

## William Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*: The Role of the Pipe

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1 THE "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* (illus. 1) is a short poem about a piper. This article addresses one particular feature that has not been thoroughly considered: the significance of the piper's pipe. Examining the instrument and its role throws fresh light on the poem.

### Background and Previous Commentaries

- 2 The "Introduction," actually a proem, is a concise tale in lyric form with five quatrains relating an episode that occurs to a piper, apparently a shepherd, wandering in the countryside. While he is piping a child appears on a cloud and advises him to pipe a song about a Lamb and then to stop playing and instead sing his songs, and subsequently to stop singing and write down the words of the songs. The poem contains motifs that appear in later poems in *Songs of Innocence* (for example, a lamb, clouds, shepherds, children, and pastoral settings), as well as issues of a religious and philosophical nature. The apparent focus is on happy circumstances, and numerous commentaries recognize that it has joyous and endearing qualities that have ensured its popularity.
- 3 While many commentators have focused on the poem's structural, emotional, and poetic features, few have referred to the piper's pipe and none has seriously questioned its role. General observations that mention the pipe only in passing, if at all, are not addressed in this article.
- 4 The lack of attention paid to the pipe is curious, given its prominence: the first word of the first line of the first stanza of the first poem in the collection refers to the act of "piping"; the poem's development depends on the instrument;

and images of a piper piping appear on the frontispiece (illus. 2) and on the title page (in the fold of the letter "I" of *Innocence*).<sup>1</sup> When the pipe has been mentioned in criticism, there is no consensus as to what it is. For example, some refer to it as a shepherd's pipe—an unarguable position, given that the player is portrayed with sheep—but the description is too imprecise to be helpful. Wicksteed, on the other hand, writes that "the reeds . . . supplied his pipes" (80), which assumes, contrary to the frontispiece, that the piper has more than one pipe and, again without justification, that it is fabricated from reeds. Bite maintains that it is a panpipe. Erdman is more perceptive, suggesting on the basis of the frontispiece that it is "no simple shepherd's pipe, it looks like an oboe" (*Illuminated Blake* 43). Such varied commentaries make unwarranted assumptions about the instrument's construction and thus obscure its identity and purpose.

- 5 One reason for this confusion is the lack of clarity about Blake's intentions when he used the generic term "pipe." Did he, in the frontispiece, portray an instrument simply and imaginatively rather than accurately, an approach taken by many artists? Or did he have in mind a particular kind of pipe, and, if so, which? While all pipes fall under the generic term "woodwind" and all derive, mythologically at least, from a syrinx made of reeds (discussed later), some produce tone when air is directed toward a sharp edge, whether internal or external, and others produce tone when air vibrates a reed. The former category includes the syrinx, duct flutes (including simple pipes, recorders, and flageolets), and transverse flute; the latter includes the ancient Greek aulos (often translated confusingly from ancient texts as "flute"), oboe, clarinet, saxophone, and shawm. Many of the pipes in both categories—notably, the aulos, syrinx, some duct flutes, and clarinet (particularly in its early form as a chalumeau)—have been associated with shepherds.

