

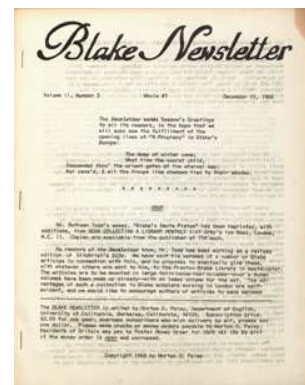
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

Mothers and Methodology

John E. Grant

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 2, Issue 3, December 15, 1968, pp.
50-54



3. Mothers and Methodology (continued from *Newsletter* 6)

John E. Grant
Department of English
University of Iowa

In an earlier statement I argued that the only possible principle for the interpreter of Blake is that every version of Blake's illuminated pages has independent authority.³ That is, if a figure appears to be thus and so in one copy and something else in another we are not justified in adding them up, dividing by two, and then telling the world that the golden mean is what Blake really intended. Blake himself was out of all patience with devotees of the general idea and alternately begged and commanded the reader to attend to "minute particulars." For the man with a different creed, Blake's dictum that only through the minute particulars can virtue or beauty be approached has no authority. Even if, it can be argued, Blake himself tried to live up to his principles, the critic has merely to invoke the Intentional Fallacy in order to obtain a license to take whatever pleases him from what Blake has left us.

It may seem unlikely that anyone would wish to take such an extreme position in public but this is essentially what Professor W. K. Wimsatt said in the Forum II conference, entitled *Literature and the Visual Arts: The Problem of Critical Terms*, at the 1967 MLA Annual Meeting. In a paper entitled "Laokoön Revisited" he declared that the pictures for "The Tyger" and "London" were obviously failures and irrelevant besides. Curiously enough, one of the discussants, Professor Jean Hagstrum, remonstrated with Wimsatt because of his principled indifference to Blake's union of the arts, but Hagstrum was unwilling to challenge Wimsatt's inaccurate description of Blake's picture of the Tyger. To be sure it was not easy for Hagstrum to do so because Wimsatt quoted Hagstrum's book which declares that "the magnificent verbal 'Tyger' is unworthily illustrated by a simpering animal" (p. 86). I found Hagstrum's refusal distressing because in my review of his book I had particularly commented on this point reminding him that the allegation is false--at least as a generalization--and pointing out that it also plays into the hands of dogmatic divorcers of the arts such as Warren and Wellek.⁴ Yet if one tacitly admits such allegations against Blake's design he cannot hope to prevail in arguments on this subject.

While he did not condescend to mention the names of the offending scholars, Wimsatt was very polemical in insisting that attempts to establish contrapuntal relationships between Blake's poems and designs must be ruled out of court. He was willing to tolerate some cases like "Infant Joy" (evidently because of the slightness of the poem) where poem and design are obviously antithetical, but he had no mercy on "London," which seemed to him downright incoherent when judged as a marriage of graphics and poetry. Because of the intransigence with which Wimsatt resists recognizing unequal unions of the arts, it would probably have been impossible to persuade him that the concurrence of poetry and picture in "London" is not fortuitous or inartistic. And in this case, as opposed to "The Tyger," no thorough attempt has been made in print to justify this design. If one chose he could begin such an apologia by combining brief comments in Hirsch's book and in one of my reviews,⁵ but this task remains unattempted. Clearly, however, and this is the immediate point of relationship between the

interpretational problem in "London" and LBI and F, the designs for *Songs* usually contain one or more pictorial elements that have no verbal correlatives in the poems. In a strict sense of the word Blake so rarely attempted literally to illustrate the *Songs*, that is, depict only objects mentioned in the poems without making suggestive additions, that scholars should be vigilant for significant differences even when there is a fairly close correspondence. Until more of these crucial problems in Blakean iconography have been studied, however, anti-Blakean opinions about Blake will doubtless remain current.

