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# Dickinson, Blake, and the Hymnbooks of Hell

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ALAN BLACKSTOCK

## *Dickinson, Blake, and the Hymnbooks of Hell*

**I**n *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*, Barton Levi St. Armand writes the following:

Dickinson, like Blake, was a deliberate naïf . . . Both poets turned orthodoxy's weapons against itself. Blake pointed to Jehovah as the fearful maker of the Tyger . . . In Dickinson's backyard metaphysic, the question who framed the sinister lineaments of the family cat was answered by her invocation, "Burglar! Banker! - Father!" (165)

St. Armand's linking of Emily Dickinson and William Blake is merely one of the more recent manifestations of a tendency that surfaced in the late nineteenth century, with the rise in critical esteem for these two writers who had formerly been dismissed as an isolated eccentric, in the case of Dickinson, and an outright lunatic, in the case of Blake. Many early critics found affinities between the two in their radical disruption of poetic language, their penchant for gnomic utterance, and their cryptic imagery that hinted at a complex private mythology, all of which contributed to a view of Blake and Dickinson as mystics or poet-prophets with a message accessible only to initiates. Christina Rossetti wrote that Dickinson possessed "a wonderful Blakean gift, but therewithal a startling recklessness of poetic ways and means" (qtd. in Doriani 37). In an 1891 *Harper's* article titled "The Strange Poems of Emily Dickinson," William Dean Howells quoted with approval Thomas Higginson's observation of a "quality suggestive of the poetry of William Blake" in Dickinson's work but added that "it is a Blake who had read Emerson who had read Blake" (319). And Louise Bogan commented in a 1960 essay that in both Blake and Dickinson, "limitation and boundary finally yielded to originality and power; they were sufficiently outside the spirit of their times so that they were

comparatively untouched by the vagaries of fashion; they both were able to wring from solitary contemplation sound working principles and just form" (140). Later twentieth-century scholarship, however, turned toward a closer investigation of the cultural milieu in which Dickinson and Blake produced their poetry—in particular, their relationship to the Protestant hymn tradition exemplified by Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and others. Scholars have examined the ways in which Dickinson and Blake individually appropriated this tradition only to subvert it, but none to my knowledge has undertaken a synoptic examination of works in which both writers perform this subversion.

In one of the earliest treatments of the subject, Vivian de Sola Pinto writes: "A study of the relationship between the writings of Watts and Blake . . . is not merely an exploration of literary sources. It throws light on an important phase of the development both of poetic sensibility and of the social conscience" (223). Blake's work was largely forgotten until its rediscovery by the Pre-Raphaelites and W. B. Yeats in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (though a few poems such as "The Lamb" did appear in nineteenth-century literary magazines that Dickinson may have seen). Since there is no evidence of Dickinson having read Blake, the point of any inquiry into the relationship between his writings and hers is not to suggest that one was a source for the other, but to examine the ways in which their common sources—the Protestant hymnodists—inform both their poetics and their social consciences. Setting texts by Blake and Dickinson alongside those of Watts allows for an assessment of congruences and divergences in the ways in which these poems and their authors challenge the theological, educational, and stylistic hegemonies the hymn tradition deliberately advanced.

My title is derived from Nick Shrimpton's "Hell's Hymnbook: Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and Their Models," in which Shrimpton places Blake's *Songs* in the context of prose and verse produced for children by John Bunyan, Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Christopher Smart, and Anna Barbauld, and points to such clearly related songs as Watts's "A Cradle Hymn" and Blake's "A Cradle Song," or Barbauld's "Hymn Five" and Blake's "Night." Shrimpton concludes that Blake's *Songs* "spring from an exceptionally specialized branch of the lyric which happened to be very active in the latter part of the eighteenth century" (20). Blake's "decision to write children's hymns. . . . was a decision to participate in what was to be the most prolific and controversial literary form of the decade" (22). Shrimpton reminds us that at the end of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, having completed the Proverbs of Hell, Blake threatened to write the Bible of Hell, and comments that it is "not altogether fanciful to suggest that in the *Songs of Innocence*

*and of Experience*" Blake is "offering us the children's hymns of Hell" (26). Dickinson never made such a threat, although her suggestion in "The Devil - had he fidelity" (Fr1510) that "Perfidy is the virtue / That would but he resign / The Devil - without question / Were thoroughly divine" would have met with Blake's approval, and much of Dickinson's work appears to participate in the "prolific and controversial literary form" of the children's hymn. Thus in performing her own subversion of that genre Dickinson might be said to have written her own hymnbooks of Hell.

The controversy Shrimpton alludes to is described in Zachary Leader's *Reading Blake's Songs* as one between Calvinist, Lockean, and Rousseauian ideas of education. John Locke's *tabula rasa* conception of the human mind suggested that the proper approach to education was to fill the empty mind with information imparted from the outside, while the Rousseauian model held that since children are born with intuitive knowledge, the best education leaves children free to follow their own imaginative bent. According to the Puritan view of human nature, all are born infected with the taint of original sin, and therefore a child's education should focus on curbing the natural tendency toward sin and correcting the misdirected course of corrupted human reason. The catechistic form of education prescribed by the Puritans was both endorsed and challenged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in debates among influential educators such as Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer. Many books and pamphlets on the theory and practice of education were published, especially for the working classes.<sup>1</sup> As Alan Richardson has noted:

The ongoing debate on the uses and dangers of literacy and popular (if not yet mass) education became during the later eighteenth century what Raymond Williams has called the most "central" issue "in the history of our culture." And as the concept of childhood became defined (if not in fact produced) by education, the new children's literature and literary representations of childhood, including Romantic idealizations of the child, reflected no less than did contemporary education theory the politics of literacy. (853)

As writers whose own education was profoundly shaped by Puritan principles, Watts, Blake, and Dickinson all addressed these debates, directly or indirectly, in their own literary representations of childhood.

