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## *Blake's Little Black Boys: On the Dynamics of Blake's Composite Art*

by MYRA GLAZER

BLAKE'S "The Little Black Boy," long recognized as a work of "astounding complexity,"<sup>1</sup> has been most often interpreted as a poem about the flaws inherent in a dualistic perception of the world. The mother, most critics have argued, teaches her son the orthodox Christian doctrines of the separation of body from soul, the now from the hereafter, earth from heaven, man from God. Since such teachings are repeatedly claimed by Blake to be erroneous, and because the poem itself is so laden with ambiguities, critics have inevitably been led to perceive "The Little Black Boy" as ironic. Harold Bloom, for example, sees it as the "epitome of the *Songs of Innocence*," but nevertheless insists that it is "one of the most deliberately misleading and ironic of all of Blake's lyrics,"<sup>2</sup> while another commentator discovers an active engagement of Blakean "Contraries" hidden beneath the dualistic surface, contraries ironically hidden from the supposedly deluded little black boy himself.<sup>3</sup>

But "The Little Black Boy" is neither about a misguided lesson nor is it ironic; the reason we have seen it as such lies in our own critical method. First and foremost, the poem needs to be studied in terms of its role on the plate as a whole; as title, "The Little Black Boy" names two plates, not merely a poem. A text extracted—and abstracted—from a plate is, I would argue, *ipso facto* different in terms of the meaning it generates, from the same text studied as an element of Blake's composite art. It is not enough, moreover, and not even appropriate, to treat text and design as independent, separate entities, for, as W. J. T. Mitchell has shown us, the meaning of any plate emerges precisely from the *dynamic interplay* of both elements.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, and as a kind of corollary, the poem as a whole has been treated in much the same manner as the mother's lesson has been re-

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1. Jacob Adler, "Symbol and Meaning in 'The Little Black Boy,'" *Modern Language Notes*, LXXII (June 1957), 414.

2. In *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1965), p. 43.

3. Howard H. Hinkel, "From Pivotal Idea to Poetic Ideal: Blake's Theory of Contraries and 'The Little Black Boy,'" *Papers on Language and Literature* XI, 39-45.

4. In "Blake's Composite Art," in *Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 57-81.

garded: as a "container," in the words of Stanley Fish, "from which a reader extracts a message."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the very presence of that lesson seems to invite the reader accustomed to approaching a text as a container with an extractable message to do exactly that. And yet, as Mitchell has amply demonstrated, to treat Blake's poetry as a "quarry" for a Blakean "philosophy," or, similarly, to regard the proper function of the critic of Blake's visual art as a search for a "fixed set of pictorial conventions" or the "identification of subject matter" is to fail to perceive Blake's own object in creating that art: not to convey a message, but, in Mitchell's words, to dramatize "the *process* by which any symbolic form comes into being."<sup>6</sup> Blake's art, as E. J. Rose has long contended, embodies the process of creating art;<sup>7</sup> his works, in this sense, are icons of the creative imagination, attempts to render faithfully "the activity of mind as it alters the objects of perception."<sup>8</sup> As I hope to demonstrate here, it is that activity of mind that "The Little Black Boy" is essentially about; it is a dramatization of the process, intricate and involved, by which symbolic form comes into being.

# I

THE moment we recognize that our unit of interpretation must be the plates, important problems present themselves. For just as the poem must be considered in its context on the plate, so the plates must be considered in their context in the *Songs*, and each copy of the *Songs* is unique. The sequential arrangement of the plates, the coloration, and often important design elements are altered from copy to copy. The sequential arrangement is a generator of meaning insofar as each plate in the *Songs* not only presents and embodies its own unique reality, but also functions to create a context within which to view the plate that follows it. The range of relational modes of plate to plate is wide; the *lex operandi* of the movement from one plate to another varies within a particular copy and from copy to copy. A Song, for example, may reverse the formal elements of its predecessor, or it may repeat, with variations, previous motifs; one plate may seem to evolve into the next, or it may contrast sharply with what follows. Thus, when Blake positions "The Little Black Boy" after "The Lamb"—the most frequent sequential arrangement in the combined *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*—he is constructing a perspective that is different in a significant fashion from that inherent in the sequence "Laughing Song"/"The

5. In *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press), p. 384.

6. Mitchell, p. 72.

7. See, for example, "'Mental Forms Creating': 'Four-fold Vision' and the Poet as Prophet in Blake's Designs and Verse," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXIII (Winter 1964), 173-183; and "'Visionary Forms Dramatic: Grammatical and Iconographical Movement in Blake's Designs and Verse," *Criticism*, VIII (Spring 1966), 111-126.

