

## Susanne K. Langer and A poem of Blake

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I seek in this essay to understand some emphases of Susanne K. Langer's theory of poetry with special reference to her interpretation of William Blake's poem : *The Echwing Green*.<sup>1</sup> I have to begin with a brief outline of the theory in question, bearing in mind her view of art taken generally.

The *essential* function of a poet, according to Langer, is neither to convey information nor to evoke emotions in the reader, but to create an 'illusion' of 'virtual' life. Direct statements may well be there in a poem, but their use is here poetic : 'their directness is a means of creating a virtual experience'.<sup>2</sup> As for the relation of *feeling* to poetry, we may not deny it ; but it is important to see how it obtains. 'A poem always creates the symbol of a feeling, not by recalling objects which would elicit the feeling itself, but by weaving a pattern of words - words charged with meaning, and coloured by literary associations.'<sup>3</sup> The locus of the feeling is therefore the poem's whole form. The total piece looks as a vital experience may feel.<sup>4</sup> A poem, as a work of art, is always so expressive ; whether its reader gets infected with a particular feeling or not, is a quite secondary matter. How the poet may be said to create an *illusion* has also to be taken with care, The word here does not mean the seeing of something as different from what it really is. It means the projection of what is not at all there. What the poet creates is no misrepresentation of facts but an unreal fabric of incident, circumstance, character and speech which is yet of great value. It has charm and can convey a kind of knowledge which

eludes the grasp of other symbolic forms. But the illusion is here absolute, because there is no underlying substrate. The creation is a *pure* appearance like the rainbow which is not taken to betoken any hidden reality. Nor is it an image or copy of anything. It is a *sheer* image, a pure apparition, that is, something which is for contemplation alone. It is true that at places Langer speaks of works of art as *images* of the 'forms of feeling'<sup>5</sup>; but in this context, I believe, she uses the word 'image' not in the sense of likeness or representation, but only as 'embodiment', so that her net meaning here is that art-works appear *imbued with* the 'forms' in question; which, in turn, explains why she prefers to speak of an art-work's significance as *import* rather than as 'meaning'. By 'virtual life' we are required to understand the 'created' or imaginary contents of *life* taken in its social sense,<sup>6</sup> though the work itself is to be taken as 'living' like an organism, that is, as a whole in respect of the 'life'(or meaning) of which we cannot decide as to how much is contributed by the various elements (or limbs).<sup>7</sup> It is indeed easy for a poem to project things and happenings, people and their attitudes, — that is, the common filling of everyday life. But all this variform content is here cast in the imaginative mode or 'the mode of naive experience, in which action and feeling, sensory and moral value, causal connection and symbolic connection, are still undivorced'.<sup>8</sup> This is the idiom of 'immediate, personal life.' Poetry, like all other art, projects life as felt 'for our perception through sense or imagination'<sup>9</sup>

Such projection is beyond the way we use language commonly. The subject-predicate form distinguishes and relates. Words here occur in the before-after order, or as a succession; and most of them have a fairly determinate, extricable meaning. How, then, can they present (in this everyday manner) the felt quality of such experiences as the self-division of being *at once* between two opposing temptations or the *instant* radiation of being with relief on accomplishing a task long overdue? If we speak of self-division we miss the tempting quality of the opposites faced; and if we take care to mention the quality as well we do so as a supplement, and (so to say) loosen what is in fact intense and unified. Our everyday speech indeed cannot make us *see* the tension of a waiting or the happy suffusion of being that is one with, *and does not only follow* the release of a tension. The 'inward life of human beings' is too intricate nimble and conjoint to brook presentation in the usual spread-out arrangement of words with often quite exclusive meanings.<sup>10</sup>

But if that is so, how can poetry which must work *through language* re-create the seamlessness of naive experience? Langer's answer is: through scrupulous omission of irrelevant details and such a deft choice and knitting of words and other materials — say, 'metrical stresses, vowel values, rhymes, alliteration'<sup>11</sup>

- that the 'look' of whatever content is picked for artistic treatment is at once vivified; hence, indeed, her emphasis on *form*. The poetic form is doubtless symbolic; and the search for a poem's import, perfectly legitimate. But in so far as the meaning of individual words is here not isolable-and because, what is more, they do not merely convey or possess, but seem impregnate with meaning - the verbal complex here may be said to non-discursive.

