A Stylistic Analysis of "The School Boy"

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"The School Boy" is one of four poems which William Blake first included in the original version of *Songs of Innocence* before eventually transferring them to the second half of the complete work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. His reassessment of the appropriate placement for "The School Boy" implies a certain ambivalence in Blake's mind, regarding either the division of the entire collection into two distinct categories, or the essential quality of this particular poem itself. One interpretation of the textual evidence which exists is that Blake already had in mind the larger collection when he first published *Songs of Innocence*, and consciously included "contrary" poems, such as "The School Boy", to establish a degree of tension through the juxtaposition of these with a core of pre-experiential compositions (Erdman, p. 791). This interpretation is supported by the fact that he had already completed a number of the poems which later would comprise *Songs of Experience* when he printed the earlier work: it is easy to imagine that he was in a process of experimentation, which led to a few contrary poems being included temporarily in *Songs of Innocence*, and others rejected but retained for use in the complete collection (Erdman, p. 791). At any rate, these unique features of the publishing background of "The School Boy" serve to highlight it as an object worth looking at more closely.

Another reason for focusing attention on this poem is its subject matter. This poem is about the effects of formal education on a person's life. What happens to children when they enter school? Do they lose anything in exchange for the opportunity to study in an organized setting? Do they gain anything in exchange for giving up their natural activities? How much of an effect does education really have? What is the individual teacher's responsibility? One possible benefit to be derived from a reading of "The School Boy" is an understanding of Blake's conception of what is entailed in the human learning experience. For the language teacher, there is a further incentive for pursuing an understanding of Blake's ideas regarding education and learning: Blake, according to letters he wrote, began teaching himself languages as a middle-aged adult, and reported having great success. "I go on merrily with my Greek & Latin: am sorry

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that I did not begin to learn languages early in life as I find it very easy" (Erdman, p. 727). It is conceivable that from an analysis of "The School Boy", the reader can gain insight directly applicable to language teaching practices.

The first stanza establishes the phonetic rhythm and meter of the poem, and evokes an initial semantic network of relationships in a reader's mind. These original patterns stimulate anticipatory inferences as the reader moves through the text; the complete effect in the end is achieved through the combined results of reinforcing and breaking the established patterns (Leech, p. 65).

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.

The first through third lines are roughly iambic tetrameter, with an anapestic foot occurring in each of the first two lines, i.e., "in a sum-" and "When the birds", and a single-syllable foot in the second line, "sing". Many of the consonants in the first two lines are approximants and nasals, and there is a predominance of voicing, interrupted only four times by voiceless stops and fricatives. In the third line, there are four gaps in the voicing, as the result of a sharp increase in the number of voiceless stops used. Also in the third line is the first occurrence of onomatopoeic effects, in the sequence of voiceless glottal approximant, voiced velar approximant, voiced glottal approximant, and voiceless glottal approximant in word-initial positions, i.e., "huntsman winds his horn" : the effect is that of exhaling, inhaling deeply, and then blowing out as if through a horn.

The line length changes in the fourth and fifth lines, which are trimeter. Also, Blake's loose iambic accent pattern is broken again, by one anapestic foot, "And the sky" ; another single-syllable foot, "O" ; and a dactyl, "company". The number of approximants and nasals drops noticeably in the fourth and fifth lines, where the repetitive use of voiceless alveolar fricatives in combinations with voiceless stops establishes a clear foreground of longer and more numerous sections of voicelessness. There are a total of ten voiceless consonants in these two lines, in sharp contrast to the low frequency of their occurrence in the first two lines of the stanza: of these ten, eight of the voiceless consonants occur in clusters or as either end of voiceless bridges from word-final to word-initial positions.

