

William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*SIBYLLE ERLE^a

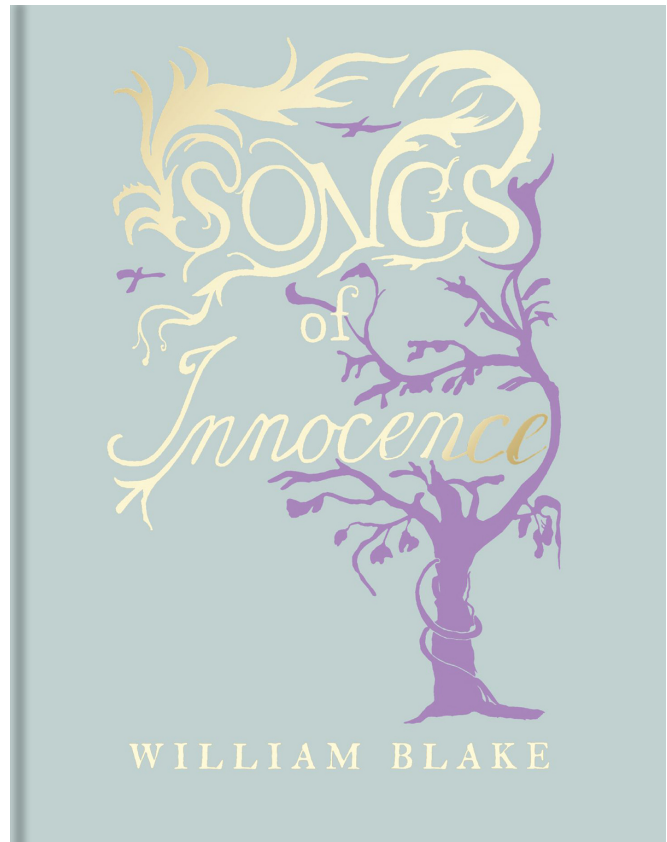
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William Blake. *Songs of Innocence*. Introduction by Mark Crosby. Bodleian Library Publishing, 2024. 72 pp. £20.00/\$30.00, hardcover.

Songs of Innocence (1789) is a first introduction to William Blake for many. It's a collection of delicately illustrated poems originally written for children. The images abound with flowers and tiny figures, as well as Christian symbols. This copy of *Songs of Innocence*, relief etched and printed in raw sienna ink in 1789, is copy L from the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Copy L is highly regarded because it is believed to be a prime example of William and Catherine Blake's collaboration. It is one of twenty-five known copies (editions), with twenty-seven of the thirty-one plates, and part of the first print run of about eighteen versions created together in 1789 (Crosby 12). Little is known about its early provenance. Miss Alice Grace Elizabeth Carthew (1867–1940), a collector of prints, Brazilian ceramics, and Mycenaean antiquities, bequeathed this copy to the Bodleian in 1940, at least twenty years after acquiring it. The library's facsimile renders the pages with the plates in a darker color, and includes a design from "Infant Joy" as a tailpiece. The light-blue cover with its gray-blue tree shadow presents title and author in gold. The book comes with transcriptions and a superb introduction written by Mark Crosby. This introduction starts with a survey of Blake's life, excels in its description of illuminated printing, and aligns *Songs of Innocence* with literature written for children.

Blake's songs, set in the "realm of innocence" (14), come with simple language, limited word choice, and basic rhyme schemes. There are many motifs typical of contemporary children's literature. Blake's view of childhood, Crosby empha-



sizes, chimes with the perception that children are not miniature adults but innocents that need protecting, a view that has gained in force since the Romantic age. The poems are responses to and corrections of the puritanical views propagated in the works of Isaac Watts and John Bunyan, and are in sync

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with the educational programs of Charles Wesley, Anna Barbauld, and Mary Wollstonecraft, whose radical ideas and approach to education Blake encountered firsthand while designing and engraving plates for the second edition of *Original Stories from Real Life*, published by Joseph Johnson in 1791. Then, as now, children's books were profitable, and Blake was acutely aware of the growing book market (18). His role in the canon of children's literature is, of course, contested. *Songs of Innocence* disappeared into private collections and would, therefore, most likely have had a marginal impact on those writing for children. Crosby, however, celebrates its significance for readers of all ages.

