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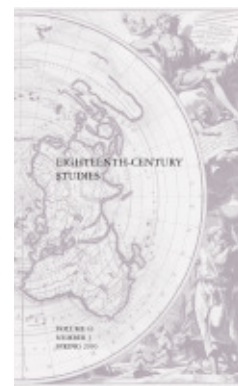
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EXPERIENCE READING INNOCENCE: CONTEXTUALIZING BLAKE'S *HOLY* *THURSDAY*

David Fairer

Blake's texts lose their innocence more easily than most, and like Adam and Eve they do so by knowing Good and Evil, by finding a wider oppositional context in which a truth is split into its dynamic contraries. The Fall of Man in *Paradise Lost* has its equivalent in the critical act: to cross the boundary into illegitimate knowledge, moving out from what is present, fitting and needful, to "things remote / From use, obscure and subtle" (book 8, ll. 191–2) is to risk entering the "wrong" context. By these terms, an innocent text can easily fall, unless the knowledge brought to bear on it is licensed and regulated. A concept like *Songs of Innocence*, therefore, raises in an acute form the critical problem of how text and context interrelate: how far can a text legitimise a context for itself, within which a "valid" reading is produced? Must *Songs of Innocence* be read innocently?

These thoughts occur in response to the late Stanley Gardner's valuable work in researching the contemporary local context of Blake's *Songs*.¹ In *Blake's Innocence and Experience Retraced* (1986) and the development of his findings in *The Tyger, The Lamb, and the Terrible Desert* (1998), Gardner fascinatingly maps out Blake's immediate locality during the 1780s, the people and places, the sights, sounds and smells that the poet would encounter as he walked the streets of his parish of St James's. Gardner reconstructs a specific context for *Songs of Innocence* in the "optimism" of the years 1782–7 when Blake, newly married and living near his brother and soul-mate, Robert, was able to witness at close quarters the "unprecedented undertakings in child care" (*The Tyger* 47) being established by the Governors of the Poor in his own parish. Their concern with nursing

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provision for destitute infants, and their founding in 1782 of the King Street charity school (supplied by the Blake haberdashery business) in place of the workhouse, constituted a humane and well-run experiment in educational charity. It was to last only a short time, but “[f]or some five or six between-war years of peace after Blake was married, his neighbours directed this enlightened undertaking in community care, with an impetus that was genuinely charitable and sustained” (52). For Gardner, *Songs of Innocence*, with its cameos of nurturing, playing and educating, is “a timeless record” (52) of this benign activity. In face of modern cynicism about eighteenth-century charity, argues Gardner, we should remember that the provision in Blake’s parish during the writing of *Songs of Innocence* was exceptionally enlightened. The crucial text, virtually the test case, for Gardner’s positive interpretation of Blakean innocence is “Holy Thursday.”²

The illuminated plate of “Holy Thursday” from *Songs of Innocence* (1789), as all readers know, takes for its subject the service in St Paul’s Cathedral, London, which annually brought together the six thousand children of the capital’s charity schools (Fig. 1). From each parish they processed through the streets in pairs, dressed in their charity coats of a distinctive colour, and wearing their charity badges. Inside the cathedral their massed ranks on specially erected scaffolds made an impressive statement about the organization of national charity, the grandeur of its benevolence. The children were there both to be seen and to give voice:

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

What is particularly striking about Gardner’s reading of the plate (both the verbal and visual text) is how neatly his descriptive critical mode fits his documentary method. For him “Holy Thursday” is a “record” of an actual event: the children stroll and smile and wave; they have emotions of anticipation, holiday excitement, even a little pride and gratitude; in which the grown-ups share. His reading treats the scene almost photographically, filling out the detail with the responsiveness of an actual spectator:

[Blake] headed the text with a line of children, out of step, casually paired and apparently turning to talk as they walk, led by the beadles, who also seem to be in conversation. At the foot, the schoolmistress walks ahead of the girls, disregarding their gesticulations and chatter. A sense of relaxed formality and assurance comes through the design, without a trace of regimentation. This is no march. (*Blake’s Innocence*, 36–7)



FIGURE 1. 'Holy Thursday' from Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789). Reproduced by kind permission of the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge.

Gardner's innocent eye reads the picture in representational terms. But there is a decorum here: the critic looks with the eyes of an approving bystander moved by the occasion's best motives and genuine emotions, and indeed such a reading of the scene is available now as it was two centuries ago. Gardner's response to the holiday atmosphere of the occasion ("the crowds, the colours again, the radiance, the involuntary alertness of the young, and the lift into harmony" [39]) was echoed by actual spectators. After his visit to the 1792 ceremony, the composer Josef Haydn recalled that "No music ever moved me so deeply in my whole life . . . I stood there and wept like a child." Indeed, he remarked to a friend that "the voices sounded like angels' voices."³ Haydn, like many others, became as a little child and entered for a while the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴ There is ample documentation to show how heartening and uplifting the London anniversary was,⁵ and the response was replicated on a smaller scale nationwide. As one preacher said, "'tis indeed a Sight full of Charms and Endearments to see the Innocent Children

of poor Parents to walk in the Streets by Pairs, decently Cloathed to the House and Temple of God.”⁶

We know that most contemporaries responded warmly to the pageant of the charity children and that they interpreted the visual and aural display in positive terms, just as the authorities intended they should. Such a response has its critical equivalent in Gardner’s approach to “Holy Thursday.” For him, Blake’s understanding of the occasion is unproblematic:

He knew the children’s feelings as they filled the cathedral with excited murmurings. He knew that for them, “when many of their contemporaries went in rags, to be neatly and warmly clad helped to suggest the self respect that went with a higher standard of living” . . . Blake knew that the workhouse children in the King Street school had been granted a special self-respect . . .⁷

This unproblematic knowledge is gained through a sympathetic and shared perspective between the critic and the poet (both fair-minded recorders of an actual situation) and through an equivalent sympathetic identification of Blake with his subject (“His imagination rejoices with the children and their working parents” [*The Tyger*, 103]). Such closeness of critic, poet, locality and moment seems to leave no room for irony. It has to come from outside, from an illegitimate distance. In offering his reading, therefore, Gardner is concerned to hold a wider world of experience at bay, requiring that we take the poem “straight, without benefit of our own brand of retrospective enlightenment” (*Blake’s Innocence*, 35).

My worries about this kind of reading, albeit of a Song of Innocence, concern its very consistency and decorum. These become the warrant for an actual local truth, in face of whose evidence, it is suggested, a modern ironizing reader knows too much (we need *conocer* or *connaître* here). It follows that in order to recover the innocent truth of the poem we must be careful to know (*saber*, *savoir*) the appropriate facts of that specific place and time (Blake’s parish during 1782–7). In this way a responsible reading is licensed, and the song comes across to us as fresh and delightful as a cleaned canvas.

Gardner’s researches have returned us to a celebratory poem. But to offer it as the “true” reading is to limit the complex ways in which poetry *means* and to preclude Blake’s awareness of contraries and multiplicities. By finding a new song of innocence in “Holy Thursday” we may be in danger of forgetting its role within that greater text, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. There is a danger of a focused and detailed parochial truth disallowing a national dimension—one whose documents, though dispersed in time and place, bear down on Gardner’s pure local moment.⁸ Other voices—those of complacency, pride, and fear—can be heard from pulpit, hymn-sheet, and rulebook. In this essay I want to recover a wider range of documentation that can remind us of the system within which Blake’s innocent children and wise guardians were working.

One of the recurrent themes in Blake’s art is his exploration of how an impulse hardens into a system, and although there were innumerable individual charitable impulses at work during the eighteenth century, these were being systematized in interesting ways.⁹ An immediate aim of this essay, taking “Holy

Thursday” as the starting-point, is to examine the extent to which charity children were caught up in a system, how they were controlled, exhibited, and interpreted, and how their singing, learning, dress, and behaviour were regulated—how, in short, they were contextualized by an anxious society and in the process had their innocence compromised. There are obvious risks involved in bringing a wide array of material, dispersed in time and space, to bear on one little text that evokes a specific place and day. But there is some precedent for this in the way the charity children’s significance was “read” by their contemporaries, in terms the children themselves could not yet understand.

