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Innocence and Experience

'Introduction' (*Songs of Innocence*)

When you first take up the challenge of studying his writings, William Blake seems to be a special case. He claimed to have visions, he was an eccentric (some people will tell you he was mad), and he did not publish his poems in the ordinary way by having them printed. Instead, he engraved them on metal plates using acid to eat away the designs, and each page is a sinuous, living swirl of shapes, with branches, snakes and other emblems often growing between the lines of poetry. When they had been printed, Blake, or his wife, coloured the plates carefully by hand. The finished works were sold to patrons and friends, in small numbers. You may feel that Blake was an oddity, and will be difficult to understand.

If you then turn to the critics, you are likely to find them indulging a rage for symbolic interpretation that can increase your confusion. If we plunge into the longer Prophetic Books, *Milton*, *Vala or the Four Zoas*, and *Jerusalem*, we are likely to lose our way quickly: Blake invented so many deities and symbolic characters that it is difficult to acquire a sense of what they all signify. Also, even in Blake's own day, few readers would have been erudite enough to recognise all of the mythological and theological references, coinages and puns in which his work abounds.

However, we refuse to succumb to all the 'expert' pressure, and pseudo-biographic prejudice, that surrounds Blake's reputation. We believe that we can read the poems as poems. We must not bring any

preconceptions to this work; on the contrary, we are convinced that a detailed, analytical study of the poems will reveal their significance.

We start, then, by looking in detail at the first two poems from *Songs of Innocence*. We should notice, however, that the title of the collection already provides us with an aim: to find out what Blake meant by the word 'Innocence'. Here is the first poem, 'Introduction':

'Introduction'

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a shild.
And he laughing said to me.

Pipe a song about a Lamb:
So I piped with merry chear,
Piper, pipe that song again –
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe they happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy chear,
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read –
So he vanish'd from my sight,
And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs,
Every child may joy to hear.

(K2, 4)

This clear song is not at all difficult: the story it tells is obvious on a first reading, and it has the short lines, easy rhymes, regular metre and simple vocabulary of a nursery rhyme or children's song. Nonetheless, we will analyse the poem in detail.

The story is clear. A 'piper' meets a child who first asks for 'a song about a Lamb', then encourages him to pipe, then sing, and finally write down his happy songs that 'Every child may joy to hear'. This is a simple story, but it is helpful to look at its stages or sections more closely. The music begins as non-specific 'songs of pleasant glee'. The child then specifies a subject: the music will be 'about a Lamb'. Next, he urges the Piper to 'Drop thy pipe' and sing instead, so we assume that the music 'about a Lamb' is no longer just a melody: it has words which fit the music and express the Piper's meaning. Finally, the song becomes only words, which are not the Piper's spontaneous singing any more: they are written down 'In a book that all may read'. Notice that the child made the Piper pipe the same song twice (stanza 2), and when he sang it was 'the same again', so the song itself has been performed three times, becoming more and more fixed, less and less spontaneous, as it develops from a purely musical expression of pleasure ('Piping songs of pleasant glee') and turns into a permanent written record ('In a book that all may read'). Blake emphasises that the final written song is unchanging, and universal, by his repetition of this idea. It is a book that may be read by 'all'; and the songs will be heard by 'Every child'.

What is Blake's subject? For the time being, we can only speculate. We notice that the pure music of a moment's pleasure changes into written lyrics. There is something about change in this poem, then. Perhaps Blake is writing about poetic creation, explaining his own natural inspiration in 'the valleys wild', and how he fashions and transforms this into poems for the joy of all children? So far, we have a well-defined understanding of the story and its structure; but our ideas about the poem's overall intention are only guesswork. Now we can turn our attention to the style, hoping that details of diction, or rhythm, may give us further clues to the meaning.

We have already commented that 'Introduction' has an apparent simplicity of style reminiscent of a nursery rhyme. There is liberal use of repetition (*piper / pipe / piping / piped; happy; chear; sing / song / songs / sung; child; joy* are all parts of a strong pattern of repetition in the poem); the vocabulary is simple, using common words of one or two syllables only. The metre is regularly trochaic, each line ending on the stress so that a 'ghost' unstressed beat emphasises the

end of the line. So, the first line goes '**Pip**ing / **down** the / **val**leys / **wild**' and we wait for a further syllable to complete the fourth foot of the line. As we read, this has the almost-unconscious effect of separating each line of the poem from the next. Only once does Blake punctuate in the middle of a line: the comma after 'piped' in line 8 stands out, and emphasises that this line includes both sides of the poem's action: 'I piped' and 'he wept'.

However, Blake manages some very subtle effects within what appears to be a simple and regular form. It comes as a surprise, for example, that the rhyme-scheme is not regular. The first stanza is ABAB, but this is not repeated in stanzas two, three and five. In these stanzas the second and fourth lines rhyme, but not the first and third. However, Blake has created a sound-link between these stanzas because lines 6, 8, 10, 12, 18 and 20 all rhyme – indeed there are only three rhyme-words in total (*hear* comes three times and *chear* twice); and the third lines of stanzas two and three end in 'again'. So, the manipulation of rhyme is much more complex than we notice at first, and contributes to the sense of a build-up of repetitive events that runs throughout the poem as the piper performs his song again and again.

Blake achieves a curious effect with the metre, also. It occurs because the second syllables in twelve lines of this poem are pronouns, either 'I', 'he' or 'thy'. We do not throw a pronoun away as we read: we naturally give it greater stress than, say, a falling participle ending (such as the '-ing' on the end of 'piping' which is the second syllable in line 1, or the article 'a', second syllable in line 5). Arguably, we invest a slight extra effort in these pronouns so that the first three syllables for twelve of the lines are of almost equal value. This emphasises the transaction between the child and the piper: the child's commands ('Drop thy pipe'), the piper's efforts ('So I piped') and the child's response ('While he wept') are all conveyed with a heavier, fuller beat than the metre alone would create. The parallelism of lines 16–19, all beginning 'And I', builds this effect further, so that the absence of this extra effort in the final line gives a feeling of relief and release, enhancing the flow of the final achievement: 'Every child may joy to hear'.

We have not learned a great deal more about Blake's meaning

from our analysis of rhyme and metre; but we have begun to appreciate what a consummate and subtly-crafted poem this is. With regard to diction, we have noted the intensive use of repetition but should also notice the 'odd-words-out' which help Blake achieve an effect similar to that he achieves in rhythm. We noted that *because* so many lines begin with three heavy syllables, this *enhances* the contrast of the flowing final line. Similarly with diction: *because* repetition is so widespread, the poem's diction seems even more limited to a narrow choice of words. This *enhances* the contrasting effect of those few words which display some difference: 'vanish'd' (line 15), 'pluck'd' (line 16) and 'stain'd' (line 18) stand out for this reason. They seem sudden actions, and are more violent than the continuous verbs elsewhere in the poem such as 'piping', 'laughing' and 'wept'. In addition, 'vanish'd' is slightly disturbing: the child has been the audience, repeatedly demanding the piper's song and delighting in the performance, so the suddenness of 'vanish'd' is an unexpected shock to the reader; and 'stain'd' carries overtones of dirt and corruption, the disturbing suggestion that the piper here interferes with water, spoiling nature's purity or innocence.

What is the overall 'meaning' of this poem, then? The title, calling it the 'Introduction' to a collection of nineteen poems, provokes us to interpret the 'piper' as representing the poet. However, our thinking should be careful and precise: this means that the 'piper' is the poet who writes *Songs of Innocence*, but is not necessarily Blake himself. Blake stands behind, having created both this 'piper' – the poet of *Innocence* – and the 'Bard' we meet later, the poet of *Experience*.

Other elements of the poem also provoke us to interpret. The child and the capitalised 'Lamb' are both references to Christ, particularly evoking ideas of gentleness, humility, love and innocence associated with Him. Meanwhile, the setting in 'valleys wild', 'rural' and with 'water clear' also brings to mind ideas of an unspoilt and therefore uncorrupted nature. In this poem, then, the qualities of the world of 'Innocence' are plainly evoked. Innocence is natural, unspoilt, and filled with gentleness and love.