The introduction contextualizes Blake's career and Crosby emphasizes that Blake was a determined student, eager to draw and study, as well as a print collector, keen to educate himself (5). The apprenticeship to James Basire was a compromise, but Blake, who excelled at whatever he put his mind to, benefited not only from his master's expertise but also from his connections. Basire taught Blake engraving and sent him to Westminster Abbey, but not, as has often been assumed, because he was difficult to work with; Blake, in Basire's eyes, was reliable, "a quick learner" and safe hand (8). Crosby, unsurprisingly, roots Blake in his profession (copy engraver) and grounds his printing experiments in the time spent in Basire's studio, where he would have been able to scrutinize prints and engravings, as well as absorb all there was to know about "eighteenth-century decorative book illustration" (15). While the design of *Songs of Innocence* can certainly be put into dialogue with other works for children, written to better them, the borders on the plates also evoke the look of medieval manuscripts; another important context, Crosby proposes, exists through medieval architecture: "While Blake may have had only a brief encounter with such manuscripts during his time in Westminster Abbey, he was familiar with the decorative flourishes of vines and flowers on the Gothic tombs he sketched as an apprentice" (16). In short, Crosby explains and emphasizes the role of Basire, who was important to Blake for what he learned about engraving.

Crosby impresses with precise language in his discussion of the way in which the development of Blake's printing experiments (resulting in poems/books in "illuminated printing") benefited from the techniques that he learned and mastered in Basire's workshop. He makes it easy to "see" Blake at work (10-13). It is a shame that there are no references (my guess is that this was the format Crosby had to work with). At times, I think, the summarizing prose blunts the distinctiveness of the interpretations of Blake's life, as well as how Crosby constructs *his* Blake. From the start, he presents Blake as "busy" (8): busy collecting prints and educating himself to advance

his career and build his life. He had talent and ambition and was determined to become a painter. He enrolled himself at the Royal Academy, but his plans were thwarted when he couldn't secure a sponsor for the trip to Italy. In the 1780s, Blake married, set up a print shop, and frequented the Mathews' literary salon (8-9), where he found a ready audience for his poetry and singing, as well as inspiration for a satire (*An Island in the Moon*). Around this time, he started experimenting with printing. Crosby explains how Blake's method differs from the intaglio technique (10); since the process was laborious, it is most likely that the Blakes were equal partners: "Blake and his wife passed the plate through the rollers of their own starwheel rolling press" (11). The discussion of their "collaboration" acknowledges the shift in the critical literature on Blake and printing; long gone are the days that a plate colored by just Catherine would fetch less money at Sotheby's. When Crosby mentions Robert Blake's untimely death in 1787, he reminds his readers of an oft-told tale: Robert "came to [William] in a vision, revealing a method of relief etching that combines text and design" (9). Robert's ghost, according to the biographers, visited and told him what to do. So while there is much to learn about Blake the poet and painter, both Blake *and* Crosby appear to hide some of Blake the printer.

Crosby also engages with the critical discussion of Blake's working process: "Blake's relief-etching method was autographic, enabling him to compose directly on to the surface of the copperplate without the need for a preliminary drawing or draft text" (11). He goes on to discuss the "autographic approach" and principles of composition, as well as consequences of bad planning, pointing out what Blake did when he "ran out of room" (11) or drawing attention to how the text and its meaning were affected by "the printing process and subsequent colouring" (13). What Crosby achieves is that he invites readers to look closely and examine the plates. This approach to introducing Blake to a wider audience hones in on his experiments and presents him as an "improving" artist¹ who worked with what happened on the page.

