THE CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD AS IMPLIED IN THE POETRY OF BLAKE, WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

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The seventeenth and eighteenth century poets expressed an acute nostalgia for childhood which they saw as a period of joy, peace and security. As a result of their reliance on reason as a guiding power in man, they welcomed its acceleration in children and hailed its presence in adulthood. It was not until the last decades of the eighteenth century that childhood emerged as a major theme in English poetry.

The Romantics' revolt against the Age of Reason and its rationalism and enlightenment, and their exaltation of the power of imagination and vision, enabled them to re-interpret the theme of childhood which they regarded as a state of mind rather than a transient period in an individual's lifetime. The Romantics believed that vision and imagination are most exuberant during the period of childhood, and are therefore most liable to be experienced then, for the child's mind lacks the intellectual and rationalizing capacity of that of the adult, and is for that reason most prone to an imaginative and visionary conception of the universe.

Various causes contrived to increase interest in the theme and the most important among these were Rousseau's views on education expounded in his great educational treatise, *Emile* (1762). He treated the child as a self-active soul, inclined to virtue from birth, and not as a passive creature of external perception.[1] Another major cause that led to the growing interest in childhood was the miserable condition of many children at the time. This was one of the undesirable by-products of the Industrial Revolution, which introduced new problems with regard to child labor. The straitened circumstances under which many children were living gave rise to the works of several writers such as Thomas Gray, Mrs. Trimmer, Hannah More and John Aikin in the eighteenth century and inspired some poems of the Romantics like those of Blake and Wordsworth.[2]

However, the main contribution which the Romantics made with regard to the child motif in poetry was the association of childhood with wisdom. In this respect they provided a re-interpretation of the theme of childhood. To them, childhood constituted the period of visionary experience during which the mind is most capable of accepting an imaginative and animated concept of the universe.

Vision is one of the perceptible forms of the power of imagination. Jung defines fantasy thus: "Those fantasies [*sic*] which are forms of the imaginative activity are either products of daydreaming or reverie or else they are perceived by intuition as a sort of vision or

inspiration.[3] Moreover, the ability to imagine and create visionary worlds is especially evident in children, as modern child psychologists inform us:

Children develop imagination and the ability to create fantasy images at an early age …. Between the ages of three and five nearly every child starts to daydream.[4]

Fantasy in children is a means of compensation for what is unobtainable in reality. More importantly, it is a "precursor of creativity."[5]

The Romantics were interested in all these forms of imagination – vision, fantasy, dreams, daydreams and reverie.[6] In childhood they found the fertile soil where all these faculties could be developed. What appealed most to them in childhood was not its unproblematic and peaceful state, but its visionary experience which they regarded as one of the essential pre-requisites for the composition of poetry, and which they consequently sought to restore.

The first Romantic poet to associate childhood with vision was William Blake, whose own childhood had been a period of visions and fantasies. When he was a little boy, he used to take long walks into the open country and bring back stories of angels he claimed that he had seen with his own eyes, and of prophets he had conversed with. Coming back one day from Dulwich, he told the family that he had seen a tree full of angels with "their bright wings bespangling the boughs like stars."[7] His father's immediate reaction was to give the little liar a sound whipping. On this occasion, he was saved by his mother's intervention, but it was she who later "beat him for running in and saying that he saw the prophet Ezekiel under a tree in the fields."[8] As Mona Wilson in her biography of Blake put it, "the boy's visionary faculty was perplexing to his truth-loving parents."[9]

These visions which characterized Blake's childhood remained with him as he grew older. In a doggerel sent to his friend Thomas Butts in November 1802, Blake says, "A double vision is always with me."[10] He gives two examples of this "double vision." One is a thistle encountered on a walk from Felpham to Lavant. This thistle, he says, could be seen as either a mere thistle or an old man depending on whether one chooses to see it with one's outward or inward eye, as he explains:

With my inward eye 'tis an old man gray;

