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Blake's Loose Canons¹

Gerald Eades Bentley, Jr,

D. Litt. (Oxon.),

Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada,

Toronto, Canada;

e-mail: gbentley@chass.utoronto.ca

Abstract

This essay talks loosely about a number of kinds of canons in connection with William Blake: canons literal, canons metaphorical, cannons military, and canons clerical. Most of these canons are, however, a smoke screen for the real issue.

Keywords

William Blake, canons, cannons, dragon, criticism, writings, editing, text, copy

¹ This essay originated in a lecture for the Conference on Editorial Problems, Toronto.

Loose Naval Cannons

A naval cannon is, of course, a weapon of offense, but, in a sailing warship, when the round barrel of a cannon was dismounted, it became an appalling hazard on the heaving deck, a more immediate danger to the gun-layers than anything threatened by an enemy. A loose cannon is a weapon of attack which has turned upon its crew and threatens to overwhelm them.

Loose cannons may appear in surprising contexts. We once saw a news-clip about Princess Diana doing good. She was depicted talking to starving Africans in the bush, charming and photogenic. Afterwards, as her Landrover pulled away from the kraal, she turned to chat with the handsome equerry accompanying her, and, just before the clip ended, she was heard to say, "Who says I'm a loose cannon?" One may well wonder who was the loose publicist who

permitted that remark to survive in the news-clip when it was broadcast.

Blake's Loose Dragons

Blake himself has literal loose cannons. In the frontispiece to his *America* <Illus. 1> is a breach in a wall which is filled by a chained and despondent angel, and at his feet is a loose cannon. He is apparently one of Albion's Angels, and he has been defeated by the rebels in the infant American republic. He had commanded the plagues to engulf the Americans:

Then had America been lost,
o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic,

And Earth had lost another portion
of the infinite,

But all rush together in the night
in wrath and raging fire[.]

The red fires rag'd! the plagues
recoil'd! then roll'd they back with fury

On Albions Angels: then the Pestilence
began in streaks of red

Across the limbs of Albions-
Guardian ...

The millions sent up a howl of anguish
and threw off their hammerd mail

And cast their swords & spears to
earth, & stood a naked multitude².

2 *America* pl. 16-17, ll. 174-179, 181-182 (*William Blake's Writings*, ed. G.E.

You can see the broken sword cast to earth at the woman's foot, the loose cannon by the angel's feet. The fearful weapon which the angel had loosed upon the Americans has been turned upon himself.

Blake and the Attack of the Dragon

Blake himself had some experience with the loose cannons of the military. In 1803, when Napoleon's troops were massing along every river and estuary of northern France, preparing to cross the channel when the wind was right, British soldiers were rushed to the southern coast of England, and a troop of dragoons was stationed in the little seaside village of Felpham in Sussex where Blake was living. Dragoons were cavalry so-called because they were armed with the short, large-bore musket called a dragon, and Blake referred to them in his poem called *Vala* which he was writing at the time:

Sound the War trumpets terrific[.],
Souls clad in attractive steel[!]

Sound the shrill fife[.], serpents of
war! I hear the northern drum[.]

Awake, I hear the flappings of the
folding banners[.]

Bentley, Jr [Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1978], 148-149).

The dragons of the North put on their armour[;]

Upon the Eastern sea direct they take their course[.]

The glittering of their horses trappings stains the vault of night[.]³

However, the residents of the coastal towns in Sussex where the troops were stationed often regarded them not as protectors from foreign aggression but as agents of domestic repression, brought in by the magistrates to stifle riots over the high price of war-time bread⁴. On August 12th 1803, when Blake found a drunken dragoon loitering in his garden and briskly turned him out, he was promptly charged with sedition.

Here the dragon had turned and attempted to rend one of those it had been summoned to protect.

And when, despite the plain intentions of the magistrates, Blake was acquitted of sedition, the loose canon seemed to have turned upon those charged with using it as a weapon.

3 *Vala*, p. 91, ll. 24-29 (*William Blake's Writings* 1213).

4 See G.E. Bentley, Jr, "Rex v. Blake: Sussex Attitudes toward the Military and Blake's Trial for Sedition in 1804", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, LVI (1993), 83-89.

William Blake, Canon of Salisbury Cathedral

Of course William Blake was also a writer of hymns; his "Jerusalem" lyric has become an alternative English national anthem. Indeed, William Blake was a canon of the Cathedral Church of Salisbury with a doctorate in divinity, and his music was reprinted over and over again from 1774 to 1800⁵. But Dr William Blake of Salisbury Cathedral is not the author of *Songs of Innocence*, though he was much more widely published than his artist-namesake.

The Canons of Criticism

And then there are all the proliferating canons of criticism, from neovorticism and concrete poetry and "Anti-Conquest" and post-lapsarianism to Russian Formalism and feminism and futurism. No critic of consequence can commence his criticism today without identifying and defending his own canons of criticism, often with a fling at those standards which he regards as uncanonical. They plainly feel that

Cannon to right of them,

5 See G.E. Bentley, Jr, "William Blake Musician", *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, XII (1986), 147-151.

Cannon to left of them
 Cannon surrounding them
 Volleyed and thundered
 Many such critics seem to have
 been

Seeking the bubble reputation
 Even in the cannon's mouth
As You Like It, II, iv

And from the point of view of
 posterity, it often seems as if "Someone
 had blundered".

The Canon of *William Blake's* *Writings*

In 1978 I published a two-volume edition of *William Blake's Writings* which I intended to be the last word on Blake's literary works – error-free, solid, handsome, definitive, irreplaceable. It included everything from *Songs of Innocence* to letters to and from Blake, marginalia, captions on engravings, and notes on drawings; it even had a section on Lost Works of which no trace remains except a chance reference, such as *The History of England* which he advertised in 1793 and *The Bible of Hell* with which he threatened the world in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The edition had over three hundred reproductions, representing every design Blake published with his own works, as well as maps, Tables

of Repeated Lines and Repeated Designs, and even a Table of Ambiguously Hyphenated Words. I thought that the Table of Ambiguously Hyphenated Words was particularly up-to-date, but I have never consulted it in twenty years since the edition was published, and I suspect that no one else has either.

I visited twenty-nine libraries and art galleries in Britain, fifty-one in the United States, two in Australia, four in Canada, and two in New Zealand. All together my wife and I worked in one hundred and eight public and private collections with almost five hundred copies of Blake's literary works. I saw the known originals of all but a handful of the known copies of Blake's writings.

For each of these copies, I recorded watermarks, paper-sizes, offsets, the individual tints in each hand-coloured copy, and the order of the leaves (Blake arranged the poems in *Songs of Innocence* in thirty-nine different orders). I compared the text **and the designs** minutely with those in a xeroxed master copy of each work which I carried with me and recorded the proliferating differences.

Two features of *William Blake's Writings* were most troublesome to the compositors and I thought most particularly valuable. First, each design from

Blake's works in *Illuminated Printing* was reproduced exactly in the position in the text where Blake had placed it, thus creating a number of blank spaces which the designer and accountant for the book found trying.

Second, Blake's punctuation has proved particularly perplexing to his editors and his readers. Some whole poems have no mark of punctuation at all, some sentences have more than one period, and there are many quotations without quotation-marks.

The first Blake editors simply tucked in punctuation as they fancied – and sometimes, when they didn't fancy Blake's rhymes or his scansion or even his religious and sexual indiscretion, they changed these too. Of course Blake's sense is imperceptibly changed when these silent alterations are made in his text.