The emotions expressed harmonise with this picture of an 'Innocent' world. 'Pleasant glee' and 'merry chear' give rise to

'laughing'. As the emotion grows, however, we find that the child 'wept with joy'. This is a curious conjunction of extremes. On one level, we can imagine a happiness so intense and poignant that it makes the child weep with joy. On the other hand, opposite extremes meet in this phrase. It appeals to us as a paradoxical truth – that opposite states of emotion tend towards each other. Paradox is a surprisingly sophisticated, unresolvable kind of idea to find in a simple, 'Innocent' world.

Finally, as we have already noticed, the setting loses some of its 'innocence' before the poem ends. The 'water clear' has been 'stain'd'; the piper has used natural materials to manufacture a 'pen', and a 'book' now exists which permanently records what began as the natural expression of present happiness. The pen is 'rural' – a word which supposes the existence of its antithesis, 'urban', and which refers to an agricultural landscape, not 'valleys wild'. So, in this short and simple poem we have already travelled a long way. We have moved from 'wild' nature to a still gentle and comforting, but nonetheless tamed and exploited nature, in 'rural'; and we have moved from the expression of momentary happiness in melody, to remembered happiness recorded in words in a 'book'. The crucial uncertainty in this poem is expressed by Blake's indefinite word 'may' in the final line. We are provoked to ask: how far is the world of 'Innocence' already an artificial ideal, an attempt to prolong innocence and protect it from change, by writing 'joy' into a book? We should also notice that 'wild' and 'rural' are not the same thing: 'wild' encompasses all of nature, including its powerful, sometimes frightening energy; 'rural', on the other hand, suggests a tamed nature.

For the moment we have met only the first poem. This presents a repetitively-reinforced impression of an 'innocent' world of nature, with christlike overtones. At the same time, we have noted that there are several elements within the poem which imply their antithesis: this 'innocent' world has an opposite, or 'contrary' world, which is still outside the poem; but which exists just as surely as 'urban' exists when the poet mentions 'rural'.

'The Shepherd'

The second poem is 'The Shepherd':

> How sweet is the Shepherd's sweet lot,
> From the morn to the evening he strays:
> He shall follow his sheep all the day
> And his tongue shall be filled with praise.
>
> For he hears the lambs innocent call.
> And he hears the ewes tender reply.
> He is watchful while they are in peace,
> For they know when their Shepherd is nigh.
>
> (K2, 5)

This poem also appears simple. It tells of a Shepherd who cares for his flock, and the poem only includes positive language about the relationship between shepherd and sheep. He follows his sheep 'all the day'; he 'hears' everything and is 'watchful'. The flock is 'innocent', 'tender' and 'in peace'. The Shepherd's presence gives them this 'peace', while their innocence affects him by giving him a 'sweet' life, and filling his tongue with 'praise'. The dependent and caring inter-relationship of shepherd and sheep seems idyllic, then.

There are two places in this poem where some slight uncertainty is left hanging, however. First, in line 4 we are told that the Shepherd's 'tongue' is 'filled with praise', but we are not told whether he praises the sheep, or God. As in 'Introduction', Christian symbols are called to mind by this poem: the Shepherd himself, with his watchful and loving role, can be seen as symbolic of God; and no higher or divine power is mentioned in the poem. So, we are left uncertain whether the Shepherd praises himself, his 'sweet' lot in life, or the innocence and tenderness of his flock. Secondly, the final two lines are linked by the logical conjunction 'For', which proposes a conditional relationship between the flock's 'peace' and the Shepherd being present. As with the word 'rural' in 'Introduction', this statement implies that a time may come when the Shepherd is not there and the flock will consequently not be at peace. Similarly, 'day' implies 'night', and we notice that the Shepherd's watchful care

is only specified as lasting 'all the day'. By implication, the flock may be deserted and terrified at night. At our present stage in reading *Songs of Innocence*, the implication of a contrary, disturbing world outside these poems is little more than an unspoken hint. Predominantly, the poem presents an idyllic picture. However, as we become more used to Blake's recurrent references to mornings, days and evenings in this collection, the implication that there is a dark and frightening future night, just outside 'Innocence' and threatening its peace, gains power and presence – even while the world of 'Innocence' itself remains an idyll.

'The Shepherd' is written in regular anapaests, a metre which gives it a more bouncy and tripping rhythm than 'Introduction'. The style is again very simple, with no punctuation-breaks within the lines, rhyme between the second and fourth lines of each stanza, and the only word of more than two syllables is 'innocent' (l. 5). This carefree and uncomplicated style enhances the simple and positive picture presented. We can say that the simple writing suits a simple, positive subject; but Blake's metre in this poem is so regular that, together with the redundant repetition of 'sweet' in line 1, it creates a slight exaggeration of simplicity. We cannot say that this 'exaggeration' is noticeable enough to be a parody: it does not mock or undermine the innocent world depicted. However, it does have the effect of defining the world of 'Innocence'. It is as if the style says: *'Here is the world of Innocence. Lovely, isn't it? But it is exactly* ***this*** *limited'.*

What have we learned about 'Innocence' from these two poems? First, there is a mood of happiness which feels 'glee'; there is laughter and weeping for joy, and a gentle, caring love. Secondly, there is a sense of fragility which is produced by the style in two ways: language and metre are simple and limited, and this makes us aware that the poem itself is vulnerable to any incursion of more violent or complicated writing (remember how the word 'stain'd' strikes a slight discord in 'Introduction'); and some of the words belong, in our minds, in antithetical pairs (for example, 'day' and 'night'; 'rural' and 'urban'). Blake reminds us of the existence and threat of the contrary, by excluding it from his 'Innocence' poem (for example, the Shepherd is there 'all day'; why not at night as well?).

Thirdly, we notice that 'Innocence' is a world with a purpose: it is

for children and sheep. In 'Introduction', the Piper writes songs that 'Every child may joy to hear'; and in 'The Shepherd', the aim is for the sheep to be 'in peace'. On the other hand, we have met two adults – the Piper and the Shepherd – and their role in relation to 'Innocence' is ambivalent. The poet would enjoy living the 'sweet' life of a Shepherd, but by implication does not do so, while the Shepherd only watches during the day. The Piper changes and tames nature, putting it to use in a 'rural' setting; and his spontaneous songs become fixed, written in a book.

This is already an understandable combination of hints: many emotions relating to childhood, such as fear, protectiveness, carefree laughter, and hints of the unknown beyond what is already known, have already been touched. We can suggest that change is a central, crucial concept in this complex of emotions. These poems are already building a range of relationships, between the world of 'Innocence' on the one hand, and natural, inevitable change on the other.

'Introduction' (*Songs of Experience*)

We now turn to *Songs of Experience*. We will use the same approach, looking closely at the first two poems of the collection, hoping to reach a preliminary insight into Blake's concept of 'Experience'. As in *Innocence*, the first poem is called 'Introduction':

> Hear the voice of the Bard!
> Who Present, Past, & Future sees
> Whose ears have heard,
> The Holy Word,
> That walk'd among the ancient trees.
>
> Calling the lapsed Soul
> And weeping in the evening dew:
> That might controll
> The starry pole:
> And fallen fallen light renew!

O Earth O Earth return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more:
Why wilt thou turn away
The starry floor
The watry shore
Is giv'n thee till the break of day.

(K2, 30)

We will begin by examining the metre and rhyme. This poem looks regular and simple on the page, but the visual impression is misleading. The metre is much more varied, and less regular, than we found in the *Songs of Innocence*. The opening line has three heavy stresses: '**Hear** the **voice** of the **Bard**!' and does not conform to any set metre. We can say that it is almost iambic, but the first foot has been reversed: but that is as much as we know, so we have to wait for the second line before the dominant iambic metre of the poem becomes recognisable. The first line of the second stanza is also irregular, and is different again: '**Call**ing the **lapsed Soul**'. Other irregularities are the openings of lines 15, 16 and 17 ('**Ris**es' and '**Turn** a**way**' both stress the first syllable; '**Why wilt thou**' stresses the first three).