The more one examines the full range of material documenting the work of the eighteenth-century charity schools and the regulation of the children, the more Blake’s text loses its innocence and becomes haunted by questions. For all the good that came of the charity schools and the goodness invested in them (this is not in question), they would seem to have been from the beginning a focus for society’s fears more than its hopes. Reading many of the sermons delivered at anniversary meetings across the country, the rule books, reports, and ordinances drawn up to regulate or reform individual schools, the hymns publicly performed by the children, the charges delivered by bishops, and the minutes and correspondence of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, leaves an impression of a nation that focused on the charity children its worries about social cohesion, working-class poverty and ignorance, and whether or how much to alleviate it. The S.P.C.K., founded in 1699, was the national body that promoted and helped to regulate the charity schools of Britain and Ireland. Its continuing vigilance during the whole of the century supervising the work of local boards, co-ordinating the schools’ activities, setting national standards for rules and behaviour, settling disputes and handing down rulings, meant that there was to some degree a nation-wide policy in place right through to the 1790s. Over the course of the century certain developments are discernible: greater uniformity and strictness followed in the wake of Bernard Mandeville’s attack on the charity school system in 1723, when the Bishop of London’s directions to the London clergy (1724) established firmer regulations that were endorsed by the S.P.C.K. and reprinted annually by them as late as 1790.¹⁰ Another move towards greater regimentation is evident in the years following the Gordon Riots in 1780, when London had been at the mercy of the mob. During the 1780s certain economic and social issues concerned with civil order were seen to be more pressing, and by 1792 extremely urgent. Overarching these developments, however, was a remarkably consistent national tradition and a persistently ambivalent public rhetoric that worried about over-education, individual skill, the role of paid work, and the implicit threat the charity children might offer *en masse*.¹¹

The children are repeatedly the object of concern about the spiritual health of society at large; and the need felt in each locality to do something with its poor meant that, from the beginning, the charity school movement was perceived to be an experiment in social engineering—an experiment that worked to some extent against the natural grain. Charity education was the point at which infant hopes met adult fears, and the wider perspective of experience challenged an innocence that was only with difficulty and circumspection being separated out from ignorance. In this way the question of regulating, directing, and occasionally exploit-

ing the charity children produces encounters between innocence and experience that can enrich our reading of “Holy Thursday,” not by offering an explication of its meaning, but by helping to recover the wider ironic reverberations of the song. In the discussion that follows I wish to argue that the problems encountered by modern critical reading of “Holy Thursday” replicate the problems which the charity children themselves posed for their eighteenth-century audiences as texts to be publicly “read.” The various ways in which the children were presented before the public, exactly how they were seen and heard, was a matter for concern, and they were explained and interpreted in ways that can illuminate our responses to Blake’s poem.

The charity-school anniversary may itself have been an innocent occasion, but in the year that Blake engraved the title page of *Songs of Innocence* (some five years after his first version of “Holy Thursday”)¹² the children became entangled in the nation’s power politics in a way that exploited the positive associations accruing to their day and turned them to less innocent ends. The date was 23 April 1789, St George’s Day, and the occasion was the National Thanksgiving for the recovery of King George III from his madness (Figs. 2 and 3). At this ambiguous moment when either the nation’s prayers seemed to have been answered by divine Grace, or when hopes for reform through a Regency and a Whig government had been cruelly dashed, the charity children were available to reinforce the positive aspect of celebration. Even an opposition Member of Parliament responded tearfully to the occasion, describing the scene in a letter to his wife:

Beyond the soldiers were the people who had got admission into the church; and under the dome were piled up, to a great height all round, 6,000 children from the different charity-schools in the city, in their different habits and colours. This was by far the most interesting part of the show. . . . As soon as [the Royal party] began to move up the church, the drums stopped, and the organ began; and when the King approached the centre all the 6,000 children set up their little voices and sang part of the Hundredth Psalm. This was the moment that I found most affecting; and without knowing exactly why, I found my *eyes running over*, and the bone in my throat, which was the case with many other people.¹³

The tone of this passage stands out from the rest of Sir Gilbert Elliot’s letter with its cruelly observant details on the dull Tory sermon and the thinness of the King’s legs. The unison singing of the Old Hundredth (a traditional feature also of the charity schools’ anniversary service) by the “little voices” in a powerful combination of sublimity and pathos, momentarily softened the sentiments of the ironic opposition commentator. Even he could be directly touched by the “moment” and find himself briefly forgetting the political context surrounding the occasion. But Elliot’s phrase “Beyond the soldiers” (they were evidently standing between the “people” and the men of power) tells us something of that uneasy hinterland. The civic authorities feared violent demonstrations, but the *Gentleman’s Magazine* was able to report:

that which was so much dreaded, tumult and bloodshed, did not occur in any one instance that has come to our ears. The anticipated dangers



FIGURE 2. The London charity-school children in St Paul's Cathedral on the day of National Thanksgiving, 23 April 1789. From a drawing by E. Dayes, engraved by J. Neagle. © Copyright The British Museum (Portfolio 1872.6.8.86).

perhaps contributed to keep the streets more free from crowds than otherwise they might have been; and to the credit of the military, we must say, that they were more orderly and attentive than they generally are when put into a street commission.¹⁴

Bordering the simple joy and ordered harmonies of that time and place was a background of fear. A cynical commentator might remark that the presence on the streets of six thousand charity children may have helped ensure that the occasion remained peaceful.

The awkward subsuming of the political into the national had characterized a comparable occasion earlier in the century, the day of Thanksgiving for the Peace of Utrecht on 7 July 1713, another gesture of Tory triumph marked by the presence of the massed London charity children. Fig. 4 shows the scene along the Strand when the procession made its way to the service in St Paul's. 3,925 children, newly clothed for the occasion, were arranged in a specially erected stand 620 feet long, consisting of eight rows of seats, and they sang together two hymns, one for the Queen as she passed along to the church, and a second three hours later as she returned. At least that was the plan, but Anne herself was too ill to be present. Nevertheless, between a repeated chorus of nine Allelujahs, the first hymn greeted her as the nursing mother of the kingdom ("Long, long may she remain"), while the second jubilantly celebrated the Tory Peace ("Peace his best gift to Earth's return'd, | Long may it here remain; | As we too long its Absence mourn'd, | Nor sigh'd to Heaven in vain").

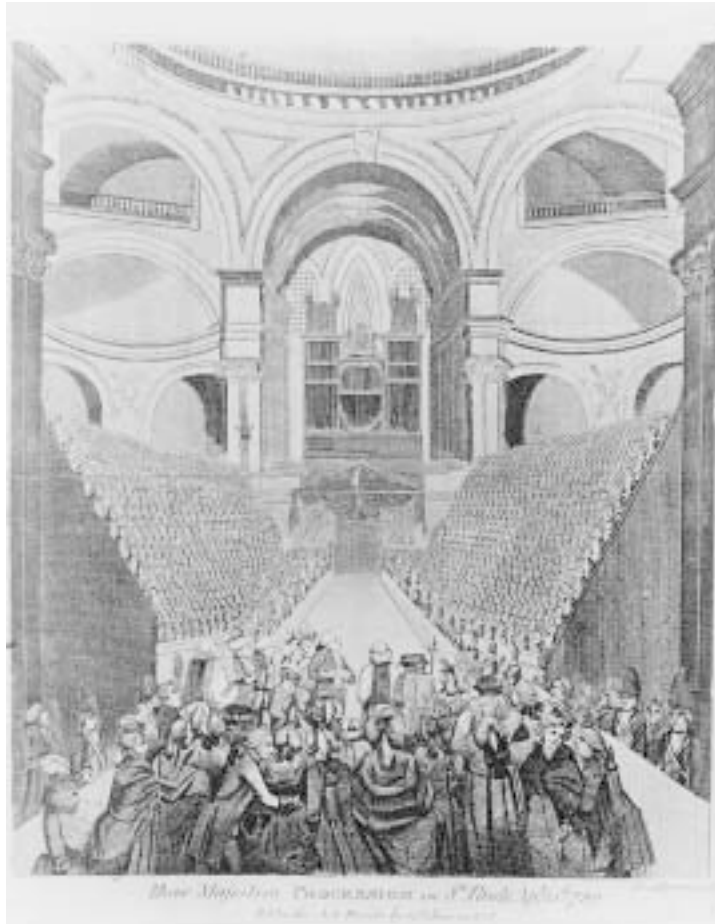


FIGURE 3. The London charity-school children in St Paul's Cathedral on the day of National Thanksgiving, 23 April 1789. Reproduced by kind permission of Dr Frank Felsenstein.



FIGURE 4. The London charity-school children in the Strand on the day of National Thanksgiving, 7 July 1713. From an engraving by George Vertue in Thomas Pennant's *London*, Crowle's edition, vol. V, pp. 212-3.

These two occasions near the beginning and end of the century illustrate how a political inflection could be given to the public exhibition of the London charity children and how the effect of their singing might be exploited. But it would be wrong to argue that such manipulation was the prerogative of the Tories. In the following year, on 20 September 1714, the massed charity children were again assembled along the south side of St Paul's to welcome the new Hanoverian King George I on his entry into London.¹⁵ In a gesture of continuity that itself made a forceful political point, the children repeated the very hymns that had been sung for Queen Anne the year before, and George became a "nursing father" for the occasion.