Let us consider again the fact, first remarked by Connolly and Levine, that the guide in LBF is often effeminate-looking and sometimes distinctly busty. When it is admitted that the figure in the margin undoubtedly is the mother described in the poem, the adult guide, who is always clothed in white, can be none other than "God ever nigh" who "appeared like his father in white." The interpretational problem, as posed by Connolly and Levine in their original article, was put backward and thus became the source of much confusion; it is not a question of why the mother looks like Christ but why God sometimes looks maternal. That is, what point is made when God is depicted as having feminine attributes, especially when the poem says that he appears as a father? Connolly and Levine can apparently think of nothing more reputable than "vaudeville" where matters of role playing are involved, but all Blake's theology is radically based on the relativity of perception; e.g., "The Vision of Christ that thou dost see / Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy. . . ." Certainly an essential part of Blake's interpretation of the Book of Job is that God looks like Job. It is not culpable pride but the beginning of wisdom to recognize that God "becomes as we are, that we may become as he is."

I do not believe that the further suggestions I shall make here constitute a significant change from what I have written before, but the depiction of God with female attributes does entail more explanation. In my piece, "Recognizing Fathers," I argued essentially that, from the Little Boy's point of view, the father imago presented in every version of the design must be sufficiently credible, just as the poem says it is. But in those copies of the design where the guide is busty, there is undeniably something more to explain. Elsewhere in *Songs of Innocence* God does appear as a paternal shepherd, or as a child, or as a lamb, but God the mother (as distinguished from the Mother of God) is a conception that would not have made Blake's contemporaries feel easy. And of course Blake himself had a profound mistrust of the Female Will, which is expressed over and over in the prophecies and is summed up in the tyranny of Mary, which is depicted in plate 99 of the illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*. Nevertheless Blake would have strenuously resisted the kind of presumptuous superstition which pretends to know that God "is really" either a male or a female.

Keynes puts the matter succinctly in his commentary for the photographic edition of the *Songs* when he declares that "probably [the rescuer] is one of Blake's not infrequent androgynous figures, having both mother and father attributes."⁶ In spite of the impropriety Connolly and Levine warned me would be involved in doing so, I thought it would not be indecent if I troubled to examine the breasts of God, as Blake chose to represent God. After all, Connolly and Levine wouldn't admit the authority of Schiavonetti's busty rendering of Blake's Jesus to which I had referred them. I must report that a quick survey through *William Blake's Illustrations to the Bible* revealed no pictures of either the Father or the Son that are as pendulous as some versions of the guide in LBF. Only in six pictures, nos. 76, Christ Girding Himself (see the reproduction in *The Blake Collection of W. Graham Robertson*, pl. 38); 110, The Third Temptation;

119, The Transfiguration; 122, Christ Blessing the Little Children; 125, The Raising of Lazarus; and 171, Christ the Mediator, does He seem notably effeminate and in all these pictures of His maturity Christ wears a beard. This lack of confirmation does not, however, subvert the specific evidence in LBF. Indeed, though it would be dangerous to attempt this form of argument if there were no other evidence, Blake often tried his daring ideas only once or rarely; precisely because he establishes iconographic norms, striking departures from them are strong evidence of allegorical meaning. Just as it can have been no accident that Blake once painted the "Sick Rose" white rather than Red, so he had a point to make when he painted a Black Madonna (no. 98)⁷ near the end of his life. It is quite probable that he also chose to produce a single indubitably busty guide in LBF because (so to speak) the Diana of Ephesus had been lost sight of at the time.