The other solution is to repeat the punctuation – and of course the rhymes, scansion, and indiscretion – just as Blake left them. However, this too creates problems. For instance, in the manuscript drafts of "The Tyger" there is no punctuation at all, and in the etched version of "The Tyger" there are six too many periods.

I invented several wonderfully tactful devices to cope with Blake's

sparse and erratic punctuation, devices which I thought miracles of inconspicuous but detectable intervention. When Blake began a sentence or a proper name with a lower case letter, I raised it to upper case but italicized the initial letter to indicate the change. When Blake peppered his sentences with superfluous periods, I suppressed the superfluous ones but italicized the last letter of the word they succeed to indicate that I had done so.

I still think that these devices are very useful and tactful methods of representing Blake's erratic texts in a way which acknowledges precisely their eccentricities but adapts them unobtrusively to more orthodox conventions.

Blake's Disintegrating Canon

A problem is that, however faithful these devices may be for Blake, they are very unfamiliar in other authors. When one quotes from my edition of *William Blake's Writings*, one must either tediously explain the unique conventions used there or suppress these eccentricities, giving what might be called a clear text which is that of neither Blake nor *William Blake's Writings*. I find that when I quote my own edition of Blake, I

am strongly tempted to normalize those italic letters.

As Blake found repeatedly and to his sorrow, there does not seem to be any way of accommodating the minute particulars of Blake's vision to the world. Once one reduces the coloured calligraphy to black-and-white type, changes the punctuation, suppresses the designs and their colouring, standardizes the size and quality of the paper, once one freezes the thirty-nine orders of *Songs of Innocence* into a fixed, singular order, however scrupulously one may have attempted to accomplish these accommodations, much of what was peculiarly Blakean about the works, their integrity and their genius, has been falsified. As Blake wrote indignantly, "The Beast & the Whore rule without control"⁶.

I'm afraid that I have been an agent, however modestly and earnestly, of the Beast and the Whore.

When I began working on the edition of *William Blake's Writings* about 1963, I had already done some editing, and I thought I knew what was involved. I would record variants in every known copy of Blake's writings from personal

examination of them on four continents, I would describe and reproduce all the hundreds of designs in Blake's printed works, I would print Blake's texts in forms as close as type would come to their originals, and I would annotate them succinctly, chiefly with references to Blake's life and to his other writings. None of these things had been attempted before – for that matter, none of them has since been attempted in print.

When the Clarendon Press said that it thought this was a dandy idea and agreed to publish the edition, complete with all those three hundred reproductions, I thought the battle was all over but the shouting, except of course for fifteen years of work. And the scholarly world, dazzled by the accomplishment, would buy so many copies of *William Blake's Writings* that the royalties would put my three – and four-year-old daughters through university.

Since *William Blake's Writings* was published in 1978, perhaps in part because it was published, scholarly expectations have been raised so high that *William Blake's Writings* will not meet those expectations, and I do not think that any edition, typographical, electronic, or even imaginary can do so.

6 Marginalium to Watson's *Apology for the Bible* (1797) in *William Blake's Writings* 1404.

Loose Canons among the Editors

These expectations have been raised, or at least focused, chiefly by four publications: (1) Nelson Hilton's *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (1983); (2) the so-called Santa Cruz group's 1984 review of David Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*; (3) Donald Ault's *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's THE FOUR ZOAS* (1987); and (4) Joseph Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993)⁷.

Lay-out

Nelson Hilton stressed the significance of lay-out on the page. In *The First Book of Urizen*, for instance, Blake's text is arranged in two columns, as were many editions of the Bible, and to re-arrange

7 Nelson Hilton, *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983); Santa Cruz group, review of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. D.V. Erdman, in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, XVIII (1984), 4-34; Donald Ault, *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's THE FOUR ZOAS* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1987); Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

the text in a single column may obscure the implication that *The First Book of Urizen* is a kind of First Book of Moses, i.e., Genesis, in a new Bible of Hell.

Further, even within these double-columns, the lay-out of the lines may be pregnant with possible meaning. For instance, Urizen the creator cries:

"Here alone I in books formd of metals

Have written the secrets of wisdom[,]

The secrets of dark contemplation"⁸

But the double-page format Blake was using left him so little space that he did not have room all on one line for "Here alone I in books formd of metals". The last word, "metals", is broken in two, so that what appears on the first line is "Here alone I in books formd of me". Of course Urizen's universe is created from himself, it is an image of himself, an extension of himself; the books are indeed "formd of me" as well as of "metals". To normalize the line may remove an intended ambiguity.

Does this mean that we must preserve all line turn-overs in case they should conceal a similar ambiguity? In the

8 *The First Book of Urizen*, pl. 4, ll. 68-70 (*William Blake's Writings* 243).

phrase "all call'd it The Net of Religion"⁹, is it significant that Blake had no room for the last syllable of "Religion" at the end of the short line and therefore had to insert it above the first two syllables?

All the minute particulars of Blake's text are significant, but they are not all equally significant, and some, such as the room left on the line for another syllable, may sometimes seem so insignificant as to be scarcely worth recording.

Similarly, the size of the letters may be significant. At the end of "A Song of Liberty" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the last words are much larger than the rest of the text:

Empire is no more! and now the lion & wolf shall cease¹⁰.

Plainly this is very significant.

But is it equally significant that the writing on plate 27, where these words appear, is somewhat larger, with twenty lines to a page, than that on plate 26, with twenty-four lines to a page? The difference in size in the writing on plates 26 and 27 is, of course, significant, but is it worth trying to reproduce in a typographic edition?

9 *The First Book of Urizen* pl. 25, l. 469 (*William Blake's Writings* 278).

10 *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* pl. 27 (*William Blake's Writings* 99).

The problem is most acute in Blake's manuscript of *The Four Zoas*. The poem is written on very large leaves, 33 x 42 cm (13" x 16 1/2"). The early pages, written in an elaborate Copper-Plate Hand, have 16 lines-per-page, while most of the poem is written in Blake's Usual Hand, with up to 37-lines-per-page. The effect of the two sections upon the reader is very different because of the character and size of the handwriting. Should a typographic edition try to reproduce these differences? Should it reproduce each of the four distinct handwriting styles Blake used in *Vala*? I did not try to reproduce the size and character of the handwriting in *William Blake's Writings*, but I did describe the differences minutely.

The Canon of Random Significance

Perhaps the most difficult standard to live up to is that erected by Donald Ault in his *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's THE FOUR ZOAS* (1987). He argues that in *The Four Zoas*, every jot and tittle is meaningful, that the inconsistencies and contradictions and false-starts are deliberate subversions of narrative, of Newtonian expectations, and that we as readers are being trained throughout.

This poses a problem for the editors, or at least for me, who tend to regard some of these jots and tittles as meaningful, such as whether a passage is written early in ink in the original Copper Plate Hand or much later in pencil in the Usual Hand. However, others are probably insignificant to Blake or to the poem. The first part of the poem is written on beautiful clean sheets of Whatman paper, but much of the poem is written on proofs of Blake's engravings for Young's *Night Thoughts*, a few leaves for it are scavenged from earlier drawings and engravings originally having nothing to do with *The Four Zoas*, and one of these engravings was cut in half to make two leaves for *The Four Zoas*. Dr Ault argues that Blake was deliberately incorporating these scavenged leaves into his illuminated poem, even the designs originally intended for other poems.

