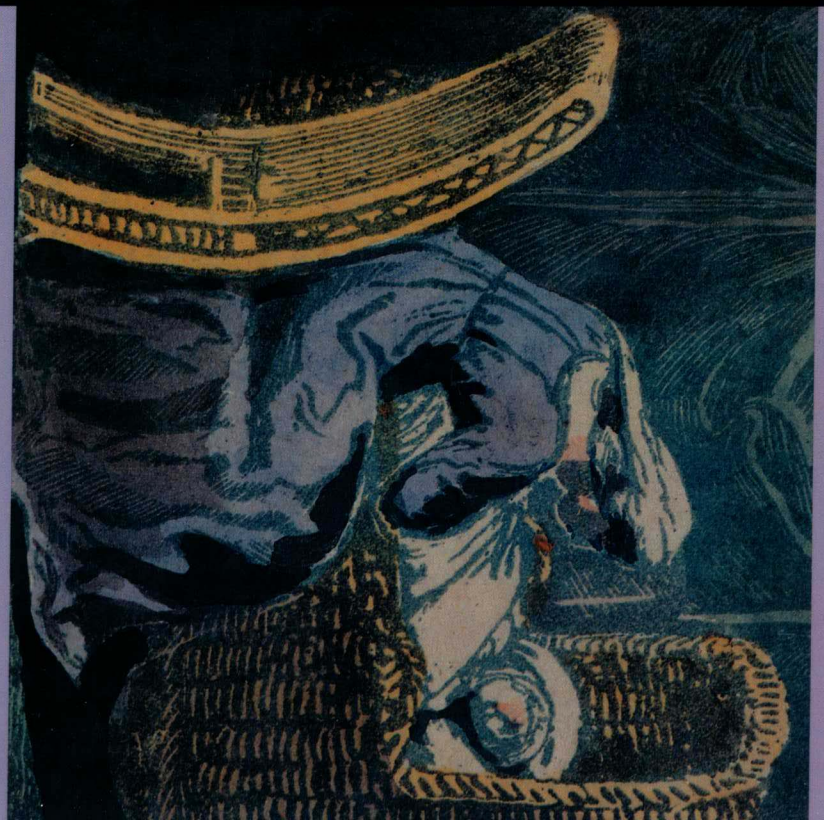
Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM



William Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience

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Songs of Innocence and of Experience

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism that has been devoted to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication, except for my introduction, which I have quarried from my *Blake's Apocalypse* (1965). I am grateful to Hillary Kelleher for her assistance as a researcher for this volume.

My introduction contrasts Blake's ironical versions of the pastoral image in *Songs of Innocence* with his equally ironic sense of sexual rebellion that constitutes the prophecy of Orc in *Songs of Experience*. Northrop Frye, the most Blakean of Blake's critics, begins the chronological sequence with his unmatched reading of the "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*. In a very different critical mode, Martin Price insists that *Songs of Innocence* ought not to be read ironically, while acknowledging that Innocence, like Experience, has false as well as true aspects.

I myself return, after Price, with a revisionary view of Blake, not wholly reconcilable with the view expounded in my introduction to this volume. My revised readings of "London" and "The Tyger" have encountered a great deal of resistance, but they do suggest a less idealized Blake than I think is available elsewhere. Susan Hawk Brisman and Leslie Brisman then offer a reading of "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" that seeks to reconcile my revisionism with the Freudian revisionism of a less overt Gnostic than myself, the late Jacques Lacan.

In a reading of the *Songs of Experience* as a prophecy of "the family romance," Diana Hume George usefully contrasts Blake and Freud. The two visions, innocent and experienced, of the little black boy, are then juxtaposed by Myra Glazer, who emphasizes the composite art of the engraved plates.

Robert F. Gleckner traces the strange odyssey of "The Voice of the Ancient Bard," which he calls "an extraordinarily ambiguous . . . plate that

never found a fully satisfactory place in the songs." In this book's final essay, Ronald Paulson attempts an advanced reading of "The Tyger," which he contextualizes in terms both of the revolutionary politics, and the situation of the arts, in Blake's era.

