



December 1982

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.4, December 1982, p.205-213

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Blake's Little Black Boy and the Bible

by ROBERT F. GLECKNER

NO ONE today, so far as I know, accepts the mother of Blake's poem, "The Little Black Boy," as a speaker of Blakean wisdom. Her advice to her son is essentially that his blackness is not a bereavement of light (to use the language of the black boy's lament in the first stanza) but a kind of special gift from God to enable him the better to "bear the beams of love"; that when all souls have "learn'd the heat to bear" they will come out from the "shady grove" of their bodies and "round the tent of God like lambs" rejoice; and, finally, that in such "heaven" black and white will no longer be. The naiveté and childlikeness of this "story" seem admirably appropriate for one of the *Songs of Innocence*. Wicksteed called it "the pure wisdom which love and generation can teach us."¹ But, although he recognized the black boy's wisdom as that of "regeneration" rather than of generation, his own position in this regard is severely qualified, if not undercut, by his interpreting the boy's wisdom as a "realisation that his very blackness may be made to render service to the tenderer soul that seems so much nearer the light" (p. 113). To put it more bluntly, and in some ways unfairly, Wicksteed sees wisdom in the black boy's acceptance of his inferior position, of his being a "dimmer but steadier" light that protects the greater "artist from the mortal consequences of his excess of light" (p. 113). That was the view of the poem in 1928.

Since that time the commentative tide has turned drastically. Harold Bloom's comments may be taken as typical.² The black boy's word "bereav'd" (in "I am black as if bereav'd of light"), he points out, "has the force of 'dispossessed' or 'divested'; the myth of the Fall has

1. Joseph H. Wicksteed, *Blake's Innocence and Experience* (London: J. M. Dent, 1928), p. 112.

2. To appreciate the persistence of widely divergent appreciations of the poem subsequent to Wicksteed's pioneering study see, e.g., what G. E. Bentley, Jr., calls, in *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 797, the "sound, though not very original, reading" of A. E. Dyson, "The Little Black Boy: Blake's Song of Innocence," *Critical Quarterly*, I (1959), 44-47; and, in Bentley's words again (p. 798), the "distressing misreading" of Ralph D. Eberly, "Blake's *The Little Black Boy*," *Explicator*, XV (1957), item 42. Of course almost all books on Blake from Damon's in 1924 to the most recent have something to say about the poem, all such commentaries falling generally between the extremes defined by Dyson and Eberly. Of these one of the most notable is Myra Glazer, "Blake's Little Black Boys: On the Dynamics of Blake's Composite Art," *Colby Library Quarterly*, XVI (1980), 220-36. Although I cannot agree with all the particulars of her analysis, or even with her conclusions, her critical method seems to me unexceptionable, and there are fine insights on, particularly, pp. 227, 229, 230-31, 234-35. Bloom's commentary, on what he regards as "the epitome of *Songs of Innocence*," is in *Blake's Apocalypse* (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor, 1963).

entered the poem" (p. 43). Further, "having been instructed in confusion, the Little Black Boy ends in that state. By his own logic, he ought to say that the English boy will be like himself at the last, but instead he gives us the opposite notion, the pathos of unfulfilled wish" (p. 46)—that is, the poem's final stanza which is, though rarely noted, entirely in the future tense:

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.

Most recently Zachary Leader, in his *Reading Blake's "Songs"* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), continues and extends the critical assault on the mother's "wisdom," which he associates suggestively with the terrifying imperceptiveness of the speaker's conclusion to "The Chimney Sweeper": "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm." Of the last stanza of "The Little Black Boy" he writes, largely echoing Hazard Adams's analysis,

The word "then" in the last line does much to evoke in us the sympathetic response characteristic of *Innocence*. The mother's explanations—with their implied superiority of black over white—cannot wipe away the tears of his own inferiority that . . . [inhere] in the words the child speaks in stanza 1. The superiority the little black boy has been taught to feel is eventually reasserted, but it has to compete with more deeply imbedded presentiments of inferiority. He is glad that, as his mother's arguments imply, he is God's favorite, but only because now the English child . . . will learn to love him.³

Leader then goes on, in an original and provocative reading of the second plate of the poem, to argue that the God presented there is "the Christ of the church, of institutionalized religion," the heaven depicted by the mother "an illusion," the Christ-figure seemingly oblivious to the black boy's presence while focusing "all his attention on the white child" (pp. 114–15). "To believe in such a Savior," he concludes, "one must have abandoned all hope of present divinity, or of a life of vision" (p. 116).

