

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

Blake, Thomas Boston, and the Fourfold Vision

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 19, Issue 4, Spring 1986, p. 142



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The word "fourfold" or "four-fold" appears many times in Blake's longer poems, and is clearly one of his favorite expressions. Probably the best-known example occurs in his letter to Thomas Butts:

Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me;
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And threefold in soft Beulah's night
And twofold Always. May God us
keep
From Single vision & Newton's
sleep!¹

The word "fourfold" can be found twice in the 1611 Bible and once in *Paradise Lost*, but its frequent use by Blake is very striking. Contemporary readers may have detected an echo of Thomas Boston's book *Human Nature, in its Four-fold State*, a popular work of theology which went through at least two dozen editions in Britain between 1720 and 1800.

Thomas Boston was a Presbyterian clergyman until his death in 1732. He tried to modify the predestinarianism of the Presbyterian Church by proposing that human experience takes place on four distinct levels. A look at these levels or stages will show that they might well have inspired, obliquely, the "fourfold vision" of Blake. The first condition is a "State of Innocence, or Primitive Integrity" which exists only at birth. This is followed by the "State of Nature, or Entire Deprivation," in which the "natural man" can "do nothing but sin."² In the third state "The conscience is renewed" (p. 197), and one apparently experiences "a mysterious union" (p. 237), a "mystical union betwixt Christ and Believers" (p. 233).

The last of Boston's four stages is entered at death, when the ungodly see "the dark side of the cloud" while the righteous perceive "the bright side of it, shining on the godly, as they are entering upon their eternal state" (p. 341). This may perhaps partly explain Blake's reference, earlier in the poem cited above, to "my Brother John the evil one / In a black cloud making his mone."

It might at first seem unlikely that Blake would have been influenced by a Presbyterian minister. But Thomas Boston's literate, allusive, and metaphorical style did indeed appeal to people of imagination. Another

poet, writing in 1832, notes that

It has been the fashion for a good while past, with a certain class of professed Christians, . . . to sneer at the doctrines of Boston. I decidedly differ from them, and will venture to assert that there are no such fervour and strength of reasoning to be met with in any modern composition, as predominate in his. Let any person take up "The Four-fold State of Man," and peruse seriously and without prejudice one of the divisions, or say only twenty pages at random, and he will join with me. There is even an originality of thought and expression in old Boston which are quite delightful and refreshing.³

¹ William Blake, letter to Butts, 22 Nov. 1802, rpt. in *The Letters of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Cambridge, MA, 1968), pp. 59-63.

² Boston, *Human Nature, in its Four-fold State; of Primitive Integrity, Entire Deprivation, Begun Recovery, and Consummate Happiness or Misery* . . . (1720; 15th. ed. rev., Glasgow, 1761), p. 109. The names of Boston's states are taken from the table of contents. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

³ "Statistics of Selkirkshire, By Mr. James Hogg, 'the Ettrick Shepherd,'" in *Prize-Essays and Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1832), pp. 303-04.

"Infant Sorrow" and Robert Greene's *Menaphon*

Greg Crossan

The origins of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in eighteenth-century children's hymns, nursery rhymes, cradle songs and the like are by now well documented, but cradle songs in particular were a popular Renaissance genre (the lullabies of Dekker and Gascoigne being the best known), and there is a source here for one of the *Songs*, "Infant Sorrow," that was suggested long ago by Foster Damon but has never, I think, been explored.¹ The source is "Sephestias Song to Her Childe" from Robert Greene's pastoral romance *Menaphon*. In particular, the opening lines of Blake's song,

My mother groand! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I lept

recall the opening lines of the last stanza of Greene's:

The wanton smilde, father wept;
Mother cride, babie lept.²

The echo here is plain enough, but I want to suggest that there are two ways in which "Sephestias Song" makes a particularly interesting context in which to read "Infant Sorrow."