart rebounded;
My melancholy voice the chorus joined;
--'Be joyful all ye nations; in all lands,
Ye that are capable of joy be glad.
Henceforth, whate'er is wanting to yourselves
In others ye shall promptly find; and all,
Enriched by mutual and reflected wealth,
Shall with one heart honour their common kind.'

(III, 722-33)¹⁷

Liberty trees seem to have died out after the early, populist days of the Revolution, and it may be that Blake, in modifying the "growth" of his own tree, is imaging the similar falling off in radical political optimism which was taking place in England in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, a period during which libertarian ideals were indeed being polled.

Before passing on to the third (and synoptic) option suggested above, that Blake's modified tree is a deliberately multivalent image designed to stimulate *questions* about its significations, I want to discuss at some length certain analogues to "The Ecchoing Green," first in the tradition of pastoral poetry which Blake inherits and certainly has in mind, and second in other areas of Blake's own work, chiefly the illustrations to Gray and to Milton. These additions will provide further echoes which will need to be gathered within our final perspective.

Blake's poem is offered quite overtly as a variation upon a theme of Goldsmith's, and perhaps also refers to similar variations by Crabbe; Blake's "innocence" has, it seems, a self-conscious ancestry in Augustan experience. Here is the famous passage from "The Deserted Village" which stands as an antetype to Blake's lyric:

How often have I blest the coming day,
When toil remitting lent its turn to play,
And all the village train from labour free
Led up their sports beneath the spreading tree,
While many a pastime circled in the shade,
The young contending as the old surveyed;
And many a gambol frolicked o'er the ground,
And slights of art and feats of strength went round.
And still as each repeated pleasure tired,
Succeeding sports the mirthful band inspired;
The dancing pair that simply sought renown
By holding out to tire each other down,
The swain mistrustless of his smutted face,
While secret laughter tittered round the place,
The bashful virgin's side-long looks of love,
The matron's glance that would those looks reprove.
These were thy charms, sweet village; sports like these,
With sweet succession, taught even toil to please;
These round thy bowers their chearful influence shed,
These were thy charms--But all these charms are fled.¹⁸

An antetype, that is, in its images, which Blake will choose to echo in a different way. For Goldsmith's revellers are of both sexes, and their mutual sexual interest is quite apparent (even if reproved), whereas Blake suggests this only pictorially in his second plate. But Goldsmith's speaker is himself suffering from the loss of what he describes, and his version of the darkening green has explicit social and political causes:

Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,
Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn;
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,
And desolation saddens all thy green:

All that is positive about the vision is thus directed toward a negative verdict upon the present. The pastoral idyll belongs firmly in the past, and could be restored only by a return to the organic rural community which Goldsmith celebrates, embodied in self-sufficient husbandry. The images of nascent sexuality, suggestive of progress and fruition, are thus brought in to make the eclipse of this community seem all the more deplorable. Implicitly, of course, this now vanished community also had a place for the speaker/poet, whereas poetry written in the "present" must remain unrewarded, given that its obligations are negative and censorious:

Thou source of all my bliss, and all my woe,
That found'st me poor at first, and keep'st me so;

(p. 303)

Blake, conversely, provides a speaker who appears to be on the edge of (sexual) experience, a child in late infancy or early adolescence; and the darkening, as Gleckner has pointed out, contains a potentially educative and ongoing ingredient. Blake has removed not only the explicit "sociology" of the earlier poem, but also its cunning and Urizenic egocentricity. For he might well have seen Goldsmith to be manipulating a familiar pastoral trope as a way of explaining the unrewarded status of the poet. Goldsmith has left the land along with the émigrés he describes, and he is Urizenic in that he projects himself as the passive recorder and receiver of an objective experience brought about by the rise of trade and luxury and outside his control. Blake, on the other hand, offers something akin to a choice of self by having his poem remain on the verge of "meaning." Because its iconographic elements have to be resolved through the active and responsible participation of a reader/holder, it can avoid contributing authoritatively to an overt mythology of loss.

Crabbe's poem "The Village" (1783), as is well known, explicitly quotes and answers Goldsmith, and in this respect it also anticipates Blake. Crabbe refuses the sociological rationale of his predecessor, but in order to replace it with the entirely negative vision of fallen humanity, unorganized and--perhaps consequently, for him--uncharitable:

Where are the swains, who, daily labour done,
With rural games play'd down the setting sun;
Who struck with matchless force the bounding ball,

Or made the pond'rous quoit obliquely fall;
 While some huge Ajax, terrible and strong,
 Engaged some artful stripling of the throng,
 And fell beneath him, foil'd, while far around
 Hoarse triumph rose, and rocks return'd the
 sound?
 Where now are these?--Beneath yon cliff they
 stand,
 To show the freighted pinnace where to land:
 To load the ready steed with guilty haste,
 To fly in terror o'er the pathless waste, . . .¹⁹

They have all, in other words, turned to smuggling, and they are none too choosy about how they protect themselves in their trade. The direction of Crabbe's irony, of course, implies that there never have been such swains, no such idyllic societies of harmonious misrule where artful striplings outwit and outweigh the bullies of this world. Crabbe does not suggest that any political or economic change in rural society is responsible for this situation. He means us to conclude that Goldsmith's vision is one of sentimental self-deception. Old John gets no comfort, vicarious or otherwise, in this poem:

For yonder see that hoary swain, whose age
 Can with no cares except his own engage;
 Who, propp'd on that rude staff, looks up to see
 The bare arms broken from the withering tree,
 On which, a boy, he climb'd the loftiest bough,
 Then his first joy, but his sad emblem now.
 (p. 5)

For Crabbe, age produces only selfishness, along with the "cares" which Blake's old man laughs away, and memory offers no comfort or security. The relation between the generations is dominated by the presence of mutability and death:

The village children now their games suspend,
 To see the bier that bears their ancient friend:
 For he was one in all their idle sport,
 And like a monarch ruled their little court;
 The pliant bow he form'd, the flying ball,
 The bat, the wicket, were his labours all;
 Him now they follow to his grave, and stand
 Silent and sad, and gazing, hand in hand;
 While bending low, their eager eyes explore
 The mingled relics of the parish poor:
 (p. 9)

There is no pleasure on Crabbe's green, beyond "gleams of transient mirth" (p. 9). Any relaxation incurs the masters' resentment that a potential working day should be wasted, and peasant society is eroded from within by slander and drunkenness. Sporting gives way to brawling.

Crabbe's vision is thus just as determinate and trenchant as Goldsmith's, but at the opposite end of the spectrum. Once again, we see how Blake avoids committing himself to a similarly authoritarian posture by maintaining a difficult and tentative relation between text and design. Crabbe's tree is a withered one, and an emblem of the old man's progress toward death. Blake's association between old man and tree is suggested only by visual substitution, so that the exact signification of the relation is not to be proven.