According to Shrimpton, Blake's vision of education coincided with none of the prevailing models of his day: "Blake's *Songs* were certainly written for children, though not exclusively so, but like all children's literature they had to be bought by adults who wished to teach or improve. Yet Blake's poems encourage children

to believe their own instincts to be superior to any adult instruction. The poems implicitly reject the very act of teaching" (26). Heather Glen also sees Blake's *Songs* as a deliberate response to the popular expectations for children's literature: "In choosing the child's book as a medium Blake was choosing a genre in which real imaginative life . . . was consistently being subordinated to 'instructive' purposes" (14). The examples Glen offers of typical children's verse of the period provide "straightforward, easily understandable lessons" and constitute "a process of simplification. . . . which imposes its own reductive categories upon the baffling diversity of experience, which closes up teasing, suggestive ambiguity and calls for a passive acceptance by rather than a creative encounter with the reader. They did not rouse the child's capacities for wonder: they told him how to think" (17). Against this sort of reductive simplicity Glen sets *Songs of Experience* like "The Lilly":

The modest Rose puts forth a thorn:  
The humble Sheep, a threatening horn:  
While the Lilly white, shall in Love delight,  
Nor a thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright.

Blake here employs the emblem tradition, in which natural imagery is used to impart a moral lesson in verse, in order to challenge the very premises underlying that tradition. Glen explains:

Its traditionally 'emblematic' subject matter, its neatly conclusive rhyme-scheme, its very appearance in a book of verse for children, all court the expectations formed by fifty years of moral songs like Watts': that there *will* be an unambiguous moral lesson . . . And in frustrating these expectations. . . . Blake is using the form of the late eighteenth-century child's song not as a vehicle for 'ideas' counter to those which it usually expressed, but in order to expose and subvert that whole mode of making sense of the world which it characteristically embodied. (18)

Here we see the thrust of Glen's argument: Blake's *Songs* are not intended to give children a different set of ideas than they are used to receiving, but to cause them to question the whole idea of receiving ideas and exercise their imaginations rather than their reason. For Glen, Blake's *Songs* "revers[e] expected hierarchies," "parody or . . . show the dark underside" of commonly proclaimed virtues, and "poetically undermine" the voices of authority; "[a]t every point where the *Songs* seem about to fit the expected pattern, they awkwardly refuse. And what they offer is not merely a subversion of a familiar mode of seeing the world: it is a subtly articulated alternative vision" (19).

Dickinson's verse has likewise been shown to reverse expected hierarchies, reveal the dark side of conventional virtues, and poetically undermine authoritative voices. Furthermore, her use of the hymn form deliberately refuses to fit the expected patterns. According to St. Armand, "Much of Dickinson's poetry was a continuing dialectic that used the imagery, premises, and metrics of Puritan hymnology as a basis for a personal psalmody of questioning and protest. When we read the abstracts of Calvinist doctrine in *Watts and Select* or *Village Hymns*, we are inevitably reminded that many of Dickinson's poems are in turn heretical paraphrases of or replies to these same orthodox sentiments" (158-59). St. Armand lists "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers - " (Fr124) "I heard a Fly buzz - " (Fr591), and "I cannot live with You - " (Fr706) as examples of these heretical paraphrases or replies. He demonstrates this dialectic in Dickinson's "The Bumble Bee's Religion - " (Fr1547) and Watts's "How doth the little busy Bee. " Dickinson transforms Watts's "little busy bee," who "Improve[s] each shining Hour," into, as St. Armand puts it, "a buccaneering bumblebee whose 'Religion' was to preach free thought" (156) and, as the poem continues,

To a delusive Lilac  
The vanity divulge  
Of Industry and Morals  
And every righteous thing  
For the divine Perdition  
Of Idleness and Spring -

(Fr1547)

Like Blake, Dickinson was likely influenced by the emblem tradition transmitted by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers such as Andreas Alciatus and Frances Quarles. In *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture* Victoria Morgan argues: "As they appear to be influences upon Dickinson's 'emblematic' way of incorporating the bee in her poetics, Alciatus's book of emblems might also connect Isaac Watts and William Blake and provide a strong link to the emblematic tradition" (174). And like Blake's "The Lilly," Dickinson's emblematic poems similarly employ traditional subjects like insects and flowers only to frustrate expectations of "an unambiguous moral lesson" and "expose and subvert" the code embodied in the emblem tradition (Glen 18).