To produce a typographic edition of *The Four Zoas* which would satisfy Dr Ault is, I believe, impossible. And even the full-size facsimile and transcript of it which I published in 1963 will not satisfy as demanding a critic as Dr Ault¹¹.

Professor Nelson Hilton, the Santa Cruz Study Group, and Dr Donald Ault seem to me to be counseling an unattainable standard of perfection. They have provided very salutary warnings of the shortcomings of all editions, however good they are as editions. We will all look more critically at editions with their criticisms in mind.

New Knowledge Disintegrates the Canon

The most profound changes in how we understand Blake's printed works, and therefore how we edit them, have been made by Professor Joseph Viscomi in his *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993). There he proves conclusively that we have been wrong about Blake's methods of printing, the dates at which he printed, how he inked and then wiped or partially masked the plate and why, the lengths of his print-runs, the way he and his wife coloured copies and when they coloured them – sometimes years after they were printed – why they coloured early copies delicately and sparsely and

11 I do not mean to imply that Dr Ault was critical of the edition of *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), for he generously said that "G.E. Bentley, Jr., exerts a monumental effort at deciphering these problems" of the manuscript (p. 482). But I

do mean to say that I think his generosity has here overcome his critical principles; by his standards, the 1963 facsimile, or any other edition, may do well, but the intractable nature of the material means that it cannot do well enough.

late copies lavishly and comprehensively, the way they collated the leaves and stitched them. Every aspect of Blake's work at the drafting table, at the printing press, and in perfecting copies has been re-examined and reinterpreted in Professor Viscomi's book.

And the works of scholarship most profoundly affected by these new ideas are the bibliography called *Blake Books* and the edition called *William Blake's Writings*. They are the works most profoundly affected because they are the works most directly based upon these physical properties of Blake's writings and the implications for understanding them.

Let us take two very simple examples. In Blake's epic *Jerusalem*, Blake arranged the hundred prints in two different orders. Of course an editor must choose one order, and there was real uncertainty as to which order was Blake's final intention. *Blake Books* and *William Blake's Writings* identify three copies in the earlier order and the other two copies in the later order. They therefore adopt the later order as the definitive one.

Many of the prints have faint etched numbers on them, and they also have manuscript plate-numbers, some of which contradict the etched numbers. In *Blake Books* I remarked that in the last

copy he produced, sold the day before he died, "Blake's [*manuscript*] numbering ... reverts to the First Order"¹².

Joe Viscomi noticed that the manuscript plate-numbers in this last copy are in two different hands, one firm and bold, one shaky and uncertain. He concludes that the shaky numbers, which are in the second order, are Blake's, and the firm numbers, which are in the first order, are John Linnell's. Viscomi argues that Linnell changed the manuscript numbers to correspond to those in his own copy which is in the earlier order before he delivered this copy after Blake's death to its purchaser. Fortunately, I have come off lightly in this case; Professor Viscomi remarks, "Bentley and Keynes are correct about the second order representing Blake's final intentions, but they are right for the wrong reasons"¹³. Well, I guess it's better to be right for the wrong reason than to be wrong for the wrong reason.

More sensationally, Professor Viscomi discovered that a third of the known copies of Blake's early little experimental work called *There Is No Natural Religion* were unpublished facsimiles produced about 1868, not originals

12 G.E. Bentley, Jr, *Blake Books* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1977), 234.

13 Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993), 339.

as they had been accepted for one hundred and thirty-five years. As no copy of *There is No Natural Religion* contains all the known plates, there was very great uncertainty as to what the complete work should consist of, and the undetected facsimile pages muddied the waters profoundly. It was only in the Blake Trust facsimile of *There is No Natural Religion* in 1993¹⁴ that the work was published as Blake probably intended it to be.

But when all is said and done, an edition is only two-dimensional images on a page – or perhaps electrons flickering across a screen¹⁵. It may look like the original, it may read like the original, but it will not feel like the original, it will not smell like the original, it will not have the history or the ambiance or the aura of the original. The fingerprint here on the *Songs* might be that of Coleridge, who read this copy. The smudge there in *The*

Marriage of Heaven and Hell might have been made by Blake's friend the charming Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, artist, forger, and murderer. Edward FitzGerald had this copy of Blake's *Songs* when he was translating *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. E.M. Forster cherished this copy of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* because of the family legend that it was Blake's own copy.

No edition is good enough. None will bring you anything but a pale imitation of the original.

And for Blake, of course, no single original is good enough – except in instances such as *The Four Zoas* where there is only a single original. Each copy of Blake's writings differs from every other, and many of the differences carry deliberate meaning¹⁶.

Changes in the Canon of Blake's Writings

Newly Discovered Copies of Known Works

All Blake's works are uncommon, and some are rare by any standards.

14 *The Early Illuminated Books: All Religions Are One, There is No Natural Religion, The Book of Thel, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, & Joseph Viscomi (Princeton: The William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press, 1993), Blake's Illuminated Books Volume 3.

15 The most ambitious electronic edition of Blake – or perhaps of any other author – is the Blake Archive on-line at the University of Virginia, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, & Joseph Viscomi (<http://Jefferson.village.Virginia.edu/Blake>).

16 See G.E. Bentley, Jr, "William Blake's Protean Text", pp. 44-58 of *Editing Eighteenth-Century Texts: Papers given at the Editorial Conference, University of Toronto, October 1967*, ed. D.I.B. Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968).

Twenty-eight copies are known of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, nine copies of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and six copies of *Jerusalem* have been traced; no copy of Blake's prospectus has been recorded in print since 1863. As a consequence, each newly discovered copy is likely to increase our understanding of the work significantly.

Since 1978, twenty-two copies of Blake's works in Illuminated Printing have been discovered¹⁷. Perhaps the most exciting of these new-found copies are the four books in the Kaiserliche

17 (1) "Albion Rose" (E); (2) "Blake's Chaucer: The Canterbury Pilgrims" (B); (3-4) *Descriptive Catalogue* (U-V) with previously unknown corrections; (5-6) *The First Book of Urizen* (E, J) in a previously unrecorded order; (7-8) *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* (M, N); (9) *The Ghost of Abel* (E); (10-12) "Joseph of Arimathea" (I-L); (13-17) Letters of Nov? 1797, Aug?, 1 Sept 1800, 27 Nov 1805, 1818?; (18) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (M) with previously unrecorded variants; (19) *Poetical Sketches* (P); (20) *The Song of Los* (F); (21) *Songs of Innocence* (Z); and (22) *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (R). In addition there are newly-discovered loose leaves of (23) *America* pl. 7, 14-16; (24) *Book of Los* pl. 5; (25) *Europe* (c) pl. 2, 4, 6-7, 9, 13-14, 18; (26) *Urizen* pl. 3 (2 copies) and pl. 4 (from copy G); (27) *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* pl. 18; (28) *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* pl. 2; (29) Inscriptions on Designs; (30) *Jerusalem* pl. 2, 28, 46, 50, 70, 75, 99; (31) *Marriage* pl. 20; (32) *Milton* pl. 13; (33) *Songs* (p) plus newly-found prints of the *Songs*.

Koeniglicher Hofbibliothek in Vienna and the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich¹⁸. These are the only known works by Blake in German-speaking countries, and the Blake books in Munich have been listed in the catalogue of Ludwig I of Bavaria since about 1840. For over one hundred forty years, no Blake scholar looked at the catalogue of the Royal Library in Bavaria with sufficient knowledge to recognize that it contained extraordinary Blake treasures until Dr Detlef Dörrbecker did so in 1986.