8. Mitchell, p. 72.

Little Black Boy," the most frequent arrangement in the separately issued *Songs of Innocence*.<sup>9</sup>

And even the perspective created by the sequential arrangement refuses to be static, for our aesthetic experience of a Song, as well as our apprehension of the symbolic realities it depicts, are also shaped by the way in which a plate, or plates, are colored. Color changes may cause the same sequence to have a different impact in one copy than it does in another; particular elements of sequential designs may be highlighted or underplayed, made to echo or contrast with one another, or to serve as visual commentaries on one another, depending upon coloration. Most important—given the frequent ambiguities in Blake's poetic language—alterations in color and design elements can cause lines in the poem to be read differently in different copies, as is the case with "The Little Black Boy." What "The Little Black Boy" therefore *means* in one copy is not necessarily what it means in another.

By now, the implications of both this proliferation of versions<sup>10</sup> and the necessity of studying the interrelationship of text and design, must be clear. The "objectivity" of a Song—and the appropriateness of a critical approach that treats the work as static object—is demolished; Blake compels alternative, subsequent "readings" of a Song not only through the means used by all poets—lexical and syntactical ambiguities, for example—but through the means made available to him by his particular medium as well. No single edition of the *Songs of Innocence* or of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* can be regarded as definitive of anything but itself; there is no "Ur-Songs." Entering into the question, first, of how each plate and each copy creates meaning, and, second, of what is to be done with the variety of meanings different copies generate, Blake's reader becomes an active participant in the creative process. No wonder Blake claimed that his art was designed to "rouze the faculties"—all the faculties—"to act."

## II

CLEARLY, it is beyond the scope of this study, and perhaps of any, to consider the significance of all the variables in all the versions of "The Little Black Boy." The discussion here is limited to just two versions of the plates: "The Little Black Boy" in copy B of the separately issued *Songs of Innocence*, and that in copy Z of the combined *Songs*. Both are available in inexpensive facsimiles,<sup>11</sup> and thus the discussion here

9. For further bibliographical information on these two copies and others see David V. Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1974), p. 69. Erdman notes that differing arrangements bring differing "juxtapositions and . . . emphases."

10. I choose the word "versions" over "variants" since the latter I take to imply the existence of an authoritative text from which other copies deviate, rather than the existence of a variety of texts only.

11. A "reproduction in the original size" of copy Z of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* was published by Orion Press, 1967, with Introduction and Commentary by Geoffrey Keynes. A "Color Facsimile" of copy B of the *Songs of Innocence* was published by Dover, New York, 1971. For the pur-



## The Little Black Boy

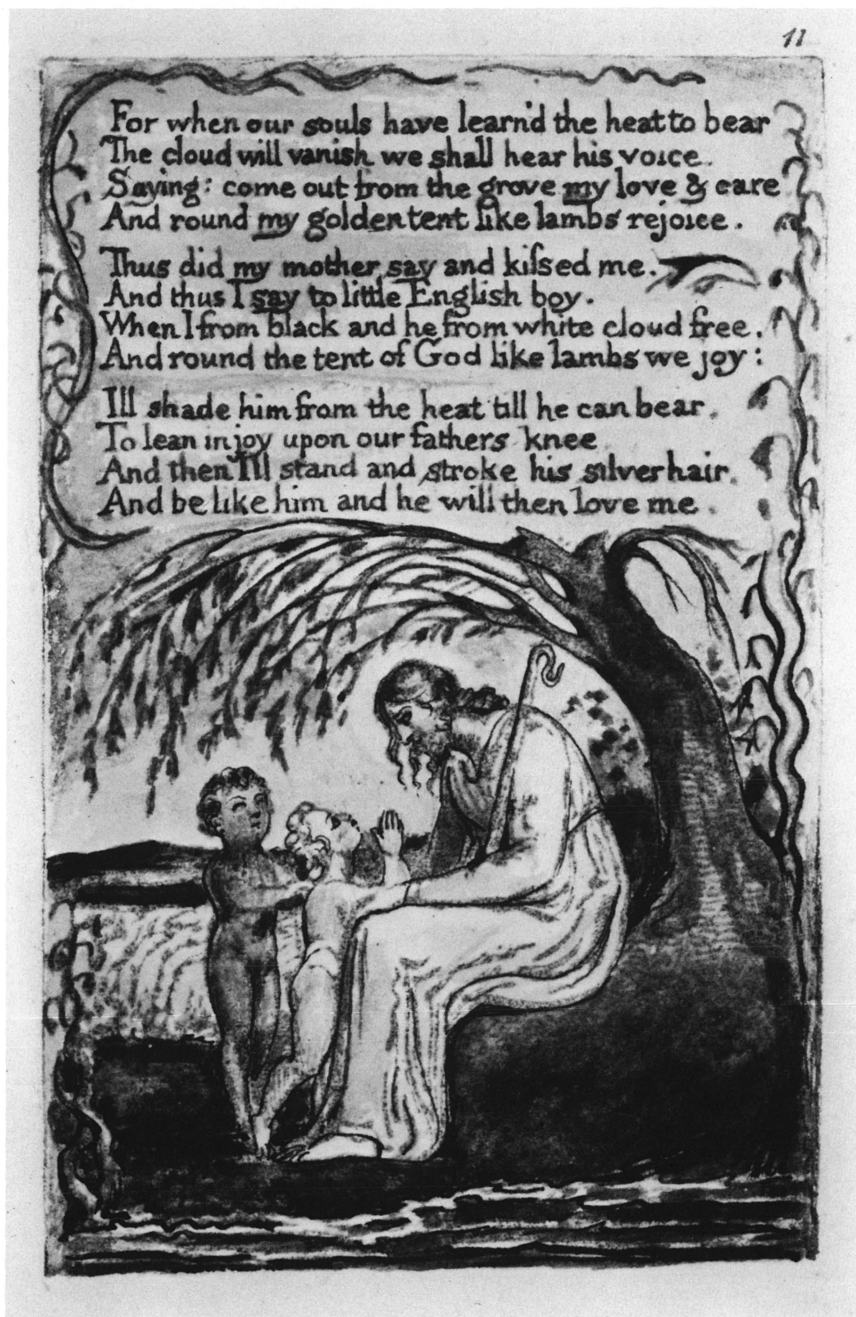
My mother bore me in the southern wild  
And I am black, but O! my soul is white  
White as an angel is the English child:  
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree  
And sitting down before the heat of day  
She took me on her lap and kiss'd me  
And pointing to the east began to say