A question may here yet be put. Does such care in the use of language serve any particular end? Or, does it only make for a neat reproduction of some experience from life? Now, this is here a vital query. For it is in seeking to answer *it* that we come to see the chief emphasis of Langer's theory of art. She maintains that art is the *only* symbolic form which can seize and project the direct feel or awareness of life for our contemplation. Ordinarily, we only experience *the immediate awareness of life*, say, its appearing to be easy-paced and secure or crowded and venturesome; we do not hold it up before the mind as an object of attention. Whether it be the feeling of finding one's way through the labyrinth of problems or the sense of well-being that may go with whatever one does on a sunny morning, or some essentially subjective experience like the passage of a reverie<sup>12</sup>, or the way one feels quickened by the birth of a great idea<sup>13</sup>-experiences such as these, though direct and so very real, merely come and go; we do not, as a rule, have the time or desire to dwell on their inner details. No one is unfamiliar with emotions like anger, sorrow, joy. They come up freely in experience. But the pressures of daily life do not let us dwell on the formal features of such states<sup>14</sup> - say, their build-up and decline or their seeming to choke or lighten being as they are withheld or given free vent. It is art which deepens our knowledge of such 'forms of feeling' and of the great 'vital rhythms' of life. It may not put an edge on our analytic ability, but it sure gives us richer insight.<sup>15</sup>

It is necessary to see what Langer means by these 'forms' and 'rhythms' before we proceed further. Some of her own relevant words may here be cited:

"What (a work of art) expresses is human feeling. The word 'feeling' must be taken here in its broadest sense, meaning everything that can be felt, from physical sensation - pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady tones of a conscious human life."<sup>16</sup>

As here regarded, 'feeling' covers not only emotions that bear names - such as joy, sorrow, anger - but *any felt content*. Even a philosophical debate may be felt in a particular way, as illuminating or inane, disjointed or well-knit. The

experience is here intellectual in itself but in relation to the self it is as directly known (or felt) as an itch. So, as Langer understands it, feeling is :

“the subjective aspect of experience, the direct feeling of it - what it is like to be waking and moving, to be drowsy, slowing down, or to be sociable or to feel self-sufficient but alone ; what it feels like to pursue an elusive thought or to have a big idea.”<sup>17</sup>

Here the important thing to bear in mind is that, according to Langer, ‘feeling’ is not merely the immediate or non-relational manner of experience, but whatever (or any *content*) that is felt. But what does she mean by the *forms* of feeling ? Here, again, her own words are of ready help :

“...The forms of human feeling (are) forms of growth and attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution ; speed, arrest, terrific excitement, or subtle activation and dreamy lapses - not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either and both - the greatness and brevity of everything vitally felt.”<sup>18</sup>

But is it proper to speak of feeling (or felt experience) in this *general* way ? I here see no reason to withhold an affirmative answer. Take a parallel case. Every thought is in fact the thinking of an individual. But nobody objects when we speak of thought, quite generally, as being clear or cogent, or subtle or fuzzy. Therefore, though felt experiences do not of course float unowned, it would be improper to protest where Langer distinguishes the general features of feeling, say, its rise and fall ; or to demur in using such language with regard to disparate emotions like joy, sorrow, anger. Unluckily, however, we miss such general features of feeling. The laws or principles of *thought* take all our attention.

Indeed we need to be told that there are patterns in our felt, life and that it is no mere jumble. Langer speaks of the great vital rhythms that embrace Man’s whole life and are therefore different from the ‘forms’ like the one we marked a little earlier. There is, for instance, the basic rhythm of animal *existence* itself - ‘the strain of maintaining a vital balance amid the alien and impartial chances of the world, complicated and heightened by passionate desires ‘such as’ the intensity of spasm, rage or ecstasy’.<sup>19</sup> This may be called the rhythm of adaptation. A look at *life* reveals another vital rhythm. Our earthly sojourn ‘has a definite beginning, ascent, turning point, descent and close ; and the close is inevitably death’<sup>20</sup>. The subjective regions of experience may be said to present yet another pattern of ambivalent feeling. The young feel unhappy at

the sight of infirm age ; yet there is no one who does not wish to grow up. Those who are advanced in years may look upon the young as raw, but do they not often long to return to their own youthful days ? Such dividedness can hardly be projected by means of ordinary language. The serial order of common speech cannot show two opposite feelings at once. But perhaps a poem can, by virtue of its careful inweaving of words.