Contents

Introduction

Of the traditional "kinds" of poetry, Blake had attempted pastoral and satire at the very start, in the *Poetical Sketches*, though the satire there is subtle and tentative. In *Tiriel*, satire and tragedy are first brought together in a single work by Blake. *Songs of Innocence* is Blake's closest approach to pure pastoral, but an even subtler form of satire seems to be inherent in these famous visions of a childhood world, as their genesis out of *An Island in the Moon* might suggest.

Pastoral as a literary form is generally associated with the antithetical relationship of Nature and Art, which on a social level becomes an opposition between country and town. Art and the urban world come together as an image of experiential Fall from Nature's Golden Age, a sad manhood following a glorious childhood. This pastoral association, which held from Theocritus and Virgil until the seventeenth century, has no relevance to *Songs of Innocence*.

Blake's shepherds are not types of the natural life as such, but rather ironically accepted figures, whose joys testify to the benevolent maternalism of the world as it supposedly is when viewed by the Deistical temperament. The Nature of *Songs of Innocence* is viewed softly, and seems to offer back the soft comfort implicit in the earliest Christian pastoral, as well as its eighteenth-century adaptations. The Christ of St. John is the good shepherd who knows his sheep and is known of them, and who offers his pastoral call to the scattered flocks. Behind this shepherd is the pastoralism of the Song of Solomon, where an allegory of divine love is presented as a song of human marriage set "beside the shepherds' tents." Blake also sets a desired good in the simple context of pastoral convention, but then demonstrates that no value can be sustained by that context. The purity and wisdom of the child or natural man is for Blake not the reflection of environment, but a self-consuming light that momentarily transforms natural reality into an illusion of innocence. The human child of *Songs of Innocence* is a changeling,

reared by a foster nurse who cannot recognize his divinity, and whose ministrations entrap him in a universe of death.

Blake's reading of literary pastoral centered in Spenser and Milton, but included (in translation) Virgil, who inaugurated the tradition by which the young poet aspiring towards epic begins with allegorical pastoral. Late in life, Blake executed a beautiful series of woodcuts for Thornton's version of Virgil's pastorals. In these woodcuts, which strongly affected the younger painters Samuel Palmer and Edward Calvert, Blake presents a remarkably Hebraized Virgil, who has more in common with Bunyan, Spenser, and Milton than with his own Roman world.

In so thoroughly absorbing Virgil into an English Puritan vision of innocence, Blake made a startling but successful continuance of the long tradition by which European pastoral had turned Virgil to its own purposes. The idealization of an Arcadian existence in nature became assimilated to Adam's loss of Eden, and to his descendants' nostalgia for that blissful seat. The theme of heroic virtue in the Puritan Saint could not readily be associated with longings for a naturalistic repose in an earthly paradise. The Protestant poet's solution was to dream of two paradises, an upper and a lower, a heavenly city and a breathing garden. So Bunyan's Pilgrims saw "the Countrey of *Beulah* . . . within sight of the City they were going to." Beulah being a land where "the shining Ones commonly walked, because it was upon the Borders of Heaven." So Spenser, whose Red-Crosse Knight is allowed only a distant glimpse of the City he is going to, nevertheless allows himself and his readers a detailed view of the Gardens of Adonis, a place where Spring and harvest are continual, both meeting at one time. Michael Drayton in his *Muses' Elizium*, the Spenserian culmination of visionary pastoral in English before Milton, secularizes these Gardens into a Poet's Paradise, an allegory of poetry's solace rendered by poetry itself. Milton is Blake's direct ancestor in pastoral as he was in epic, and Milton's early poetry is the likely source for Blake's version of the *locus amoenus*, the lovely place upon which a visionary landscape centers.

Milton's earlier poetry, from "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" to "Lycidas" and "Comus," failed to resolve its creator's inner conflicts between the other-worldly religion of a Puritan believer and the desire of the greatest of Renaissance Humanists to free man's thought and imagination. Unlike Calvin, Milton insists always that the will of a regenerate man is made free by his rebirth in the spirit. Again unlike Calvin, Milton is not a dualist; the outward form of man as well as the human soul is made in God's image. Arthur Barker summarizes Milton's position by emphasizing that dualism "was unpalatable to one whose highest delight was the integration

of form and substance in poetry. Man must therefore be regarded as an indivisible unit." Yet, as Barker emphasizes again, Milton turned to prose in his middle period because his early pastorals did not fulfill this desire to integrate nature and spirit within himself.