Blake adds to the destabilising effect of metrical irregularity by varying the length of lines. In 'Introduction' and 'The Shepherd' from *Innocence*, all lines have the same number of stresses. Here, by contrast, the pattern of stresses in each stanza is 3, 4, 2, 2, 4. Rhyme has also developed into something more complex than we found in *Innocence*: here, Blake uses an ABAAB rhyming pattern in each stanza; but the new elements are half-rhymes (Bard / heard; return / worn; grass / mass), with the use of single and two-syllable words as rhymes (Soul / controll; dew / renew). This more sophisticated rhyming reduces the chiming sing-song effect of rhyme, and introduces us to more complicated relationships between sounds.

The overall effect of this poem is very different from that we have

met in *Innocence*. Reading it keeps us alert: we take time to recognise the underlying patterns, we meet surprises and changes, and Blake does not allow us to settle down. In *Innocence*, by contrast, the form conspired to lull us, reassuring us that we could predict the poem. Only slight variations were allowed into the poems from *Innocence*, none of them strong enough to overturn the regular, predictable whole.

The overall effect of metre and rhyme here, then, is to involve and destabilise the reader. Now we can turn to the meaning: why does Blake write in such a markedly different manner? The poem begins with a forceful imprecation to the reader: we are commanded to 'Hear', and the opening line – as previously remarked – is rather lumpy and ugly in sound and rhythm. The rest of the first two stanzas are subordinated to this command, grammatically connected by relative ('the Bard / Who . . .'), participle ('Calling'), and finally pronoun ('That'). The sentence appears to be structured, with each part related to the command. However, the more we strain to make sense of what Blake is saying, the more elusive it becomes. Two voices and acts of listening are described in the first stanza: first, the 'voice of the Bard' of line 1, and secondly, the 'Holy Word' heard by the Bard. These two voices create two ambiguities. First, we cannot know whether 'Calling' in line 6 refers to the Bard 'calling', so we should listen, or alternatively refers to the voice of God ('Holy Word') 'calling', which the Bard heard in the past. Secondly, we cannot know whether the voice 'That might controll / The starry pole' is the Bard's voice, or the 'Holy Word'.

At this stage we are building up a sense of the poem as a whole, so we will set these ambiguities aside for later discussion. All we know for sure is that the poem shouts at us rather brashly in the first line, and immediately follows this with a confusion of meanings. The third and fourth stanzas are not ambiguous, however. There can be no doubt that everything from 'O Earth O Earth return!' until 'Is giv'n thee till the break of day' should be enclosed in quotation marks. This is the actual 'voice of the Bard' which we are supposed to hear.

What is the message of the last two stanzas? The voice urges 'Earth' to 'return' and 'arise', and orders her to 'Turn away no more'.

This command is surrounded by phrases which fix the time of the poem as just before dawn ('Night is worn', 'the morn / Rises', 'till the break of day'). Here again, however, oddness and ambiguity in Blake's meaning become increasingly apparent the closer we look. For example, we are told that the morning rises from a 'slumberous mass' which could be either night itself, or the 'dewy grass' in line 12. Also, the two phrases 'starry floor' and 'watry shore' are hard to unravel. We would accept a starry roof or vault, but 'floor' surprises us; and does 'watry shore' simply mean the shore of the sea, or does it mean a limit or 'shore' of water? Finally, the Bard's tone of voice seems ambivalent. The third stanza appears optimistic, while the tone of 'Why wilt thou turn away' recognises that Earth may not respond to the Bard's call, but cannot understand Earth's reason.

Having acknowledged that 'Introduction' contains ambiguities, we should nonetheless focus on what we can interpret, and build an understanding of Blake's intentions from there. Our first job is to define the Bard himself. We are told that he sees 'Present, Past, & Future'. The Bard's knowledge of the past is demonstrated because he heard the 'Holy Word'. This is a reference to Chapter 3 of Genesis. Immediately after Adam and Eve ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and became aware of their nakedness, they 'heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day'.[1] So, Blake's 'ancient trees' stand in the Garden of Eden, and the odd expression of a word which 'walk'd' echoes the ellipsis of the Bible.

The Bard's knowledge of the future is suggested by his references to a coming dawn, particularly 'Night is worn, / And the morn / Rises', and the final words 'till the break of day'. His knowledge of the present is shown in his definition of the current situation: it is night, but soon it will be morning. The world is ruled by a 'starry pole' and everything – Earth, the weeping 'Holy Word', and the reader – is in a 'fallen fallen' state.

The Bard, then, contrasts with the carefree Piper of *Songs of Innocence*, who is only aware of the present moment's sensation as he pipes 'songs of pleasant glee'. The Bard is much more aware of time

[1] Genesis Chapter 3, verse 8. Future references to the Bible will be given in brackets in the text thus: (Genesis 3, 8), and are from the Authorized (King James) Version.

and change, even to the extent that he has a prophetic vision of a new dawn and Earth's awakening. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the Bard is Blake himself. We have noticed that his prophetic tone is ambivalent, and his question 'Why wilt thou turn away' casts doubt on the eventual outcome: this Bard is struggling against a recalcitrant will which prevents Earth from waking, and he is far from sure that the coming morning will rejuvenate the world. This Bard has a broad vision including prophetic insight; but he cannot enjoy the present moment as the Piper of *Innocence* can. Indeed, he doubts whether such innocent pleasure can exist.

This is an important distinction. The Bard is the poet of *Songs of Experience*. He is not Blake himself, but the Piper's 'contrary'. As such, his insight sees a world which excludes the world of *Innocence*, just as surely as the world of *Innocence* is limited by excluding *Experience*. The Bard's hesitant references to an imminent 'morn' therefore balance the darker world we found implied but outside the poems from *Innocence*. He is caught inside the limited world of 'Experience' just as surely as the Piper is restricted from further knowledge by his 'Innocence'.

What more can we learn about the world of *Experience* from this poem? We have noticed that some of the phrases, such as 'starry floor' and 'watry shore' are difficult to confine within a clear meaning. On the other hand, these images cry out for interpretation. We can try approaching the remaining elements of the poem from a more impressionistic standpoint. If we look at the language, and attempt to describe its effect, this may help us to understand better.

In 'Introduction' there are a number of words which contribute to a negative feeling: 'ancient', 'lapsed', 'weeping', and the repetition of 'fallen fallen'; 'worn' and 'slumberous mass'. This language evokes an atmosphere of weariness and sadness, as if after a long-sustained effort. A hard and unwelcome effort is also evoked by other words and phrases: 'Calling' and 'might controll' lead to the begging tone of 'O Earth O Earth return! / Arise . . .', and as we have noted, there is some fatalism in the Bard's querulous imprecations: 'Turn away no more: / Why wilt thou turn away'.

Next, there are the two images of a 'starry' pole and floor, and the

'watry shore'. When in contrast to the 'morn', the word 'starry' suggests coldness, distance and darkness. The words it is coupled with (pole, floor) both suggest fixed limits and are also, emotionally, rather cold words. 'Pole' is ambivalent: it suggests both the final waste point at the end of the world, and a measuring-pole or a 'rod' of authority such as that held by judges or kings. 'Watry' again evokes coldness, and possibly hints at chaos, since water has traditionally been an emblem of chaos in our culture. Like 'floor' and 'pole', a 'shore' is an edge or limit. As we study more of Blake's poems, we will be able to put forward firmer interpretations of these images. For the time being, we can already conclude that the world of *Experience* is a cold, sad, despairing place bounded by strict limits and – seemingly – lacking the energy to escape from them. The poem records a plaintive call, something like *'You **could** escape, **please** escape: why **won't** you try?'* in conflict with a despairing sense that, if any renewal is achieved, it will be after a weary struggle, and against the odds.

Now that we have allowed ourselves to respond to the poem's effect, we can look back at the Bard. 'Introduction' tells us that this singer differs from the Piper of *Innocence* because his 'ears have heard / The Holy Word'. We traced this reference to Genesis Chapter 3. The 'Holy Word', then, was God's judgment on Adam and Eve for their sin and disobedience; and the punishment he pronounced on them:

> Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children . . . And unto Adam he said, . . . cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.
>
> (Genesis 3, 16–19)

When we put this 'Holy Word' into the context of the poem, God's voice seems to add to the negativity of the whole. His words are curses, depriving Adam and Eve of their innocence and sentencing

the human race to mortality in 'sorrow', pain and 'sweat'. God's final words giving 'dust' as the origin and end of human life evoke a cycle of pointlessness.