The annual gathering of the London children exemplifies most spectacularly the fact that the singing of charity children in the eighteenth century was public and communal. In thousands of parish churches throughout the country, including individual London parishes like Islington, Kensington, Eastcheap, Deptford and Rotherhithe, the body of children from the local charity school was a familiar sight making its way to the weekly service, and once or twice a year on the occasion of the parish's charity sermon they were publicly on display for the purpose of raising money. They were also inevitably part of an ongoing debate about the function of charity in the community and the structure of society itself. The parish charity school was in general a day school, whose trustees undertook to feed and clothe the children of the deserving or "industrious" poor (carefully differentiated from the dissolute or indigent poor) and to prepare them appropriately for their future role as servants, apprentices, or ship-boys. It was important therefore that their education should be useful and practical. Regularly in sermons, pamphlets, rule books and reports, the danger of widening the child's expectations is made clear. In 1755 the Bishop of Norwich told the Charity Schools Anniversary Meeting:

There must be drudges of labour (hewers of wood and drawers of water the Scriptures call them) as well as Counsellors to direct, and Rulers to preside. . . . These poor children are born to be daily labourers, for the most part to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. It is evident then that if such children are, by charity, brought up in a manner that is only proper to qualify them for a rank to which they ought not to aspire, such a child would be injurious to the Community.¹⁶

In such cases, said another preacher with alliterative emphasis, "*Over-Education* is not *Kindness*, but *Cruelty*."¹⁷ At the opening of a charity school in Birmingham in 1725 the reverend Thomas Bisse responded to the widespread concern about the social mobility that such schools might encourage by reassuring his congregation, like a modern-day Menenius, that the purpose of their fledgling foundation was:

not to change the subordination of mankind, by raising these children above their level, into ranks and trades belonging to their betters. . . . It keeps the lowest order of mankind, viz. the poor, in its proper situation, fitting it for its proper office; which like that of the feet, though the lowest of the members, is ordained to support the rest of the body politick. . . . These feet then of the publick body do not receive from this education such an unnatural ply or distortion, as to be turn'd up into the place and function, either of the eye to guide, or of the hand to controul; but they continue feet still.¹⁸

The system had to demarcate what was “proper” and “fitting,” and it could not allow education to become a dynamic concept that might challenge the *status quo*. It was therefore crucial to inculcate industriousness and simple physical skills to prepare the charity children for survival in the world of work. At the London anniversary ceremony of 1788 a later Bishop of Norwich saw it as helping prevent the innocent children from succumbing to temptation:

Practical habits must be acquired. Of these the first and most essential are habits of industry. . . . Indolence is the inlet to every seduction both of the world and of our own corrupt hearts. For these reasons this Society [the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge] hath wisely recommended, that, in Charity Schools, labour, of some sort or other, should always be made a necessary part of the education.¹⁹

From its foundation in 1708 the Liverpool Blue Coat School, for example, set its children to work on a series of manufacturing schemes, including making stockings, spinning and preparing cotton, or pin-making (this latter brought in £400 p.a.).²⁰ Schools had to justify themselves by their productivity, so as to avoid the accusation that they were removing potential workers from the labour market. The initiative of the market place could take ingenious forms. The Bristol Ladies Charity School, founded in 1755, signed a contract with a local manufacturer for spinning flax, and twice a week the Visitors inspected the quality of each girl’s work which she had to hang on her own peg. The Visitors placed the spun yarn into three locked boxes (good, middling, and bad), and there were prizes for the best spinner and the runner-up. The girls were fined a halfpenny per ounce for any waste.²¹

Many schools helped to pay their way by taking in needlework or other jobs, and this became so regularized that price lists were included in the published Rules and Orders, along with a bequest form to encourage donations.²² The Sheffield hymn-sheet dating from 1790 (Fig. 5) carries on the reverse, along with notice of the sermon, an advertisement that “For the benefit of the charity, Plain Needlework is taken in at the said School upon moderate Terms.” Looking at the accompanying hymn, it is clear that the charity girls on this occasion were made to announce their usefulness to society:

. . . feed our tender Minds with useful Lore:
Teach her that Social Life is best array’d
When well-instructed Woman lends her Aid.

The stress, on both sides of the hymn-sheet, therefore, is on practical and useful labour. The needlework was *plain*, not fine. Yet the song itself, we notice, is more than a simple verse hymn or metrical psalm, but almost a miniature cantata, a little drama that moves from the fearful plea of the opening air, which was possibly a solo, to the combined prayer of the first chorus, then the soloist’s joy at their being heard (“Sisters! wake the Strain of Joy”), and the final chorus giving thanks to God the Father and asking blessings to be poured on their benefactors in the congregation (“On these our Friends thy choicest Blessings pour”).

Throughout the eighteenth century there was a debate about the role of singing in charity schools, centring on that notion of usefulness and what kind of

H Y M N,
To be sung by the Charity Girls,

Set to Music by Mr. MATHER,

A I R.

G O D of Merry! hear our Pray'rs---
Female Infants ask thy Care,
Poor, and weak, Corruption spreads
Snar'd round our helpless Heads:
Want and Fashion aid our Foe:
Darkness leads the Way to Woe,

C H O R U S.

O T H O U whose Strength in Weakness shines
confess'd,
Through whole paternal Love thy Sons are bless'd,
Teach Christian Piety to dispense her Store,
And feed our tender Minds with useful Lore:
Teach her that Social Life is best array'd
When well-instructed Woman leads her Aid.

A I R.

S I S T E R S! wake the Strain of Joy,
Fraise should now our Tongues employ:
Heav'n has heard our humble Pray'r;
We, tho' poor, are still its Care,
Look around---with Transport see
Bounteous Friends in each Degree:
Wisdom, Virtue, Beauty join,
Warm'd by Truth, and Love divine,

C H O R U S.

J E H O V A H! Father! God of Gods adore!
Of Gratitude the joyful echoes thrice!
On these our Friends thy choicest Blessings pour
When Poverty and Time shall be no more,

FIGURE 5. Hymn-sheet for the annual service of the Sheffield Charity School for Poor Girls, 24 October 1790 (two-sided). Reproduced by kind permission of the Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library.

A SERMON,
FOR THE BENEFIT OF
The Charity School for Poor Girls,
IN SHEFFIELD.

Will be preach'd on Sunday, October 24th, 1790,
IN THE MORNING
At Trinity Church,
AND IN THE AFTERNOON AT
St. Paul's Church;
And on Sunday, October 31st, 1790,
IN THE AFTERNOON,
At St. James's Church,

By the Rev. EDWARD GOODWIN,

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CHARITY,
Plain Needlework

It taken in at the said School upon moderate Terms.

singing was appropriate. In 1790 the Sheffield school may have had a girl good enough to sustain and animate the solo line, and if so the school's attitude must have been quite enlightened, since the issue of solo singing had traditionally been a controversial one. In the early decades of the century singing was being taught in some charity schools, and local parsons encouraged the children to take an active part in Sunday service. During 1719–20 the Reverend Joseph Karfoot of Yeovil, Somerset, wrote to the S.P.C.K. describing his progress in teaching the charity children to sing.²³ The Reverend George Millard of Box, Wiltshire, was delighted with the skills he discovered: "I began on the 6th day of February last to teach all our Charity Children, now at School, to sing Psalms by Notes; and I found them so apt to learn, that by Exercising them only 2 hours in a day, they became perfect in 4 Tunes in little more than a week." But he reassured the Society that "I oblige them to keep only to a few Tunes, and those the oldest & most Grave; and I require them to perform it always *Standing*, as the most becoming posture for it."²⁴ In these early years the S.P.C.K. was even being asked to find masters who could teach singing in "the London method." But this growing enthusiasm was countered with complaints that "fine" singing undermined social discipline, and that those children who "sang singly" were in danger of pride. The society had early on urged its schools to abandon the solo, stating that from henceforth it would sanction only singing in full chorus.²⁵

In 1724 the Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, took steps to regulate what the charity children were being taught. In an influential address to the teachers of the London Charity Schools which was regularly reprinted and circulated by the S.P.C.K. throughout the century, Gibson argued that fine accomplishments of any kind had no place in a charity school system designed to produce good servants and compliant apprentices:

But if Charity-Schools should grow by degrees into a more polite Sort of Education; if the Boys should be taught fine Writing, and the Girls fine Working, and both of them fine Singing; in which Cases also the Masters and Mistresses would hardly refrain from teaching the Children to *value* themselves upon these Attainments; all this, I own, would have a natural Tendency to set them above the meaner and more laborious Stations and Offices of Life . . . For these Reasons, many wise and considerate Men have condemn'd the Custom in some Charity-Schools, of teaching the Children to sing Anthems, and such Psalm-Tunes as are uncommon and out of the Way.

Anything "fine" or "polite" could be dangerous. Accomplishments should therefore be discouraged, and it was the role of the schoolteachers to suppress the aspirations of their charges and keep them "from any aspiring or conceited Thoughts." The Masters and Mistresses "may do well to put them frequently in Mind, that whatever Attainments they get there, are all the Effects of Charity; which will keep them humble, and at the same Time put them in Mind to be thankful to God, and grateful to their Benefactors."²⁶ Gibson's 1724 address would be known to many in the St Paul's congregation, as it was attached to the S.P.C.K.'s annual reports during the 1780s which were printed with the sermon.

