

The Notebook, Laocoön, and Blake's Beauties of Inflection

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I.

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought,
and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold ...
(Ecclesiastes 2:11)

1 **T**HOUGH included among the articles of his “genius” from the start (see Dorfman 3-4), William Blake’s Notebook has received little scholarly treatment beyond the instrumental. It has functioned, for thematic readers, as another store of revealing epigrams; for editors, as a manuscript source for the *Public Address* and *The Everlasting Gospel*; for biographers, as a heartwarming keepsake from an intimate companion. In such cases the Notebook is used to subsidize some offshore critical enterprise at the expense of its own discursive and material integrity. To be sure, a handful of important Blakeans—Keynes, Jugaku, Bentley, Erdman—have outstripped instrumentality and, in a short series of facsimile editions and bibliographic studies, tended to the Notebook per se.¹ With transcription and descrip-

tion, collation and chronology, these efforts march toward a fuller and more faithful representation of the Notebook as a literary- and art-historical artifact. But by design they stop short of the explanatory work of *poetics*—that is, the disclosure of “the conditions of meaning” and the other “means by which literary works create their effects” (Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* vii, xiv).² It remains to be asked how the Notebook operates when subject to a thorough formal reading, and how, if at all, that operation might affect our understanding of Blake more generally.

2 Geoffrey Keynes encouraged this line of inquiry long ago when he praised the Notebook as “a faithful representation of Blake’s urgent genius” (*Blake Studies* [BS] 13). In our day the editors of the *William Blake Archive*—Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi—draw it out more directly in the headnote to their digitized Notebook. There they observe that the document “makes potent demands on its readers” when “taken as a whole,” as if to say that the Notebook exploits a complicated but ultimately scrutable set of organizational precepts. They assume, moreover, that “artists’ notebooks ... declare their dynamic energies outright,” as if to make the Notebook a perceptual door onto the structure of Blake’s creative exertion. And, what has been sanctioned by the *Blake Archive*’s resources but so far unobserved by scholars, they insist that “Blake’s Notebook ... can and should ... be considered as an integral work, in this case the work of a lifetime, unlike any other that he left us” (my emphasis). This mandate petitions for exactly the detailed poetics that earlier studies of the Notebook have left undeveloped—and that the present essay seeks to deliver in full.

3 Indeed, the *Blake Archive*’s injunction prearranges my agenda at nearly every turn. The first two sections below (II and III) investigate the modus operandi of the Notebook “as an integral work,” while the following pair (IV and V) attempt to situate it properly among the “other [works] that [Blake] left us.” I begin with a narrative of Blake’s acquisition and peculiar employment of the Notebook because together they have determined the discursive condition of the

With thanks to the anonymous reader at *Blake*, to Morris Eaves, Sarah Jones, and Morton Paley for their editorial guidance, and to Jerome McGann for his unsparing support.

1. The introductory essay to Geoffrey Keynes’s 1935 facsimile—later reprinted in *Blake Studies*—briefly covers the Notebook’s physical characteristics, composition history, and documentary afterlife. In 1953, Bunsho Jugaku’s *A Bibliographical Study of William Blake’s Notebook* adduced from Keynes’s images a page-by-page description of the document’s contents. G. E. Bentley, Jr., then streamlined and augmented these earlier records for his *Blake Books* in 1977—the same year in which David Erdman produced a second edition of *The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile*, whose “improved photography” allowed Erdman to pursue higher orders of

critical business: collation and tabulation, repagination and revised chronology, and a look at how some Notebook sketches “precipitated into” the series of emblems called *The Gates of Paradise* (Erdman, *Notebook* vii, 14).

2. At the end of his introduction, Jugaku writes, “The study concluded will, I hope, form one section of a trilogy to be followed later by aesthetical and doctrinal studies of the *Note-book*” (9). I can find no evidence that such a trilogy ever materialized. But there are reasons to worry that we would not know even if it had, not least because relatively few Western scholars of British literature can read Japanese; see also Ima-Izumi 85-87 on the narrow circulation of much Japanese literary scholarship. For information about the Japanese contribution to Blake scholarship in particular, see Bentley’s *Blake Studies in Japan*.

document as we encounter it. In that condition there are four bibliographic species, four distinct arrangements of text and image, which I delineate and enumerate in section III before closely “reading” two exemplary pages. By way of these readings I ascertain that the Notebook cultivates a *poetics of inflection*—where inflection refers to “the action of ... bending in or towards,” “a mental or moral bending or turning,” “modification ... to express ... different grammatical relations” (*OED* 1a, 1c, 4a). In the Notebook, semantic meaning results largely from the inflective forces of position (of discursive units on the page) and proximity (of one discursive unit to another).

- 4 This conclusion acts as a bridge between the Notebook and the rest of Blake’s corpus. In section IV I undertake to show that the Notebook, through the development of an inflective poetics, concisely models the signature instabilities of Blake’s illuminated prints (disorienting juxtaposition, “repetition without duplication” [Visconti, in Kraus 166], surrender to material determinants). Here and throughout I draw extensively on existing Blake scholarship, in part to demonstrate how well the Notebook dovetails with so much of what we already know and value about Blake. My penultimate section then formulates two hypotheses—one cognitive, the other biographic—about why Blake might have used the Notebook for as long and as variously as he did. Both designate the document as a kind of material stimulant for Blake’s working imagination. But ultimately, wherever our causal speculations lead, the heart of the argument is that the Notebook “can and should ... be” taken to typify Blake’s creative habits across the whole of his career.
- 5 There are logical reasons for scholars to have avoided the interpretive approach to the Notebook that I pursue in sections III through V. The liminal status of the Notebook potentially bars it from the seal of intentional design that authorizes finished products as “integral.” And in the absence of such authorization, readers risk imposing their own ideas of order where, as Swinburne said of the Notebook, “there is absolutely no hint of order whatever” (130-31). So in my sixth and final section I turn to one of Blake’s last engraved works, the Laocoön separate plate, to showcase the uncanny (and apparently deliberate) use it makes of the Notebook’s graphic architecture.³ Commenta-

3. Morton D. Paley has argued that we ought not to know the plate as “*The Laocoön*,” since Blake actually titled it *ἦ & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact or History of Ilium* (81). I agree: the difference epitomizes one of the plate’s ideological ambitions, and its significance will feature prominently in my analysis below. But I retain “the Laocoön plate” as an informal reference, largely for the sake of familiarity: in the *Blake Archive*, Erdman’s *Complete Po-*

tors have often seen the Laocoön plate as “a kind of summary index” (Tayler 72) of Blake’s “interrelated opinions on money, empire, morality, Christianity, and the arts,” which the expository aphorisms on the plate “set forth” candidly (*Blake Archive* headnote).⁴ But these “opinions” are centered in an anticlassical ideology whose fullest articulation emerges not from the aphorisms alone but from their inflective interaction with the classical image that they encircle. Thus, spotlighting the formal resemblance of the Laocoön plate to the most complex Notebook pages, I contend that Blake’s engraving and printing of the former ratifies—and in fact advances—the long-term construction of the latter.

II.

It may be worked backwards and forwards without end,
and last a Man’s whole Life
(Blake, *Blake’s Chaucer*, in Erdman, *Complete Poetry* [E] 567-68)

- 6 In February 1787, William Blake’s beloved younger brother Robert died at twenty-four, probably of tuberculosis (Bentley, *Paradise* 98).⁵ Blake had nursed him without a falter “for a whole fortnight,” and after Robert had gone for good Blake reportedly slept for three days uninterrupted (Ack-

etry and Prose, and almost every other critical publication, the plate is identified not as *ἦ & his two Sons* (*ad finem*) but by some direct mention of Laocoön.

4. Commonly recording Blake’s engagement with some zone of his immediate intellectual environment, these commentators have made for themselves a picture of great historical detail. Irene Tayler targets Blake’s appeal to eighteenth-century mythographer Jacob Bryant. Rosamund Paice considers to what extent the separate plate resists the ideologies of Rees’s *Cyclopædia*, for which Blake had first sketched the Laocoön group. Jerome McGann argues that “one of [the Laocoön plate’s] contemporary points of reference ... would have been Byron” and the “ekphrastic representation of the Vatican statue” in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (“Blake and Byron” 625). Sarah Stein examines the possible influence of Hebrew micrography on the Laocoön plate and *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. Paley (53-100) documents what art and philosophy relating to the Laocoön group Blake could have encountered, and to what effect, before and during composition. All such explorations are relevant, even essential, to the somewhat different one I organize in the final section below.

5. Some engaging ambiguity surrounds the birthdate of Robert Blake and, therefore, his age at his time of death. Early testimony (for example, from Tatham [3]) listed him, as I have done here, as having died at twenty-four. Bentley later speculated that he was born in 1767, which would have him dead at nineteen or twenty (Peter Ackroyd’s 1995 biography asserts nineteen [100]). Current consensus—now including Bentley, as my citation suggests—seems to rest on the former hypothesis, which carries with it the fascination of Robert’s having been mistakenly called “Richard,” but correctly assigned a birthdate of 19 June 1762 (the genealogy in Bentley’s *Paradise* says July instead), in the St. James’s parish register. For a summary of the puzzle and the rationale for its resolution, see Ward.

royd 100). As these tiny anecdotes alone suggest, the death of his “favourite brother” (Bentley, *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. [BR(2)] 10) was as devastating a loss as Blake could have endured. But in the end Robert left behind a threefold consolation (each fold of which we will return to in time): he continued to return to Blake in visions (E 705); in one such vision, he revealed to Blake what would become the method of illuminated printing (Gilchrist 1: 69); and he handed down fifty-eight lightly trodden leaves, irregularly 19.5 x 15.7 cm. and sewn in (now mostly incomplete) gatherings of twelve (Bentley, *Blake Books* [BB] 321-23)—that is, the “not very large notebook” (Erdman, *Notebook* 1) that has come to concern us here.

- 7 Blake held the Notebook close throughout his life, although he used it with varying degrees of frequency and devotion. His work in it probably began with a series of emblems tentatively titled “Ideas of Good & Evil” (see N14 [in Erdman’s numbering, which I cite throughout]) and datable, in the earliest case (that is, N75), to the year of Robert’s death; prior markings were likely Robert’s own (Erdman, *Notebook* 7). Sometime before autumn 1792, these emblems reached the final pages of the Notebook, and Blake, unwilling (or unable) to part with its surfaces, turned the book around for reuse. A second trek through, back to front, then saw the drafting or copying in of various textual materials, including much of the poetry that would become the *Songs of Experience* (Erdman, *Notebook* 7).⁶ After 1793 Blake’s use of the Notebook slowed for a time, marking the first perceptible ebb in an undulating rhythm typical of his creative (though not his professional) practices.⁷ But the pivotal maneuver, the decision to turn and return to the document after marking most every page, had in some sense already been performed; and for almost all of his remaining years,

6. Multiple Notebook emblems, sketched between 1787 and 1792, also appear on illuminated *Songs* plates, though often in revised or re-worked forms; I discuss one, N65 and “The Angel,” in my section III. Erdman writes that “work on all the illuminated prophecies from *The Marriage to Europe* was current and interfertile” with the Notebook, by which he means that Blake’s compositions inside the Notebook influenced and were influenced by those outside it (*Notebook* 12). This must be cognitively accurate no matter what, but, in addition to the *Songs* carryover, graphic materials from several other illuminated books are technically traceable to Blake’s first five years in the Notebook. Compare, for example, the penciled Nebuchadnezzar on N44 to *Marriage* plate 24; the frantic woman on N25 to *Europe* plate 7 (Erdman numbering; Bentley plate 10); the “Deaths Door” emblem on N71 to *America* plate 12 (Erdman numbering; Bentley plate 14). The *Blake Archive* conveniently hyperlinks Notebook pages to related images across Blake’s digitized corpus.

7. However continuously Blake worked through commissioned or otherwise commercial projects, the illuminated books were conceived and executed in periods of concentrated invention, rather than in ongoing outputs on a smaller scale. See Viscomi, “Concept of Difference” and “Illuminated Printing.”

Blake would occasionally come back to the Notebook, find available space on some leaf or other (or in rarer cases some old inscription that warranted erasure), and there work through whatever occupied his mind. The process forced him to write and draw at several angles, with several orientations, and with a diversity of bumps and contortions, into and out of and around previous inscriptions. As a result, the Notebook contains (all told) hundreds of lines of verse, thousands of words of expository prose, dozens of pictorial illustrations, practical and professional lists, and remnants of technical exercises—often with samples of each crammed and crowded onto individual pages.

- 8 These autographic acrobatics (and the convoluted graphics they produced [see *illus.* 1]) already provoke a series of questions. Most obviously, instead of going to all that inscriptive trouble, why not simply get another notebook—another “standard stationer’s commodity” (Erdman, *Notebook* 2), as the unassuming original seems to be? Was it frugality, or rather scarcity, as Damon assumes (128)?⁸ Or sentimentality, as Keynes infers?⁹ Or some imaginative stimulation? Consider that, “not earlier than 1818” (Erdman, *Notebook* 2), Blake joined two leaves of deviant shape and color to the Notebook’s end (BB 322-23): in other words, in the very final decade of his life, he was still seeking space in the Notebook’s discursive world.
- 9 After Blake died in 1827, his wife, Catherine, gave the Notebook to William Palmer, a painter and brother of Blake’s friend Samuel Palmer and (according to Dante Gabriel

8. The years of highest Notebook usage correlate with the years of Blake’s highest earnings. He made less money in the 1780s than in the 1790s but still more in the 1780s than in any decade after 1800. Thus 1787–93, unquestionably Blake’s most active period in the Notebook, was a particularly comfortable financial period in his life. If it were frugality that drove him to reuse the Notebook, we might expect the opposite correlation—the less money he brings in, the more he is forced to recycle materials for composition. Of course an alternate view might hold, that Blake’s use becomes re-use only after the Notebook has been filled, and that the relevant interval is therefore not 1787–93 but 1794–1818(?). While I shall not argue that frugality had nothing to do with Blake’s keeping the Notebook, it does not satisfy as a straightforward and comprehensive explanation of the document’s enduring centrality. For statistics regarding Blake’s income, see Bentley, *Desolate Market* 103-05.

9. “The feeling that existed between [William and Robert Blake] was evidently very deep, and this provides the clue to the motive that made William use and treasure the *Notebook* from the day of Robert’s death until his own” (Keynes, *BS* 9). It is worth saying that keeping the Notebook would not have necessitated writing or drawing in it—indeed, for around six years, Blake left untouched the pages at the front that contain Robert’s illustrations (Erdman, *Notebook* 7). In June 1793 he finally wrote on N4: “I say I shant live five years / And if I live one it will be a / Wonder.” Then, almost fourteen years later, just above: “Tuesday Jan^{ry}. 20. 1807 between Two & Seven in the Evening—Despair.”

Rossetti) “an attendant in the Antique Gallery at the British Museum” (BB 334; Erdman, *Notebook* 1). It is not clear what Palmer did with it until 1847, but on 30 April of that year he sold the document to D. G. Rossetti for ten shillings. Rossetti tampered extensively with the Notebook’s bibliographic code, binding it in half calf and appending to it thirty-three leaves of half-accurate transcription—complete with an “unceremonious shaking up of Blake’s rhymes” (Hill 264-65) and a header of yet graver editorial sin: “All that is of any value in the foregoing pages has here been copied out” (Erdman, *Notebook* 1) (see *illus.* 2).¹⁰ On the verso of the document’s front flyleaf, Rossetti penciled a note explaining his purchase and, in lines now mostly erased, conjecturing some commentary: “Among the sketches, there are one or two profiles of Blake himself. ... Illustrated div ?... ation is by Robt. Blake but with neither his brother’s ease and vigour nor his ?heavenly spirit” (Erdman, *Notebook* 2) (see *illus.* 3). Erdman speculates that the lacunae once bore Rossetti’s commitment “to the observation that Blake illustrated his works divinely” (*Notebook* 2). Seems so indeed.