If we make a serious attempt to interpret LBF as a design in context, both of the *Songs* and of Blake's work as a whole a number of factors not previously considered must be born in mind. Several critics have observed that distinctly paternal roles are disfavored in *Songs of Innocence*, but the designs are not anti-paternal more than twice. So far as pictures are concerned, the masculine leadership role seems to be enacted in *Innocence* in the following plates: 7, 10, 12, 14, 18, 19, 26. To this one might add: 5, 8, 23, and possibly 54, "The Voice of the Ancient Bard," which was at first included in *Innocence*. In plates 12 and 19 the male guide is less authoritative or less human than he seems, but he is a benign presence elsewhere. In pl. 7, the second of "The Ecchoing Green," the guide is not really in charge because the gift of the grapes of pleasure behind his back unmistakably reveals him to be Mr. Parental Spoilsport, rather than a good guide. In 10 the Good Shepherd or Jesus (who is sometimes depicted as being almost without beard) suffers little children to come unto him--beside the waters (of Life), which are uniquely depicted on the original plate of this design.⁸ In 12 the "Angel with a bright key" has, in late versions, a halo, but no wings. Comparison with the water color drawing "The Woman Taken in Adultery" will show that the liberating "Angel" is almost identical, though reversed, with Jesus in the drawing. The Innocent but benighted Chimney Sweeper did not recognize Jesus when he saw Him, but the reader of Blake will recall the first picture of *Blair's Grave*, entitled "Christ Descending Into the Grave," because there the Savior carries a key in each hand. I referred to this design for Blair in my earlier article on "Recognizing Fathers" (pp. 8-9) because the posture of Christ is very similar to that of the boy's savior in LBF. I shall also mention some other designs related to pl. 14, but must first consider the other three designs in *Innocence* that depict masculine authority. In 18, "The Divine Image," at the bottom, Jesus, who is duly haloed in late copies, evidently raises Adam (who is shown under the flames of wrath in the general title page of the combined anthology, pl. 1) in a gesture that recalls Michelangelo's version of his Creation and anticipates Blake's own later depiction of Jesus in "The Creation of Eve" in the designs for *Paradise Lost*. The same motif occurs, with greater modification, in the second of the two versions of the Genesis frontispiece in the Huntington Library. The beadies regimenting the boys and girls in 19, "Holy Thursday," are, of course, trying to contain the work of Christ the Liberator. Finally, in 26, "A Dream," the glow-worm who impersonates the watchman of the night, is shown in his human form as he redirects the errant mother Emmet.

In Blake's work as a whole it is not inappropriate to ask what happens to the Little Boy who was Found and returned to his Mother by an androgyne who resembles Christ and the Boy's father as he imagined him.⁹ We can say that the

Boy, together with his archetypal sister who is not mentioned in this pair of poems, may be observed in such a tempera painting as "Bathsheba at the Bath" (Tate #22) in company with his mother. But insofar as the Boy and girl are always small they remain in the keeping of the Good Father, as shown in the tempera painting "Christ Blessing Little Children" (Tate #23) where Jesus sits under the same kind of tree depicted in *Innocence* 6, the first plate of "The Ecchoing Green," and in the background of 8, "The Lamb." In this tempera one should notice the river in the background and also observe the motif of the intertwined trees in the left background.¹⁰

This sweet company is delivered to its ultimate destiny in "The River of Life" (Tate #37), a painting which integrates most of the motifs that have been employed in the pictures we have chiefly been concerned with. Here Christ turns his back to us, taking the little boy and the girl by the hand as he swims up the river whose lower reaches were depicted in the other paintings. He has left the keys in the Grave into which he had descended facing the reader (as well as the Mother in LBF) and is departing with the regained children to the source of Life. The mother, who was about to accept the Little Boy Found and who submitted her children for Christ's blessing, here is shown cutting the line that connects them to this world. St. John, who flies out of the sun, points downward, in a posture comparable to that of Jesus in "The Woman Taken in Adultery" and the "Angel" in "The Chimney Sweeper," though adapted to this more complex design. One may also observe, on the right bank of the river, the standing mother holding a child, who also appears in "Christ Blessing" and the second plate of "The Ecchoing Green," and the girl reaching up for the fruit of the Tree of Life, which also supports bunches of grapes such as were handed down by a boy to a girl at the end of the procession in the latter design. She has at last reached the condition unencumbered by prohibitions. Potential naysayers are now on the other side of the River and in any case, they are now studying the Book of Life rather than the holy book of cursing. Music is provided by the Piper depicted in *Innocence* pls. 2, 3, and 27, accompanied by a flutist who is a wingless counterpart of the angel evidently required to "Sound the Flute" in pl. 22 of *Innocence*. The eternal counterpart of this music of "Spring" is provided by the chorus of angels standing on the Sun, having evidently foresworn the happy pipe. Between them putti enact ecstatic reunions such as appear on the title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The joy here, as it were, on the top of Day, is to be contrasted with the sorrow depicted in the lower borders of LBI where (in later copies) the 4 angels stand despondently against the background of a starry night while the wingless creatures trailing ribbons separate from one another. The Little Boy will be Found in the next plate, and perhaps also Saved, but the pictures of *Innocence* contain only a few emblems of such blessedness and ecstasy. The strenuous future is only adumbrated in the world more attractive called the contrary state of Innocence.