This Bard, then, has heard the unforgiving, punishing words of God. In the negative context of this poem, Blake conveys a clear feeling of antipathy towards Jehovah's judgment. Astonishingly for its time, 'Introduction' to *Experience* seems to call for the expulsion to be undone, and it implies two ideas which would have shocked the religious establishment. First, the poem highlights God's punishment of Adam and Eve, rather than their sin – as if the Fall was caused by the 'Holy Word' and its pitiless intransigence. Secondly, the Bard speaks as if 'Earth' could throw off God's punishment (the 'floor', 'pole' and 'shore') by her own efforts, if she only had the will to do so. This, as I have remarked, is an extraordinary and subversive suggestion. Blake tells us that all the sufferings of mortality are only a temporary dream, that we can throw them off and nullify Jehovah's curse, if we have the will.

'Earth's Answer'

The second poem in *Songs of Experience* is 'Earth's Answer':

> Earth rais'd up her head,
> From the darkness dread & drear,
> Her light fled:
> Stony dread!
> And her locks cover'd with grey despair.
>
> Prison'd on watry shore
> Starry Jealousy does keep my den
> Cold and hoar
> Weeping o'er
> I hear the Father of the ancient men
>
> Selfish father of men
> Cruel jealous selfish fear
> Can delight

Chain'd in night
The virgins of youth and morning bear.

Does spring hide its joy
When buds and blossoms grow?
Does the sower?
Sow by night?
Or the plowman in darkness plow?

Break this heavy chain,
That does freeze my bones around
Selfish! Vain!
Eternal bane!
That free Love with bondage bound.

(K2, 31)

'Earth's Answer' can be read straightforwardly as a reply to the Bard's call. We quickly realise that the answer it gives is to pass the buck: Earth feels cruelly imprisoned, expresses her misery powerfully, but in the final stanza she puts the question back to the Bard. She cannot arise, but calls on him to 'Break this heavy chain' for her. Having summarised the general sense of the poem, we can begin analysis by looking at rhythm and rhyme.

This poem takes the lumpy and irregular rhythm of *Songs of Experience* further. Metrically, it is an unpredictable mixture of trochaic (see '**Earth** rais'd **up** her **head**' and '**That** free **Love** with **bond**age **bound**') and iambic (see 'When **buds** and **bloss**oms **grow**'), and in many lines we find extra unstressed syllables which briefly add an unexpected anapaestic lilt (see, for example, 'From the **dark**-ness' in line 2, or '**vir**gins of **youth**' in line 15) or wearily extend the line (see '**Fath**er of the **anc**ient' in line 10). The overall effect is of constantly changing rhythms which are driven by powerful emotive emphasis, the poet's and Earth's natural need for self-expression, rather than by any pattern. Even the paired, rhymed short lines (the third and fourth of each stanza) are often metrically opposed:

Her **light fled**:
Stony **dread**!

The changing rhythms of the poem also give a flexible pace which alters with mood. So, for example, the double stress ('**locks co**ver'd') and open endings ('g**rey** desp**air**') of line 5 slow the pace, suiting the negative mood expressed.

As in the previous poem, there is wide variation in line-length. The number of 'beats' per line follows the same pattern in each stanza: 3, 4, 2, 2, 4.[2] However, the pattern of rhymes established in the first two stanzas (ABAAB) is changed in stanzas 3 (ABCCB, where A rhymes with the final line of stanza 2) and 4 (ABCDB). These two stanzas express Earth's condemnation of Jehovah as 'Selfish', and her outraged rhetorical questions about nature, and the speaker's violent hostility may explain why she breaks through the rhyming pattern, refusing to be restricted by the poem's form. Certainly, our analysis of metre and rhyme has revealed a boiling tension between content and form in this poem. It is as if the ideas are unhappy at being imprisoned in the form, and constantly batter against their frame, threatening to break it.

Imagery intensifies the sense of cold and darkness already apparent from 'Introduction'. The landscape of Earth's imprisonment, however, has become more barren, harder; suggestions of colour have been drained away from it. 'Darkness', 'grey', 'starry', 'hoar' and 'night' all contribute to the monochrome scene. Other elements in the poem further emphasise white, black and grey: 'Stony', 'Chain'd', 'chain' and 'freeze' are all colourless. The sad green of 'dewy grass' and 'ancient trees' we met in the previous poem have disappeared: Earth does not sense any softness or movement of water. Metal, stone and ice are her surroundings.

When we analysed 'Introduction', we commented that 'starry' suggests coldness and distance. In this poem, the impression is reinforced when 'starry' describes 'Jealousy' which, in the next stanza, is further defined as a 'Cruel jealous selfish fear'. The limits ('pole', 'shore' and 'floor') we noted have also become stronger and more clearly expressed in the form of a narrow imprisonment ('Prison'd' in a 'den' and 'Chain'd'). These cruel elements which cause Earth to despair are

[2] It can be argued that line 10 has 5 beats, if 'of' is stressed.

now openly identified with the God of Genesis: the God who punished Adam and Eve. Earth is outspoken, saying that the 'Father of the ancient men' is 'Selfish'. He is cruel, jealous, selfish and afraid and his curse is an 'Eternal bane' which binds 'free Love' in 'bondage'.

This poem, then, makes a more direct and hostile attack on the God who punished mankind. Again, however, we should consider the question of voice. The first stanza of this poem is spoken by the poet of *Experience* (who is neither the Bard nor Earth). The tone is sympathetic, telling us that the poet feels Earth's 'dread'; but the restriction he describes is a covering of 'grey despair', not any literal chains or prison. It is important to make the distinction between what the poet sees, and what Earth herself perceives; and we should remember the difference as it will help us a great deal when we come to unravelling – in particular – *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In this case, we can conclude that the prison and chains described by Earth may be illusory. She is prevented from rising by her own despair, not any concrete object.

The tendency of abstract and emotional states to be coupled with concrete images, so that they seem to have a material existence, is characteristic of Blake. Here, for example, Earth's 'dread' is described as 'Stony'. This technique, of accreting concrete metaphors to abstract terms, gives great force to the ideas in Blake's poetry. However, we must keep in mind that the poet himself is on top of this process: he sees how solid fear can become in a frightened mind (such as Earth, here); but he never concedes that fear actually *is* a concrete object. As a result, the poem contains two radically different perceptions of reality. Earth is convinced that she cannot rise, because of the chains she sees and feels freezing around her bones, and the prison she perceives around her. The poet, on the other hand, sees a character suffering in agony, who could arise without hindrance if she could only see that she could, i.e., if only she were not in despair. In the poem 'London', later in the *Songs of Experience*, this process of solidifying abstract restrictions is encapsulated in Blake's phrase, 'the mind-forg'd manacles'. In 'Earth's Answer' we can distinguish objective and subjective perceptions because the poet's view is given in stanza 1, and Earth's in the remaining four stanzas. The difference between these two voices is vital.

Earth's series of four rhetorical questions deserves close attention. She begins by asking whether 'delight' can bring forth 'youth and morning' while she is 'chain'd in night'. The implied answer is no, and this is part of her answer to the Bard's call: *I cannot arise because I am chained*. She is *not* literally chained, however, so this question is not valid and the argument becomes an impasse, along the lines of: *'You're not chained', 'Yes I am', 'No you are not'*, and so on.

We could also take 'bear' in its other sense of 'endure'. This gives a different implication to Earth's question: that she could not bear (endure) to see the hopeful 'virgins of youth and morning'. It is as if she would *prefer* to suffer and complain. Hope would be frightening because it would threaten to change the status quo.

Earth's second question is more complex. She asks:

> Does spring hide its joy
> When buds and blossoms grow?

