Colby

Colby Quarterly

Volume 25
Issue 1 *March*

Article 3

March 1989

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.1, March 1989, p.4-11

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Innocence Re-called: The Implied Reader in Blake's Songs of Innocence

by DEBORAH GUTH

IT IS one of the axioms of Blake criticism that the two "Contrary States of the Human Soul," Innocence and Experience, are portrayed separately through the sets of songs bearing their respective names. The *Songs of Innocence*, rendered through lilting childlike rhymes, dramatize the enchanted inner world of the child;[1] the following series defines the spiritual landscape of its absence, while critical distance, mutual exposure, and satire are achieved through the juxtaposition of the two sets of songs within a single composite work (Frye, 237; Bloom, *Vis. Co.*, 34).

However, although the *Songs of Innocence* are apparently intended for children—"Every child may joy to hear"—closer analysis reveals, within this series alone, complex levels of discourse which are alien to the child's world as well as implied situations and conflicting emotions glimpsed by Innocence but properly belonging to the world of Experience. Most significantly, although the stated purpose of these songs is to portray the state of Innocence, almost all contain forebodings and insights from the world of Experience which subliminally call on the reader to focus beyond the halcyon world of joy and faith which is their ostensible subject. The intrusion is subtle but pervasive. Fear of loss and abandonment, inexplicable sorrow, the absence of love, the existence of social and racial injustice are at times included in the children's awareness; at other times they are conveyed through the adult guardian's words, through a change of tone and voice, or through the inferences of an external narrator. In more ways than one, the knowledge of a post-innocent world where the child is not found, pain is not redeemed by vision or love, and harmony does not prevail is cleverly inserted into the very texture of the poems in such a way that while the imaginative states of Innocence and Experience are clearly polarized through their respective sets of songs, the opposition between them is not merely outlined, it is almost fully realized in the *Songs of Innocence* alone.

The questions that must then be posed are: if the purpose of these poems is to portray the world of Innocence, why the insistent presence of elements from the world of Experience? What is their function in these poems? And secondly, in the light of this, who is actually the implied

1. For recent scholarship on Blake's *Songs* and eighteenth-century children's verse, see Glen, 8-32, and Leader, 1-36.

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reader of the *Songs*? An answer to the first will clarify the second. The argument that Innocence is not merely joy but equally the capacity to imaginatively overcome pain and fear does not fully explain this phenomenon. The pervasive presence of these elements has also been seen as a foreshadowing of Experience to come and a means of highlighting the vulnerability and transience of Innocence (Bloom, *Apoc.*, 4; Gleckner, 65). But this is misleading: the awareness of Experience in the *Songs of Innocence* should not be seen as tangential to the portrayal of this state or to the central meaning of the poems. It does not merely hover on the periphery, pointing to the tragic disruption of Innocence in the future. On the contrary, this muted awareness is included in the textual present of the poems and thus *coincides* if not with the children's state then at least with its presentation. This distinction is crucial: while Innocence is the subject and informing principle of the poems, the constant reminders of Experience make it clear that the prism through which the innocent vision itself is viewed is that of adult experience. In other words, just as the tyger burns brightly only in relation to "the forests of the night," so Experience is the defining framework through which the state of Innocence is both perceived and invested with those qualities of poignancy, ideality, and enchantment which are so central to the appeal of the poems. A few examples will make this clear.

In "Infant Joy," the interwoven voices of mother and child in the first stanza and the melodious balance of "I" and "thee" throughout the poem project a sense of intimacy and harmony within the protected world of childhood:

I have no name:
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name,—
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;
Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

Closer attention to the change of tone in the second stanza, however, modifies this impression substantially. As open dialogue gives way to self-reflecting monologue, the mother's static, repetitive crooning undermines the vitality of the child's joyous self-definition. The change from exuberant "Joy" to the tender diminutive "Pretty joy! / Sweet joy" has a subtly belittling effect which contains a slight lament—"Sweet joy but two days old"—as though time were against it. And this plaintive edge is carried through to the end: through repetition, the spontaneous blessing of the first stanza, "Sweet joy befall thee," becomes a muted plea to life

