

Listening to William Blake

That William Blake was a visual artist as well as a poet is, quite rightly, a commonplace of Blake scholarship. His works are, in Jean Hagstrum's and W. J. T. Mitchell's influential formulation, a form of 'composite art,' in which literary and visual modes are inseparably fused.¹ It would therefore be remiss to approach *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) without attending to its pictorial elements. And yet Blake himself insists that there are 'three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise', those three powers being 'Poetry, Painting, and Music.'² Blake's 'composite art', this remark suggests, is not merely dual but triple in nature: not just literary and visual, but also musical. Alongside Blake's verbal and visual artistry, this essay argues, we must also attend to the fundamentally aural character of the *Songs* if we are to appreciate them fully. These poems are, after all, songs: they are meant not only to be read and looked at, but to be heard. We know from Allan Cunningham's writing on Blake that he sang and composed music for many of his poems, and although these compositions have not survived, the complex interplay of sound and meaning is still central to understanding Blake's poetics.³ The title pages of *Songs of Innocence* (1789) identifies its creator as 'The Author and Painter W. Blake.' My argument in this essay is that a third term should be added to those two designations: 'Musician'.

From the outset, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* demands that its readers listen to the noises it makes. The illuminated title page announces itself with the emphatic, capitalised word 'SONGS,' a declaration of the work's extra-literary ambitions. Beneath it appears an engraved bird, a figure that recurs throughout the *Songs* as part of what B. H. Fairchild calls Blake's 'musical iconography.'⁴ Evoking birdsong, the image reinforces the importance of sound to the collection. The songbird, of course, occupies a central place in Romantic poetics as a (perhaps unattainable) model for the composing poet – from the ecstatic song of Keats's nightingale to the 'unpremeditated art' of Shelley's skylark. By including a bird – its beak open as if in full-throated song – on his title page, Blake suggests a direct analogy between birdsong and the 'songs' his collection offers.

¹ Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake: Poet and Painter* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 9; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978; repr. 1983), p. 3.

² William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David V. Erdman, 2nd rev. edn (London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 559.

³ Allan Cunningham, in *William Blake: Songs of Innocence and Experience*, ed. by Margaret Bottrall, 5th edn (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1970), pp. 42-44 (p. 42).

⁴ B.H. Fairchild, *Such Holy Song: Music as Idea, Form, and Image in the Poetry of William Blake* (Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1980), p. 20.

One of the collection's other recurring illustrations, similarly indicative of the importance of sound to these poems, is the figure of the shepherd-piper. The title page of *Songs of Innocence* (1789), for instance, depicts a piper leaning against the 'I' of the word 'Innocence', wearing the same sort of wide-brimmed hat that Blake himself was known to wear. The identification is hard to miss: leaning against the letter 'I', this piper-figure visually fuses author, speaker, and song. Blake thus presents himself not only as 'poet and painter,' the phrase used in Jean Hagstrum's critical commentary *William Blake: Poet and Painter*, but also as a kind of musician. Indeed, Blake uses his visual iconography to gesture towards the aural, so that one sense directs us towards another.

That invitation to aural attention is taken up immediately in the poetry itself. The collection opens with the word 'Piping,' repeated – with variations – ten times in the 'Introduction' alone. As Angela Esterhammer notes, repetition is this poem's central principle.⁵ Sound, accordingly, becomes its primary medium. The word 'pipe,' reiterated so insistently, begins to lose semantic weight and instead functions as a musical utterance, almost becoming a purely onomatopoeic 'piping' sound:

Pipe a song about a Lamb;
So I piped with merry chear,
Piper pipe that song again –
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Blake's language, particularly in that plosive third line ('Piper pipe'), seems to imitate the sound of a pipe, and the reader is therefore implicated in the poem's creation of song: when the poem is read aloud, the reader's mouth becomes the piper's instrument, our own lungs providing the sound required to make the poem's piping sound. But the choice of a wind instrument also seems significant here, because unlike a lyrist, the piper cannot accompany himself while reading. Without musical accompaniment, the words themselves must *become* the melody: that is, the language has to do the piping.