- 10 In any event, and whatever our view of his methods, Rossetti treated the Notebook and the artist it depicts (“my manuscript by that genius”) as objects of great interest. Feeling that “its contents really ought to be edited” but having “no time” himself (Hill 237), he lent the manuscript in 1861 to Alexander Gilchrist, Blake’s first proper biographer (Keynes, *BS* 17). Though he must have consulted the Notebook for his *Life of William Blake*, Gilchrist died suddenly before the year’s end, leaving the biography “substantially complete” but its accompanying selection and catalogue much less so (Gilchrist 1: v-vi). Editorial duties thus fell back into the lap of Rossetti, who prepared Notebook transcriptions—well in excess of what he had originally deemed “of ... value”—for the two-volume *Life* carried into publication by Gilchrist’s widow in 1863.¹¹ Back in 1847,

10. Rossetti would come to regret at least his stylistic emendations of Blake’s verse. D. G. wrote to W. M. Rossetti on 8 October 1874: “I know you would not quite have coincided with my method of treatment [of Blake], nor should I now have adopted it to the same extent.” Compare D. G. Rossetti’s earlier remarks to Gilchrist: “I am glad you approve of my rather unceremonious shaking up of Blake’s rhymes. I really believe that is what ought to be done” (Hill 264-65). Between 1866 and 1874, Richard Herne Shepherd edited three editions of Blake that outwardly argued for “textual fidelity” against the aesthetic meddling of “the Rossetti-Gilchrist-Swinburne circle” (Dorfman 110). D. G. Rossetti privately expressed his regret in the context of these public debates. See Dorfman 106-14.

11. Rossetti’s selections from the Notebook are not presented together in volume 2 of Gilchrist’s *Life*—not systematically, at least. They are instead distributed across sections of miscellanea such as “Prose Writings” and “Poems Hitherto Unpublished.” Rossetti acknowledges the source of these materials in sweeping prefatory notes but seems not to trust (or even suspect) the integrity of “the MS. Note-book,” which

D. G. Rossetti had gotten the money for the Notebook from his brother, William Michael, who was also fascinated by Blake and who may be responsible for the physical excision from Notebook pages 71 and 72; we know that he offered in 1864 to “snip out” a piece for Horace Scudder, “just as a specimen of writing” (Peattie 134; see also Erdman, *Notebook* 3). W. M. Rossetti’s 1874 *Poetical Works of William Blake* added to his brother’s Notebook transcriptions, although, according to Keynes, not with much stricter exactitude. Meantime, Algernon Charles Swinburne had extracted further from the Notebook for his *William Blake: A Critical Essay* of 1868, having presumably accessed the manuscript through the Rossetti brothers, the younger of whom became the study’s dedicatee (Keynes, *BS* 11). Ultimately, the curation (and interference) of D. G. Rossetti and his circle would dominate critical understanding of the Notebook in subsequent years, as scholars and collectors settled on “The Rossetti Manuscript” for shorthand reference (BB 323).

- 11 “The Rossetti Manuscript” was purchased for £110 by editor and bookseller F. S. Ellis upon Rossetti’s death in 1882, and by Ellis and Scrutton for £85 upon F. S. Ellis’s retirement in 1885.¹² The following year it was “traded” to the New York dealers Dodd, Mead & Co., who in 1887 sold it to collector William Augustus White of Brooklyn for \$825 (C. E. Wright 89; BB 334). White entered his own bibliographic information below Rossetti’s, in the footer of the front flyleaf (see *illus.* 3); numbered the pages 1-120 in the upper outer corners; sent the document back to London briefly in 1890 so that Yeats and E. J. Ellis could consult it for their three-volume *Works* (1893); a decade later provided John Sampson with Notebook “materials” for the Oxford editions of 1905 and after; and in 1924 had the manuscript comprehensively photographed for Keynes, who prepared a “new and carefully revised text” for his 1925 *Writings* (BB 323; Keynes, *BS* 12). At his death in 1927, the Notebook passed to his daughter Frances Hillard White Emerson of Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was Emerson who brought the document back to England for Keynes to make its further acquaintance and, in collaboration with Nonesuch Press, to produce his 1935 collotype facsimile and transcription (Keynes, *BS* 12-13). Throughout her life Emerson lent the Notebook for exhibition at various Amer-

makes him, in yet another sense, the forerunner of many subsequent Blake editors (Gilchrist 2: 76).

12. A friend and publisher of D. G. Rossetti and others in the Rossetti circle, F. S. Ellis was succeeded in business by his nephew G. I. Ellis, who brought out *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* in 1886 under the London imprint Ellis and Scrutton. In other words, even though the Notebook technically changed hands in 1882 and 1885, it remained within one tight-knit coterie until it was brought to the United States in 1887.

62

Verse and Prose by William Blake.
(natus 1757. obiit 1828.)

* * ~~All that is of any value in the foregoing pages~~
~~has here been copied out. D.G.C.R.~~

The Everlasting Gospel.

The vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy.
Thine is the fare of all mankind, —
Mine speaks in parables to the blind;
Thine loves the same world that mine hates;
Thy Heaven-doors are my Hell-gates.
Socrates taught what Meletus
Loathed as a nation's bitterest curse,
And Caiaphas was in his own mind
A benefactor to mankind.

I purchased this original m.s. of Palmer,
an attendant in the Antique Gallery at the
British Museum, on the 30th April, 1847.
Palmer knew Blake personally, and it was
from the artist's wife that he had the present
m.s. which he sold me for 10^s. Among
the sketches, there are one or two profiles of
Blake himself.

D. G. C. R.

Don't read this
with 2 vols 80
R & 11

W. A. White
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ican institutions, including the Pierpont Morgan Library (now the Morgan Library & Museum) in New York City, where Erdman first encountered it; and at some point she also rebound the volume, with interleaves, in levant morocco (BB 334; Erdman, *Notebook* 2). Before her death in 1957, Emerson donated the Notebook to the British Museum, and when the British Library moved from the museum's plot on Great Russell Street to Euston Road in 1997, our document went along with it. The Notebook remains at the British Library today, where it is catalogued as Add MS 49460.¹³

- 12 I recapitulate this history at such length because it points up both the importance and the predicament of the Notebook for scholars. Inherited and occupied habitually by Blake throughout his life, it comes to us preserved and—inevitably—annihilated, and always in uncertain proportion. “Time,” writes Eaves, “will do many things besides set things right,” and so will the well-meaning but perhaps overeager hands that guard documents against “oblivion” (“Editorial Void” 519). Today the Notebook flaunts its epistemological obstinance. We do not know, almost two-and-a-half centuries later, the whole of what Robert drew in it before his death, nor can we tell when precisely Blake began, stopped, resumed, and finished using it.¹⁴ We do not know in exactly what order all the texts and drawings were inscribed, nor in exactly what order all the leaves ought to

13. Note its steadily increasing market value: apparently free for Palmer, 10s. for Rossetti, £85-110 for the next buyers, \$825 (or £154 [Erdman, *Notebook* 2]) for White, and worth around \$40,000 by the time it reached Emerson (C. E. Wright 89). According to the relative consumer indexes and GBP-USD conversions on *MeasuringWorth.com*, those values translate to the following in 2019 USD: \$59; \$11,400-14,400; \$22,900; \$589,000. These are complicated multivariate calculations and should be taken in every case as estimations. But the relevant trend nicely illustrates Blake's migration into the English canon, from the inaugural curations of Rossetti, Gilchrist, and Swinburne, through the Yeats/Ellis and Sampson editions, and into the Damon, Keynes, and Frye eras.

14. The guesswork about Robert's contributions began with D. G. Rossetti in 1847 (see *illus.* 3; Erdman, *Notebook* 2) but apparently dropped out thereafter, for Keynes claims to have discovered (or discerned) Robert's hand himself: “On pages 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13 are sketches and drawings that have always, until recently, been assigned with the rest of the contents of the book to William Blake. But their lines are such that this belief cannot any longer be held true” (BS 8). Today the *Blake Archive*, with slightly different paginations and slightly less assurance, says that “the drawings on Objects 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, and 15 are very probably [Robert's] work.” Though Keynes seemed quite confident in his chronological estimations, Erdman has shown much of that initial timeline to be questionable at best (see Keynes, BS 8-10; Erdman, *Notebook* 7-11). Bentley's chronology is dominated by ranges such as “1801-3” and markers of uncertainty such as “about” and “?” (BB 322-23). The *Blake Archive* states that Blake “may not have begun using [the Notebook] until c. 1790.” That would be three years too late according to Erdman, but three years too early according to Bentley (Erdman, *Notebook* 7; BB 321).

be arranged.¹⁵ We cannot restore W. M. Rossetti's excision, reverse his brother's interventions, negate subsequent alterations, and rest assured that none other has slipped by undetected.¹⁶ Though relevant to most cultural artifacts, these sorts of uncertainties are especially troublesome with notebooks and manuscripts—materials of what Sally Bushell would call “textual process,” which fascinate because of the spatiotemporally specific actions (the “dynamic energies” [*Blake Archive* Notebook headnote]) encoded within them (“Origins” 101). The analyst of such materials is less concerned with what than with how and under what circumstances an artist composed, but the clarity of the latter partly depends on the extent of the former's preservation. “Readers” (or “viewers”) of Blake's Notebook confront tangled and fragmentary vestiges of creative action that withhold even as they evidence the details of their compositional origins.

III.

- 13 That disclaimer done, I offer another. The following investigation emerges from work with David Erdman's print and the *Blake Archive*'s digital facsimiles of the Notebook—not

15. The temporal sequence of composition and the sequential arrangement of leaves are related but not synonymous problems because Blake does not seem to have used the Notebook in a consistently linear manner. He not only doubled (and tripled and quadrupled) back on his own work but also left some pages rather bare while completely covering others (see, for example, the variation from N44 through N54); some other or additional logic determined what went where and when.

“The leaves of this blank book were ... originally bound in gatherings,” Erdman writes, “but in rebinding they have been separated into individually mounted leaves no longer physically conjugate” (*Notebook* 5). From White's numbering (before 1927) at the latest, the Notebook leaves lay in what the physical evidence (for instance, offprinted ink, textual continuation) proves to be an implausible (if not impossible) order. Erdman's two editions did much to establish a more accurate consensus, but his account is still ridden with qualification and uncertainty: “The evidence is inconclusive” as to whether his N22 and N23 really belong in succession; the leaf containing N5/6 “bears no clear evidence of fitting against any of the ends of the confirmed sequences here or ... anywhere else in the Notebook”; etc. (*Notebook* 4).

16. “Of the gatherings that comprise the extant book of 116 pages”—not counting the added leaves—“only three are complete There is no watermark in the paper, but top and bottom segments of a countermark, which has not been identified, occur at the inner centre edges of the leaves, each of which is now mounted separately. ... At least four leaves are missing at the end of the book Apparently two leaves are lacking from the broken gathering preceding [page 37]” (Erdman, *Notebook* 2, 6). “It seems likely ... that the eight pages missing at the end were removed before William Blake began using the *Notebook*. By analogy, it seems likely that the four pages missing from pp. 17-24 and the unknown number probably missing from pp. 1-16 were also removed before the poet used the book” (BB 322). This material incompleteness also threatens to complicate our encounters with the manuscript.

with Blake's original manuscript.¹⁷ Therefore, while the theoretical blueprint ought to hold fast, any fine-grained observations of shading and medium, for example, are particularly vulnerable to error: facsimile—to say nothing of time—might have missed or distorted Blake's inscriptions in any number of ways. Because I am interested, too, in how "readers" or "viewers" encounter the Notebook—as they would encounter Blake's other "integral work[s]," with interpretive impulses and conventions at hand—my commentary on specific pages necessarily reflects the rousing of my own subjective faculties. As multiple scholars have recently argued, interpretive engagement with drafts, manuscripts, marginalia, and other "unfinished" materials of "textual process" often requires the readerly to meet the writerly imagination halfway: only a "personally inflected critical method" (Stauffer 13), one that generates "imaginative, even speculative, critical responses" (Tyler 4), can enter the lacunae left by partial- and provisionality. Though I make no defense of freewheeling subjectivity, my readings proceed on the similar assumption that, if we are to access the aesthetico-semiotic "integr[ity]" of the Notebook at all, it will be through an interpretive reciprocation of the "dynamic energies" that each page displays.¹⁸

- 14 Of 120 total pages in the Notebook, fifteen feature only handwritten text, whether prose or verse or both; thirteen feature pictorial drawing alone or pictorial drawing accompanied by handwritten text meant obviously to caption it; twenty-five are palimpsestic, with handwritten text predominating over erased or obscured pictorial drawing (the reverse does not occur); and sixty-seven feature both handwritten text and pictorial drawing without one either over-

17. The British Library classifies the Notebook as a "highly restricted" manuscript that, even before COVID-19 protocol adjustments, required "special permissions," granted only in "exceptional circumstances" for "very specific reasons," to access. At the time of writing "there is no chance at all" of my viewing the original manuscript and no indication of when—if ever—that absolute restriction might change. I quote here (with permission) from personal correspondence with reference staff at the British Library.

18. From a scholarly perspective, the reasons to trade subjective report for a mind of winter are legion and fairly obvious. But as my citations to Stauffer and Tyler suggest, literary studies has also witnessed sophisticated defenses of the former in recent years. Since the turn of the millennium, McGann has produced a number of books and articles that attempt a "dramatic exposure of subjectivity as a live and highly informative option of interpretive commentary" (Samuels and McGann 36): see *Scholar's Art* (2006), *Change It* (2007), and *Inconsequent* (2009), all of which build on the respect for subjectivity that he has been channeling into dialogic criticism since *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (1972). The crucial qualification for McGann is that, when responsibly conducted, subjective engagement follows from—it does not replace—intimate historical/material/structural familiarity. Other contemporary paradigms, such as reader-response criticism (see Bickman) and rhetorical poetics (see Phelan), work with subjective reading in similar ways. For more, see also my note 52, below.

riding (as in the palimpsests) or straightforwardly supplementing (as in the captioned drawings) the other. There are therefore four bibliographic species in the Notebook—four distinct arrangements of marks on the page: the textual, the pictorial, the palimpsestic, and what we might call (after W. J. T. Mitchell) the *composite* (see also Luisa Calè). The boundaries between each species are conceptually stark but practically fuzzier because, for example, palimpsests exist in degrees, some original inscriptions may now be indecipherable (if not invisible), and deciding what counts as a caption will often involve some exegetical supposition. But even allowing for small-scale taxonomic variation, it would remain true that the majority of the pages in the Notebook combine textual and pictorial components to form a sort of composite presentation. These composite pages are the primary interest of all that follows here.