Look on the rising sun: there God does live  
And gives his light and gives his heat away  
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
Comfort in morning joy in the noon day

And we are put on earth a little space  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.  
And these black bodies and this sun burnt face  
Is but a cloud and like a shady grove.

For



can be followed, and the interpretations verified or criticized, with relative ease. The fact that the differences in these two versions of "The Little Black Boy" are so extraordinary is by no means intended as an artificial buttress to the argument; other copies may yield less disparate interpretations. On the other hand, the fact that the differences are indeed so radical will help to point out how dynamic and variable a work of art "The Little Black Boy" actually is.

### III

BEFORE we can turn directly to "The Little Black Boy" plates in the two copies, we need to take into account the nature of those copies themselves. The perspective through which we view "The Little Black Boy"—and all the other Songs of Innocence—in copy Z differs from that of copy B first and foremost because the former includes the *Songs of Experience* as well: copy Z is designed to show us the "Two Contrary States of the Human Soul," B to portray only the state of Innocence. The fiery pain dramatized on the combined title-page; the declaration that the human soul possesses—or is possessed by—two states in dialectical opposition to one another and that the book before us will show us those states, the sexual tension inherent in the posture of the male and female on plate bottom,<sup>12</sup> are all absent in B. The poems of copy B move from the "Introduction," in which the vision of a child is transformed into "happy songs" for "every child," to "Night," as if the book itself recapitulates the course of one day; of copy Z, from the "Introduction" through to *Experience* and the "Voice of the Ancient Bard," calling for an "opening morn" not yet realized, and warning us of the maze of "Folly." Given these profoundly disparate contexts, it should not be surprising that the state embodied by "The Little Black Boy" in the one copy should be markedly different from that which it embodies in the other.

In copy B, "The Little Black Boy" is preceded by "Laughing Song"; in copy Z, by "The Lamb." Each structures a different relationship with "The Little Black Boy," and causes different elements of that Song to move from what Gestalt psychologists call the "ground" into the "figure area" of our perceptions.

"Laughing Song" is exactly what the title indicates: a frothy celebration of a joyously animated world. Nature is presented to us as untim-

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poses of this essay, I have used both of the above as well as the original of copy Z, in the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., and the facsimile of copy B published by the Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, London. The plates reproduced with this article are from yet another copy: copy E of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. They are reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

12. For a further discussion of the implications of the combined title-page and its variable meanings in different versions, see Gerda Norvig and Myra Glazer Schotz, "Blake's Book of Changes: On Viewing Three Copies of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*," *Blake Studies*, IX, No. 1 (1977).

idating, diminutive, humanized into the scene of picnic. Blake neither shows us nor describes forests, rivers, mountains, vast fields, animals of prey; instead, we are offered "green woods," "dimpling streams," "green hills," "meadows," a "grasshopper," and "painted birds." By the end of the poem, the sheer accumulation of "Whens" ("When the green woods laugh . . . When the air does laugh . . . When the meadows laugh . . . When the painted birds laugh") turns them into a *Now*, climaxing with an invitation to us to join in the celebration depicted on the top of the plate, where the colorfully dressed adults sit around the table, led by one of their number:

Come live and be merry and join with me  
To sing the sweet chorus of Ha Ha He.

The poem ends with an invitation to laughter and with the sounds of laughter itself; the reader who reads aloud ends the poem laughing. "Laughing Song" thus depicts, and brings about, by visual image and word, *shared* joy, and we become the invisible guests in the collective scene on the plate.