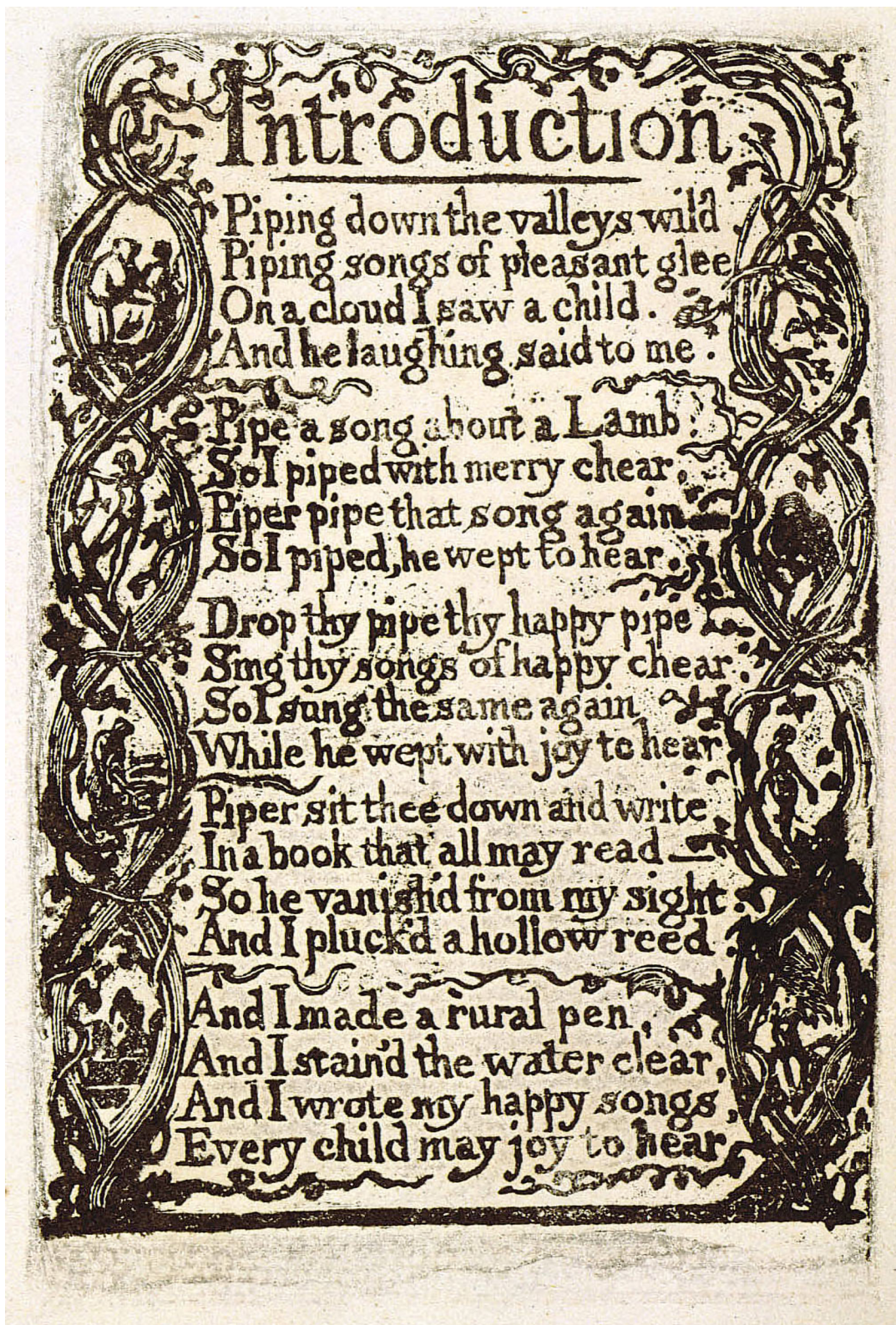
### The Piper's Features

- 6 The first stanza conjures an image that is common in folk art: the solitary piper. He is "Piping down the valleys wild / Piping songs of pleasant glee."<sup>2</sup> This shepherd appears to be

1. Erdman's *Concordance* (2: 1435-36) shows that "pipe" and related words ("piping," etc.) are spread thinly among Blake's works. A flute is mentioned in *Songs of Innocence* in connection with a new beginning in "Spring" (E 14).

2. This opening line, referring to a piper wandering in the world of nature, resembles a scene in Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte* (Vienna, 1791) in which Papageno enters piping.

Glen suggests that the unattached present participles "give a sense of undirected, timelessly spontaneous energy" (65). Not all commentators agree with the idea of a contented shepherd. In Gleckner's view, for example, Blake's shepherd leads a way of life that is far from peace-



1. "Introduction," *Songs of Innocence* copy U (composed and printed 1789). 11.3 x 7.9 cm. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Typ 6500.34u.



2. Frontispiece, *Songs of Innocence* copy U (composed and printed 1789). 11.0 x 7.0 cm. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Typ 6500.34u.

at peace in nature and content with his pastoral circumstances, a picture of tranquillity that has been portrayed in literature and visual art since classical times.<sup>3</sup> Classical authors express the extent to which contemporary shepherds revered Pan, the ancient Greek god of the natural world, who inhabited the fields and forests, usually playing pipes: Theocritus reports that pipes were not played at noon because that was when Pan slept, and he was not to be disturbed. It is difficult to conceive that Blake constructed an image of a shepherd-piper in woodland valleys without having Pan in mind, and the allusion has accordingly been recognized by many commentators (see, for example, Wicksteed 79).

- 7 While Blake's piper cannot be dissociated from the idea of Pan, he is not "Pan-like" (McLane 427) and does not represent Pan figuratively. Pan was given form as a disreputable, licentious, zoomorphic figure with cloven hooves, while the frontispiece of *Innocence* depicts an upright, statuesque human form, barefoot and in token clothing, evoking classical representations of gods in sculpture. These contrasting features of Blake's piper cease to be contradictory when they are linked to the idea of progression or spiritual development—the principal theme of this poem. The pipe plays an important role in this process.

