Blake’s “Introduction” and Hesiod’s Theogony

By Kurt Fosso

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Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read . . .
(“Introduction” to Songs of Innocence, E 7)'

ORTHROP Frye was, so far as I can find, the first critic to shine a light on the Greek poet Hesiod’s influence upon William Blake. Specifically, Frye judged the divine characters Tharmas and Enion from The Four Zoas (c. 1796) to be “probably the Thaumas and Eione of Hesiod’s Theogony.”

Kathleen Raine, following upon Frye, in turn detected the Theogony’s presence in Blake’s The Book of Urizen (1794), and recently Paul Miner has uncovered significant Hesiodic allusions in The Book of Ahania (1795). The Theogony’s influence can similarly be traced in the divine struggles described in the continental prophecies America and Europe (1793, 1794).

Blake would likely have read Hesiod’s eighth-century genealogy of the gods in Thomas Cooke’s English translation (1728), the first, and have found there a useful source not only for the names and attributes of those Greek deities

1. All quotations from Blake’s Songs of Innocence and other works are from The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor–Random House, 1988), abbreviated as “E”. My reading of the “Introduction” to Songs of Innocence has also benefited from consulting the William Blake Archive’s reproductions of the copy B and U plates (1789).


but also for conceptualizing their generational struggles. Joseph Wittreich, Jr., argues that the "Theogony" in fact "provides the best introduction to the large design of Blake's own mythology." "To read Hesiod alongside Blake is indeed to witness the resemblances between their theogonies of differentiation, desire, patriarchy, and revolt," with Blake's Orc cycle of "regicide and revolution" distinctly mirroring the "Theogony's" lineage of repression and revenge between Uranos and his son Kronos and then between Kronos and Zeus. "Urizen," the punning name of Blake's tyrannical creator god, aptly recoins the appellation of Hesiod's Uranos as well as the similar-sounding ourizein (Greek "to bound") and perhaps even offers up a patrilineal portmanteau of Uranos and Zeus.

3 Yet, although critics have exposed Hesiod's impact upon Blake's prophetic works of the early to mid-1790s, no one to my knowledge has noted the "Theogony's" influence several years prior, particularly in the "Introduction" to Songs of Innocence (1789), with its figure of the muse-struck "piping" poet (line 1). This overlooked intertextual link has led to numerous misappraisals of that introductory poem's pastoralism and depiction of poetic investiture, and contributed to a long-standing tendency to give this first of the Songs relatively short shrift in favor of the later, more explicitly prophetic and mythic premon to the Songs of Experience from Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794). The evidence within the "Introduction" to Songs of Innocence in fact strongly suggests Hesiod's (likely recent) influence upon Blake in or before the revolutionary year of 1789.

4 Before composing the Songs' leadoff poem and quasi-epic, Blake may have paused over Cooke's translation of these lines from the "Theogony's" prooimion, describing Hesiod's poetic ordination by the Muses of Mount Helicon:

   So spoke the maids of Jove, the sacred nine,  
   And pluck'd a scepter from the tree divine,  
   To me the branch they gave, with look serene,  
   The laurel ensign, never fading green:  
   I took the gift with holy raptures fir'd,  
   My words flow sweeter, and my soul's inspir'd ... (47-52)  

In words that may resonate in the introductory poem of Songs of Experience, whose bard the "Present, Past, & Future sees" (line 2, E 18), Hesiod proceeds to relate how, upon his investiture,

   Before my eyes appears the various scene  
   Of all that is to come, and what has been.  
   Me have the Muses chose, their bard to grace,  
   To celebrate the bless'd immortal race;  
   To them the honours of my verse belong;  
   To them I first and last devote the song:  
   But where, O where, inchant'd do I rove,  
   Or o'er the rocks, or thro' the vocal grove! (53-60)

5 The "Introduction" to Songs of Innocence specifically echoes this narrative of receiving from the immortal Muses a freshly "pluck'd" laurel branch turned "scepter" (Greek skeptron, "staff") and bardic "ensign." Blake also writes of "piping songs" in "valleys wild"—a possible nod both to Hesiod's Boeotian wilds and to the valleys below Heli-con—and of thereupon having been inspired by a divine muse-like presence envisioned as a godlike child atop "a cloud" (lines 1-3). The child first commands him, "Pipe a song about a Lamb," but then bids the pastoralist, who in the Songs' frontispiece stands before a contented flock,
to “drop thy pipe” and sing words to that tune (5, 9-10). Finally, the cloud-child requests the singer to “write” the song “in a book that all may read” (13-14). (Appropriately, one of the Songs is of course entitled “The Lamb.”) As in the Theogony, this introductory scene of divine investiture thereby presents the “story of an inspired origin,” which is to say an etiological account both of the poem itself and of the verse to come.

