



THE VOICE OF SONG:
A prosodic and phonological approach to
William Blake

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SUMMARY

William Blake specifically designated certain passages of his poetry "song" and this thesis examines these from both a prosodic and phonological point of view, testing the contention that Blake possessed a critical "inner ear".

Since Blake both raised and changed the "voice of song" throughout his lifetime, it will be argued that Blake had, first, a developing sense of the aural effect of his poetry and, secondly, that he had a growing awareness that "song" as he used it in his poetry could supply a "medium between that of conversing and singing ... the graces of cadence" which John Herries, his contemporary, saw as lacking in the expression of Blake's age.

Blake is placed against a background of "sound": what the writers of his day said about poetry and its relation to music; which composers were influential in the London from which he was rarely absent; and what elements of London speech and song may have influenced the poet.

The early "Songs" from the Poetical Sketches have a lyrical Elizabethan appeal, but Blake is seen as continually experimenting both prosodically and phonologically as he does in An Island in the Moon. However, in this latter work he who sings and he who listens emerge more clearly and "song" is used as a connecting device in a piece of good theatre. This artificiality, in turn, gives way to the Songs of Innocence and of Experience wherein Blake transforms the tradition of the nursery rhyme and of the children's

hymn into "songs of happy cheer", "melodies" and cadences which "every child may joy to hear".

Having achieved what many critics consider the "ultimate" in song, Blake then began a new period of experimentation; in the minor prophecies he produced a variety of forms of "song" and about the same time began The Four Zoas which, although not taken to the etched stage, contains some of the most lyrical of Blake's songs. Milton contains the longest song of all in the "Bard's Song" which, despite the crucial problem of multiple revisions, reveals that the voice of the bardic figure raised in song is effectual. Jerusalem develops this emphasis upon the voice, rather than upon the song as a returning measure - such as is seen in the broadside ballad or the conventional lyric; however, although Blake speaks in the Preface to Jerusalem of three kinds of poetry and writes in a variety of types of cadence he, nevertheless, begins and ends this prophetic work with mention of song.

It may be concluded, therefore, that in a lifelong pursuit for the best voice, Blake never abandoned the concept of song as it could be used in poetry of many different forms and function but, rather, developed the medium to accord with the message.

Whether it is in a song which is voiced, or in a voice which sings in the graces of cadence, Blake variously and gloriously raised the voice of song.

This thesis contains no material which has been previously submitted for any other degree in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief it contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where acknowledgement is made.

Signed:

M.A. HOOD

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