Blake's poem can thus be seen to avoid both the serious pessimism of Crabbe and the perhaps indulgent simplicity of Goldsmith. Urizen's lament over his fallen world in *The Four Zoas* explicitly invokes the images of "The Ecchoing Green":

Art thou O ruin the once glorious heaven are
 these thy rocks
 Where joy sang in the trees & pleasure sported
 on the rivers

And laughter sat beneath the Oaks & innocence
 sported round
 Upon the green plains & sweet friendship met in
 palaces
 And books & instruments of song & pictures of
 delight
 Where are they whelmd beneath these ruins in
 horrible destruction

(E 343, K 317)

Implicitly it recalls also Goldsmith who, like Urizen, fails to realize that his world is of his own making, and that to subject oneself to an outside authority for one's formative myths, or their failure, is merely a delusion of the object-bound vegetative eye. Urizen/Goldsmith thus represents an embittered "Old John" figure who resents and laments his own unfulfilled potential, and is now wasting his adult years in hopeless retrospection. This is not to say, of course, that this is all there is to Goldsmith's position, nor that Blake intended "The Ecchoing Green" to stand as a complete dismissal of it. But it seems not unlikely that Blake's sense of the interdependence of the described object and the mind of the describer would have led him to question the position of Goldsmith's poet in his vision of the disappearance of the rural community.

Blake might have found a precursor for this stringent examination of the habit of "pastoralization" in a yet earlier poet. I know of no evidence to suggest that Blake read John Dyer, but *The Fleece* was very popular in the eighteenth century, and it includes a version of the tropes we are discussing which would be worth attention if only for its own sake:

At shearing-time, along the lively vales,
 Rural festivities are often heard:
 Beneath each blooming arbour all is joy
 And lusty merriment: while on the grass
 The mingled youth in gaudy circles sport,
 We think the golden age again returned,
 And all the fabled Dryades in dance.
 Leering they bound along, with laughing air,
 To the shrill pipe, and deep remurmuring cords
 Of the ancient harp, or tabor's hollow sound.

While the old apart, upon a bank reclined,
 Attend the tuneful carol, softly mixed
 With every murmur of the sliding wave,
 And every warble of the feathered choir;
 Music of paradise! which still is heard,
 When the heart listens; still the views appear
 Of the first happy garden, when content
 To Nature's flowery scenes directs the sight.
 Yet we abandon those Elysian walks,
 Then idly for the lost delight repine:

As greedy mariners, whose desperate sails
Skim o'er the billows of the foaming flood,
Fancy they see the lessening shores retire,
And sigh a farewell to the sinking hills.

(Bk. I, 601-24)²⁰

The self-defeating paradox of activity presented as passivity, which I am suggesting Blake might have found in Goldsmith (and which he certainly dramatized in *Urizen*), is expressed perfectly here. The loss of the paradisaical image is self-incurred; we abandon it and then lament its absence as an externally imposed necessity. The simile of the greedy sailors hotfooting it for the colonies suggests that in this case the motives for the abandonment are corrupt and commercial ones. This occasions a comic version of the pathetic fallacy as the sailors see the shores "retire" and the hills "sinking." They fail, in other words, to understand their own responsibility for what they "see," and in the same way the image of an ideal rural past serves as a sentimental avoidance of the responsibility for a crudely self-seeking status quo. The "objectivity" of that past is insinuated to cover over our motives for perpetuating the present, so that we can tell ourselves that this "present" is not really what we want. Here, Dyer exposes the role of the pastoral image in the propaganda of Augustan mercantilism (and colonialism), which mystifies the authority of the present by presenting it as necessarily consequent upon a prior fall of man. As long as we remain convinced that we cannot regain the ideal past, we need not face the challenge of trying to construct it again, or in a new way.

This view of the images of pastoralism seems to me very close to Blake's own. The "pastness" of the idyll is emphasized as an active construction of the present, and our good faith is questioned if we blandly endorse that pastness.

The idea that "The Ecchoing Green" is Blake's commentary on a well-developed tradition in eighteenth century poetry, and indeed may in its various versions provide the vehicle for a continuing commentary thereon, is substantiated by the inclusion of its major icons among the designs for Gray's *Poems* which Blake was commissioned to produce in 1797. This connection is of course well known; the first plate of "The Ecchoing Green" is recalled in one of the pages at the end of Gray's "Elegy," and the second appears in illustration of the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College."

To take the second first (illus. 8): a boy in a tree is handing down what we take to be a nest of linnet to a girl waiting below. Beside her, but ignoring this incident, another boy is reading a book, whilst a third boy is running energetically away from this group, playing with a hoop (like the marginal figure in the first plate of "The Ecchoing Green," but here much more vigorous). In the distance two figures can be discerned under a tree.²¹ The poem pursues the familiar theme of lost youth, and the melancholy continuity of the generations as they pass through the same roles from youth to maturity, and culminates in the famous lines

Yet, ah! why should they know their fate!
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more--where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.

Once again, in other words, the eighteenth century poet deals in despair and inevitability, an authoritative prediction of decline and disappointment. The most complete reading of these plates is that of Irene Tayer, in her *Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Gray* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), and her thesis for this poem is that Blake's first five designs are deliberately limp and listless in order to suggest the connection between a vapid pastoral mode and the "horrors" shown in the last four pages. Of the fifth design, the one we are considering, she comments that

The cumulative effect of these young people, for whom reading is one of a group of rather infantile--certainly childish "innocent"--occupations, is to suggest that life is bland, and best encountered with placid indifference.

(p. 37)

I do not wish to defy this thesis on any large scale, but there is more to be said about this particular design. The motif of the plundering of the tree, which Blake uses as it were parodically in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,²² may here also be a negative image, signalling a senseless interference with the life of nature. But the nest is at the same time a sign of exchange between the sexes, for which there is no authority in Gray's poem. There were no girls at Eton. And even if this is a negative or unfruitful exchange, according rather than contrasting with the boy reading the book, I am unable to see the boy with the hoop as a mere depiction of the "idle progeny" indicated in the text. There is more than idleness and listlessness in this plate, even if it resides at the level of misdirected or as yet unfulfilled potential.

The image of the bird's nest appears in a popular engraving published in 1798 (illus. 9) and may speak for a popular iconography relating to the principle of sexual exchange. The young adult mediates between the two young children, the girl plucking flowers (perhaps roses) and the boy proffering the nest of young birds. These two figures, who are in the "spring" of life (though they could also be brother and sister), are to be compared with those on the right hand side of the design, described as "summer." The latter are of an age when adult love becomes possible, and the tree here acts as a motif dividing the two halves of the allegory, which can also be distinguished in terms of social status and occupation. On the left is bourgeois leisure, on the right peasant labour, where even the women work. It is tempting also to suggest a contrast between the

8 Design number 17 from Blake's watercolor illustrations to Gray's *Poems* (Eton College Ode). From the collection of Paul Mellon.