- 15 The cornerstones of the composite model are the emblems that Blake presumably sketched on his first trip through the Notebook, sometime between 1787 and 1792, when most of the pages would have been blank. Consider N39 in Erdman's edition, object 41 in the *Blake Archive* (see *illus.* 4). In this paradigmatic form, the composite Notebook page exhibits one centered emblem drawn in pencil, framed by a gentle, somewhat messily penciled rectangle. As inaugural inscriptions, the emblems set the terms of each composite page: their size, shape, and location parameterize the behavior of subsequent inscriptions, which run, as if respectful of their guard, around the emblems' rectangular frames. The positional parameters set by each emblem divert the next inscription toward some open spot on the page, where, having zoned its own territory, it readies an additional set of positional parameters for upcoming inscriptions. After two or three rounds (or some Blakean loquaciousness) the terms can become quite constraining, and units of text must resort to margins, nooks, and crannies, warp and malformation—or, if especially late arriving, upside-down suspension from the biblio-rafters. In effect, every inscription responds to the total sum of material conditions set out before it: the emblem has free rein of the page but cannot run off it, just as the very final marking must muscle its way into whatever available space it can find. We—every peruser of the Notebook from Blake's death on—encounter these accommodations woven into one static discursive composite, from whose visual display we infer their accrual. Each composite page therefore bodies forth an image of Blake's complete Notebook procedure.
- 16 The *Blake Archive* researchers responsible for digitizing *The Four Zoas* have laid the conceptual ground for an outline of the Notebook's poetics. This concomitant benefit does not come as a surprise, given the textual condition of both documents; indeed, Eaves et al. "anticipate" that the markup strategies devised to manage *The Four Zoas* "will [also] al-

- low us to better describe Blake's densely revised Notebook" (17). The multidimensional *Four Zoas* manuscript proves editorially challenging because its "vertical stacks of revision" and marginal and variously oriented inscriptions conflate "spatial and temporal data" and resist standard linear methods of description (10, 19). According to their field reports, the manuscript's digital editors tested several preliminary solutions to these problems before realizing that their reliance on the "line" (or <line>), the *Blake Archive's* bedrock descriptive unit, was limiting the complexity they could effectively represent. They needed an encoding tagset, and hence a set of "conceptual metaphors," that could capture spatial relations between inscriptions that do not sit on "the same horizontal plane" (16-17). Moreover (and more important for our purposes), they needed a way to articulate temporal distinctions between inscriptions, as implied by the manuscript's "physical-textual evidence," without committing to a particular genetic narrative or artifactual telos (5). Thus they incorporated into their descriptive toolkit the "zone" (<zone>) and the "stage" (<stage>): the former locates an inscription or group of inscriptions on the page, while the latter marks without necessarily sequencing "a moment of composition or alteration." With these supplements to the "line," Eaves et al. could "more precisely capture the relative location and extent of any given moment of writing or revision" (17).
- 17 A general poetics of the composite Notebook page would begin with the recognition of multiple "stages," each indicated by the manuscript's "physical-textual evidence," even where a detailed genetic account is not desired or available. Differences in shading (light or dark), medium (ink or pencil), orientation (left to right or footer to header), segmentation (versified or margin to margin), and penmanship (large or small script) all evince the eventual differences that lie behind the chaos of the page. In other words, each unique inscriptive disposition represents a discrete "moment of writing," drawing, "or revision." And because every "stage," every moment of inscription, must feature a spatiotemporally specific inscriber, each composite Notebook page hosts a meeting among the legion of Blakes responsible for its ultimate arrangement.
- 18 N39, for example, includes at least eight such Blakes and points up how we might responsibly guess at their temporal relations based on "physical-textual" characteristics alone. If [1] the center emblem led the charge, then [2] the penciled couplet in the header ("The Hebrew Nation did not write it / Avarice & Chastity did shite it") probably arrived soon after, given its visual obscurity and equally prominent positioning. Then [3] the series of numbers and [4] the quatrain beneath the emblem appear to have had considerable elbow room at their origin—enough for a fourfold numerical indecision ("26 26 14 25") and for four perfectly
- tidy lines of verse. It seems, furthermore, that [5] the poem in the footer was begun shortly after the quatrain above it; that [6] the variously rubbed-out, rightside-up, and upside-down verse above the emblem arrived next; that [7] the vertically oriented prose commentary—which sandwiches the emblem, dodges the poetry of [4-6], and continues upside down across the top margin—filtered in thereafter; and finally that [8] the footer poem ([5]) was then revised to feature the dark-ink strikethrough, the couplet crammed into one line along the bottom edge, and the final couplet (with pronominal continuity) bent around the borders of [4] and [5] and [7].
- 19 Each of these inferences is backed by the same evidentiary principle, namely that later inscriptions will respond in form to (somehow cover or avoid) earlier ones, and that the first inscriptions will show no sign of such pressures. Sequential precision matters less at present than the cumulative composition process itself, in which Blake [2] encounters Blake [1], Blake [3] encounters Blakes [1] and [2], Blake [4] encounters Blakes [1] through [3], and so on. Though we could probably continue dividing inscriptive "stages," so many will do to model the Notebook composites as records of incremental interactions among multiple space- and time-specific Blakes. What the Notebook portrays, irrespective of its content, is a creative and creating mind working with and around various iterations of itself, each imposing on each. The document was literally the site and stock of such interaction (or intra-action?), one whose pages now present to us every iteration coiled into single static wholes.
- 20 Which we manage—how? To start, the layout of any given page can activate reading conventions that attach certain semiotic functions to certain units of discourse.¹⁹ In other words—as the *Four Zoas* prototypers might have it—the "zone" of an inscription can influence the kind (and to some extent the amount) of meaning it generates. Centrality, for example, denoting both a middle position and a special salience, affords the Notebook emblems a pride of place that jibes with their forerunning role in the compositional order: hubs, not satellites. Once we grant that privilege to the emblems, the other inscriptions configure themselves formally and semiotically in relation to their established "centers." Take, again, N39, whose emblem depicts a sick figure (probably a child) lying on a bed or pallet before a kneeling attendant; a cloaked and turbaned man standing tallest on the right, bearing a doll like a gift; and another child standing farthest from the foreground, hands appar-
19. For an extended, practical implementation of this theoretical principle, see McGann, *New Republic* 168-98: "All texts are marked texts, i.e., algorithms—coded sets of reading instructions" (169).

ently to face, as if in mourning. A quatrain sits directly below the emblem—

If I eer Grow to Mans Estate
O Give to me a Womans fate
May I govern all both great & small
Have the last word & take the wall

—where we might expect to find an entitling or elucidative caption. And indeed, in the twofold act (most familiar to Blake's audiences) of reading-and-viewing, text and image, poem and emblem cannot help but act on each other in suggestive ways. "Man" and "Woman" call out to the two adult figures in the emblem, one whose "Estate" includes the socioeconomic freedom to come and go (fully dressed, he appears to have entered off the street) bearing material gifts, and another whose "fate" consists in tending to the ailing child. "Fate" rhymes here not only textually (aurally and visually) with "Estate" but across media, with the death that presides thematically over the emblem and its scene. Thus the first couplet rings out as supplication, a request that God—fate's programmer—keep the speaker fastened to feeling for the vulnerable, even as he "Grow[s]" into an invulnerable liberty to leave them behind. Let to resonate similarly with the emblem, lines 3 and 4 then approach the metarepresentational: for while to "govern all both great & small" may be part of "Mans Estate," it certainly is what Blake has undertaken here in the design of men, women, and children. In the same way does Blake "Have the last word & take the wall," where the former harks back to the order of composition ("word" debuting "last," after image), and the latter lights up the open window in the upper right quadrant of the emblem—the *missing rectangle in the wall*.

- 21 Subject to standard bibliographical conventions, such as that text "zoned" immediately below a centralized image serves a captioning function, the poetry on N39 initiates a dialogue with the emblem that leads (however circuitously) to a reflection on the making and the maker of the page itself. This process, unfolding in the mind of the reader-viewer to be sure, nonetheless depends on the specificities of both text and image—and, equally important, on the frictional energy of their juxtaposition. The point is not that Blake has deliberately "written the poems as a kind of commentary upon the central sketches" (Jugaku 46) but that "the poems" and "the central sketches" are graphically arranged in a would-be expository relation whose "coded sets of ... instructions" (McGann, *New Republic* 169) remain operative in the act of reading-and-viewing. And their operation ultimately works in both directions, allow-

ing poem and emblem reciprocally to impart significance not otherwise available in either.²⁰

- 22 Perhaps there are thematic similarities between the emblem on N39 and the poem beneath it—death, gender, adult- and childhood—that predispose their conjunction to such interpretive readings as the one above. But the remainder of N39 shows how less consonant, even thematically discordant material behaves in the same way when configured in a composite fashion. Consider the prose running vertically up either margin, in which Blake theorizes art and method by antagonizing his usual cast of painters, poets, and engravers. He writes, "I do not condemn Rubens Rembrandt or Titian because they did not understand Drawing but because they did not Understand Colouring." Nor, he continues, does he condemn Robert Strange or William Woollett "because they did not understand Drawing but because they did not understand Graving." There, at the upper left corner of the emblem, the diatribe breaks momentarily, to pick up at the bottom right corner with poets:

I do not condemn Pope or Dryden because they did not Understand Imagination but because They did not understand Verse Their Colouring Graving & Verse can never be applied to Art That is not either colouring Graving or Verse which is Unappropriate to the Subject

Blake's typical *punctuation libre* suspends the final declaration between two meanings. On the one hand, he might say that the methods of Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian, Strange, Woollett, Pope, and Dryden are all insufficiently universal: because they "can never be applied to Art That is not either colouring Graving or Verse," they are "Unappropriate to the Subject" of art as such. On the other hand, he might say that their methods apply only to art that is itself "Unappropriate to the Subject" of art—which would be little art at all. The difference matters, since one critiques primarily execution, the other referential content or subject matter, but in either case the optical sandwiching effect (text | image | text) invites us to search the emblem for remnants of what (or how) the others "did not understand."

- 23 One set of discoveries, again freighted with metarepresentational significance, rewards even a provisional glance at the text | image | text design. First, so close to a condemnation of the Rubens-Rembrandt-Titian approach(es) to "Colouring," the penciled sketch takes on a more starkly

20. Compare Visconti, *Printed Paintings* 136: "[Blake] paired these two initially separate Notebook subjects [sketches of Satan and Elohim] specifically for his new monograph project, which suggests that he enlarged and recomposed the *Elohim* and *Satan* drawings together, one in response to the other. Doing so allowed each to contribute to the meaning of the other."

delineated self-conception, effectively announcing its own uniform constitution: outline. It has no color to speak for, which absent other talk of “Colouring” may go unnoticed (or dismissed as endemic to sketching) but which paradoxically shines here in opposition to Rubens and company, another emphatic statement of Blake’s doctrinal “all depends on Form or Outline” (E 529-30). Then, in a similar way, the mention of Pope, Dryden, and their misled verse reaches out to the poetical sketches nearby, where Blake employs couplets more doggerel than heroic, light and monosyllabically rhymed. Running into and around the verse below and above the emblem, the vertical prose appears to embrace these poems, or to pull them toward some propositional synthesis with itself: point (their bad verse), counterpoint (my alternative). Finally, where Blake’s censure of earlier artists seems to center on their narrow reach or applicability, it underscores the image-text interaction I have already sampled, stressing the transfer of relevance across artistic media.

- 24 A subtler but at the same time more remarkable effect emerges from a conflict between the expository objective of the prose and the physical dimensions, or restrictions, of the Notebook page. By the end of the passage excerpted above, Blake has more or less exhausted the right margin: the prose can extend no further. But rather than proceed just yet to the following page, he continues his commentary along what is, for one reading linearly through the Notebook, the top margin of the same N39:

He who makes a Design must know the Effect & Colouring Proper to be put to that Design & will never take that of Rubens Rembrandt or Titian to turn that which is Soul & Life into a Mill or Machine

For the sake of discursive continuity, Blake does not alter his autographic orientation—writing, for example, left to right across the header—but rotates the book again so that the end of the vertical lines (“... Subject”) can link up to the start of the horizontal ones (“He who ...”). What results, in relation to the page *ut totum*, is a banner of upside-down text that demands of the reader, as it would have demanded of the writer, an act of *turning* to return it to proper legibility. This when the sin for which Blake chides Rubens, Rembrandt, and Titian here is a “turn” of their own, one doubly apparent because, having first written “to put that which is Soul,” Blake has to raise that voltaic verb above the textual mainline. What’s more and most striking, the turn that we perform to finish reading, again like the turn that Blake would have performed to finish writing, defamiliarizes the mimetic component of the central emblem: hung like stalactites from the roof of the rotated emblem, the gravity-defying figures have their artifice laid bare, their status as mere pencil and paper brought to front and center. This is to say

(in Blake’s own terms) that the protean prose, curling once about the image and again about the perimeter of the page, “turn[s] that which is Soul & Life into a Mill or Machine.”²¹

- 25 Thus, as an “integral work” for reading and viewing, the Notebook operates on what might be called a poetics of inflection, one made up of both “spatial and temporal data.” I have said that the composite Notebook pages represent Blake’s working with and around various time-bound iterations of himself. This cooperation—or contestation, depending—involves bidirectional constraint, where Blake at t_2 must deal with the terms he set at t_1 and simultaneously alter or add to the terms he will encounter at t_3 . But those terms and that constraint are expressed primarily in a spatial medium, in the vacant and occupied spaces on the page, which means that Blake’s formal responses are in the first instance contortive and (re)locative. The temporal endurance of the Notebook, in other words, directly sources the spatial parameters that drive inscriptions this way and that. Then the resulting arrangement arbitrates how those inscriptions might signify wholesale. To recur again to the vocabulary of the *Four Zoas* prototypes, within the Notebook’s semiotic system, “stage” dictates “zone” determines meaning, where meaning emerges at least in part from the “coded ... instructions” that attach conventionally to each “zone” and from the juxtaposition of each inscription with other independent markings. My interpretation of N39 has focused on these two inflective forces, illuminating energies.
- 26 They become, if not stronger necessarily, then even more perceptible on Notebook pages whose contents (provisional, recycled, redrafted) also appear elsewhere, in similar or identical forms. N65 (see *illus.* 5) can start us toward a set of examples—the first of which resides in that header: “Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims / Being a Complete Index of Human Characters as / they appear Age after Age.” Readers are most likely to know such language from the second prospectus for Blake’s 1810 engraving “Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims.”²² A prose fair copy of that prospectus covers N117-19, where the lines from N65 reappear, revised, in the closing paragraph: “The Characters of Chaucers Pilgrims are the Characters that compose all Ages & Nations, as one Age falls another rises” (see *illus.* 6). In the context of

21. Compare Visconti on the first plate of *Milton*: “The naked poet as muscular youth walks into a vortex of clouds or smoke, splitting his name and the book’s title in half, forcing the reader to turn the plate in the circular motion of the vortex” (“Illuminated Word” sec. 2, par. 15). Throughout I cite by section and paragraph the online open-access copies of Visconti’s “Word” and “Concept of Difference” (“Invention” and “Illuminated Printing” were born digital), though I also specify the original publications in my bibliography.