Even allowing for the fact that in a number, perhaps most, of the *Songs of Innocence* the world of experience impinges menacingly on the scene, the thrust of interpretations like Bloom's and Leader's is toward displacing "The Little Black Boy" entirely out of that scene or context. It is, they say in effect, a song of experience: the mother is in serious error; the black boy is at best confused, at worst doubly convinced of his own inferiority; the white boy apparently still does not "love" the black boy even while leaning comfortably on God's knee; and God himself favors his already favored white "lamb." Yet Blake himself was firm in retaining the poem as a song of innocence—unlike his uncer-

3. P. 111. Adams's analysis is in his *William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963), pp. 263–66.

tainty about "The Little Girl Lost," "The Little Girl Found," "The School Boy," and "The Voice of the Ancient Bard," all of which began in *Innocence* only to be transferred at later dates to *Songs of Experience*. My own analysis of the poem over twenty years ago was an attempt to honor Blake's persistence in maintaining the poem in *Innocence*.⁴ Although I am not now willing to remount the barricades to defend all the particulars of that analysis (which has the added disadvantage of ignoring the illustrations) I still believe that my instincts about the poem, and Blake, and the state innocence were right. Fortifying them in 1959 were my citations of parallels to the *Song of Solomon*, especially 1:5-6, 2:2, and 8:2. The last of these is the most poignant with respect to "The Little Black Boy," its larger context (verses 1-3) underscoring the black boy's sense of difference between himself and the white boy:

O that thou wert as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother! When I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, I should not be despised.

I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother's house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate.

His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me.

In fact, of course, in Blake's poem the white boy does none of these things, yet in the innocent-imaginative "thinking" of the black boy he does: "My beloved is white and ruddy, the chieftest among ten thousand. . . . yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend . . ." (5:10, 16). Mother is to black boy as black boy is to white boy as body (cloud, blackness) is to soul (the black boy's "soul is white" and, in a sense, the white boy's soul is, non-pejoratively, black). Both are lambs, not merely *will be*; and God is not merely a God or even *the* God but, in the black boy's words, "our father"—the same one who "finds" the little boy in "The Little Boy Found."

So far so good. But what of Bloom's objections and of Leader's disturbingly persuasive analysis of the second plate of the poem? The problem clearly lies with the mother, for it is her metaphors, her idea of the body-soul dualism, her view of God and Heaven that precipitate the second plate with its "god of this world" and his inadequate heaven.⁵ As Leader points out in scrupulous detail, "the first plate of the poem remains rooted in Innocence" (p. 113)—properly so, for it is the black

4. *The Piper and the Bard: A Study of William Blake* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 104-08. Although she does not address the point, Glazer's essay cited in Note 2 above tends to support the poem as a song of innocence—although the essay's full implications would finally place it in an imagined *Songs of Higher Innocence*.

5. Long ago Damon cited Dante's use of the body-cloud metaphor, in *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (New York: Peter Smith, 1947; orig. ed. 1924), p. 269; and Jacob Adler later traced the metaphor back to Plato, in "Symbol and Meaning in 'The Little Black Boy,'" *Modern Language Notes*, LXXII (1957), 412-15; but both tend to accept the body-soul dualism as appropriate to Blake's entire conception and argument in the poem. Similar uncritical discoveries of Blake's sources are represented by Damon's citing of "the anti-slavery agitation of Blake's times" and of Isaac Watts's "Grace Shining and Nature Fainting" in the *Horae Lyricae*. Mona Wilson's demurrer on this point is well taken—in *The Life of William Blake* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949; orig. ed. 1927), pp. 28-29.