OF ETON COLLEGE.

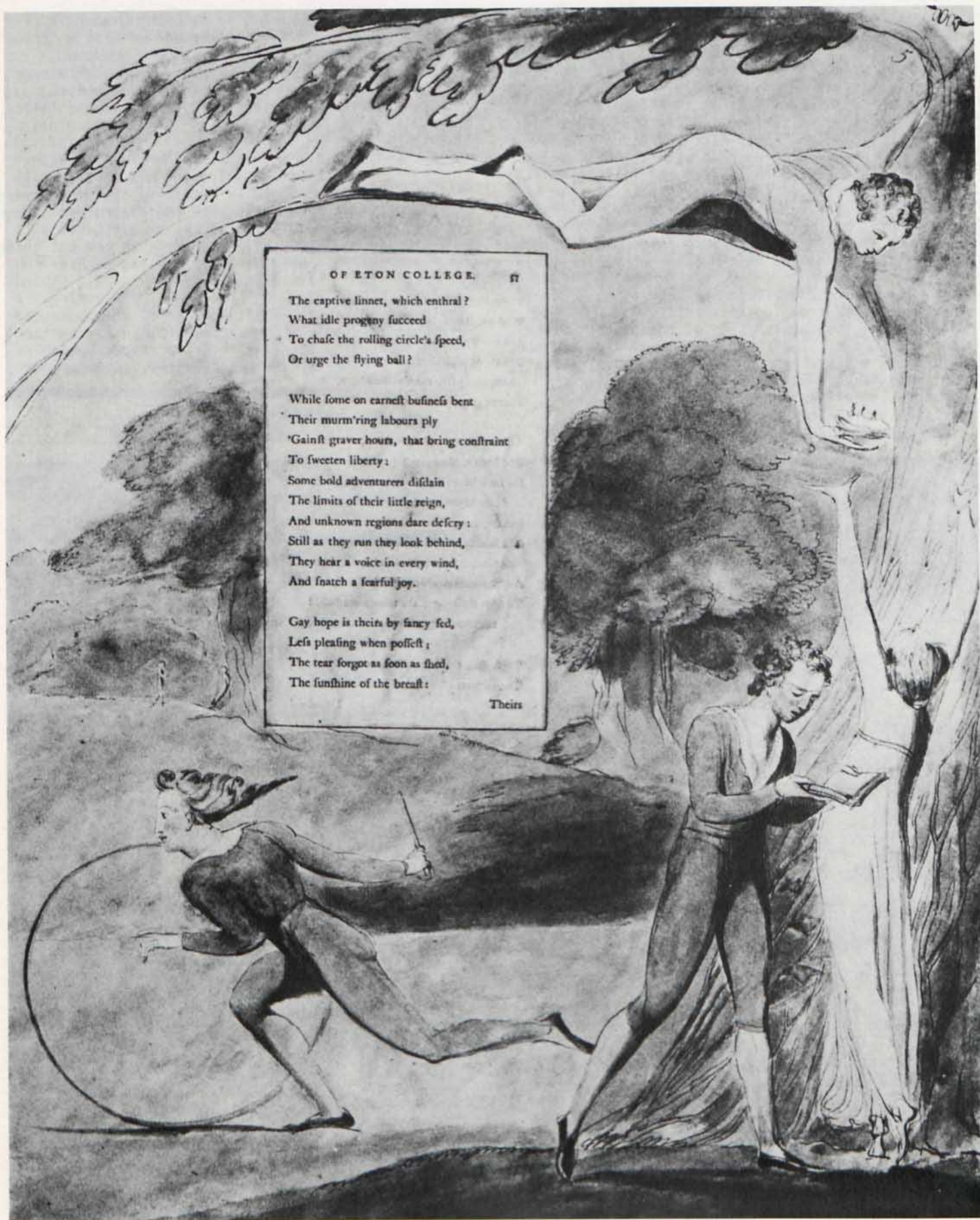
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The captive linner, which enthal?
 What idle progeny succeed
 To chase the rolling circle's speed,
 Or urge the flying ball?

While some on earnest business bent
 Their murmur'ing labours ply
 'Gainst graver hours, that bring constraint
 To sweeten liberty:
 Some bold adventurers disdain
 The limits of their little reign,
 And unknown regions dare descry:
 Still as they run they look behind,
 They hear a voice in every wind,
 And snatch a fearful joy.

Gay hope is theirs by fancy fed,
 Less pleasing when possesst;
 The tear forgot as soon as shed,
 The sunshine of the breast:

Theirs



plundering of nature on the left (the robbed nest, plucked flowers, and the caged or tamed bird) and the husbanding of nature on the right. In this use of the tree as a principle of compositional and thematic division, we might compare Morland's drawing *Midday Rest at the Bell Inn*, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (illus. 10), where the sportsmen on the right have obviously taken over the tavern and its ladies and are regarded with suggestive coolness by the seated rustics on the left.²³ The first plate of "The Ecchoing Green" does use the tree to divide activity from leisure, or play from rest, but the point may be that the "division" is not important, since the figures seem to be all of the same sex (though an age distinction may be implied).

To return to the allegorical engraving in the context of Blake's design for Gray's "Ode," it is certainly the "bourgeois" side of things that Blake means to suggest. The images of labor which are so dominant in the series are absent from this composition, yet the absence of adults and the evident exchange between the sexes indicates to my mind a less straightforward view of the scene than Tayler's thesis would suggest.

The first plate of "The Ecchoing Green" is present in modified form at the end of Gray's "Elegy" in the tenth design for that poem. A group of mothers and young children are sitting under a tree in the right foreground, and one of the mothers points to a funeral procession passing behind (illus. 11). Tayler says of this that

The pastoral bounty of the scene in the foreground--mothers and children, and particularly the nursing infant, in a setting of lush greenery--provides a contrast with the drab order of the distant funeral march at the same time that it reminds us that the end of life is not the grave but eternal rebirth, that "new and greater sunrise." (p. 142)

Tayler moves to this position from an acceptance of Hirsch's reading of "The Ecchoing Green"; from the perspective of Gleckner's interpretation, we could presumably come to other conclusions. The greenery,

9 "Spring and Summer": a popular print of 1798, photographed from a copy belonging to John Barrell.



to my mind, is not particularly lush, and even if it were, as we shall see, we would not have to read this as a positive image. It may be worth pointing out that three of Blake's four children are not looking at the funeral at all, and there may be a sign here of an infantile non-recognition of death and its melancholy and moralized trappings. We recall Crabbe's conjunction of the children with the funeral, and suspect that Blake may once again be forcing a distinction between the generations of the kind hinted at in "The Ecchoing Green." But it does seem that the two children on the right of the design are peculiarly static and erect, almost like miniature adults, and may speak for the constraining influences on childhood in Gray's society. To be honest, I am unsure how to read this plate, but I incline toward a negative reading of the "pastoral bounty" (with the exception of at least two of the children) from the evidence of the other designs for the same poem wherein powerful and energetic images of peasant labor contrast forcefully with the effete icons of the "poet" and his literary baggage. In the fourth design, for example, the head and trunk of the massive gravedigger are "obscured" by the text, rather suggestively, and we "see" only the energyless figures of the priest and the mourners. Most of the figures of the tenth design seem to me to belong to this latter class.

