

The Unspoken Voice in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

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Abstract

Critics of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* not surprisingly have focused their attention on the galaxy of characters whose voices are heard throughout Blake's poems. These are the voices of London's disenfranchised—the men, women and children who thronged London's streets and whose piteous cries became the object of Blake's concern. However, in addition to these spoken voices there runs throughout *Songs* an undercurrent of silent voices—voices that can be inferred, or as Blake would say, imagined—which speaks no less directly to the reader but which sustains Blake's depiction of the frightful living conditions he witnessed daily in late eighteenth century London. By giving voice to these unspoken, silent voices that haunt the margins of his poems, and complementing them with the voices of his other characters, Blake hoped to create a more sympathetic and humane vision of life by showing his fellow citizens how they might transcend many of the evils that plagued their daily existence.

Although much has been written about the various characters who speak to us from the pages of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, scholars not surprisingly have tended to focus their attention on the galaxy of characters whose voices are heard throughout Blake's poems. Old folk and children, mothers and fathers, pipers and bards, chimney sweeps and little black boys, nurses, beadles, hapless soldiers, harlots and even an occasional angel's voice can be detected speaking to the reader--sometimes sweetly, occasionally ironically, but always reflecting the psychological states of mind that Blake meant to represent by the twin perceptions of innocence and experience. These are the voices of London's disenfranchised: men, women and children alike who thronged London's streets and whose piteous cries were stifled by English authorities who turned a blind eye to their suffering and who consequently became the object of Blake's wrath throughout *Songs*. In addition to these spoken voices, however, there runs throughout *Songs* an undercurrent of silent voices—voices that can be inferred, or as Blake would say, imagined—which speaks no less directly to the reader but which sustains Blake's depiction of the frightful living conditions he witnessed daily in late eighteenth century London. By giving voice to these unspoken, silent voices that haunt the margins of his poems, and complementing them with the voices of his other characters, Blake hoped to create a more sympathetic and humane vision of life by showing his fellow citizens how they might transcend many of the evils that plagued their daily existence.

Of the twenty-three lyrics which comprise *Songs of Innocence*, the voice of a narrator (and presumably Blake is speaking here in his own voice) is predominate in all but five poems. A surprisingly small number of poems, then, is given over wholly to voices other than the narrator's, but of these voices only three are the voices of children: the chimney sweep, the little black boy and a schoolboy, while two other poems record the voices of adults, including a mother who sings a lullaby over her sleeping infant and a nurse who supervises children at play in a meadow.

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In a small number of other *Songs of Innocence* the voices consist either of a dialogue or conversation between the narrator and some other character (as in “Infant Joy,” for instance) or poems where the voice is shared, as in “The Little Boy Lost,” where we overhear a child expressing fears of abandonment while the narrator's own voice ends the poem with a descriptive commentary of his own.

From one perspective the most complex of these voices is that of the narrator himself. It is important to keep in mind that Blake wrote the *Songs of Innocence* over a five year period from roughly 1784 to 1789, when they were initially etched by Blake, although it would be another five years until these early lyrics were joined by their counterparts, the *Songs of Experience*, which Blake then bound together into a single volume of poems in 1794. Both the composition and the publication dates are important because the way Blake looked upon himself as a poet changed considerable over the intervening years and, consequently, the voice of the narrator in the individual songs differs in some remarkable ways. We need only look at the introductory poem in the *Songs of Innocence* (written in 1789) and contrast it with “The Voice of the Bard” which Blake placed at the end of the *Songs of Innocence*, or to the introductory poem in *Songs of Experience*, to get some sense of Blake's evolving view of his role as a poet. In the earliest of these three poems, Blake simply describes himself as a “piper” (111) or songster, a mere entertainer of youth whose stories and happy songs are the delight of children. In the two later poems, however, Blake refers to himself as a bard, whose voice calls out to the “youth of delight, come hither,” inviting them to “see the . . . /Image of truth new born” (126). And by the time he shares his *Songs of Experience* with readers, the voice of the bard becomes truly prophetic: he now “Present, Past, and Future sees” (210).¹

The critic Martin Nurmi cites “reliable contemporary evidence that Blake actually sang the earliest versions of these poems,” though he notes that “Blake's melodies have not survived” (36). That Blake himself should refer to his poems as *Songs of Innocence and Experience* probably underscores his earliest appreciation of their value to entertain his originally conceived audience which very well may have been limited to youthful readers. Only later, as he began to think of himself as a bard, comparing himself even to the Biblical prophets of the Old Testament, did Blake broaden his vision to entail what can only be described as a scathing indictment of contemporary evils that very much appealed to adult readers.