I now feel enabled to discuss Langer's reading of Blake's *The Echoing Green*. She comments on it at length, and so I may cite the poem in full :

The Echoing Green

The sun does arise,  
And make happy the skies ;  
The merry bells ring  
To welcome the Spring ;  
The skylark and thrush,  
The birds of the bush,  
Sing louder around  
To the bells' cheerful sound,  
While our sports shall be seen  
On the Echoing Green.

Old John, with white hair,  
Does laugh away care,  
Sitting under the oak,  
Among the old folk.  
They laugh at our play,  
And soon they all say :  
"Such, such were the joys  
When we all, girls and boys  
In our youth time were seen  
On the Echoing Green."  
Till the little ones, weary,  
No more can be merry ;  
The sun does descend,  
And our sports have an end.  
Round the laps of their mothers  
Many sisters and brothers,  
Like birds in their nest,  
Are ready for rest,  
And sport no more seen  
On the darkening Green.

Now, what does this poem really mean? What is its literary import, as against its literal meaning? Tillyard's view is here as follows:

"I believe that Blake in this poem is expressing an idea, an idea that has nothing in itself to do with birds, old and young folk, or village greens, and one most common in Blake's poetical works. It is the idea that there is virtue in desire gratified. Though desire is not mentioned, yet the keynote of the poem is fruition. The poem gives the sense of the perfectly grown apple that comes off at a touch of the hand. It expresses the profound peace of utterly gratified desire. (The poem) is as nearly perfect an example of poetical obliquity as can be found...The abstract idea, far from being stated, has been translated into completely concrete form; it has disappeared into apparently alien facts."<sup>21</sup>

Langer agrees that *fruition* is here the key idea. But she protests that the poem cannot be taken to mean the statement: 'there is virtue in desire satisfied'; and that the meaning here is rather '*the feeling developed and revealed in the poem*.'<sup>22</sup> The statement in question may well be fixed as the meaning where Blake writes thus;

"Abstinence sows sand all over  
The ruddy limbs and flaming hair  
But Desire Gratified  
Plants fruits of life and beauty there.

But if, as required by Tillyard, we interpret *The Echoing Green* too similarly, we hardly do justice to its own details and form. We have therefore to take fruition differently. It is rather

"the life process itself, and the direct experience of it is the profoundest harmony we can feel. This experience is what the poem creates in three short stanzas. Gratified desire is only end of this experience; the desire itself, the whole joy of beginning, freedom, strength, and then mere endurance, and finally weariness and the dark, held in one intensive view of humanity at play are all equally important in creating the symbol of *life completely lived*. The completeness is felt; and the peculiar elan and progress of this feeling is the abstraction that the poetic form makes"<sup>23</sup>

Langer goes on to say that in interpreting the poem as he does, Tillyard has merely passed over the title,

"which is an integral part of the piece. A village green is usually flat and open, the houses standing too far back to produce noticeable echoes. But Blake's use of 'echoing' is not descriptive, it is the opposite; it

counteracts the flatness and openness of the ordinary green, and holds his image of life together as in an invisible frame. The 'echo' is really that of the repeating life-story - the old laughing at the young and recalling their own youth, the young returning to a previous generation - 'Round the laps of their mothers, many sisters and brothers' and there is another level of 'echoing' life - one form of life being typified in another: the children 'like birds in their nest,' and the aged people gathered under the oak. Even the line 'Old John with white hair' achieves the interweaving of age and youth, for 'John' means 'The Young'. One can go on almost from word to word in this poem that is completely organic, and therefore able to articulate the great vital rhythms and their emotional overtones and undertones. What such a symbolic form presents cannot be expressed in literal terms, because the logic of language forbids us to conceive the pervasive ambivalence which is characteristic of human feeling."<sup>24</sup>