boy's plate so to speak. But we must also see, as Leader does not, that the second plate is his as well, even while it is ostensibly the mother's vision of God in his heaven with all the disturbing accompaniments Leader details. It is a necessary ambiguity; otherwise we must charge Blake with mistaking his own song of innocence for a song of experience. Leader is right as far as he goes: plate 2 of the poem is the world of experience and generation that reflects the imaginative incapacity of the mother who envisions it in the conventional terms of black-white, evil-good, body-soul, and (as I noted in my earlier analysis) comfort-joy, cloud-sun. That is to say, the graphic versions of both mother's love for son and God's love for his children, in deliberately parallel design conformations, are emblems of love, the one (as Leader notes) of mother's love in this world—as that is pictured as well in the designs for “The Ecchoing Green,” “The Little Boy Found,” “Spring,” and “Infant Joy”—the other as mother's love transformed into God's love (as it is, for example, in the texts of “A Cradle Song” and “On Another's Sorrow”).⁶

Love in the *Songs of Innocence* appears, textually and graphically, in a variety of forms, of course, the textual paradigm being “The Divine Image” where love is “the human form divine”—and is, in turn, both the sheep and shepherd of “The Shepherd” as well as the sheep and the child of “The Lamb” and the sheep, mother, and child of “Spring,” and so on.⁷ Such associative clusters (or identities) are the percepts of innocence, as distinct from the dislocations inherent in the black mother's “analysis” of the human form divine into the body-soul dualism that is, for her, the image of the macrocosmic dissociation of earth from heaven—precisely the dissociation Blake dramatizes by making what very well could have been a single-plate poem into a two-plate poem. Countering that split, however, is the sustaining by the black boy speaker of his own innocent-imaginative perception of his world in all its interconnectedness, the fusing agent being love. To establish this Blake rather remarkably plays off the Bible against itself. That is to say, the conventional Biblical idea of God and his flock and the rescue (as it were) of the soul from the body—which sanctions the mother's perception—is countered by two of the great Biblical passages on love. One I have already mentioned, the Song of Solomon. The other is the first epistle of John.

The epistle opens with an assertion of “that which was from the beginning,” that which eternally is: “for the life was manifested, and we have seen *it*, and bear witness . . . , that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us” (1:1–2). This is the child's percep-

6. This is the essence of Glazer's conclusion with regard to the second graphic design—namely that it transforms, via the sun-son-halo, the “maternity” of plate 1 into the divinity of plate 2.

7. For a fuller discussion of this characteristic Blakean merging of symbolic forms see Chapter II of *The Piper and the Bard*.

tion, what *is*, not merely what is as preparation for or a prelude or even prerequisite to what will be. John's characterization of what is employs precisely Blake's imagery in "The Little Black Boy": "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all"; and "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another . . ." (1:5, 7). Even more tellingly,

He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.

He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.

But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes. (1:9-11)

It is difficult not to see in Blake's poem a shrewd reversal of these roles: the little black boy as the "brother" who "abideth in the light" because of his love, and the white boy as the brother who "is in darkness" because he does not love.

The pertinence of John's epistle as a "source" for Blake's conception (as radically distinct, say, from those sources cited by Damon, Adler, and others) is strengthened by the fact that much of chapter 2 is devoted to an attack by John upon false teachers. He writes "these *things*," he says,

concerning them that seduce you.

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and yet need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.

And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.

If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him.⁸

The passage is quite extraordinary. Needless to say the baptismal "anointing" John speaks of is daringly (but characteristically) transformed by Blake into an anointing with light, which is precisely what the mother, with her dimmed adult vision, interprets as a necessary suffering, having to "bear" the beams of love. The chimney sweeper's "bearing" of his burden and being "good" about doing his "duty" is Blake's other, perhaps even clearer, version of the same "necessary suffering," the doctrine being enunciated there by an "Angel" who releases those children from their "clouds" ("coffins") and, if they are good, promises them they'll "have God for [their] father & never want joy." The counterthrust of John's epistle, then, is pertinent to both poems and, above all, consistent with Blake's vision of the state of the human soul

8. 2:26-29. Cf.: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (4:1). Further, says John, "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them" (4:4-5).