³ See John E. Grant, "Tense and the Sense of Blake's 'The Tyger'" (A Controversy), *PMLA* LXXXI (1966), Section III, p. 601.

⁴ In *JAAC* xxiv, No. 1, Pt. 1 (1965), 127. Now that Copy U, which contains the most formidable Tyger I have seen, is publicly more accessible, in the Firestone Library at Princeton (see *Newsletter* 3, pp. 6-7), the existence of an heroic Tyger should be easier to prove.

⁵ *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake*, (New Haven, 1964), p. 265 and Grant, "The Colors of Prophecy," *The Nation*, CC (January 25, 1965), p. 92.

⁶ Mr. Tolley reminds me that the clearest example of androgyny in *Songs* is the main figure in the tailpiece design, Pl. a, which is reproduced in Wicksteed.

⁷ I have heard it alleged that the negroid coloration in this picture is the accidental result of the deterioration of the tempera. After having studied it quite closely twice I doubt that the allegation is correct. But if there is any evidence of accident having produced design this should be presented where all can read it.

⁸ In contrast with places 4, 7, 8, 20, and 21 where a small strip was added to the plate and the area was painted as water. In later copies of plates 12 and 23 indications of water are added in paint but the plates themselves were not similarly enlarged.

⁹ In Blake's cosmic myth we can also ask how it is that one can get lost in spite of essential innocence. Here the final design of the *Paradise Lost* series, "The Expulsion," is particularly apposite, since the angel Michael is depicted as an androgynous guide who grasps the hands of those adult children, Adam and Eve, and leads them down from freedom. The nadir of human fortunes is represented, it may be added, in the great picture "Pestilence: Death of the First Born," which is also in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. There Michael's Satanic aspect is inflated, as it were, by the four wild horsemen in the background of the "Expulsion" until he has become a giant reptile sowing the tares of disease. Conversely his polite but firm policeman's role in the "Expulsion" is represented by the diminished angel, seen between the Satanic legs, who modestly guards the way out as the Covering Cherub. The sequel to this, in turn, is shown in another great picture, "The Angel Binding the Dragon," which is in the Fogg Museum. The action here occurs in the time of the end when the alliance between Michael and Satan has been broken as a result of the further degeneration of Satan from a smiter with disease into a dragon old. This consolidation of error, brought about by the redemptive action of Christ in history, which I trace in the conclusion of this piece, is nevertheless not sufficient for Michael to free himself entirely by belated positive action. As some critics have previously noted, one coil of the chain is looping Michael's shoulder, presumably because his ages of complicity have taught him some bad habits.

¹⁰ This key symbol in *Songs* also appears on pls. 2, 7, 28 (in some copies), and 36, and in more attenuated forms on pls. 3, 4, and 53 as well as in pls. 5, 8, 9, 18, 20, 24, 27, 28, 34, 36, 38, (41), (43), 51, and 53, where the motif becomes a tree and clinging vine.

* * * * *

[In connection with previous discussion of "The Little Boy Found" in the *Newsletter* (#2, 7-9; #3, 17-18; #6, 29-32), we have an interesting suggestion from Mr. Niels Christian Hertz, who is writing a dissertation on *The Gates of Paradise* at the University of Copenhagen. Mr. Hertz writes "I thought it might be relevant in connection with 'the nightgowned adult' to mention a passage in Rev. i.13 describing 'one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.'"]

* * * * *

...and ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...