Something similar to the same narrative sequence characterizes the poems of *Songs of Experience*, though here Blake seems less likely to speak in his own voice—which seems ironic since he now looks upon himself as a bard or Biblical-like prophet who has “walked among the ancient trees,” whose “ears have heard/The Holy Word” and whose own prophetic words are a “Call to the lapsed Soul” (210). Now, instead of seeing himself as a mere piper inventing songs and stories to amuse children, his poems take on a redemptive, indeed almost a messianic purpose, as he pleads with his readers to “turn away no more,” asking them plaintively, “Why wilt thou turn away?” (210). The question Blake raises here in the introductory poem of *Songs of Experience* is an important one, for it indicates not only his changed perception of himself as poet-prophet, but his increasing frustration with that role in a world that often—and typically—ignores and even persecutes its moral reformers. We get an even clearer indication of this aspect of Blake's isolation as a moral reformer in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, composed about this same time between 1790-1793.

Of the twenty-two poems that comprise *Songs of Experience*, Blake's own voice can be heard as narrator in at least thirteen instances. Among the remaining poems, in “A Poison Tree,” the speaker seems to be a person other than the poet whose falling-out with a friend has led to drastically different results than his anger with an enemy. And in “A Little Boy Lost,” Blake shares his role as narrator with the little boy himself and the priest who condemns him.

The final seven poems express voices different from the poet's own, ranging from a chimney sweeper, a nurse, and an infant (all obvious counterparts to poems included in the earlier *Songs of Innocence*), a little vagabond (another of the children Blake may have seen aimlessly wandering the streets of London), and the unusual dialogue between the clod and the pebble.

Obviously, then, Blake's treatment of voice throughout his *Songs* is complicated in ways that go beyond the mere use of different speakers. Nor is it always easy to determine who is actually speaking certain contexts within individual poems, because Blake's punctuation is at times inconsistent between poems and does not always set apart spoken text with the appropriate identifying quotation marks. Such inconsistency and confusion has led even the best of critics to disagree about Blake's intent in some of his most famous lyrics. "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence* is a case in point. The poem begins, obviously, with the words of a chimney sweep who is so young that he cannot even properly pronounce the word "sweep" (117). Blake's play on the word "weep" is a somewhat subtle, if not actually clever, use of social criticism to make his point about the sad plight of such children whose cries could be heard throughout London's crowded streets at all hours of the day. When the chimney sweep describes little Tommy Dacre's dream in stanzas three through five, however, there are no punctuation marks identifying the end of his recitation, which has led some scholars to speculate that the words of the final stanza are actually Blake's own. In *The Piper and the Bard*, Robert Gleckner "cannot see Tom as the speaker [of these lines], as so many [other] critics seem to do," while at the same time Gleckner insists that "he can see Blake as the speaker under the guise of [his role as] the piper of the *Songs of Innocence* (110). Hence, Gleckner explains away "the last line of the poem, which causes so much embarrassment to Blake's enthusiasts" by shifting the voice from the chimney sweep to an authorial intrusion by the poet himself.

My own reading of this poem differs from Gleckner's if only because Blake signals—clearly enough for me—that the chimney sweep is continuing his story about little Tommy Dacre's dream into the following morning when, he exclaims, "we rose in the dark/And got with our bags and brushes to work." (118). It seems to me that the plural pronoun "we" here embraces Tommy and his fellow chimney sweeps, without having the need, as Gleckner insists, to attribute the poem's final affirmation to Blake himself: "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" (118), an affirmation that Gleckner accepts—wrongly, it seems to me—as the affirmation of piper of the introductory poem in the *Songs of Innocence* who "simply states a Blakean truism" (110).