The Book of Urizen provides an example of the new kinds of information discovered. Before 1978, *The Book of Urizen* was known in seven copies, these were bound in seven different orders, and one of them, copy A, has partially erased numbers by Blake in an eighth order. The newly-discovered copy of *The Book of Urizen* in Vienna is in yet another unique order, so that the eight copies of *The Book of Urizen* have nine distinct and authoritative orders.

How is an editor to cope with this proliferation? He could, I suppose, issue the prints of *Urizen* loose and allow the reader to shuffle them into any order he chose – but even this ignores the fact that

18 *Urizen* (J) is in Vienna and *Song of Los* (F), *Songs of Innocence* (Z), and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (R) in Munich.

Blake sold apparently-complete copies of *Urizen* with twenty-four prints, twenty-six prints, twenty-seven prints, and twenty-eight prints.

Further, the colouring of some prints is radically different from all other copies of the same print. For instance, Blake coloured out the word "First" from "First Book of Urizen" in three copies, he added a white beard to a formerly clean-shaven young man in one copy, he coloured out lines of text in two copies, and he added a boy and an eagle to a design in one copy. One cannot shuffle the prints at random and still retain a Blakean order and significance. Only complete colour facsimiles of each of the eight copies of *The First Book of Urizen* will demonstrate the variety of effects and meanings Blake intended – and this will be definitive only until we discover yet another copy of *The First Book of Urizen*.

A similar kind of problem is provided by the discovery – or rather the rediscovery – of a copy of "A Song of Liberty", the last prints of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. These prints were first described briefly at a sale in 1918, and then they disappeared. In June 1997, the book-dealer John Windle was turning over a set of Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job which had been brought

in with a lot of furniture to be sold at Sotheby's in London, when he found tucked into it "A Song of Liberty" which the owner apparently had not known was there.

The 1918 sale catalogue had described this copy of "A Song of Liberty" as lacking the "Chorus" at the end, and the natural conclusion was that Blake had not yet thought of the chorus¹⁹. However, when this copy of "A Song of Liberty" was visible once more and brought to Toronto, it became clear that the "Chorus" was already etched on the plate. It is visible, at least to the eye of faith, faintly blind-stamped just where we should expect it to be. Why Blake masked it when printing so that the paper did not take the ink I do not know.

How is a faithful editor to represent blind-stamped text? I think few readers and no editor would thank him for giving another blind-stamped text, especially one as faint as that in the new copy of "A Song of Liberty".

New Texts of Blake

Even more disconcerting to the editor of a stable text is the discovery of

¹⁹ A then-apparently-plain analogy was the design of Nebuchadnezzar eating grass not yet etched on pl. 24 of *Marriage* copy K (which consists of only pl. 21-24).

new, previously undreamt-of texts. Since 1978 we have discovered six new Blake letters²⁰, about 7% more than before, one of them transcribing yet another previously-unknown letter and containing a new poem.

In addition there are four new works attributed to Blake, each of which raises problems not hitherto encountered.

Two of these attributions may be dealt with fairly summarily, for they are not by Blake. One is a poem printed by his namesake William Staden Blake, writing engraver, for the poet's good friend George Cumberland, and the other is a very long translation from the Greek of Sophocles with learned notes in English, Latin, and Greek and with many signatures of "William Blake". This William Blake is probably one of the score or so of London contemporaries who bore the same two names as the author of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*²¹.

20 A characteristic problem is that several letters presumed to have been composed and copied by William Blake are signed by his wife Catherine, and that two new letters dated two years after Blake's death are signed by her, but perhaps they were copied or even composed by Blake's disciple Frederick Tatham.

21 Sir Geoffrey Keynes, "'To the Nightingale': Perhaps an unrecognized poem by William Blake", *Book Collector*, XXX (1981), 335-345; no other scholar has accepted

In 1981, a man came into the British Museum with some uninteresting letters written to his grandmother about 1860 and with a poem called "The Phoenix" signed by William Blake. With the owner's permission, the poem was shown to a number of Blake scholars, whose initial response was uniformly grave doubt. The discovery that the owner was a previously unknown descendant of the wife of Blake's chief patron Thomas Butts helped to overcome some of these doubts, for the poem is addressed to Mrs Butts.

The oddest feature of the manuscript is that it seems to be designed to imitate Blake's technique of Illuminated Printing, which in turn is intended to imitate manuscripts. The text is carefully lettered in a hand very like that of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in pale blue ink touched up with red, brown, and purple, there are marginal flourishes of a kind technically essential in Illuminated Printing but irrelevant in a

Sir Geoffrey's suggestion that Blake is the author of the poem.

The claim for Blake as author of the Sophocles MS by Michael Phillips, "William Blake and the Sophocles Manuscript Notebook", *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, XXXI (1997), 44-49, is dismissed by G.E. Bentley, Jr., "William Blake and the Sophocles Enigma", *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, XXXI (1997), 65-71.

manuscript, and by the title is a flying figure of a characteristically Blakean kind. The poem is now accepted as Blake's, and the chief editorial problem is how to treat an imitation of an imitation.

Even more puzzling is the stubby, stemmed drinking glass of about 1800 called a rummer which appeared in an unheralded sale of glassware at Christie's in 1982. The Christie catalogue cautiously described it as "decorated *in the manner of William Blake*", and its bona fides were not well thought of among the buyers there, for it went for a mere £55. However, it appeared within a few months in a London bookseller's catalogue priced at \$45,000! The glass itself is uninteresting, but it bears on it the engraved figure of an angel and the legend "BLAKE IN ANGUISH FELPHAM AUGUST 1803", with a couplet of indifferent quality. The poet William Blake **was** in anguish in August 1803, for he was charged with sedition in that month. However, he was not previously known to have engraved on anything but a flat surface, the handwriting is different from that in his manuscripts and from that on his engraved copperplates, where the writing is of course backwards, and the total lack of provenance before 1982 was very troubling.

There are autograph features of the engraved glass which are demonstrably Blakean. In particular, the formation of the capital letter "T", with the ends of the cross-bar turned down to points, is unusual in itself and exactly what Blake was doing in his engravings of 1803²². The Felpham Rummer is now accepted as unquestionably Blake's.

But what is an editor to do with the poem? The mere words are easy enough to set in type and even to photograph, but the curved surface distorts any flat reproduction of the angel. And the poignancy of the reference to "IMMORAL DRINK" is crucially diminished without the evidence that it is written on a vessel for holding immoral drink – and that Blake's accuser was a sergeant of dragoons who had been disgraced for habitual drunkenness and who was thought to be drunk

22 See R.N. Essick, "A Question of Attribution: The 'Felpham Rummer' and William Blake's Graphic Inventions", *Journal of Glass Studies*, XXXI (1989), 90-100; the issue is dealt with less persuasively in G.E. Bentley, Jr, "The Felpham Rummer: A New Angel and 'Immoral Drink' Attributed to William Blake", *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, V (1984), 94-99. The Rummer was sold at Christie's auction of English and Continental Glass, 2 Nov 1982, Lot 68 (£55), offered in Pickering & Chatto's *Miscellany of Rare and Interesting Books and Manuscripts* (1983), Lot 1 (\$45,000), bought in 1988 by Arthur Houghton, and given to the Corning Museum of Glass.

when Blake turned him out of his garden. Nothing less than the three-dimensional object itself, or a full size replica of it, is likely to do justice to it.