Turning the page to "The Little Black Boy," what we immediately encounter is the relative sparsity of the scene before us: in the place of eight gaily clad adults at a picnic, there is a very black mother and child portrayed alone together in an otherwise uninhabited world. In contrast to the human figures of "Laughing Song," the mother and child on this plate do not dominate the illustration, that is, they do not dominate nature. Rather, they are enclosed within it; the greenery in the background of "Laughing Song" emerges into the foreground of "The Little Black Boy." Moving us away from the socialized, "civilized," northern world of adults back to a primary circle of mother and child still in the womb of nature, Blake is symbolically taking us through a recapitulation-in-reverse of human history. The fact that "Laughing Song" is written in the present conditional, whereas "The Little Black Boy" poem begins with a statement written in the past and referring to birth, intensifies this return to origins.

When "The Little Black Boy" is viewed after "The Lamb," however, such an orientation is absent. "The Lamb" embodies one child's apprehension of God, nature, and the self, and to turn the page is to encounter another's. That is, it is the religious life of two boys which is being compared; the relationship of child to mother is subordinated in this context to that of child and God. "The Lamb" and "The Little Black Boy" play off one against the other to reveal the profoundly holistic, yet ultimately partial, vision of the one, and the painful divisions of the other.

Whereas both "Laughing Song" and the first plate of "The Little Black Boy" have the same page lay-out, when we turn from the title "The Lamb" to the title of the next plate our eye falls almost midway



down the page: "The Lamb" as title names the whole of the plate as a composite unit—the title rising above yet including and included by both text and design—but the words "The Little Black Boy" cut through the middle of the plate, dividing poem from design (or vice versa). In itself, this difference in page lay-outs has no significance; my intention is *not* to claim that a particular lay-out corresponds to a particular "message" (it is that kind of assumption to which I am opposed). In the context of this sequence, in this copy, however, this shift in lay-outs *is* a generator of meaning. It reinforces the contrast between the joyously unified universe of the white child and the conflicted world of the little black boy. In more specifically artistic terms, the position of the two titles structures a different relationship between the text and design on each plate: the way the words of the poem of "The Lamb" are related to the design is not the same as the way the words of "The Little Black Boy" are related to *its* design.

In "The Lamb," the identity of Lamb, Child, and Christ is intuitive and certain; the child's voice comes to embody both the object to which he addresses himself and the subject of his discourse (for the three are revealed to be One). In the universe of this poem, moreover, what we call ourselves and what we are called are the same; no "Other" confers an identity upon us which bewilders, estranges, or hurts us, or that we seek to oppose. The fact that Christ was crucified, that the lamb may be led to the slaughter, and that the child may lose the "Divine Vision in time of trouble" is knowledge we may bring to the poem, knowing, especially, that the *Songs of Experience* will follow, but it is not there, nor, do I think, is it implied.<sup>13</sup> The illustration, too, supports this vision of a beneficent, sacramental environment. Depicting an eternally dynamic present—the child in the act of speaking the words of the poem to the lamb—it is a visual counterpart to the child's conviction that the divine is incarnate, immanent. The saplings and vines which grow up on either side of the plate meet and mingle between the title and the first line of the poem, creating a kind of marriage canopy. The light of divinity is not centered, but suffused throughout; nurtured by his vision of Christ, the child is shown in the act of nurturing the lamb.

To turn to "The Little Black Boy" after "The Lamb," however, is to come face-to-face with what, in the absence of this particular sequence, we may have easily ignored, especially if we ourselves are white viewers (as Blake's original readers certainly were). The speaker of "The Lamb," this sequence makes us see, is not a Universal Child, but a *white boy* (Blake doesn't show us how a white or black *girl* might relate to God; his concern here is how one's color, not one's sex, shapes one's apprehension of divinity). Thus the boy's certain identification with Christ, his sanctification of nature, and his—and our—at-homeness

13. As Harold Bloom implies in "The Pastoral Image," *Blake's Apocalypse*, *passim*.

with both are now re-comprehended as functions of his whiteness. As viewers, this sequence teaches us to recognize our own visual blindspots; it shows us how "the Eye altering alters all." Both are apt initiations for entering the tense and troubled world of "The Little Black Boy" in this copy.