With my outward, a thistle across my way. (ll. 29-30)

Again in a famous letter dated August 23, 1799 he asserts to Dr. Trussler his belief in imagination and vision:

I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision …. To me this world is all one continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination.[11]

In the same letter, he states his awareness of the child's ability to perceive vision; he expresses his joy at finding that his works, which mostly partake of vision, are especially comprehended by children:

I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can elucidate my Vision and Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children.[12]

Elsewhere he compares children to angels in their capacity to behold heavenly visions.[13] Also in a remark made in 1805 on Malkin's drawing "A Father's Memoirs of his Child", Blake praises Malkin's dexterity and says that

All his [Malkin's] efforts prove this little boy to have had that greatest of all blessings, a strong imagination, a clear idea, and a determinate vision of things in his own mind.[14]

This visionary quality outlasts childhood and becomes part of adulthood and age, as Blake states in a note written in 1808 on Sir Joshua Reynolds's idea that "the forms of childhood and age differ exceedingly," and affirms his belief that "Childhood and Age are Equally belonging to Every Class."[15]

Such beliefs found utterance in Blake's poetry and may even have inspired his *Songs of Innocence* (1789), which, in addition to being poems about children, could be said to have been written from a child's point of view. In other words, Blake had entered a childlike visionary state of mind before he put pen to paper. The poems are

Written by a man who was also a child because his visionary powers enabled him to live for a time in the Age of Innocence.[16]

The *Songs* start with the "Introduction" poem in which the speaker is introduced as a "Piper" piping songs "down the valleys wild". He then encounters a child sitting upon a cloud. The latter asks the speaker to write down the piped songs, a request which the speaker immediately obeys:

And I plucked a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,

And I stain'd the water clear,

And I wrote my happy songs

Every child my joy to hear. (ll.16-20)

Most of these child-speakers experience a vision in one way or another. In the "Introduction" poem, for instance, the speaker sees a cloud-borne child whose imperative utterances reveal his inspirational character or his symbolic nature as the inspiring vision that compels the speaker to compose. In the next poem the vision is revealed in the form of a dream. In "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found," taken from the *Songs of Experience* (1794), the vision takes the theriomorphic shape of a lion that is in fact called "a vision" (l. 46) in the latter poem. In "The Little Boy Found," the vision this time assumes an

anthropomorphic shape. In "The Chimney Sweeper," a child beholds an angel unlocking the black coffins in which children are imprisoned and taking them to sunny fields to sport in. In "Night" a similar vision is attained in which a host of angles are seen on their nocturnal mission of pouring blessings over the slumbering creatures of the night. In the same poem the heavenly fields are described where the lion, after having cast away its wrath, is able to sleep beside the bleating lamb and even act as its guardian. This association of vision with children is one of the characteristics which run throughout the *Songs of Innocence*, whose main theme, as C. M. Bowra remarks, is "the childlike vision of existence."[17]

The visionary power enjoyed by Blake's children enables them to animate the otherwise lifeless objects of nature. In "Laughing Sons", for instance, the rippling of the stream and the blowing of the wind through the meadows are interpreted as sounds of laughter. The world of the *Songs of Innocence* is that of talking animals, plants and objects; an emmet could have a conversation with a glow-worm, a lion could speak to children. In the *Songs of Experience* a similar outlook to nature is presented – though a quite different tone is evoked. The earth speaks to the bard and a clod and a pebble are quoted as they offer contradictory definitions of love. In *The Book of Thel* (1789), the maiden Thel, while wandering in the ales of Har and lamenting the vanity and fleeting nature of life, is answered by the lily, the cloud, the worm and the clod who explain to her the principle of mutual self-sacrifice and the fact that death means a new birth.