To the contrary, Blake was well aware of the controversy surrounding the treatment of London's chimney sweeps and the dangers these children faced when they were sent out on their daily rounds. Even the London authorities seemed willing to acknowledge the sad plight of children sold or apprenticed to a master sweep often at the age of six years old or less.² From Blake's perspective, the reforms recommended by London's city council regulating the conditions under which the sweeps worked clearly did not go far enough to protect these exploited children whose situation commonly led to a future with twisted limbs, damaged eyesight, testicular cancer and, not uncommonly, even death from asphyxiation when sweeps were forced to clean out chimney flues with the remains of coal embers still giving off carbon monoxide fumes (Nurmi 61).

Blake was not concerned with merely reforming the conditions under which the sweeps worked; he wanted the abuse of these children put to an end. When Tommy Dacre awakens from his dream at the end of Blake's poem, it is to the nightmare world of child abuse so commonplace in late eighteenth century London that most of Blake's contemporaries refused to acknowledge it or even see it. And if little Tommy Dacre and his fellow sweeps are comforted by doing their duty without fearing any harm coming to them, Blake surely knew the dangers that these children faced. His voice is a call not for reform but for the elimination of the evil he clearly perceives a part of the daily life of London's chimney sweeps—an evil which, because of their innocence, the sweeps themselves cannot comprehend.

In my introductory remarks I suggested that in several of Blake's poems, it is the unspoken, silent voice that catches one's attention. These lapses of the spoken word are typically surrounded by a context that suggests its own narrative framework which, I'd like to believe, Blake assumed his readers would be able to infer by relying on their own imagination to supply the missing details. "A Little Girl Lost" in *Songs of Experience* is among the several poems where Blake uses this technique to his advantage. The poem opens with a statement uttered by Blake in his prophetic voice, as he addresses "Children of the Future Age" who may be "reading this indignant page" to "know that in a former time/Love, sweet Love, was thought a crime" (219). The poem is a fairly straightforward depiction of adolescent, sexual awakening which Blake enthusiastically celebrates as the young lovers, free now "from winter's cold," take their delight in spring's "sunny beams" (219). Following four stanzas which depict the youthful lovers "playing on the grass" until they become "tired with kisses sweet," the youthful maiden eventually is confronted in the poem's final two stanzas by an angry father who, clutching "the holy book," demands an explanation for his daughter's behavior (219). "Pale and weak," "trembling with fear" (219), the adolescent girl stands mute before her parent, unable to give voice to the emotions she has experienced or to justify and explain her sexual awakening. Although we can well imagine what must have gone through the young girl's mind, she stands mute before her father, unwilling because of her embarrassment to speak to her father about something as intimate and personal as sex. Her silence here is Blake's way of indicating that no explanation is necessary, despite her humiliating encounter with an overzealous parent.³

Perhaps a more compelling example of the silent voice in Blake's poems occurs in "The Little Black Boy," who apparently has come to his mother for the first time to voice a perception about himself that the parent of any child would dread to hear. His is the voice of innocence, but of a type of innocence that suggests one of the boy's first encounters with the evils of racism that are shortly to become a part of his everyday world. The opening two stanzas of Blake's Song tells the story of a young black child who, for the first time in his life, has become aware of the fact that he is looked upon differently from the English child because of the color of his skin. "I am black," he tells his mother, "is if bereav'd of light" (125). As shocking as this self-perception seems, since it defines the little black boy as bereft of intelligence when compared to his white playmates, it is the boy's opening comment, "My mother bore me in the southern wild" (125), that implies a story about his origins, the significance of which he still does not realize or understand—if only because it relates to the mother's attempt to prepare him for a life of racial taunts that from her own experience she knows will soon enough become a part of her son's lot in life.

For Blake, the state of innocence which characterizes childhood involves the child's inability to perceive evil as it exists in the world—a condition that parents even today acknowledge whenever they admonish their children not to take candy from strangers. Children today cannot understand a world of childhood predators, pedophiles, or kidnappers, just as the little black boy of Blake's time could not grasp the prejudice of racism that already has begun to shape how he thinks about himself. For his mother, racism is a reality she not only grasps (based upon her own experience) but she accepts such treatment of blacks as inevitable. In order to prepare her child for the evil he will encounter, therefore, she tells him the story of his origin "in the southern wilds" of Africa, hoping to instill not only a sense of his difference from the English child, but a feeling of racial pride as well.