This emphasis on sound is reinforced throughout the poem, not only through explicit references – 'pluck'd,' 'laughing,' 'chear,' 'sing' – but through the poem's persistent linking of reading and hearing. The songs are written 'In a book that all may read,' yet they are also 'happy songs / Every child may joy to hear.' To read, here, is to 'hear'. Writing does not mute sound; rather, Blake suggests, it preserves it. Tellingly, the 'rural pen' with which the songs are written is fashioned

⁵ Angela Esterhammer, *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 126.

from a 'hollow reed,' itself a musical instrument. Pen and pipe thus become one in this introductory poem. The poem's rhyme scheme further underscores its acoustic concerns: the dominant rhyme sound is '-ear,' and the final word of the poem – rhymed three times – is 'hear.' Blake ends his introduction by directing us, quite literally, to our ears.

Opening poems are important. They set the tone for a collection, and can guide us towards the particular type of reading that the poems will demand of us. This 'Introduction', I want to suggest, insists on the significance of 'hearing' to our understanding of Blake's poetics. If we follow these cues and attend closely to the sounds of the *Songs*, one of the most striking things we might notice is the strong influence of hymnody and balladry on these poems, especially when we contrast the rhythm and form of these poems to the much longer lines of Blake's prophetic books. Both balladry and hymnody enjoyed significant revival in the eighteenth century. Isaac Watts and the Wesley brothers led a Low Church renaissance of English hymnody, while antiquarian enthusiasm produced ballad collections such as Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), a volume Blake owned.⁶ As John Holloway has shown, the remarkable variety of metrical forms in the *Songs* owes much to hymn traditions, and M. W. England goes so far as to claim that Blake's rhythms are 'closer to Wesley than to any other poet.'⁷ Many poems directly echo hymn metres: 'Introduction' and 'A Dream' use the seven-syllable trochaic measure of Wesley's 'Christ the Lord is ris'n today,' while 'The Divine Image' adopts the hymnal common metre of 'Amazing Grace.'⁸ Blake's opposition to organised religion is well known, but the significance of hymnody to his poetics is indicative, perhaps, of the ongoing importance to him (at least towards the end of the eighteenth century) of song as a communal form of worship.

Donald Davie has argued that the influence of the hymnwriter Isaac Watts was far more pervasive than is often recognised, and Blake's verse offers striking confirmation of this claim – particularly in its use of metrical variation.⁹ Watts's hymns are surprisingly irregular in their metre: 'Retirement and Meditation,' for instance, opens with three initial inversions ('Call me away') and repeatedly forces the reader to crowd multiple syllables into single beats ('sovereign,' 'inferior,' 'heaven').¹⁰

⁶ See Fairchild, *Such Holy Song*, p. 4.

⁷ John Holloway, *Blake: The Lyric Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), p. 32; M.W. England and John Sparrow, *Hymns Unbidden: Donne, Herbert, Blake, Emily Dickinson and the Hymnographers* (New York: New York Public Library, 1966), p. 48.

⁸ As discussed in Holloway, *Blake: The Lyric Poetry*, pp. 33-7. For hymns, see *English Hymns of the Eighteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. by Richard Arnold (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1991), p. 167, p. 408.

⁹ Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church: The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700-1930* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 33-4.

¹⁰ Isaac Watts, *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: in Three Books*, rev. edn (London: William Ball, 1838), Book II, Hymn 122, p. 498.

Watts himself criticised strict metrical regularity for producing ‘tedious uniformity’ and ‘the perpetual chime of even cadences.’¹¹ Balladry, another popular form that is often marked by metrical looseness, played just as significant a role in the development of Blake’s rhythms. Consider these lines from ‘The Ballad of Chevy Chase’, the first ballad in Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*:

With that ther cam an arrowe hastely
Forth off a mightie wane,
Hit hathe strekene the yerle Duglas
In at the brest bane.

Because hymns and ballads were written to be sung, their metres could afford a certain degree of irregularity. As Robert Burns would later observe, ‘irregularity’ and ‘redundancy of syllables’ can work ‘most melodiously’ when sung, which is to say that metrical variability is a prominent feature of verse written to be sung.¹² This same melody-derived freedom is evident throughout Blake’s *Songs*, particularly in their loose rhymes and frequent foot substitutions. It is from this popular, musical tradition that Blake develops his distinctive rhythms.