In view of establishment disapproval, therefore, the impetus during the century was for an approved plain type of singing that avoided an overt art and

skilfulness. There was pressure for the charity song to avoid any sense of refinement, and so the simple verse hymn or metrical psalm tended to become the norm.²⁷ In 1728 the Secretary of the S.P.C.K. wrote that in the light of Bishop Gibson's address "the Society came to a Resolution in July last of not defraying the Expence of a Singing Master at the anniversary Meeting of the Charity Children, as being in their opinion very contrary to the design of his Lordship's Directions."²⁸ This principle was continued when the anniversary meetings moved to St Paul's from 1782, where the massed children sang the simple tune of the Old Hundredth, while the cathedral choir sang the anthems. The charity children joined in, however, for the "God Save the King!" section of Handel's *Zadok the Priest* and for the "Hallelujah" sections of the Hallelujah Chorus, which must have had a rousing effect.²⁹

The fearful implications of too much "art" were stressed by Richard Coleire preaching the benefit sermon for the children of the Isleworth Charity School in 1729. He warned the congregation (which as always included the sixty children themselves) of the dangers of over-educating them to the extent, he said, that "their Attainments . . . will be *too great* for *future Use*, and *dangerous* in being *too great*. They are taught to *Sing*, with too much *Skill* and *Art*; at least too much for the *Vulgar Level*: and *This* lays a *Train* for future Riot and Excess."³⁰ Coleire's line of reasoning is interesting; any artfulness or skill in the singing would raise the child beyond the confines allotted to it, and would dangerously widen its hopes beyond society's ability to accommodate them. In a markedly Blakean way, therefore, the emphasis on the innocent simplicity of the children's singing could be a function of society's fears for its own stability.

Such disciplined innocence was part of a wider context of regulation that touched many aspects of the children's lives. The schools had to be publicly accountable, visible to the community that supported them, and the children's procession to and from their local church every Sunday was a regular sight in London and other towns. The printed rulebooks for charity schools take pains to ensure their orderly behaviour during divine service and on their way through the streets. Rule six from the orders of the Irish charity schools is typical:

That [the masters and mistresses] bring the Children to Church twice every Day . . . or at least on all *Sundays* and *Holy-Days*; causing them *First*, to Meet at the School, and from thence to proceed *Orderly* to Church; (carrying their BIBLES and COMMON-PRAYER-BOOKS with them) in which they must take particular Care of their Behaviour: that they carry *Themselves* with the *utmost Decency and Reverence*, remaining in *perfect Silence and Stillness*, during all the parts of the *Service* which the *Minister* is to perform alone: And in the rest, either joining *with*, or repeating *after* him . . . with an united, and audible, but yet *humble* or *low Voice*; which they are to observe likewise, as well as the Time and Tune, in *Singing Psalms*; that so neither the *Minister* nor the *Congregation* may be drowned or disturbed by them.³¹

Humility, orderliness and uniformity were the watchwords. The children's innocence was a function of the harmony and uniformity they projected, and the Reverend Thomas Bisse no doubt gestured approvingly towards the children as he interpreted the scene for his Birmingham congregation: "Behold then this little

order or choir of innocents: behold, how uniform in their gestures, how agreeing in their responses, standing, kneeling, bowing, answering, reading, singing, all at once with exact uniformity.”³²

Any move away from uniformity, as from plain usefulness, tended to be resisted.³³ The children’s coats, for example, renewed annually for the benefit service, were kept simple. In 1754, an attempt by some S.P.C.K. schools to introduce feathers and ribbons as adornments was objected to as “improper & Superfluous,” and as occasioning vanity in the children and expense to their parents.³⁴ The rules for the York Charity School on its foundation in 1706 stipulated that “The Boys shall wear their Coats, Bands and Bonnets every day when abroad, whereby the Benefactors may know them, and see what their behaviour is.”³⁵ The children were marked out so that the local patrons of the charity could see if their money was being properly used. It was thought appropriate by the Rev. Millard for the boys of his school to wear caps “of ye same Colour with ye Livery wore by ye deceased Benefactors servants.”³⁶ Visibility was important, and occasionally particular arrangements had to be made. Among the children of the Birmingham Bluecoat School after 1741 were some three or four conspicuously dressed in green. These were the beneficiaries of Mr Fantham’s bequest, who were given a green coat “by way of distinction.”³⁷ The Fantham trustees clearly wanted their individual legacy to be visible.

The clothing of the naked provided the key image for charity, and the fact that the children were “annually cloathed” would feature in a school’s advertising.³⁸ A charity child walking home through a poor neighbourhood would be colourfully and conspicuously *not naked*. As the children of the Liverpool Blue Coat hospital sang in one of their simple songs:

How many Children in the street
Half-naked I behold!
While I am cloth’d from head to feet,
And cover’d from the cold³⁹

But such innocence is waiting to be tainted by the voice of adult experience. In justifying their clothing, Richard Coleire told his congregation that the charity children before them were not merely the “*Hands and Feet*” of society, as St Paul had said, but were in fact society’s “*Pudenda Natura*,” and as such, they ought to be covered up so that “the *Eye* may not be offended with their *indecent Wants*.” They needed, he said, that clothing of which “*our comely Parts have no need*.”⁴⁰ With this extraordinary comparison of the charity children to the genital organs, the gesture of clothing the naked loses its innocence and becomes tainted by a voice of sexual disgust from the fallen world. Perhaps Coleire’s words made audible a suppressed fear of the poor’s proliferation, the danger that (to quote Bisse again) they “would otherwise run wild, and overspread the land with a stupid or wicked generation.”⁴¹

Given the visibility of the children, and the public investment in them through local subscription schemes, incidents of indiscipline and idleness could cause problems and might result in ingenious regulatory measures. By the 1790s some schools had in place a ticketing system, which allowed them to measure the children’s obedience. At St Albans in 1792 tables of vices and virtues were hung in view of the girls, and at the end of the day each of them received a ticket if her

conduct had been uniformly good. A child who committed any of the faults in the Table of Vices would have her ticket withheld.⁴² In another school the ticketing could be linked to productivity. When the rules of the Bamborough Castle Girls Charity School (which doubled as a flax-spinning business) were revised in 1794, a sophisticated system was introduced whereby tickets were given out for productiveness and good behaviour, and taken away for lateness, absence, and bad work. All aspects of their lives seem to have been regulated by the tickets, which were awarded and removed by the mistress on every suitable occasion. In this way the school could measure the exact merit-ranking of each of the sixty girls by the number of tickets she held. Judgment Day came at the end of the year, when the profits of the business were distributed to the children's families "in exact proportion to the number of tickets each of them shall have received during the whole year"—a brilliant scheme for ensuring both compliance and competitiveness in the workforce. Some of the Bamborough parents were unhappy about the "reforms" and attempted to resist them.⁴³ One of the many rules reinforced by the sanction of ticketing was number twenty-four:

The scholars shall go to church decently and regularly two by two, having hold of each others hands, in such order as the Mistress shall range them according to their merits, and if any break their ranks they shall forfeit one ticket.⁴⁴

Looking at Blake's plate of "Holy Thursday" with the eye of experience makes one wonder just how many of those children have white knuckles as they cling anxiously to their partner. It is also possible that they are marching like the Bamborough girls in strict order "according to their merits."

By such filtering, the stream of benevolence could be channelled more selectively down towards deserving cases. In innumerable charity songs the children evoked God's blessings on their benefactors through whom they could expect benefits to flow: "On all our Benefactors pour / Thy daily blessings down," in the words of Ned Ward.⁴⁵ The children were taught to regard the local subscribers in the congregation as channels of divine favour. In a 1764 sermon at Southwark, Thomas Gibbons told the charity children to "consider the blessings you receive from God as the fountain, and from your friends as the channels,"⁴⁶ and this imagery is repeated in many of the charity hymns that were written for the children to perform. Their singing served a subtle purpose, combining the calling down of blessings on the patrons of their charity with praise for wealth's *trickle-down* effect. In his sermon the Reverend Gibbons rejoiced that "God has placed us in this world in different situations; some on higher and some on lower ground. Let the hills communicate of their dews and rains to the humble vales" (32–3). This landscape was not by nature a level one, and its fertility depended on being well watered. The children's hymns make the same point repeatedly by praying for their patrons' economic success because their coffers needed to remain full enough for good to overflow. In 1792, at a time of particular financial stringency when increasingly little was trickling down to them, the Rotherhithe children sang: "Oh, look for ever kindly down / On those that help the poor / Oh, let success their labours crown / And Plenty keep in store."⁴⁷

As mediators of this divine bounty, the children's local supporters became equated with the angelic host. At a 1778 service the children sang: "Be all our Benefactors crown'd / Amidst th' Angelic Throng,"⁴⁸ and John Wesley's widely used "Yearly Hymn for Charity Children" identifies the charity patrons with the angels ("Our watchful guardians, robed in light"), and the children are made to draw the parallel between their earthly and heavenly protectors: "With what resembling care and love / Both worlds for us appear! / Our friendly guardians, those above; / Our benefactors here."⁴⁹ In Blake's poem, however, the St Paul's seating plan is taken literally, and the "guardians" sit beneath the children, noticeably inverting the hierarchy of the charity songs. Gardner documents interestingly the work of Blake's "wise guardians of the poor" in Lambeth, but their noticeably static and subservient role in "Holy Thursday" suggests an unwillingness to accord them status as angelic "guardians," like the children often did in their hymns. In Blake, it is the children themselves who assume this role.

