

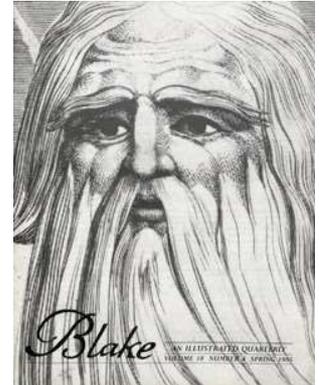
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R E V I E W

Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*

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HEATHER GLEN

Vision & Disenchantment:
Blake's *Songs* &
Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*



Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Pp. ix + 399. \$49.50 cloth; \$14.50 paper.

Reviewed by David Simpson

Heather Glen's book consists of close to four hundred pages devoted to an account of the contexts and intrinsic qualities of a relatively brief body of poetry. At its best, it is thus very thorough and well researched. It is packed with references to contemporary writings and documents; time after time I found myself appreciating and enjoying the obvious relevance of the sources and analogues the author brings to bear upon the poems. With some notable exceptions, the distinguished work of David Erdman on the historical identity of Blake's poetry has

not established the ongoing tradition which it deserved to beget, in part perhaps because of Erdman's intimidating comprehensiveness, but also surely because the trends in Romantic criticism over the last twenty-five years have not favored historical scholarship or political outspokenness. If these trends are changing, as some seem to think, then Glen's book comes at a timely moment, and it will make a useful contribution to the further investigation of the politics of Romanticism.

Whilst many Blakeans are in principle (and some in practice) fully aware of the importance of Blake's precursors and contemporaries for a proper understanding of his work, the problems of making some sort of basic sense of his poems have been so daunting that writers like Ronksley, Trusler, Barbauld, Wesley, Watts and others have been insufficiently examined. Glen's use of such writers indeed suggests that some of the problems of "intrinsic" exposition arise precisely because of an inadequate knowledge of their contexts; "Spring," for example, can now be posited as part of a genre of rhymes for reading and pronunciation practice (p. 10). *Pigott's Political Dictionary*, to which Glen refers frequently, is an especially worthy object of attention for students of Romanticism, as is the context for Wordsworth's poems established by the conventions of the *Monthly Magazine*. Even where Glen's readings of individual poems are not themselves new (which is much of the time), something is yet added to them by the sheer amount of relevant information she has gathered; if we end up confirming what we already thought, then we do so with a much stronger sense that our hunches are historically credible and relevant to the expectations of their original audiences. Students of Blake will be grateful for this book's way of increasing the range of texts which their poet might have known and knowingly reacted to; it is thus a serious contribution to the ongoing and difficult attempt to read Blake as a man of his times.

This historical foundation is the great strength of Glen's book, and at its best it produces a satisfyingly sophisticated blend of critical and historical exposition, as in the fine reading of "A Poison Tree" (pp. 187-98). But Glen's book is not simply a poem by poem account which changes its perspectives and priorities as the poems seem to demand. It also has a thesis, and a very trenchant one at that. Like most theses that seek to hold together everything they claim to derive from, it has both strengths and weaknesses. It also depends upon assumptions which themselves must be questioned, and whose implications need an airing.

Both Blake and Wordsworth, for Glen, are engaged in questioning and unsettling the received categories of poetic discourse, especially those which had developed for the instruction of children, for the inculcation of moral dogma, and for the expression of outrage at social injustice. For Glen, much of this inherited literature is

overtly or covertly reactionary, taming what is "uncontrollable" by reducing it to the terms of the "dominant culture" (p. 37). She argues convincingly that, seen in this context, both the *Songs* and the *Ballads* are highly disconcerting, opting to suspend or complicate the very questions that other writers pretend to answer. Where other writers assuage or comfort, Blake and Wordsworth subvert and interrogate. But Glen's thesis goes further, as she argues for a crucial difference of kind and degree between their respective techniques of subversion. Blake has access to a Swedenborgian and "underground" tradition, whereas Wordsworth is associated more with the rationalist radicals, the Dissenters, and those who continue to believe in the "customary sense of words" (p. 59).

