Fact and Symbol in "The Chimney Sweeper" of Blake's Songs of Innocence

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A reader of William Blake's two chimney sweeper songs needs little more information concerning eighteenth-century London "climbing boys" than the songs provide, in order to grasp their general humanitarian and symbolic significance. Yet familiarity with some additional details does, I think, help us see more clearly Blake's indictment of a society that allows children to be subjected to almost unbelievably wretched conditions, and it also gives more force and point to the symbolism. For in the songs Blake does not really describe the living and working conditions of the sweeps; he presupposes knowledge of them. Writing at the time of the passage of the "Chimney Sweepers' Act" of 1788, when newspapers and reformers like Jonas Hanway were publicizing the treatment of the sweeps, Blake could depend on his readers' being aware of the facts in a way that modern readers are not. And he can therefore express his deep outrage, obliquely and ironically, through the understated discourse of boys who, in the symbolic context of *Songs of Innocence & Experience*, have somehow learned to preserve their humanity in circumstances that are all but completely dehumanizing. The details of chimney sweeping which these notes will briefly review, do not, to be sure, reveal the poems in a new light. But a more sharply delineated picture of the lives of the sweeps than Blake's speakers in the poems can give strengthens our awareness of the ironic disparity between the tone of the boys' discourse and the conditions they allude to; it helps us to see some of the imagery of the poems a little more vividly; and it sets some badly needed limits on symbolic interpretations of the poems.

As any reader of *Oliver Twist* is aware, the boys were indeed boys, the smaller the better. When Blake's sweep of *Innocence* says,

*When my mother died I was very young,*

*And my father sold me while yet my tongue*

*Could scarcely cry "weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"*1
he is not exaggerating. Although the usual age at which children became sweeps, or apprentices, was six or seven, some did so at five or even four. And the word "sold" is to be taken quite literally. Unlike the usual apprenticeship, in which the fee is paid to the master, binding children -- both boys and girls -- to a master sweep usually brought a payment ranging from twenty shillings to five guineas from the master to the parent, if there was one, or to whoever had the child at the time. Ostensibly the child was apprenticed for seven years, after which he was usually too large to go into small chimneys; but after his apprenticeship he was by no means assured of a living as a journeyman, since there was not enough work to go around. Often he was left to the parish to support, not only because work was scarce, but because he was physically unable to work. Chimney sweeping left children with kneecaps twisted and spines and ankles deformed, from crawling up chimneys as small as nine or even seven inches in diameter, with "chimney sweep's cancer" of the scrotum resulting from the constant irritation of the soot, with respiratory ailments, and eye inflammations.

Their living and working conditions were almost incredibly wretched. Although some masters took reasonably good care of their sweeps, most, to judge from evidence given before parliamentary committees and other contemporary sources, kept them worse than animals. Sweeps arose literally "in the dark" and worked until about noon, when they "cried the streets" for more business until it was time to return, carrying heavy bags of soot, to the cellars and attics where they slept, often not on mattresses or even straw but on the bags of soot they had swept. When Blake's sweep says "in soot I sleep," he is not talking metaphorically. Soot is his element day and night. Nor was there much relief from it, even temporarily, for sweeps often went without washing for six months.
Little Tom Dacre cried when they shaved his head but not the ordinary child's tears that come from fear of the unknown. As the older sweep's remark makes clear, Tom's haircut is a ritual one, like those given in prison or the army, and he is aware of it. Tears will be common in his new life for awhile. The children did cry when forced, by fire, slaps, proddings with poles, or by the pricking of the bottoms of their feet with pins, to go up small chimneys. Because the chimneys were very narrow where small boys were used, climbing was accomplished through inching one's way up using knees and elbows, which at first became raw and bled but in about six months, after "the sores," developed a thick sole. The most frightening aspect of climbing was going into a confined dark space, uncertain what would happen in the curves, where boys sometimes got stuck and suffocated. To Tom Dacre, the new sweep, unaccustomed as yet to being shut up in a narrow black space but aware of the real possibility of death, a dream of being locked up in a coffin of black is more natural than symbolic. And a boy spending his days squeezed in sooty chimneys, being cleansed only when he was taken outside to be swept off, spending his nights sleeping on soot, would quite naturally dream wishfully of leaping, laughing, running, and being able to "wash in a river, and shine in the sun."