22. Blake included a tempera painting that he called *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the Nine and Twenty Pilgrims on Their Journey to Canterbury* in his 1809 Broad Street exhibition. The *Descriptive Catalogue* that ac-

Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrimage
 Being a Complete Index of Human Characters as
 they appear Age after Age

65
 34

If Men will act like a mad mink or a Chamois
 They ought not when it comes to another town
 no good nor at what a friend may utter
 knowing & being that we all have need of Butter
 To give the pie
 To give our Friendship ~~from that~~ now
~~we~~ we will be greatly freed than ever



Having given great offence by writing in Prose
 I write in Verse as soft as Basil Borgia
 Some think at what others can see no crime in
 But nobody sees any harm in Rhyming
 My due in Rhyme ever Milton only planned
 Every foot hock his heels throughout the land
 You look at Roger the dog with his clean graying
 The great of Conscience with his can raising
 They say he is his Tottle being his hope
 Every corner is very much improved by Pope
 Some say we give great Provocation to my dog
 But now I lead my false friend by the nose
 Flaming & hot smelling a sweet savour
 My Poet's friend waving forth powder & Engraving
 While looking up to my Umbrella

Revised to be a very engraving
 My looking quite from Humphrey to Carter
 No one can find it so high as the original monster
 Than the character the dog of the French
 A thing that he's given to examine much
 This is my best copy to my friend
 That I may put them in mind of their latter ends

5. The Notebook of William Blake. Add MS 49460, f.34r. 19.5 x 15.7 cm. Erdman, Notebook N65; Blake Archive, Notebook object 67. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive, © British Library Board.

time. interspersed with Cottages & Villages, the first beams of the sun, ⁶¹ are
seen above the Horizon. Some buildings & spires indicate the situation of
the Great City. The Inn is a Gothic Building which Thynne in his Glossary
says was the Lodging of the Abbot of Hyde by Winchester. On the Inn is
inscribed its title & a proper advantage is taken of this circumstance
to describe the subject of the Picture. The words written in Gothic Letters
over the Gateway are as follow: 'The Tabarde Inne by Henry Baillie
the Lodgyng House for Pilgrims who journey to Saint Thomas Shrine
at Canterbury.'

The Characters of Chaunces Pilgrims are the Characters that compose
all Ages & Nations; as one Age falls another rises. different to Mortal Sight
but to Immortals only the same, for we see the same Characters repeated
again & again in Animals in Vegetables in Minerals & in Men. Nothing
new occurs in Identical Existence: Accident ever varies Substance can
never suffer change nor decay

N117-19, as the topic sentence pivoting toward a benediction, the statement sounds entirely literary-critical, an archetypal or allegorical interpretation of *The Canterbury Tales* that justifies Blake's showing its *dramatis personae* on the basis of their transhistorical relevance. Blake reading Chaucer in the mode of Frye. But on N65 the same idea surfaces not to close a larger critical disquisition but in the prominent zone of a title, and without the operative verb "are" that establishes the propositional grammar of N119. So positioned and so formulated, it seems less to advance a claim than to enact an angle of perception, a sort of "seeing-as" (in the mode of Wittgenstein) that counsels us how to—or becomes the assumption with which we—view what falls below it.²³ What happens if we follow those instructions in earnest?

- 27 Under the sign of the archetype, the "Complete Index of Human Characters" as such, the central emblem on N65 (in which an "infant boy woos [a] big girl by tugging at her arm" [Erdman, *Notebook* 24]) solicits an allegorical reading of absolute generality. Erdman has taken one step in the general direction already by positing that the image "explodes" the "romantic fiction" that "Love is an angel who comes to a lovesick maiden among the tall shrubs, disguised as a naked little boy" (*Notebook* 24). True as that may be, the Chaucer title sends us out beyond "romantic fiction" to where, at the utmost bounds of such a story, there lies—and the emblem comes to depict—Temptation, Rejection, Willpower, Deception. (These, as Blake knew, were all traceable in the "Complete Index" of *The Canterbury Tales* itself.) This modulation, a sort of swelling of significance, occurs even though Blake would have drawn the emblem long before writing of Chaucer in the header: the arrival of the text belatedly inflects the meaning of the preestablished image.
- 28 Before he had even conceived the Chaucer prospectus, Blake had adapted the emblem on N65 for "The Angel," an illuminated poem included in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (see *illus.* 7). There the boy and girl are flipped along the y-axis of the emblem; the boy has grown sizable wings, the girl a sadder countenance, and they appear more to caress each other than to push and to pull. Plucked from the Notebook, the nearly featureless (that is, not particular-

compared that exhibition explained and championed the painting at length, often in terms similar to those expressed on N65. In the same year Blake "propose[d]" to engrave the same picture for sale, which he did (without managing to sell it) in 1810. For the engraving, which the *Blake Archive* titles "Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims," Blake drafted briefer explanatory material (a "Prospectus" [E 567-70]) in two iterations—a significant portion of the second recycled from the original *Descriptive Catalogue*.

23. Compare Haggarty: "Blake may mark a note as summary simply by virtue of its placement at the head of a page, something we need to see in order to understand that note's significance" (44).

ized, an "eternal Principle" [E 536]) girl becomes a royal woman, the naked boy an angel, the scene itself a poet's bewildering reverie.

I Dreamt a Dream! what can it mean?
And that I was a maiden Queen:
Guarded by an Angel mild:
(lines 1-3)

Insofar as the boy (or "Love") "disguise[s]" himself in the Notebook emblem, "The Angel" seems committed to a tentative role-reversal. Spoken by the poet-dreamer-queen, "I ... / ... hid from him my hearts delight" (lines 7-8) displaces disguise or deception from the male to the female figure; the former now "guard[s]" rather than "woos" or "tug[s]," a true "Angel *mild*," and on the same account wipes "away" the woman's unending tears (my emphasis). As if privy to the "romantic fiction" "explode[d]" above (since she had been among the emblems), the queen has apparently insisted on remaining "ne'er beguild!" (line 4). But the final couplet, "For the time of youth was fled / And grey hairs were on my head," carries more than a touch of regret, casting an ironical light back over the strength with which she buried her "delight" in former years. "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle," that ending might have read, "than nurse unacted desires" (E 38). "Infant boy" and "big girl" could hardly have said as much in the Notebook.

- 29 Adjoined to different textual counterparts, that is to say, the one image takes on entirely different significative functions. To experience that principle at work, we do not need to venture beyond the bounds of the Notebook (as we have just done) or even beyond the bounds of N65, but only to observe the behavior of the verse on the same page. Material pressures such as leaf dimensions overpower the poetry on N65 such that individual parts unfasten from the whole and seem liberated to move about as they please. Given the slant-rhyming couplet ("While I looking up to my Umbrella / Resolv'd to be a very contrary fellow") that hitches one to the other, nose to tail, the fifteen horizontal lines below the emblem and the seven vertical lines in the right margin evidently constitute a single poem. But it makes quite the enjambment for a formal/prosodic unit to be carried across not (or not only) a line break but a change in inscriptive orientation. If terminal rhyme can steel the link strained by that ninety-degree rotation, what prevents metrical regularity (rising pentameter) and a shared direction (verticality) from similarly linking the right- and left-marginal verses?

This is my **sweet apology** to my **friends**
That I may **put** them in **mind** of their **latter Ends**
...
False **Friends** fie **fie** our **Friendship** you shant **sever**
In **spite** we **will** be **greater friends** than **ever**



7. "The Angel," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy C (composed and printed 1789, 1794). 11.1 x 6.8 cm. Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection, catalogue number 1801. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

They bear no less semantic relation to each other, their sequence is no more causally inevitable, than umbrellas do and are to contrarians: in fact, some echoes of theme and address—friends and friendship, for example—ring out across any close listening. Taken, then, as one entity, the vertical verses on N65 sandwich the emblem much as did the condemnatory prose on N39; and, as on N39, the arrangement invites us to read for some expository image-text complementation. Immediately new significative possibilities, suitably archetypal or allegorical, emerge from the representation: “Friendship” between the boy and girl, offense (“False ... fie fie”) given one to the other, “apology” offered to remedy, forgiveness (“shant sever”) in response to that apology. Et cetera. I will not continue such probing, whose upshot is simply that, with nothing mandated by their unorthodox typography, the verse units on N65 let a reader govern them freely—foregrounding one or another set of inflective associations, and seeing the rest of the page as one thing or another, accordingly.

30 We should linger, however, on the fact that these semiotic freedoms have material causes. In his edition of the Notebook, Erdman explicitly designates the left-marginal verse on N65 as separate from the centered and right-marginal verse, which he groups together as a single poem. This editorial judgment has a strong, two-part rationale: in the first place, there are observable differences in ink-shading, with the left-marginal verse appearing in a paler ink than the others; and in the second place, the centered and right-marginal verses seem to be a fair-copy redrafting of several lines more roughly written on N62. That earlier version contains various lines omitted from the later but none of what runs up the left margin of N65. Hence the centered and right-marginal verses belong to the same developing poetical structure, whereas the left-marginal verse must have developed elsewhere, in relative isolation. But the pivotal moment comes when Blake moves to extract and re-copy the former structure on the cleaner surface of N65. For there he promptly encounters the strict seniority of the center emblem, which will not accommodate the uninterrupted transcription of twenty-two consecutive lines. So, without a choice, he fractures the verse after line 15 (an awkward faultline in poetry built by twos) as he runs into the bottom of the page. His workaround, to resume vertically up the right margin, then initiates the unfastening, parts from whole, that I have described and examined above. It all would have unfolded rather differently on an emptier—or indeed a fuller—Notebook page, or one, say, 22.5 x 18.7 cm. instead of 19.5 x 15.7 cm.

31 And yet again the relevant variables are both spatial and temporal. For while the spatial restrictions of the Notebook as a material object accrue in tandem with Blake’s ongoing use of its surfaces, his returning to (or remaining in) the

document over time also continually subjects him to those restrictions in their latest manifestation, at which point they shape his compositional experience anew. This is why inscribing the same poem or the same image at two different times literally forces the work to change. Composition in the Notebook becomes a recursive feedback loop, a collaboration and a competition, between Blake and the material conditions he both confronts and creates.

32 Let me sum up the foregoing. Blake’s Notebook operates on an inflective poetics in which any one inscription signifies according to its interaction with other proximate inscriptions, where proximity is defined in graphic—not semantic or otherwise grammatical—terms. This *modus operandi* derives naturally from Blake’s long-term commitment to the document, his protracted (and partly unrecoverable) series of miscellaneous engagements with its finite materiality. Spatial limitations snowball across sustained usage, shoving marks into cracks and corners, bending and flipping and breaking them, and ultimately dropping them into charged but incongruous juxtapositions. Despite that thematic incongruity, poems, pictures, and prose tirades gather on composite pages to form what Mitchell has called “imagetexts” (*Science* 39–47), specific aggregations of verbal and visual discourse that the reader-viewer encounters as total, even unified, displays. Yet despite that unified totality, discursive units also remain free to wander into (to partake in the project of) other “imagetexts,” where—circling back to the poetics of inflection—they would in every case assume a new set of significative potentialities. This last observation broaches the critical upshot of everything I have shown so far, namely that, to recycle an old mainstay of the Blakean lexicon, the Notebook commands attention to “Minute Particulars” in their minutely particular contexts—that is, to what something means next to and thanks to its discursive neighbor, and to what it might mean if and when it were subject to relocation. Blake’s diachronic attachment to the Notebook, in other words, mandates an interpretive practice devoted to synchronicity. “Generalizing in Every thing the Man would soon be a Fool” (E 649).

IV.

Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find,
That gives us back the image of our mind.
(Pope, *Essay on Criticism* lines 299–300)

But the face of truth, like that of nature, is different
and the same.
(Hazlitt, “On Consistency of Opinion”)

33 So much for my consideration of the Notebook “as an integral work.” I hope it will have challenged Swinburne’s sense, representative of so many others, that “in the mass of float-

ing verse and prose there is absolutely no hint of order whatever" (130-31). But I must now take issue with the second half of the *Blake Archive's* injunction, its characterization of the Notebook as a "work of a lifetime, unlike any other that [Blake] left us." For as both documentation and motivation, description and rationale, the remark seems to me exactly the wrong way around. Really the Notebook ought to be "considered as an integral work" because it is *so much like* the other integral works for which we know (and value) Blake better. The Notebook and the illuminated books, I will attempt to demonstrate here, take consonant approaches to the production, and enlist consonant approaches to the reception, of textual and pictorial meaning.

- 34 No one would deny by now the unstable, even frankly random, elements of the illuminated books, nor of the processes via which Blake brought them into being. "Each 'copy' of [an illuminated] work differs from all others," writes Stephen Leo Carr (182), and that difference, as Essick explains, has both "accidental" ("the viscosity of the ink, the pressure with which it is applied, the way it runs over the edges of relief plateaus") and deliberate (coloration, pagination) causes ("Graphic Meaning" 839-40). One anthological work such as the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* may survive in several dozen color schemes and as many sequential arrangements, not all of them orchestrated by Blake himself (BB 385-86).²⁴ An epic poem such as *Jerusalem* may come to us not only both colored and uncolored but in multiple, irreconcilable narrative progressions (BB 224-35).²⁵ These matters matter: the differences make a difference. They give the runaround to our search for Blake's intentions, disputing the authority of any one design, but they also alter—even with, say, coloration alone—the basic affect with which we receive the "verbal-visual sign system" (Viscomi, "Concept of Difference" n7) of a given plate.²⁶ For

24. Given their division into mostly one- and two-plate units, the *Songs* are particularly conducive to rearrangement: by Blake and by later owners, as well as by accident or happenstance. On the role of later owners, and of other hands more generally, in what survives of the *Songs*, see Viscomi, "Posthumous Blake."

25. On the particular case of narrative and graphic variation in *Jerusalem*, see Yoder. For a similar set of problems regarding plate 4 of *The [First] Book of Urizen*, see Essick, "Variation." For obvious reasons—they relate events in causal order—narrative poems such as *Jerusalem* and *Urizen* are more fundamentally altered by sequential changes than are collections of stand-alone poems such as the *Songs*. But I would argue that the difference is gradational, not categorical: consider how drastically Wordsworth tempered *Lyrical Ballads*, as both a readerly experience and an organized literary event, by moving *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from the beginning (as in 1798) to the middle (as in 1800) of the collection.

26. See my comparative readings of "The Sick Rose," below. But note also the affective language with which Bentley describes the varying coloration of the *Songs*: "The colours are bold in A ... heavy in K, S ... careful in E ... and elaborate, extensive, and splendid in U, W-X. ... T²

Blake himself, according to some scholars, they mattered even more: pervasive and apparently welcome, "these differences ... seemed definitive of the difference between one sort of art (free, creative) and another (commonplace, generalized)" (McGann, "Text" 276).

- 35 On the other hand, as other scholars have argued, some constancies do temper the "radical variability" (Carr 182) of the illuminated books. An "economy of similitude" partially counters the "economy of variation," in Essick's keen phrases ("Body" 203).²⁷ This balance characterizes, for example, the relation (formal, procedural, conceptual, thematic) throughout Blake's work and process of outline to color, the line to the shade. According to Eaves, for Blake "drawing is primary and coloring secondary," a programmatic triage that has the consequence of stabilizing the former (relatively speaking) as it unsettles the latter ("Expressive Theory" 786). Linear stability, much like colored instability, was in part a mandate of Blake's medium: the copperplate "embodied" a "resistance to change" in that once the acid had bitten it into relief, forming the outline of a design, it became enormously difficult to restore the bitten metal for linear addition or amendment (Essick, "Graphic Meaning" 839). That acid pour sealed a sort of commitment, then, one broken back into "free, creative" "variability" only with subsequent processes such as inking, printing, and supplemental handwork. Rather typically for Blake, however, neither mechanical condition was permitted to remain mechanical—not without doing double-duty as a trope in the representations themselves, where (as Mitchell has argued) "outline is ... linked with permanence and recurrence through time" and "coloring, drapery" and "space" "with impermanence and evanescence, the fleeting mutable world in which linear archetypes may be incarnated" (*Composite Art* 49-50).²⁸ Committed but far from comprehensive, we might say, the "radical variability" of the illuminated books was only one part of their story, always apportioned against a countervailing sameness or "similitude."²⁹

is dull" (BB 385). These are subjective reports of colored resonance as well as objective descriptions of physical characteristics.

