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D I S C U S S I O N

Mother of Invention, Father In Drag

John E. Grant

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DISCUSSION

"With Intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought"

Mother of Invention, Father in Drag

or

Observations on the Methodology that Brought About these
Deplorable Conditions and What Then is to be Done

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Re. Thomas E. Connolly and George R. Levine, "Pictorial and Poetic Design in Two Songs of Innocence," PMLA, LXXXI:1 (May, 1967), 257-264; John E. Grant, "Recognizing Fathers," Blake Newsletter, 2 (October 1, 1967), 7-9; Thomas E. Connolly and George R. Levine, "Recognizing Mother," Blake Newsletter 3 (December 15, 1967), 17-18.

Part I

Dialogue is difficult, even with disputants who are thoroughly conversant with the issues and evidence, if their overriding concern is to vindicate themselves rather than to correct error whatever its origin. Strenuous encounter magnifies this danger, but mildness is no more reliable guarantee against indulgence in self-hood. Correspondents of the Blake Newsletter must believe that a number of essential truths in Blake's art can be identified and that assertions about them can be evaluated. When the question at issue has a markedly empirical dimension a scholar must be prepared to lay out all his evidence for inspection. Most Blakeists would agree with these principles, at least in theory. In practice, however, a good deal of amateurish or careless work on Blake gets published and it is often less stringently dealt with than it deserves. At a distance such indiscriminating habits may resemble the Blakean virtue of forgiveness; closer up they look more like indifference. That ineptness should sometimes have passed for new light indicates a need for more thought about procedures of validation.

In Newsletter 2 I attacked certain points in the original article on "The Little Boy Lost (and) Found" by Connolly and Levine both because I thought they were substantially in error and because their article seemed to contain many exemplary mistakes. Just as there are ways of checking assertions about Blake's work, so there are ways of making reference to it that every scholar ought to follow, both for the sake of his own accuracy and for his reader's convenience. A preoccupation with methodology as an end in itself is, of course, pedantry. But a refusal to discuss the rules of evidence and the customs of reference is obscurantism, a more serious vice in scholarship. Educators must be willing to talk about what it takes to get things right.

I do not wish to exult over the difficulties that Connolly and Levine got themselves into when they tried to sustain an energetic apology for their errors of reference in Newsletter 3. But since few people will have troubled to compare their allegations with my statements, I must insist on greater precision on the points at issue than their account contains. Because I mentioned that no reproduction is perfect, my controvertists imply it is unreasonable to ask them to check the "admittedly poor" Blake Trust facsimiles which, together with the Micromethods

microfilms, are of "dubious reliability."¹² This tactic can only have been an attempt to avoid generally available evidence that might weaken their argument. In point of fact both the facsimiles and the microfilms are very good and nothing I have said either in my criticism of their article or elsewhere could possibly lead anyone who understands the necessary limitations of such reproductions to think otherwise. After having spent many hours comparing the Rosenwald facsimiles with the originals I know how good they are. And I have also spent hours looking at the copies of the Songs in the British Museum--as well as twenty other original copies. Nobody who has spent so much of his life studying the originals would think of preferring the copies. At least not as a general principle.

Here one must draw back from an idolatry of authenticity, however; to have seen even one original illuminated book is a valuable personal experience, but it is not a firm enough basis for serious criticism. In fact, some copies which are supposed to be originals are less reliable than the Blake Trust facsimiles despite the blurring, fuzziness of text, changes of hue, and hard edges on color areas of the latter. Even "good" original copies can mislead: if one had seen only the splendid copy Y in the Metropolitan Museum he would suppose that the flower Blake depicted in "The SICK ROSE" was so sick that it had turned almost white, since that is the color of the blossom in this copy. Yet evidently Blake employed this symbolism only once. As I have argued elsewhere, each original copy (which is not obviously and accidentally defective) has independent iconographic authority and the variation in rendering of details is such that no serious scholar should try to make pronouncements about iconography until he has carefully compared a considerable number of copies. I am sorry to be so absolute about this, but no other standard for scholarship makes sense.

It happens that a liberal interpretation of this standard would not disqualify Connolly and Levine, since they studied the copies of the Songs in the British Museum (which cover a considerable span of Blake's work) if they had also been willing to consult the Blake Trust facsimiles and if they had shown any awareness of the Keynes and Wolf Census in their first article. Such is their tenacity for their own mistakes, however, that even now they will not concede the superior authority of the Census. They declare that the Bibliography "is everywhere available" whereas the Census "was printed in an edition of four hundred copies and has long been unavailable to the general reader." But in fact the Bibliography was printed in an edition of only two hundred and fifty copies in 1921 and thus can hardly have been as widely disseminated as the Census, 1953.¹ Frye and Nurmi mention the rarity of the Bibliography. He who publishes in PMLA has, in any case, no need to be so tender about the convenience of "the general reader."

Scholarship must make a distinction between verification, the checking of evidence prior to publication, preferably in the light of a number of original copies, and validation, post-publication testing of theories, which should be facilitated by references to reliable facsimiles that are accessible in major libraries. It would be unfortunate if, for convenience sake, we were to accept the 1967 Trianon Press photographic reproduction of Songs as a sufficiently reliable indication of what one late copy of the work looks like. While this edition is good, it is by no means equal to the 1955 Blake Trust facsimile of copy Z, over five hundred copies of which were issued and sold. For other copies of Songs one must refer to less reliable reproductions: the Micromethods color microfilms, of Copy B, in the British Museum, and of Copy AA, in the Fitzwilliam Museum. If Songs of Innocence are in question, we must also refer to the Blake Trust facsimile of Innocence Copy B, which is in the Rosenwald Collection. A very thorough report might then branch out and discuss other copies of which reliable

reproductions are not so easy to come by. If editors of journals are willing to reproduce pages of other copies, of course, we should encourage them to do so, while making sure that the code letter of the copies is clearly indicated.