Conclusion

Blake's works are much more difficult to edit in 2013 than they were in 1978, not to mention in 1954 when I first set out to edit a poem by Blake. In the first place, the canon of Blake's writings has expanded. There are more copies and more titles of works by Blake known today than there were in 1954. In the second place, the materials on which Blake's newly-discovered works are written and the techniques used to produce them make translation of them into conventional typography far more difficult.

And in the third place, the canons of criticism and of editing have changed in ways unimagined even twenty years ago. The most severe critics of printed or electronic editions point out, quite rightly, that any reproduction is a falsification of the original material object, that all editions are significantly misleading, and that most readers of such editions are even more gullible than their editors.

In the face of these severe canons of editing, it seems to me that the best we can do, if we are not to abandon all

editions of every kind, is to explain as carefully and succinctly as possible the ways in which the edition differs from the original.

For the Blake editor, the problem is that he has been forced to normalize in more ways than the works of other authors require, and the explanation, like this one, is likely to be so extensive as to make it difficult to keep in mind the genius of the original which is the only justification of the enterprise.

Blake's writings form a kind of Song of Liberty, liberty not only political and religious and social. He has liberated his texts from many of the conventions of literature, and he has almost liberated his editor from the possibility of representing him faithfully in a single, stable, and legible printed text.

For the editor of Blake, the loose canons of criticism have not quite made the enterprise of editing impossible, but they have made it far more interesting than it used to be.

I'm glad that all these loose canons were not rolling so dangerously across the heaving decks of criticism when I began to edit Blake almost sixty years ago. I don't think the ship will founder, but the footwork of the endangered editors will have to be a good deal more nimble than used to be necessary if the ship is to be kept afloat.

Perhaps the greatest danger of such loose canons is that the editor, in his struggle to keep his feet, may forget the beauty of the poetry itself, may forget its purpose:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower[,]
Hold Infinity in the palm of your
hand
And Eternity in an hour[.]²³

Captions for Illustrations

Illus. 1 *America* pl. 1, frontispiece (copy E, Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, etched 1793, printed 1794, not coloured), showing Albion's defeated angel seated in chains in the gap in a broken wall, with a broken sword and a loose cannon in the foreground.

Illus. 2a "The Tyger" from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* pl. 42 (copy e, collection of Mrs William Drysdale, etched 1794, printed 1831), with six too many periods.

Illus 2b "The Tyger" from *William Blake's Writings* (1978), 185-186, with italicized terminal letters indicating where periods have been suppressed.

Illus. 3 *The First Book of Urizen* pl. 4 (copy B, Pierpont Morgan Library,

etched 1794, colour-printed 1795), showing in the penultimate line at the bottom left a possibly-significant turn-over:

Here alone I in books formd of
me
tals

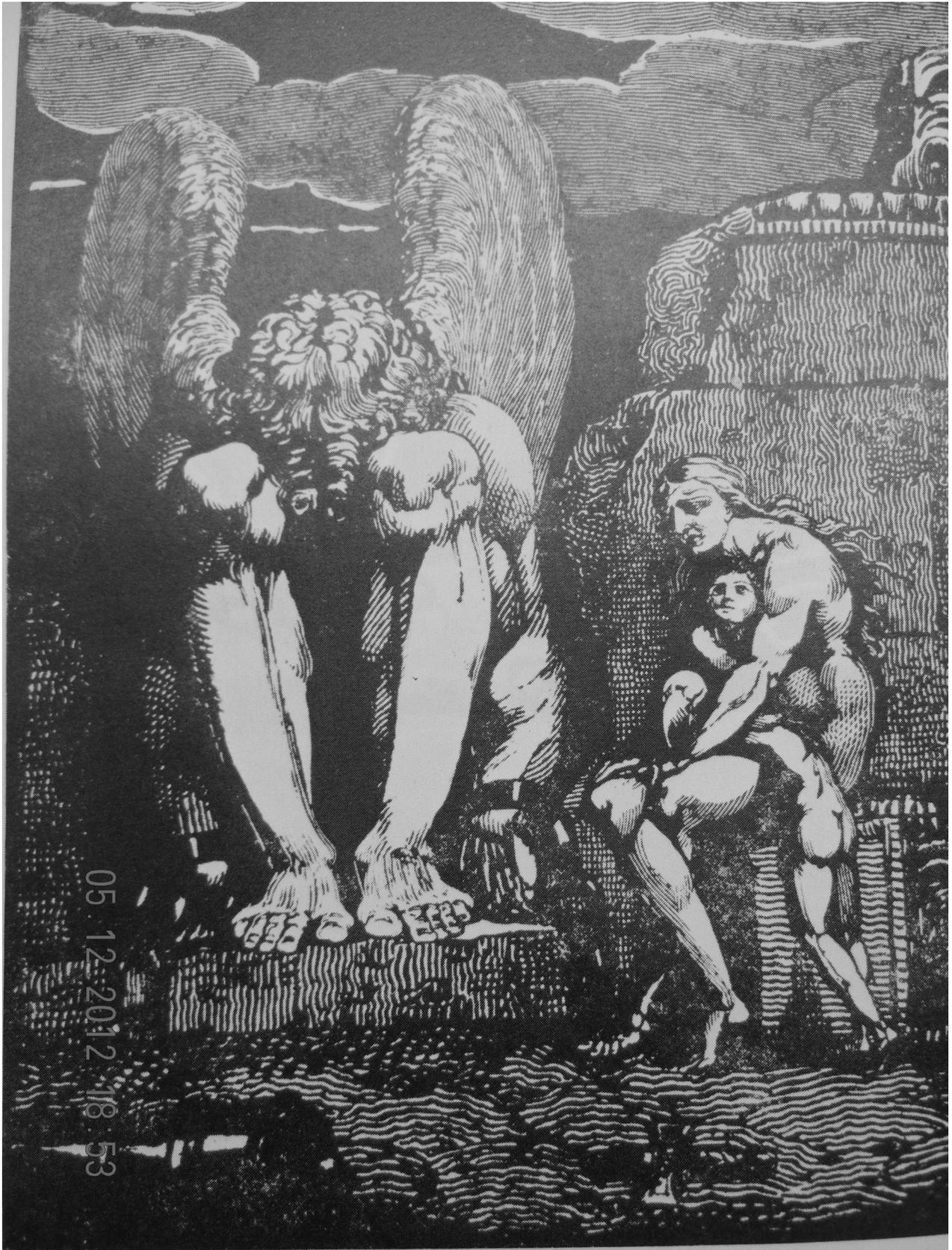
Illus. 4 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* pl. 27 (copy I, Fitzwilliam Museum, etched 1790, printed and coloured in 1827 for T.G. Wainwright). Notice that just above the Chorus, the words "Empire is no more! and now the lion & wolf shall cease" are significantly larger than the other letters.

Illus. 5a *The First Book of Urizen* pl. 1, title page (copy B, Pierpont Morgan Library, etched 1794, colour-printed 1795), showing the word "First" in the title.

Illus. 5b *The First Book of Urizen* pl. 4 (copy G, Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, etched 1794, printed and water-coloured 1815), showing the title with the word "First" omitted and replaced by a branch

Illus. 6a *Marriage* p. 27 (copy M, collection of E.B. & G.E. Bentley, Jr., etched and printed 1790), proof consisting of pl. 25-27 only, with variant text on pl. 25 and lacking the "Chorus" at the bottom. Notice that the "C" of "Chorus" is, however, partly visible, and the rest of the text of the Chorus is visible to the eye faith, blind-stamped at the bottom of the page.

²³ "Auguries of Innocence" ll. 1-4 (*William Blake's Writings* 1312).