## IV

FROM the opening lines of "The Little Black Boy" it is clear that we, as readers, are brought into a psychic universe at odds with itself. The child who speaks the poem reveals an ambivalence from which the reader is not exempt. The poem, however, it needs to be added, does not so much speak of these feelings as manifest them in the rhythm of the child's speech, and the particular quality of his inner conflict differs markedly in the two copies. As the poem opens, the speaker seems to possess an easy matter-of-factness whose two-fold purpose is to introduce us to himself and to begin the act of defining the illustration above his words:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
And I am black . . .<sup>14</sup>

Although the first line describes where the boy was born—not where he is now—we identify the visual image above his words as depicting the "southern wild." That is, the illustration is, as it were, drawn from the child's memory and gives visual form to his present conception of his past life. The perspective being established, for both the poem and the illustration, is thus that of the boy's. In comparison to both "Laughing Song" and "The Lamb," the visual image and the opening lines make the boy's reality—now as then—seem remote, but the boy's tone seems to belie any sense of discomfort at that distance. He seems merely to be conveying information to us, reciting the facts of his life. But his apparent self-acceptance and his informational stance are interrupted and revealed as partial by the middle of the second line. Instead of another "And," there is a disjunctive "But," functioning both to stop the flow of the line for the reader, who is made to pause at the "O!," and to interrupt the ease of the black boy's description of himself:

And I am black, but O! my soul is white.

Just as the boy's intuition of "I-ness," his ego identity, is presented as distinct from his sense of his own soul, so we, as readers and as viewers, are faced with a split between what we see and what we are told is real, and the unseen reality—the whiteness of the boy's soul—is implied to have greater value than that which is seen. The next line magnifies both his disorientation and ours:

14. I follow the punctuation of the original in all quotations from poems.

And I am black, but O! my soul is white,  
White as an angel is the English child:

The claim that the English child (the one depicted in "The Lamb"?) is "White as an angel," like the black boy's assertion of his whiteness of soul, declares the presence of an unvisualized reality, contracting the scope of the reality depicted in the illustration. Blake has chosen to show us the boy with his mother on this plate, not the boy in contrast to the English child he has conjured up, and he is ignoring the "angel" altogether, keeping the illustration on plate i of the earth. Progressing through the poem, by the third line we are also becoming aware of the apparent limitations of the illustration; the poem seems to be creating an independent symbolic space.

For a reader at home in the conventions of *ut pictura poesis*, and the dualistic epistemology which is its basic premise, this apparent division of seen and unseen, body and soul, design and poem, may be acceptable and therefore unquestioned, for the tradition sees the purpose of the picture as expressing the "body," as the poem expresses the "soul."<sup>15</sup> But to rest with this view is to disregard the wavering uncertainty and apologetics of the boy and his own sadness at being so divided; it is to separate (dualistically) the content of his words from the form in which they are bodied forth, and to ignore the ambiguities of the poem. At this point in the text, "The Little Black Boy" becomes a testing ground for dualistic premises, and, as we shall see, it neither validates, nor actually portrays, a dualistic reality, but rather creates an artistic expression before which dualisms falter. The process of doing so begins almost immediately. Let us look again at lines two and three: "my soul is white, / White as an angel is the English child." Compare that to:

. . . my soul is white,  
The English child is white as an angel.

The difference between Blake's version and mine is clear: the fact that the child has shifted subjects in the third line of the poem is hidden by the child's actual word order, and is obvious in the way I have recomposed it. The shift in subject is abrupt; the disjunction between the two halves of the line caused by the "is" is also subtler than the disjunction earlier caused by the "but O!," and this time not even the punctuation warns us. What is clear from the syntax is that there is at once an unbridgeable gap, and an identity—unspoken—between black boy and white: the one can sometimes shift easily into the other.

The lines can be read in two ways. Either we pause after "my soul is white," as if the statement of division is complete in itself and therefore, on some level, acceptable to us who are prepared to begin a new thought with the next line; or we search for a further explanation of "my soul is

15. See Mitchell, p. 60, quoting Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 96.

white," and thus assent to read "White as an angel" as a continuation of the previous line. In the case of the former, what is stressed is the two-fold split the boy is experiencing: within himself and between himself and the English child. He lives in an alienated world and thus perceives himself to be in absolute separation from the kind of whiteness only the English child possesses. In the case of the latter, however, the differences between the two boys pivot only on an "is," and what one is, the other may become. For the moment, the boy was carried away by the thought of his whiteness of soul; only in mid-sentence does he change his mind, realizing that, however white his own soul may be, it is not "White as an angel": only the English child—whose soul is at one with his body, whose whiteness of soul is matched by the whiteness of body, is that. Whereas in the first instance the boy is going to have to traverse an immense distance before he can feel whole, or achieve wholeness, in the second he is already halfway there. As we shall see, the first reading corresponds to other elements in copy Z, and is thus supported by the thrust of that copy, whereas the second is the correct one for copy B.

