

Blake's Juxtapositional Prosodic Method in "Holy Thursday" (*Innocence*)

BY FRANCESCA CAUCHI

FRANCESCA CAUCHI is an associate professor at National Sun Yat-sen University. Her research interests include Romanticism, Nietzsche, and modern European drama.

Damn. braces: Bless relaxes.

(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

1 **A**T first glance, Blake's "Holy Thursday" (*Songs of Innocence*) depicts the heartwarming scene of brightly clad charity-school children parading toward St. Paul's Cathedral to join the congregation in hymn and prayer.¹ On closer inspection, however, the poem's metrical variation, barbed similes, and juxtapositional prosodic method jointly execute a subtle indictment of the "cold and usurous hand" ("Holy Thursday," *Experience*) of institutionalized charity. Such an indictment is further illuminated by viewing the *Innocence* poem retrospectively through the lens of its identically titled counterpart in *Songs of Experience* and prospectively through the lens of *An Island in the Moon*, Blake's unpublished prose satire or burlesque.

2 Written in the mid-1780s, *An Island in the Moon* contains the first drafts of three poems that would appear a few years later in *Songs of Innocence* (1789)—namely, "Holy Thursday," "Nurse's Song," and "The Little Boy Lost." The ironic subtext of the first is signaled to the reader of the satire by the name of the character who delivers the song: Obtuse

1. For the critic Stanley Gardner, "[Blake] knew the children's feelings as they filled the cathedral with excited murmurings. He knew that ... the workhouse children in the King Street school had been granted a special self-respect" (*The Tyger, the Lamb, and the Terrible Desert* [London: Cygnus Arts; Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998] 63, cited in David Fairer, "Experience Reading Innocence: Contextualizing Blake's 'Holy Thursday,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35.4 [2002]: 535-62, on 538). Similarly, for W. H. Stevenson, the poem suggests that Blake was as moved as Joseph Haydn (their "eyes began to fill") by the singing of the children ("The Sound of 'Holy Thursday,'" *Blake* 36.4 [spring 2003]: 137-140, on 140).

Angle, a caricature of the "amiable pedant"² who is wont to display the minutiae of his knowledge but, in his obtuseness, "always understood better when he shut his eyes."³ Thus it is that in his "Holy Thursday" rendition he sees only the pious annual spectacle of charity-school children "rais[ing] to heavn the voice of song" (E 463) and not the flogging and severe undernourishment to which they were routinely subjected.⁴ Similarly, in his earlier verse panegyric to Richard Sutton, the founder of the Charterhouse pensioners' home and charity school for boys, Obtuse Angle is so awed by Sutton's installation of "sinks & gutters ... / ... / To hinder pestilence" that he remains blind to the institutionalized "pestilence" metastasizing within the penned confines of the school's "walls of brick & stone" (E 461).

3 As David Fairer astutely observes at the start of his illuminating essay on the historical context of "Holy Thursday" (*Innocence*), "Blake's texts lose their innocence more easily than most" (535). Drawing on an array of archival records from the period, including charity-school rule-books and reforms, ordinances, sermons, and hymns publicly performed by the children, Fairer builds a compelling argument on the extent to which eighteenth-century charity children were caught up in a system that not only controlled, regulated, and exhibited them, but groomed them for a life of drudgery.⁵ The control and regulation, I shall argue, are reenacted in "Holy Thursday" (*Innocence*) through the poem's juxtapositional verse structure, whereby the first half of a line, connoting discipline and restraint, is antithetically linked to the second half, figuring the innocent children. More specifically, this antithetical dynamic is reinforced through the poem's metrical shifts and barbed similes—the foci of the ensuing analysis.

4 To offset the granular nature of my argument, I shall begin by highlighting the poem's intralinear juxtapositions (itali-

2. See David V. Erdman, *Blake, Prophet against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 119.

3. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1988) [hereafter E] 450.

4. Erdman notes that "concern over charity-school abuses rose early in the 1780s" and in the same footnote references Jones's oft-cited account of the appalling treatment of the children in some of the schools, especially the boarding schools, where masters and mistresses "lined their pockets with money saved from the children's rations" (see M. G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth Century Puritanism in Action* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938] 103, cited in Erdman, *Prophet* 122-23n23).

5. Fairer (543) cites the Bishop of Norwich's 1755 address to the Charity Schools Anniversary Meeting in which he asserts that "there must be drudges of labour These poor children are born to be daily labourers, for the most part to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows."



"Holy Thursday," *Songs of Innocence* copy U (printed 1789). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Typ 6500.34u. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

cized below), and then proceed sequentially by stanza. Since the metrical shifts and similes are presented in this article as exemplifications of the poem's juxtapositional framework, the latter, when not explicitly stated, is implicit in my readings of the former.