27. Blake was evidently tempted to stabilize the identity of the *Songs* after all, for around 1821 he stipulated a sequence in a manuscript headed "The Order in which the Songs of Innocence & of Experience ought to be paged & placed." Only one copy (V [1821]) actually matches that order, of course. But as Bentley has noted, there are some regularities among the many distinct arrangements anyway (for instance, several copies begin and/or end in the same way [BB 386]).

28. Compare Bentley: "Characteristically, Blake used his images archetypally, adapting them to new situations all his life" (*Paradise* 92).

29. Viscomi has stressed Blake's "economy of similitude" on slightly different, though still relevant, grounds. Rather than printing each copy of each book one by one (or one of one), Blake printed largely in "editions": that is, several copies in one run, then none for some time,

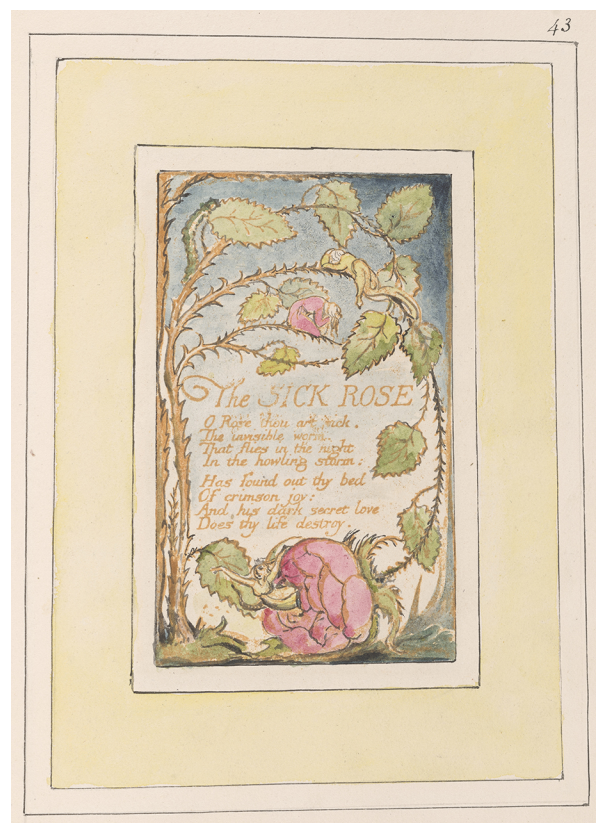
36 This very compressed survey, relying on the insights of several major Blake scholars, intimates something like the broad semiotic order in which the illuminated books seem to operate across time. In short: some relatively stable units of discourse are subject to some destabilizing processes of random and deliberate variation. It would be unwise, I think, to cement (or taxonomize) exactly what changes and what remains the same in all cases: even the stable line/unstable coloration model fails to obtain sometimes.³⁰ More important is the overall implication that Blake's formal "economy" of "similitude" and "variation" generates meaning through the continual (re)contextualization of enduring signifiers, textual as well as pictorial. Certain discursive units—say, without committing unfailingly to, words or outlines—retain unto themselves some baseline semiotic values that constitute their fixed autonomies. These baseline values are what carry over from copy to copy, signifying differently according to their concert with the particular contextual forces (for example, coloration or sequential arrangement) of each stop along the way.³¹ While we notice the fact of variability against the identical value that each unit holds, as it were, for all time, the outcomes of that variability itself must be measured by differences in actualized signification. One specific matrix of impermanent contextual details envelops one specific collection of transferable inscriptions to yield one copy of one plate, which is (at least for the reader-viewer) the basic unit of meaning in Blake's composite art. When another copy then comes along, and then another until the end, the same inscriptions are gradually proven capable of remarkable semiotic variation—and the illuminated books themselves are shown to work, it seems fair to say, on another poetics of inflection.

then several more copies in another run, then none for some time, *ad finem*. This rhythm of production alone refutes the image of every copy as an island unto itself, equally demarcated and distinct from all the others. But Viscomi also argues that within "editions" (or "printing sessions") copies exhibit similarities more salient than their differences, frequently varying by color scheme but not by coloring style, by pagination but not by bibliographic distribution (for example, designs on recto and verso vs. designs on recto only), and so on. These latter variations, according to Viscomi, occur mostly—or only—among different editions. See "Concept of Difference."

30. See Carr (178-89) on *Jerusalem* plate 36 (Erdman numbering; Bentley plate 40), where a tree grows slowly in the left margin across the copies.

31. This semiotic breakdown derives from Saussure's foundational distinction between "value" and "signification," where "value" refers to a signifier's referential meaning within the stable "set of forms" that constitutes a given language (*langue*), and "signification" refers to a signifier's communicated meaning within a live speech act (*parole*). In Saussure's model, "signification" emerges from a meeting between a "value"-laden signifier and a particular discursive context. See Culler, *Saussure* 27-63.

37 We have learned one method for dealing with such matters from the Notebook: that is, thick description—field reports, say—of local encounters with uniquely signifying copies of individual pages (or prints). Consider two roses (illus. 8 and 9). Which one really looks "Sick"? Although the language conveys, consistently in both cases, the sad fact and furtive approach of death, each color scheme seriously influences the wholesale import of that semantic *donnée*. With its clear sky, pale pink rose, and angelically golden figures, "The Sick Rose" in copy V imparts a lightness that contrasts with the dreaded information of the poem, as if to stress the ambushing quality of an unexpected death. "The invisible worm, / That flies in the night" (my emphasis), in other words, remains "invisible" indeed but also imminent, a textual specter haunting a pictorial noon whose "life" blossoms on unaware. Meanwhile, in copy R "The Sick Rose" takes on darker colors and heavier forms all around: the rose drops to blood red, the soil both darkens and deepens, the leaves show brown and orange patch-



8. "The Sick Rose," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy V (composed 1789, 1794; printed 1821). 11.1 x 6.8 cm. Image © Morgan Library & Museum, New York. PML 62442, gift of Mrs. Landon K. Thorne, 1972.



9. "The Sick Rose," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy R (composed 1789, 1794; printed c. 1795, c. 1808). 11.1 x 6.8 cm. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive, © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. P.124-1950.

es of autumn. In the sky pink streaks preview dusk, the hour of death for day and rose alike; and so the conclusion of the poem ("And his *dark* secret love / Does thy life *de-destroy*"; my emphasis) emerges as most salient, a real-time introduction of that—all of a sudden—very visible worm. Constant as it may seem, then, the textual component of "The Sick Rose" communicates differently in different pictorial contexts, which is to say that only careful looks at each instantiation can gain any purchase on its "meaning."

- 38 But "The Sick Rose" of course does not begin and end with copies R and V. And as Essick has pointed out, given the sheer number of books and plates and copies in the corpus, any absolute commitment to such hermeneutical synchronicity risks embroiling "the Blake industry" in an impossibly long to-do list of individual analyses ("Graphic Meaning" 834). (This hazard is most serious of all where, as

above, the analyses involve comparative juxtaposition.)³² So other scholars have shown the way toward another method, not a replacement for but a supplement to synchronic readings, one that abstracts responsibly from the diachronic perception of variance to what ideology might underly its cultivation. Both McGann and Mitchell, for example, derive epistemological frameworks from the idiosyncrasies of Blake's mode of production. For Mitchell, who pursues an "embracing concept of style as epistemology," "ways of showing" equal "ways of knowing," which turns the illuminated books into "cognitive structures" whose instability corresponds to an equally unstable—continually undermined and reformulated—measure of intellection ("Style" 148-50). Similarly, according to McGann, the capriciousness of the illuminated books embodies an absence-based "anatomy of truth" in which one plate or print, as a single possibility among many others, declares its own deficiency upon arrival. What guarantees that deficiency is "point of view"—that is, partiality, which in each iteration logs a set of inclusions (what it sees) and exclusions (what it fails to see) that negatively "discover the limits" of its yield. "Truth for Blake," McGann writes, "does not *exist*, it has to be created," and Blake assents to variation (even where he does not actively procure it)³³ to "create" fresher and further images of "truth" (*Knowledge* 32-36). This would all be to posit a generalized logic for Blake's fixation on "Minute Particu-

32. Not that comparative readings ought to be avoided as a rule. Indeed, Viscomi has discouraged them on grounds which I take, at least in part, actually to justify the procedure. He argues that to read plates comparatively would [1] bely the fact that very few of Blake's contemporaries could have seen more than one copy of any book; and [2] ascribe implausible acts of collative memory to Blake himself. But in my view comparative juxtaposition, historically luxurious as it might be, serves only as an instrument to highlight the inflective forces already active within the bounds of the single page: comparison simply brings them to the fore. Nor does it presuppose genetic intentionality (as Viscomi also objects): in fact, that one copy does not in any definite sense improve upon another is exactly what would motivate a treatment of each in equal detail. Finally, Viscomi claims that the most capricious aspects of the illuminated books (for instance, "coloring") "usually do not" "alter the reading experience" when changed (see "Concept of Difference" pars. 1, 5). Though I have no empirical data (documenting readerly cognition vis-à-vis different copies, for example) with which to rebut it authoritatively, this objection seems to me straightforwardly inaccurate. Whose "reading experience"? Certainly (as my readings of "The Sick Rose" will have revealed) they "alter" mine.

33. "Absolute control over relief etching was not possible. ... Blake's idea of uniformity permitted variation; if variations were technically inevitable and aesthetically acceptable, then they could also be deliberately *allowed* to occur" (Viscomi, "Concept of Difference" par. 4). In some cases Blake seems to have leaned into that deliberate, if passive, allowance: for example, "Subsequent handwork could have covered traces of the printing method and increased uniformity among impressions. It is notable that Blake did not do this [on the *Song of Los* title page], or in many of his other color-printed designs, but allowed his graphic techniques to signify themselves" (Essick, "Graphic Meaning" 855).

lars”—paradoxically to be sure, but perhaps not (as Blake might say) idiotically, since it retreats to and then issues from a higher order and vantage.

- 39 Particular or general, synchronic or diachronic: what changes in neither analytic method is the crucial necessity of reader-viewer involvement. Because they modulate affect and salience and other phenomena bound up in the reception of meaning, the unique inflections of two sick roses, for instance, rely on interpretive attention to a fairly obvious extent. But by his own account, when Mitchell refers more generally to “ways of knowing,” he also invokes the presence of a “knower” who is “both the artist who creates the form and the beholder who perceives it” (“Style” 149). Likewise, when McGann construes “truth” as a dynamic creation rather than a static condition, he insists that “Blake’s poetry ... looks ‘toward,’ calls out ‘to,’ reciprocal forms of activity” (*Knowledge* 31).³⁴ These big-picture, *longue durée* responses to variation in short contend that Blake strives both to dramatize and to facilitate the workings of what he called “Poetic or Prophetic character” (E 3). For by installing familiar forms within unfamiliar environs, or by devising frankly novel aggregates of verbal and visual signs,³⁵ Blake forces the reader-viewer [1] to re-envision the expressive possibilities of older, assimilated markings; and [2] to participate more broadly in an “imaginative, even speculative” (Tyler 4) perceptual mode that by definition exceeds “bounded” “Reason or the ratio of all we have already known” (E 2). This, to crib a phrase from Tennyson, is a climb up a climbing wave, since fresh begins descending into stale the very moment it emerges: hence the urgency of variation. Hence, too, Blake’s famous defense of “obscure” art, containing not only “recondite meaning” (E 531) but unpredictable relations between text and image, as “the fittest for Instruction because it rouses the faculties to act.” “That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot,” he says, where “Explicit” means roughly stable and familiar, “is not worth my care” (E 702).
- 40 A diachronic view reveals Blake’s various instabilities to be part and parcel of a long-term, reciprocally active pursuit of imaginative fecundity, one that implicates in equal parts the author, the audience, and the artwork at hand, past,

present, and future. Again we have seen as much in the Notebook, and learned from that document how to think through the reciprocal process of meaning-making—much as scholars such as Essick and Viscomi have already done—in material as well as historical, rhetorical, and ideational terms. “Graphic media,” writes Essick vis-à-vis illuminated printing, “have an intentionality or *telos* of their own that establishes a *dialectic* between the artist’s will and the materials and procedures he uses (and that use him)” (“Body” 206, my emphasis). Hegel called the dialectic a “speculative mode of cognition” (*Philosophy of Right* §10), a sort of open exploration that would move, in the context of Blake, from the thesis of “the artist’s will” through the antithesis of his “materials and procedures” to the synthesis of the finished object that marks the middle ground. In other words, the medium yields something to authorial intention (for example, takes on the ink of inscription) even as authorial intention yields something to the nature of the medium (for example, inscribes where the surface has space for it), and from that negotiation comes the artifact that we observe as “integral” in itself. Here, I think, we can locate the epicenter of the wide-ranging overlap between the Notebook and the illuminated books that I have been trying gradually to uncover.

- 41 Thanks in large part to the reconstructive work of Viscomi, most Blake scholars will know the ins and outs of illuminated printing already.³⁶ But the technical itinerary of the method bears repeating here, for it highlights how Blake, under the dominion of his medium, had to work on a sort of contractual obligation with his past and future selves. Rather than transferring his designs from separately drafted mockups, as others of his profession might have done, Blake composed them directly on the copperplates. He wrote and drew on the metal (with pens, brushes, and ordinary autographic gestures) in an acid-resistant varnish, then he poured acid over the plate to eat away its unmarked surfaces.³⁷ First and second, these two processes could be repeated to bite greater depth into certain areas while preserving plateaus elsewhere, but (as I have mentioned) they were in effect powerless to restore already bitten areas to old heights. What was once etched must remain etched,

34. Compare Essick: “The structure of the text is but the cue for an event wherein the reader realizes that the text is only one moment in a continuum of which he is himself a part” (“Today and Tomorrow” 398). See also Eaves, “Expressive Theory.”

35. As Mitchell and others have consistently observed, these aggregates sometimes feature “illustrations which do not illustrate,” texts and images that, although coupled on the same plate, do not explain or expand on each other in any straightforward fashion. Such juxtapositions, by virtue of their spatial contiguity (and in a manner familiar to any Notebook reader), invite the “creative participation” of the interpreting reader-viewer, whose imagination must step in to fill the semantic breach. See *Composite Art* 8-9.

36. The *locus classicus* of such work must be *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993). But for a more recent walk-through of Blake’s method, highly detailed but still efficient, see Viscomi’s *Blake Archive* exhibition called “Illuminated Printing.” I have also benefited here from Essick, “Graphic Meaning” passim, but especially 835-36.