It is a story the mother has told, we imagine, on countless occasions. Taking her child on her lap, kissing and caressing him, she told her son the story of his origins in words that reveal the mother's profoundly religious outlook on life—an attitude that she hopes to pass on to her son, so that he too "may learn to bear the beams of love" [125] (and surely Blake is being ironic here, because what she is preparing her son to endure, in reality, is a lifetime of racist taunts, which, if he succeeds, will earn him a reward from his heavenly father after he has completed life's sad journey), and in the afterlife the little black boy "will be like" the white English child, "and he will then love me" (125).

For Blake such delayed reward—even if divinely sanctioned—was simply unacceptable. Like the chimney sweep who does not understand the irony of his own words about duty, the little black boy too fails to realize that the evil of racism can be overcome here and now simply by learning to “accept the beams of love” in this world, a message that Blake aims not at the child but at his white adult readers who, by simply rethinking how they look upon people whose skin color may differ from their own, could eliminate racism from their midst. The little black boy—from his perception of the world in a state of innocence—doesn't grasp this fundamental fact, and so he awaits a time when earthly wrongs will be redressed by a merciful God in a heavenly kingdom that awaits all mankind after our lives on earth have run their course.

What is so poignant about the mother's story is the love and concern she showers on her son—implicit in the unheard story about the little black boy's origins in the southern wilds of Africa. We never hear her voice as she tells her son this story, but she knows a terrible truth: that she lives in a racist society, that her son will suffer from the same prejudice that has marred her own life, and that, tragically, she accepts such racism as an inevitable part of life in eighteenth century England. She has become blinded by her own experience and, ironically, passes on to her son an acceptance of a society tinged throughout with racism that she cannot imagine escaping except in a vision of some heavenly afterlife. Blake was unwilling to wait that long for redress of such evils, however, and his poem, through the unspoken words of the mother's story to her child, establishes a context for the reader to imagine an alternative reality much more to Blake's liking: a world where one doesn't have to wait until life is over to free itself from the evils of racism.

The way in which the little black boy's mother perceives and understands the world, and especially in her acceptance of the fact that racism is an inevitable and unchanging aspect of life in contemporary London, reflects perhaps more forcefully than any other context in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake's own insistence that it is “the mind-forged manacles” that rob mankind of its birthright. “London,” whose “chartered streets” echo with the cries of infants, chimney sweeps, and hapless soldiers, replicates in every face Blake encounters “marks of weakness, marks of woe” (216). But of all the suffering Blake witnessed, the outcries that are most disturbing to him are the youthful prostitutes whose curses “blast the new born Infant's tear” (216). Yet the voice in the poem throughout remains Blake's own; we do not actually hear the spoken words of the chimney sweep, or the hapless soldier whose “sigh/Runs in blood down Palace walls,” or the words with which the youthful harlot “blasts the new born Infant's tear” (216). It is as if Blake were saying that their suffering is so immense that putting it into words could never do justice to the pain they are made to endure by institutions that turn a blind eye to their plight, including the Church and the Government, both of which impose mind-forged manacles on its citizenry, making it impossible for them even to voice their outrage. If their voices are not heard directly in Blake's poem, it is because their inarticulate cries alone are heard by the poet, whose own outraged voice will express their suffering in order to awaken a sympathetic response to their plight from among his readers.

Moreover, the three principal figures in the poem—the chimney sweep, the hapless soldier, and the youthful prostitute—were so commonplace that they became virtually invisible to Blake's contemporaries as they blended into the urban landscape of London's maze of chartered streets. Although it is difficult to project actual numbers, Peter Ackroyd estimates that there were around eighty thousand prostitutes plying their trade in London at the time of Blake's death (370). Of these, “it was said that eight thousand prostitutes would die each year in London's hospitals,” and what is even more remarkable given Blake's allusion to the youthful harlot, “2,700 cases of syphilis were diagnosed each year in children from eleven to sixteen years of age” (373). When Blake refers to “the youthful harlot's curse” then, he is not referring to the words she cries in her despair, but rather the curse she must bear knowing that her child has been born infected with syphilis.