Blake recognized this aspect of Milton's experience, and profited by it to the extent of approaching pastoral in a spirit of subtle irony. The *Songs of Innocence* are the songs *of* the innocent state; they are not songs *about* Innocence. For Blake's "Innocence" is from the start an equivocal term. The root meaning of innocence is "harmlessness"; hence its derived meanings of "freedom from sin" and "guiltlessness." Blake's first use of Innocence is in the "Song by an Old Shepherd" he added to *Poetical Sketches*, where the quality of Innocence serves as a winter's gown that enables us to abide "life's pelting storm." In annotating the moralist Lavater, probably in 1788, Blake speaks of one who is "offended with the innocence of a child & for the same reason, because it reproaches him with the errors of acquired folly." Neither of these uses of Innocence make it an opposite of sin or harmfulness or guilt, but rather of experiential life, its storms and its acquired follies. So, by 1789 when he engraved the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake already seems to have anticipated joining them together with songs that would show the "Contrary State of the Human Soul," as he did five years later. Innocence is a state of the soul that warms our hearts against experience, and reproaches the errors of a supposedly mature existence. So far this is easily assimilated to the Arcadian state of the soul presented by the Virgilian pastoral and its descendants. But Blake could not stop with a study of the nostalgias, or with a simple reproach to adult readers. The next step in understanding his concept of Innocence is to begin examining some of its songs.

The "Introduction," "Piping down the valleys wild," is a poem of immediate knowledge, and evidently celebrates a kind of unsought natural harmony. The pure reactions of the child to the piper are those of the spirit as yet undivided against itself, free of self-consciousness. The child has not sundered itself to self-realization, and his natural world shares the same unity, as the little poem, "A Dream," indicates.

The same theme, of a primal oneness between the human and the natural, is exemplified in the traditional Christian pastoral of "The Lamb" and "The Shepherd," but a disturbing element begins to enter as well. The Lamb dressed in its own wool is described as wearing "clothing of delight," in an overly anthropomorphized image, and the Shepherd inspires a confidence in his flock which is entirely dependent upon his actual presence. "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found," transferred by Blake to *Songs of Experience* in 1794, relate the theme of Innocence as primal unity

with the animal creation, to the romance convention of the lost child cared for by beasts of prey. The transfer to Experience was probably based on "The Little Girl Lost"'s opening stanzas:

In futurity
I prophetic see
That the earth from sleep
(Grave the sentence deep)

Shall arise and seek
For her maker meek;
And the desert wild
Become a garden mild.

As a prophecy of a return to Innocence, this was clearly out of place *in* the realm of Innocence. So was the implied sardonicism that climaxes "The Little Girl Found," when the seeking parents lose their fear and make their home in the land of lions and tygers where their daughter is found:

Then they followed
Where the vision led,
And saw their sleeping child
Among tygers wild.

To this day they dwell
In a lonely dell;
Nor fear the wolvish howl
Nor the lions' growl.

This is an escape from Experience, as Blake recognized when he transposed the poem into that state of existence. The genuine ambiguities of Innocence begin to reveal themselves in "The Blossom":

Merry, Merry Sparrow!
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Sees you swift as arrow,
Seek your cradle narrow
Near my Bosom.

Pretty, Pretty Robin!
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Hears you sobbing, sobbing,

Pretty, Pretty Robin,
Near my Bosom.

The repeated phrase, "A happy Blossom," in the third line of each stanza is a clear mark of the inadvertence of the natural world to suffering even when the grief ought to be its own. The Blossom is equally happy to grow on the same tree that cradles the sparrow's merriness, or that merely shades the robin's sobbing. It is enough that the joy or the sorrow takes place near its bosom. In "The Ecchoing Green" a day's cycle moves from spontaneous sounds of happiness in the first stanza to the nostalgic laughter of the old folk in the second, to the total absence of any sound in the conclusion:

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.