Tom's dreaming of sweeps sporting "naked & white," while it serves Blake's symbolic purpose in the *Songs*, also has a more specific significance. Nakedness is not here merely a symbol of Innocence. In dreaming of it Tom is making a connection between his dream imagery and his ordinary life. For sweeps often went up chimneys naked, since clothes took up needed room, and bare skin, though it would bruise and scratch, did not catch on the rough plaster inside the chimney, and of course did not cost anything to replace. Protective clothing of leather had been used earlier in the century but was abandoned because the heat from the fires
that were sometimes kept going while boys were in chimneys would parch and spoil the leather.  

Naked immersion in soot, therefore, is Tom's normal state now, and naked white cleanliness is its natural opposite.

The sweeps were not simply children who were forced to clean chimneys. Tom's ritual haircut changes him into a different, somehow subhuman creature. Even Charles Lamb, who was sympathetic with the sweeps, could not help regarding them as beings not quite the same as other people. And Thomas Hood, despite his sympathics for the laboring poor, remarked with a callous detachment, in defending the practice of using children for sweeps, that it was just as natural for these creatures to make their call as it was for sparrows to chirp.

When Blake's sweep of *Experience* says that his parents have gone off to church, it is significant that *he* does not go: the sweeps were not welcome, if an anecdote told by Jonas Hanway is indicative of a common attitude:

As an instance in what manner these poor children are treated, I remember an anecdote of a little band of them, who had the fortune to be supplied with Sunday's clothing: their faces, however, proclaimed them chimney sweepers. Curiosity, or information that the churches were houses of God, carried them within the gates of a church; but alas! they were driven out by the beadle, with this taunt, "What have chimney sweepers to do in a church?"

Blake's songs are not merely humanitarian poems, like those which Lamb characterized as being "colour'd by fiction," published in James Montgomery's *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend and Climbing Boy's Album*, where "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Innocence* was first reprinted.
To Lamb, who unsuccessfully "batter'd [his] brains . . . for a few verses" for the album, Blake's poem was "the flower of the set."[^23]

Chimney Sweeper" belongs only superficially in the genre of sad stories of little sweeps, for Blake deals with particular social evils symbolically in the comprehensive "prophetic" context of Innocence and Experience. But if this prophetic context of "The Two Contrary States of the Human Soul" reveals a larger meaning in the plight of the sweeps than can be seen naturalistically, we must nevertheless see the sweeps with as much harsh particularity as possible, not only to restore a factual context for Blake's allusive imagery to work in, but also to grasp them clearly enough as symbols. A symbolic interpretation of these songs that does not keep the cruel facts firmly in view is in danger of going badly astray.

The black skin of the sweep of *Innocence* is indeed, as Northrop Frye suggests, a symbolic "modulation" of the black skin of the African,[^24] but it is a mistake to take the sweep as being too closely analogous in all respects to the Little Black Boy, as, for instance, Robert F. Gleckner does:

> He sleeps in soot instead of the earthly mother's bosom or lap. But just
> as the mother shields the child from the intense beams of God's love until
> he is able to bear them alone, so the sweeper's soot is ironically his shield.[^25]

A reading such as this is possible only if one takes a rather generalized view of the sweep's condition, for it is hard to imagine what the sweep's soot shields him from, ironically or otherwise. The dark pigment of the African's skin enables him to bear the beams of God's love, symbolized as sunbeams, and, in showing his closeness to God, Blake ironically reveals the clouded vision of the dominant white society which has enslaved him.[^26] But the sweeps do not need protection from the beams of love, symbolically or naturally. Naturally, they do not see the
sun, and symbolically they are far worse off than the Black Boy, since their humanity has been all but completely obscured. They live in a world of unrelieved blackness, rising in the dark, spending their days enclosed in black chimneys, and sleeping on bags of soot.