Illus. 1: America (copy P), pl. 1 (frontispiece), image as reproduced in William Blake's Writings, ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 118.

The Tyger.

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare sieze the fire?

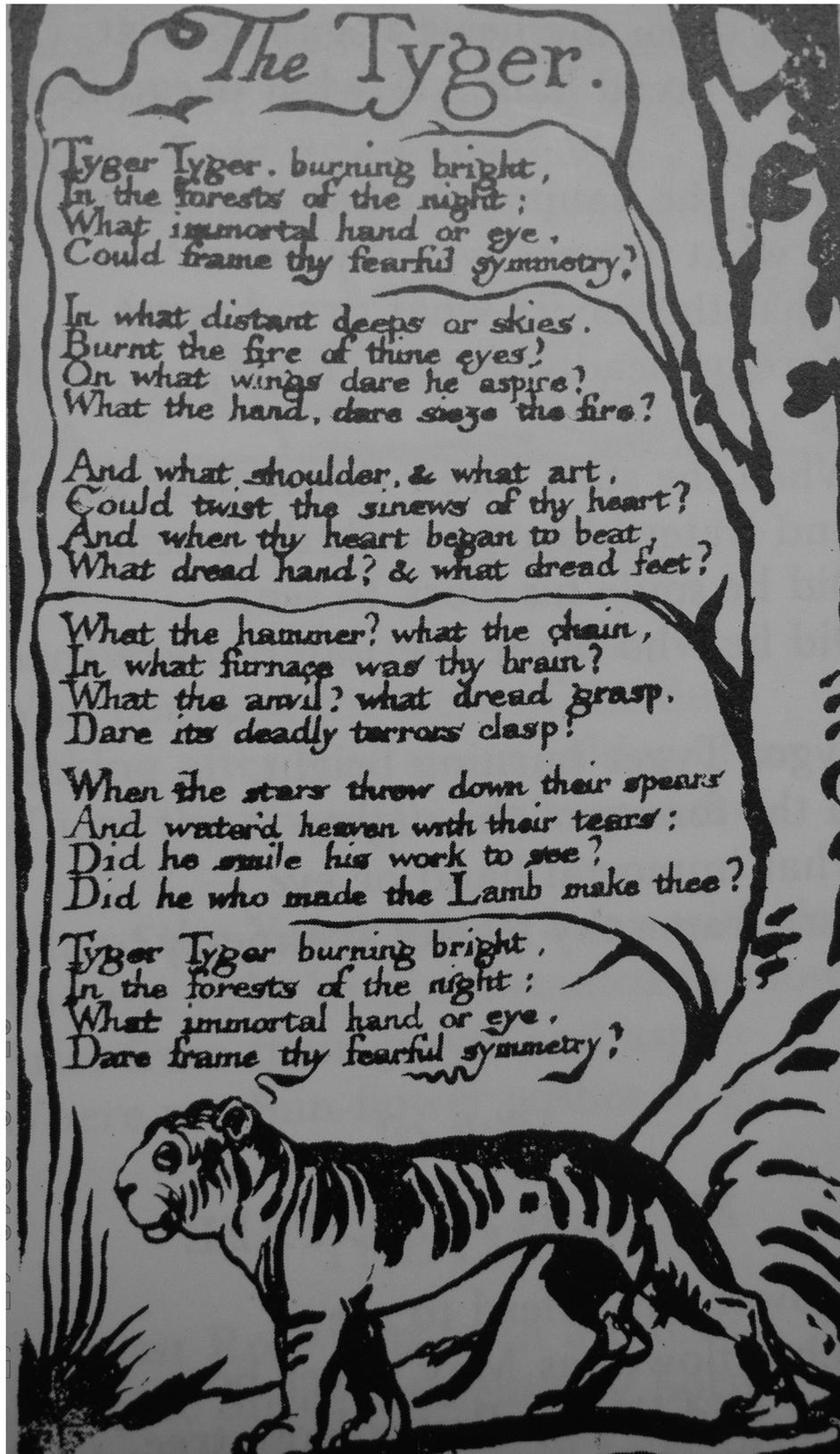
And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

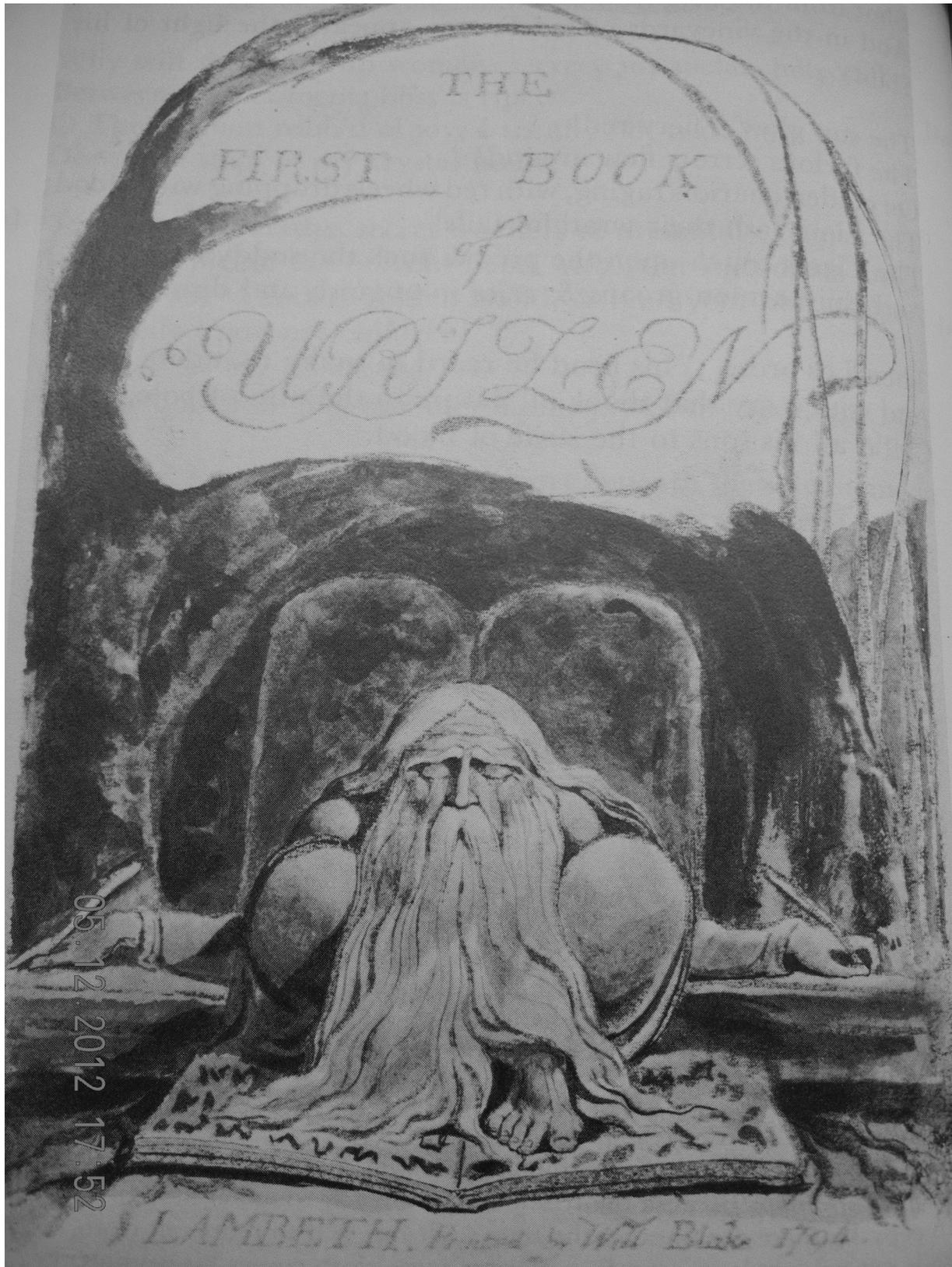
When the stars threw down their spears
And waterd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