Phonetically, then, a general pattern emerges in a close reading of the first stanza. The first three lines are roughly iambic tetrameter and the last two iambic trimeter, with a looseness throughout in regard to the placement of accents, following the natural rhythm of speech, which results in occasional anapestic, single-syllable, and even dactyl feet. The third line is pivotal, as might be expected, and functions to bring about a transition, from the largely uninterrupted voicing of the first two lines to the extensive voicelessness of the last two lines. One possible effect of this marked change in voicing is to convey the singular clarity of the huntsman's horn, the sky-lark's song, and the connection the speaker senses between himself and these other two living things, by foregrounding through the use of word-final and word-initial voiceless breaks which serve to separate each word from the others, in contrast to the blending of voiced sounds across word boundaries in the first two lines.

The use of positively charged words, such as "love", "rise", and "morn" in the first line imparts a solidly upbeat tone to the entire stanza; however, there is a certain ambiguity in the existence of "the distant huntsman", which connotes a sense of threat, and his horn, a warning. References to nature abound in the first stanza, including "birds", "tree", and "winds", which implies that these natural elements will provide the vehicles for any metaphor developed in the rest of the poem. For example, since birds have wings and can sing and fly, it is likely that wings, song, and flight will become vehicles for figurative language; trees are rooted in the soil, initiate their growth through the formation of buds, and provide shade, so one might anticipate the use of roots, buds, and shade in metaphors; wind can be anything from a light refreshing breeze to a stormy tornado, and the reader might imagine that this element will also find its way into the figures of the poem. In this way, these first key concepts establish a context which entails all the potential metaphorical uses of language which could possibly occur in the rest of the poem.

The first word of stanza two suggests that at least some aspect of the initial pattern will be broken.

> 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.

The most noticeable break is in tone: the first stanza holds the promise of happiness in

perfect harmony with the natural environment; in the second stanza, the harshness of formal education displaces that pleasant harmony. The positive tone of the first stanza, then, seems to serve as a background on which the rest of the poem, with its weightier, more somber tone, creates the foreground. Here is the first hint of a reason for Blake to have equivocated on whether this poem belonged in *Songs of Innocence*, or the later work, *Songs of Experience*. If formal education is seen as the foreground, then the poem belongs in *Songs of Experience*; if, however, education is the background, and the foregrounded element is natural harmony, then the poem fits best in *Songs of Innocence*: further difficulties in categorization could have resulted from an initial intention of foregrounding natural experience, rather than a pre-experiential condition, against the background of formal education, i.e., two alternative modes of experience or learning.

The second stanza scans similarly to the first, as loosely iambic. There are again sporadic occurrences of non-iambic accent patterns: two anapestic feet in the first line, "But to go" and "in a sum-", and another in the fourth, "-tle ones spend"; a single-syllable foot, "O", in the second line; and a trochee, "under", at the start of the third line. Nonetheless, by this point in the poem, these slight modifications actually function to reinforce the general pattern of rhythm and meter, by interrupting and drawing attention to it.

The repetition in the first line of an entire adverbial phrase from the first line of the first stanza creates a strict parallelism between these two lines, which draws attention to the variable portion of each line's text, and, furthermore, the variation between each subsequent set of lines from these two stanzas. In other words, "in a summer morn" is a constant element which establishes a direct parallel between stanza one and stanza two, inviting a comparison of the remaining sections of each of these stanzas: at the level of each line, there is a potentially enlightening contrast.

In the first line from each of these stanzas, there is an action which occurs in the same given time frame, "in a summer morn". In the first stanza, the action is waking up and getting up; in the second stanza, going to school. The sounds used to express these different actions can also be compared: in this section of the first stanza, there are four syllables, in a straightforward iambic meter, with only one interruption of the consistent voicing; in the parallel section of the second stanza, there are five syllables, including the anapest, "But to go", and five voiceless consonants, primarily the same three which establish the voiceless foreground in the last part of stanza one, voiceless alveolar fricative, voiceless alveolar stop, and voiceless velar stop, with another occurrence of the voiceless bridging effect and a voiceless consonant cluster. Again, these

voiceless breaks function to mark clear disinctions from one word to the next, highlighting each one and, in this case, achieving a kind of stacatto effect, particularly because of the rhythm of speech required to fit five syllables into two metrical feet. This seems to be another example of onomatopoeia, suggestive of the rapid walking typically observed among children en route to school, in contrast to leisurely awakening in response to morning sunlight.