The difference between the blackness of the African and that of the sweeps is literally the difference between day and night, between eventual light and unrelieved darkness. The Negro boy is able to look forward to the day when he will be like the English boy -- not "white," to be sure, but freed of his "black cloud"; the sweeps, who were white, are now black and, unless an angel releases them, will presumably stay that way. Blake uses blackness ironically in "The Little Black Boy" and "The Chimney Sweeper," but the irony twists in a different direction in each. In the former, white society feels that it can enslave and hence dehumanize the Negro because of the blackness of his skin, which then becomes symbolic of his inferiority in the eyes of the whites, and also of his oppression. But a naturalistic fact about dark skin, its ability to withstand the sun's heat, allows Blake to manipulate the symbol to show the Negro boy, from the perspective of humanity, as superior to his oppressors. Naturalistic fact allows no positive reversal of blackness in "The Chimney Sweeper." The irony here is that the white victims of oppression are turned black and become, in the eyes of their oppressors, what they seem to be: creatures so different as to have no claims on humanity.

Although the sweep is like the Negro boy a slave and like him black, the Negro boy can envision a release from his slavery because his mother's wise teaching has enabled him to see life so comprehensively that he can feel tender now toward the English boy while he waits for a cloud of white supremacy to vanish. The hope held out to the sweep is much fainter. All the older sweep can tell Tom Dacre is that if his hair is shaved off the soot won't spoil it. This consolation could, perhaps, be taken as offering a hope of Tom's actually regaining his
Innocence, his imaginative vision, but if so it is not very much to go on. It is more a counsel of endurance than of hope: if your outward appearance of Innocence is completely gone, you will be better able to survive in the world of Experience. In being shorn of his lamb-like hair and being plunged into a world of death and blackness, Tom has been stripped of all the Innocence that Experience can strip him of.²⁷

Both poems are of course Songs of Innocence, belonging to that complete stratum of songs showing Innocence or imaginative perception of reality dwelling with bitter knowledge gained in the world of Experience. And part of the wonder of "The Chimney Sweeper" is that Blake can make us feel this Innocence as being alive even in the midst of such bitter oppression. But the imagery in which Innocence is represented, derived largely from the modest wishes of a little boy who would like to be liberated from black chimneys to wash in a river and run about in the warm sunshine, does not allow us to forget the realistic context, which even a symbolic view of the sweep's dream should not ignore.

The only hope actually held out to the boy in his dream is vague and distant, expressed by the angel in the language of a kind but stuffy adult:

And the angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father, & never want joy.

Tom's wish to have God for his father is natural enough, since his real father sold him into his present condition.²⁸ But when is this to be? Being "a good boy" in Tom's situation can mean little more than being a good sweep and staying out of trouble, but he must find what consolation he can even in an admonition like this, which makes him feel that someone, if only in a dream, cares about him. Since no one will really come with a bright key to release him into
the sunshine, he must, in order to endure, find in the angel's words private meaning of more immediate hope than they actually hold out.

The moral appended by the older sweep, "So if all do their duty they need not fear harm," puts another conventional construction on the matter. Doing one's duty here means primarily going up chimneys without having to be forced, and the "harm" is the very real punishment given boys who would not climb. Joseph Wicksteed has suggested that doing one's duty means the dreaming of dreams.29 I think this interpretation passes too easily over the facts. But the line could be taken to mean that if one adapts as well as possible to the present inhuman condition, sustained by such glimpses of Innocence as are possible, in dreams, then one may be able to keep from losing one's humanity altogether. In any case, there is nothing else that can be done.

If the facts of Tom Dacre's condition make the poem affecting in a way that limits critical ingenuity, I do not think the poem loses very much by that. It does not become sentimental; the speaker's understatements prevent it. Nor does it become simple; the tension between Innocence and Experience, on the contrary, becomes, when fleshed out, more compellingly complex than ever.30