This seems to reverse the order. Her first question implied that she could not create in darkness. This time, procreation seems to be occurring anyway, naturally ('When buds and blossoms grow') and the question centres on whether the new growth remains hidden (in 'night', we presume) or displays itself in a joyful form, which must mean in bright daylight. We sympathise with the feeling behind Earth's question: it is horrifying to contemplate the beauty and energy of nature unnaturally hiding itself away. However, our minds are forced to return to her conviction that she is 'delight / Chain'd in night'. If it is unnatural for nature to hide its joy, then she is guilty of doing exactly that. If the inevitable cycle of procreation, here represented by spring, is proceeding anyway and putting forth buds and blossoms in the natural way, then Earth is somehow distorting and hiding the process. The night she thinks 'eternal' is 'worn', and her fearful perceptions are only delaying her own rebirth. The growth of buds and blossoms is a further hint that the 'night' she sees is a creation of her own darkened brain.

Earth's third and fourth questions, about 'sower' and 'plowman', return to her first point: that she cannot initiate a new age by rising up, because it is still night. The second question has invalidated

these, however. What she proposes is an unresolvable paradox, what in the present day we might call a 'Catch-22'. She will not arise while she still fears that it is night. The 'buds and blossoms' of new life, 'joy' and 'delight' will not show themselves, and cannot grow, until she arises. One cannot happen without the other. The other cannot happen without the one. QED. In the meantime, her rhetorical questions all provoke the opposite answer to the one she implies. As long as her imprisonment continues and she fails to arise, spring *does* hide its joy, and buds and blossoms grow unnaturally in darkness; sowers and plowmen *do* sow and plow, also in darkness. The Bard calls for her to break out of this destructive cycle; and she calls on the Bard to break it for her. How can this deadlock end?

What is responsible for this hopeless state of affairs? This poem provides us with two figures who bear a part: the punishing God of Genesis, and Earth herself. One quality is emphasised in relation to both: fear. God is filled with 'jealous . . . fear'; Earth feels 'Stony dread' and is covered with 'grey despair'. We can suggest, then, that fear is an important target of Blake's criticism. Fear leads to the vicious self-righteousness of God's unnatural, punishing laws. The poem shows how these laws bind 'free Love', 'delight' and 'joy', and force nature to hide in darkness. Fear of this punishment acts equally powerfully on nature itself, however; and Earth contributes to the deadlocked status quo by refusing to abandon her 'dread'.

The above discussion of 'Earth's Answer' has inevitably been abstract. The figures we meet in these first two poems of *Experience* – the Bard, Earth, and the 'Father of the ancient men', are all allegorical in kind. That is, they are personifications of the concepts they represent, and make no pretensions to being 'realistic' people. We have therefore discussed Earth as representing nature, both human and plant life in its seasonal cycles of growth and regeneration. The Bard represents a form of prophecy – a kind of insight into history, the present and the future. God, in these poems, is exclusively associated with the punishment of sexual sin. He represents the law, which oppresses nature by forbidding natural behaviour.

These poems tend to deal in abstracts, then: many of the nouns are abstracts, too, such as fear, dread, jealousy, delight, joy, love.

What is Blake writing about? Is he simply playing with concepts, or do these poems relate to our experience of everyday life?

The first part of an answer to this question has already been given. We have commented on the sympathy and emotional power with which these figures are invested. The horror and hatred with which Earth speaks of the 'Father', for example, creates a powerful and convincing relationship between them; and the way in which Earth's metaphors give concrete existence to her imprisonment and fear, moves us. Also, we have analysed the Bard's urgent, yet fatalistic tone of voice, building a naturalistic character to his feelings. Nonetheless, we may still wonder what is so important about the situation these figures find themselves in?

Much of the answer to this will gradually come to us as we study more of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. We will find that individual poems elaborate real-life situations, showing us how the 'two contrary states' emblematically presented in these opening poems are lived out by actual people, from children playing on a green, to chimney sweepers plying their trade in Blake's London, beadles and pauper children, nurses, soldiers, priests and others. However, it will be helpful to stop and think at this early stage. The poems are passionately written, and an effort to connect with Blake's passion, to understand how his ideas relate to ordinary life-experience, will be both rewarding and enlightening.

We have also met elements of fear in the *Songs of Innocence*. In 'The Shepherd', fear of the night, and of the Shepherd's absence, is implied by the emphasis on how 'watchful' he is, and the flock's 'peace'. We are beginning to see a pattern emerging, because the worlds of Innocence and Experience are both presented to us in the form of limited, subjective perceptions. *Innocence* is a beautiful, warm and affectionate world; but it is limited because its inhabitants fear dangers from the outside, and the terrors of a night which must come. The world of *Experience* expresses critical insights which are more penetrating than we find in *Innocence*. So far we have noticed that the punishing God of Genesis is castigated for cruelty and selfishness, and we will find the society and institutions of Blake's time critically analysed, exposed and condemned in such poems as 'Holy Thursday', 'The Garden of Love', 'London' and 'The Chimney

Sweeper'. Yet the subjective perception of *Experience* is also limited by fear. This time, fear centres on the sufferings and punishments which follow any attempt to be free and natural. We can suggest the conclusion, then, that in Blake's view fear itself is an enemy. It does not matter whether it is fear of experience (in *Innocence*) or fear of freedom, which could be expressed as fear of innocence (in *Experience*): it is always fear which prevents the human spirit from achieving wholeness, and keeps us thralled within a restricted, distorted perception of reality.

Innocence and *Experience*, then, are related to each other in a complex but symmetrical way. We may look at the setting of morning and daytime in *Innocence*, and that of night in *Experience*, to deduce that the second state is a later, older 'state of the human soul'. However, we can already see that it would be wrong to think of *Experience* as any wiser than *Innocence*. It is a later state, but its inhabitants are just as restricted by fear and delusion as are those of *Innocence*. Since each of these states is disabled by its fear of the other, we can suggest that *Innocence* and *Experience* are in need of each other. It appears that the route towards wholeness and a 'true' vision lies through combination of the two, not rejection of either of them.

The Designs

William Blake was an engraver by trade. The *Songs of Innocence and Experience* were 'published' by being engraved, printed in Blake's workshop, and finally coloured by hand. Each poem, then, is integrated within a design which Blake intended as a part of the whole artistic work. Blake's designs complement the poems they present. In some cases the design carries an independent but related meaning, enlarging on the poem's significance; in other cases the design functions more in the manner of an illustration to the poem. However, even in these simpler cases, the design often clarifies, or adds to, the words of the poem. We will study the designs for the four poems we have analysed in this chapter, both as a brief introduction to the interpretation of Blake's visual images, and as a reminder of the way Blake wished his work to be appreciated.

Figure One: The 'Introduction' to *Songs of Innocence*. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The 'Introduction' to *Innocence* is set within a marginal design consisting of two trees, each having two trunks which twine up beside the poem. Small vines grow up each tree, and branches of these grow partly across between each stanza. They grow across and almost join at the top of the page. The two trees with double trunks twining are derived from medieval illuminated manuscripts and stained-glass windows depicting the Tree of Jesse. The ground at the base of the page seems very regular and flat, and the trees rise without visible roots: some commentators see a sill, or even Jesse's coffin here. However, most copies show a narrow contained stream on this ground, flowing across the bottom of the page.

Each twining of the trunks is used as the frame for a different tiny design. These are of figures variously male, female and child, clothed or naked, with birds or in some cases indistinct objects near them (one of these is seen variously as a printing-press or a bed). One frame (top right) is of a bird flying upwards. We cannot be sure what these tiny figures are doing, but some are certainly concerned with writing (or printing), while one depicts a woman sowing and another a woman and child in a domestic scene. Also, some are expressions of freedom of spirit, such as the bird flying upwards, and the clear naked figure with spread arms which is the second design on the left.