Like the harlot's curse, the sigh that runs in blood down palace walls expresses the plight of the hapless soldier who, having returned to England wounded and maimed in the aftermath of his country's War with America, received no succor of financial support for sustaining injuries that have made it impossible for him to support himself or his family. Abandoned by their government, such soldiers were reduced to begging on the streets of London, a scene no doubt Blake witnessed anytime he ventured outside his own shop.⁴

The callousness of government toward its soldiers is echoed in the response of the Church which, though it may be appalled by the plight of London's chimney sweeps, does nothing practical to alleviate their suffering. Like the Palace turning a blind eye to wounded soldiers, the Church absolves itself of any responsibility for the chimney sweeps even as its own buildings are blackened with soot. Blake seems to be saying here, as he earlier had claimed in "The Little Black Boy," that "without a Church which sustains social injustice by promises of heaven" (Hirsch 94), such deplorable conditions would not be allowed to exist.

Ironically, however, the most significant of the silent voices in this poem belongs not to the chimney sweep, the hapless soldier, or even the youthful harlot, but to the young wife whose husband's pre-marital sexual infidelity "blights with plagues the Marriage hearse" (216). Blake evokes the image of the marriage carriage—a familiar scene, it must be imagined, outside many London churches as happy couples marked their wedding day, escorted by horse and carriage to the celebratory breakfast feast at a London inn, only to have the spread of deadly venereal disease eventually infect the unsuspecting wife.

It is these silent, untold stories—unspoken but implied—that haunt the pages of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and whose outpouring of grief is unheard, or simply ignored, by London authorities. Perhaps that is why Blake was satisfied in at least some of his poems to force readers to listen to the unspoken voice, the voice of London's disenfranchised, a voice that ultimately Blake hoped would appeal to the conscience of a nation, even if ignored by Church, Parliament, and King.

Notes

¹ C. M. Bowra (*The Romantic Imagination*, London: Oxford UP, 1969) makes a point of emphasizing the shift in Blake's attitude that takes place during the five year interval between the composition of the *Songs of Innocence* and the later *Songs of Experience*. The earlier poems, he notes, "are the words of a poet who sings because he must, not of a prophet whose first wish is to summon his generation to a new life" (27). In contrast, "in his later prophecies," Bowra contends, "Blake had a great message for his generation, an urgent call to awaken from its slothful sleep, a summons to activity and to that fuller life which comes from exerting the imagination" (26). Likewise, J. R. Hirsch (*Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to William Blake*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964) cites "The Ancient Bard" as signaling "Blake's expanding conception of his prophetic vocation in lyric poetry" (27), noting that this poem, in particular, "is so fundamentally different from those [other] poems in the canon of innocence that something [must have] occurred in his attitude toward the actual world which made him confident that the 'opening morn' was at hand" (49). All references from Blake's poems, cited parenthetically by page number, are taken from *Blake: Complete Writings*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971).

² The exact age of the chimney sweeps in Blake's poem may be open to interpretation, though clearly the speaker is older than little Tommy Dacre. Peter Ackroyd (*London: The Biography*, New York: Doubleday, 2000) notes that typically chimney sweeps "were attached to their masters at the age of seven or eight, although it was also common for drunken or impoverished parents to sell children as young as four years old for twenty or thirty shillings. Small size was important because the flues of London's houses were characteristically narrow and twisted" (637-38).

³ Having achieved self-identification and self-realization, [the little lost girl] must rely on herself to perform a self-less act, the greatest one being the surrender of self openly in sexual intercourse” (104-05), according to Robert Gleckner (*The Piper and the Bard*, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1959). “The girl must pursue her love affair, not clandestinely but openly, and must cut the paternal cord if she is to be free” (105). For Gleckner, “the girl is lost at the hands of her father” (104), and only by defying his authority can she fully realize her self-hood. Since she remains mute, not defiant, in the face of her father's admonition, Blake may have intended to show that such self-realization and freedom have not yet been achieved in her case, which, of course, could also be said of Blake's chimney sweeps and the little black boy, who mentally still perceive the world from a state of innocence.

⁴ The physical condition of the soldiers Blake has in mind is an open question. David Erdman (*Blake: Prophet against Empire*, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969) speculates that they may represent “the mass desertion of England's fighting men,” which he claims was a matter of record, “especially at the end of the Revolutionary War” (60), a point, he argues, “not taken into account by those who interpret 'the sigh that runs in blood down Palace walls' as the soldier's own” (278). “Blake would have known that curses were often chalked or painted on the Royal Walls,” one contemporary example of such graffiti reading, “No coach tax, Damn Pitt, Damn the Duke of Richmond, No King!” (278).

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