37. Like most of his contemporaries, Blake used diluted nitric acid for biting metal, and his acid-resistant “ink” was the “stop-out” varnish (made of resin and turpentine) commonly used by etchers to prevent unwanted corrosion. For details regarding medium and writing implements, see section 4 of Viscomi’s exhibition, “Chamber Two: Executing the Design.” For details regarding acid and related substances, see section 5, “Chamber Three: Etching with Acid.”

and be treated as such, forever. Furthermore, although Blake could technically add and rub out varnish any time before the initial acid pour, composing on the copper from start to finish would have raised the stakes of every inscriptive decision. The size and shape of even the most provisional markings would have determined, at least in part, what presented as feasible end-states for the materials at hand: for instance, how many plates one book might require; or how much poetry might one plate hold, and in what configuration; or how text and image might dovetail, or diverge.³⁸ In such circumstances, every extemporaneous move shades (or forecloses) some futures and illuminates (or activates) some others, in the same kind of give-and-take replicated on a larger scale by the movement of copperplate fixities into the *coup de dés* of ink and coloration.³⁹

- 42 Basic principle: in designing and executing the illuminated books, Blake composed such that each maneuver, itself partly a response to earlier maneuvers, established a set of rules by which he must play thereafter. In other words, he acts intentionally now (at t_1) and simultaneously creates the conditions that will curb his intentional control later (at t_2). As it relates to Blake, then, the “dialectic” set going by “graphic media” unfolds not only between artist and medium but between the artist and his own prior manipulations of that medium. This reformulation has real, clarifying consequences, for it captures what Viscomi has called Blake’s “re-creational aesthetic,” where “returning to one of his own plates ... provided opportunities for new invention” (“Invention” sec. 4, par. 12).⁴⁰ But it also—finally—brings il-

38. “The lettering style, letter size, spacing between word and line, number of lines, the text’s shape, the vignette’s placement are all determined when the text is rewritten on the plate, which means that the parts that form the *page design* are visually composed when executed. Because the page design as such does not pre-exist its execution, relief etching produces rather than reproduces its designs” (Viscomi, “Illuminated Printing”).

39. Essick seems to understand the illuminated process as an oscillation between stages of freedom and instability and stages of constraint and stability. In the first, compositional stage, Blake can apply and remove acid-resistant varnish from the plate with relative ease; in the second stage, Blake fixes the design by etching the plate with acid; in the third, Blake subjects the plate to the almost endless possibilities (and uncertainties) of inking, printing, coloring, and finishing handwork. Then in the final stage, which is perhaps too obvious for Essick to define, comes the finished copy, which can support further alteration (at Blake’s hands) only in the form of another copy. See “Graphic Meaning” 836-40.

40. According to Viscomi, one particularly salient product of the “re-creational aesthetic” is *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which “unfolded through its production, with the execution of one section inspiring the invention of the next section” (“Invention” sec. 2, par. 14). More specifically, *Marriage* began as plates 21-24 alone (the whole of copy K), with their “anti-Swedenborgian” energies, and then developed over “four or more stages of production” according to Blake’s gradual disillusionment with that initial set of propositions (Viscomi,

illuminated printing around full circle to the Notebook, in which the parameters of the medium combined with the schedule of composition to generate, on the same contractual basis, a poetics of local inflection, “econom[ies]” of “similitude” and “variation,” and all the other quirks examined just above. If these make up what McGann terms a Blakean “anatomy of truth,” then in the Notebook it would seem that Blake assembles, part by part, the same truthful organism as everywhere.

V.

- 43 Back to our central questions. Why did Blake keep and use the Notebook for so long? What did he get out of its enduring partnership? What might he have lost by replacing it with another “standard stationer’s commodity” (Erdman, *Notebook* 2), another bundle of five-dozen leaves? We have been breaking these grounds implicitly all along, but I want to offer now two more direct hypotheses—one cognitive scientific,⁴¹ the other historical biographical. I will set them forth in that order.
- 44 In recent decades, researchers in the cognitive sciences have begun to theorize how mental operations such as memory and reasoning actually “lean ... on environmental supports” that exist outside the brain (Clark and Chalmers 8). Andy Clark and David Chalmers, whose pathfinding paper “The Extended Mind” generated much of the earliest enthusiasm for such ideas, argue that the human being often thinks as an “extended system,” which is to say a “biological organism” coupled with “external resources,” rather

“Evolution” 334-36). In other words, *Marriage* as we know it presents a jumbled record of Blake’s changing his mind in the midst—not to say because—of creative execution. Elsewhere, Viscomi has implied that a similar procedure obtains across impressions of Blake’s illuminated plates: “The works at the end of the series differ significantly from those at the beginning but could not have been reached without all the intermediate work” (in Kraus 166).

41. At least three critics have discussed Blake in relation to cognitive neuroscience. In *The God of the Left Hemisphere* (2012), Roderick Tweedy argues that “Blake’s portrayal of Urizenic dominance within the human psyche” anticipates later discoveries of brain lateralization, particularly the “rationalizing” and “law-making” functions of the left hemisphere (19, 25). In his 2016 Blake Society lecture “The Infinite Brain and the Narrow Circle” <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijg3HTpEKMI>>, Iain McGilchrist observes that Blake—possessing an “intuitive awareness of the functioning of his own brain” (04:42-04:48)—exhibits a “tendency towards the phenomenology of the right hemisphere, which is concrete, embodied, and contextual” (23:03-23:10). And in his new biography *William Blake vs. the World* (2021), John Higgs suggests that Blake’s understanding of the liberatory potential of “self-annihilation” tracks with recent research into the “stubbornly practical and rational ... default mode network” in the brain, which generates autobiographical memory and also (until deactivated by, for example, task-oriented focus or psychedelic drugs) hinders imaginative experience (31-37).

than merely as a vessel for internal neuropsychological processes (18). We “delegate” the labor of remembering commitments and contact information, for example, to calendars and address books (physical or digital), which come not only to assist but effectively to replace—with regard to specific tasks—the storage function of our “biological memory” (8, 12). Or, somewhat more profoundly, in a case first presented by David Kirsh, Scrabble players customarily “shuffle” or rearrange their tiles before them in an effort (Kirsh calls it “self cueing” [*sic*]) to stir their word-hoard into some productive epiphany (Kirsh 64-65). These are “epistemic actions,” as opposed to “pragmatic actions,” in the lexicon of Clark and Chalmers, in that they are performed not for their own sake (because we desire the change they bring upon the environment) but in the interest of some mental consequence that they alone or most efficiently can effect. Given that ultimate objective, through the performance of “epistemic actions,” “the mind extends into the world” (Clark and Chalmers 8, 12).

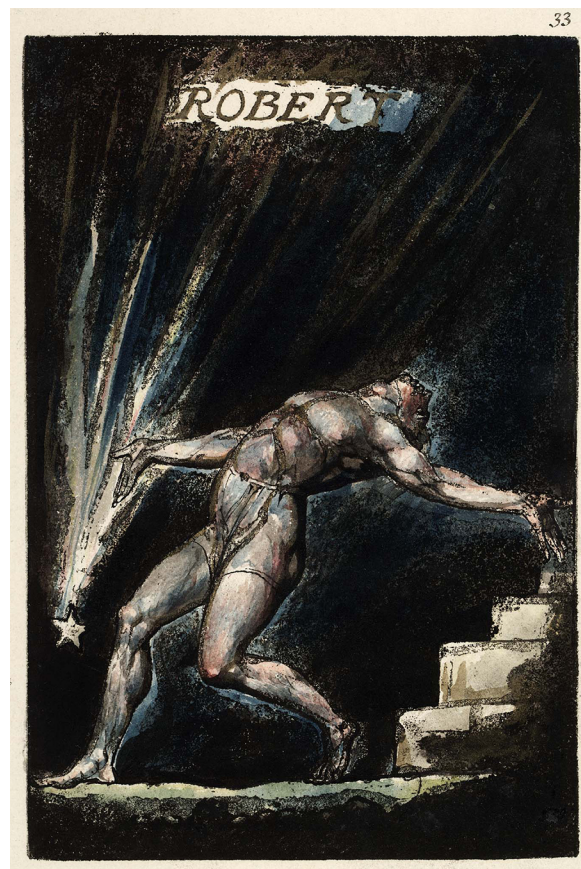
- 45 Expanded and grouped under the heading of “4E [embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended] Cognition,” such research has already proven useful for some humanistic scholars and theorists.⁴² Little wonder, since (as my examples above suggest) it has kept linguistic and specifically written phenomena in its sights from the start. For instance, following the intervention of Clark and Chalmers, Richard Menary has construed writing (“the creation and manipulation of written vehicles”) as a kind of “thinking in action,” one that entails “a cognitive integration between neural, bodily, and manipulative processes” (622). At the tip of those “manipulative processes,” what both endure and facilitate manipulation, are the “media” or materials involved in writing: pen and paper, keyboard and word processor, copperplates and “not very large notebook[s],” what have you (Erdman, *Notebook* 1). According to Menary, these tools and implements “enable processes that cannot be completed in the head alone”: “manipulations, transformations, reorderings, comparisons, and deletions,” and so on (629). But as qualitatively unique “representational systems” (624), where “representation” refers to both the process of turning thought to writing and the manifest written product that results, they also “enable processes that cannot be completed” via the other tools and implements on offer. Finally and most important, it follows from there that to write in different media, to externalize and manipulate symbols with different material supports, is to open oneself to different modes of cognitive activity.

42. For an extensive treatment of 4E cognition, see Newen et al. For humanistic applications, see Caracciolo; Caracciolo and Kukkonen; and Yuen-Collingridge’s extraordinary essay “Writing as Thinking on Papyrus.”

- 46 Blake knew as much himself, insisting that “Invention depends Altogether upon Execution or Organization,” that “Execution is the Chariot of Genius,” that “Thought is Act” (E 626, 637, 623). And his scholars learned as much not from the cognitive sciences but from Blake’s own working order, from his “dialectic[al]” approach (on full display in such remarks) to the alliance between action and cognition. “Graphic activities were not posterior to invention and composition [for Blake] but fully involved with them,” writes Essick (“Graphic Meaning” 836), and the illuminated books appeared, as Visconti puts it, “in a graphic medium whose materiality and natural language were fully exploited” (“Illuminated Printing”). In broad methodological terms, the cognitive reality of “writing-as-thinking,” as well as the *ante factum* proximity of Blake to such theories, would point critics to compositional machinery as influential for and therefore indexical of some aspects of authorial ideation. Parts of my previous section have already sampled what that prioritization looks like in Blake studies.

- 47 In the immediate context, though, the “extended mind” licenses another supposition, namely that the used and reused Notebook might have “enable[d]” some cognitive “processes” that were not accessible through, or at least were not so nurtured and encouraged by, the other bibliographic media at Blake’s disposal. As we have seen, the material parameters of the document demanded autographic and ultimately compositional ingenuity, reconfiguring a first-order constraint as a sort of higher-order liberation.⁴³ Being made to break the chain of verse and write vertically up the margins, for example, could well reveal to a poet the possibilities of language portioned (as are proverbs and epigrams) into portable fragments. Wrapping aesthetic philosophy around a central emblem like coating around a core could point up the subordination of theory to practice and expose the inflective potential of confounding juxtaposition. Determining which earlier marks deserve erasure or effacement, and which call out for preservation, might train a revisionary spirit fit to overtake the “bounding line” (E 550) of the known. And so on. From an “extended mind” perspective, the Notebook pages seem not only to model the inflective poetics of the illuminated prints but also to generate (at most) or to reinforce (at least) the states of mind that would be conducive to such composite productions. We do not need to deny the reciprocal effect—of mind on matter—to suppose that using the Notebook as he used it must have shaped Blake’s thinking in these ways. The Notebook remained, at whatever level of awareness, a

43. Compare Eaves: “They [all tools and materials, including pen, ink, and paper] allow you to do some things, they force you to do other things, and they keep you from doing yet other things. That is the price of admission—we must pay to play” (in Kraus 168).



10. *Milton* copy B, plates 29 and 33 (Bentley numbering; not numbered in Erdman) (composed c. 1804–11, printed c. 1811). 16.0 x 11.2 cm. and 16.9 x 11.3 cm. Images courtesy of the *William Blake Archive*, © Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA. Call no. 54041.

fertile soil from which Blake could cultivate his creative singularity.

- 48 Essick talks of the “extended mind” *avant la lettre* when he says that Blake “did not have to hear voices to have some of his poetry dictate to him” but “needed only to receive the messages of his medium” (“Body” 216). But in a rather remarkable way, those two varieties of mediumship intersect at the Notebook, forming the multivalent ground of my second guess at the why of that document. As biographers have more or less universally acknowledged, although he died in body in 1787, Robert never exactly left William Blake. In more than one instance, the poems and designs assert a sort of fraternal perpetuation straightaway, with each brother kept alive on the ongoing vitality of the other.⁴⁴

44. In a letter of 15 May 1824—by which time Blake had passed out of whatever public presence he might have enjoyed—Charles Lamb

“Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brothers face,” Blake writes in *The Four Zoas*, for example, almost as if he were preparing a caption for the famous mirror images of *Milton* plates 29 and 33 (see *illus.* 10). According to Blake himself, behind such memorial impulses in the art there lay a series of visionary consults with Robert in posthumous shroud, events both frequent and pivotal, whose ramifications crept through the emotional into the aesthetic domain.

—I know that our deceased friends are more really with us than when they were apparent to our mortal part. Thirteen

rather perfectly mistook one brother for the other: “Blake is a real name, I assure you, and a most extraordinary man, if he be still living. He is the Robert Blake, whose wild designs accompany a splendid folio edition of the *Night Thoughts* ...” (Woodcock 154–55). William Blake, author of those designs, was of course still living in 1824; but Robert Blake had been dead some thirty-seven years, ten of which had elapsed before the publication of the illustrated *Night Thoughts* to which Lamb refers.

years ago. I lost a brother & with his spirit I converse daily & hourly in the Spirit. & See him in my remembrance in the regions of my Imagination. I hear his advice & even now write from his Dictate— (E 705)

For behind these “daily & hourly” meetings, beneath their productive exercises in “Dictat[ion],” lay one encounter of especial consequence—one in which, after years of mulling over the sad captivities of standard media,⁴⁵ Blake was delivered the technical prospect of illuminated printing.⁴⁶ The critical insight—that is, “the simple solution to the problem of composing directly on copper” (Bentley, *Paradise* 102)—came easily to the otherworldly eye of “Brother Robert” (E 721).

- 49 In his version of the story, Ackroyd ventures two naturalistic hypotheses about how Robert might have “revealed” illuminated printing to Blake in a vision, both of which also place the Notebook at the center of the development. “It may be,” Ackroyd muses first and most obviously, “that in thinking of [Robert] and using his notebook, [Blake] actually *saw* and *heard* him again” (112). In other words, because the Notebook bore the trace of Robert’s animated being, contact with it provided for Blake the sense of an intimate encounter. Reasonable enough. Or, Ackroyd then guesses (on equally firm footing), perhaps Blake “hit upon the method” during his early trial-and-error period using one of Robert’s drawings as a template, which in turn moved him to reflect that “Robert had truly inspired him” (113). Here Blake would have narrativized the fortuitous integration of technique and prototype as the visitation, the hint and helping hand, of that prototype’s original purveyor. The Notebook enters this retrofitted structure through a side door, for it never in fact contained the *finished pen-and-wash* drawing of Robert’s upon which “The Approach of Doom,” commonly taken as “Blake’s first relief etching” (Viscomi, “Invention” sec. 3, par. 3), was based. But it did

45. The tenor of my remarks here follows Bentley, who not only portrays Blake as having “been thinking about such problems at least since 1784” but also asserts that Blake “must have talked about them with his brother Robert” (*Paradise* 102). See Viscomi, “Invention,” for a stricter materialism that nonetheless remains compatible with the positions that Blake sought “to make printable the autographic gestures of pen and ink and brush marks” and that, according to a long tradition, “Blake credited his brother Robert ... as the method’s source” (sec. 3, pars. 2-3).