Dickinson's subversion of traditional forms is further adumbrated by Angela Sorby in her masterful survey *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917*. Sorby compares the ways in which Dickinson and nineteenth-century American poet Eugene Field appropriated Puritan literature

aimed at children, such as Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs* and the *New England Primer*, in words that apply equally well to Dickinson and Blake:

both use pedagogical forms (Watts, the *Primer*) while maintaining the sense that these forms are also forms of bankrupt authority. And both, in aligning speakers against this authority, resort to the subject-position of the child, while continually negotiating what it means to be a child. The figure of the child is generally defined in relation to adults: the Calvinist child is fallen, subject to adult instruction; the romantic child is innocent, subject to adult nostalgia. But, from Field's perspective as from Dickinson's, neither model is safe or stable. Institutional powers, represented by adults, are threatening even to innocents . . . and the hierarchies that maintain them are dangerous. (142)

Both Blake's *Songs* and Dickinson's poems frequently employ child speakers to challenge bankrupt forms of authority while simultaneously negotiating between Calvinist and Romantic conceptions of what it means to be a child, ultimately finding neither to be stable nor safe.

Another element linking Watts, Blake, and Dickinson is their revolutionary use of hymn meter. Beginning with Thomas Johnson, Dickinson scholars have recognized that most of Dickinson's lyrics fall into the metrical patterns employed in the hymns she would have sung and studied in church and school ("The Poet and the Muse"). Morgan, however, contends that Dickinson's appropriation of hymn meter is more nuanced than commonly thought, in that Watts himself had scandalized his contemporaries by breaking free of the conventions of hymnody he had inherited: "Dickinson was interested in Watts not merely, as other critics have argued, as a patriarchal figure whose modes she could reject and rebel against, but somewhat more crucially, because his verse provided an example for the breaking of rules; grammatical rules, rules of prosody, and also rules of taste, both literary *and* religious" (92). A. R. C. Finch, citing John Hollander's landmark study of Blake's metric in *Vision and Resonance*, further links Dickinson with Blake in her use of hymn meter to rebel against cultural expectations by creating "an anti-meter, as opposed to the norm of blank verse" (qtd. in Finch 167). In Finch's analysis, both Blake and Dickinson found their anti-meter in the same place: "Blake's rough fourteeners employ a one-line adaptation of the meter Dickinson favored, the hymn stanza" (168). But Dickinson's "resistance to the authority of a standard meter" (167) manifested itself differently than Blake's: a "hundred years before Whitman," Finch writes, "Blake transformed the fourteenier pattern into

a loose, cadenced accentual meter. Dickinson stayed near, or at least constantly returned to, the strict count of her hymn stanzas throughout her career" (168).

Thus while Dickinson also offers a subversion of standard poetic meter and of familiar modes of seeing the world, the subtly articulated alternative vision critics have found in Blake's *Songs* is more difficult to locate in her poems.<sup>2</sup> Rather, while her work challenges conventional hierarchies, Dickinson herself either never succeeded in creating, or never fully articulated, a vision of the world that could replace them. In the words of Shira Wolosky, "Dickinson restructures hymnal modes and tropes she borrows from Watts, clearly intending to subvert his doctrinal assertions. She then, however, often proceeds to subvert her own subversions" (232). To compare the purposes for and extent of Blake's and Dickinson's subversion of Watts, then, I should like to examine three sets of poems by each of these three hymnodists. I have also included some of the illustrations that invariably accompanied Watts's poems and Blake's *Songs*, since these images were deliberately intended either to reinforce, or in Blake's case, support and challenge the text, in keeping with his project of encouraging his readers to question instruction. Dickinson's published works were not accompanied by illustrations, but it may be instructive to think about the physical form of her texts in relation to the hymns and printed sermons whose forms they often employ, a print tradition that manifested itself in Dickinson's home and church in the hymns and sermons of Watts.

Watts was both a noted Calvinist theologian in his day and was regarded as one of the leading poets of the eighteenth century. As such his work was immensely influential in theological and literary circles. The Poetry Foundation entry on Watts observes that "as author of several widely sung hymns in the tradition, Watts influenced later poets, particularly Blake and Emily Dickinson." His *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, first published in 1715, went through countless reprints over the next two centuries and were in standard use in Protestant homes and churches in England and America (including the church Dickinson attended in Amherst). De Sola Pinto characterizes Watts as "a man who stood between two worlds . . . the inheritor of the old Calvinist tradition of rigid morality and bibliolatry. . . [and] a humanist of the reign of Queen Anne with a classical education and a philosophic training" (214). Watts's songs for children occupy for de Sola Pinto an intermediary stage between the strict Calvinist didacticism of John Bunyan and the revolutionary ideology of Blake. This is illustrated in de Sola Pinto's comparison of poems by the three writers that take the ant as their subject:

[These poems] represent three different stages in the approach of adults to the world of childhood (for the insect is the symbol of the child). In Bunyan we see the adult interested only in forcing the child into the mould of traditional morality. Watts also holds this view, as it were officially, but he has a secret sympathy for the child as a child, and feels the charm and beauty of the small and the helpless. Blake no longer thinks of turning the child into a model of adult virtue, but tries to enter with imaginative sympathy into the child-world of smallness, helplessness and bewilderment. (220)

Dickinson occupies the same place as Blake in de Sola Pinto's continuum of imaginative sympathy. Unfortunately, she left us no poems about ants, but many of her poems do treat subjects and themes also explored by Watts and Blake. Among these themes is the aforementioned controversy over the nature and purpose of education. Three poems that use the image of morning to express the speaker's attitude toward education and indoctrination are Watts's "Song XXV: A Morning Song," Blake's "The School Boy," and Dickinson's "Will there really be a 'morning'?" (Fr148). Watts's poem offers the following perspective:

My God who makes the sun to know  
His proper hour to rise;  
And to give light to all below,  
Doth send him round the skies.