9. The fundamental error of Watts's conventionality is thus exposed by John's epistle, for it is Watts's poem that invokes the idea of bearing the heat:

that is innocence. But, the final passage I want to cite here focusses John's "message" sharply on "The Little Black Boy." It concludes with the black boy's words:

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

The language is the mother's, the false teacher's, put into the child's mind and mouth: "Thus did my mother say. . . . / And thus I say to little English boy." The cause-and-effect reasoning rhetorically betrays the error of this second-hand misperception. As such it stands in sharp contrast to the simplicity of the opening stanza of the poem with *its* misperception—there a result of the child's simple sensory acknowledgement of a physical fact: he is black.¹⁰ But, "anointed" as I suggested above he also perceives that his "soul is white," his apparent blackness not causally attributable to a loss of light but only "as *if* bereav'd of light" (my italics). Thus John's epistle:

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. (3:1-2)

Such a bestowal is obviously not the same as the mother's idea of the sun and heat and sun-burning. That is but one version of the world's knowing us not. The black boy does know: "we are the sons of God"; what "we shall be" we do not, cannot know, and is, in any case, a presumptuous irrelevancy. To the mother, speaking through the black boy's mouth, her son will be "like" the white boy. But the black boy knows he is *already* "like" God, that he and his "brother" white boy *are* the sons of God, for he sees "him as he is"—in himself, the human form divine. The white boy clearly does not.

But the line, "But I am black as if bereav'd of light," still nags, for it is of a different order of discourse from the preceding "*And I am black, but O! my soul is white.*" The repetition is poignant and affecting but also disturbing, for it has all the earmarks of an interpretation of what,

Nor is my soul refined enough
To bear the beaming of his love,
And feel his warmer smiles.
When shall I rest this drooping head?
I love, I love the sun, and yet I want the shade.

Nowhere in his three epistles does John mention heat. It is worth noting as well that all the other Biblical references to heat (aside from the simply experiential "heat of the day" references) also serve to expose the mother's unfortunate metaphor: heat is anger, destructive devouring, sexual arousal, a smiting force, drunkenness, viperish. Job 30:30 is not untypical and, in its language, may very well be another "source" for Blake's conception: "My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat."

10. The pertinence of the Song of Solomon to Blake's poem should be obvious: "I *am* black, but comely" (1:5). The black boy's dual perception is here epitomized.

in the first utterance, is merely a statement of fact. Is the black boy's reason functioning beyond his years to make him as mistaken as his mother—and thus to make him no innocent after all? I think not; but how are we to know? Glazer addresses this problem directly, but in her effort implicitly to confute Bloom's reading of the "bereav'd" line (cited above) she founders some in her own explanation. Milton could have helped her, as could the Bible elsewhere in her analysis, but she ignores both.

There is no bereaving of light in the Bible but there is a signal instance of it in *Samson Agonistes*, however unlikely a place that seems to look for help here. Addressing the "first-created beam" as well as the "great Word, / 'Let there be light, and light was over all,'" Samson cries in anguish, "Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree?" (ll. 83–85). Annotating the passage Douglas Bush writes that "Samson's being cut off from light suggests his alienation from God."¹¹ The Chorus quickly agrees, and in the terms of their agreement Blake found his basic language for "The Little Black Boy": "Thou art become," they say,

The dungeon of thyself; thy soul
(Which men enjoying sight oft without cause complain)
Imprisoned now indeed,
In real darkness of the body dwells,
Shut up from outward light. (155–160)

And, even worse, "inward light, alas, / Puts forth no visual beam" (162–63). Milton's error, Samson's error, and the Chorus's error are the black boy's mother's error. And it is all too often ours as well. Only the black boy himself knows (imaginatively, without rationalization) that his soul is white, that "inward light" *does* put forth a visual beam—and that his "appearance" of blackness (which is what Blake graphically reifies), the "real darkness of the body," is but appearance, an "as if." Although patience has nothing to do with Blake's poem (except as that may inhere in the mother's idea of learning to bear the beams of love), the Chorus's later perception is that of the black boy:

But patience is more oft the exercise
Of saints, the trial of their fortitude,
Making them each his own deliverer

No deliverer awaits "out there"—or in plate 2 of Blake's poem.