In the remaining lines of each of these stanzas, where experiences and events accompanying the two different actions are presented, several key semantic and phonetic comparisons can be made. In the second lines, the happy singing of birds up in the trees, in the first stanza, contrasts sharply with the loss of happiness in the second stanza. In the third lines of the first and second stanzas, respectively, there are five fricatives as opposed to none: the presence of these consonants in the first case, with their characteristic turbulent airflow, conveys a sense of liveliness utterly lacking in the second stanza, in which the third line begins with the falling rhythm of a trochee, "under", and ends with a reference to the absence of enthusiasm in the teacher's "cruel eye outworn". In lines four and five of the first and second stanzas, the contrast is between singing in "sweet company" and spending "the day in sighing and dismay". These two phrases express unambiguously the distinction Blake is drawing between natural experience and formal education, two different approaches to learning.

This distinction acquires yet more clarity in the third stanza, in which figurative reference to natural phenomena is used to express the absence of appropriate conditions for learning to be found in formal settings.

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

The tree, or plant, metaphor anticipated early in the poem can be perceived in this stanza. The tenor, or literal topic, of the metaphor is the speaker as student, sitting slouched down, unable to enjoy learning, and bored by the lessons; the vehicle, or figurative representation of the tenor, is a young "drooping" plant, unable to stay in a garden under the shade of trees, and beaten down by rain. The relaxed, listless posture of the schoolboy is reflected in the similarly weakened condition of the plant; just as the plant stands outside of the protective and nourishing environment of a bower, the boy while in school

is separated from the environment which nourishes his mind; in the same way that rain wears down the newly sprouted plant, the teacher's lessons have begun to dampen the boy's spirit.

The desultory tone of stanza three is accentuated by the phonetic quality of several lines. In the second line, for example, just following the phrase "I drooping sit", there is a series of trochee, or falling rhythm, feet: "and spend", "many an", "anxious", and "hour", functioning to reiterate the resigned attitude of the schoolboy. In line three, again, the lack of lively, turbulent fricatives seems to correspond to the deadening effects of classroom experiences like the ones depicted in this poem. Finally, in the fifth line, there is not even one occurrence of a stop, and only a few voiceless consonants, amidst numerous voiced fricatives, nasals, and approximants, commonly considered to be much softer sounds than voiced consonants and stops, thus reflecting the soft, "drooping", weakened, and "worn" condition of the boy and the figurative plant.

Certain words in this stanza are suggestive of modern educational concepts, particularly the ***natural approach*** to language learning. Because of anxiety caused by a harsh, threatening classroom environment, the student in the poem cannot enjoy learning; this notion bears an interesting resemblance to theories which postulate an "affective filter", and an inverse relationship between the strength of that filter and the amount of learning which can occur (Krashen and Terrell, pp. 37-39). Anxiety is a key factor which can strengthen the affective filter, and reduce a student's ability to focus on learning, according to Krashen and others; interest and teacher-student rapport tend to weaken this filter, allowing people to learn more efficiently. One additional dimension in Blake's vision of education is the pervasiveness with which negative experiences in school can affect the lives of students: just what is at stake, and what are the repercussions of a teacher's actions? The second half of the poem is an impassioned call for the sensitive treatment of young minds.

In the fourth stanza, another figure from stanza one is used metaphorically, to illustrate the severe effects of an authoritarian approach to education.

> 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.

The tenor of this metaphor is a frightened child forced to attend school and ignore his

feelings; the vehicle, a caged bird which droops its wing and forgets its joyful songs. The common ground which establishes the metaphor is the confining structure of both the school and the cage, which function to control and display these creatures at the expense of their natural, free self-expression; stifling the fragile, young songs within them. Once again, the near absence of wilder, more turbulent fricative airflow in line four coincides with a listlessness in the text, "droop his tender wing".