When, from the chambers of the east,  
His morning race begins,  
He never tires, nor stops to rest,  
But round the earth he shines.

So, like the sun would I fulfil  
The business of the day;  
Begin my work betimes, and still  
March on my heavenly way.

Give me, O Lord, Thy early grace,  
Nor let my soul complain,  
That the young morning of my days  
Has all been spent in vain.

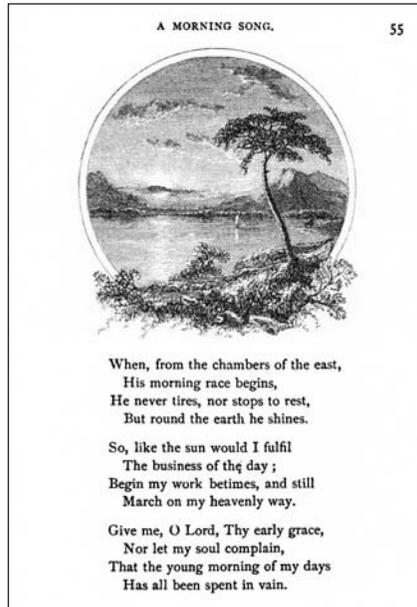


Fig. 1. Isaac Watts, "Song XXV: A Morning Song," *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, 55.

Though, as Morgan has shown, some of Watts's hymns represent a more nuanced approach to questions of religious doctrine than did earlier Puritan hymns, "A Morning Song" is typical of the *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* in its transparent didacticism. The image is also typical in its unambiguous pictorial representation of the glorious rising of the sun. Equally characteristic is the response Blake titled "The School Boy" (see Fig. 2):

I love to rise in a summer morn  
When the birds sing on every tree;  
The distant huntsman winds his horn,  
And the sky-lark sings with me.  
O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn  
O! it drives all joy away;  
Under a cruel eye outworn  
The little ones spend the day.  
In sighing and dismay.

Ah! then at times I drooping sit,  
And spend many an anxious hour,  
Nor in my book can I take delight,  
Nor sit in learnings bower,  
Worn thro' with the dreary shower.

How can the bird that is born for joy,  
Sit in a cage and sing.  
How can a child, when fears annoy,  
But droop his tender wing.  
And forget his youthful spring . . .

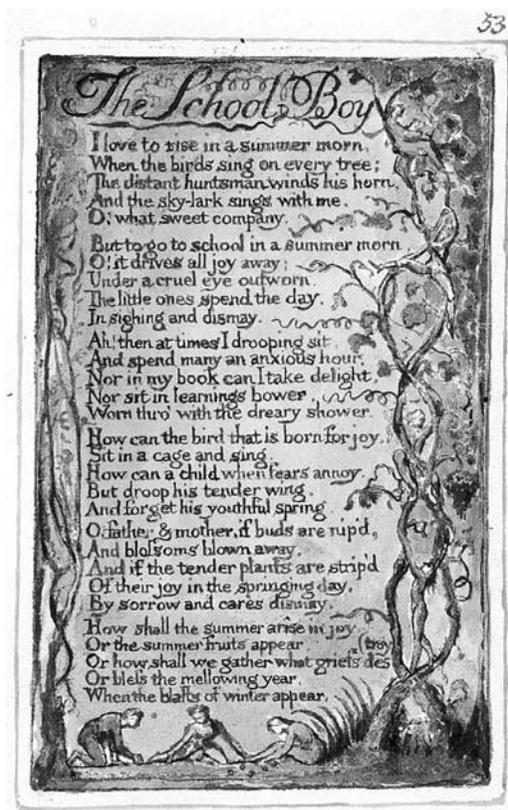


Fig. 2. William Blake, "The School Boy," *Songs of Innocence*, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, William Blake Archive (Library of Congress).

The speakers in both songs are meant to be children, but only in Blake's poem do the voice and perspective show imaginative sympathy with those of the child. Watts's child is a sort of ventriloquist's dummy, a mere vehicle for the utterance of adult moralizing. It may be noted that the perspective in "The School Boy" shifts between the first and third person, and it can thus be questioned whether the poem presents an adult's or a child's point of view, or both. Richardson argues that Blake's *Songs* are double-voiced: "Blake's child-narrators speak in a double register, at once innocent and experienced, putting the subject positions of child and adult into a dialogical relation that critically undermines the catechistic relation prescribed by Trimmer" (865). The accompanying illustration is also ambiguous: what first appears to be an idyllic scene of children engaged in a game of marbles becomes an image of oppression. As Stanley Gardner comments, "the game of marbles, which turns their vision to the ground, is no longer a recreation bringing together a community. The fronds, which loop over the girl by the root of the vine, cage her to the ground, bending her over the game" (246). Both text and image then collaborate to invoke the childlike desire for spontaneous and imaginative experience of the natural world, along with the stultifying effect of reducing that experience to what is imparted by conventional educational theory and practice.