So far so good. But with the aid of Glen's chosen literary-critical methods and assumptions, this distinction starts to build itself into an almost Manichean model of the Blake-Wordsworth relation. Ghosts of the old Leavisite "loaded comparison" begin to emerge as one poet's strengths (Blake's) are used to argue for the other poet's weaknesses. Wordsworth's choice or affiliation is soon seen to condemn him to (at best) the soulless and egotistic language of theoretical egalitarianism (that which Coleridge scorned as speaking of the "benefactor" instead of the "fellow man"). Blake, reciprocally, wallows a little too comfortably for my liking in the warm gaze of an achieved humanity (no matter that hardly anyone read him!). At least, the Blake of *Songs of Innocence* does so. For Glen's argument depends also upon a strong distinction between innocence and experience, with Wordsworth emerging later as one trapped within experience.

First, the innocence-experience crux. In the *Songs of Innocence*, Glen finds Blake to be in touch with a "real imaginative life" (p. 14), and to demonstrate a "refusal to accept the terms of the dominant culture, either by agreement or opposition" (p. 146-47). He refuses, in other words, both the complacent moralities of the usual children's poem, and also the strident tone of outright denunciation that typifies the usual gesture of social protest (and which surfaces for Glen in *Songs of Experience*). The *Innocence* poems are for Glen the genuinely challenging and radical ones, in that they refuse the alienated, accusatory self-other separation in favor of "an actual experience of a wholly different mode of being" (p. 147). What is meant by this is "a mode of interaction characterized by openness and responsiveness to rather than distortion and domination of the other, by the expression of vulnerability and need, and an answering vindication of the trust implicit in the expression; a mode of interaction in which both self and other achieve their fullest realization and create a mutually satisfying actuality" (p. 345). I shall return in a moment to the implications of this somewhat orgasmic language (nothing wrong with that, of course, except that it is lan-

guage!). To continue: innocence is typified by responsive play and energy unfixated into obsessive desire. A deep tradition this, and Glen is right to point to it. Experience, on the contrary, is a state in which the self seeks to keep control and to adjudicate all the oppositions. Innocence offers the authentically erotic (in the widest sense), experience only "a failure to project any compelling alternative" (p. 174) to confrontation and despair. The speakers of innocence are integrated, those of experience alienated.

This amounts to an almost absolute distinction between innocence and experience, of the sort which more attention to other criticism, or to Blake's other work, might have put into question. I at least favor a more interactive view of the two states, in the spirit of the contraries. In particular I find myself looking for a more protean notion of innocence than the one Glen proposes. Are there not various *kinds* of innocence in the poems collected by Blake under this title? Including perhaps the false innocence of a deluded or sentimental narrator? Which might vary also according as there are adult or child readers? Glen does not discuss "Laughing Song," "The Blossom," "The Little Black Boy," or "The Little Boy lost" and "The Little Boy found" in any detail—all poems in which such questions seem to me to be crucial. But she does devote several pages (pp. 96-102) to "The Chimney Sweeper," and her account may serve as an example of some of the problems I find with the thesis.

The account of the contemporary debate which this poem addresses is fuller than any I know, and very valuable: Hanway, Southey, Swedenborg and the legacies of the Wilkes riots are tellingly invoked. But Blake's poetic reaction to the debate is less unambiguously delineated. Glen finds in the child speaker's lines a "potent immediacy" and a "dynamic vision of present possibility" in which everyday misery is "transfigured" (p. 97). She also admits that there is "an obvious, pathetic irony in the little sweep's repetition or [?] of the precepts of a morality which allows and even justifies suffering such as his" (p. 99). But this insight never colors her reading of the poem, which seeks to legitimate a "potency," an image of "human potential for unjudging wholeness of vision, for unselfseeking, loving relationship, that is manifestly not actualized by the official structures of the society . . . and which its morality cannot encompass" (p. 102). I cannot see a way of having this both ways. If we perceive the uncomfortable coincidence of the dream with the popular Christian quietism, and admit that it has the effect of making the sweeps work joyfully amidst their miserable situation, how can we at the same time be happy with the "wholeness" of the vision? In transcribing it, might Blake not be dramatizing a state of false consciousness? Is this perhaps what becomes of "innocence" in a state of ideological subjection, wherein

it learns and repeats the homilies which keep it in chains? This seems to be a poem as much about mind-forged (and socially enforced) manacles as about transfiguring and wholesome alternatives.