In both cases, however, no sooner does the black boy envision for us and for himself the white-as-an-angel English child, than he see-saws back to himself, bringing the reader with him and causing a reacknowledgement of the visual image on the plate:

But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

Why does the boy describe himself as being "bereav'd of light"? What implications does the image have? Who has bereft him, and of what kind of light? It is, I suggest, with this image that the meaning of "The Little Black Boy"—already beginning to be quite different in the two copies—begins sharply to diverge, and the reader may begin to perceive just how much a "literalist of the imagination" Blake could be if he chose. The illustration on plate i offers one possible source of light from which the child may feel bereft: the sun. Now, the sun in copy B is differentiated from the yellowish sky only by its outline; half of it is unpainted. As a concomitant both of the transition from "Laughing Song" and of the underplaying of the sun, our visual attention rivets onto the pronounced blackness of mother and child and onto their enclosure within intimate, protective space. This emphasis is further reinforced by Blake's having painted not only their bodies, but also part of the bark of the tree against which the mother leans black as well; the two black figures are thus shown to be enclosed within the black perpendicular formed by tree and ground.

In consequence of this emphasis on mother and child and their mutual blackness, and this barely present sun, the image of being "bereav'd of light" refers to nothing in the illustration. What is emphasized instead is the "as if"—not that the boy *is* bereaved of light, but that that is what

his intense blackness, which *is* reinforced in this copy, may seem to suggest, especially, perhaps, for the viewer. As we shall see in a moment, by neutralizing the sun and creating this sense of protected space, Blake is also hinting that the "beams of love" the boy is learning to "bear" are not those of the sun, or, ultimately, of God, but those of maternal love.

But an entirely different dynamic is at work in copy Z, where the sun is shown as a presence so powerful the sky burns a fiery crimson. Copy Z enacts the literal physical basis of the boy's words, for the child is shown to be quite literally out of the light of the sun, not merely *sitting* on the left side of the plate but polarized there. Insofar as he clearly prefers being in the light—of the light—the shade provided by the tree is not being experienced—or being remembered—as protective, but rather is associated with trapping him in the blackness of his "natural" body, and severing him at once from his own soul, from the English child, from a sense of immanent divinity, and from a feeling of psychic wholeness. When he tells us in the next line, therefore, that his "Mother taught him underneath a tree," an ambivalence toward the mother (who is, in this copy, the one keeping him out of the light, not merely "protecting" him), that is simply not present in copy B, is manifest.

In other words, the implications of the line "My mother taught me underneath a tree," like the meaning of being "bereav'd of light," alters from copy to copy. In copy B, the absence of visual distraction from the mother/child relation suggests that it is the boy's memory of her and of their relationship which is of most significance to him; the fact that both stanzas one and two begin with the words "My mother" assumes an importance in this context it does not possess to the same degree elsewhere, for here she is shown to be his primal and primary reference point. She bore him and taught him and thus plays a major role—if as yet an unclear one—in any understanding of who he is now. Finally, in copy B, more than one tree is depicted on plate i; if the southern wild has many trees, the fact that mother and child are shown underneath one lessens the symbolic charge of the image.

This divergence between the two copies is intensified as the poem-within-the-poem, which is the mother's lesson (or, more accurately, the boy's remembrance of it) begins. Sitting down "before the heat of day" may be a casual memory for the boy in copy B, but it is charged with significance in copy Z, where it hints at a further criticism of the mother. When the mother bids her son—and us—to "Look on the rising sun" in copy B, we see a wholly unimpressive object which takes on a vivid spiritual and symbolic aspect only as the mother's lesson continues, only as she transforms the bland natural landscape through the power of her imagination. In copy B, she is not trying to *explain* the sun's power; she creates it through words. *She* is the dominating creative presence. But in copy Z, where the boy's sense of bereftness, his ambivalence toward his mother, his feelings of division, and the radiance of

the sun all rise into the foreground of our awareness, the mother's same instruction only serves to focus more attention on the boy's longing for wholeness and his distance from the imagined source of divinity (as earlier he felt distant from the English child). In copy Z, it is as if the more the mother associates the sun's power with divinity, the more cut off from that divinity the boy will feel.

For both copies, however, the same question presents itself. Why is the lesson here? Why does the boy recapitulate for the reader the lesson his mother taught him? What is it *doing* in the poem? What dramatic, thematic, psychic, aesthetic, spiritual function does it serve? What is it that the little black boy wants to show or to tell us by reciting the lesson word-for-word?

The temptation for the reader in being presented with a lesson is, of course, to seek to extract a message from it, and then to compare that message with the conclusions drawn by the boy: that, in any case, is what most critics have done.<sup>16</sup> But the lesson is presented within a context, a poem-within-a-poem on a plate, and as we read the lesson we move to a different plate which, like that before, differs in different copies. The "container" in which the lesson is offered alters; does the meaning of the lesson, therefore, not alter as well? And if the state of the speaker varies, the point of view through which the lesson is presented, and thus the lesson itself, alters as well. "As the Eye," Blake tells us, "Such the Object." To ignore this principle of his artistic strategy is to misconstrue the nature of the "object."