Before moving on to attempt some kind of summary of Blake's concept of pastoral, there is one more important connection to be discussed. The images of Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" anticipate those of "The Ecchoing Green," and Blake produced illustrations for these poems in the years 1816-20.

In the first of Milton's poems there is a passage which relates specifically to the scenario of Blake's lyric. It describes a holiday shared between the sexes and between the generations, a time

When the merry bells ring round,
And the jocund rebecks sound
To many a youth, and many a maid,
Dancing in the chequered shade;
And young and old come forth to play
On a sunshine holiday,
Till the livelong daylight fail,
Then to the spicy nut-brown ale,
With stories told of many a feat,²⁴

and so on. Milton, unlike Blake in his text alone, continues his account beyond nightfall. The revellers pass on to drinking ale and telling stories of the rural supernatural, stories which, like the events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on which Milton draws for this poem, project implicitly sexual undertones. This may well be one of the clues Blake responded to for his image of the older children picking the grapes; it does at any rate suggest an ongoing nocturnal aspect to the sunshine holiday. His illustration for this particular episode (illus. 12) shows a landscape densely populated by trees, with a face in at least one of them, this time a clear face drawn within the foliage of the tree in the right foreground.²⁵ The revelling is done by the young adults or adolescents of both sexes, with the old people

and young children looking on. Once again, it seems that Blake is insisting on a separation between the generations, as if to imply that progress must be made with one's peers and not with one's parents. Blake left some notes for these designs, but they are teasingly literal. He says of this one, for example, that "Mountains Clouds Rivers Trees appear Humanized on the Sunshine Holiday" (E 664, K 618), but he leaves us to estimate the import of this humanization. Grant finds this to be "one of the happiest visions in Blake" (p. 122), though even he admits that the humanized mountains appear to be in distress. Butlin, conversely, finds that the allegory of nature "forms an oppressive accompaniment, perhaps signifying the negative materialism of the state of Innocence."²⁶ So, we have a choice again. Blake wrote to Butts in October 1800 of the visionary identity of man and nature:

Each rock & each hill
Each fountain & rill
Each herb & each tree
Mountain hill Earth & Sea
Cloud Meteor & Star
Are Men Seen Afar
(E 683, K 805)

and we recall again the possibility of an anthropomorphic figuration of the tree in the later versions of "The Ecchoing Green." But this does not tell us how to interpret the more definite humanization of the landscape of "A Sunshine Holiday," for it could be read as mere allegory, depicting the fallen separation of self and other which Blake saw enacted in the birth of priesthood, abstracting "The mental deities from their objects" (E 37, K 153). The tilt of the face in the tree, read by Kiralis (p. 63) with some credibility as the face of Christ, mimics or images that of the old man beneath, and there is a beckoning finger pointing upwards which may be calling him to an afterlife. If so, then the figures in the sky above may indicate another incarnation for the old man, locating him as part of a cycle intimated also in the presence of the children he holds by the hand. Kiralis identifies the figures in the sky as images of "the sexual-spiritual life abundant" (p. 63), but it is to be noted that both the old man and the allegorical female recumbent on the mountain have one hand--opposite hands--on their heart or breast. Is the old man dying, as the female, who may be a personification of moisture or cloud (note that she seems to be the source of the water or river), is disintegrating by evaporation or precipitation? If so, then the animate forms spiralling away from her body could suggest yet another transition to another "form" of existence, and an extension of the cycle in which the old man has his place. The whole design certainly responds to being read as a depiction of mutability, and the allegorical female might thus endorse the mortal acceptance of change and decay. No one did so more willingly than Christ, who may be the figure in the tree, and we are reminded also of Blake's Milton as he accepts the passage back into experience. The net effect might be to establish the necessary unity of all the stages in our vegetative and spiritual life, and in this it anticipates the "synoptic" reading of "The Ecchoing Green" with which I shall conclude this essay. For this unity



is one of the lessons of *The Book of Thel*, imparted by the cloud:

O virgin know'st thou not. our steeds drink of
the golden springs
Where Luvah doth renew his horses: look'st thou
on my youth,
And fearest thou because I vanish and am seen
no more.
Nothing remains; O maid I tell thee, when I pass
away,
It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and
raptures holy:

(E 4, K 128)²⁷

The juxtaposition of sunshine and trees recurs in "Il Penseroso," and in the design which Rose sees as complementary/antithetical to that for "A Sunshine Holiday." Milton's poet is pleading for an unmolested landscape:

And when the sun begins to fling
His flaring beams, me goddess bring
To arched walks of twilight groves,
And shadows brown that Sylvan loves
Of pine, or monumental oak,

Where the rude axe with heaved stroke,
Was never heard the nymphs to daunt,
Or fright them from their hallowed haunt.

(*Poems*, p. 145)