I have similar reservations about the reading of the first "Holy Thursday" poem (pp. 121-29), which once again offers Glen a "potentiality that is actualized" (p. 129), about the proffered simplicity of "A Cradle Song," and so forth. I am sure that others besides this author and reviewer will continue to disagree over these poems. I want now to discuss the methods and assumptions that make these readings possible, indeed necessary. The ghosts in Glen's machine are those of Leavis, above all, and of Donald Davie's *Articulate Energy*. From the last she takes the habit (not to be simply identified with Davie) of making syntax the dominant and even single carrier of poetic meaning. At times this works well (see the comments on "Ah! Sunflower") and at times not so well. Often, remarks about the syntax are offered as if they self-evidently produce a meaning, without reference to the argument of a poem. The important *logic* of "The Lamb," for example, does not emerge from an account of its syntax, even if it happens to be coincident with it. I find myself on such occasions thinking of Johnson's remarks in the *Life of Pope*, that "even in such resemblances the mind often governs the ear, and the sounds are estimated by their meaning."

From Leavis, or from the tradition of Leavis, Glen has imbibed far more. Her writing is evidence of a positive cult of "presence" and "actuality," of exactly the sort that so many American (and some British, of whom more later) critics have been busy upsetting for the last ten years or so. Regardless of the ultimate questions about right and wrong, Glen's account is weakened by the way in which it *completely* fails to take on the challenge of this recent work. Phrases like "the imaginative pressure of experience" (p. 37), the "actual experience of a wholly different mode of being" (p. 147), and the "living actuality which can be created in human relationships" (p. 291), recur throughout the readings of the poems, which are judged according as they stimulate these terms. Hence the "mutually satisfying actuality" that I mocked, somewhat unfairly, earlier. From all of this, I can only beg to differ. Poems are not and never were *actual*, except as poems, and most critics have long since stopped trying to defend the idea that they should be. For the most part, we are no longer as desperate for the phantasy that poetry *is* the experience it refers to. Glen demonstrates in this very book that she can write analytical and historical criticism of poetic statements; but when the affirmative fit is upon her, these statements seem to become incarnate before her eyes as *real things*. Hence her reading of the first two lines of "Holy Thursday":

Suddenly they are *there*—not merely in the visual details, their

clean faces and their coloured clothes, the specificity of "Upon a holy Thursday"—but in the rhythm of the verse, marching hobbledehoy through the streets of London. The suddenness and immediacy is there in the syntax: the unrelated present participle, the shifts of tense between past and present exactly recreate the position of an observer who has begun to offer his impression of the procession *in medias res*. (p. 121)

No wonder the children are an "overwhelming presence" (p. 123)! The critic has stopped thinking and has started seeing, or hallucinating. No further questions need be asked; the image has turned into the real, and the magic of art has put to sleep the inquiring spirit. To query the point of view of the narrator would simply be to spoil the mood.

I shall not spend time on the view of experience Glen offers, one governed by the model of hysterically alienated speakers unable to relax from their oppositional stances into mutually satisfying actualities. This thesis calls for the same reservations in reverse. It must also be objected that by my reckoning at least twelve, or almost half of the poems in *Experience* are not discussed beyond a mention, and sometimes not even that. But I want now to pass on to the case of Wordsworth, who is, as some readers will already have guessed, destined to be the loser in the competition to "actualize." If fans of this journal are going to have some differences with Glen's book, then the readers of *The Wordsworth Circle* are going to have many more. (Those who are fans of both should try to stay cool.) Wordsworth is sold short in at least two interrelated ways. Much of his subtlety is missed because he does not provide the right signals to raise the Leavisite pulse rate; and, perhaps as a result of this, the historical context that is established around him is much less full than that focused on Blake, the favored poet. It must be said that Glen is right to claim that in Wordsworth's writings "the self is fundamentally egocentric," so that "real recognition of others must come as a traumatic self-questioning" (p. 276), if indeed it comes at all. Every reader of Wordsworth must come to terms with this. But Glen cannot carry this insight into useful explanation because it is consistently connected to some moral and imaginative *failure* in Wordsworth, dismissed once acknowledged by the righteous critic. So Wordsworth has no "effectual sense of actuality" (p. 316), the adult-child relationship in "Anecdote for Fathers" is "not actualized" (p. 245), and "There Was a Boy" lacks a sense that "society is shaped by living human relations" (p. 270). These are not inapt statements, but they should be the beginnings of an inquiry, not its conclusions. The complex terms of Wordsworth's poetic alienation are never explored—nor are their historical contexts. In a book which is often successfully historical in its treatment of Blake, the effect of failing to offer the same richness of context around Wordsworth is to suggest that it is not there, and cannot be found. This is simply not true. Glen's reading of "The Thorn,"