Secondly, the boy's recitation of the mother's lesson functions to re-define the illustration. Just as the ending of the poem reveals that the boy has infused her lesson with personal spiritual significance, so her words, for the reader/viewer, transform this scene-in-nature to a stage where mother, child, the world of nature, and the Divine Presence interact. The poem-within-a-poem thus enables Blake to "expose as a fiction the bifurcated organization of . . . reality"<sup>17</sup> that is otherwise implicit in the tradition of the sister arts: "soul" is, as it were, infused into the "body" of the illustration. It is thus particularly appropriate that, in the course of her lesson, we move onto the second plate, to the boy's imagination of the future and his concrete visualization of God. The mother's lesson is our *rite de passage* from the world of nature, where God exists as it were in the background, to the world of embodied symbolic form, the actualized and incarnate Christ. In this sense the transformation brought about in our apprehension of the nature of the illustration on plate i, by the words of the mother, serve as a type—in the traditional hermeneutical sense—of the transformation from plate i to

16. As Bloom, Hinkel, Adler see it; see also E. D. Hirsch, *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 179–180, and Robert Gleckner, *The Piper and the Bard* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 102–109.

17. Mitchell, p. 61.

plate ii of the Song, where we meet God incarnate in Christ. And, of course, it is the boy himself, moving from memory to imagination, who brings this about: the words of the mother are spoken by him.

Having said this, however, it is necessary to add immediately that the nature and qualities of our journey—and, of course, of the boy's—differ in the two copies, for the “sacramental guardianship”<sup>18</sup> of the mother is questionable in copy Z, unquestioned in B. In the latter, the effect of the visual emphasis on the mother/child relation on plate i reveals that the mother—rooted in her condition as mother and as black—is projecting onto the divine-human relation the attributes of her own relation to her son and of their situation in the “southern wild.” As the sun rises in its unassuming fashion, she infuses it with spiritual significance in order to offer comfort to her son by transforming the natural environment for him. Thus, in copy B, the “Comfort” that she portrays the God of her imagination as offering in the “morning” is a projection of that which she is bestowing upon the boy “before the heat of day”—in the *now* depicted on the plate—and in the morning of his life. The boy points upward to the promised joy (the tree under which they sit is painted in a manner which makes it clear that the boy is pointing not to it, but beyond it), to the position of the noonday sun; he is hearkening to her words, in accord with her, for she is a woman who, out of so simple a natural life, can create an image of the sacred. She speaks of black bodies as a kind of “shady grove,” as Blake brings to the viewer's fore the image of black boy and mother ensconced within a shady grove. In this context, with its implied emphasis on this life, this world, and the human imagination, the “beams of love” the boy is learning to “bear” are those radiated by the mother, and the “little space” boy and mother occupy on the plate contain that love rather than existing in contradiction to it. The actual message being conveyed to the boy is not that life is a trial, but that he is loved, and that the value of life is in loving. If this is the case, however, why is it he has to learn to “bear” those beams? Is mother-love really so oppressive, even to the Blake of copy B?

The problem is with our interpretation of “bear.” “Bear” in this context has usually been taken to mean that our life on earth has, as its primary purpose, learning to suffer or endure; in copy B, however, I suggest, learning to “bear the beams of love” means learning how to *bring them forth, produce them, give birth to them*, which is precisely what the mother is doing with her own son and the rising sun. When we have fully internalized that love—“when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear”—and are thus capable of loving as well as being loved, all obscurity, and all the feeling we may have that our bodies obscure the divine light—vanishes. Christ is incarnate before us, as he is before the

18. The phrase is that of Hirsch, p. 180.

viewer who turns the page to that line, as a God of Love. As the words of the mother were a type of the transformation from plate i to ii, so the grove on plate i, where the lesson of love was learned, is shown as a type of the grove on plate ii, where a pastoral Christ sits underneath a willow, greeting two little white boys. God's love, copy B tells us, is a metamorphosis of mother-love, not in conflict with it; *almost* like the little English child in stanza one, by the end of the poem the black boy is like him indeed.

That the black boy understands that his mother is teaching him how to create—and thus dwell in—the light of love is clear from the ending of the poem. He turns, in his imagination, to the English child:

Thus did my mother say and kissed me.  
And thus I say to little English boy.

Most commentators on the poem have assumed that what the black boy says to the English boy is contained in the last six lines of the poem. However, the parallelism of the lines and the punctuation may also suggest that the black boy recapitulates the lesson taught him by his mother for the English child: what the black boy says, in other words, is what his mother says, for he knows that by so doing he will awaken love in the English child, and thus free the English child from *his* "cloud." Once he has done so, both boys are "alike," whole in body and soul, loved and loving: which is why Blake, in this copy, portrays them both as white. Like his mother before him, and like the willow of Christ, he will, as a final gesture, shade the English child from the heat: create a space in which further love can be learned, and the English child can perceive the divinity inherent in human love—and the human love inherent in divine love.