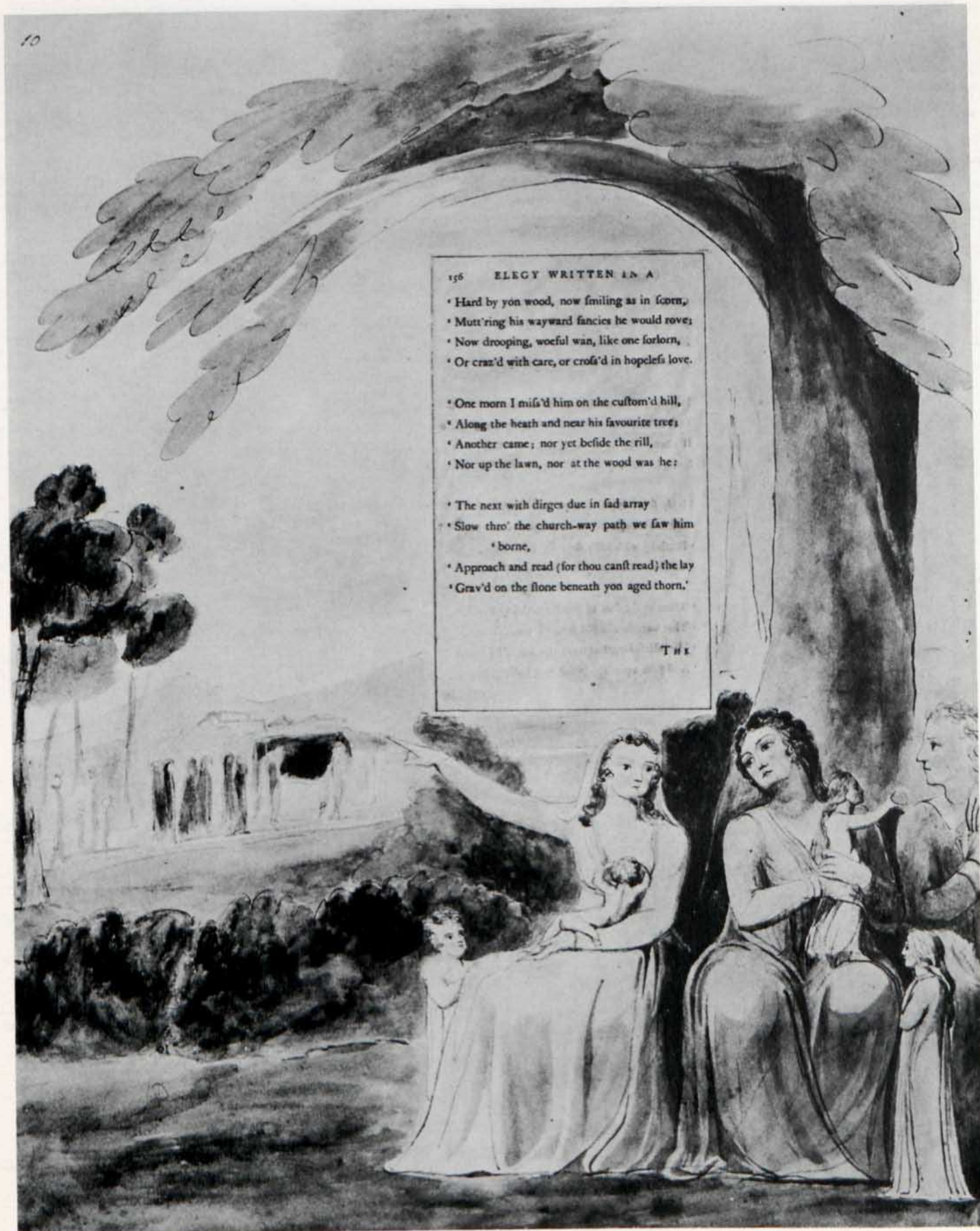
He seeks a grove where there is neither pollarding nor felling; hence, no rural husbandry and no ship-building. Blake's design (illus. 13) shows the young poet, carrying a book, being led into the grove by the goddess. The sun is personified as a naked, frontal figure of energy, "throwing his darts &

10 Morland's "Midday Rest at the Bell Inn" (undated). Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

11 Design number 114, Gray's *Poems* (Elegy . . . in a Country Church-yard). From the collection of Paul Mellon.

12 Blake's "A Sunshine Holiday" (*L'Allegro*). Reproduced by permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library.

13 Blake's "The Sun in his Wrath" (*Il Penseroso*). Reproduced by permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library.



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ELEGY WRITTEN IN A

* Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
 * Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove;
 * Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
 * Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

* One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
 * Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
 * Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
 * Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he:

* The next with dirges due in sad array
 * Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him
 * borne,
 * Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay
 * 'Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

THE





flames of fire" (E 666, K 619). But only the "Spirits of the Trees" appear to respond to the sun and gaze upwards with an expression of apparent longing. Blake describes them as being "under the domination of Insects raised by the Sun's heat." This may mean that the tree spirits wish to escape from their sylvan prisons but cannot do so. If "A Sunshine Holiday" can be read, in its images of movement and conversion, as a study of the theme of transformation, then the absence or inhibition of that transformation here (though the rising figures in the treetops could be taken to indicate a potential future for the spirits within) may be ironically echoed in the poet's opting for shade and darkness, the very prison which the spirits wish to escape. Such a reading is, roughly, argued by Kiralis (p. 71), although for Grant the passage into the shade is read positively. He sees the poet as escaping from the "pestilential" arrows of Apollo and beginning his regeneration (p. 131). Milton, for him, is avoiding "the maddening effects of the noonday sun."

It would be quite out of place to suggest that Grant's reading of the design is "wrong," and it has its place in his interpretation of the larger sequence of these illustrations. But there is a good deal of evidence for thinking that the sight of Milton being led, book in hand, into the shady groves he appears to be asking for in "Il Penseroso" would not have been a positive one for Blake. We remember the ambiguity of shade in Gleckner's account of "The Little Black Boy" and the suggestion that the little white boy must learn to stand the heat of the day. Blake's short lyric "Memory Hither Come" prefigured many of the motifs in the Milton illustrations, and it is particularly interesting in its treatment of melancholy. The poem is worth quoting entire:

Memory, hither come,
And tune your merry notes;
And, while upon the wind,
Your music floats,
I'll pore upon the stream,
Where sighing lovers dream,
And fish for fancies as they pass
Within the watery glass.

I'll drink of the clear stream,
And hear the linnet's song;
And there I'll lie and dream
The day along:
And, when night comes, I'll go
To places fit for woe;
Walking along the darken'd valley,
With silent Melancholy.

(E 406, K 8)

This is one of those songs which, as so often in Blake, depend for their elucidation upon an assumption about the status and integrity of the speaker. Read in good faith, the acceptance of woe at night-fall would seem to stand as a positive integration of the darker elements in the life of experience. But to my mind the poem works best if we distrust its speaker, and his invocation of memory, a faculty not endorsed by Blake in general, is a good clue to lead us to do so. The speaker seems to be trapped

within a static and retrospective psychology, oscillating between memory and melancholy. The sense of inertia and even of narcissism--"the watery glass"--suggests that Milton may not be making the best use of his time in opting for shade rather than sunshine.

This reading of the "Il Penseroso" illustration would have been endorsed by the orthodox neoplatonic tradition, for which the tree, etymologized via Latin (*sylva*) and Greek (*ύλη*), stands for "matter," the merely earthly quality as against the spiritual. This was a commonplace,²⁸ and this input into Blake's thought has been well documented by George Mills Harper in his *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (Chapel Hill & London: Univ. of North Carolina Press & Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 169-76. There are strong hints throughout Blake's work of a leading awareness of the metaphorical connection between trees and the material world. They are evident in the Dante illustrations, and also in the illustrations for *Paradise Lost*, for example in "The Judgment of Adam and Eve" (Houghton Library, Harvard University), dated 1808, where a dense background of trees echoes the leaves around the loins of the fallen couple. Indeed, in Milton's poem, Adam's lament at his complicity and guilt is phrased in terms of a desire for the shelter of trees, which would certainly have been read by a neoplatonist as a desire for immersion in matter:

O might I here
In solitude live savage, in some glade
Obscured, where highest woods impenetrable
To star or sunlight, spread their umbrage broad
And brown as evening: cover me ye pines,
Ye cedars, with innumerable boughs
Hide me, where I may never see them more.