for example, is embarrassingly thin, and yet this ought to be one of the most carefully treated poems in a study which purports to make judgments about Wordsworth's handling of the relation of the individual to the community. The intelligence with which Wordsworth *analyzes* (as opposed to simply *perpetrating*) the failure of interactive relations is completely missed. To give just one more example, "The Reverie of Poor Susan" is interpreted in apparent good faith (pp. 103-109), but always as the losing half of an account which compares it with "The Chimney Sweeper." Thus Wordsworth never achieves the "particular details of an actual society" (p. 106), and can never compete with Blake's "imaginative pressure" (p. 105). The suspicion that it might be an entirely different *kind* of poem is never entertained. The very poetic diction of which Glen complains might be thought entirely consonant with the loss of "actuality" which the poem describes. If it is *about* such loss, why should it provide any "imaginative pressure"?

The point is, of course, that Wordsworth analyzes a different kind of alienation from Blake; it is indeed less hopeful and less energetic, but that does not make it poetically deficient. The terms for such judgments are moral, not technical, but for Glen these are usually the same thing, so that we are browbeaten into accepting each by means of other. Glen's inability to make any sympathetic or complex sense of Wordsworth is not, moreover, coincidental. It is tied up with the hidden agenda in the book, which I must now comment upon, especially for the benefit of American readers who might not otherwise recognize the signals being so vigorously put out.

I began to sense the place of this agenda long before the revealing comment in the conclusion to the book:

The poems of *Lyrical Ballads* offer not so much answers to the questions which confront those who try to think creatively about human possibility today as a revealing articulation of a particular way of confronting them. In many ways, Wordsworth, the Cambridge-educated radical, deeply disillusioned with the course he had seen the French Revolution taking, guiltily aware of the manifest inequalities within his society, wishing at once to transcend its complacently paternalistic attitudes and to affirm a "common humanity" with those from whom he was separated by privilege, may be seen as a prototype of a certain kind of modern left-wing intellectual. (p. 340)

What Wordsworth and the "certain kind of modern left-wing intellectual" fail to achieve is, for Glen, "satisfying relations between people" (p. 340). In the mode of their denunciations and self-preoccupations, both share the "failure to project any compelling alternative" of the speaker of *Songs of Experience*, with his "millenarian gestures toward total revolution" (p. 175). Of course, many worthwhile books of literary criticism set out to address their own times as well as their apparent topics, and none of us ultimately escapes the famous hermeneutic circles. The distinction to be made, then, is not one

between innocence and contamination but between conscious allusion and unconscious or dishonest manipulation. Glen's book is to my mind a disappointment in this respect, in that it shows itself insufficiently conscious of the degree to which its implicit *bête noir*, the British theoretical Marxist, determines so much of its argument "about" Blake and Wordsworth. There is a famous debate on the British left, one that has been going on for some years and has taken its most public form in E. P. Thompson's attack on Althusser, and (in a reciprocal though not identical way) in Terry Eagleton's criticism of Raymond Williams. Herein, the "Althusser" lobby is portrayed as obsessively preoccupied with "theory," and taken to imply that ideological determination is an all-encompassing patterning of thought within which no authentic perception of a creative alternative is possible. We live within our chains, they infect our imaginations at the deepest level, and no easy recourse to a solution in "experience" can be promised. Against this, the "Thompson" lobby wants to maintain a faith in the authentic consciousness of the common man, who *can* perceive the truth of his situation, and *can* act upon it, without fear of simply reproducing the terms of his own repression. The message of Thompson's seminal book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, is that early nineteenth-century laborers were not prisoners of ideology, and that they knew perfectly well what needed to be done to change their world for the better.