The refrains of the first two stanzas were of sport seen, in present and then in past time, on an *Ecchoing* Green. Now, with no sport to be seen upon it, the Green has lost its echoes also, and the darkening upon it is the shadow of mortality, recognition of which will end Innocence as a state. "The Divine Image" sets forth the virtues of that state at its most confident:

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

The human form divine is the God of Innocence, but this God is not presented as a visual form or the image of the title, but rather as a monster of abstractions, formed out of the supposedly human element in each of

Innocence's four prime virtues. What is the face of Mercy, or the heart of Pity, we are expected to wonder. In what dress does the human form of Love present itself, and what is the form of Peace? Until its matching contrary comes to it in *Songs of Experience*, the poem's prime characteristic is its deliberate incompleteness.

The same incompleteness, but expressed as an inability to make a necessary moral judgment, dominates "The Chimney Sweeper" of Innocence, where for the first time the inadequacy of the unsundered state is stressed. The voice of the Piper is replaced by the voice of the Chimney Sweeper, a charity child sold into bondage by his father and the Church:

> When my mother died I was very young,
> And my father sold me while yet my tongue
> Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"
> So your chimneys I sweep, & in soot I sleep.

The coming together of "sweep" and "weep" here introduces the cry of Experience, which is "weep!". Blake is returning to the rhetorical art of his "Mad Song"; as readers we need both to understand the limitations of the poem's dramatic speaker, and yet to feel also the poignance attained by the intensity of that speaker's Innocence:

> There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
> That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd: so I said
> "Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare
> You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

This is the Lamb, called by Christ's name, who became a little child, only to have his clothing of delight shorn by the exploiter of Experience. But more is in this stanza; the child's illogic mounts to a prophetic and menacing sublimity. The bare head remains adorned by an unspoiled white hair, comparable to the "naked & white" appearance of the children in their own liberating dream:

> And so he was quiet, & that very night,
> As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight!
> That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
> Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black.
>
> And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
> And he open'd the coffins & set them all free;
> Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
> And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

The black coffins are at once confining chimneys and the black ragged forms of the sweeps, in the death of the body which has become their life. The Angel's promise is the loving fatherhood of God which, with the loving motherhood of Nature, is one of the prime postulates of Innocence. But the Angel's promise is also the direct projection, as dream-fulfillment, of the Church's disciplinary promise to its exploited charges. The final stanza, more powerful for its lack of consciously directed irony on the child's part, beats, with a new fierceness for Blake, against the confining and now self-deceiving trust of Innocence:

And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

The sourness of that last line as a moral tag becomes sourer still in the last line of the "Holy Thursday" of Innocence:

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two & two in red & blue & green,
Grey-headed beadles walk'd before, with wands as white as
snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters
flow.

O what a multitude they seem'd, these flowers of London
town!
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own.
The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands.

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of
song,
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of Heaven among.
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor;
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

On Ascension Day the charity children are led into St. Paul's to celebrate the charity of God, that loving pity of which human charity is in-

tended as a direct reflection. The voice of this song is not a child's, but rather of a self-deceived onlooker, impressed by a palpable vision of Innocence, moved by these flowers of London town. The flowing metre is gently idyllic, and the singer gives us two stanzas of Innocent sight, followed by the triumphant sound of Innocence raising its voice to Heaven.

The ambiguity of tone of Blake's songs is never more evident than here, and yet never more difficult to evidence. One can point of course to several disturbing details. The children's faces have been scrubbed clean, and are innocent, in a debased sense—because they ought to appear brutalized, which they are, and yet do not. The children are regimented; they walk two and two, and the beadles' wands are both badges of office and undoubtedly instruments of discipline in a savage British scholastic tradition. The children are dressed in the colors of life; the beadles are grey-headed and carry white as a death emblem. It is the fortieth day after Easter Sunday, forty days after Christ's ascension into Heaven, yet the children, his Lambs, still linger unwillingly in the wilderness of an exploiting society. Though they flow like Thames's waters, this is not a mark of their freedom but of the binding of the Thames, which is already the "chartered" river of the poem "London" in *Songs of Experience*. The prophet Joel, crying that man's wickedness was great, called for "multitude, multitudes in the valley of decision." The hum of multitudes is in St. Paul's, but these are multitudes of lambs, and their radiance is "all their own"; it has nothing to do with the Church. Their voice rises like a wind of judgment, and thunders harmoniously among the seats of Heaven. *Beneath* the children, spiritually as well as actually, are the seats of Heaven upon which sit the beadles. If these guardians of the poor are wise, it is not with the wisdom of Innocence, and their wisdom is epitomized in the last line, at once one of the bitterest in Blake by its context, and one of the most seemingly Innocent in its content.