6 The more obvious allusion to Hesiod’s prooimion follows upon the child’s sudden disappearance:

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. (15-20)

Like Hesiod, Blake’s wandering speaker figures himself as a poet with this “pluck’d” piece of flora, and although there are evident differences (the pipper makes of his reed not a staff but a pen, self-picked rather than bestowed), the ceremonial act likewise invests the pipper with the powers of poetic composition and with the authority to sing. In short, like Hesiod, Blake’s pipper is confronted by a figure of inspiration and transformed into a poet by that experience, gaining a new poetic, pointedly prophetic vocation and the accompanying material insignia of this art.

7 What these various allusions to the Theogony arguably most illuminate is the Songs’ own emphasis upon the divine: being hailed by an inspiring muse to sing of what Hesiod devotedly calls the “bless’d … race.” Suitably, Blake’s child floats aloft angelically, and the commanded song “The Lamb” itself turns upon the theogony of Christ made human child and sacrificial lamb. For all their irony and pathos, other of the Songs—“The Little Black Boy,” “The Chimney Sweeper,” “The Little Boy Found,” “Night,” “A Cradle Song”—similarly point toward the divine and its relationship to the human. So, for example, one adult speaker “trace[s]” the “holy image” in his sleeping child’s face, and recalls that “thy maker” once “wept for me for thee for all, / When he was an infant small. / Thou his image ever see, / Heavenly face that smiles on thee” (“A Cradle Song,” lines 22-28, E 12). Blake’s poet writes songs for children, as divinely hidden, but in doing so he praises “the human form divine” (“The Divine Image,” line 15, E 13). And although his printed book will itself do Hesiod’s itinerant traveling, a muse has authorized its production, and it is to the Muses that Blake’s book of songs implicitly is dedicated, answering the child-muse’s special request of “a book that all may read.”

8 By taking stock of Blake’s allusions to Hesiodic investiture, readers are thus less likely to misjudge the “Introduction” as merely presenting a pipper who “has no duty.” Instead, they find a poet who traverses the world of experience in his divinely ordained vocation of prophetic duty and poetic labor, both of which can and should be distinguished from the pastoral otium of Theocritus, Moschus, and even Virgil. As in the Theogony, the Songs’ muse prompts in the wanderer a newfound talent for singing as well as a prophet’s duty to perform and communicate, to clarify the cosmos of the human-divine: “stain[ing] the water clear” for all who’ll “hear.”

9 When he wrote the Songs of Innocence, Blake might have believed, as he proclaimed some years later, that the ancient Muses were only “daughters of Mnemosyne, or Memory, and not of Inspiration or Imagination” (A Descriptive Catalogue [1809], E 531; see also Milton a Poem [c. 1804-11], pl. 1, E 95). But, as Robert Lambert points out, although Homer and other early Greek poets invoke the Muses solely to recollect the past, the Theogony’s daughters of memory “are more ambitious and in a sense are on the way to be-

15. Gillham 149.
17. See Brown 35. See also Claude Calame, Masks of Authority: Fiction and Pragmatics in Ancient Greek Poetics, trans. Peter M. Burk (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) 92, and Kathryn A. Morgan, Myth and Philosophy from the Pre-Socratics to Plato (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 74: “the inspiring power endows the poet with the ability that he then uses to create songs in his own voice.”
coming the daughters of inspiration Blake invoked to replace them.” Blake's poet-singer, like Hesiod's poet person, sings of and for his muses, and in doing so recounts and affirms his bequeathed aspiration. For his poetic “Inspiration” Blake looked back not only to the Bible's prophets but also to a classical lineage extending directly from Hesiod's *Theogony*. That visionary line leads us to Blake's mythological prophecies of the 1790s and also, to judge from the “Introduction,” to the earlier *Songs of Innocence* and its piper made bard.

20. E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964) thus rightly contends that the piper's “Panlike occupation ... presents a contrast with his serious and dedicated occupation at the [poem's] end,” that “of making poetry out of such inspiration” (173).