(IX, 1084-90; *Poems*, p. 919)

Immediately after this passage, moreover, we find the recourse to the fig leaves.²⁹

Further, Blake's patron and "friend" Hayley offered a poetic coincidence in his very name, which was converted into the form "Hyle" (*ύλη*) and appears thus in the prophetic books. Corporeal friends could be spiritual enemies, as Blake wrote to Butts in April 1803 (E 697, K 822), and Hayley was one of them. The oak of the village green may be another manifestation of limited material vision in its status as an emblem of guardianship and protection. There are many analogues, not only the images of Albion's oaken navies discussed by Erdman (*Prophet Against Empire*, p. 482)--who, by the way, argues for the negative implications of the oak tree in Blake's earliest works (e.g. p. 82)--but also the criticisms of the Druids as they fell from an intuition of spiritual truth to an exclusive concern for the ossified dead letter of religion.³⁰ Urizen spends much time beneath the oak (just like Old John), as do Har and Heva in *Tiriel*, whiling away their time in a pastoral world which may be read as one of idyllic innocence but is more often taken to suggest vapid fantasy:

But they were as the shadow of Har. & as the
years forgotten

Playing with flowers. & running after birds
they spent the day
And in the night like infants slept delighted
with infant dreams

(E 274, K 100)

Albion beholds a Christ-figure crucified on an oak in *Jerusalem* 76 (Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake*, p. 355), and the Bible itself provides numerous instances of sinister goings-on under and around oak trees. Absalom is murdered under an oak (2 Sam. 18), and beneath others the Israelites render homage to their idols (Ezek. 6, Hosea 4, Isaiah 57).³¹

There is then considerable evidence for concluding that Blake was conscious of the neoplatonic reading of the tree as an emblem of limited material vision; but can this be related to the modification of the shape of the tree in the later versions of "The Ecchoing Green"? Not in any monovalent way, I think. We might read the thinning out of the vegetation in these later versions as a hint of progress away from the material toward the spiritual, in contrast with the dense forests which Milton's Adam and Blake's Dante (see "Dante and Virgil Penetrating the Forest") have to confront. But this conflicts somewhat with the "sociopolitical" reading for which I have already given evidence, that the later version of the design might represent a censorious comment upon the state of Albion (deforestation and pollarding) after the Napoleonic Wars. Indeed, I have presented speculations with varying degrees of evidence in several directions, although it is my own impression that allusion to pollarding and/or to the neoplatonic tradition is the most likely intention here. Any decision made between these two (or other) options would locate Blake within a specific historical, political, or intellectual context; it would read him as the exponent of a specific corporeal--not to say arboreal--vision.

My aim has thus been to try to suggest a way of seeing the icon of the tree in some inclusive, synoptic way. Of course, in seeing in the design a facsimile or reflection of the human face I may be doing no more than consulting my own "watery glass," but such a possibility does fit very well with the self-referring function of the image as a pointer to spiritual vision. Blake wrote to Trusler in August 1799, in that famous letter which declares that "The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouses the faculties to act" (E 676, K 793), that

I see Every thing I paint In This World, but
Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of
a Miser a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun
& a bag worn with the use of Money has more
beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with
Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of
joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing
that stands in the way. Some See Nature all
Ridicule & Deformity & by these I shall not
regulate my proportions, & Some Scarce see
Nature at all But to the Eyes of the Man of
Imagination Nature is Imagination itself. As
a man is So he Sees.

(E 677, K 793)

As a critic is, so he reads, always hoping, of course, that we will read with him. Not an ignoble predicament, by any means. But it is important to register Blake's sense of the plurality of "readings." In this context it is worth at least considering the availability of a mode of seeing his work which takes account of the dynamic interaction *between* interpretative possibilities--stirring up the standing water, so to speak. For example, I doubt that Blake would have intended to limit himself to the standard neoplatonic reading of the tree. Like Hegel, he was generally concerned to recognize the spiritual in the material (*pace* the polemical annotations to Wordsworth), and thus to avoid an idealism which would make the world of objects merely redundant and inhibiting. The tree which Blake is interested in may well ultimately be the one which grows in the human brain, and which, as a "potential" image, thus stimulates varieties of perceptions in different minds, and indeed in the same minds at different moments in time. The disjunction I have suggested between text and design in "The Ecchoing Green" can be seen as a way of encouraging the interaction of "meanings" which will then tend to involve the self-conscious reader in a process of critical self-referral.

Of course, it would be foolish to ignore the presence of a caveat; that this pirouetting between various options and modes of evidence is merely a way of dodging the issue, of avoiding the conclusive statement which conventional critical discourse certainly demands. However, I hope it will be clear that such insistence on a conclusion itself contains an assumption about the nature of Blake's creative imagination, as well as a more esoteric but perhaps more important assumption about what we as readers require of him. I have chosen to operate on a different assumption, that there is an aesthetic and historical rationale for organizing the evidence for determinate conclusions within an inclusive perspective. Thus I think that it is quite possible that Blake's tree might have been modified at the prompting of a heightened pessimism about the state of post-war England, but that an "eternal" perspective might also have its place, one in which all moments in historical consciousness are held together. Blake, I believe, always held that the eternal was to be approached through the historical; to understand this is to be reconciled to the life of experience and to accept the fall. This understanding itself becomes the vehicle of movement through experience. All being is becoming, and to assume otherwise is to repeat Urizen's mistake.³²

We can now see the force of Blake's renovation of the traditional images of pastoral poetry, which operates (I have argued) by replacing product by process, passivity by activity. Unlike Crabbe and Goldsmith, he provides an eternal present which is always "about to" turn into meaning, and which relies for that meaning upon the decisive contribution of a reader. Like Dyer, Blake reminds us that we are responsible for what we see. The only mythology of loss in Blake's pastoral is thus the one which his readers may choose to create for themselves.

Hence, in the early "Song" from *Poetical Sketches* which Keynes has noted as a precursor of "The

Ecchoing Green," Blake is quite explicit about the mythologized images of the village green:

I love the oaken seat,
Beneath the oaken tree,
Where all the old villagers meet,
And laugh our sports to see.