To accept Blake's world and enjoy his poetry, it would, therefore, require a childlike state of mind on the part of the reader, a state which Blake himself achieved when he composed his poems. It would also demand the sloughing off of one's rational faculty of reason which, according to Blake, could only hamper the power of the imagination.[18] Consider, for example, the image in the opening line from the first chapter of "The Book of Ahania" (1795), where Fuzon rises "on a chariot iron-winged" to overtop the clouds. Such an image, which overtly defies gravity, could only be grasped if it is not lent to Newtonian interpretations.[19]

Blake's concept of childhood, therefore, lies at the core of his poetic theory. He did not only pay attention to the relationship between childhood and the experience of vision, but also found it indispensable for the poet to experience a childlike mentality which could enable him to attain the inspiring vision.[20]

Like Blake, Wordsworth's concept of childhood began, as a critic once remarked, with himself, and this

Concern with his own childhood became the means of establishing general truths about childhood itself, and that, in turn, only for establishing truths about the whole nature of man.[21]

His childhood, like that of Blake too, was characterized by its visionary moments. In the first book of *The Prelude*, an autobiographical poem published posthumously in 1850, he refers to that early period of his life as "Those recollected hours that have the charm / OF visionary things."[22] In the second book he remembers how he used to stand

Beneath some rock, listening to notes that are

The ghostly language of the ancient earth,

Or make their dim abode in distant winds.

Thence did I drink their visionary power. (ll. 308-311)

Ordinary objects of nature, like sparrows' nests in the poem "The Sparrow's Nest" would seem to Wordsworth "like a vision of delight" (l. 4). He did not only give nature a "double vision" as Blake did, but also went a step further to identify himself with it.

I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to he reality.[23]

This attitude to nature was reflected in his well-known ode "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807), the poem to which Wordsworth attached great importance when he decided to place it at the end of his collected poems, thus regarding it as the crown of his work.[24]

The ode begins with the poet's awareness of a sense of loss. There was a time, he says in the opening stanza, when every object of nature was "appareled in celestial light" (l. 4). But that time seems to have gone forever, and the visionary power which he had possessed during his childhood has never been restored: "the things which I have seen I now can see no more" (l. 9). The expected question concerning the whereabouts of the vanished vision poses itself at the end of the fourth stanza:

Wither is fled the visionary gleam?

Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (ll. 56-57)

With this unanswered question he discontinued the ode. At this point it is quite obvious that the greatest loss felt by the poet after he had grown into manhood is the loss of vision, a fact which is clearly revealed in the very title of the poem.[25]

Resuming the ode in 1806, Wordsworth attempted to answer the question at the end of the fourth stanza by having recourse to the theory of pre-existence.[26] Heavenly visions, he states in the fifth stanza, accompany us to earth when we are born: "Heaven lies about us in our infancy" (l. 66). As we grow up, however, we begin to lose touch with them. But not quite so, for despite the fact that "Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing boy," he still "beholds the light" (ll. 67-69). At the threshold of manhood, he can

still experience vision and is "by the vision splendid … on his way attended" (ll. 73-74). Then, unfortunately,

… the Man perceives it [the vision] die away,

And fade into the light of common day. (ll. 75-76)

Despite the poet's keen awareness of this loss, he chooses not to sink into pathos by concluding the poem with a mere lament over an irretrievable loss. Rather, he tries to put a brave face on it by finding solace in the gains of maturity which compensate for the losses of childhood. Therefore, the poem does not, or at least does not seem to, end on a regretful note: "We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind" (ll. 183-184). Nevertheless, "the most intense emotion of the poem is one of regretful loss," in spite of the consoling conclusion of the poe.[27]

It is more characteristic of Wordsworth – a "worshipper of Nature," as he called himself in "Tintern Abbey" – to succumb to nature's law of growth than to sneer at it. Accepting age is part of the wisdom he has come to learn in his mature years, as he writes in "The Fountain":

the wiser mind

Mourns less for what age takes away

Than what it leaves behind. (ll. 34-36)

This is a lesson he has learned from his very gospel of nature, from birds, as he says in the same poet:

With Nature never do *they* [birds] wage

A foolish strife; they see

A happy youth, and their old age

Is beautiful and free. (ll. 41-44)

But his regrets for what age leaves behind never seem to forsake him, for the fact remains that

… we are press'd by heavy laws

And often, glad no more,

We were a face of joy, because

We have been glad of yore. (ll. 45-48)

The speaker is totally convinced that the laws of nature are "heavy." However, they must be endured, for to oppose them would result in a foolish strife. In other words, any attempt to recapture the state of childhood would prove of no avail. Unlike Blake, who has succeeded in re-entering the visionary state of childhood, Wordsworth expresses his wish to regain his early visions but cannot manage to fulfill this wish. This probably accounts for the

lack of descriptions of actual visionary moments in his poetry as those found in Blake; his poems reveal the necessity of visions rather than depict or present one to the reader.

However, Wordsworth's critical premises, stated in both his poetry and prose, indicate that his childhood and its visionary quality are important in the making of poetry. In his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), he asserted his intention to write about incidents from common life, and to "throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way."[28] This "certain colouring of imagination" is undoubtedly attained in the visionary, childlike state of mind, a state he had longed for all his life, as he says in the following lines:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man.[29]

The friendship which bound Wordsworth and Coleridge may have stemmed largely from the various affinities in their intellectual interests.[30] This could explain the fact that Coleridge's attitude towards childhood is quite similar to that already found in Wordsworth, an attitude characterized by its nostalgic tone. This is explicit in a number of Coleridge's poems. In his sonnet "On Quitting School for College," written in 1791, Coleridge bids a sad farewell to his childhood days, expressing his wish that "those happy days" would "return again."[31] In "Absence," a poem written in the same year, he sees childhood as a period "when Peace, and Cheerfulness and Health / Enriched me with the best of thought" (ll. 7-8). In his sonnet "To the River Otter," composed two years later, he contemplates the lasting impressions that his childhood has impinged upon his mind: "so deep impressed / Sink the sweet scenes of childhood" (ll. 5-6).

At their face value, these musings over childhood could lend themselves to traditional interpretations; Coleridge may only be attempting to recapture a happier state in his life. A closer analysis, however, reveals that what nourished such nostalgic feelings was the visionary experience which Coleridge associated with the period of childhood and which he aspired to attain.

Coleridge's views on imagination on vision are akin to those of Blake. As Blake discerned a "double vision" in nature, Coleridge looked at natural objects with a similar animating eye: "Everything," he said, "has a life of its own."[32] In a letter to his brother dated March 1798, he describes his purpose in poetry as an endeavor "to elevate the imagination

and set the affections in right tone by the beauty of the inanimate impregnated, as with a living soul."[33]

In childhood, Coleridge found the fertile ground to plant the seeds of vision and imagination. In "To the River Otter," referred to above, there is an apostrophe to the "Visions of Childhood," which he believes have "oft … beguil'd / Lone manhood's cares, yet waking fondest sighs" (ll. 12-13). It is this visionary aspect he finds in childhood that leads him to conclude the sonnet with the desire to be a child "once more" (l. 14). In "Frost at Midnight," written in 1798, he remembers how, when he was a child, he used to dream "with unclosed lids" and how he "brooded all the following morn" over the things he dreamt of (ll. 27-36). It is the Romantic tendency of daydreaming which is here associated with childhood and because of which, he says, his childhood haunts him "with a wild pleasure" (l. 32). In Hartley, his son, he finds the ability to

See and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
If that eternal language, which thy God
Utters. (ll. 58-61)

It is also Hartley that he describes in a letter to Poole in 1803 as "An utter Visionary!"[34] In the second part of "Christabel" he again speaks of him as "such a vision to the sight" (l. 660).