We may compare the voice and tone of Dickinson on the same subject:

Will there really be a "morning"?  
Is there such a thing as "Day"?  
Could I see it from the mountains  
If I were as tall as they?

Has it feet like Water lilies?  
Has it feathers like a Bird?  
Is it brought from famous countries  
Of which I have never heard?

Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!  
Oh some Wise Man from the skies!  
Please to tell a little Pilgrim  
Where the place called "morning" lies!

(Fr148)

In form this poem of Dickinson's is quite conventional. Note the standard syntax and the absence of slant rhyme and ellipsis. The sentiment, however,

while not revolutionary, is markedly distinct from that expressed in Watts's "A Morning Song." Like Blake's, Dickinson's speaker expresses the childlike wonder characteristic of the state of innocence, and the speaker feels no need to do anything with the morning other than enjoy it. Yet, unlike Blake's, Dickinson's speaker is eager for instruction from a "Scholar," "Sailor," or "some Wise Man" — an adult—and there is no suggestion that the beauty of the morning might be sullied by learning about it. Of course, like Blake's *Songs*, Dickinson's poem may be read on more than one level; the language of "Wise Man from the skies!" and "Pilgrim" invites us to read "'morning'" as "Heaven" and thus functions as one more instance of Dickinson's recurring concern about existence beyond the grave. In this way, too, the poem may be seen as an answer to Watts's call to "Begin my work betimes, and still / March on my heavenly way." "Will there really be a 'morning'?" thus poses the question that Dickinson would later answer in "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church - " (Fr236): "So instead of getting to Heaven, at last - / I'm going, all along." Dickinson here rejects the Puritan notion that entry into Heaven is conditioned upon the diligent fulfillment of one's earthly tasks, but she does not share Blake's view of education as oppressive or of imparted wisdom as fatal to the imagination. And in her speaker's receptivity to instruction, Dickinson might more genuinely reflect the child's perspective than Blake's "The School Boy," with its overt criticism.

Although the pronounced social criticism that runs throughout Blake's *Songs* is often more indirect in Dickinson's poems, "The Beggar Lad - dies early - " (Fr496), like many of Blake's *Songs of Experience*, seems a pointed retort to such complacent affirmations as Watts's "Song IV: Praise for Mercies Spiritual and Temporal":

Whene'er I take my walks abroad,  
How many poor I see;  
What shall I render to my God  
For all His gifts to me?

Not more than others I deserve,  
Yet God hath given me more;  
For I have food while others starve,  
Or beg from door to door.

How many children in the street  
Half naked I behold!  
While I am clothed from head to feet  
And covered from the cold.

.....  
Are these Thy favours day by day,  
To me above the rest?  
Then let me love Thee more than they,  
And try to serve Thee best.

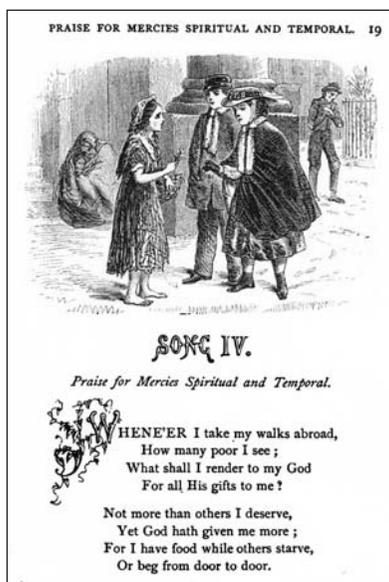


Fig. 3. Isaac Watts, “Song IV: Praise for Mercies Spiritual and Temporal,” *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, 19.

Many of Blake’s *Songs of Experience*, such as “The Chimney Sweeper” and “Holy Thursday,” are written from the point of view of the starving children whom Watts’s speaker dismisses as less favored by God. The closest parallel to Dickinson’s poems may be found in Blake’s “The Little Vagabond” (see Fig. 4):

Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,  
But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm;  
Besides I can tell where I am use’d well,  
Such usage in heaven will never do well.

But if at the Church they would give us some Ale,  
And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale;  
We’d sing and we’d pray all the live-long day,  
Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray.

Then the Parson might preach & drink & sing  
And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring:  
And modest dame Lurch, who is always at Church,  
Would not have bandy children nor fasting nor birch.

And God like a father rejoicing to see  
His children as pleasant and happy as he:  
Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the Barrel  
But kiss him & give him both drink and apparel.