The two interpretations of the poem are clearly different. Which of them is nearer the truth? Obviously, an answer can be given at once? We have first to give close attention to the poem itself:

To begin with, I agree that the poem appears self-complete ('perfectly grown apple that comes off.....') and thoroughly 'organic'; and, quite generally, that repression of (innocent) desires is wrong. But where *in the poem* do we find any hint of desire? This is, in my view, a crucial question here. For, Langer too looks on the poem as a projection not of the mere fulfilment of desire, but of 'the desire itself, with some key features of its career in life. My view however is that no such reading is warranted by what one finds *in the poem*. The having of a desire is at once to look for something, and so it is always felt as a tension, in a measure. In the poem on the other hand, even where it speaks of sport, there is not the slightest suggestion of aiming at any target. The relation or adaptation here found appears as a working for the sake of a going well along with, or a willingness to receive something else (see: 'bells ring to welcome the 'spring.' "sing louder to the bells' cheerful sound." and "are ready for rest,") but *never as a pressing for or towards*. So I find it impossible to agree that the poem expresses the idea 'that there is virtue in desire gratified', or that it projects the *feeling* of desire which is (in the end) gratified. But, may not desire be here taken as the very love of life that makes us quietly *look for* the next moment instead of *trying* to achieve or secure something? Perhaps yes; but if we regard the fruition of desire *so taken* as the poem's keynote, almost the whole first stanza is left unconsidered. For here, in the first eight lines, the poet speaks only of the birds, bells and skies.

And yet it is these very opening lines that give us a clear clue to what I regard as the focus of the whole poem; the idea of mutual accord and self-giving. The daybreak gladdens the blue<sup>25</sup>-with colour and light. Nor do the bells ring in a vacuum. They welcome vernal charm; and, what is more, themselves find an echo in the birds' louder singing.

I here feel impelled to make some comments on the title, on the word 'echoing' in particular. Langer takes it to be integral to the poem. But it cannot be so if we take 'echo' as she wants us to: 'the repeating life-story - the old laughing at the young and recalling their own youth, the young returning to a previous generation'. For, upon this interpretation the content of the first eight lines is again merely left out. On the other hand, the concept I have put up as the focal one covers both human and natural referents of the poem.

Nor can I accept the insistence that 'echoing' here is *not at all* descriptive. The village green may well be flat in fact, and so may not be said to echo a sound literally. But, in respect of a field which is enlivened with rustic sport, and where the players are all young girls and boys, would it seem quite untrue to say that it resounds with their merriment?<sup>26</sup> Further, an echo, we may note, is a sound which returns not only without distortion, but with deeper intensity. I see this hinted adroitly in the opening stanza:

“The birds of the bush  
Sing *louder* around  
To the bells' cheerful sound.’,

Many other details of the poem's inner weave seem notable. The beginning and the end of sport are here no mere fringes. They seem clear termini, in part because they are made to go with the rise and descent of the sun, *both alike emphasized*. If there is nothing indefinite about the poem,<sup>27</sup> it is partly because its details are in general so conjoined. But what I here find admirable, because it is subtle, is the singular use of a device to vivify details. It relates to what the poem is expressly about: 'our sports'. There is no mention of their kind or particulars. In this respect Goldsmith's poem, *The Deserted Village*, is much more eloquent:

“And many a gambol frolicked O'er the ground,  
And sleights of art and feats of strength went round;  
And still as each repeated pleasure tired,  
Succeeding sports the youthful band inspired.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet, I doubt if such an obtrusive mention impresses the reader's mind more powerfully with the thought of sports than Blake's wilful omission of their

details. The way he projects what sets the stage for sports, so to say - and also what comes in their wake - is so clear that the reader is directly enabled to visualize what intervenes, that is, the cheer and ebullience of the play itself, if not its details. This is, in my view, a better way to see 'obliquity' in *The Echoing Green* than the one which Tillyard chooses and which makes the literal details - the 'birds, old and young folk, or village greens - virtually irrelevant to poetic meaning'<sup>29</sup>

Both Tillyard and Langer, I fear, are a bit too impatient to look for deeper meanings. Why I do not see any hint of desire in the poem has been already brought out, and only the following from Langer may now be attended to :