#### What Is the Pipe?

- 8 The piper-Pan allusion serves to define some fundamental features of the pipe and its ability to establish heavenly communication. The source for this is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work that records the ancient myths. Despite harboring doubts about the neoclassical tendencies of his period, Blake was well aware of the *Metamorphoses*, which had been published a number of times in English during the eighteenth century, and is said to have "delighted" in it (Damon 313, quoting Samuel Palmer). Ovid explains how Pan chased the nymph Syrinx, who, wishing to escape his clutches, prayed to be transformed. In the margins of the water, she was transfigured into reeds, which in the breeze produced "sweet tones" (Ovid 53).<sup>4</sup> Pan cut the reeds into

ful: "irresponsible," "infantile," and "aimless" (he uses the latter adjective on four occasions [86, 89 (twice), 97]). Gardner notes that the piper is coming "back from the open country towards the congenial, inhabited locality" (19), which may mean that he is guiding his flock down the valley from upper summer pastures. As Gardner suggests, this piper is a "guardian of Innocence" (18).

3. The shepherd with his pipe appears, for instance, in the *Idylls* of Theocritus, the first of the bucolic poets, and as Daphnis in the early novel *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus (Theocritus 19, 21, 107, 161; Longus 12-197). As a symbol of what came to be called Arcadian bliss, the image remained popular (see, for example, John Craxton's 1948 *Pastoral for P. W.*).

4. Blake refers in *The Four Zoas* to the "soothing flute" (E 319).

different lengths and joined them together, making a set of proportionate pipes, each open at one end, which has since been called a syrinx in memory of the nymph (and frequently a panpipe in memory of Pan). The syrinx became—mythologically—the first flute. While Pan was unable to fulfill his carnal desires, he could communicate with Syrinx through the reed pipes—"This union, at least, shall I have with thee"—and thus the reeds were the means by which he could overcome desire and embrace a spiritual attitude.<sup>5</sup> In Blake's "Introduction," this story is the mythological basis of the piper's communication with the heavenly child, who appears in the third line of the first stanza. In that case, does the piper play an instrument derived from, or related to, the syrinx and reeds?

- 9 There is no evidence that he plays a syrinx. The poem's text refers to a "pipe," not pipes. The frontispiece depicts the piper with a single pipe, even using the correct left/right hand positioning for such an instrument. However, this identification can be dismissed for a number of reasons. The design shows a pipe approximately fifty centimeters in length, which implies that it has keys, and, most importantly—Blake makes this absolutely clear—it has a beak and terminates with a pronounced bell, characteristics that exclude the possibility of its being a *simple* pipe. It is not a rustic device but an engineered instrument, most likely fabricated from boxwood or ebony. The size of the bell rules out other forms of flutes, such as the recorder or flageolet, and the beak rules out the oboe, a woodwind that produces tone when air is directed to a slim, exposed double reed, which then vibrates. It is also unlikely to be a shawm: there is no indication of a pirouette (a disc against which players rest their lips to prevent strain), and while shepherds have on occasion been portrayed with shawms the instrument tended to be played ceremonially by professional musicians.

- 10 Blake's piper appears to be holding an eighteenth-century clarinet, an instrument that the musicologist Johann Gottfried Walther records in his 1732 *Musicalisches Lexicon* (168). Originally called a chalumeau, a bucolic instrument played by peasants, and alternatively and confusingly a "shepherd's pipe," the clarinet is suited in its upper register to outdoor use and remains an outdoor instrument in marching bands and folk ensembles in eastern Europe. It became increasingly popular in European art music as the eighteenth century progressed. Most specimens were fabricated from boxwood and ebony and all had a relatively

5. Pipes, even when not made from reeds, have continued to evoke a connection with the spiritual world. Flutes appear on Etruscan tomb decoration and a flute is the sound of the underworld in act 2 of Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice* (1774).

large bell.<sup>6</sup> It is related to the reed, insofar as a clarinet produces tone by means of a vibrating reed secured to its beak. Moreover, there is a close relationship between the clarinet and the changes that occur later in Blake's poem: clarinet is a diminutive of clarion, which was formerly the name for a trumpet.<sup>7</sup> Walther refers to this when he writes that the early eighteenth-century clarinet produced "the far-away sound of a trumpet, softened and sweetened by distance" (168).<sup>8</sup> There are numerous references, particularly biblical, to trumpets' announcing or introducing important changes or events, so a trumpet-like instrument is perfectly appropriate for heralding the spiritual change that the piper experiences later in the poem.<sup>9</sup> A trumpet itself would have negated the essential image of a bucolic shepherd, whereas a clarinet, which is associated with shepherds and with a sound that has the qualities of a trumpet, makes an extremely effective compromise.