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denoting fear, and the suddenly obtrusive "befall," evoking all the uncertainty of life, conveys a falling off—rather than an affirmation—of that joy which the lullaby purported to protect. Retrospectively, this shift in tone causes enclosure. While the child has moved beyond a sense of its own helplessness, the mother has not. Or, rather, she moves beyond its jubilant self-affirmation to a fear that reverts to and stresses the vulnerability of the opening lines, thus creating a frame which isolates the image of joy within the poem as a passing moment with which she cannot fully identify and which she cannot sustain. By the end of the poem the two voices are at odds. As the mother's voice modulates towards a wistful end, the child's vibrant tones recede to the imaginative background, and it is through the eyes of a knowledge tinged with fear that the joyous outburst is remembered.[2]

A similar counterpointing can be seen in the "Nurse's Song" where once again harmonious voices conceal a widening gap of awareness. Superficially, the difference of perspective implied in the nurse's pre-emptive vision of night versus the innocent "for it is yet day" is resolved as the nurse yields and the children play on. The last two lines, however, subtly restrict this triumph of Innocence. As the nurse returns the children to their world, implicitly excluding herself both from their joy and from the shelter to which they—but not she—will go ("Well, well, *go* & play. . . / And then *go* home to bed"—my emphasis), the innocent scene moves away from her: the external viewing eye that now takes over, moving from the children to the hills beyond and recording the diminishing sounds of joy, suggests a growing spatial distance—"The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd / And all the hills ecchoed." At the same time, the sudden change to the perfect tense makes the entire scene recede into the past (Hirsch, 199) and finalizes the gap. Intoned from the vantage point of a future that Innocence does not see, these lines shift the poem from actuality to memory, from a dynamic open-ended present to the enclosure of a time now gone. And as the scene fades back into the past, leaving behind the strange hollowness of the two-syllabled "ecchoed," the present of adult exclusion is affirmed as the prevailing viewpoint. What is more, this ending justifies the nurse's fears: through the distancing devices of the last stanza, the reader is left with a residual sense that the laughing, dancing children are no more, but the nurse still stands alone on the hill.[3]

Other poems develop along similar lines. A significant number end with

2. If one remembers, as Stanley Gardner points out, the high rate of infant mortality in Blake's day, and the self-protective indifference on the part of new mothers to which this led (52–53), then the tremulous fear implicit in the poem's end denotes a particularly tragic reversal to the world of reality and fact which both the child's own joy and the uncommon intimacy between mother and infant had so uniquely transcended in stanza 1.

3. In the context of this reading, as well as for other poems analyzed, Professor Iser's comment on the reader-text relationship is particularly illuminating: "(The reader) is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said 'expands' to take on greater significance than might have been supposed. . ." (111).

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a note of sadness or a muting of previous joy which, through a process of "retrospective patterning" (Smith, 10),[4] subtly undermines or even denies the sovereignty of Innocence. In "The Blossom," the closing lines: "A happy blossom / Hears you sobbing sobbing / Pretty Pretty robin," suggest the blossom's inability to project its innocent vision onto the world around and, through the symmetry of "sobbing sobbing" and "Pretty Pretty," point to some inexplicable correlation between beauty and grief. In "The Ecchoing Green," playful joy is undermined by the final narrative shift to a landscape of irreversible absence as well as through the sharp contrast between the children's continued openness (they are "ready for rest") and the elliptical closure of "And sport no more seen," which disavows both the children's faith in tomorrow and the "old folk" 's rejuvenating memory.

"On Another's Sorrow" ends with a still more jarring reversal. Although innocent faith appears to dissipate the indignant tone of the first six stanzas, the redemptive vision of Jesus falls back from rapturous awareness of joy to an image of shared grief which subliminally denies the transcendence it celebrates:

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

The failure of the last line to reaffirm as expected the power of divine joy becomes a metaphor for the failure of vision within the poem, and the very choice of the word "moan" in relation to Jesus suggests a helpless lamentation more characteristic of the world of Experience.[5]