I love our neighbours all,
But, Kitty, I better love thee;
And love them I ever shall;
But thou art all to me.

(E 406, K 8)

I think that there is more here than just the conventional hyperbole of the love poem. The speaker displaces the inherited catalogue of rural pleasures, all drawn from the tradition, in favor of personal (and implicitly sexual) experience, of the kind which may be intimated in the design of the second plate of "The Ecchoing Green." The "all" may be inclusive or exclusive; it may be that Kitty

14 Frontispiece to "The Gates of Paradise," copy G. From the collection of Paul Mellon.



displaces all the other attractions and stands alone, or that she includes and contains them, in that they are only apprehended as significant through her. Whichever reading we prefer, it is clear that the personal relation is the crucial one, and that the images of rural pastoral are void of meaning except when seen in its context.

Much of the uncertainty about Blake's use of personification, for example in "A Sunshine Holiday," is related to the difficulty of deciding whether he means to suggest matter being brought to life, or life turning into matter. I have argued that this design, at least, can be taken to require the recognition of both processes occurring and recurring through time. It may be that "The Ecchoing Green" operates in a similar way with the plurality of references which a perusal of the design has called up. There is a similar inclusiveness, I think, with another of Blake's echoing oaks, that portrayed in the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise* of 1793 (reissued 1818). This design (*The Illuminated Blake*, p. 268, reproduced also at K 760) shows a humanoid chrysalis dormant on the sunny side of an oak leaf, and a caterpillar eating downwards into the dark side of another leaf (illus. 14). We are asked the question "What is Man," and the later version adds the couplet:

The Sun's Light when he unfolds it
Depends on the Organ that beholds it.

The question seems to demand a choice between the two images, but the couplet goes on to intimate the importance of the perspective and character of the beholder. We see only the dark side of the caterpillar's leaf, but the creature itself is in the sun, and the sun, moreover, will be in different positions at different times of the day. By eating leaves the caterpillar will pupate, on the way to becoming a butterfly, which the sleeping humanoid may yet have to become. There is, then, a causal sequence in this design as well as a contrast, and it suggests that the frontispiece taken as a whole may be meant to indicate the entire career of man as he exists in time. Of course we can take our pick. "As the Eye-- Such the Object" (E 634, K 461); as the beholder, so the allegory. The butterfly (psyche) may be the spiritual form of both chrysalis and caterpillar, thus implying the necessity of each to the other. Perhaps we are to see through the eye and not with it, through to the spiritual identity behind phenomenal appearances. This is one of the mandates of *Milton*:

And every Natural Effect has a Spiritual Cause,
and Not
A Natural: for a Natural Cause only seems, it
is a Delusion
Of Ulro: & a ratio of the perishing Vegetable
Memory.

(E 123, K 513)

The spiritual form of the oak (or other) tree of "The Ecchoing Green" thus includes all the options I have touched on, as well as the early and fully canopied version of the tree, in a dynamic aesthetic characterized by modification and growth. Like the

older children of the poem, we have a choice before us, but we will also grow into the possibility of other insights and choices. Perhaps it is not accidental that the grand climax to *Jerusalem*, which identifies (verb active) so many of the incremental dualisms in Blake's own myth and in the tradition at large, operates through all the generations (kept apart in "The Ecchoing Green"), through "Childhood, Manhood & Old Age" (E 255, K 746). More particularly, it identifies many of the trees latent in Blake's books and used by him in different ways at different times. Along with the "Covenant of Priam" has disappeared "the Tree of Good & Evil," "The Oak Groves of Albion that covered the whole Earth," and "The Fruit of Albions Poverty Tree" (E 256, K 746). They have "disappeared" by becoming one in the tree of life which is the human form divine: "All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone" (E 256, K 747). As we see in the text of *The Book of Thel* and have seen in (my reading of) the design for "A Sunshine Holiday," the dualism of animate and inanimate is resolved as all created forms expand energetically into oneness in the cycle of becoming, "living going forth & returning wearied." The generations and the trees of "The Ecchoing Green" also have their places within this coadunation. And yet they remain stages on life's way. The end of *Jerusalem* involves a recognition of the necessity of repetition. In terms of a critical aesthetic, this appears as a demand for a continual re-reading. The very moment of determinate interpretation frees us to look for further echoes.

¹ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1964); D. G. Gillham, *Blake's Contrary States: The "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" as Dramatic Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966); Robert F. Gleckner, *The Piper and the Bard: A Study of William Blake* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1959). See also E. M. W. Tillyard, *Poetry Direct and Oblique* (1934; rpt. London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), pp. 11-15.

² I shall quote from *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, 4th printing, with revisions (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1970), giving references also to Sir Geoffrey Keynes' *Blake: Complete Writings*, rev. ed. (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971). The citation here is E 36, K 151. Reference to "The Ecchoing Green" will be to Keynes' popular facsimile edition, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1967; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

³ See Jim S. Borck, "Blake's 'The Lamb': The Punctuation of Innocence," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 19 (1974), 163-75.

⁴ "Songs of Innocence and of Experience": The Thrust of Design," in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman & John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 196-213. See p. 198.

⁵ Virgil, in *Georgics*, II, 288 f., sees the oak as the emblem of longevity (though of course he refers to *aesculus*, the Italian oak). We may contrast Erasmus Darwin, quoted by Jacob George Strutt, *Sylva Britannica: or, Portraits of Forest Trees, distinguished for their Antiquity, Magnitude, or Beauty* (London, 1822), p. 2: "Yes, stately Oak, thy leaf wrapp'd head sublime, / Ere long must perish in the wrecks of time." The oak as a symbol of mutability is invoked also by Spenser, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, "February"; by Cowper in "Yardley Oak"; and by Mrs. Barbauld in the tenth of her *Hymns in Prose for Children*. The contrast between Virgil and the others here depends precisely upon one's choice of time-scale, which was a phenomenal quality for Blake.

⁶ David Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), p. 47, reproduces the 'I' copy, and Keynes' facsimile of the Z copy shows the later version. The V copy is watermarked 1818 on thirteen leaves; W and Z are watermarked 1825.

⁷ This is less true of the V copy, where the bottom edge of the canopy has a slight (though symmetrical) uplift away from the trunk, the whole image being thus less rectilinear. The Z copy of "The Lamb" suggests a clear tree-face (not in W or AA) with one eye shut in somewhat sinister recognition. This was pointed out to me by John Wright, who suggested that this could be read as Blake's acknowledgement of his own scrutiny of the plate as he observed the biting process. The idea that this may be an image of Blake's own face reflected from the surface of the acid bath operates as another signal of complicity and self-referral. It may also be that the Z copy of "The Lamb" indicates a pollard tree (see below).