"What the poem creates...is the direct experience of...the life process itself (which is)...the profoundest harmony we can feel...(The poem is a) symbol of *life completely lived*. The completeness is felt; and the peculiar elan and progress of this feeling is the abstraction that the poetic form makes...What (this poem as) a symbolic form presents cannot be expressed in literal terms...(it is) the pervasive ambivalence which is characteristic of human feeling"<sup>30</sup>

Now, I do not quite see what Langer could here mean by a 'life completely lived.' At no point does the poem look crowded with (virtual) events. Nor does it anywhere project a wrestle with problems. So the completeness spoken of can only be taken lengthwise, or as a sign of the unobstructed reaching of a ripe old age.<sup>31</sup> But *such* a life can hardly be felt as an experience of 'profound' harmony. The poem, it is true, looks complete in itself. Nor can a careful reader here blink the hint of ambivalent feeling. It is surely easy to imagine that as they recall their own youthful joys 'the old 'folk' experience 'the primal Joy-Melancholy'.<sup>32</sup> But I see no *intensity* about this invocation of the past, no sting or poignancy. It rather opens leisurely :

"*Such, such* were the joys,  
When we all, girls and boys,  
In our youth time were seen  
On the Echoing Green."

Here, as indeed throughout the poem, the marks of punctuation are so used that they make for clear segments. There is no interfusion of details, and I am at a loss to see how, as Langer suggests, everything here could be said to be 'held in one *intensive* view of humanity at play'.<sup>33</sup> To me the poem is just a true projection of the 'look' (or feel) of a single typical day enlivened with the young at play in perfect accord with the village elders and nature.

Yet though I find Langer's net reading of the poem questionable, I do not reject her theory-of poetry. Some of its emphases in fact appear borne out by the poem under review. But let me explain :

Statements in the poem do not merely inform : they all alike serve to evoke an effect or atmosphere. 'The sun does arise' marks a general quickening, and 'the sun does descend' not merely announces the end of the day and sport, but is a call to return to the haven of maternal care. The poem's form, I may add, is also expressive in the sense that its very 'look' projects the self-completeness of a typical day. Again, the 'events' are all 'virtual' or cast in the imaginative mode. It is indeed easy to see how the very opening words of the poem 'effect the break with the reader's (actual) environment'<sup>54</sup> :

The sun does arise  
And make happy the skies.

In everyday life we may well be struck by what goes along with a sunrise : the upsurge of colour and light in the heavens. But we do not believe that the heavens rejoice at the dawn, or that the sun rises *with a view* to making 'happy the skies.' And in case we seek for literal truth it would be a further strain on our credence if we are told that 'the bells and the birds keep up their merry music *while* (or as long as)...sports shall be seen.' The fact, however, is that the injection of a little feeling and purpose into nature is done so straightway and so kept up throughout the first stanza that the reader's passage from the actual to the poem's virtual world is quick and secure. It is true that an individual, 'Old John,' is named, and his 'white hair' distinguished. But the singleness is set off at once, for John is shown as sitting...*'among the old folk' who laugh (as one) 'at our play'*<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the entire poem is an apparition, that is, an image for contemplation alone. There is nothing in it to impel us to check the veracity of its details with any outer fact. But, though I certainly regard it, I repeat, as a powerful projection of the felt gathering of Nature and Man, so to say, around the village youth at play, I do not here see the dominance of any 'vital rhythm' or 'form of feeling'

But, if this is all that the poem 'says', how is it significant ? There is no great value in the thought that the young are playing merrily and that nature and the village elders are at one with them. Here, following Langer, my answer is that the value of the poem lies not in any message that may be extracted from it, but in what it is able to create : the image of a cheery day of village sport, of how it begins, attains to its zenith, and finally ends, quite as agreeably as it opened. The reader is enabled to dwell on the cheer and the pervasive harmony ; he does not only read about them. But such a

contemplative access to what is felt is granted only to those who are able to get at the poem's total form; only then does it appear to project the 'feelings' I speak of.