An early example of what became a standard type of charity hymn is that represented by Fig. 6, "to be sung by the Charity Children of *St. George the Martyr*," Eastcheap, on 30 May 1714. The hymn-sheet appears to show Queen Anne as Charity enthroned within a heart, with the ranks of boys and girls on either side. Supporting the word "HYMN" are two figures speaking two of the Seven Mercies of Christ (feeding the hungry and clothing the naked). As so often with charity songs there are repeated Allelujahs (easy for the youngest children to join in). The note struck is one of joyful thanks ("To Thee, O Father of Mankind, / Shall our glad Hymns ascend"), happiness being an emotion crucial to the charity hymns, which are sprinkled with phrases like "this happy day," "bounty's endless spring," "endless worlds of joy," etc. In this Eastcheap hymn the expected invocation of blessings on their benefactors is announced in the now familiar terms: "The choicest of thy Blessings show'r / On those who have us blest: / Unfailing Streams of Bounty pour, / On every bounteous Breast." Through repeated images such as these the charitable economy helped ensure that the *humble vales* were well watered and bountiful.

Blake's poem is concerned with the immediate effect of the children's singing, not with the text of their songs. Not until the equivalent poem in *Songs of Experience* will Blake raise the issue of what actual words they might have been using. In the wintry landscape of the 1794 plate of "Holy Thursday" (Fig. 7) an infant corpse lies on a valley floor; in the distance an undeviating stream flows (if it flows at all) parallel to, but out of reach of, the child, skirting a huge mountain of snow.⁵⁰ In the foreground a bare overhanging branch fractures the sky like cracking ice. The ironies become clear when we realise that the text reads like the after-echo of a charity children's hymn, something like the Eastcheap hymn (which was included in collections later in the century). Blake's children have just finished celebrating their "Unfailing Streams of Bounty," but a question hangs in the air: "Is that trembling cry a song? / Can it be a song of joy? / And so many children poor? / It is a land of poverty!" These are the doubts raised when the glad occasion is over. After the hymn has assured local subscribers that they will receive spiritual interest on their charity ("Nor shall their Love be unrepaid, / Who for the POOR provide"), Blake's song raises the spectre of "Babes . . . / Fed with cold and usurous hand" to suggest that the charitable economy of feeding

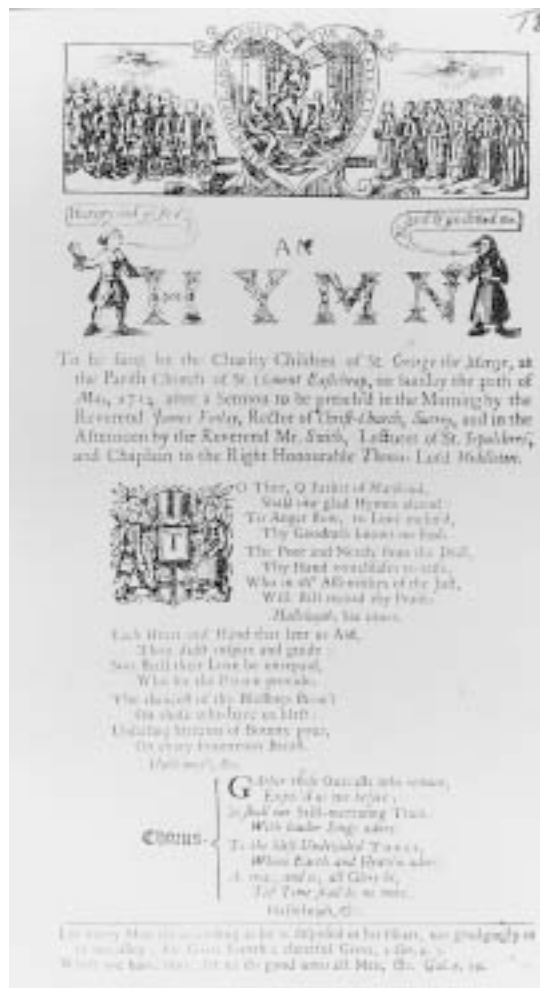


FIGURE 6. Hymn-sheet for a charity-school service at St George the Martyr, Eastcheap, London, 30 May 1714. Reproduced by permission of the British Library (BL 11602.i.12[18]).

the hungry is a “usurous” one. Here, too, experience is reading innocence, placing the earlier text in a wider context. Once the heart-warming moment of the singing is past, the questions begin.

On the Eastcheap hymnsheet we may also notice that above the groups of children at the top of the page hovers God’s all-seeing eye. The rules for the good government of the charity school at York (which were read out to the children twice a year) ordered that the master

shall acquaint them with the Majesty and All-seeing Eye of God, their own Sinfulness and Unworthiness of being admitted into his Presence, and the honour he does them in hearing their Petitions; Which therefore ought to make them very humble and reverent before God, and very attentive to what they are about.⁵¹

What we might think from the hymn-sheet is a touching image of God’s never-ceasing love and care begins to evoke a sterner unremitting watchfulness. As we

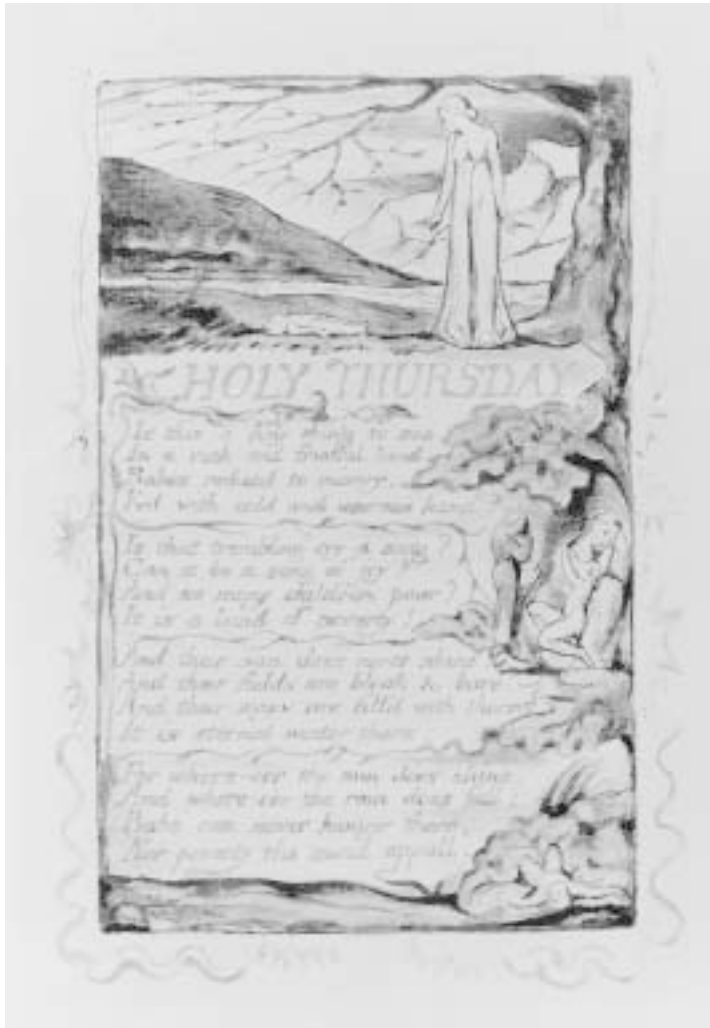


FIGURE 7. 'Holy Thursday' from Blake's *Songs of Experience* (1794). Reproduced by kind permission of the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge.

have already seen, the charity children were, especially on such an occasion, very much under public scrutiny—a point often stressed in the sermon when the children would be reminded of their visibility and be exhorted to behave decently in gratitude to their patrons. The public singing and parading of the charity children was partly their side of the bargain, a reassuring return for their local benefactors, and the school rule books usually make a point of setting out the regular public expression of their thanks.

The benefactors themselves were also given visibility at the annual service, and in 1789 this was highlighted at the St Paul's thanksgiving ceremony for George III by the striking of "large gold and silver medals by Pingo, pendant on ribbands" bearing the motto *Laetitia Cum Pietate* (Joy with Piety). As the be-medalled patrons took their seats in St Paul's they were specifically greeted by the children of their own school (the *Gentleman's Magazine* describes the children

“saluting their different benefactors as they passed” [59: 368]). Blake’s strange detail of the children “raising their innocent hands,” which Gardner sees as individual children waving cheerfully to their friends and families, is likely to have been a more regimented greeting of their patrons.

If the charity children were expected to give thanks in song, they were also conspicuously there in the church as a symbol of Innocence itself, to be exploited by the preacher in his appeal for money. Their decent behaviour played a vital part in the fund-raising. In his 1788 sermon at Colchester, Robert Ingram used the children as a speaking picture to awaken the generous feelings of his congregation (as with all quotations from charity sermons, we have to remember that these words were spoken in front of the children):

Let these poor children plead for themselves: let the emphatic language of Innocence and humility more expressive than words, more interesting to the feelings of a pious heart, than the slow process of didactic argumentation, prevail with you to continue to share with them the superior advantages God has blessed you with . . . Is it possible to contemplate that innocence, which occupies every feature in the youthful countenance, and at the same time behold that false security and careless inattention to their perilous situation, the consequence of inexperience, which may soon betray them into the lowest abyss of profligacy and sensuality . . .⁵²

The trajectory is clear. For Ingram the children are visual emblems of “Innocence,” but in reading the picture for his congregation, he invites adult eyes to imagine the chasm of vice that is only a step away. To him, their innocence is also a dangerous “inexperience.” As he scrutinizes the innocent scene with the eye of experience, rather like the speaker of Gray’s *Eton College Ode*, he taints the very purity he treasures, with his message that only the wise adults can see what lies in wait for some of them.