This contrast between context and content is prevalent. The childish patter of "Infant Joy" is meaningful only when we realize how much the poem's voice imposes its sentimentality upon the helplessly mute infant. "A Cradle Song" has a surface of even more exquisite sentimentality, as it identifies the lovely infant with the Christ Child for whom "all creation slept and smil'd." The poem's enigmatic beauty hovers in the juxtaposition of its final stanzas with the milkiness that has gone before:

> Sweet babe, in thy face
> Holy image I can trace.
> Sweet babe, once like thee,
> Thy maker lay and wept for me,

Wept for me, for thee, for all,
When he was an infant small.
Thou his image ever see,
Heavenly face that smiles on thee,

Smiles on thee, on me, on all;
Who became an infant small.
Infant smiles are his own smiles;
Heaven & earth to peace beguiles.

The tears of the Christ Child were not an image of infant helplessness, but a lament for all mortality, for the transience of Innocence. Yet the mother singing "A Cradle Song" will not see this, but converts the infant god of Innocence very rapidly into a father god of the same state, with a supposedly inevitable movement from "Wept for me, for thee, for all" to "Smiles on thee, on me, on all." The tense shifts from past to present, for Christ's incarnation, to the Mother of Innocence, is a past moment, and his heavenly smiles a perpetual present.

The more elaborate patterning of "Night" is a clearer testimony to the ambiguities of Innocence. The best definition of Innocence may be that it is that state of the human soul in which we ascertain truth as immediate knowledge, for the knower and the known share an unsought natural harmony. In "Night" that harmony is apprehended with a loving wonder, edged by the consciousness of how precarious such harmony must be. The guardian angels of the childhood world may not avert all natural calamity, but what they cannot prevent, they translate into new worlds:

When wolves and tygers howl for prey,
They pitying stand and weep;
Seeking to drive their thirst away,
And keep them from the sheep.
But if they rush dreadful,
The angels, most heedful,
Recieve each mild spirit,
New worlds to inherit.

This is a gentle irony, but an irony nevertheless. The confiding simplicity of tone reminds us of the paradox of how the spiritual must be sundered from the natural, for the spiritual "new worlds" cannot exist unless the condition of nature surrenders itself, to be absorbed in the higher angelic condition. However gently, Blake begins to hint that Innocence is

not enough, that realization depends upon a severing between the natural and the human.

Nor can concord be won in nature or Innocence again, as "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found" exist to show us. The lost child weeps to see his father vaporize into the dark night, but his tears vanish at the appearance of the God of Innocence, a white likeness of the father who has abandoned him. Led by this ghostly father back to his pale and weeping mother, the little boy is back where he started, in a helpless dependence on a state of being where any darkness can vaporize the forms of his protection. We have here the prelude to the entrapments of Experience, as the songs there of "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Girl Lost" will show. The "Nurse's Song" of Innocence is another of these delicate premonitions of the sundered state. Here the poem's meaning is in the implied time-to-be, when the voices of children are no longer heard on the green, and the heart ceases to rest in their laughter. Yet to *become* as little children is not always to remain children, and to find *knowledge* of delight we need to discover sorrow. "On Another's Sorrow" gets this exactly (and deliberately) backwards. Here the poem's progression depends on a rather grim little cycle in which Christ's incarnation is ascribed to his pity for the helplessness of infancy's natural grief. The communion of sorrow is the only vision available to Innocence of the mature consciousness of sin in Experience:

He doth give his joy to all;
He becomes an infant small;
He becomes a man of woe;
He doth feel the sorrow too.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy maker is not by;
Think not thou canst weep a tear
And thy maker is not near.

O! he gives to us his joy
That our grief he may destroy;
Till our grief is fled & gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

The poem in *Songs of Innocence* that most clearly forebodes that state's lament against its destruction is "The School Boy" (later transferred to *Songs of Experience*), where the child's voice undergoes a transition from the sweet company of the sounds he hears in a summer morn to the anxious