Twas on a *Holy Thursday* their *innocent faces clean*
The children walking two & two in red & blue & green
Grey headed beadles walkd before with *wands as white as snow*
Till into the *high dome of Pauls* they like *Thames waters flow*

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

Now like a *mighty wind* they raise to heaven the *voice of song*
Or like *harmonious thunderings* the seats of heaven among
Beneath them sit the aged men wise guardians of the poor
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door
(E 13)

- 5 The poem's iambic heptameter is interrupted twice in the first stanza: once in the first line and again in the third. In the former, "Twas **on** / a **Ho** / ly **Thurs** / day their **in** / nocent **fa** / ces **clean**" (stresses marked in bold), the two anapests in the second half of the line, caught between an ostensibly "holy" day of obligation⁶ and obligatory clean faces, set into relief the uniformed children's iambic lock-step procession in the second line, "The **chil** / dren **wal** / king **two** / & **two** / in **red** / & **blue** / & **green**." Note, too, the tautological incongruity of "innocent" faces having been scrubbed "clean"—not for God, it would seem, given the poem's subsequent depiction of the children as inherently radiant and as "lambs" and "angel[s]," but for public consumption.⁷ The implied censure in the word "clean" also calls into question the timeworn proverb "Cleanliness is next to godliness," immortalized by Blake's contemporary

6. As Clare Simmons reminds us, the titular Holy Thursday of Blake's *Innocence* and *Experience* poems "is not functioning as a date in the Christian calendar, but ... serves as an ironic reminder that an annual event held on a Thursday merely for the convenience of St. Paul's and its patrons is now a substitute for true holiness and humility toward the poor that Christ showed by example on the Thursday before his death" ("Blake's 'Holy Thursday' and 'The Martyrdom of St. Paul's,'" *Blake* 53.3 [winter 2019–20]: par. 24).

7. The lamb epithet clearly suggests Lamb of God, echoing lines from another *Innocence* poem: "Little Lamb who made thee / ... / Little Lamb I'll tell thee, / ... / He is meek & he is mild, / He became a little child: / I a child & thou a lamb, / We are called by his name" (E 9).

John Wesley, who cited it in support of his rather dubious claim that "slovenliness is no part of religion."⁸

- 6 The second metrical shift in the first stanza is the spondee that opens the third line, "**Grey head** / ed **bea** / dles **walkd** / before / with **wands** / as **white** / as **snow**." Taken in conjunction with the reiterated dental plosive ("d") in "headed" and "beadles," the spondaic foot accentuates the oppressive nature of a hoary, hidebound authority, metonymically figured in the beadles' ceremonial staves and hinted at in the simile "wands as white as snow." The simile itself evokes a cluster of associations: the snow-cold hands of the grey-haired beadles wielding their disciplinary rods; the contrast between a ceremonial staff of office and the Lord's metonymical shepherd's staff—the first emblemizing discipline and authority, the second love and nurture; and lastly, Isaiah 1:17–18, "Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (KJV). According to Elliott's *Commentary*,⁹ the phrases "relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless" are principally addressed to men in office "to restrain the wrong-doing of the men of their own order ... [and to] be true to their calling." Correspondingly, while the invitation to "reason together" in the Authorized Version of the Bible "suggests the thought of a discussion between equals[,] the Hebrew implies rather the tone of one who gives an authoritative *ultimatum*, as from a judge to the accused, who had no defence, or only a sham defence, to offer (Micah vi. 2, 3)"—an ultimatum, perhaps, not dissimilar to the one given by Blake in the last line of the poem.

- 7 Another simile rich in associations is in the last line of the first stanza, "Till into the high dome of Pauls they like Thames waters flow." Mirroring the earlier juxtaposition of "Holy Thursday" and "innocent faces clean," the image of charity-school children streaming into St. Paul's "like Thames waters" suggests on the one hand the moral uncleanliness of coercing children into an orchestrated public display of well-invested charity¹⁰ and on the other the stark

8. "Sermon XCIII—On Dress," in John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, vol. 2 (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855) 259. Michael Farrell has argued that notwithstanding the evangelical commonalities between Blake and Wesley, the former's attitude to the latter was "complex and problematic," not least because of what Blake would have viewed as Wesley's authoritarianism (*Blake and the Methodists* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014] 67).

9. Charles John Elliott, ed., *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers by Various Writers*, vol. 4 (London: Cassell & Company, 1884) 419.