Copy B offers us a symbolic manifestation of a God of Love, showing us the mode in which that God is realized; copy Z, of a God of Love and Suffering. The one sees the world of nature and of childhood *sub species maternitatis* as a vale of soul-making; the other, as a vale of soul-forging. In copy Z, the psyche is polarized between an intensity of spiritual conception and an embeddedness in the natural world that can be resolved only by a fusion of the two. And the key image in this copy is the burning sun portrayed on plate i perceived as a type of the halo of Christ on plate ii: we will witness the sun become the Son.

Because of the power of the sun depicted on plate i, the dissociation evident from the very opening of the poem gathers force as the boy recites more and more of his mother's lesson. On the level of simple physical, "natural" reality, the shade, especially in a climate as hot as that of Africa, is much to be desired: to be out in that sun can be devastating, black skin or no. But now, the more the mother goes on, the more inescapable becomes the knowledge that the realities of this physical life conflict bitterly with those of the spiritual, if the mother's metaphor of



God as "light" and "heat" is accepted. The "little space" they occupy on earth is heavily, almost oppressively, shaded by the wild-looking tree of the south, and exists as a kind of dialectical counterpart to the rising sun. In this context, the "beams of love" are searing, and learning to "bear" them also means learning to bear both our remoteness from them and the potential suffering implicit in being exposed to them. No wonder, then, that the mother conceives of the body as a refuge blocking out the sun (a "cloud") and as a "shady grove": divinity is, in this copy, difficult to bear, but since we ache for it we are riven by conflicting desires. The sheer difficulty of the mother's lesson in this copy is intensified for the reader struggling to make out its words from the dark blue of the background wash.

As soon as we come to the bottom of plate i, to the lines "like a shady grove," and turn the page, however, that dark wash disappears, and we are presented with a golden background that seems to illuminate the words from behind. Before us now is God-as-Christ, with a vivid sun-like halo, a powerful visual metamorphosis of the sun on plate i. One consequence of this new alignment of Christ and the sun is that the former's *maternity*, implied by his assumption of the posture and position of the mother (and by a myriad other factors in copy B) is modified, and, in its place, Christ's *divinity* is stressed. When we recognize this as an embodiment of the boy's own active imagination, we realize that, although his envisioning of Christ as a source of light comes from his mother's teaching, he is now less tied to the mother of his "mortal part" than was the little black boy of copy B. Perhaps what is reflected here is Blake's own rejection, expressed vehemently in *Jerusalem*, of woman-as-mother, as well as his insistent claim that man must continually slough off "Maternal Humanity" for the sake of spiritual rebirth.

Thus "Maternal Humanity," seeking to "protect," yet by that very act keeping us from the divine (which itself thereby becomes more searing, more remote), prepares us not for a God of Love, but for a God who embodies yet surpasses all conflicting human desires, a God acknowledging both Love and Suffering, Christ not only as a Shepherd but as a Man of Sorrows and of Resurrection as well: the haloed Christ who appears to the little black boy once his own soul has "learn'd the heat to bear." Serving as a *rite de passage* from the world remembered by the boy to that imagined by him, the mother's lesson teaches the son to overcome nature, even if, in so doing, he must overcome the mother as well. No wonder, then, that the "river of life" depicted on the bottom of plate ii is considerably wider in copy Z than in copy B: the child has had a longer, more arduous journey to endure.

What does the black boy say to the English child in copy Z? Does he repeat the mother's lesson? What purpose, in this copy, would such a repetition serve? If the little white child has never experienced the kind of profound divisiveness that the black boy knows, why need he tell him

how to endure it? In copy Z, I suggest, the line "And thus I say to little English boy" *does* refer to the six final lines of the poem:

When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear,  
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him and he will then love me.

The white-as-an-angel English child, like the child of "The Lamb," has never known what it feels like to be split between soul and body; to need the shade at the very moment you ache for and value the light; to know that your mother's words (and there is no mother in "The Lamb") will awaken in you your imaginative powers and bring you to the very verge of divinity ("come out from the grove my love & care") and yet keep you from a spiritual life (more because of the burning power of the natural world than from any frustration or malevolence on her part; she is not the willful Enitharmon or tortured Vala). And, in copy Z, it is inconceivable to the little black boy that one can rejoice around the tent of God without having suffered first, without having first undergone such an experience of love and trial. Thus, even when he tries to imagine both himself and his little companion free from the "cloud" of the body, the lessons of the world of nature and the realities of the body press upon him. It is not that the black boy "knows what his mother evidently cannot know, that: 'Labour is blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure soul' "19; it is rather that the soul bears the bruises of the body, and is unfathomable otherwise. Thus the little black boy seeks to "shade" the English child "from the heat," for he assumes that the English child must need such shading, as he himself did. And thus, too, Blake portrays both boys, on plate ii, as neither black nor white, but as a kind of bruise-blue. To journey to the tent of God, to create an image of God, and to awaken the divine in one's self and love in another, is in this world, "The Little Black Boy" tells us, a "Great Task."

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19. Bloom, p. 45.