POSTSCRIPT ON LEGISLATION

The conditions of climbing boys began to be publicized in 1780. In June and December of that year a committee organized by Jonas Hanway and others sent out appeals to all masters who could be located for better treatments of sweeps.31 Another committee was formed in 1783 and yet another in 1788, which was instrumental in securing the passage of "An Act for the better regulation of chimney sweepers, and their Apprentices" (28 George III, c. 48). The act stipulated that a churchwarden or overseer of the poor, with the approval of two justices, could bind a boy of eight, or older; that masters could have no more than six apprentices; that boys
would not be let our for hire to other masters; and included in the indenture forms further stipulation that masters must provide "competent and sufficient meat, drink, washing, lodging, apparel": provide working clothes and at least once a year, clothes to be worn when not working; "at least once a week . . . cause the . . . apprentice to be thoroughly washed and cleansed from soot and dirt"; require the apprentice to attend church and "permit and allow him to receive the benefit of any other religious instruction," when the apprentice would not wear his working dress; limit the hours which apprentices would call the streets; and, finally, the forms stipulated the master or other persons delegated by him could not "require or force the said apprentice to climb or go up any chimney which shall be actually on fire, nor make use of any violent or improper means to force him to climb or go up any chimney."

The act of 1788 helped a little, but it was weak and difficult to enforce. Abuse continued. What was needed was an act prohibiting the use of climbing (and girls) altogether. Machines of various kinds were demonstrated during the next eighty-seven years, as efforts to gain the needed legislation continued. Bills were passed in the Commons in 1804, 1818, 1819, the latter two as the result of a good deal of distressing testimony in committee hearings; but the Lords, for a variety of reasons, among them that of ostensibly not wanting to infringe on property rights by dictating the kinds of chimneys that would be needed for effective mechanical sweeping, regularly defeated them. Bills regulating the trade were finally passed by both houses in 1834 (4 and 5 Guilielmi, c. 35), in 1840 (3 and 4 Victoria, c. 85), in 1864 (28 Victoria, c. 377). But it was not until 1875, when a bill introduced by Lord Shaftesbury was passed (38 and 39 Victoria, c. 70), that the practice of sending children up chimneys was at last made illegal.
Notes

1. Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes (London: 1957), 117. All quotations from Blake are from this text.


3. Hanway, 53-54; *CSF*, 102, 170, 211, 228.

4. Hanway, 25; *CSF*, 169, 182. Small boys fetched a higher fell. Children were sometimes stolen and sold; see *CSF*, 219.


6. Ibid., 170, 233.

7. Ibid., 170, 199, 228.

8. Ibid., 202.

9. Ibid., 201.

10. See, for instance, the reports issued annually by the Society for Superseding the Necessity of Climbing Boys which extracted reports of newsworthy abuses from the papers. A good bibliography of contemporary accounts of climbing boys and chimney sweeping in general may be found in George L. Phillips, *England's Climbing Boys: A History of the Long Struggle to Abolish Child Labor in Chimney-Sweeping*, Publication No 5 of the Kress Library of Business and Economics (Cambridge: 1949).


12. *CSF*, 210; see also *Oliver Twist*, chapter III.


14. Ibid., 186.

15. Several accounts are given in the Society for Superseding of the Necessity of Climbing Boys, *Report* of 1826.

16. Hanway, 53-54; *CSF*, 194.
17. Hanway, 101, 102. Children did not sweep in Germany, and the men sweeps wore leather suits like those used now by scuba divers.

18. Becoming a chimney sweep "cuts them off from all society," says W. Tooke; see CSF 175.


20. "The Sweep's Complaint."


23. Ibid.


27. According to Gleckner, "the white hair cannot be spoiled because it is not there substantially yet to the imagination the hair is there, unspoiled and in a sense protected" (100).

28. The poem does not say that Tom's father sold him, but parents were usually the ones who sold children. The speaker of the poem was sold by his father. Cp. "The Song of the Poor Little Sweep," which closely parallels this passage: An orphan sweep says, "The gentleman said I'd a father in heaven, /Whose care never slumber'd, whose eye cannot sleep. . . .," CSF 254. This sweep too is filled with gladness, but in a much more conventional way.


30. I am grateful to Professor John E. Grant for valuable critical suggestions


33. See B. M. Forster, "An Account of Some Attempts which have been made at different Periods to benefit the Condition of Chimney-Sweepers," *The Philanthropist* 5 (1815): 341-342. A very full account of later efforts is to be found in Phillips.
Bibliography


F[orster], B. M. "An Account of Some Attempts which have been made at different Periods to benefit the Condition of Chimney-Sweepers." *The Philanthropist* 5 (1815): 341-342.