In other poems distance is achieved through the evocation of hidden doubts or fears within the adult protagonist's mind. In "A Cradle Song," for example, the mother's tears, the distinction she draws between her own vision of Jesus weeping and the happy image she wishes for her child—"Thou his image ever see, / Heavenly face that *smiles* on thee" (my emphasis)—as well as her awareness of the need to "beguile" the night (Gleckner, 118–19), all point to implicit knowledge of a more sorrowful reality. The vision is one of Innocence; but the mind through which it passes stands slightly apart from its enchantment, aware that the peace restored at the end of the poem is not a natural, self-evident state but one to which the world and she herself have been momentarily entranced. In other poems again, distancing is effected through the presence of an adult narrator revealing himself as such from behind the childlike voice, as in

4. Barbara Smith stresses the crucial role of a poem's ending: ". . . the conclusion of a poem has special status in the process (of formal and thematic patterning), for it is only at that point that the total pattern—the structural principles which we have been testing—is revealed" (13).

5. An example of this may be seen in "A Little Boy Lost" in *Songs of Experience*, where the parents' tears denote helpless complicity in their child's execution. In *Songs of Innocence*, on the other hand, tears of compassion are seen to activate redemption, as in "A Dream," where the speaker's "pitying . . . tear" becomes a glowworm which lights the emmet's way out of sorrow.

"The Lamb," or clearly separate from the innocent subject of the poem as in "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found." In the first, the inclusion of adult vocabulary between the childlike question and answer modifies the reading of the final lines—"Little Lamb God bless thee. / Little Lamb God bless thee."—which can be seen simultaneously as the child blessing the lamb and the adult blessing the child for a faith lovingly acknowledged but not entirely shared. In the two latter poems the narrator clearly distinguishes between the child's own experience and the "true" situation: in the self-redemptive world of Innocence the boy's father returns in visionary form to take him back to his mother. But from the vantage point provided by the narrator there was no father: "And away the *vapour* flew" (my emphasis), he does not return, and through the strange inversion of events in the last stanza, the mother appears to sob on endlessly, seeking for her child.

Finally, in poems such as "The Little Black Boy" and "The Chimney Sweeper," distance is achieved through the child's unwitting integration of Experience into the very vision that is designed to oppose it. In "The Little Black Boy" this integration can be seen in the conclusion drawn by the boy as he first celebrates the divine equality and love portrayed by his mother and then subverts its meaning to reveal a heaven tragically modelled on the limitations of earth. As the present tense of conviction ("And thus I say...") gives way to a future of unfulfilled yearning, he reiterates his original awareness that the English boy will only ever love those like himself, and his ostensibly protective gesture has undertones of unredeemed servility: standing and still stroking the white child's head when protection is no longer needed—"I'll shade him from the heat... / *And then* I'll stand and stroke..." (my emphasis)—he envisions an eternity in which love still has to be earned.

The apparently innocent resolution of "The Chimney Sweeper" equally includes the world of Experience it is designed to exclude: both the presence of the moralizing Angel and the actual structure of Tom's dream show the extent to which he has interiorized the thought patterns of the world of Experience. Implicit in this structure—vision of joy leading to moral instruction—is the child's unspoken awareness that even dreams are not freely given, while the twisted logic that connects images of freedom to the necessity of submission discloses an apprenticeship in false clarity that will serve as model to his friend.

The poetic recreation of the innocent vision together with a distancing achieved *internally* within the poems has a determining effect on the reading experience. The constant reminders of Experience serve to inhibit the reader's total immersion in the world of Innocence portrayed.[6] They appeal to and implicate him as an adult while simultaneously the poems

6. In this context, see Pagliaro's comment: "Self-consciousness, or the knowledge that the world is not a unity, restrains us in some degree from membership in joy's coherence" (9).

draw him into the internal rhythms and impressions of childhood. Through Blake's various poetic strategies and voices, Innocence thus reveals itself to be both a total perceptual world and a limited stage of life, both immediately present and slightly remote, real and yet magically "other," simply self-evident and moving in that same simplicity. This dual perspective is crucial: just as the modulations and shifts of the poetic voice show the implied author to be an adult whose imagination spans both worlds, uniting yet actively distinguishing between them, so also the implied reader is not, as has often been felt, the child but the mature adult who is called upon to participate in both imaginative worlds and to live them side by side.[7] The function of Experience in these songs is to retain the reader within the framework of his extratextual state of adult awareness. The function of dramatized Innocence and of the poems as a whole is to revive within his mind the responses of Innocence[8] both within and beyond the *Songs*, to restore to imaginative actuality the faculty for enchantment and the leaps of faith which the life of Experience has clouded over.