The poem 'Introduction' has been illustrated in the frontispiece to *Songs of Innocence*: there we see the Piper looking up at a floating

Figure Two: The frontispiece to *Songs of Innocence*. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

child, with a feeding flock in the background. The design we are studying, then, is a second visual presentation, not an illustration. We remember that the poem's story is ambiguous: on the surface it appears cheerful, and the Piper's songs are such that 'every child may joy to hear'; yet at the same time nature becomes 'stained' and tamed, and the exuberance of 'glee' changes into a permanent written record. The variety of figures and designs up and down each side of the page certainly echo this ambiguity. Some are agricultural (the woman sowing) and domestic, suggesting a settled life, and the exploitation of nature. On the other hand, the bird and the naked figure are more free and energetic images. Similarly, some of the figures seem upright or expansive: the naked child, for example, spreads his arms and is walking. Others, in contrast, are bowed or huddled in attitudes which suggest submission, preoccupation or fear: attitudes which visually enclose these figures, and present them as unaware of what is beyond or outside their downcast view. Clearly, the sad ambivalence of the poem is reflected in these designs. It is a pity that we cannot be sure exactly what each one is, and so we cannot analyse how they link together in sequence.

Interpreters of Blake's designs point out features which represent the limitations of *Innocence*. An example of this is the stream across the bottom of the page: it is narrow, and contained within straight banks, and this is interpreted as a sign that *Innocence* is fertilised by a limited and narrow source. The vines' failure to join across the top of the design may also be significant, as well as the trees without roots, whose growth seems insecure.

The design around 'The Shepherd' is more of an illustration: the poem occupies a limited space at the top, and the rest of the page is a picture of the shepherd and his flock, with a tree to the right and a bird rising on the left. In the background are woods, a distant hill and a burst of light in the sky. Some smaller birds in the distance, and two lark-like birds on a branch, confirm that it is dawn and we are looking east.

Even in this illustration, however, Blake has used his design to indicate a clear meaning. Compare the figure of the Piper from the frontispiece to that of the Shepherd on the next page. The Piper looks up, the Shepherd looks down. The Piper is naked, the

Figure Three: 'The Shepherd' from *Songs of Innocence*. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Shepherd is clothed in a tunic-like garment. The Piper carries his pipe, emblem of music and his songs of 'glee'; the Shepherd carries his crook and his shepherd's wallet hanging by his right side. The significance of these developments is that 'the piper's role is prophetic, the shepherd's protective'.[3] Blake visually underlines the transition from unspoilt natural energy to a more settled, agricultural rural life. At the same time there is a hint of a 'fall', a loss of innocence, as this figure is clothed. As you study Blake's designs in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, you notice that clothing and nakedness are indicative. Many of the figures in *Songs of Experience* wear dresses and

[3] Erdman, David V., *The Illuminated Blake*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 46.

robes which completely obscure the shape of their bodies. Here, the departure from unspoilt nature is slight: we can see the outlines of the Shepherd's body clearly through his clinging and short garment.

The sheep graze peacefully. Ram and ewe graze together next to the Shepherd's leg. Two of the sheep have raised heads, however. One calls to the Shepherd, and the other looks out of the picture. This seems to suggest both a desire for reassurance, for the Shepherd's care, and some alert fear of what may lie beyond the confines of this peaceful scene to threaten its safety in the future.

It is a lovely design: the flock huddles as a single, warm and woolly unit; the Shepherd's pose is willowy and relaxed leaning on his crook, and both the tree and a blossoming plant twining up the trunk echo the figure's pose. However, we should not ignore the energy of the splendid bird of paradise, of the dawn whose rays are strongly lined to burst into the sky, and of a wind which appears to be blowing powerfully, making the tree's foliage bend towards the dawn and leaving the ends of branches somewhat ragged. It is reasonable to read this picture as an emblem of rural peace encircled by wild natural energies, and the signs of development we have noted, from natural to cultivated life, support such an ambivalent reading.

The frontispiece to *Songs of Experience* on page 36 should be considered next, as it is a direct development from the figures of Piper, child and Shepherd from *Innocence*. Several changes have taken place, and these indicate something of the 'contrary' collection of poems readers are about to meet.

The child which flew free, with expansive arms, in *Innocence*, now sits upon the Piper / Shepherd's head and is held there gripped by both hands. The child now has wings and (in some copies) a halo: it has become a cherub. Both child and man now look directly at us with serious but otherwise unreadable expressions. The man is dressed much as he was in 'The Shepherd', but he now has no pipe, crook or wallet and is clearly walking away from his flock and entering a darker foreground, with his right foot taking a pace forward, towards us. A tree is on the right of the design again, but this time it has a thick, older trunk which seems scarred by striations (one commentator suggests lightning) and has ivy growing upon it with dark and sharp leaves. In place of the verdant woods, there is a

Figure Four: The frontispiece to *Songs of Experience*. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

single young tree (in some copies apparently two trees with crossed trunks) in the background, as well as hills and a sky with a yellow, possibly evening light above the horizon.

The significance of some of these changes is obvious, but several features of this picture are still a matter for conjecture and argument between the commentators. We will record the obvious points first.

The child reappears transformed into a holy cherub. This change, whatever it means, is parallel to the man's development from naked Piper to a serious, clothed Shepherd who is abandoning his protective role. The man is making a determined move forward, away from the world of *Innocence*, and the absence of crook and wallet shows that he will no longer protect innocence. The tree indicates violence

and suffering, and the evergreen ivy seems to suggest endurance through a hard winter, in contrast to the blossoming and therefore seasonal plant that twined the tree in 'The Shepherd'. The picture as a whole suggests both courage and determination, danger and endurance, while the world of innocence in the background is barer, and the flock continues grazing rather obliviously. To me, there is a mood of loss and decline in the background, in contrast to the man's determined foreground stride.

Uncertainty in the interpretation of this design centres on the cherub, and the fact that the figure advances with his right foot. Commentators agree that Blake distinguished symbolically between right and left, and some[4] read the two sides as spiritual (right) and material (left). However, most take a more flexible view: Blake seems to advance the right side of a figure to indicate a positive movement, perhaps a movement towards change and development – whether in a spiritual or material context – and he advances the left side to indicate a negative movement or attitude, perhaps when forces of oppression or stagnant conservatism are dominant. In this case, the firm stride leading with the right foot indicates a positive movement. This is in keeping with the general idea we will find conveyed by poems in this collection, and other prophecies (notably *The Book of Thel*, which is discussed in Chapter 4): that it is positive and necessary to leave the world of innocence behind. Trying to maintain innocence beyond its natural time leads to ignorance and idiocy; and the world of experience, however fearful it seems, must be entered.

The child's cherubic wings and halo, and his position on the man's head, have spawned some ingenious interpretations. Keynes[5] sees a reference to Ezekiel 28. 14 where the King of Tyre is likened to 'the anointed cherub that covereth', as he has been 'perfect' from the day he was 'created' until 'iniquity' was found in him due to his great riches. Ezekiel continues:

[4] For example one of the earliest and most influential interpreters of Blake's designs, Joseph Wicksteed, whose *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job* appeared in 1910.

[5] *Songs of Innocence and Experience, with an Introduction and Commentary by Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, London and Paris, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967.

> By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned: therefore I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God: and I will destroy thee, O covering cherub . . .

The story of the King of Tyre is clearly related to Blake's parable of passing from Innocence to Experience: the King's original virtue is corrupted and destroyed by material riches and the temptations associated with Experience. In Blake's other writings there are references to the 'covering cherub', which represents what Blake called the 'Selfhood', that selfish and greedy aspect of a person that becomes hard and cruel with time.

Keynes's interpretation is persuasive, but as with the 'spiritual' right foot, it is likely that Blake uses symbolism in a looser, less directly allegorical way than Keynes proposes. If we look again at the child's figure, we are left with more questions than answers. The child has definitely become holy – an object of worship rather than the free and natural spirit it was in *Innocence*; and this implies a negative move towards religion, and submission to oppressive, fixed doctrine. On the other hand the child is young and naked, and so contrasts with the many white-haired, white-bearded and robed old men who visually represent religious oppression in *Songs of Experience*. Is the man holding the child as a protection for himself, or carrying the child towards experience?

It seems sensible to accept the reference to the 'covering cherub' in general terms. This picture includes the dangers which come with Experience, and the 'covering cherub' is an emblem of material riches, greed, and the corruption they may bring. Its transformation into a cherub with wings and halo also reminds us of religious laws, which delude and oppress. We have already met the beginnings of this theme in our analysis of the poems 'Introduction' and 'Earth's Answer', where a tyrannical God makes his appearance, terrifying Earth into submission, and punishing 'free Love' with 'bondage'.

