

Blake's "Introduction" and
Hesiod's *Theogony*

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Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read . . .
("Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*, E 7)¹



Songs of Innocence copy B (1789), frontispiece. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Image © the William Blake Archive <<http://www.blakearchive.org>>.

1 NORTHROP 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 Thaumias and Eione of Hesiod's *Theogony*."² Kathleen Raine, following upon Frye, in turn detected the *Theogony's* presence in Blake's *The Book of Urizen* (1794),³ and recently Paul Miner has uncovered significant Hesiodic allusions in *The Book of Ahania* (1795).⁴ The *Theogony's* influence can similarly be traced in the divine struggles described in the continental prophecies *America* and *Europe* (1793, 1794).

2 Blake would likely have read Hesiod's eighth-century genealogy of the gods in Thomas Cooke's English translation (1728),⁵ 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 <<http://www.blakearchive.org>> reproductions of the copy B and U plates (1789).

2. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947) 284.

3. Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) 1: 415n28; see also 2: 90.

4. Paul Miner, "The Influence of Hesiod's *Theogony* on Blake's *The Book of Ahania*," *Notes and Queries* 56 (2009): 361-64.

5. Thomas Cooke, trans., *The Works of Hesiod* (1728), 2nd ed. (London: Printed by John Wilson for John Wood and Ch. Woodward, 1740; T. Longman et al., 1743). On Cooke's achievement, see Stuart Gillespie, "Hesiod Goes Augustan: An Early English Translation of the *Theogony*," *Translation and Literature* 17 (2008): 197-209. See also Sir Charles A. Elton's criticisms of Cooke in his *Remains of Hesiod the Ascræan Including "The Shield of Hercules"* (1809), 2nd ed. (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1815) iii-xiv. In addition to Cooke's English rendering, Thomas Robinson's Greek/Latin edition, *Hēsiodou tou Askraiou ta heuriskomena; Hesiodi Ascræi quae supersunt, cum notis variorum* (Oxford, 1737), would also have been available to Blake, but beyond his abilities at the time as a reader in either language. On Blake's later mastering of Greek and Latin, see his letter of 30 January 1803 (E 727).

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.”⁶ To read Hesiod alongside Blake is indeed to witness the resemblances between their theogonies of differentiation, desire, patriarchy, and revolt,⁷ with Blake’s Orc cycle of “regicide and revolution”⁸ 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 proem to the *Songs of Experience* from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794).⁹ 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-exordium, Blake may have paused over Cooke’s translation of

these lines from the *Theogony*’s *prooimion*, describing Hesiod’s poetic ordination¹⁰ 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)¹¹

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, enchanted 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 Helicon—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,

6. Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr., *Angel of Apocalypse: Blake’s Idea of Milton* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975) 246.

7. See Norman O. Brown, trans. and introd., *Hesiod, Theogony* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1953) 15.

8. Frank M. Parisi, “Emblems of Melancholy: *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*,” *Interpreting Blake*, ed. Michael Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 86. See also Julia M. Wright, *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004) 44.

9. See, for example, Maureen McLane, “Ballads and Bards: British Romantic Orality,” *Modern Philology* 98 (2001): 427-32. Other diminished appraisals include Robert F. Gleckner, *The Piper and the Bard* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959) 84; C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961) 27; Harold Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1963) 32; Hazard Adams, *William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963) 16-21; D. G. Gillham, *Blake’s Contrary States: The “Songs of Innocence and of Experience” as Dramatic Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 149; Nick Shrimpton, “Hell’s Hymnbook: Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and Their Models,” *Literature of the Romantic Period, 1750-1850*, ed. R. T. Davies and B. G. Beatty (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976) 19-35; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 4-9; Zachary Leader, *Reading Blake’s “Songs”* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 70; Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake’s “Songs” and Wordsworth’s “Lyrical Ballads”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 65-66; Stanley Gardner, *Blake’s “Innocence” and “Experience” Retraced* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986) 18-19; Andrew Lincoln, ed., *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 143-44; Nicholas M. Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 56-58; and Robert N. Essick, ed., *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2008) 29-32.

10. See Milton, *Paradise Lost* 4.674-78; Theocritus, *Idylls* 1, 7; Callimachus, *Aetia* 1: 1, 2; Virgil, *Eclogues* 1, 4, 6; Petrarch, *Eclogues* 3. Only Hesiod’s original account provides the specific details of investiture and vocation. See also Blake’s engravings for John Flaxman’s *Compositions from the Works Days and Theogony of Hesiod* (c. 1817), including “Theogony” and “Hesiod and the Muses” (*William Blake Archive*, Commercial Book Illustrations, Flaxman, *Compositions*, objects 21 and 22).

11. All quotations from the *Theogony* follow Cooke’s English translation in the 2nd edition (see note 5, above). My readings have also been informed by Hugh G. Evelyn-White’s Greek/English edition, *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homeric* (1914; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), as well as by M. L. West’s translation in “*Theogony*” and “*Works and Days*” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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,”¹² 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 piper makes of his reed not a staff but a pen, self-picked rather than bestowed), the ceremonial act likewise invests the piper with the powers of poetic composition and with the authority to sing. In short, like Hesiod, Blake’s piper is confronted by a figure of inspiration¹³ 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 bidden, 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.”¹⁴

- 8 By taking stock of Blake’s allusions to Hesiodic investiture, readers are thus less likely to misjudge the “Introduction” as merely presenting a piper who “has no duty.”¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ to clarify the cosmos of the human-divine: “stain[ing] the water clear” for all who’ll “hear.”¹⁸
- 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 Lamberton 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-

12. Angela Esterhammer, *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 130.

13. See John H. Jones, *Blake on Language, Power, and Self-Annihilation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 23; the cloud-child functions “as a muse figure, a voice external to the piper’s own that aids in the production of the poem,” the latter thus being “dialogically inspired.” Jones grants the “Introduction” considerable discursive importance, as does Esterhammer (124-32).

14. See W. J. T. Mitchell, “Visible Language: Blake’s Wondrous Art of Writing,” *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 46-86, esp. 55.

15. Gillham 149.

16. See David Wagenknecht, *Blake’s Night: William Blake and the Idea of Pastoral* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1973) 13-14, 69, and Joseph Wicksteed, *Blake’s Innocence and Experience: A Study of the Songs and Manuscripts* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928) 81.

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.”

18. For an early glossing of the “stain” as that of materialization via art, from “Ideal Song” to written book, see Howard Justin, “Blake’s ‘Introduction’ to *Songs of Innocence*,” *Explicator* 11 (1952): item 1. See also William R. Bowden, “Blake’s ‘Introduction’ to *Songs of Innocence*,” *Explicator* 11 (1953): item 41; Glen 65-66; Edward Larrissy, *William Blake* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) 27; Mitchell, “Visible Language” 55-56; Jones 51; and Esterhammer 129-30.

coming the daughters of inspiration Blake invoked to replace them.”¹⁹ Blake’s poet-singer, like Hesiod’s poet persona, sings of and for his muses, and in doing so recounts and affirms his bequeathed aspiration.²⁰ 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.

19. Robert Lamberton, *Hesiod* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 65.

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).