From this vantage point the two worlds do not merely polarize as mutually opposing states of mind. Rather, through the intersecting of the two within in a single poetic structure and a single mind, the state of Innocence is shown to be a visionary distillation extracted from the world of childhood while Experience is redefined as the *creator* and purveyor of this vision. Only the state of knowledge, it is implied, can transform the childish world as immediate state of being into a transparent visionary construct, and for this reason it is the gateway to a state of imaginative totality which is far more meaningful than the self-enclosed paradise of childhood can ever be. In writing these poems, Blake is not merely eulogizing the beauties of childhood innocence. By reviving and integrating the wonder of Innocence into the knowledge of Experience, he is affirming the perennial presence of the innocent vision since poet and reader alike can reenter its innermost workings. But more significantly, he is marking out for the reader the path to a state of imaginative wholeness in which Innocence, rendered transparent through distance and reintegrated through awareness, is coeval with and dependent on the presence of knowledge.

The "Introduction" to the *Songs of Innocence* clarifies the nature of this unity as well as that of the child reawakened within the adult. Stripped of all the trappings and situations of external childhood found in the other songs, the cherubic creature that appears to the piper "on a

7. As the English philosopher, John Wisdom, puts it: "We need to be at once like someone who has seen much and forgotten nothing; and also like one who sees things for the first time" (qtd. in Bloom, *Bl. Apoc.*, 102).

8. Both Hirsch (44) and more recently Leader (35, 60–61) make a similar point. Hirsch, however, does not examine the implications of this idea, while Leader restricts the revival of Innocence to the reading experience alone: "...we think of *Innocence* as an 'alphabet' or 'guide' to vision, one which teaches us *how* to read..." and sees the role of adult knowledge mainly in the "self-conscious critical procedures" carried out simultaneously by the adult reader vis-a-vis the text (36, 60).

cloud" is no image culled from the real world of childhood but a visionary being born of his mind. Conversely—and fittingly—this child of his imagination contains and reflects the world of adult awareness: to sense sorrow beneath apparent happiness ("So I piped with merry chear, / . . . / So I piped, he wept to hear") and to cry for joy ("While he wept with joy to hear") are not responses of the simple child. They are insights and emotions that derive from the knowledge of disillusionment. Clearly, then, this visionary child does not simply reflect or revive the world of childhood. Rather, as it evolves from joy to tears and from there to a unified vision containing both, it becomes an image of his adulthood transfigured and renewed. And it is for this reason that as child it does not call on the piper to deny his adult state nor as vision to negate the mortal world of Generation but on the contrary leads him to embrace it joyfully as the true medium for his self-realization.

This process is duplicated in the reader.[9] Like the piper following his visionary alter ego, the reader is led through Blake's poems from a revival of the original child's simple response to the more complex responsiveness imaged in the tears of joy, from recollection to an expanded state of consciousness and vision in which both states are contained. As he echoes the piper's wonder at the appearance of the child and the child's wonder at and transfiguration through the beauty of the piper's mortal song, the reader is both projected beyond his original state and reconciled to the world in which he lives. By including the tears of experience within the image of the child, Blake defines the true source of visionary Innocence. Just as, paradoxically, the water must be stained for the purity of the vision to be made manifest—"And I stain'd the water clear, / And I wrote my happy songs"—so Blake is implying that only the world of tears and knowledge, the "fallen" inner world of adult awareness, can truly conceive of and eternalize Innocence, the child of its mind and its redeemer.

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9. A number of critics have recently discussed the participatory role of the reader in Blake's works. See among others: Mitchell, 140; Eaves; Robert Essick also discusses Blake's "conversionary art" and "participatory rhetoric," specifically in connection with *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.

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