10. Fairer notes how "inside the cathedral [the children's] massed ranks on specially erected scaffolds made an impressive statement about the organization of national charity, the grandeur of its benev-

contrast between the staggering number of London's poor and the sheer volume of mercantile profit flowing into the River Thames, a synecdoche for Britannia's imperial wealth via the East India Company. As Blake rhetorically asks in "Holy Thursday" (*Experience*):

Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand? (E 19)

Just as the East India Company capitalized on its exploitation and monopolization of trade with Britain's colonies in India and Southeast Asia, so the charity schools capitalized on the annual spectacle of serried ranks of colorfully dressed charity children as an effective method of loosening the purse strings of the well-heeled cathedral congregation.¹¹

- 8 A more positive association invited by the Thames water simile is brought out by the plate's illumination. Unlike any of the other poems in either *Innocence* or *Experience*, "Holy Thursday" contains wavy strokes of varying lengths between each line. In marked contrast to the density of the text—the heptameter lines, crammed cheek by jowl and extending the full width of the copperplate, give the impression of being compressed between the comparatively commodious space allocated to anodyne illustrations of a beadle-led row of boys above and girls below—the interlineal wavy lines evoke an image of unencumbered fluidity. A possible interpretation of this distinctive "underlining" is that in spite of the regimented conformity imposed upon the children, satirically masked by the publicity-type images of leisurely parading boys and girls, the "pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Revelation 22:1) flows unimpeded within these multitudinous lambs.
- 9 The metrical variation in the second stanza, which occurs in the second and last lines, performs the same antithetical

olence" (536). See also Sarah Lloyd: "Charities ... took shape within eighteenth-century consumer culture. They exchanged spectacle for money Midcentury, charities advertised alongside quacks, publishers, and auctioneers" ("Pleasing Spectacles and Elegant Dinners: Conviviality, Benevolence, and Charity Anniversaries in Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 41.1 [2002]: 23-57, on 27). 11. See Fairer 557. It is also worth noting that "the East India Company, the South Sea Company and the Bank of England were the three most popular investment opportunities offered to the eighteenth century public. Investors varied in social status, being predominantly merchants and landowners, but also included members of the clergy" (Giada Pizzoni, "The English Catholic Church and the Age of Mercantilism: Bishop Richard Challoner and the South Sea Company," *Journal of Early Modern History* 24 [2020]: 111-35, on 115).

function as that in the first stanza. In the second line, "Seated / in com / panies / they sit / with ra / diance all / their own," the opening trochee ("Seated"), reinforced by the repetition in the third iambic foot ("they sit"), militates against the children's radiance. In other words, the battalion-like "companies" of charity children on the left-hand side of the line are juxtaposed to the angelic-like host on the right—a positioning that recalls Christ's seat at the right hand of God (1 Peter 3:22; Acts 7:55-56). In the last line, "Thousands / of lit / tle boys / & girls / raising / their in / nocent hands," the stanza's second metrical shift is effected through Blake's deployment of two trochaic feet ("Thousands" and "raising"), demarcating the two halves of the line, and a closing anapest ("nocent hands") that produces the poem's sole hypermetrical line. In sum, the metrical shifts in the second stanza impress upon the reader the incongruity of a veritable army—hence the anomalous hypermetrical line and the stanza's thrice-reiterated "multitude"—of little Christian foot soldiers raising "innocent hands" that would be better employed in play.

- 10 In the third and final stanza, the poem's antithetical dynamic is condensed into the second line's oxymoronic collocation "harmonious thunderings" ("Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among"), which simultaneously reverses the hierarchical order between the beadles and the children¹² and encapsulates the stanza's eschatological warning. The reversal inheres in the references to placement and the two similes "like a mighty wind" and "like harmonious thunderings": the seated ranks of uniformed children in the first stanza are now being critically observed from the "seats of heaven" above; the "mighty wind" of "thousands of little boys & girls" singing psalms and hymns in (arduously rehearsed?)¹³ unison is likened to a thunderous aural assault upon the celestial realm; the beadles who in the first stanza had "walkd before" their charges are now seated "beneath" the cherubic children in accordance with the synoptic Gospels: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:16); and the ironic epithet "wise guardians" is a warning to the old beadles to exercise less of the guard and more of the guardian angel lest they find themselves driven from the "door" of heaven—the door, moreover, that is eternally open to the "little children."

12. As the Reverend Thomas Bisse was at pains to point out at the opening of a charity school in Birmingham in 1725, the purpose of the charity school was "not to change the subordination of mankind," but to keep "the lowest order of mankind, viz. the poor, in its proper situation" (cited in Fairer 543).

13. In the first draft of the poem in *An Island in the Moon*, Blake deletes the last line of the second stanza, "And all in order sit waiting the chief chanters commands" and replaces it with "Thousands of little girls & boys raising their innocent hands" (E 850).

- 11 In short, Blake's juxtapositional prosodic method in "Holy Thursday" (*Innocence*), together with the juxtapositional relation between the poem and its earlier draft in *An Island in the Moon* and later counterpart in *Experience*, brings sharply into focus the tension between institutionalized charity and the well-being of the young charges.