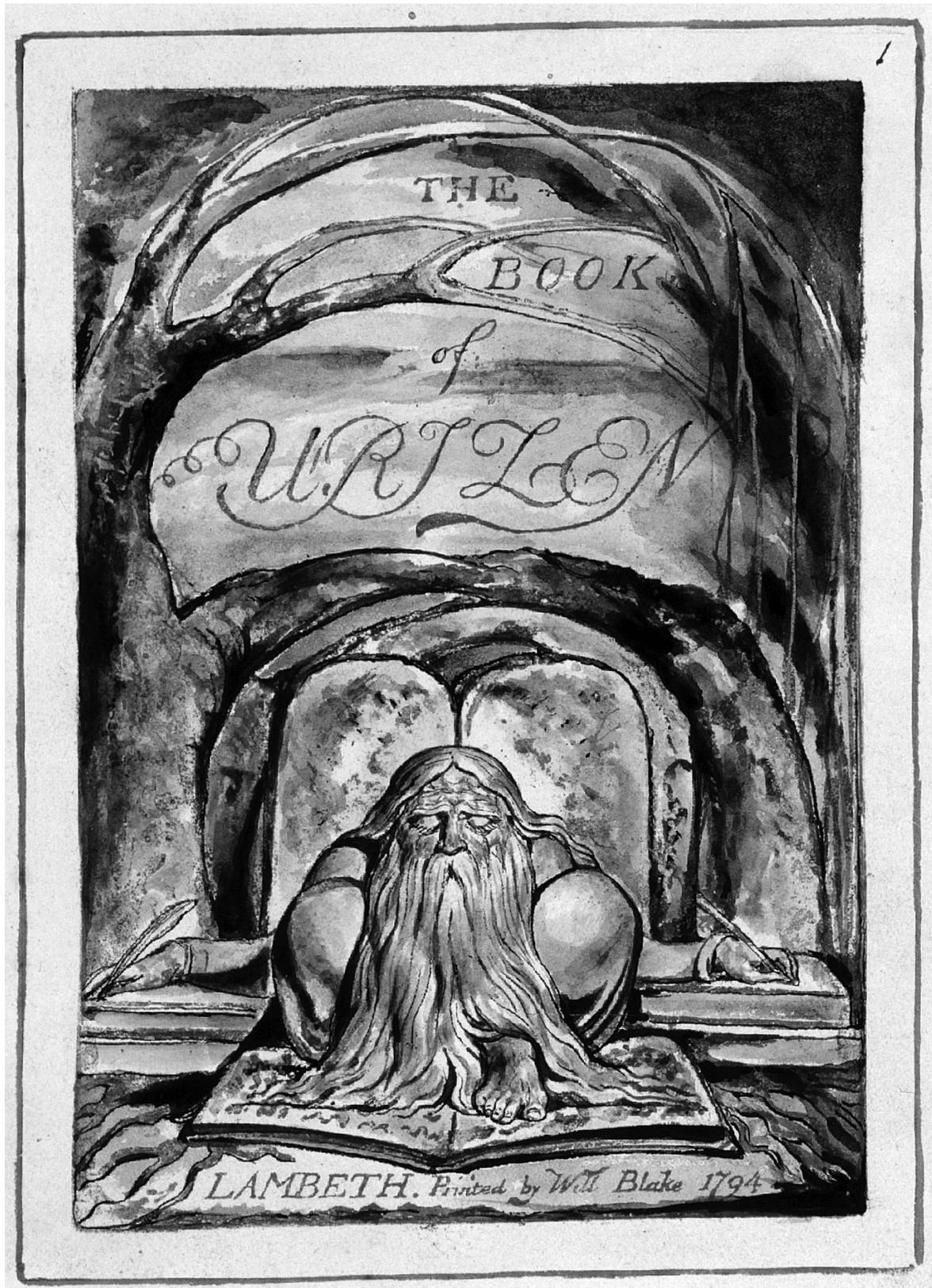
Illus. 2a and 2b: “The Tyger”, Songs of Innocence and of Experience, pl. 42, text as transcribed in William Blake’s Writings, ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 185-186.



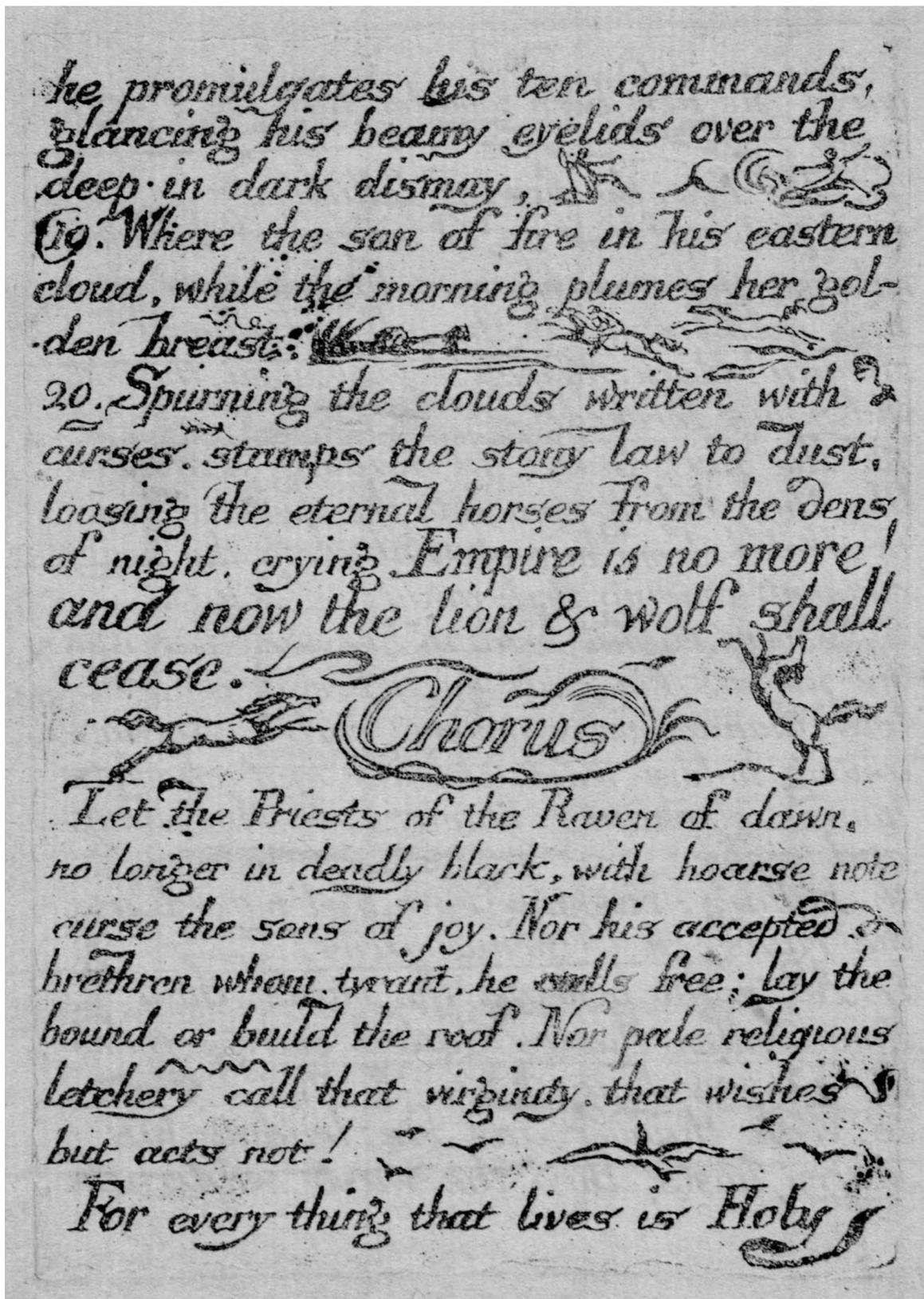
Illus. 3: "The Tyger", Songs of Innocence and of Experience (copy c), pl. 42, as reproduced in William Blake's Writings, ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 185.