The children who attended the annual benefit services frequently heard themselves being used as an admonitory text, as examples of innocence under threat. This was a particular concern of Dr William Parker who preached in 1781 at the last London anniversary service held in Christ Church, Newgate Street, before the move to St Paul’s. Many of these children had been rescued, he said, “out of the streets and lanes of corruption, where simplicity and innocence would soon have been tainted, and the fountains of life poisoned.” As audience, the children were warned indirectly (such points were always made to the adult congregation) to preserve their innocence, the alternative scenario being starkly presented:

Education in religion and industry will be the best preservative of innocence. And innocence, and her sister modesty, will be mutual guardians to each other. It is idleness, joined with vanity, uncontrolled by any solid, rational principle, that often gives a loose to the licentious tongue, the tongue of abuse; hardens the countenance, and brings forth the stubborn look of defiance against magistracy and legal government.

Once again the reading of the scene shifts its ground. As the preacher speaks, the faces and voices of the children are made to turn nasty and become expressive of

a threat to the government. The “innocent faces clean” of Blake’s children evoke an emblem of innocence that was regularly exploited by the charity preachers, who understood how precariously it was maintained. In the year after the Gordon Riots, Parker was in no doubt that the age was hovering on the brink of disorder:

Strange, that in an age of light . . . so many should be reverting back again into all the darkness of illiterate, wild enthusiasm; others, into all the madness of unprincipled, uncontroll’d licentiousness, under the name and cloak of supporting liberty: for licentiousness and true liberty are incompatible names and things . . . We have but too lately seen, alas! into what confusion and terror, how near to the brink of ruin and ashes, our civil dissensions, and the clamours of faction, deceiving the multitude, had shamefully reduced our city, in the unhappy commencement of the last summer.⁵³

Parker’s image is of the *multitude* “reverting back” to its wild state. The presence of thousands of children, innocent of face, humble of voice and neatly clothed, provided an orderly throng to counter the terrifying mob the congregation had recently witnessed.

Whether Blake attended that 1781 service is not known, of course, but “Holy Thursday” suggests that he was present at one or more of the three St Paul’s services, 1782–84.⁵⁴ In both the 1782 and 1784 sermons he would have heard a preacher voicing fears about the corrosive ideas that might be brought within reach of the children if their education were extended too far. The issue, as we have seen, was repeatedly raised during the century, and by the 1780s it had gained a new urgency. Speaking from the pulpit of St Paul’s, faced with six thousand children from the ranks of the London poor, both preachers took the opportunity to deliver a striking attack on Enlightenment philosophy. The 1782 preacher, Beilby Porteus, Bishop of Chester, invoked the danger of enlightening the *multitude*:

It has been frequently asserted, that it is PHILOSOPHY, MODERN PHILOSOPHY, which has enlightened and improved mankind. But whom has it enlightened and improved? A small knot, perhaps, of wits and philosophers, and learned men; but how have *the multitude*, the bulk of the people, those who really constitute *the world*, been enlightened? Do *they* read the works of Bolingbroke, of D’Alembert, of Hume, or of Raynal? Thanks be to God those elaborate and bulky compositions are equally beyond their understandings to comprehend, their leisure to peruse, and their ability to purchase.⁵⁵

Talking in front of the orderly *multitude* of charity children, Porteus takes comfort from their ignorance. Here was a further justification for the incessantly repeated argument against over-educating them. (What he says is “Thank God such texts are out of their reach”; what his words imply is “Thank God the six thousand children listening to me now do not understand what I am talking about.”) A similar attack on French philosophy featured in the 1784 St Paul’s sermon given by William Vincent (shortly to be Headmaster of Westminster School):

It is true, this evil is not of native growth; the philosophy of our own country has been sound and genuine; we triumph in the faith of Bacon,

Newton, Boyle, Locke, Addison, and many living names, whose belief appears as firm as their philosophy is solid; but it is a philosophy derived from the French school, founded in speculative and abstract reasoning; capable, it is true, of dazzling and confounding, but proving nothing; destroying all the fixed principles of Religion and Reason, but proposing nothing in its place.⁵⁶

Blake's unholy Trinity of Bacon, Newton and Locke represents those "fixed principles of Religion and Reason" that the preacher felt to be under threat. It is clear that the charity children's moral guardians could be motivated by fear as well as by love, and the worries of Porteus and Vincent antedate the fall of the Bastille. It is perhaps less surprising that in the years following, concern about spreading disaffection placed increasing importance on maintaining the system of national charity. In Sunderland Parish Church on 16 December 1792, Samuel Clapham preached a sermon for the benefit of the local charity school that must have frightened his congregation into generosity. After reaching a climax by reminding them of the "alarming riots . . . perpetrated in some of the interior provinces in this kingdom" and particularly of "the savage cruelties of a deluded or incensed populace in a neighbouring country," he awakened the fear of revolution in his audience:

It is to deliver yourselves from personal danger; it is to preserve your countrymen from the guilt of robbery and of murder, that I am now called upon to convince your understandings of the necessity . . . of cloathing the naked, and instructing the ignorant . . . / . . . Do you want motives to your charity? Observe the pleasing, the delightful spectacle now before you. It is only a very little while since some of these children, whose appearance is now so decent, whose behaviour is so conciliating, whose improvement is so conspicuous, were a local nuisance, and a national disgrace. "Their tongues, the best members that they have," instead of lisping oaths, and imprecating curses, are now employed in "singing hymns, and psalms, and spiritual songs, and making melody unto the Lord."⁵⁷

For the preacher the children once again play a dual role as emblems of a precarious innocence that might revert back to wildness at any moment. Their singing becomes a benign and heart-lifting alternative to murmuring discontent and sedition. We come inevitably back to the sound evoked in Blake's innocent "Holy Thursday" of those six thousand infant voices: "The hum of multitudes was there but multitudes of lambs" ("but" in the sense of "only"), as if in another place and on another occasion the "hum" might figure differently. How easily their voices could become those of a disorderly mob if left unregulated. Blake's "harmonious thunderings" is also precarious, almost an oxymoron—sweet singing and threatening noise—held at this moment in what may seem an uneasy poise. Indeed, in the following year (1793) Laetitia Matilda Hawkins was finding it intimidating to walk the London pavements partly because of the rude and raucous charity children, whose unconstrained voices in church were for her all of a piece with their foul-mouthed behaviour in the streets. This was enough to raise questions about her annual charity donation:

The only proof the public have, or ask for, that their donations are well bestowed, is the bawling of the responses, or the screaming hallelujas,

once in seven days: but let any one observe charity children, who, between the school hours, are returned home; let their behaviour be watched, and particularly their ingenious modes of execration listened to (if any body can listen to them), and no farther hint of the necessity of reformation in this department of public tuition will be necessary.⁵⁸

Let their behaviour be watched. Behind the public display of the innocent charity children lay many adult fears—social, sexual, and political. The regulating of the children through linked notions of visibility, plainness, uniformity, humility, gratitude, obedience and usefulness, bore witness to the uneasy balance between benevolence and self-interest that motivated the schools' supporters throughout the century. The charity school system was an odd combination of the claims of innocence and experience. In its innocent guise its ideals and hopes were driven by thousands of individual efforts to nurture goodness and give poor children a place, however lowly, within the social structure. But the public face of the system, as expressed through sermons, rule-books, hymn sheets, reports and so on, insistently counters innocence with the claims of experience, stressing future perils, and the dangers of knowledge, aspiration, and pride (those things that caused the downfall of our first parents). Caught in this way between opportunity and limitation, hope and fear, the charity children were situated within a social force-field that celebrated innocence, while sensing how precarious and in reach of harm it was. For many, the children were less positively "innocent" than, to use Milton's ambivalent phrase about the serpent, "not . . . nocent yet." (*Paradise Lost*, book 9, l. 186).

The role of knowledge in the charity school system was consequently ambiguous, and the same might be said for the way we read Blakean innocence today. The critical act can sometimes seem to introduce experience where it does not belong and taint the childlike delight that characterizes these pieces. This essay has contributed to that tendency by using contextual "fallen" knowledge to surround "Holy Thursday" with voices from the wider world. But the charity children were public property; their schools were nationally constituted; and their regular appearances throughout the country were part of the social ritual. These other voices remind us of the system within which the children were contained, and they can help to sharpen the reader's awareness of Blakean innocence as one of the "two contrary states of the human soul." Innocence is waiting to become part of a dialogue, and Blake criticism should likewise remain open to heuristic possibilities. Perhaps on the 2nd of May 1782 one child among the six thousand heard the words *Bolingbroke*, *D'Alembert*, *Hume*, and *Raynal*, and determined to remember them?