‘A Cradle Song’ provides a clear example. The poem’s underlying metre might be described in classical terms as catalectic trochaic tetrameter, but Derek Attridge’s beat prosody (as outlined in *The Rhythms of English Poetry*) may offer a more flexible and helpful account of its movement. Like many of the *Songs*, ‘A Cradle Song’ operates within the four-beat rhythm that Attridge identifies as the most common in English verse. The opening stanza is as follows:

Sweet dreams form a shade
O’er my lovely infant’s head.
Sweet dreams of pleasant streams,
By happy silent moony beams.

The opening line of this poem – ‘Sweet dreams form a shade’ – is metrically irregular: something like ‘Sweetest dreams do form a shade’ would better fit the trochaic tetrameter that asserts itself in the second line of the poem, ‘O’er my lovely infant’s head’. But despite this irregularity, the Attridgean four-beat rhythm is clearly at work here, with stresses on ‘Sweet’, ‘dreams’, ‘form’ and

¹¹ Isaac Watts, *Horae Lyricae: Poems, Chiefly of the Lyric Kind*, 7th edn (London: printed for Richard Hett at the Bible and Crown in the Poultry near Cheapside, 1737), preface, p. xxvii.

¹² Quoted in David Daiches, *Robert Burns*, rev. edn (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1966), p. 85.

'shade'. The reason this is relevant to my argument is that the four-beat form that Attridge identifies is most emphatically associated with 'the popular tradition' of ballads and nursery rhymes.¹³ Blake's poems, with their metrical irregularities, follow these same oral conventions and allow for the sort of flexibility that Attridge's four-beat form accommodates. The irregularities of these poems are thus part-and-parcel of their insistent musicality.

Given Blake's insistent emphasis on the aural qualities of his collection, it is unsurprising that his metrical variations often carry expressive weight. Alicia Ostriker argues that Blake's metrical freedom enables him 'to present emotion directly in terms of meter and sound'.¹⁴ I want to finish this essay by discussing 'The Tyger', perhaps Blake's most famous poem. This poem offers, I think, a clear example of the meaningful effects that rhythmic variation can have. The poem shows clearly the influence of 18th Century nursery rhymes to which, as Heather Glen has shown, Blake was regularly exposed.¹⁵ The children's book trade was flourishing at the time: John Newbery produced over two hundred children's titles between 1745-70, and between 1780-91, Joseph Johnson commissioned Blake three times to illustrate children's books.¹⁶ The very size of Blake's illuminations for the *Songs*, some of which are as small as 10.9 x 6.3 cm, alludes to the tradition of printing nursery rhymes in small, pocket-size collections.¹⁷ It is therefore unsurprising that so many of Blake's poems echo the rhythms of nursery rhymes. The trochaic tetrameter of 'The Tyger' is the same as that of 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', a lullaby first published in 1806.¹⁸ This nursery-rhyme rhythm creates what Ostriker calls the 'surface naivety in Blake's metrics.'¹⁹ There is a simplicity to the poem's insistent beat, an insistence which makes the rhythm, in Attridge's words, 'self-reinforcing.'²⁰ Which is to say that, reading this poem aloud, we cannot help but read it in such a way that we reinforce the poem's rhythm.

And yet there are also several moments of metrical irregularity in this poem, irregularities that are particularly noticeable if we try to accommodate them to the poem's thus-far-insistent trochaic beat. For instance, the fourth line ('Could frame thy fearful symmetry?') falls surprisingly into

¹³ Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman Group, 1982), p. 80.

¹⁴ Alicia Ostriker, *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (Madison and Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 50.

¹⁵ Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs & Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 8-10.

¹⁶ Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy R, c. 1795, c. 1808, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (see <http://blakearchive.org>). For an example of nursery-rhyme collections, see *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song-Book*, vol. II (London: Mary Cooper, 1744), British Library, London.

¹⁸ Jane Taylor, and Ann Taylor, *Rhymes for the Nursery*, rev. edn (Philadelphia: D. Appleton & Co., 1849), pp. 30-31.

¹⁹ Ostriker, *Vision and Verse in William Blake*, p. 56.