### The Piper's Spiritual Transition

- 11 The opening lines of the poem present the piper in a pagan culture and in a lowly place, a valley. He is addressed by a child in a higher place, on a cloud, who asks him to pipe a song about a Lamb. As many commentators have pointed out, the child almost certainly has a Christian imperative, given that the capitalized "Lamb" in Christian imagery refers to Christ. The pagan piper cannot at this point distinguish "Lamb" from lamb and is unlikely to have piped a hymn—he probably played a well-known traditional tune such as "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep"—but the child is nevertheless ecstatic about what he hears. Previously overlooked, but of particular significance in this Christian context, is the child's subsequent instruction to the piper to discard the pipe: "Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe."
- 12 The child's command is critically important for understanding the poem's purpose, for two reasons. It signals change in accordance with the biblical comment "And the voice of ... pipers ... shall be heard no more" (Revelation 18), a chapter that refers to overcoming unChristian activities. Secondly, it alludes to the way in which the early church restricted piping. The circumstances are rooted in

6. See images of the early clarinet in Baines, plate xxvii; Rendall, plates 1 and 2.

7. It is not always clear what instrument Blake is referring to when he mentions the clarion—he distinguishes clarions and trumpets in *The Four Zoas* (E 400) and *America* (E 55), but appears to associate trumpet and clarion as an instrument of revelation in "let the clarion of war begin" (*Poetical Sketches*, E 436).

8. See also Baines 117-18; Rendall 64.

9. For example, in 2 Chronicles 13:12 trumpets "sound the battle cry"; in Matthew 6:2 they "announce"; and in Revelation 8-11 seven trumpets are sounded, one at a time, to signal each of the apocalyptic events.

the use of pipes in agrarian economies to deceive birds—the *Distichs of Cato*, for instance, uses the metaphor of birds' being deceived by the hunter's pipe to caution people to be wise:

Approve not men who wheedling nothings say:  
Fowlers pipe sweetly to delude their prey.  
(*Disticha* book 1, no. 27)

The early church developed the metaphor, linking the pipe to the phallus and arguing that heretics and nonbelievers were deceived by the passions aroused by the pipe, just as they were by passions related to the phallus. An example may be found in the *Panarion*, in which St. Epiphanius expresses his profound concern about phallogentric Gnostic doctrines and likens the phallus to an end-blown pipe (and thus the pipe to the serpent that deceived Eve):

For there is a spirit of imposture which, like breath in a flute, sets every fool in motion against the truth .... Indeed, the flute itself is a replica of the serpent through which the evil one spoke and deceived Eve. For the flute was prepared to deceive mankind, on its [the serpent's] model and in imitation of it.  
(*Panarion* book 1, no. 25, par. 4.9-10)

Phallogentric activities were considered degenerate, idolization of the phallus was condemned, and the church chose to stigmatize the pipe.<sup>10</sup> Abandoning the pipe was the means by which people were directed away from passions and toward reason/wisdom.<sup>11</sup> Pipers were dissuaded from piping and the instrument fell into disuse for centuries, to be replaced in art by images of harps and other stringed instruments. Despite Blake's nonconformist beliefs and his misgivings about the established church, he alludes in the "Introduction" to one of the early Roman Church's earliest challenges and appears to be siding with the church fathers.

- 13 Discarding the pipe signals that the piper's association with Pan has ended and refers, by implication, to the end of Pan, who was the only Greek god to die. The story was told by an Egyptian sailor named Thamus, who heard the cry "Great Pan is dead" coming from over the sea in the vicinity of Paxi. His experience was subsequently documented by the Greek historian Plutarch in *De defectu oraculorum* (*The*

10. Epiphanius would have been referring to an aulos, an end-blown double-reed instrument that subsequently developed into the oboe. Flute instruments did not reemerge significantly in western European culture until around the tenth century, and the images that accompanied their return were in the main courtly.

11. Other Christian writers condemned pipes: St. John Chrysostom calls them "the very pomp and hotchpotch of the devil" (quoted in Fitzgibbon 270).

*Obsolescence of Oracles*, c. 100 AD) (Plutarch 401-03). Medieval scholars considered the tale credible because it conveniently defined the point at which the era of paganism was over and Christianity was in the ascendant. John Milton refers to Pan's having descended to the underworld on Christ's birth in his celebratory work *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (written in 1629), a poem that Blake knew well and illustrated (Milton 22; Swaim 487-93).<sup>12</sup> Blake's "Introduction" alludes unmistakably to the tale: the piper's pagan associations stop when he develops as a Christian, arguably as a Christ figure.