As we seek to unravel its form we see how the poem is organic. I have already shown how some of its elements conduce to its import. But I must add that this build-up of significance is no mere delivery of pre-fixed, independent meanings. The elements contribute what they come to acquire in the knitwork, so that the overall form must be said to be non-discursive. Langer suggests that 'the line 'Old John with white hair' achieves the inter-weaving of youth and age, for John means 'The Young''<sup>36</sup>; but I wonder if the linkage in question would be so fully 'achieved' or manifest as it is without the help of the words that follow immediately; 'Does laugh away care', and the prompt reiterative touch:

Among the old folk,  
They laugh at our play

And I am sure the last line of the opening stanza:

On the *Echoing Green*

would not make much sense unless we bear in mind the joyful aspect of nature - and its little 'virtual' acts of self-giving - projected by the poem's very opening. But it is where the poem ends that the note of self-giving and accord rings audibly and clear:

Round the laps of their mother,  
Many sisters and brothers,  
Like birds in their nest,  
Are ready for rest.

It is the gathering of a need around its true source of succour. The weary ones look for rest; and their human nest, the mother's lap, is a ready refuge. It is easy for the reader to fill in this picture of a loving trust returned. What I here wish to emphasize, however, is not merely the echoing of a basic human feeling but the subtle way in which these lines bring the poem to a close by providing a foil to the opening ones. Birds singing 'around' (to the bells' cheerful sound) and the sunrise that enlivens the blue evoke images of suffusion and free happy flight. All this is reversed when we come to the following:

'Round the laps of their mothers...  
like birds in their nest.

The poem does not merely end, but gathers itself into a point of repose.

## Notes and References

1. The theory and the interpretation both occur in Chapter XIII of Susanne K. Langer's: *Feeling and Form*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 3rd Impression, 1963, pp. 208-235.
2. *Ibid*, p 228.
3. *Ibid* p. 230.
- 4,5. S. K. Langer : *Mind - An Essay on Human Feeling*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, Vol. I, 2nd printing P. B. 1975, p. XIX.
- 6 *Feeling and Form* p. 214.
7. S. K. Langer : *Problems of Art*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, p. 135.
8. *Feeling and Form*, p. 217
- 9 *Problems of Art*, p. 15.
10. *Ibid*, p 22.
- 11 *Feeling and Form*, pp. 212-13,
12. Cf. *Ibid*, p 218,
13. *Ibid*, p. 219.
14. Or rather 'feeling's The word 'feeling'...covers more than a 'state'; for feeling is a process, and may have not only successive phases, but several! simultanous developments..." *Ibid*. p 230.
15. Cf. *Ibid*, p 220.
16. *Problems of Art*, p. 15.
17. *Ibid*, p. 22.
11. *Feeling and Eorm*, p 27
19. *Ibid*, p. 330.
20. *Ibid*, p: 332.
- 21 E. M. W. Tillyard : *Poetry, Direct and Oblique*, Chatto and Windus, London 1934, pp. 11-12.
22. *Feeling and Eorm*, p 226.
23. *Ibid*.
24. *Ibid*, pp. 226-27.
25. I am here reminded of Blake's colour print worked up with brush · *Glad Day* (1794). See Kathleen Raine's *William Blake, The World of Art Library : Artists*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1974 Reprint, facing p. 92.
25. I here feel encouraged by the thought that, according to Blake, delight is the essence of life See *William Blake*, p. 50.
27. It would here be relevant to mark Blake's penchant for definiteness in the visual arts : 'He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all...Expression cannot exist without character as its stamina ; and neither character nor expression can exist without firm and determinate outline'', Kathleen Raine : *William Blake*, pp. 8, 20.

28. *Feeling and Form*, p. 231.

29. *Ibid*, p. 225.

30. *Ibid*, p. 226-27. I here diverge from the order of the original, but no violence is done to Langer's meaning.

31. The reference here is to: 'Old John, with white hair'.

32. *Feeling and Form*, p. 227.

33. *Ibid*, p. 226. Italics added.

34. *Ibid*, p. 214.

35. The careful reader is bound to be struck by the free use of words suggesting collectivity. Thus, see: 'our sports shall be seen', 'And soon they *all* say', 'When we *all*, girls and boys', '*Our* sports have an end', and '*many* brothers and sisters'.

36. *Feeling and Form*, p. 227

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