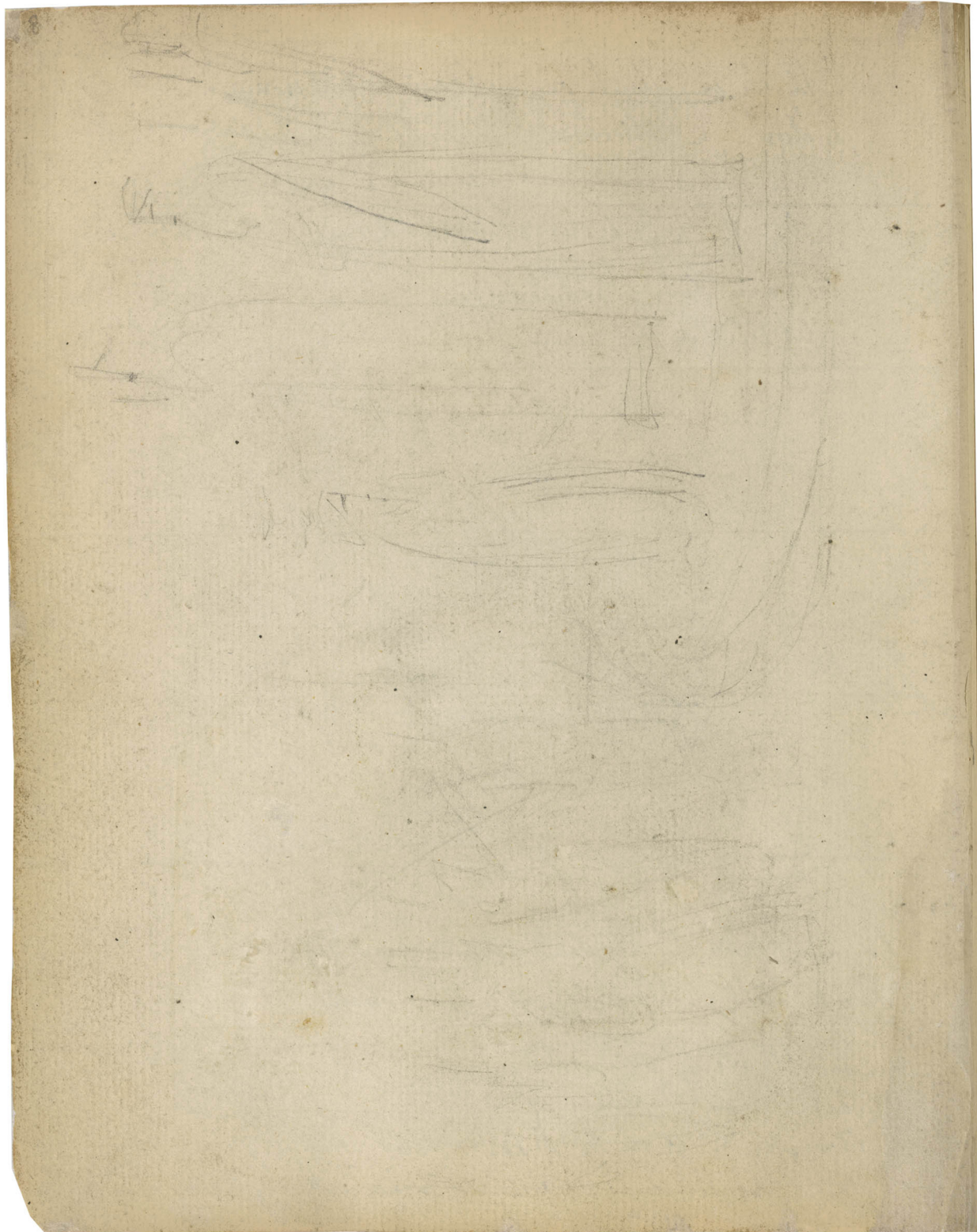
46. The original source for this story is the detailed secondhand account of Blake’s contemporary J. T. Smith. Gilchrist reiterated Smith’s account matter-of-factly in the 1860s, and Bentley treated it with similar confidence a century and a half later (see Gilchrist 1: 69; Bentley, *Paradise* 102). Ackroyd, while acknowledging the ineradicable chance of fabrication or embellishment, concludes that the story—including Catherine Blake’s rushing out for the necessary supplies the morning after—is “close to the truth” (111-12). I find little reason to dissent from these authorities—Bentley’s assurance most especially.

feature several other drawings by Robert, including some that show huddled figures (see *illus.* 11) not unlike those in another “Doom”-related sketch, now held at Tate Britain; and in general, around 1787–88, Blake must have seen the Notebook chiefly as a storehouse of these, his brother’s handwork. By either account, then, if Robert was “present” and even active at the conception of illuminated printing, then the Notebook—itsself a fraternal “memento” (Ackroyd 84, 109), a pen-and-paper stand-in for the Robert of flesh and blood—should likewise have been party to that moment.⁴⁷

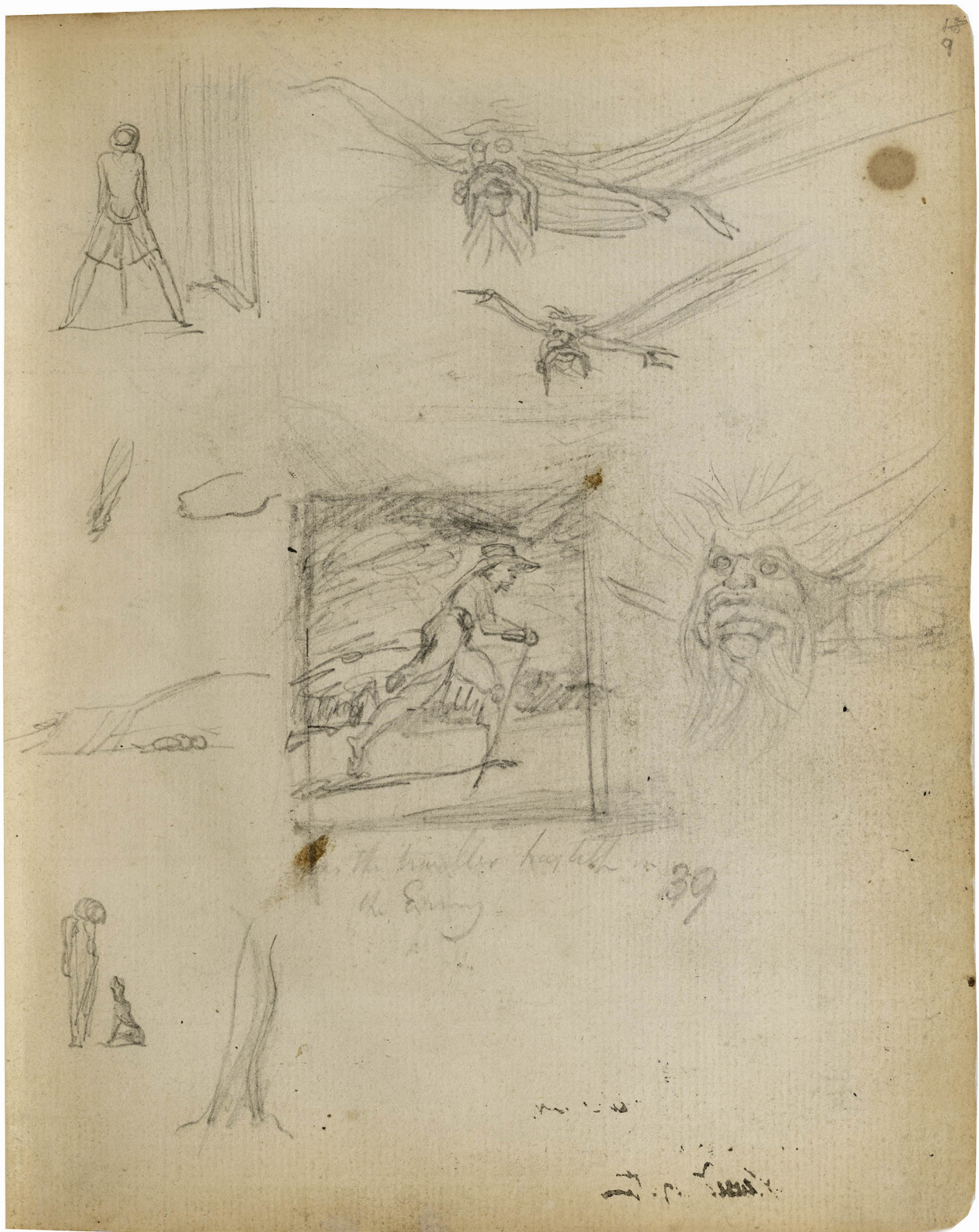
- 50 Not merely present from the beginning, the Notebook seems moreover to have accompanied the technical maturation of illuminated printing. Consider origins once more. In a fascinating retrospective at the very end of *The Ghost of Abel* and near the end of his very life, Blake located his “Original Stereotype” somewhere in “1788” (E 272). This date refers almost certainly to one or both of the tiny tractates titled *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*, the true firstborn of which was *All Religions*, whose concentric bull’s-eye layout takes closely after the emblem-only pages that would have dominated the Notebook in the same year. Indeed, the *Blake Archive* describes the images in *All Religions* as “emblem-like designs” (*All Religions* headnote), and Ackroyd observes—albeit without further explanation—that they “are related to the emblems [Blake] had been drawing in his brother’s notebook” (115). That relation extends beyond formal resemblance to embrace, for example, the carryover of content, as in the traveler silhouette that occupies both N15 (*illus.* 12) and *All Religions* plate 7 (*illus.* 13). More obliquely, Blake also seems to have cherished *All Religions* in a private manner similar to the Notebook’s enduring station, printing and storing the tractates (much as he recurred to the Notebook pages) long after he could have seen any commercial incentive to do so (see *BB* 82; Ackroyd 116).

- 51 The stereotypic significance of *All Religions* and *No Natural Religion* presumably rested in their being the earliest illuminated prints to incorporate both text and image—a composite state that Blake reached only after relief experiments (such as “Doom”) with pictorial matter alone. Still, the textual components of the tractates consisted in philosophical prose and not, as we may have come to expect, in the more formally intricate pursuits of lineated poetry. These Blake worked into illuminated printing first with the *Songs of Innocence* and *The Book of Thel* in 1789. But however mo-

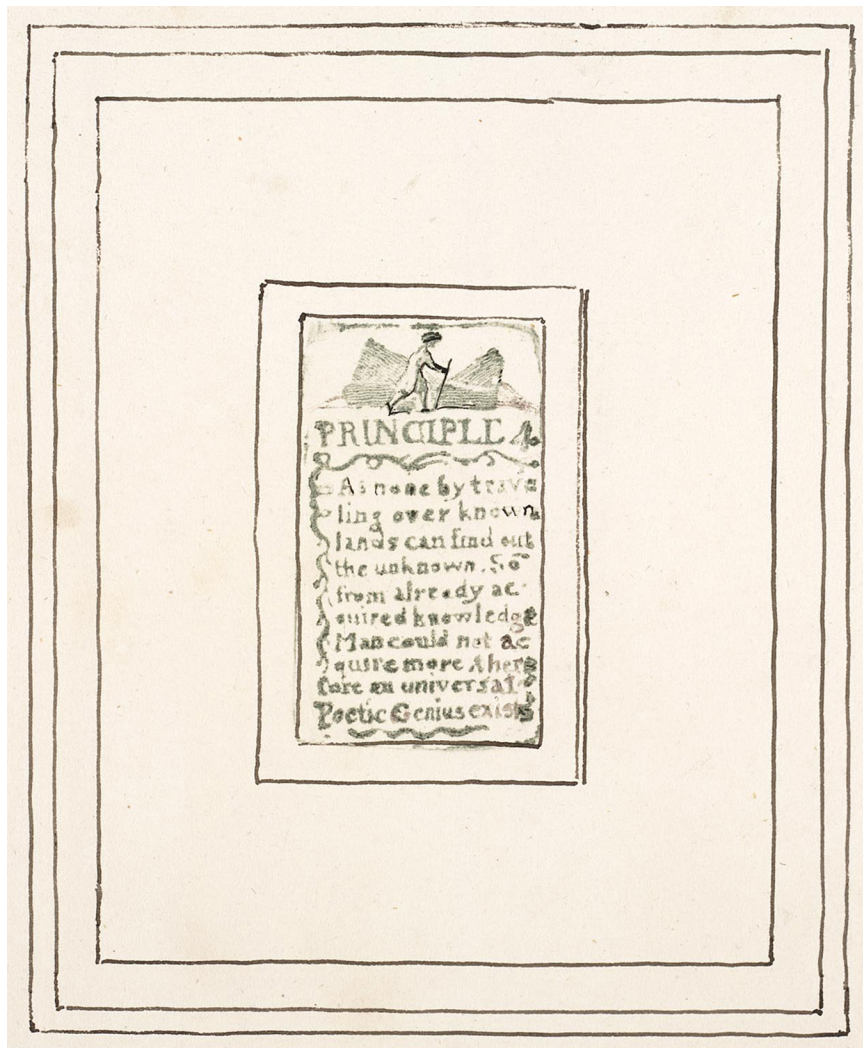
47. Compare Bentley: “The death of his brother when William was twenty-nine years old marked ... the end of his intellectual apprenticeship. ... And the triumphs for which he is best known are due to the inspiration of Robert Blake” (*Paradise* 99).



11. The Notebook of William Blake. Add MS 49460, f.2v. 19.5 x 15.7 cm. Erdman, *Notebook N10*; *Blake Archive*, Notebook object 8. Image courtesy of the *William Blake Archive*, © British Library Board.



12. The Notebook of William Blake. Add MS 49460, f.9r. 19.5 x 15.7 cm. Erdman, *Notebook N15*; *Blake Archive*, Notebook object 17. Image courtesy of the *William Blake Archive*, © British Library Board.



13. *All Religions are One* copy A, plate 7 (composed c. 1788, printed c. 1795). 5.2 x 3.1 cm. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive, © Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA. Call no. 57445.

mentous was their graduation to verse, the earliest copies of *Innocence* and *Thel*, like the earliest copies of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), remained otherwise plainly executed. Like “printed manuscripts” (Essick, *Adam* 170), they were un- or lightly (water)colored, starkly divided poem from picture, fit to recto and verso à la ordinary codices, and wiped clean of the border-impressions left behind by the plates (Viscomi, “Word” sec. 2, pars. 3, 8).

- 52 After 1790 Blake strayed from illuminated printing until 1793, by which time he had drafted in the Notebook much of the poetry that would become the *Songs of Experience* and that began to bend the Notebook pages toward the composite specimen, analyzed above (Erdman, *Notebook* 12). His return included provisional strides beyond the

“printed manuscript”—such as texts “more organically integrated with illustrations”—which were then lengthened by the introduction of color printing to the books of 1794 (Viscomi, “Word” sec. 2, pars. 7, 10-11).⁴⁸ Commercial work

48. These earliest steps beyond the “printed manuscript” coincided—not coincidentally—with Blake’s prospectus *To the Public* (published October 1793), which announced his new “method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet” (E 692). It is telling, as well as consistent with the principle that execution generates invention, that Blake reflects upon his innovation in expository prose only after confronting its material potentialities in the workshop—and, as my interests go, only after having filled the Notebook pages with both verse and image.