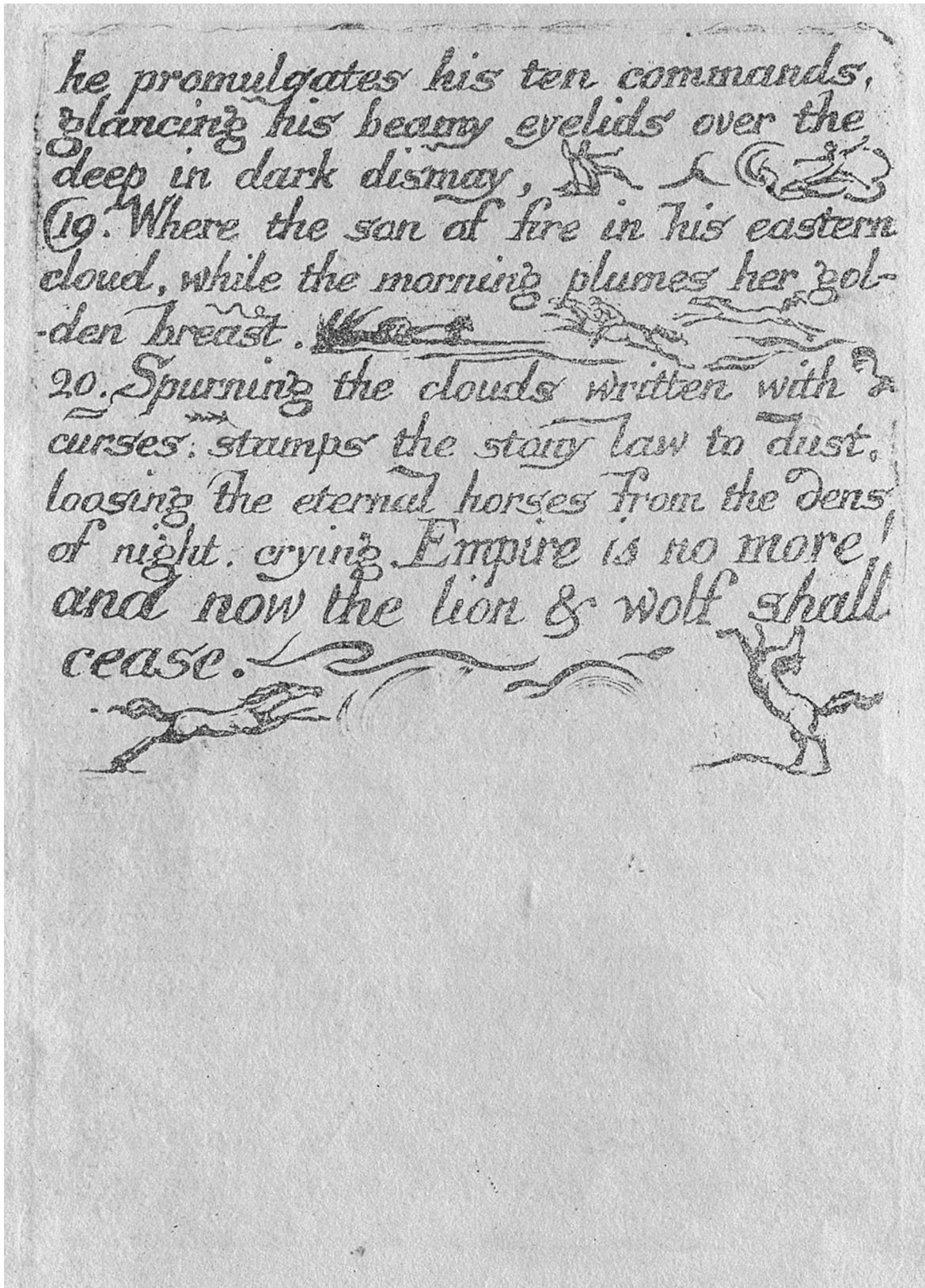
Illus. 4: The First Book of Urizen (copy B), pl. 1 (title page), image as reproduced in William Blake's Writings, ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 238.



Illus. 5: Book of Urizen (copy G), pl. 1 (title page), with the titular word “First” omitted. (Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright © 2013 William Blake Archive; used with permission.)



Illus. 6: Marriage of Heaven and Hell (copy L), pl. 27, showing the "Chorus".
 (Collection of Robert N. Essick. Copyright © 2013 William Blake Archive; used
 with permission.)



Illus. 7: Marriage of Heaven and Hell (copy L), pl. 27, in which the “Chorus” was masked out when printing. (Collection of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. Copyright © 2013 William Blake Archive; used with permission.)

Illus. 6b *Marriage* p. 27 (copy L, collection of Robert N. Essick, etched and printed 1790), proof consisting of pl. 25-27 only, with variant text on pl. 25; notice the "Chorus" at the bottom.

Illus. 7 The Sophocles Manuscript, ff. 43v, 116r, 140r, 103r, 83r (collection of Clare Blunden, widow of Edmund Blunden), a translation from Sophocles with learned commentary in English, Latin, and Greek and many signatures of "William Blake", who is probably one of the scores of prosaic contemporaries who bore the poet's names. The manuscript was first associated with the poet in 1993.

Illus. 8 "The Phoenix" (c. 1795, British Library Department of Manuscripts), discovered in 1981, a manuscript imitating Blake's works in Illuminated Printing which in turn imitate manuscripts. The text is in blue touched up with red, pale brown, and brownish purple. The flourishes in the margins correspond to the borders of Blake's works in Illuminated Printing, a technological necessity in his etched plates (see Illus. 2 of "The Tyger", posthumously printed without having the borders wiped clean of ink when it was printed). "The Phoenix" is addressed to Elizabeth Butts, the wife of Blake's chief patron Thomas Butts.

Illus. 9 The Felpham Rummer (glass of c. 1800 engraved by Blake August 1803, Corning Museum of Glass), a drinking vessel discovered in 1982. It was engraved by "WILLIAM BLAKE IN ANGUISH FELPHAM AUGUST 1803" when he had just been charged with sedition. The uncharacteristic disapproval of "IMMORAL DRINK" probably relates to the drunken dragoon who laid the charge of sedition, and his drink (and perhaps this rummer) probably came from The Fox Inn, Felpham, where the dragoon was billeted, fifty yards from Blake's Cottage.

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