That Coleridge's concept of childhood is closely associated with his concept of the poet is shown in his eighth lecture on Shakespeare:

The poet is one who carries the simplicity of childhood into the powers of manhood; who with a soul unsubdued by habit, unshackled by custom, contemplates all things with the freshness and wonder of a child.[35]

Such a belief is exemplified in "Something Childish, But Very Natural," a poem written and sent by Coleridge to his wife in 1799, in which he wishes for a pair of wings to help him fly to her. As, of course, his wish could not be granted, he chooses to dream of her in his sleep. The title of the poem is quite telling. The conjunction "but" both defines and defends Coleridge's attitude towards childhood against conventional views: what other people might regard as "childish" and hence inappropriate for adults, is believed by the poet to be "natural." Against the traditional views which sneered at the wishful thinking of children, Coleridge wrote in an 1809 issue of the *Friend*:

If men laugh at the falsehoods that were imposed on themselves during their childhood, it is because they are not good and wise enough ….[36]

Elsewhere he describes infants as "Untaught, yet wise!"[37] Like Blake, he mistrusts experience which could destroy the innate virtue found in the state of childhood. In his poem

"Progress of Vice," composed in 1790, he says that "inborn Truth and Virtue" guide the child who might otherwise be inclined to vice as he grows up and gains more experience (l. 3). Experience is never the path to truth, for "all truth," Coleridge contends, "is a species of revelation," which is yet another Blakean belief.[38]

Whether Coleridge was successful in carrying his childhood into his manhood is beside the mark. It suffices to say that he desired to achieve it, as shown in his report of his lecture "The New System of Education" Which appeared in the *Bristol Gazette* for November 18, 1813:

he [Coleridge] always when viewing an infant, found a tear candidate for his eye, not because of feelings of pity at the transient state of infancy, but because of a desire to be able to recover that innocency [*sic*] once possessed.[39]

This desire is clearly echoed in his poem "To an Infant" in which he identifies himself with the addressed child: "A Babe art thou – and such a Thing am I" (l. 16).

It would be adequate to conclude that such a re-interpretation of the Romantic concept of childhood paves the way for a revolution of the Romantic theory of poetry in general, for the Romantics' concern with the theme of childhood stems largely from their concern with poetry. The ability to compose – as Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge believed – is dependent on the ability to perceive vision which is in turn dependent on the poet's power to restore a childlike state of mind that helps him enter a visionary experience. The theme of childhood, therefore, forms one of the most vital aspects in the poetic theory of the Romantic poets.

NOTES

[1] C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.3.

[2] Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), pp.42-50.

[3] Elliott Landaw, S. L. Epstein, and A. P. Stone, *Child Development Through Literature* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p.291.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] *Ibid*., p.292.

[6] Bowra, pp.1-25.

[7] William Blake, *Selected Poems of William Blake*, ed. F. W. Bateson (London: Heinemann, 1961), p.xiii.

[8] *Ibid*.

[9] Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.3.

[10] William Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: The Nonsuch Press, 1957), p.817.

[11] *Ibid*., p.793.

[12] *Ibid.*, p.794.

[13] *Ibid.*, p.774.

[14] *Ibid.*, p.439.

[15] *Ibid.*, p.460

[16] Wilson, p.31.

[17] Bowra, p.30.

[18] Blake, *Complete Writings*, pp.476, 775.

[19] *Ibid.*, p.97.

[20] *Ibid.*, p.471.

[21] Coveney, p.69.

[22] William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p.502.

[23] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett, and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), p.286.

[24] Bowra, p.76.

[25] Coveney, p.77.

[26] *Ibid.*, p.77.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp.79-80.

[28] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, p.244.

[29] Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, p.62.

[30] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, p.242.

[31] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p.29.

[32] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, p.xxiv.

[33] *Ibid.*, p.xxi.

[34] John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1959), p.94.

[35] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Everyman's Library, 1960), p.vol. II, p.112.

[36] Coveney, p.84.

[37] Coleridge, *The Poems*, p.91.

[38] Coveney, p.84.

[39] *Ibid.*, p.89.

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