⁸ J. C. Loudon, *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum*, 8 vols. continuously paginated (London, 1838), p. 2426. This essay is much indebted to the various sorts of special information offered by Max Walters, Oliver Rackham, John Barrell, and Norman Bryson.

⁹ Loudon, p. 2410, gives an account of Pococke's travels of 1744-45, quoting details of a visit to Mt. Lebanon: "The great cedars, at some distance, look like very large spreading oaks . . . The Christians of several denominations . . . have built altars against several of the large trees, where they administer the sacrament."

¹⁰ *The Review and Abstract of the County Reports to the Board of Agriculture*, by Mr. Marshall, 5 vols. (York, 1818), II, 321. See also V, 378-79, 430-31.

¹¹ John Evelyn, *Sylva: or a Discourse of Forest-Trees, and the Propagation of Timber in his Majesties Dominions* (London, 1664), p. 14. In the classical myth of the four ages, it was only in the last and lowest, the age of iron, that shipbuilding and warfare began together with the felling of trees. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 132.

¹² John Scott does use the pollard as an image in his vision of the harmonious husbanding of nature. See *The Poetical Works of John Scott* (London, 1782), pp. 77-78, 94-95, 269, etc.

¹³ W. M. Craig, *A Course of Lectures on Drawing, Painting, and Engraving* (London, 1821), p. 286.

¹⁴ This passage is discussed by David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 245.

¹⁵ *Blake Records*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 282.

¹⁶ *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister etc.*, ed. Maurice Tournoux, 16 vols. (Paris: Garniers, 1877-82), XVI, 62. My translation.

¹⁷ *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-49), V, 101.

¹⁸ *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), IV, 287-88. The derivation from Goldsmith is well known, as is that from Milton which I shall discuss later; but they have never been fully analyzed.

¹⁹ George Crabbe, *Tales, 1812, and other Selected Works*, ed. Howard Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), p. 3.

²⁰ *The Poetical Works of Armstrong, Dyer, and Green*, ed. George Gilfinnan (Edinburgh, 1858), pp. 134-35.

²¹ Sir Geoffrey Keynes, in the commentary for his reduced facsimile edition, *William Blake's Water-Colours for the Poems of Thomas Gray* (Chicago: Philip O'Hara, 1972), pp. 46, 70, has of course noted the analogues to both designs.

²² See Sir Geoffrey Keynes' notes on plate 2 in his facsimile edition, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (London & New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975). Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake, Poet and Painter: An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse* (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 56, notes the existence of an emblematic tradition depicting the plundering of fruit trees.

²³ John Barrell, who brought these analogies to my attention, will discuss the Morland drawing in his forthcoming *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979).

²⁴ *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey & Alastair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 137. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., *Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1975), p. 285 n. 25, makes some valuable points about the tradition of pastoral motifs in illustrations of Milton.

²⁵ All the designs are reproduced, with a commentary, by John E. Grant, in "Blake's Designs for 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso,' with Special Attention to 'L'Allegro' 1, 'Mirth and her Companions,'" *Blake Newsletter*, 16 (Spring, 1971), 117-34; continued in *Blake Newsletter*, 19 (Winter, 1971-72), 190-202. See also Edward J. Rose, "Blake's Illustrations for 'Paradise Lost,' 'L'Allegro,' and 'Il Penseroso': A Thematic Reading," *Hartford Studies in Literature*, 2 (1970), 40-67; and Karl Kiralis, "Blake's Criticism of Milton's 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' and of its Author," in *Milton Reconsidered: Essays in Honour of Arthur E. Barker*, ed. John Karl Franson, Salzburg Studies in English Literature (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1976), pp. 46-77.

²⁶ Martin Butlin, *William Blake*, catalogue for the 1978 Blake exhibition (London: Tate Gallery, 1978), p. 120.

²⁷ Compare Shelley's "The Cloud," *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. ed. G. M. Matthews (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 602: "I am the daughter of Earth and Water, / And the nursling of the Sky; / I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores; / I change, but I cannot die."

²⁸ See, for example, James Harris, *Hermes: or, a Philosophical Enquiry Concerning Language and Universal Grammar* (London, 1751), pp. 308-09; Thomas Taylor the Platonist: *Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Raine & George Mills Harper (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 331, 353.

²⁹ The connection is suggested again in a passage from Cowper's "Yardley Oak":

It seems idolatry with some excuse
When our fore-father Druids in their oaks
Imagin'd sanctity. The conscience yet
Unpurified by an authentic act
Of amnesty, the meed of blood divine,
Lov'd not the light, but gloomy into gloom
Of thickest shades, like Adam after taste
Of fruit proscrib'd, as to a refuge, fled.

See Cowper: *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford, 4th ed. corr. Norma Russell (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 410.

³⁰ See Peter F. Fisher, "Blake and the Druids," *JEGP*, 58 (1959), 589-612.

³¹ Both oak and palm stand on the edge of Beulah, and are so illustrated in *Jerusalem* 33 [37] (*The Illuminated Blake*, p. 312). Wittreich, *Angel of Apocalypse*, pp. 12, 142, reads the contrast as an absolute one, the oak negative and the palm positive. The oak and the palm, respectively, appear in the two tempera paintings of 1810, *Adam Naming the Beasts* and *The Virgin and Child in Egypt*, perhaps suggesting a contrast between the falling man and the redeeming child.

³² This position is very much in the spirit of W. J. T. Mitchell's *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), which was published soon after I had finished this essay. Although Mitchell does not offer a specific discussion of "The Echoing Green," I find that my methods here are very much in line with the general principles he recommends and the conclusions he draws. He notes, for example, the potentially disjunctive relation between text and design and locates it within an aesthetic of deliberate discordance, seeing text and design as drawing upon different and varied sources and traditions (see, e.g., pp. xvii, 5, 11-12, 31). He further suggests that this disjunction both represents the fall and stimulates inquiry and reconstruction in the awakened mind (p. 33). I do sense two different priorities in our respective procedures, but they are complementary ones. My scope here is much narrower, concentrating as it does on one iconographic element and establishing for it both an immediate context and a possible position within a larger sequence in Blake's work. I have treated the "historicality" of Blake's image as potentially situated within specific political and social preoccupations, with relatively little reference to the autonomous traditions of painting and engraving discussed in detail by Mitchell. Of course, these remain important and undoubtedly provide a repository of materials echoed by Blake with varying degrees of irony and respect. But it may be that attention to historical particulars will tell us something about the pressures operative upon such echoing. Evidence in this sphere of inquiry is harder to adduce and probably less satisfying. We are unlikely to discover exactly how much Blake knew about liberty trees, and I am well aware of the hermeneutic paradoxes which come into play in trying to reconstruct that very "history" which one aspect of his aesthetic seems designed to unsettle. But eternity is produced out of time, and produced for the times.