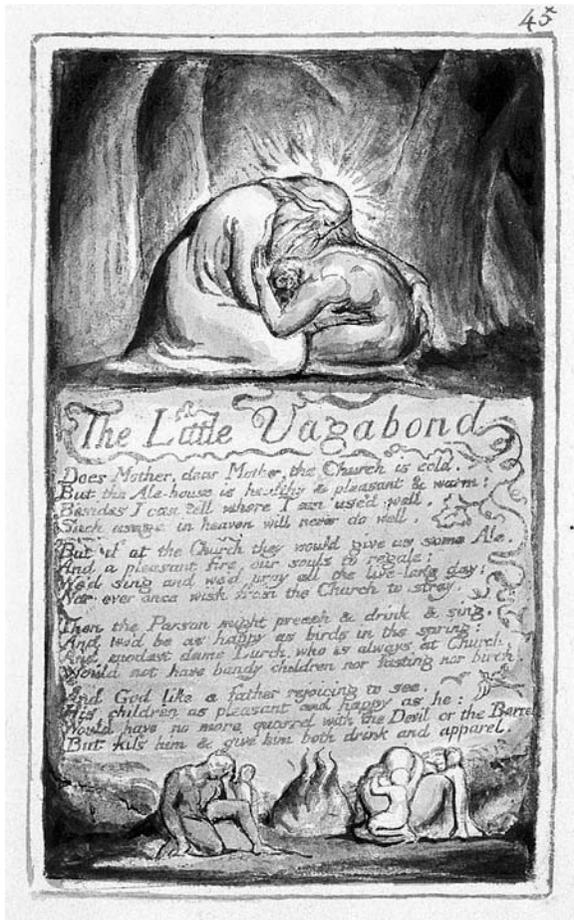


Fig. 4. William Blake, "The Little Vagabond," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, William Blake Archive (Library of Congress).

One of Dickinson's most Blakean poems is "The Beggar Lad - dies early - " (Fr496), which though not written in the first person, similarly presents the world from the point of view of Watts's less-favored children, and likewise imagines these children receiving from God the blessings presently denied them:

The Beggar Lad - dies early -  
It's Somewhat in the Cold -  
And somewhat in the Trudging feet -  
And haply, in the World -

The Cruel - smiling - bowing World -  
That took it's Cambric Way -  
Nor heard the timid cry for "Bread - "  
"Sweet Lady - Charity" -

Among Redeemed Children  
If Trudging feet may stand -  
The Barefoot time forgotten - so -  
The Sleet - the bitter Wind -

The Childish Hands that teased for Pence  
Lifted adoring - then -  
To Him whom never Ragged - Coat  
Did supplicate in vain -

(Fr496)

The subject matter and much of the imagery are similar here: note the parallels between the "smiling - bowing World - " that is deaf to appeals for Charity and "modest dame Lurch, who is always at Church," but whose charity results in beatings, starvation, and children bandy-legged with rickets. Note also in Blake's headpiece the figure of the Redeemer comforting the vagabond and Dickinson's image of the beggar lad among the redeemed children. But Blake's tone is ironic, in that the speaker does not expect the Church to begin providing beer or cease from wielding the birch, nor God to reconcile with the Devil; and the illustration at the foot of the page, with the vagabond isolated from the happy family, suggests that the speaker is well aware of the impossibility of his vision. As Gardner observes, "With the children already rejected, the family can be no more than a day-break away from dropping a child in a field some Holy Thursday. It would take the unlikely transformation of Sarah Trimmer's Church and its Deity, as the

little vagabond proposes, to rescue this family; and to return the boy, naked in Destitution, to the arms of the Redeemer in the head-piece" (242).

At the end of "The Beggar Lad - dies early -," in contrast, the tone is hopeful, and while the speaker's concern for the plight of the beggar lad is worlds away from the self-satisfaction exhibited by Watts's speaker, the sense that all will be made right in Heaven might be said to perpetuate the status quo. Dickinson's speaker expresses sympathy for the dying beggar lad and mild criticism of "The Cruel - smiling - bowing World -" but rather than investigating the social conditions that created the beggar lad's plight (which Blake identifies in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "London" as God, Priest, and King) and calling for reform, the speaker receives comfort from the hope of redemption in the afterlife. Here again, however, the hopeful tone may more closely reflect the child's point of view than does either Watts's smugness or Blake's sarcasm.

In fairness to Dickinson, it should be acknowledged that "The Beggar Lad - dies early -" is a relatively early poem; the tone of a later response to another of Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, "Song XXIII: Obedience to Parents," is much closer to Blake's. First Watts:

Let children that would fear the Lord  
Hear what their teachers say;  
With reverence meet their parents' word,  
And with delight obey.

Have you not heard what dreadful plagues  
Are threatened by the Lord,  
To him that breaks his father's laws,  
Or mocks his mother's word?

What heavy guilt upon him lies!  
How cursèd is his name!  
The ravens shall pick out his eyes,  
And eagles eat the same.

But those that worship God, and give  
Their parents honour due,  
Here on this earth they long shall live,  
And live hereafter too.