There is, of course, a limit to what we can see in the facsimile. In a note, Crosby writes, "Blake's spelling is not always consistent with modern standards and his punctuation can, at times, be challenging to decipher. The transcriptions that follow preserve what can be read in this version of *Songs of Innocence*" (19). Nevertheless, with his excellent description of Blake's process and the labor he shared with his wife, Crosby raises questions about syntax and the pauses that commas and full stops introduce to the flow of words in poetry. If we look closely, which we are continually encouraged to do, we might ask ourselves which of the splashes of color or squiggles

¹ Joseph Viscomi, *William Blake's Printed Paintings: Methods, Origins, Meanings* (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2021) 112.

might actually qualify as punctuation marks. Crosby's framing returns the reader/viewer to an approach (to Blake) that makes the most of material conditions of his poetry. Taking into account those conditions, and reflecting on the interventions that a critical introduction can afford, I felt prompted to think about the aesthetic effects of the different versions of the plates in the different editions of *Songs of Innocence*.

Crosby, who discusses "The Little Black Boy" in detail, cautions that this is "a poem that from our contemporary perspective may be considered troubling" (14). Censorship in Blake's time is another matter, but Crosby's discussion does not consider how the images of copy L transform into narrative. He explains what the little black boy has internalized—that he thinks he is worthless and, therefore, needs to disregard his own desires, take a step back, and resign himself to his fate (in the design on the second plate, the little white boy is closer to Jesus)—suggesting that Blake does not tackle the inherent racism head on, while insisting that "Blake was aware of, and influenced by, the abolitionist movement" (14). This interpretation follows conventional patterns. Blake, of course, cannot but have been aware of slavery, and Crosby's explanations are a valuable reminder of what was at stake in terms of both the historical context and political positions. But, looking at the plate and pondering the black boy's "subordinate position" (15), should we really stop at that? Crosby talks about "physical bodies" and "disembodied souls" (15), but without acknowledging the possibility of racism. If, indeed, the image on the second plate is set in the afterlife, should we not consider that the little black boy—still black in this copy—is looking out at us, the beholders, as well as talking directly to us, the readers? He has stepped aside and stands proudly, while the other boy is about to kneel. Crosby appears to use the expression "disembodied soul" in its literal meaning or Platonic sense—a soul free of the body it once inhabited. What we see quite clearly, however, has a body—is an embodied soul. Caught in the little black boy's gaze, I wonder what Blake is telling us.

Crosby says nothing about the importance of color in connection with "The Little Black Boy" and copy L, even though he mentions it to justify the publication of yet another copy of *Songs of Innocence*: "Unlike later copies of *Innocence*, the colouring in the Bodleian version is at times effervescent, delicate, and subtle, perhaps even tentative as the Blakes developed their colour scheme" (17). In copy L, the little black boy, or rather his embodied soul, is "black." It is through the change in color of the figure in the different versions of the plate that Blake and his poetry really challenge the dualistic thinking in religion, perception, and colonialism, including slavery. This, of course, is something that we—adult readers—imagine. A child reader is unlikely to pick up more than one copy of *Songs of Innocence*. But questions are left hanging: What is a child, and what can a modern child process and handle?

Perhaps more than we think. If we look at the different copies, we literally see the little black boy change color and merge into what he really wants to be: white and loved. And yet, as noted, the print run of 1789 is seventeen or eighteen versions, some of which can be accessed at *The William Blake Archive*: "The Little Black Boy" comes in different colors, colors other than black. As I put this lovely and well-produced book to one side, I want to say this: maybe his training as an engraver gave Blake the freedom to express himself as a poet and painter. That is why I think that more needed to be said about color: choices and combinations of color and correspondences between colors suggest a coordinated and staged process. Blake, for Crosby, is "an experimenter and iconoclast striving against the eddies and currents of history" (18-19). Working and printing alongside Catherine allowed Blake to see and think for himself and with his wife from beginning to end, without compromise and with every single copy that they produced. The "transformative" power of reading Blake, which Crosby celebrates, originates from the different versions. If we consider them together, we might be able to construct new narratives about all of our relationships.