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An Emendation in “The Chimney Sweeper” of
Innocence

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

Charles Parr Burney as a Blake Collector G. E. Bentley, Jr.

Charles Parr Burney (1785–1864), the grandson of Charles Burney (1726–1814) the musicologist and nephew of Fanny Burney (1752–1840) the novelist, was a wealthy schoolmaster and Archdeacon successively of St. Albans and of Colchester. He is not known to have had any connection with William Blake, except for a letter which he wrote on 29 September 1862 to D. P. Colnaghi the print dealer asking about

a Volume of 'Blake's' eccentric, but very interesting Drawings, accompanied by Verses, written with great care and in very minute characters, — which is now in my possession, — was purchased from you¹

This "Blake" can only be the artist-poet (despite the quotation marks round his name), but no such "Volume" of "Drawings, accompanied by Verses, written . . . in very minute characters" by Blake is known to survive.

On the other hand, the work may not be a manuscript at all. In the nineteenth century Blake's etched works in illuminated printing were sometimes referred to as drawings. For instance, in 1818 Coleridge wrote of "the Drawings" of that "strange publication" *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.² If Charles Parr Burney was similarly casual in confusing drawings and engravings, the volume he owned might be one of Blake's works in illuminated printing. Few of these have "Verses, written with great care and in very minute characters," but *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* seems to fit the description fairly well. Perhaps Burney owned a copy of the printed *Songs*. Or he could have had a copy of *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* (?1818) which has eighteen printed designs and some verses in a small hand. But no copy of either work can be traced to Burney.

It was also common to consider Blake's works in illuminated printing primarily as books of designs. Allan Cunningham speaks of the "wild verses, which are scattered here and there" among the powerful designs of *The Book of Urizen*, and he refers to *America* and *Europe* as being "plentifully seasoned with verse" (*Blake Records*, pp. 487, 500).

But the most likely candidate seems to be a "Volume" of "Drawings, accompanied by [Blake's] Verses, written . . . in very minute characters" which is neither a printed work nor a manuscript by Blake. It may be a facsimile of Blake's *Songs* made by a contemporary of the poet. There are two such manuscript copies, the first (Alpha) apparently copied from *Songs* (P) and the

second (Beta) copied from Alpha by 1825.³ Alpha is known to have stayed in the same family throughout the nineteenth century, but the history of Beta is known only from recent times. It may have been Beta (or another, as yet untraced, contemporary facsimile) which C. P. Burney owned. Beta is colored with considerable imagination and skill, but the text was somewhat carelessly transcribed and was extensively covered by the coloring. These facts may explain why Burney describes it as primarily "a Volume of . . . Drawings" and why he puts "Blake's" name in quotation marks; the designs and words are Blake's but the hand that held brush and pen was not his.

It would be pleasant to think that such a Blake volume as Charles Parr Burney acquired from Colnaghi about 1862 had remained in the family, but C. P. Burney's direct descendant Mr. John R. G. Comyn, who has a number of Burney treasures including C. P. Burney sketchbooks, tells me that he has nothing of the kind, and Professor Joyce Hemlow of McGill University, the editor of Fanny Burney's letters and journals, who has given me generous advice, can throw no more light on the subject. Of all the possibilities among surviving "Blake" works, the contemporary manuscript facsimile of the *Songs* (Beta) seems to me most plausible.

¹ Quoted from the manuscript in Beinecke Library, Yale University. Colnaghi's does not have records which extend back to this period. The firm sold *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (B) to the British Museum on 12 January 1862.

² *Blake Records* (1969), pp. 252, 251.

³ See "Two Contemporary Facsimiles of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*," *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 64 (1970), 450–63. In 1982, copy Alpha belongs to Mr. Paul Mellon and Copy Beta to Mr. Justin Schiller.

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A curious variant in the text of "The Chimney Sweeper" (*Songs* 12) in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy AA (Fitzwilliam Museum), appears to have gone unremarked in spite of the wide distribution of transparencies of this copy by EP Microform. Blake's etched text of line 20 of the poem reads, "He'd have God for his father & never want joy"; in Copy AA, however, the contraction "He'd" has been replaced by the word "But." Though I have not examined the original, the EP transparency appears to reproduce the plate accurately.