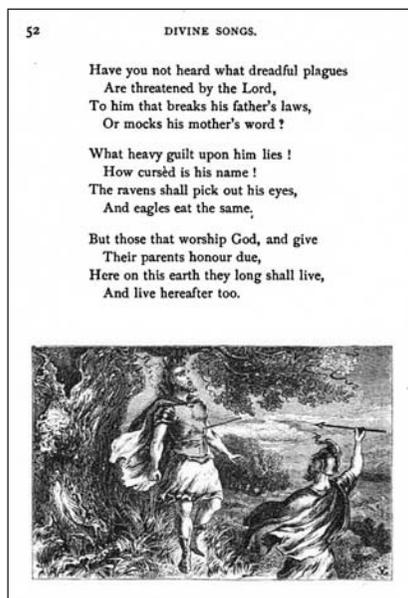


Fig. 5. Isaac Watts, "Song XXIII: Obedience to Parents," *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, 52.<sup>3</sup>

In this song there is no pretence of adopting the child's voice; neither is there in Blake's nor Dickinson's ripostes. Blake's "A Little Boy Lost" takes Watts's threat of punishment for disobedient children and transforms it into an indictment of the entire English social structure (see Fig. 6):

Nought loves another as itself  
Nor venerates another so,  
Nor is it possible to Thought  
A greater than itself to know;

And Father, how can I love you,  
Or any of my brothers more?  
I love you like the little bird  
That picks up crumbs around the door.

The Priest sat by and heard the child.  
In trembling zeal he siez'd his hair:  
He led him by his little coat:  
And all admir'd the Priestly care.

And standing on the altar high  
Lo what a fiend is here! said he:  
One who sets reason up for judge  
Of our most holy Mystery.

The weeping child could not be heard.  
The weeping parents wept in vain:  
They strip'd him to his little shirt.  
And bound him in an iron chain.

And burn'd him in a holy place,  
Where many had been burn'd before:  
The weeping parents wept in vain.  
Are such things done on Albion's shore?



Fig. 6. William Blake, "A Little Boy Lost," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, William Blake Archive (Library of Congress).

Like Watts, Dickinson cites Scripture to support a moral conclusion, but one decidedly different:

Abraham to kill him  
Was distinctly told -  
Isaac was an Urchin -  
Abraham was old -  
  
Not a hesitation -  
Abraham complied -  
Flattered by Obeisance  
Tyranny demurred -  
  
Isaac - to his Children  
Lived to tell the tale -  
Moral - with a Mastiff  
Manners may prevail.

(Fr1332)

The equation of obedience to parents with obeisance to tyrants is one Blake would certainly endorse, but while Blake is explicit in his condemnation of the religious structures that encourage the oppression of children, Dickinson is much more oblique in her commentary. The "Mastiff" of the final stanza may refer either to Abraham or to God (who gave the command in the first place), but if there is an implied criticism of Puritan theology here, what such criticism calls for would be a reconsideration of the nature of God rather than the overthrow of the existing ecclesiastical regime.

In the case of "Abraham to kill him," the form of the poem, like Watts's and Blake's illustrations, serves to reinforce or elaborate on its ideological content. Beth Maclay Doriani finds that this poem follows "the structure of the Edwardsian sermon" in citing a Biblical text and then "proceeds logically through the 'doctrine,' 'reasons,' and 'application.'" In the following lines Dickinson "elaborates on the proposition, interpreting Abraham and Isaac's situation as it appears to her," and the final two lines provide the application, "prophetically extending the significance of the text—and her reading of it—to all humanity" ("Homiletics" 63-64). Dickinson's appropriation of the sermonic structure, Doriani concludes, "provides her a form through which she can speak confidently as a visionary speaker of truth, moral chastisement or alternately, consolation, while she appropriates the preacher's prophetic role as exhorter, edifier, and comforter"

(68)—the role that Blake maintained throughout his work and made manifest not only in his words but in his very means of creating his texts, inventing a relief etching technique that functioned by “melting apparent surfaces away and displaying the infinite which was hid” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 1383).

Many more examples could be adduced to illustrate the similarities and differences between Blake’s radical and Dickinson’s partial subversion of the Protestant hymn tradition, but at this point the question must be addressed: what accounts for this difference, and what does it signify about the social conscience of these two poets? It is not my intention to suggest that Dickinson’s conscience was less developed than Blake’s, but that her experience of education, religion, and related social and political institutions was less oppressive than Blake’s. Therefore her response to the hymn tradition, while often questioning certain tenets, did not constitute a whole-hearted repudiation of that tradition. Blake lived next door to a charity school and must have encountered beggar children and chimney sweeps frequently on the streets of London. Furthermore he was once tried for treason, a hanging offense, for evicting a drunken soldier from his garden. Dickinson by all accounts enjoyed her schooling and much of the preaching she heard in church, and she never seems to have personally encountered government as an oppressive force. “She was not, in short,” says Rowena Revis-Jones, “as socially oppressed as some would make her out to be. Nor was the independence that marks the person and the poems necessarily a sign of rebellion or rage . . . Her poems in part grow out of and reflect the mental rigor, sense of personal worth, and consciousness of divine dimensions impressed upon her through a ‘Puritan’ education” (315-16). Cristanne Miller concurs: “Social reform is not Dickinson’s concern. The breadth of circumstances in her life in which she sees an unfair differential of power . . . reveal the clarity of her vision, not a desire to revolutionize the world” (166-67).