Later in this study we will find that Blake was opposed to any doctrine which divided the body (wicked) from the soul (good): instead, he favours the idea of a whole person, body and soul together and inseparable. In this case, then, the cherub may be

viewed as a warning of the dangers of Experience. As winged and haloed figure, it warns of the dangers of false spirituality; as 'covering cherub' it warns of the dangers of materialism.

So, the design as a whole can be summarised as a complex challenge to the reader. We are not spared the doubts, fears and risks which accompany the move from sweet Innocence to harsh Experience; yet the figure's courage and purpose, as he steps resolutely forward, are clear. At the same time, both man and child look directly at us, as if challenging us to join them on their frightening but resolute journey into the darker, more violent world we are about to meet in this collection of poems.

Figure Five: The 'Introduction' to *Songs of Experience*. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Musuem, Cambridge.

The design for the 'Introduction' to *Experience* is a simpler affair. The poem appears engraved upon a large multiple cloud which occupies most of the plate, and is bordered by a deep indigo starry sky. A naked figure, probably female, reclines upon a scroll-like couch upon a smaller cloud at the bottom of the page, head turned to her right in profile and with her back to us. Commentators differ about her identity: she is either Earth, lying on her couch and resisting the Bard's call to her to 'return!'. Or she is the Bard himself who 'Present, Past & Future sees'. I incline to the first interpretation as the figure appears female. Looking back to our analysis of this poem and 'Earth's Answer', we concluded that Earth's perception of chains, a 'den' and imprisonment was false, produced by her fear. Therefore Blake's 'true' picture of her, upon a cloud in comfort and able to survey the sky and stars, as well as able to turn toward us if she will only realise that she can, expresses a truth implied but not put into words, in the poem. So, this design acts as an expansion of the poem's significance, and confirms the theme of Earth's delusions we developed in our analysis.

'Reading' the design, it is apparent from the constellations shown around the border, and from the slight yellowness glowing on Earth's cloud (and around her head in some copies), that it is early Winter and near 'break of day' as it says in the poem. The figure is looking West. This again underlines that Earth could turn, and look out of the plate, Eastward, towards a rising sun.

Finally, let us look at the design for 'Earth's Answer'. This again is one of Blake's simpler designs; yet again, the visual plate extends the meaning of the poem. The illustration consists of stems leading up the left and branching across between stanzas and over the top of the poem, to leaves and tendrils hanging down on the right. At the bottom a serpent crosses from left to right, its mouth open and forked tongue extended. A vine grows from the words 'father of' in stanza 2, leading to a bunch of dark purple grapes.

The serpent is a common symbol in Blake, and often represents the selfish lust male sexuality becomes when suppressed and frustrated by Holy Law. The grapes may be a natural fruit, a sign of natural regeneration with Spring and Summer, and the fruits of sexual love. They are out of reach, and the serpent – and Earth in

Figure Six: 'Earth's Answer' from *Songs of Experience*. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Musuem, Cambridge.

the poem – are prevented from enjoying them by the 'selfish father of men': religious laws with their denial of natural energies. In this case, then, the serpent contributes to the significance of the poem. In the poem Earth, a female, laments her lack of fulfilment and that 'free Love' is 'with bondage bound'. If we see the serpent as perverted male lust, the design adds a masculine dimension to the denial of sexual love. So, this design can be seen as prefiguring the powerful poem about destructive sexuality, 'The Sick Rose', later in *Songs of Experience*.

Conclusions

We began this chapter with the aim of learning about *Innocence* and *Experience*, and Blake's teasing phrase 'the two contrary states of the human soul'. It will be helpful to summarise our progress before moving on to look at the natural world in Chapter 2.

When we first face *Innocence* and *Experience*, and try to grasp these two concepts, it is tempting to run to certain stock responses. There are a number of antithetical pairs of ideas which are common in our culture and background, and we are tempted to apply these to Blake's poems first. They include such paired ideas as ignorance and knowledge, illusion and disillusion, nature and society, optimism and pessimism, and good and evil. In this chapter, we have found that none of these conventional dualities fits what Blake has in mind. A short discussion will show how misleading they can be.

Optimism and pessimism. There is certainly something more positive in *Innocence*, and something negative in *Experience*. For example, the anticipation of pleasure in the Piper's songs which 'every child may joy to hear', and the security of the sheep who 'know that their Shepherd is nigh', point to trust in the future, in *Innocence*, which could be called optimism; while Earth's despair and her belief that she is unable to rise might be called pessimism. On the other hand, the limitations we discerned in *Innocence*, with its exclusion of change and its vague awareness of the coming night, are not optimistic; and Earth in the world of Experience does not expect the worst, like a conventional pessimist. Rather, she fears hope itself, while at the same time she knows that 'buds and blossoms grow'. When we bring into consideration **ignorance and knowledge** and **illusion and disillusion**, we find ourselves even more at a distance from what Blake portrays. Ignorance is not the right word to describe what we see in *Innocence*, where the child undergoes the extremes of emotion when he weeps 'with joy' to hear the Piper's songs, and the sheep are sensibly at peace because they 'know that their Shepherd is nigh'. Knowledge is even less accurate to describe the state of *Experience*: Earth will not 'arise' and is blindly covered with 'grey despair', while the Bard castigates her ignorance, asserting, contrary to her denial, that 'Night is worn, / And the morn / Rises'.

Clearly, the outlook of *Experience* is at least as ignorant as that of *Innocence*. In fact, both disillusion and our conventional assumption that 'experience' brings knowledge are portrayed as destructive illusions in the poems we have studied.

Blake re-orders our concepts in these opening poems, then. Many of the facile assumptions we make about gaining knowledge and experience, and growing up, simply do not fit his vision, and we are sent back to the poems to rethink our understanding of the 'contrary states' he has taken as his theme.

Our stock concept of a dichotomy between **nature** and **society** suffers a similar fate. Readers of these songs must never forget what happens in the 'Introduction' to *Songs of Innocence*: there is a clear distinction between the 'valleys wild' and 'songs of merry glee' at the start of the poem, and the 'rural' pen and 'stained' water near its end. A long pastoral tradition provokes us to associate sheep, meadows, woods and shepherds with nature; and pastoral contrasts with the world of courts, palaces and sophistication as well as cities and industries. Many of Blake's poems feed this assumption by contrasting rural and urban settings. However, it would be wrong to confuse Blake's pastoral with nature itself. Nature is 'wild' and its emotion belongs to the present moment only, like the Piper's 'merry glee' expressed through his songs. The pastoral world of Shepherd and sheep is in contrast to this, supervised, protected and tamed.

The more we think about *Innocence* and *Experience*, the more we are struck by the similarities between these two states rather than their differences. Both of the worlds Blake presents are societies: supervision and authority exist in both of them, in the persons of the Shepherd (*Innocence*), and the 'jealous selfish father of men' (*Experience*). Both worlds also have a population – the flock of sheep in *Innocence* and Earth herself in *Experience*. In our analyses we have found that the relationship between authority and the individual is fraught and ambiguous in both worlds, and both depend to some extent on fear, which supports dependence and illusion.

At this point we can return to some plain commonsense: are there really two separate, symmetrically opposed worlds around us? Of course not – we share only the one world in which we live. This is a timely reminder, as it points firmly towards the insight that Blake's

two 'contrary states' are not different worlds at all, but only different perceptions of the same world. Somewhere there is an objective reality, but truth can only be perceived through a 'state of the soul', and different or contrary 'states of the soul' can only see different truths.

Applying this insight to the figure of authority, we can suggest that the gentle caring Shepherd of Innocence and the cruel punishing tyrant of Experience are one and the same: the difference between them is entirely a matter of how they are perceived. The Innocent are grateful for what they see as benevolent loving care. They willingly obey their shepherd's commands because they believe that he has their well-being at heart. The Experienced believe that their tyrant enslaves and imprisons them, that his laws are cruel and selfish, and that his power deprives them of freedom and happiness.