An innocent reading of Blake's text remains available, and some readers will continue to respond positively to its details. Like Gardner, they will watch the children moving in chattering informal groups through the streets to the delight of the crowds, holding hands endearingly, and in St Paul's they will see them sitting "clean and warm-clothed" as they spontaneously raise their hands to their friends. The hum of multitudes heard in the church will be merely "the hum of conversation" (*Blake's Innocence*, 41, 36), which no doubt it was, and their simple untutored unison singing will be genuinely moving. There is nothing self-evidently invalid about such a response, and Gardner is entitled to claim that he

has characterized the occasion, as it seemed to many. But is such innocence of reading, like Blakean innocence, quite enough? Criticism should perhaps be more than reconstruction, and an alert reading of “Holy Thursday” ought to acknowledge the text’s wider national context and allow the answers of innocence to become unsettled by the questions of experience.

That, after all, was what the preacher of a charity-school sermon did. Like Blake, he had a verbal and a visual text before him, and he drew from both to produce an effective composite. While the biblical passage was used to exhort the Christian congregation to the duty of charity, it was the role of the children to perform innocence, joy, and gratitude. The preacher, as we have seen, could then introduce darker tones to entangle hope with fear, and invite his audience to place that innocence in a more complex setting. As “readers,” the congregation supplied the experience and imagination to understand the wider picture. I would argue that the verbal text of Blake’s poem performs something similar. The song parades an orderly innocence but then raises it into an elemental force: emblems of beauty turn into intimations of sublime power, and Blake’s language only just manages to hold these forces in check. The charity authorities are precariously placed in relation to the children. It has often been noted how the “wise guardians” sit beneath “the seats of heaven,” while wind and thunder are heard above; but the “Grey headed beadles” are also uneasily situated in the first stanza. Their role is parenthetical. Unlike the children’s, the beadles’ walking is in the past tense (“walkt before”), and in the fourth line they are overtaken by the present tense again, swept aside by the children pouring into the cathedral—not the hierarchical “stream” of charity reassuringly invoked in the hymns, but a dynamic force that replaces “snow” by “flow.”

“Holy Thursday” is about the children’s social exhibition, and it enacts the public occasion: first the procession, the arrival, the singing, and finally the sermon (“Then cherish pity . . .”). The twist of the last line, however, is that Blake’s preacher pictures a single child begging at our door and soliciting a personal response from us—a one-to-one situation not visualised until the companion poem in *Experience*. Here the words reach out to that later unsettling image. The colourful organized spectacle easily captures our charitable sentiments and loosens our purse strings, as it was intended to do. Those “innocent faces clean” could be a visual aid in the preacher’s appeal for money; the orderly “walking two & two” reassures us, and the bright clean colours (this was the day on which their new coats were distributed) stand out like red and blue flowers amid the green grass, lightening the heart against a background of greyness and white snow. Blake unashamedly gives us the full spectacle. Inside the church, as the beautiful children are transformed to a sublime force, their physical bodies are dispersed into transcendence, first as the radiant angelic “companies,” then as the Pentecostal Holy Ghost itself, swirling “like a mighty wind.”⁵⁹ How easy it is, in being swept up by this occasion, to forget the single child and its particular, awkward, and perhaps inconvenient appeal directly to us. As if to remind us of the practical realities on which the whole system depended, those two final lines make an uneasy couplet. Do we surrender responsibility to the “guardians of the poor” by a charity school subscription, recharged annually by our sentimental feelings on this heartwarming day, but fail to acknowledge the noisy young beggar in the

street? If the poem begins with the great pageant of the charity children, when innocence is on display and public charity dons its best clothes, it ends by placing the matter, briefly and undemonstratively, at our own door.

NOTES

1. Stanley Gardner, *Blake's Innocence and Experience Retraced* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986); *The Tyger, the Lamb, and the Terrible Desert* (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1998). Gardner asserts that in 1789 Blake's approbation of the "wise guardians" is "unequivocal" (*Blake's Innocence*, 38) and that his verbal changes to the earlier *Island in the Moon* text express his approval of the way Gilbert's Act (1782) had been implemented in his parish to rescue orphans from the workhouse (41). I am grateful to Professor Alvaro Ribeiro of the Department of English, University of Georgetown, and to Professor Ed Larrissy and Dr. John Whale of the School of English, University of Leeds, for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2. Ironic readings of "Holy Thursday" include Robert F. Gleckner, "Irony in Blake's *Holy Thursday*," *Modern Language Notes* 71 (1956): 412–5; Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 43–5; Eben Bass, "Songs of Innocence and of Experience: The Thrust of Design," in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), 196–213 (205–06); Zachary Leader, *Reading Blake's Songs* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 18–19; Stuart Crehan, *Blake in Context* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984), 64–5; and Edward Larrissy, *William Blake* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 60–1. David Erdman has drawn on M.G. Jones's history (see note 8 below) and on newspaper reports of the St Paul's anniversary meeting to show how abuses were becoming more marked in the 1780s, enough to lend support to Blake's critique of the system (*Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd ed. [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954, 1977], 121–3); and Peter Ackroyd remarks on the "sorrowful connotations of constriction and convention" in the opening stanza (*Blake* [London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995], 119). Andrew Lincoln balances the speaker's delight against the "unsettling questions" the poem gives rise to (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [London: The William Blake Trust / The Tate Gallery, 1991], 160–2). D.G. Gillham, however, argues that "[W]e cannot look on the poem as an ironic exposé of the sentimental view" (*William Blake* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973], 22); other non-ironic readings include E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), 194–7; and S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 187.

3. H.C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn in England, 1791–1795* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 173–4.

4. "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18: 3).

5. Heather Glen has discussed how Blake's song both develops and transforms contemporary accounts of the anniversary ceremony; see *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 120–9, 366–9.

6. Martin Strong, *The Great Duty and Necessity Of a Vertuous and Religious Education of Youth, Recommended in a Sermon Preach'd at Yeovill in Somersetshire, At the First Opening of a Charity-School there . . . September the 28th 1707*, 14.

7. *The Tyger*, 63. Gardner's quotation is from Dorothy Marshall, *English People in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longman, 1956), 162.

8. In his chapter, "The Charity Children" (*Blake's Innocence*, 30–7), Gardner offers a glimpse of the wider national picture; but his account is over reliant on M.G. Jones's standard historical study, *The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth Century Puritanism in Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1938). Gardner defends the charity day-schools from charges of physical brutality, which is not the issue. The discussion is based on his assertion that "charity schooling, which could open doors on the ground floor, if little higher, was not an imposition, but a privilege for the poor" (33).

9. See Donna T. Andrew, "On Reading Charity Sermons: Eighteenth-Century Anglican Solicitation and Exhortation," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 43 (1992): 581–91.

10. Bernard Mandeville's influential attack on the charity school system, "An Essay on Charity, and Charity-schools" (1723), was included in his *Fable of the Bees*, ed. F.B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 1: 253–322. Mandeville argued that ignorance was vital in preserving a tractable labour force, and he condemned the vanity and hypocrisy of the schools' governors and patrons. Edmund Gibson's *Directions Given to the Clergy of the Diocese of London, In the Year 1724* were regularly reprinted by the S.P.C.K.

11. For a wider perspective on the charity system see Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989).

12. The earliest version is sung by Obtuse Angle in Blake's *An Island in the Moon*. See *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 895–6, 1697–1700. Bentley convincingly dates the satire to Autumn 1784.

13. *Life and Letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot, First Earl of Minto, from 1751 to 1806*, ed. the Countess of Minto (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1874), 1:303–4; for the Fig. 2 engraving I am grateful to Dr. Frank Felsenstein.

14. *Gentleman's Magazine* 59 (1789): 370.

15. The children of the charity school of St Anne's, Soho, took part in all three celebrations. See the descriptions in John Henry Cardwell, *The Story of a Charity School: Two Centuries of Popular Education in Soho, 1699–1899* (London and New York: Truslove, Hanson & Comba, 1899), 53–7.

16. [Thomas Hayter], *Sermon preached by the Bishop of Norwich at the Anniversary Meeting of the Charity Schools in and about London and Westminster, May 1, 1755*. Quoted by M.G. Jones, 74–5.

17. Richard Coleire, *The Education Proper for Charity-Children. A Sermon preach'd at Isleworth On Sunday the 10th of August, 1729. Being the Day on which the Yearly Collection was made for the Benefit of Sixty Charity-children, belonging to that Parish* (London: John Pemberton, 1729), 3.

18. Thomas Bisse, *Publick Education, particularly in the Charity Schools. A sermon preach'd at . . . Birmingham . . . at the opening of a charity-school* (London: W. & J. Innys, 1725), 22–3.

19. [Lewis Bagot], *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London: On Thursday, June 5, 1788. Being the Time of the Yearly Meeting of the Children Educated in the Charity-Schools* (London, 1788), 17. The passage was quoted approvingly by John, Baron Wrottesley, in *A Concise Account of the establishment . . . and present state of the Charity School for . . . the children of the industrious poor, in the parish of St. Mary-le-Bone* (London: T. Craft, 1794), 2.