- 14 In reality, the transition from Pan to Christ was not as abrupt. Paganism decayed as Christ gradually acquired many of Pan's characteristics. Some poets then fused the two: for example, the glossary to May in Edmund Spenser's *The Shepherdes Calender* (1579) states that "Great Pan is Christ, the very God of all the shepherds." The Pan-to-Christ transition serves in part to explain the ambiguous two-god representation of the piper-shepherd in the frontispiece.
- 15 Discarding the pipe is the piper's first step into the church: he is ready to conform to Christian doctrine. Accordingly, the pipe is not mentioned again and the piper acquires a more spiritual way of life, adopting first the voice and then the written word as a means of expression. The child weeps with joy at this development—another unbeliever is converted and saved.
- 16 It is generally accepted that the child is a channel for conveying divine favor to an otherwise undeserving human being, a pagan shepherd, but the significance of this in a Christian context has not been addressed. The piper's conversion means that the child has conveyed grace. The manner in which grace is applied is theologically complex and doctrines differ from church to church, but three points illustrate Blake's awareness of the issues: the poem is aligned with the idea that grace precedes faith; the grace is efficacious, which in reformed doctrine means that it is applied directly to the person (the shepherd) whom god wishes to save, and is irresistible, so the shepherd must comply with the child's demands, giving the impression that he does so freely;<sup>13</sup> and intellectual faith is useless without accompanying good works, in this case writing the songs ("Grace" 698; Holy Bible, James 2:14-17; Jeffrey and Davids 317).

12. Milton writes: "Full little thought they then, / That the mighty Pan / Was kindly come to live with them below."

13. This explains Essick's comment about the piper's "responses being immediate, almost as though his independent will is suspended" (29).

- 17 The poem is thus not entirely about the progression from rustic innocence to civilizing experience but about the power of reason over passion and in religious terms the enlightened progression out of an unChristian culture.

### The Reed Pen

- 18 With the pipe dropped, the child calls for the piper to sing, and then transcribe, his songs. The demand for singing associates the poem with the Moravian aspects of Blake's religious beliefs. Count Zinzendorf, founder of the Moravian Church, promoted singing, writing over 2000 hymns. Moreover, the requirement for the piper to instantly fit words to his music reflects Zinzendorf's ability to write songs extremely quickly, often while religious services were in progress.
- 19 In order to write the songs the piper fabricates a "rural pen" from a plucked reed. It is a writing implement that suits the circumstances, but its inclusion in a late eighteenth-century poem is curious, given that reed pens had been replaced by quills as early as the sixth century and possibly during Roman times. John Beckmann's *History of Inventions and Discoveries* (published in English in 1797) notes that Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) reported the use of quills in *Etymologiae* (Beckmann 2: 214-16; Finlay 1-2). Quills offered better elasticity and durability, were easier to cut, did not require seasoning, and were suitable for small writing. Why, then, does Blake not refer to a quill? It is partly because of the continuing use of the reed pen by artists, who appreciated its ability to produce bold strokes—an attribute that draws attention to the significance of the piper's words—and partly because the reed pen supports Blake's allusion to the period when Pan's influence was declining and Christ's rising—a time when such pens were commonplace. The reed, moreover, is a unifying feature in the poem. Through the pipe's mythological origin in reeds and its development in the clarinet (which requires a reed to produce tone), the instrument's tones at the beginning of the poem are linked with the words transcribed by the reed pen. However, those who too closely associate the piper's notes with his subsequent words (Gillham 149-53) are incorrect. His notes are not sustained long term—they are transitory and can never be played and heard in exactly the same way again. Written words, on the other hand, last forever. This refers to the consistent authority of the "Word of God"

- 20 The reed, with its Ovidian mythology relating to spiritual conversion and communication between earth and heaven, is crucial to Blake's storyline. No other type of instrument would have served his purpose. It underpins the poem as a metaphor for the continuity of the human soul in changing circumstances: Blake is saying that while humans are root-

ed in nature, they can, by restraining natural passions, acquire wisdom.

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- 21 There is more to this poem than has been recognized to date. In particular, the works of Ovid are fundamental to a full appreciation. Ovid's tale about Pan's conversion to a more spiritual way of life offered Blake a perfect basis for developing a tale about a piper who is converted to Christianity. It is a poem that relies on the juxtaposition of Christ and Pan, god figures representing (as Blake writes of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794), "the two contrary states of the human soul."

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