²⁰ Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, p. 74.

iambics, ironically making it – despite the focus on ‘symmetry’ – the poem’s first explicitly irregular line. So the poem sets up this insistent hammer-like rhythm – ‘TYger TYger, BURning BRIGHT’ – only then to disturb that rhythm in the very first stanza. The off-rhyme ‘eye/symmetry’ is also striking: we are tempted to manipulate our reading of the word ‘symmetry’ not only so that it rhymes with ‘eye’, but also so that the fourth beat of the line is fully realised in a stressed ‘TRY’. How exactly are we meant to read that word, ‘symmetry’? G.E. Bentley has argued that Blake often took ‘poetic license’ when it came to pronunciation, ‘choos[ing] how to pronounce terminal “y” for his convenience. He rhymes “eternity” with “eye” and “me,” “futuraity” with “sky” and “see,” “jealousy” with “eye” and “tree,” “merrily” with “sly” and “knee,” and “mystery” with “fly” and “he.”²¹ But I also want to suggest that this ‘symmetry’ rhyme might act as a deliberate frustration or disturbance of our attempts to read the poem aloud: we ‘try’, and perhaps fail, to make ‘symmetry’ rhyme with ‘eye’. This line therefore seems to question the possibility of poetic regularity or ‘symmetry’, contrasting – perhaps – the poem’s human craftsmanship with the perfection of the divine.

There are several other moments in which the poem’s stresses shift subtly in ways that disrupt our reading of the poem, or at least force us to pause to consider how exactly we are going to pronounce the words in front of us. For instance, in the poem’s penultimate stanza: ‘Did he smile his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee?’ While the first line repeats the catalectic trochaic tetrameter of the poem’s opening line, with beats on ‘Did’, ‘smile’, ‘work’ and ‘see’, the second line falls again into a more iambic rhythm. Or, in Attridgean terms, the second line introduces an initial ‘off-beat’, with the beat moving from ‘Did’ in the first line to ‘he’ in the second. The same can be said of the movement from ‘Could frame’ in the poem’s fourth line to ‘Dare frame’ in the final line. Though we might expect the poem’s ending to provide some sense of closure through a return to rhythmic regularity, the reader is instead struck by another change in movement. We hesitate over these final words, unclear exactly of where the beat is meant to fall, either on ‘Dare’ or ‘frame’ or perhaps on both. We are struck again with the problem of how to read this line, indeed of how to read the whole poem.

My analysis of this poem demonstrates, I hope, the significant role that sound plays as an expressive tool in Blake’s poems. If, as Wolf Mankowitz suggests, ‘The Tyger’ comments on humanity’s limited capacity to conceive God, then these metrical variations and irregularities are

²¹ G. E. Bentley, Jr. ‘Blake’s Pronunciation’, *Studies in Philology*, 2010, 107.1, pp. 114–129 (p. 118).

central to its meaning.²² Blake's manipulations of rhythm makes this a difficult poem to read and thus imply the difficulty of reading the tiger itself, of comprehending god and his works: the illustration for the poem, after all, only shows the tiger in profile, so its 'symmetry' is not visually confirmed for us. 'The Tyger' may appear to be a simplistic – perhaps even childish – poem, but its off-rhymes and fluctuating rhythms belie that very simplicity. If we do not pay particular attention to the details of Blake's sounds, we may miss these suggestive nuances. Which is to say that the interpretation of Blake's poems must always be an aural activity.

Romantic poets are often telling us to listen. Wordsworth's 'The Tables Turned', for instance, calls on us to 'Come, hear the woodland linnet.' Coleridge's 'Christabel' opens with a volley of sounds we are told to attend to: 'Tu—whit! Tu—whoo! / And hark, again! the crowing cock...' And of course, there's the refrain in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind': 'O hear!' This is more just a convention associated with lyric's oral roots as a genre – though that certainly is a part of it. It is also, I think, indicative of the way in which the poets associated with the Romantic tradition, from Blake onwards, wanted to be read – or indeed to be *heard* – not just as 'wordsmiths', but also as 'sound-smiths' working away at the anvil of song. As Jean H. Hagstrum reminds us, 'Blake wanted his message to attack the whole man – all at once.'²³ We must not only use our eyes to appreciate Blake's art; we must also use our ears.

²² Wolf Mankowitz, 'The "Songs of Experience"', in *William Blake: Songs of Innocence and Experience*, ed. by Margaret Bottrall, 5th edn (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1970), pp. 123-135 (p. 134).

²³ Hagstrum, *William Blake: Poet and Painter*, p. 139.