



EDWARD J. ROSE: UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

### The 1839-Wilkinson Edition of Blake's *Songs* in Transcendental America

Random speculation and general comparisons are to be found scattered through Blake criticism about certain affinities for Blake's views in the work of several American writers of the mid-nineteenth century. Nothing is said, however, of the specific fate of the first typographical edition of his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in America, that, in fact, two copies of this edition came to the attention of influential men and women of letters. It is important that Blake criticism take special note of this interesting literary phenomenon because of the possible direct influence of Blake's work on writers of the American Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> The Houghton Library of Harvard University has in its collection two copies of the *second issue* of the 1839 edition,<sup>2</sup> one owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson and another owned by Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

The edition is well described in Keynes' *Bibliography* where he quotes from the *Memoir of J. J. Garth Wilkinson* (London, 1911) to the effect that Charles Augustus Tulk lent Wilkinson "a copy of Blake's own making." Keynes corrects Gilchrist and Sampson by saying that Wilkinson did not adopt an arrangement of his own (p. 265), but followed the order in the Tulk copy. The Tulk copy is also listed in the *Bibliography* (pp. 121-22). It should be noted that "The School Boy" and "The Voice of the Ancient Bard" appear among the *Songs of Innocence*, but "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" songs appear in the *Songs of Experience*. The copy that Tulk lent Wilkinson appears to be the same one that Coleridge examined. Whereas Coleridge saw Blake's own designs, Emerson and Higginson saw only the printed poems. Unlike Emerson, Higginson reveals a knowledge of Coleridge's opinions. Emerson does not comment on Wilkinson's introduction, but marks poems all of which are songs of experience.

#### *Emerson's copy:*

- p. 48: a penciled "X" at the beginning of the title of "A Little Boy Lost"
- p. 52: penciled brackets around "sweet" in the third line of "Ah! Sun-flower"
- p. 65: a light vertical pencil stroke in the right margin by the last two stanzas of "To Tirzah"

In Emerson's hand on the inside of the back cover (in pencil):

Tyger 46  
 Little Boy Lost 48  
 Sunflower 52



The last page reference is to "To Tirzah." Written in Emerson's hand on the recto side of the front end paper (flyleaf): "R. W. Emerson / from his friend / E.P.P." The initials are those of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894).

Elizabeth Peabody was associated in the 1830's with Bronson Alcott in his Temple School. Her home in Boston became the forum for Margaret Fuller's series of conversational classes from 1839-1844. During the 1830's and 1840's, the Symposium, also known as the "Transcendental Club," often met at Emerson's home in Concord, but it also met frequently in Elizabeth Peabody's bookshop, which was a kind of physical point of reference for the transcendental intellectuals in the Boston area. Like many of the other members of the Symposium,<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Peabody was a contributor to *The Dial*. She was also the sister-in-law of Hawthorne and Horace Mann. I think it is a safe assumption that Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were well known by many members of the transcendental community through the 1839-Wilkinson edition with its biographical-critical preface which quotes Cunningham's hostile views of Blake and Wilkinson's partial attempt to argue those views.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911), twenty years younger than Emerson, grew to adulthood in the transcendental climate created by Emerson and his fellowship. He is not much younger than Thoreau or James Russell Lowell and was a student at Harvard shortly after they were. These were the years in which Emerson upset the statesmen and divines at the Divinity School and read to Phi Beta Kappa his intellectual declaration of independence, "The American Scholar." Higginson tells us inside his copy of the *Songs*, "I read these about 1842."

*Higginson's copy:*

Inside front cover: "T. W. Higginson." In pencil on end paper:

First pub. 1787 / 10 yrs. before Lyrical Ballads /  
 Lamb said in 1824 / 'only saw in Ms' /  
 Crabb Robinson read in 1812 to / Wordsworth who  
 thought them above / Byron or Scott /  
 Coleridge criticized in 1818 / (Corresp. II. 686) /  
 I read these about 1842

p. 56 (in pencil): "Coleridge disapproved" written above and to the left of the title of "The Little Girl Lost."

Higginson seems to have read Wilkinson's introduction, but he does not mark any of the poems besides "The Little Girl Lost." We can only speculate on how much of Blake was still meaningful to Higginson when Emily Dickinson asked him in 1862 to become her "self-appointed teacher." Her poems have often been compared to Blake's songs. Although she does not write about Blake, she may well have known his work through Higginson.

To Emerson in his most neglected and certainly most important late essay, "Poetry and Imagination," Blake was still "William Blake the painter":

He [man as poet] is the healthy, the wise, the fundamental, the manly man, seer of the secret; against all the appearance he sees and reports the truth,



namely that the soul generates matter. And poetry is the only verity,--the expression of a sound mind speaking after the ideal, and not after the apparent. As a power it is the perception of the symbolic character of things, and the treating them as representative: as a talent it is a magnetic tenaciousness of an image, and by the treatment demonstrating that this pigment of thought is as palpable and objective to the poet as is the ground on which he stands, or the walls of houses about him. And this power appears in Dante and Shakespeare. In some individuals this insight or second sight has an extraordinary reach which compels our wonder, as in Behmen, Swedenborg and William Blake the painter.

William Blake, whose abnormal genius, Wordsworth said, interested him more than the conversation of Scott and Byron, writes thus: [Emerson then quotes through secondary sources (if the spelling and punctuation are any clue) from Blake's comments on his painting of the Bard in the *Descriptive Catalogue* and the concluding passage from *A Vision of the Last Judgment*.]

Emerson clearly sees Blake in a sound context, especially for a nineteenth century writer with so different a disposition. It was a context, however, with which the younger Unitarian minister, Higginson, Elizabeth Peabody, Emily Dickinson, and much of intellectual New England were familiar. Painter or poet, Blake was a fellow visionary.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It would be nice to believe that Barlow had come full circle, but alas *America* does not seem to come to America until much later. For Barlow, see David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 154 and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup>This edition is no. 134 in the *Bibliography of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Grolier Club, 1921); the second issue is no. 135, from which "The Little Vagabond" song is missing. Although Deborah Dorfman discusses the Wilkinson edition, she never speaks of Emerson's ownership in her random remarks on Emerson and Whitman. She never mentions Higginson. See *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969).

<sup>3</sup>Members included Emerson, Alcott, F. H. Hedge, Thoreau, Hawthorne, J. F. Clarke, Margaret Fuller, the younger W. E. Channing, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, Jones Very, W. H. Channing, Elizabeth Peabody, Christopher P. Cranch, and others. Cranch, another Unitarian minister, became a writer and illustrator of children's books. Cranch also did humorous illustrations for Emerson's essays.

MORTON D. PALEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

#### Blakes at Buffalo

While teaching a seminar on *Jerusalem* in the Buffalo summer session of 1970, I became aware of five Blake pictures the whereabouts of which are virtually unknown to present-day students of Blake. Four of these are in the Lockwood Memorial Library of the State University of New York; one is in the Rare Book Department of the Buffalo and Erie County Library. As these pictures have been lost track of for at least several decades,