20. The school ended the pin-making contract in 1783 "because of 'several inconveniences to the house' as well as the detrimental effect on the children's health" (G.G. Watcyn, *The Liverpool Blue Coat School Past and Present* [Liverpool: Liverpool Blue Coat Brotherly Society, 1967], 11).

21. *The State of the Ladies Charity-School, Lately set up in Baldwin-Street, In the City of Bristol, For teaching poor girls to read and spin; together with their rules, etc.* (Bristol: S. Farley, 1756).

22. The rules and orders for the Lambeth girls' charity school (1794) include a pro-forma bequest form, and on p. 15 an advertisement that "Needle-Work sent to Mrs REED, at the School-House, High-Street, Lambeth, will be executed on the following terms . . ." This is followed by a price list for individual items (napkins, shirts, tablecloths, etc.). Examples of the organizing of manual labour in the so-called "Working Schools" (which had become the norm by 1723) are given by W.K. Lowther Clarke, *The History of the S.P.C.K.* (London: S.P.C.K., 1959), 44–5.

23. Karfoot's letters are summarized in S.P.C.K. "Abstracts of Letters received and read to the Society," items 6221 and 6258. In researching this paper I am grateful to the Archivist, Dr Gordon Huelin, for valuable assistance at the S.P.C.K., Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone, London.

24. S.P.C.K. "Abstracts of Letters," item 5213 (9 May 1717).

25. "Agreed . . . to discourage the Practice of some Children taught in Charity-schools, who Sing Singly in the Church, or any thing farther than the Common Tunes" (S.P.C.K. Minutes, 10 June 1708).

26. Edmund Gibson, *Directions Given to the Clergy of the Diocese of London, In the Year 1724* (London, 1744), 140–3.

27. See Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979) 1:133–34. Temperley notes that some charity hymns were written in more ambitious extended settings, although generally (to quote one hymn) "To psalms and hymns we may aspire, Though anthems are too high." This was the case at St Paul's.

28. Henry Newman to "Mr Auditor Harley," 7 May 1728. S.P.C.K. "Special Letters, 1708–1732" CS3(2) 191.

29. The conductor of the anniversary meetings, John Page (?1740–1812), marked the passages for singing by the children in his collection, *The Anthems & Psalms as performed at St. Paul's Cathedral, On the day of the Anniversary Meeting of the Charity Children, arranged for the Organ* (n.d.). This meant that the St Paul's service could be replicated in local churches throughout the country.

30. Coleire, *The Education Proper for Charity-Children*, 12.

31. *Methods of Erecting, Supporting & Governing Charity-Schools: with An Account of the Charity-Schools in Ireland. The Third Edition, with Additions* (Dublin, 1721), 10.

32. Bisse, *Publick Education*, 24.

33. Mandeville remarked on the principle of uniformity: "[T]here is a natural Beauty in Uniformity which most People delight in. It is diverting to the Eye to see Children well match'd, either Boys or Girls, march two and two in good order; and to have them all whole and tight in the same Clothes and Trimming must add to the comeliness of the sight" (*The Fable of the Bees*, 282).

34. "Whereas the Dressing up of the Ch. Children with Feathers & Ribbands, wch are thought improper & Superfluous Ornaments as well as expensive to ye Parents of the Children, has given Offence. Agreed That it be recommended to Sir Robert Ladbroke the Chairman & to the Trustees for the Management of the Charity Schools to discountenance & forbid the use of such Ornaments" (S.P.C.K. Minutes, 2 April 1754).

35. *Articles agreed upon . . . to be the Standing Rules and Orders for the good Government and Management of the Charity-School, now Erected in the City of York* (1706), rule 12.

36. S.P.C.K. "Abstracts of Letters," item 3088 (12 June 1712). The benefactor was Lady Speke.

37. *A Short Account of the Blue Coat Charity School, in St. Philip's Church Yard, Birmingham, from its institution in 1724 to 1817* (Birmingham, 1817), 13–14.

38. One of many examples is a hymnsheet, *An Hymn to be sung by the Charity Children, of St. Mary, White Chapel, On Sunday the 27th of December, 1772*, which carries the following note: "N.B. This School consists of 60 Boys and 40 Girls: The Boys are taught to Read, Write and cast Accompts, the Girls are taught Reading, Writing, Knitting, Sewing and Marking. They are Annually Cloathed, and when of Age put out Apprentices, or to Services."

39. *Prayers, Psalms and Hymns, used by the Children at the Blue Coat Hospital* (Liverpool, [c.1800]).

40. Coleire, *The Education Proper for Charity-Children*, 8–9.

41. Bisse, *Publick Education*, 14.

42. These details are described approvingly by Sarah Trimmer in her *Reflections upon the Education of Children in Charity Schools* (London, 1792), 15. Trimmer voices the need to keep the children in their place: "neither could such multitudes be trained up as *Charity Children* are, without great injury to society: for, however desirable it may be to rescue the lower kinds of people from that deplorable state of ignorance in which the greatest part of them were for a long time suffered to remain, it cannot be right to train them all in a way which will most probably raise their ideas above

the very lowest occupations of life, and disqualify them for those servile offices which must be filled by some of the members of the community" (7). In this argument the fact that they were "multitudes" counted against them.

43. *Rules for the Government of the Charity School for Sixty Poor Girls, at Bamborough Castle* (Alnwick: J. Catnach, 1794), 10–11. Some of the parents objected to the new rules curtailing their daughters' education and withdrew them from the school, hence the publication the following year of R.G. Bouyer's *An Earnest Address to the Parents, Guardians, or other Friends of such Children as now take, or are intended to take, the benefit of the Charity School, for Sixty poor Girls, as it has been lately regulated at Bamborough Castle* (Alnwick: J. Catnach, 1795). One reason given by parents for the withdrawal was "that their daughters had been instructed in fractions, and they found they were not to be allowed to pursue that knowledge any further." Bouyer on behalf of the governors took a firm line: "from our information, profession, and habits of life, we must be better judges as to what methods are fittest" (9).

44. Bamborough Castle Rules, 10.

45. "A Hymn sung before Her Majesty, by the Charity-Children, at Kinsington," from *The Poetical Entertainment* (1722).

46. Thomas Gibbons, *Dedication of Ourselves to God argued from the Divine Mercies in a Sermon [on Rom. xii. 1] preached at St. Thomas's, January 2, 1764. For the Benefit of the Charity-School in Gravel-Lane, Southwark* (London, 1764), 34.

47. Hymn sheet printed for the anniversary service of the charity school in St Mary's parish church, Rotherhithe, 1792, quoted by M.G. Jones, 76.

48. Sunday, 20 September 1778. This is no. 11 in 'A Collection of 139 single sheets, containing hymns to be sung by the Charity Children of Saint Mary, Islington, at the special service in aid of the funds of the Islington Parochial Schools, 1768–1833' (British Library, 3434.h.8).

49. *The Poetical Works of J. and C. Wesley, Reprinted from the Originals*, ed. George Osborn, 13 vols. (London, 1868–72).

50. This describes Copy W (King's College, Cambridge) reproduced in William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. Andrew Lincoln (The William Blake Trust / The Tate Gallery, 1991). The mountain is also snowy in copy Y.

51. York Articles (1706), rule 11.

52. Robert Acklom Ingram, *A Sermon [on Gal. vi. 9] Preached in the Parish-Church of St James, Colchester, on Sunday the 24th of August, 1788, For the Benefit of the Charity School* (Colchester, [1788]), 20–3. A similar point was made by George Horne in his sermon for the London anniversary of 1783: "Thousands and ten thousands of children have been snatched from the jaws of ruin, from ignorance and vice" (*A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London: On Thursday, June 12th, 1783*, 17).

53. *A Sermon Preached in the Parish Church of Christ-Church, London: On Thursday, May the 10th, 1781. Being the Time Of the Yearly Meeting of the Children Educated in the Charity-Schools, in and about the Cities of London and Westminster*, 11, 21–2, 15–16.

54. Gardner (*The Tyger*, 95) argues that Blake's reference to the "guardians of the poor" indicates that he attended either the 1783 or the 1784 St Paul's ceremony, since the Gilbert Act (1782) stated that the guardians' new responsibilities should not commence until March 1783.

55. *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London: On Thursday, May 2d, 1782*, 22.

56. *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London: On Thursday, June 10th, 1784*, 18.

57. Samuel Clapham, *A Sermon, preached in the Parish Church of Sunderland, for the benefit of the Charity School, December 16th 1792* (Leeds: J. Binns [1792]), 10–11, 20.

58. Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Letters on the Female Mind, Its Powers and Pursuits* (London, 1793), 168. She complained: "I feel it impossible, with any degree of comfort, or even security, to walk in London, unprotected by a gentleman. The levelling principle has rendered all persons, making an appearance at all above the common rank, obnoxious to the most galling abuse, and often to personal insult . . . I have found it so irksome lately, that I leave the *pavé* to the democrats" (166–7).

59. "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting" (Acts 2: 2).