The idea that the two contrary states of Innocence and Experience are only different perceptions of the same world focuses our attention on the differing visions of Piper and Bard. These two figures, and the relationship between their two visions of the world, are complex and difficult to define. For the present time, we can only begin to interpret their roles by noticing – as with the contrary states themselves – that they have elements in common. Both Piper and Bard share the perceptions of the 'state' in which they exist. The Piper clearly shares feelings of 'glee' and 'joy' with the innocent world surrounding him, finds the Shepherd's life 'sweet' and full of 'praise' while the flock is innocent and tender. Similarly, the Bard shares *Experience*'s perception: he hears the 'Holy Word', feels the power of the 'starry pole' and recognises the need to renew 'fallen fallen light'. We should also notice, however, that both Piper and Bard are capable of a wider vision than the limits of either *Innocence* or *Experience* would allow. The Piper begins by expressing the wild pleasure of untamed nature in music, so his imagination is capable of a freedom unknown to the protected world of *Innocence*. The Bard sees 'Present, Past, & Future', and his imagination is capable of a more prophetic range than that of Earth, who lives within the state of *Experience*. The Bard can see that 'morn / Rises from the slumberous mass'. He is aware of a coming 'break of day' while Earth herself sees only a continuing night.

The functions of the two poetic figures differ, however. The Piper composes and then writes songs which will give 'joy' to children living in the protected world of *Innocence*; the Bard calls impatiently for Earth to throw off her chains and arise. Which poetic role is appropriate depends on which version of 'truth' is perceived. If the world is protected by a benevolent Shepherd, then the poet celebrates with songs of 'joy'. If, on the other hand, the world is cruelly imprisoned and mercilessly punished by a selfish, jealous God, then the poet must become an agent of rebellion with a vision of freedom and a call to Earth to rise and throw off her chains. The poet's role, then, is either to celebrate joy, or as a revolutionary prophet, depending what the 'truth' is that is perceived in such different ways. The effect is to focus our attention on the crucial question: what is the 'truth'? In this chapter, we have found limitation and distortion in both perceptions – *Innocence* and *Experience* – and we already guess that truth and its perception will be a complex theme in Blake's poetry.

At the same time, we have begun to appreciate that the symbolic figures in Blake's poetry need to be understood as symbols rather than as people. They do not act conventionally as characters in a story. The kindly Shepherd, seen through different eyes, can turn into a vicious old tyrant, and vice versa; the carefree Piper can turn into the prophetic Bard. As we continue to study, and meet more of the symbolic figures of Blake's imagination, it will be important to remember that they represent states and perceptions, not permanent deities, but attitudes, beliefs and desires which can change into each other with a change of mood or viewpoint, with bewildering speed.

Methods of Analysis

In this chapter we have used a standard approach to the analysis of poetry. Our attention focused on the following:

1. The general sense, circumstances or 'story' in the poem. In the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* this is often clear on a first reading; but some poems present less of an obvious 'story',

demanding some interpretation even at first. It is worthwhile to think about the whole poem as soon as you have read it. Try to formulate simple statements about it, which give a general idea of what it is about. For example, looking at 'The Shepherd' in *Innocence*, we quickly came to the conclusion that 'The dependent and caring inter-relationship of shepherd and sheep seems idyllic'.

2. The metre of the poem. Analysing patterns of rhythm, we have concentrated on:
   [i] describing the predominant metre or metres, and the overall effect on the poem.
   [ii] noticing where the metre is irregular, then relating this to the meaning. We seek to explain why Blake altered the poem's pattern at that point.
3. Diction. We have looked at the 'diction' of poems as a way of adding to our understanding of the way Blake uses sound and language. This has included thinking about the length and kind of sound a word makes, and the tone or 'attitude' of the language, as well as simpler effects such as alliteration. We have approached 'diction' flexibly, then, ready to notice anything about the language used; so, for example, we noticed the *absence* of the word 'urban' from the poem 'Introduction' in *Innocence*.
4. Imagery, both of actual objects which are part of the narrative, and in figurative references which add a figurative idea to the experiential pattern of the poem. In the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* we have found that many elements of the poems prompt us to interpret them – they are natural, literal things like the Piper's valleys 'wild' and his 'rural' pen made out of a hollow reed, but we are provoked to add significant meaning to them because of the context (so we contrasted 'wild' with 'rural' and thought of the development of a society) or because they are common symbols which carry overtones of extra meaning in themselves (such as the 'buds and blossoms' and 'heavy chain' Earth refers to in 'Earth's Answer').
5. In particular, we have paid interpretative attention to landscape or setting, animals, and the roles of emblematic figures such as Piper, Bard / Prophet, Shepherd and so on. The roles and quali-

ties of various figures in Blake's poetry will deepen and fill out as we continue to study, developing into the complex emblematic figures we will meet in the Prophetic Books, and we will further investigate the role of setting and animals in the next chapter. This amounts to observing *the way in which the poem is written* very closely, and involves an open-minded, detailed scrutiny. As you become more practised and experienced, your approach to a poem will become less dependent upon looking at 'compartments' such as 'diction' or 'metre' in turn, and will become faster and smoother. You will naturally appreciate how and what each element contributes to the whole, and that they are ultimately inseparable from the poem itself. Also, it is important to remain receptive to anything you notice in what you read: whatever you *notice* about the writing is of interest, because it must be *noticeable*, i.e. a feature of the style. Describe the feature and its effect as accurately as you can.

6. The designs. We have looked at the designs of Blake's plates. We found that:
   [i] the designs often reflect and support interpretation of the poem, and sometimes add to that interpretation.
   [ii] Blake will sometimes add a contrasting image to the design which highlights an element which appears as an implication of the poem, so that the design brings out and complements the 'subtext' of the writing rather than its more overt primary meaning.

Suggested Work

At this stage it will be helpful to carry on with the investigation we have begun in this chapter, building up further understanding of Blake's concepts *Innocence* and *Experience*. Follow the same method we have used on the opening poems of each collection, but choose a 'group' of poems to look at in detail.

In *Songs of Innocence*, look at 'The Ecchoing Green' and 'Nurse's Song'. In the first of these poems the subtle modulations of metre, rhyme, diction and subject-matter imply a more disturbing picture

than the explicit calm of the surface 'story', which is typically restrained within the world of *Innocence*, would suggest. Look at the designs (this poem extends over two plates and has three distinct pictures); consider in particular the incompatible dual activities of white-haired, protective age and grape-eating youth on the second plate and the progress of the children from naked to clothed in all three pictures, as well as the kind of clothing they wear.

A detailed study of this poem will add to your appreciation of the subtle undercurrents, what we can call the 'implications' or 'subtext' Blake creates within the apparently restricted world of *Innocence*. This contributes to the impression that, within the simple apparent form of these poems, other shapes, processes and forms are living and developing unseen. Turning from this to 'Nurse's Song' we find a dramatisation of the conflict between anxious adults and playing children, as the end of the day draws near. In this poem, the theme of fear is further developed and there are some subtle, ominous touches which will refine your responsiveness to sounds and rhythms. For example, attempt to describe the effect of the final word.

In *Songs of Experience*, a 'contrary' poem to 'The Ecchoing Green' and 'Nurse's Song' is 'NURSES Song'. Here, the speaker is a nurse caring for children who play on a green. The time is the same as at the end of 'The Ecchoing Green' and the 'Nurse's Song' of *Innocence*. This is a short poem, so you will be able to make a close and very detailed comparison between its treatment of the adult's perspective, and the view of adults ('old folk' and 'mothers' as well as the nurse) in the poems from *Innocence*. You may also find it rewarding to consider how Blake renders the same metre differently in all three poems.

Making a detailed study of these poems will also develop your sense of the inter-relatedness of 'groups' of poems within these two collections. In the next chapter we will be studying a group of poems about lost and found children, for example. We will look at four of them in detail, but there are a further two in *Experience* that we will not have the space to analyse. The three poems suggested for study here are all about adults watching children play, but they are not the whole group (which might include 'The Garden of Love' as well),

while the motif of childhood play spreads into a much more socially-concerned 'pair' of poems such as the two entitled 'The Chimney Sweeper'; and these can arguably belong in a 'group' with the two poems – one in each collection – called 'Holy Thursday'.

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