Let us now consider one particular disagreement between Connolly and Levine and myself. This concerns the identity of the figure in the lower right margin of LBF. I am convinced that this must be the mother mentioned in the poem, not, in spite of the evidence cited by Connolly and Levine, "an angel with wings." Nothing in the copies these scholars rely on supports such an identification.

The microfilm of copy B of Songs of Innocence and of Experience which is reliable enough for this question, shows that this figure has no wings. This copy resembles copy A (also in the British Museum) in that the simple transparent coloring does not obscure the printed lines. Connolly and Levine themselves reproduce Copy T (which was also reproduced in Wicksteed), though not in color. The other copy in the British Museum, posthumous copy a, is uncolored and has no independent authority except that it shows Blake had not tinkered with the plate.² If I now consult the facsimile of Z and the microfilms of B and AA (in Innocence Copy B the figure is sharply delineated but uncolored) I see beyond any question that the figure in the border is trailing ribbons or pieces of cloth that are attached top and bottom to her dress and are the same color as it is (dull violet in B, greenish-yellow in Z, dull purple in AA). In the latter two cases the sky in the background is colored blue and is carefully filled into the area of the opening; in B the same area is left white to distinguish it from the dress. I will assert dogmatically that this wind-blown fabric is utterly unlike any wings Blake ever tried to paint. If he had wanted at some point to change the figure into an indubitable angel, he could have used opaque pigments to depict wings in the dorsal area, but there is no evidence that he ever did so. This is an important matter because this figure must also be related to the six in the border of the text area of LBI, which have sometimes all been referred to as "angels" (e.g., Damon, WB, p. 273). The two at the bottom undoubtedly have no wings, though they do trail pieces of fabric similar to the one trailed by the figure in LBF except that these tails are not secured at the end. I shall not attempt at this point to explain these details in LBI but simply state what must be the principle for interpretation: When in a design some figures have wings and others do not the difference cannot be treated either as a matter of artistic convenience (i.e., "wings would have gotten in the way") or as a matter of insignificance (i.e., "we know what Blake was really trying to say"). The difficulty is not that Blake, as an inarticulate visionary, was trying to tell us something but that, if we are readers indifferent to minute particulars, we will erroneously settle for the general idea, which is what he was trying to protect us from. In the design of LBI the two wingless figures at the bottom are carefully distinguished from the four winged ones at the borders, and they unmistakably foreshadow the mother in the border of LBF. If one were to explain the iconography of LBI he would necessarily have to deal with the title page and plate 19 of the Job illustrations, and he would also have to consider plate 18 of Jerusalem. My remarks on the latter design in an essay in the forthcoming Damon Festschrift should be of some assistance on this point. Other pictorial perspectives will be mentioned at the end of this article. In such designs Blake has left us enough evidence to interpret his meaning correctly, if we consent to look at all of it.

If the reader will accept this account of the facts and agree that the wings Connolly and Levine assign to the figure in the border of LBF do not exist, we can return to the problematic adult figure in the main picture of LBF with some hope of clarifying its ambiguous gender. On the following pages of Songs of

Innocence figures probably not female are wearing a similar costume: 6, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 25, 26. This survey of the evidence confirms what one observes generally, namely, that this costume, the Empire robe or nightgown (belted or unbelted) is worn by all the sexes in Blake's pictures. Why is it that the adult figure in LBF comes to seem female to some readers? In all candor I must mention that those who have remarked on the femininity of the figure include, not only Mrs. Chayes, in Newsletter 2, p. 6, but even Sir Geoffrey Keynes in the 1967 photographic facsimile of the Songs, p. 14a, which I have mentioned above. And since I call into question the methodology of Connolly and Levine, I must hasten to concede that Keynes has looked at many more copies of Blake's illuminated books than I have. That such expertise necessarily makes Keynes correct in this matter, however, we are all free to question.

Further study has now convinced me that everyone has been more or less guilty of excessive generalization, a tendency that demands sturdy resistance as Blake criticism begins to study the pictorial dimension of his work more deeply. In early copies of LBF, such as Innocence B and Innocence and Experience B, the adult looks more masculine than feminine and there is very little suggestion that the figure is busty. In copies T, especially Z, and, to a lesser extent, AA, however, the figure looks more feminine. This is evidently due to more shading in the chest area which includes in T and Z spots in (different) areas of the left breast that suggest nipples. And in copy Z particularly much shading has been added to the belt area which further contributes to the impression of female breasts. The fact that this impression is diminished in the later copy AA indicates that Blake did not rework the plate between the earlier and latter impressions. After every allowance for the increasing evidence of breasts in a few copies has been made, however, it remains necessary to recognize that Blake never gave this character an unmistakably feminine face, as he could easily have done. Such ambiguity should be a sufficient caution against jumping to conclusions about the significance of the feminine characteristics this figure sometimes displays. Certainly the fact that even a hint of femininity is rare should prevent any scholar from generalizing as though the exception were the rule. The interpretational problem is not going to come into focus until a number of other vistas have been explored with some minuteness.

¹ It is true that the Census could be purchased new as recently as 1960 and some major libraries (such as Houghton!) were slow in acquiring it. The news in Newsletter 2 that both the Bibliography and the Census are now being reprinted is, on the whole, encouraging, though one could wish that at least the Census were to be corrected and updated. At a minimum it should include some additional pages listing data about the present locations of the various copies.

² Mr. Michael J. Tolley has kindly verified my contentions about copies in the British Museum. I am also grateful to Edward J. Rose and Judith Rhodes for a number of suggestions.

[The concluding part of Professor Grant's article will appear in the winter Issue of the Newsletter.]

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