The transparency shows no evidence of erasure, but the inking of the plate was uneven; in consequence, letters are obscured by overinking and by underinking. The large area washes further reduce legibility. Someone ap-

pears to have strengthened some letters with pen and ink of the same orange-red color used in printing, but the result is not equal to the legibility of strengthened pages in late copies such as Copy Z (Rosenwald). The original contraction, "He'd," has printed very poorly, but vestiges of the word are still visible beneath the word "But," which has been supplied in the same orange-red ink.¹ The upper right serif of the "H" can be seen protruding from the upper lobe of the "B," the printed crossbar of the "e" is visible in the written "u," and most of the ascender of the "d" is evident to the right of the written "t," which has been formed along the curved bowl of the "d."

There are only a few textual alterations like this one elsewhere in the *Songs*; most other known instances of textual change attributable to Blake provide plausible readings, and most are improvements on the etched text. An emendation that is mechanically similar to the one in AA has been adopted by both David V. Erdman and G. E. Bentley, Jr. in their editions of Blake's writings. This change (from "sung" to "sang") in line 5 of "The Clod & the Pebble" (*Songs* 32), in Copy Z, has been accepted in spite of the fact that it appears in only that copy, and could have been accidental; Copy Z was finished at about the same time as AA and in a similar style.² But the emendation in Copy AA should not be accorded the same degree of respect, for it is a patent corruption. By itself line 20 of "The Chimney Sweeper" as emended in AA is not obviously wrong, but in context it leaves the Angel's promise incomplete and makes the sweeps' happy awakening particularly abrupt:

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

And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.

Although this variant is not particularly meaningful in itself, it could well be authorial, and probably originated in Blake's workshop. The plate appears to have printed so poorly that it is unlikely that it would have been issued without any retouching of the text, and all strengthening (both accurate and inaccurate) appears to have been done with the same ink and in the same style. Whoever did it was certainly not paying close attention to the syntactic or printed evidence on the page; it is hard to imagine an owner of the book who would be sufficiently

officious to go to the trouble of carefully matching the ink but sufficiently obtuse to make such an implausible emendation. Because the word seems to have been added so casually, and because the ink used matches the printing ink so closely (indeed, it could be a diluted form of the printing ink), the emendation should probably be attributed to one of the Blakes or, as Erdman has suggested in correspondence, to an anonymous assistant in the workshop. The task of retouching the text was no doubt tedious, and it is likely that someone, working absent-mindedly, relied on an imperfect memory of the line rather than thoughtful consideration of the evidence in making the unhelpful emendation.³

¹ That the variant in AA is not a change in the plate is certain, for the posthumous Copy *b* (Harvard) has the usual reading. See the Albion Facsimile edition (Albion Facsimiles #1) (London and New York: 1947), n.p. This (as well as all other facsimiles of Harvard's *b*) should, however, be used with caution; see below.

² In addition to the variant in "The Clod and the Pebble" mentioned in the text, four other *Songs* are emended in one or more copies: "A Cradle Song" (*Songs* 17), emended substantially in Copy J; "Night" (*Songs* 21), in Copy Q of *Innocence* (Erdman and Bentley differ slightly as to which words are changed); and "The Tyger" (*Songs* 42), in Copy P. Bentley also mentions an obviously inadvertent textual change in "On Another's Sorrow" (*Songs* 27), in Copy L of *Innocence*: the word "tear" in line 31 printed faintly and was covered by a painted leaf. Erdman's textual notes seem to imply that "The Blossom" (*Songs* 11) has been emended "in all copies issued by Blake." His assertion that the text of "posthumous copies" reads "thy" rather than "my" in line 6 is based on one of the unaccountably retouched facsimiles of Harvard's Copy *b*, in which "my" has been altered to "thy." That Copy *b* itself contains the usual reading has been demonstrated by Mary Ellen Reisner in "Folcroft Facsimile of the *Songs*," *Blake Newsletter* 40 (Spring 1977), 130. See Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 1982), and Bentley, *William Blake's Writings*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

³ In correspondence Erdman cites two instances in which retouching has similarly corrupted the text of *Jerusalem*, Copy B, on plates 17 and 18. These are mentioned in his textual notes, p. 809. Copy B of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* contains another instance of sloppy retouching on plate 25: the word "chariots" is crudely written as "charots."

Detail of *Songs* 12, Copy AA. Reproduced by permission of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