Thus though both Blake and Dickinson employed the form of the Protestant hymn to satirize or question Puritan doctrine, Blake’s rejection of the political, religious, and moral hegemonies of his day was outspoken and unwavering, as opposed to Dickinson’s indirection and evident ambivalence. To quote Wolosky again: “The hymnal frame of so much Dickinson verse asserts a genuine and profound effort to accept doctrines that she cannot, however, help but question, leading her in turn to question her own doubts” (215). Blake, by contrast, never expressed the anxiety that runs through much of Dickinson’s work; instead, he aphorized, “If the sun and moon should doubt / They’d immediately go out” (“Auguries of Innocence,” *Songs*). Wolosky continues: the “traces from Watts are neither fully assimilated nor absolutely displaced as Dickinson struggles to

deny doctrine and then deny her denials. What results is a self-subversion that approaches a double negative" (232).

It is this self-subversion that seems to have frustrated any temptation Dickinson may have felt to compile her own hymnbooks of Hell. After all, she writes:

I never felt at Home - Below -  
And in the Handsome skies  
I shall not feel at Home - I know -  
I dont like Paradise -

(Fr437)

But as much as she mocks the conventional view of Heaven, where "it's Sunday - all the time - / And Recess - never comes - ," she fears the alternative:

If God could make a visit -  
Or ever took a Nap -  
So not to see us - but they say  
Himself - a Telescope

Perennial beholds us -  
Myself would run away  
From Him - and Holy Ghost - and all -  
But there's the "Judgment Day"!

(Fr437)

For Blake, though, the Last Judgment is a day to be welcomed by those who have freed their minds from the conventionally imposed, sanctioned, and perpetuated dualities of good and evil, reward and punishment, heaven and hell: "The Last Judgment [will be] when all those are Cast away who trouble Religion with Questions concerning Good & Evil or Eating of the Tree of those Knowledges or Reasonings which hinder the Vision of God turning all into a Consuming fire" ("A Vision of the Last Judgment"). In Blake's Last Judgment, both Watts and Dickinson would be cast away for their persistence in troubling religion with questions concerning good and evil, knowledge and reason, questions that hindered them from achieving the all-consuming vision Blake proclaimed. Though Watts's defenders have argued that his work represents an advance in imaginative sympathy and poetic innovation from Puritan predecessors like Bunyan, his *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* on the whole remain firmly bound within

catechistic Puritan tradition and educational theory. Although Dickinson never escaped the dualities Blake exploded, her purpose in writing poems partaking in the children's hymn tradition was neither to support the status quo overtly, like Watts, nor overturn it, like Blake. Thus in dramatizing the struggle to resolve questions of good and evil, knowledge and reason, Dickinson's work may more closely approximate the child's perspective than that of either Watts or Blake. Not aspiring to write a hymnbook of Hell, she appears to have been content with hymns expressing her (and her readers') hope—and doubt—of Heaven.

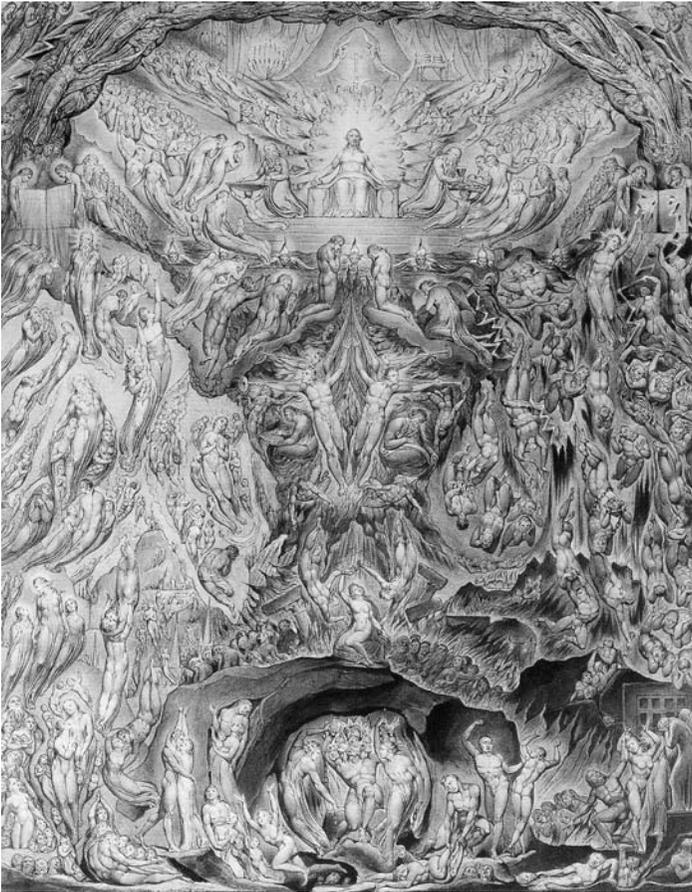


Fig. 7. William Blake, "Last Judgment," 1808, Petworth House, Sussex, UK (The National Trust Photographic Library, John Hammond, The Bridgeman Art Library).

## Notes

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, William Blake Archive at the Library of Congress in Washington and the Bridgeman Art Library for permission to use scans of the images in this publication.

1. Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer were eighteenth-century writers and educators who founded Christian Sunday Schools and supported limited education for the poor while strictly maintaining the established social hierarchy.
2. Camille Paglia has argued that "Blake and Spenser are [Dickinson's] allies in helping pagan Coleridge defeat Protestant Wordsworth" (624).
3. The illustration appears to depict the fate of King David's son Absalom, who died violently while leading a rebellion against his father.

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