Further correlation between the content of this stanza and its phonetic form can be seen in the unusual tensions within the first two lines. In line one, the natural rhythm of the text pushes out against the established pattern of iambic tetrameter: nine syllables, squeezed into the sequence of a single-syllable foot, two anapestic feet, and just one normal iambic, in the same way that a lively bird might struggle against being confined. In line two, the sudden shift from tetrameter to trimeter mirrors a correspondingly drastic reduction in both the bird's and the schoolboy's ranges of physical activity.

In the last two stanzas, three different metaphors are activated or reactivated, conveyed as a complex in which different aspects of a single tenor are related to three separate vehicles: plants, the wind, and seasonal changes.

O! father & mother, if buds are nip'd,
And blossoms blown away,
And if the tender plants are strip'd
Of their joy in the springing day,
By sorrow and cares dismay,

How shall the summer arise in joy.
Or the summer fruits appear,
Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy
Or bless the mellowing year,
When the blasts of winter appear.

The first aspect of the tenor in this complex mataphor is an action through which a child's initial attempts at the expression of ideas or pursuit of interests are interrupted by sad experiences and the introduction to his/her awareness of things to worry about, such as, perhaps, homework assignments and class rules. The ground in which this tenor is compared to the vehicle, a young plant whose buds are nipped, is the similarity between buds and new ideas, which both require attention and encouragement for growth. The second aspect of this tenor is the scattering of a student's thoughts, by way of forceful disruption, as in commands or indoctrination; this is likened to the vehicle,

wind blowing away blossoms, on the basis of the lack of self-generated results in either case.

The developing metaphor is reinforced through a marked increase in the number of stops and voiceless consonants in line three of the fifth stanza, which gives the expression "tender plants are strip'd" an added dimension of physical hardness to contrast with the sensitivity of the plants, or minds, under discussion. Also in the fifth stanza, it becomes clear that the second lines in this half of the poem are all trimeter, perhaps, again, a metrical correlate of Blake's depiction of formal education as a prison-like institution which restricts the natural range of human movement and growth.

Modern teachers at this point will recognize, in the figure of the bud, Blake's call for student-centered, self-generated, autonomous approaches to learning. Curran's "Counseling" (Stevick, pp. 71-99) and Gattegno's "Silent Way" (Gattegno, pp. 1-15) are two examples of fairly recent efforts to cultivate among teachers a more acute sensitivity and openness to each unique individual's sense of what he／she needs in the learning process.

The third aspect of tenor in the complex metaphor which overlaps stanzas five and six is life itself, and the stages thereof, from periods of happiness and productivity to times of sadness and loss, from moments of reflection to the intensity of conflict. Life is compared to a sequence of seasonal changes, on the basis of the unique challenges which each season and each stage in life present to the human mind. This completed metaphor is supported in two different lines of the last stanza, in which phonetic features underline the seasonal qualities. In line one, there are no stops and few voiceless consonants, resulting in a lightness quite complementary to the phrase "arise in joy" ; in line four, there is an even softer combination of sounds, with a predominance of nasals and approximants, and only one stop and one occurrence of voicelessness, evoking a meditative mood to match "the mellowing year" .

Blake's point has been made. Education must cultivate a student's inner sense, so that afterwards he／she will be prepared to face the inevitable changes and fluctuations of experience which accompany human life. By retarding the development of this inner sense, through the imposition of strict rules and dogma, a teacher not only causes painful suffering and apprehension for the student, but also limits the lessons that student is capable of learning from his／her experiences and, most lamentably, reduces the overall quality of that individual's life and his／her potential enjoyment of it. Several centuries beyond Blake's period, and despite innumerable technological advances, human society continues to condone this type of mistreatment of students in the name of education.

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