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Recognizing Fathers

John E. Grant

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DISCUSSION

"With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought."

Recognizing Fathers

Re. Thomas E. Connolly and George R. Levine, "Pictorial and Poetic Design in Two Songs of Innocence," PMLA, LXXXII (May, 1967), 257-264, and the query by David V. Erdman in Blake Newsletter I,...

There are so many marks of weakness and unfamiliarity with the basic facts of Blake scholarship in this article by Connolly and Levine that it would take many pages to identify and correct them all. One must, however, share the exasperation of Erdman at the contention of these authors that the guiding figure depicted in "The Little Boy Found" is the boy's mother. To be sure, they hedge their identification by conceding that "there are traces of the Blakean version of Christ's face in the face of the female figure. Perhaps Blake, by interfusing the face of Christ with that of the earthly mother, attempted to suggest the interpenetration of the human with the divine . . ." (p. 263). But they return to their assertion that the guide is the mother and it is this identification which is sure to be referred to in all subsequent discussions of the design. The methodological as well as interpretational problems raised by this article make it particularly apposite for readers of the Blake Newsletter.

That the reader cannot be depended on simply to look at the picture and then make up his mind as to whether the guide is a man or a woman must immediately be conceded. The basic reason that this is not possible, of course, is that it is not self-evident what we are referring to when we speak of the "picture." Because Connolly and Levine don't know how to identify the picture, as it exists for systematic scholarship, it is not surprising that they don't know how to interpret the few versions of it that they claim to have seen. In their "Appendix" (p. 264), where they give almost all their detailed data, they mention having examined "all the British Museum copies of Innocence and Experience"--"subsequent to this paper's being sent to the printers"[!]"--and they also mention the copy "that Blake gave [sic] to Henry Crabb Robinson in 1826," though it is not perfectly clear that they have actually seen the original of this copy. They also show no awareness of the Keynes-Wolf William Blake's Illuminated Books: A Census (1953), which changes the letter designations of Keynes's Bibliography (1921) that they employ to identify the four copies they seem to have seen.

I suppose all Blake scholars would agree that such carelessness and evasiveness is avoidable, but it remains possible that Connolly and Levine may be right about other more important things. What there is likely to be less unanimity about is how many copies of the Songs a scholar ought to study before he is competent to pronounce on niceties of color or iconography. Probably four copies taken at random are not enough;

certainly four are not enough if the would-be scholar has not read the Census and shows no awareness of the Blake Trust facsimiles, as Connolly and Levine do not. It seems inevitable that the Blake Trust facsimiles should be the first source cited for evidence of what the pictures look like since the facsimiles are widely available and since everything averred by true scholarship should aspire to be verifiable. The facsimiles are not perfectly reliable (as I imply on p. 6 of Newsletter I) but none of the pages of Songs should mislead anyone who has seen enough original copies to know how to interpret the stencil colored pages.¹

Because Connolly and Levine refer to Keynes "Z," the Crabb Robinson-Rosenwald copy of Innocence and of Experience, they might seem to have covered themselves with regards to the Blake Trust facsimiles, but they do not even hint that they have seen the Blake Trust facsimile of Innocence, Census "B," (also Rosenwald) of the uncombined anthology. If they had done so they would have seen a version of the guide who has nothing that can be called a halo, though in their lengthy discussions they assume that this figure always possesses one.

On the other hand, Erdman seems to imply in his query that if the figure (usually) possesses a halo it couldn't be the mother who is depicted as the guide. This objection is not sustained if we look--properly, it seems to me--at the facsimile of copy Z and also at the Micro Methods color microfilm of copy AA.² In both copies the figure in the right margin, with outstretched arms, has a halo. Connolly and Levine refer to her as an "angel," though she has no wings (like the four indubitable angels in LBL) but she must be the mother about to take over, just as the poem says she does.

It must be admitted, however, that the guide ("the nightgowned adult," Erdman) does not always look very masculine. In copy Z the somewhat indistinct features are almost as feminine, though quite different, as those in copy T, which Connolly and Levine reproduce. The fact that the guide is generally busty will not persuade Blakeists who have seen many of Blake's pictures of Christ in Empire nightgowns that the figure in question is a woman. An especially well-known representation of Christ in this costume and in almost the same position will be found in the first picture of Blake's Grave, entitled, "Christ

¹I too was happy to see the announcement in Newsletter I, 5, that the Trianon Press is about to issue a photographic reproduction of the facsimile edition. But the quality of the plates in Keynes's Blake: Poet, Printer, Prophet (1964) was often quite poor. The new edition of Songs is likely to cause trouble. See also fn. 2.

²These microfilms, which in the case of the Songs are of copies B and AA, ought to have authority comparable to that of the Blake Trust facsimiles and thus should also be cited in all real scholarly work. Until somebody carefully reviews both the microfilms and the facsimiles, opinions as to which is more reliable will not be worth much. "Reliability" may, indeed, not be what is at issue: perhaps we should be concerned with "proper uses and proper purposes."

Descending Into the Grave." This figure is almost as busty, even though Schiavonetti's engraving stands between Blake's conception and the reader. The only significant difference is that the guide in LBF has no beard, as do almost all Blake's representations of the mature Christ, including the one on the second page of "The Little Black Boy" (pl. 10). If Connolly and Levine had bothered to present this evidence to substantiate their claim that the guide is female they would at least have made an impressive case.

But the evidence that the guide is supposed to be either a woman or Christ per se cannot be found in either the poem or the picture. Where Blake wanted an indubitable Christ, as in the aforementioned plate 10, he depicted one; where he wanted an unmistakable God the Father, as in "The Little Vagabond," (p. 45), he also depicted one; likewise, where he wanted to depict women he did so with unquestionably female figures. There is one figure³ depicted in Songs, however, who is clearly related to the beardless guide of LBF. I refer to the nude and beardless male supported by two females and being given water by a bearded man in "To Tirzah" (pl. 52). This figure undoubtedly suggests Christ after the deposition, though His notable lack of beard is remarkable in view of Blake's iconography elsewhere. The fact that this picture was probably made after 1805, much later than the rest of the anthology, probably has no bearing on this iconographic detail. Even if fashions in facial hair were changing, Blake's indubitable Christs continued to be bearded.

The probable explanation for the lack of beard on the man in "To Tirzah" is that the reader is being invited to see that he too is in a plight similar to that of the male victim, who is in the condition of the crucified Christ but is not dignified, remote, and therefore irrelevant. This, at least, is what the refrain of the odd poem that was oddly added to the anthology much later seems to imply. Every man needs to say, Woman, "what have I to do with thee?" In a somewhat similar way the reader of LBF is shown a guide who, though he is God, appears like the boy's father, not like the Savior who is depicted in Church. Every reader should be able to penetrate this clean-shaven disguise but it will not help the innocent little boy to think he has no earthly father. Presumably he does not have to envision this father as a rough, tough, two-hundred percent male in order to believe in his existence.

John E. Grant
University of Iowa

³I am reminded by E. J. Rose that other kinds of connections can also be made to such a figure as that mysterious adult on plate 28, the frontispiece to Experience, who carries a winged child on his head.

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A reply by Professors Connolly and Levine will appear in Newsletter No. 3.

Our second discussion article, by Mr. Michael Tolley of the University of Adelaide, refers to my own "Tyger of Wrath," PMLA, LXXXI (December 1966), 540-551. --MDP