"The black boy's fears and doubts" that Leader argues (pp. 113–14) as governing the nature of the second plate of the poem simply do not exist except as they are imposed onto the child's brain by his mother. He already loves. He is the child of "The Lamb" plate, both of its text and design. His mother may have "bore him" but he knows that the Lamb "makes" all lambs and that

11. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 521n.

He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name

If there is a “real” little black boy (in the mother’s sense) in the poem, then, it is “the English child” who does not love, whose God is “out there” somewhere just as the mother perceives him, and who is therefore the one, in Blake’s second design for the poem, leaning physically on that external “fathers knee.” As Leader himself notes (p. 116), even while making the poem into a kind of song of experience, the “Saviour” in *Jerusalem* rains down no beams of love that must be borne but rather, “Spreading his beams of love,” dictates the poet’s “mild song” (4:4–5), a phrase that one is emboldened to interpret in the context of the foregoing discussion as the little black boy’s song, not his mother’s. The burden of that song is “I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine.”¹² In *Jerusalem* Albion (in a very real sense the English boy of “The Little Black Boy”) is called upon to awake and return:

Thy nurses and thy mothers, thy sisters and thy daughters
Wept at thy souls disease, and the Divine Vision is darkened
.....
I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend;
Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me
Lo! we are One; forgiving all Evil; Not seeking recompense!
(4:12–13, 18–20)

Despite John’s admonition, “No man hath seen God at any time” (4:12)—that is, in the language of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “in a finite organical perception” (plate 12)—Blake’s white boy does see Him in precisely that sense, as the second plate of “The Little Black Boy” demonstrates. But “If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us” (4:12–13).

Ignoring the fact that in several copies of the *Songs* “the black boy is as light of skin as the English boy,”¹³ Leader concludes that Blake’s careful separation in plate 2 of the black boy from the two other figures reflects the boy’s “sense of separateness,” which Leader sees “mir-

12. I John 4:7. The key question in the poem, then, has nothing whatever to do with which child is “superior” or “inferior” to the other. Mona Wilson called that idea into question in 1927, but few listened (see her *Life*, p. 30). While Leader, following Adams, is quite right to focus on the “then” of the last line of the poem, both are wrong, it seems to me, in interpreting that as a final pathetic realization by the black boy that he is indeed inferior. Glazer ignores the “then.”

13. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor, 1974), p. 51. Glazer makes much of what she calls these “two little white boys” in Copy B of *Songs of Innocence*; but in Copy Z she sees them both, without comic intent, as “bruise-blue” (“Blake’s Little Black Boys,” pp. 234, 236). “Bruise-blue” ought to be sufficient reminder that essentially it makes no difference to Blake what color the black boy is—really or in his graphic representation. In the rest of my discussion here, the black boy’s “separateness” on plate 2 has nothing to do with his color (which is what Blake calls elsewhere our “accident”) but rather with his “essence”—see his annotations to Lavater’s *Aphorisms on Man*, in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 585, 590. Among these annotations Blake alludes prominently to the passages in John’s epistle I have been citing (see pp. 588–89).

rored” as well in “the troubled expression on his face.” This “marks the end of the child’s innocence” (p. 112). “Troubled expression,” however, is at best a dubious imposition and besides, as I have argued, the black boy’s sense of his own separateness from these earthly images surely exemplifies his firm sense that God is *in* him, not “out there” merely to be leaned on. Moreover, the separateness may very well depict his essential “freedom” from mother and her doctrinal teachings (plate 1), the boy’s standing not defiantly but comfortably (and in some sense triumphantly) in the “light” of his own imaginative knowledge. Perhaps too he is meant to be seen as imaginatively *unshaded* by the leafy branches that still *do* shade him in “reality,” the burden of the text of the second plate constituting as it does the tree’s “foliage,” quite literally hovering heavily above him just as the darkness of the tree in plate 1 does. The poem is a song of innocence after all. Although Adams clearly did not intend to do so, his final comment on the poem may be taken here as symptomatic of what the explicatory tradition that still eddies uncertainly about the poem has not acknowledged: “Blake traps the adult reader into criticism of his own state” (*A Reading*, p. 266).

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