We can see here, then, the same polarity that Glen suggests between the *Songs of Innocence* on the one hand, and the *Songs of Experience* and most of Wordsworth on the other. The first is creative, optimistic and "actual"; the second manically oppositional or incapacitated by melancholy self-absorption. We can see also the degree to which Glen is in the grip of a "theory" which she would presumably blush to acknowledge, given that her argument is posited precisely against the restrictions of theory itself. This tactic of avoidance is a fine example of the precise strategy by which, in the aftermath of the "faculty wars" inside the Cambridge English department some three or four years ago, so many of those who regard themselves as solidly "left" in their political credentials ended up (and even started out) siding with the old-guard defense against all that "abstract fancy stuff." It seems to me that the terms of the Thompson-Althusser choice are absurdly extreme; in particular cases, each lobby can find evidence for its case, but no perusal of a large body of data seems to me to suggest that either position can be maintained to the exclusion of the other. People sometimes are and sometimes are not trapped within the framework of ideology, and the issue can only be adjudicated with reference to the particular case. The trouble with Glen's version of the "Thompson" position is that it intellectually short-circuits a whole range of potentially interesting questions and approaches by ref-

erence to a naive notion of "actuality." Glen achieves this condition all too glibly for my tastes, and having achieved it is not inspired to think further, or even to think at all. If Blake does offer, in poems like "The Lamb," the kind of alternative that Glen finds everywhere in *Innocence*, then he offers it not as an "actualized" experience but as a piece of poetic logic, there to be thought about as well as felt. But I think he also analyzes the refracted perceptions of false consciousness in poems like "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday." There is no unitary notion of "innocence," nor indeed of "experience," in Blake's volume, as we realize if we attend to the poems Glen does not discuss, as well as to alternative readings of those she does. As for Wordsworth, I would argue that there is no poet who does more to explain and analyze the operations of the unconscious within the restrictions of "ideology" and alienation. This is not merely a failure of Wordsworth the poet, it is the precondition and anatomy of his poetic intelligence. The peculiar *problem* of Wordsworth is indeed that he reproduces both these things; by not always suggesting the dramatic differentiation of poet from speaker, he does suggest that the various misreadings of the world which the poems chronicle are his own. Only a criticism which goes at least as far into the deconstructionist or "theoretical" Marxist methodology as to accept the disintegrated model of subjectivity which those approaches (for quite different reasons) offer can hope to make anything of this aspect of Wordsworth's writings. Glen is a very long way from this point, being committed to a moral-poetic faith in "actual experience" and, more to the point, to a faith in poetry's ability to incarnate such a thing. Glen, like all critics of her kind, never has an answer to the challenge that her experience might not tally with someone else's. The danger of this position is that, given these terms, the other is always dismissed as improperly "human." This criticism commits precisely the gesture of which it accuses its opponents, except more covertly and thus more dangerously.

I realize that in much of the above I have gone somewhat beyond the terms of the standard review essay. Nor shall I make any conciliatory mutterings about the friendship of opposition. The *true* friendship that Blake invoked is probably best left vague or undefined, though it is unlikely to be found at odds with the exposition of the maximum number of relevant issues. Some of the issues raised in this book do seem to be as "extrinsic" to the Blake-Wordsworth question as they could possibly be. Because they are important issues, however, and not likely to be familiar to some American readers, I have spent some time exploring them. Before concluding, I might make a few points within the "standard" vocabulary. The book will annoy some readers for other reasons than those I have been declaring. It is deficient in point of "etiquette," in that it does not show a very wide

awareness of the secondary literature; it is not very sensitive to the composite nature of Blake's art (though the author is conscious of this, and apologizes for it); and it continues to cite from the Keynes edition, despite the obvious superiority of Erdman's textual work. The point of "etiquette" is more an American than a British preoccupation. It does not bother me much at those points where it is made up for by the richness of the historical documentation, as in the best parts of the account of Blake. But in the case of Wordsworth, where the history is skimpier and the premises less sympathetic, some awareness of the work of others might have made Glen's case a bit more sophisticated than it is. The historical material is, in its own way, authoritative, even where the reader might dispute the nature of its exact relation to Blake or Wordsworth. But I must end with a strong word of warning to those readers who acknowledge in themselves a tendency to be beguiled by intimations of actuality.

The Collected English Letters of Henry Fuseli.
Ed. David H. Weinglass. Milwood, N.Y.;
London; Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus
International Publications, 1982. Pp. xviii
+ 685, 4 plates. \$90.

Reviewed by G.E. Bentley, Jr.

[Editor's note: Typesetting limitations have necessitated the following modifications to the author's manuscript: The superscript letter in abbreviations such as "M." and "S." have been moved from directly over the period to the right of it. Also, the symbol "∧" replaces a caret below the line which indicates an insertion; two such symbols indicate a second set of insertions. "They are recorded here because they indicate important changes of mind by Fuseli—and to indicate something more which the editor could have indicated in his transcripts," the author writes.]