Color printing of illuminated books involved applying pigmented solution to the etched copper and pressing ink and colors simultane-

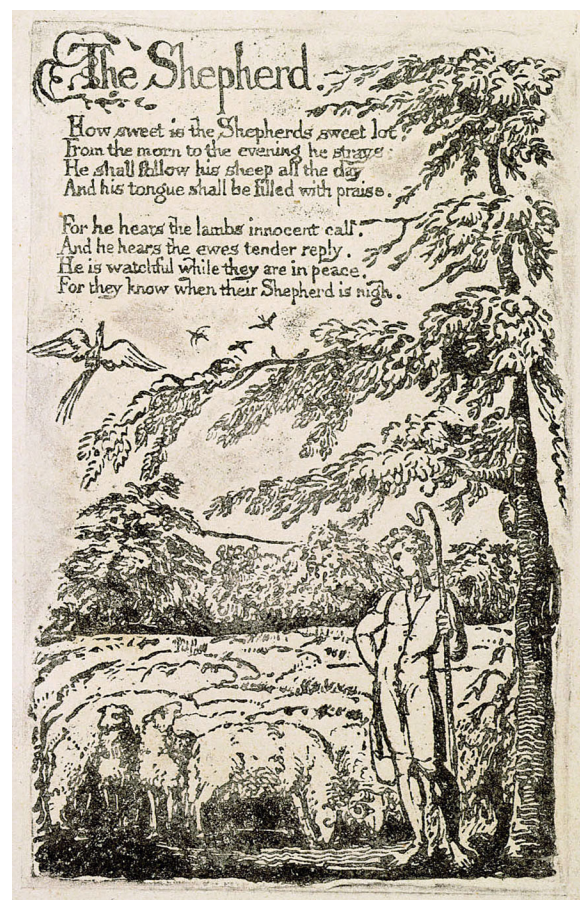
again took over from 1796 to about 1804,⁴⁹ when Blake began to design *Milton*, the touchstone epic that would occupy him for the better part of a decade. This period, through roughly 1811, saw the advent of new etching techniques that increased the number of tones and textures at the method's ready (Viscomi, "Word" sec. 2, par. 15), as well as the entry of a motley lot of language, prosaic and poetical, into the Notebook: the "Satiric Verses and Epigrams" (as Erdman terms them [E 499-517]), the *Public Address*, the Chaucer prospectus, *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (Erdman, *Notebook* 12-13). What space these writings left, from the late 1810s onward, Blake stuffed overfull of *The Everlasting Gospel*, clinching the chaos that characterizes the Notebook today. Around the same time—in 1820 to be exact—*Jerusalem* surfaced in full, with white-line etching, accented borders, and a steep price tag that together completed "a change in Blake's idea of the book" from "prints as" rudimentary "pages" to "prints as" elaborate miniature "paintings" (Viscomi, "Word" sec. 3, par. 4).⁵⁰

- 53 Particularly long-standing projects such as *Innocence* and *Marriage*, which Blake printed during almost every stage of his technical evolution, demonstrate the same change (from rudimentary "pages" to elaborate "paintings") across the course of their independent reproductions (see *illus.* 14). Hence, both phylogenetically, as a species of print- or bookmaking, and ontogenetically, as constituted by single art-organisms following developmental trajectories, illuminated printing tends from relative sparseness and simplicity toward extravagance and graphic complexity. I have attempted to suggest that the illuminated book had by its side a sympathetic partner, if not an outright cicerone, in the similarly matured Notebook. In material terms, the Notebook and the illuminated book shared first steps in their interfertility with the "Original Stereotype" of *All Religions*, and they amassed constituent elements, at coincident

ously; it added thicker and more opaque shades to the lighter palette of Blake's watercoloring. The original-work venues for Blake's move to color printing in 1794 were *Experience*, *Europe*, and *Urizen*—though he also returned to and re(color)printed earlier books such as *Marriage* and *Visions*. This stage helpfully depicts the development of illuminated printing as coextensive with the printmaker's accumulation of capacities, for Blake also finished *Europe*, *Experience*, and *Urizen* with watercolors after color printing them. The earlier technique is compounded with (not replaced by) the later. See Viscomi, "Word" sec. 2, pars. 10-11, and *Printed Paintings* 15-24, 78-81.

49. For the significance of 1795, which I bypass in my primary narrative for purposes of brevity and clarity, see Viscomi, *Printed Paintings* *passim*. In "Annus Mirabilis," a precursor essay to *Printed Paintings*, Viscomi argues that *The Song of Los* (1795) carried Blake closer to "fus[ing] poetry, painting, and printmaking" than he had ever managed before (59).

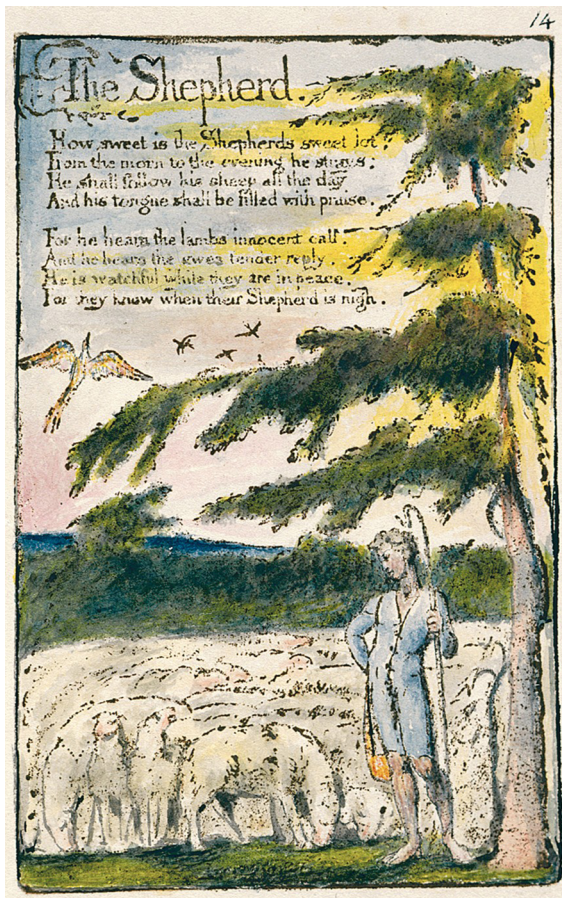
50. As my citations in these paragraphs will have suggested, I—like anyone now concerned with illuminated printing and its evolution—am enormously indebted to the reconstructive work of Joseph Viscomi.



14. "The Shepherd" (11.1 x 6.9 cm.) from:
(this page) *Songs of Innocence* copy U (printed 1789),
Houghton Library, Harvard University, Typ 6500.34u;
(next page, left) *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*
copy L (printed 1795), Yale Center for British Art,
Paul Mellon Collection, B1992.8.13(14);
(next page, right) *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*
copy Y (printed 1825), Metropolitan Museum of Art,
17.10.5.

All images courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

paces, from there. But in fact that timeline falls short of the relevant beginning, for they also seem to have shared a very source and fount of life: I mean beloved "Brother Robert." This common origin ultimately distinguishes the Notebook as both a sentimental "memento" and an extended-mind stimulant for the working imagination—two functions that acted as one in the specter of Robert Blake. Far from complicated, my broadest contention here is that, whatever etiology we settle upon, the Notebook was all wrapped up in the founding and unfolding of Blake's illuminated method. As such—and if for no other reason—it deserves a prominent place in our talk of his artistic becoming.



VI.

... because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

(Matthew 13:13)

Or had not men been fated to be blind,
Enough was said and done t'inspire a better mind.
(*Aeneid* [trans. Dryden] 2.73-74)

I found them blind I taught them how to see
And now they know neither themselves nor me
(Blake, Notebook N34)

- 54 The Laocoön separate plate forecloses one tempting objection to such treatments of the Notebook as an “integral work.” It would be reasonable to assert that the Notebook lacks the requisite stamp of authorial intention—that Blake assumed for it no audience, that the pages embody no deliberate design, and that the document’s apparent semiosis results more from chance and material stricture than from any expressive or communicative action. This position might imply that formal links drawn between the Notebook and the illuminated books cannot finally succeed as critical insights, since they conflate two ontologically dis-

parate phenomena: private trial and training ground on the one hand, public event and authorized object on the other. My earlier sections have argued, with the help of leading Blake scholars, for the prevalence of provisionality and live experimentation even in Blake’s ostensibly finalized printings.⁵¹ What is more, recent critical trends have complicated the assumption that notes and drafts and manuscripts are better conceived as subsidiary matter than “as ends in themselves” (Reader 3).⁵² But rather than deliver a theoret-

51. The underlying distinction—between the final and the processual, the intentional and the incidental—is itself spurious in relation to Blake. If strictly upheld, it would blackball several Blake works that have already rewarded careful and sustained attention: the *Four Zoas* manuscript, for example, would be considered an aesthetic abortion first and foremost, not “the artistic workshop in which [Blake’s] myth could be fully imagined” (*Blake Archive* headnote). Another essay might explore how Blake’s writing *The Four Zoas* on discarded proofs from his *Night Thoughts* engravings generated inflective pages like the Notebook composites but inverted: text enclosed in otherwise unrelated design. For two looks at *Night Thoughts* and the *Four Zoas* manuscript together, see Whittaker 187–222 and Calé.

52. Simon Reader’s *Notework: Victorian Literature and Nonlinear Style* (2021) was published too late to factor into my argument but nonetheless sets a standard for examining “the writer’s notebook” as an aes-

ical—or even a literary-historical—defense of my method, I want to close by showing how the Laocoön plate pulls the teeth from the intentionalist objection itself.

- 55 In 1815 Blake was commissioned to produce illustrative plates for articles in Abraham Rees's *The Cyclopædia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* (Bentley, *Paradise* 358-59). Ultimately the project required seven engravings from Blake, one of which depicted what scholars generally call "the Laocoön group," or the father and two sons overcome by serpent-assassins in several classical narratives, lost and extant.⁵³ Book 2 of Virgil's *Aeneid* perhaps excepted, the flagship portrayal of the Laocoön group, in Blake's day as in ours, would have been the ancient sculpture unearthed in Rome in 1506 and stationed in the Vatican from then to now.⁵⁴ Blake could not have seen that original sculpture because he never left England. But by the nineteenth century it had become around Europe the subject and central image of numerous reproductions and

thetic object—and indeed as "a genre equal in importance to the novel, poem, drama, or essay" (2). "Revers[ing] the formal priority" of most studies—that is, "treating the author's notes as primary while still considering the achievements of [their] other works"—Reader defines "the genre of notework" by the "incremental collection" (within material bounds) of "seemingly insignificant and unordered observations." This "nonlinear style," a formal telos of non-teleology, expresses the "aestheticized inconsequentiality" of the late-Victorian period even as it throws light on the circulation and organization of "personal data" in our own "digital age" (4-5, 8-11, 19).

For similar "revers[als]" of "the formal priority," and for the "personally inflected critical method" (Stauffer 13)—the "imaginative, even speculative, critical responses" (Tyler 4)—that they often require, see the following: on written correspondence, Marta Werner's *Writing in Time: Emily Dickinson's Master Hours* (2021); on marginalia, Andrew M. Stauffer's *Book Traces: Nineteenth-Century Readers and the Future of the Library* (2021) and (for a Blake-centered counterpart) Jason Allen Snart's *The Torn Book: UnReading William Blake's Marginalia* (2006); on drafts and manuscripts, Daniel Tyler's edited volume *Poetry in the Making: Creativity and Composition in Victorian Poetic Drafts* (2021) and (for rigorous philosophical and methodological background) Sally Bushell's *Text as Process: Creative Composition in Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Dickinson* (2009). The MoMA exhibition Cézanne Drawing (6 June–25 September 2021) and the associated catalogue of the same name (ed. Jodi Hauptman and Samantha Friedman) show how nearly identical interests have been playing out in art history and curatorial studies.

53. We can say with confidence that Laocoön appears in Pseudo-Apollodorus's *Epitome* and Quintus Smyrnaeus's *Posthomerica*, that he probably occupied center stage in Sophocles's lost tragedy *Laocoön*, and that he stars in a particularly dramatic episode in book 2 of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

54. Scholars attribute the statue to Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus of Rhodes and date it conjecturally (and without consensus) to c. 40–20 BC. See Paley 68-70 and the headnote here: <<http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-clementino/Cortile-Ottagono/laocoonte.html>>. For an interactive look at the statue, visit the Laocoön page at the *Digital Sculpture Project*: <<http://www.digitalsculpture.org/laocoön/index.html>>.

high-profile treatises,⁵⁵ and the Royal Academy in London had acquired a cast from which Blake could sketch as needed.⁵⁶ For the *Cyclopædia* commission, he made at least two drawings of the Royal Academy cast, one of which survives, and from these he executed one engraving of the Laocoön group, published in the *Cyclopædia* in 1816, for John Flaxman's "Sculpture" article (Paice 47; Paley 53).

- 56 That commercial assignment done, the Laocoön group evidently lingered in Blake's imagination, for around 1825 he undertook (but probably never finished) a fairly large drawing that varies on the ancient theme: it dresses Laocoön in a sort of gown, partially effaces the outline of the serpents, and partially conceals the sons behind the father (see Paley 56). After that, in 1826–27, Blake returned to the original silhouette with more fundamental innovations in mind, engraving and (at least) twice printing the composite *pièce de résistance* he called יה [Yah] & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact or History of Ilium. Or, as more economical scholars have taken to calling it, the Laocoön separate plate (see illus. 15).

- 57 This labor pattern prompts an analogous question to that prompted by Blake's long maintenance of the Notebook: "Why did he do it?" (Paley 70). What about the Laocoön sculpture made it not only an abiding fascination but also, eventually, a fit subject for Blake's own original work? With characteristic efficiency Bentley pivots us toward an answer:

Within the next few years [after the *Cyclopædia* illustrations] he evidently saw the relevance of the statue to his own beliefs and made another engraving of the subject,

55. For visual adaptations of the Laocoön group, see Paley 58-89. For expository commentaries on the sculpture, see Richter. For a recent outpouring of responses to the best-known commentary, Lessing's *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerie und Poesie* (1766), in particular, see Lifschitz and Squire.

At times the sculpture has been taken to typify the principles of representational art *tout court*—as it did for Pliny the Elder, who wrote in the first century AD that "the Laocoön, in the palace of the Emperor Titus ... may be looked upon as preferable to any other production of the art of painting or of statuary" (36.4).

56. Paley runs a brief comparison between Blake's Laocoön group and the cast currently held at the Royal Academy (53-55). Though its consequences are difficult to determine, that move seems to me slightly misleading, for the current cast was acquired by the academy in 1816: the year of the publication of Blake's Laocoön engraving, but not the year of his first copying down the sculpture. The cast that would have been there when Blake went to sketch from it in 1815 is depicted in the background of Henry Singleton's 1795 painting *The Royal Academicians in General Assembly*. See Eaves, *Counter-Arts* 15-16, and the Royal Academy's headnote here: <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/laocoön-and-his-sons-roman-version-of-a-lost-greek-original>>.



15. The Laocoön separate plate. 26.6 x 21.6 cm. Collection of Robert N. Essick. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

"Drawn & Engraved by William Blake," which he filled with aphorisms and observations, sideways, round the figures, and in almost every empty space. Since the words are written higgledy-piggledy, it is difficult to establish the order in which they should be printed. (BB 268)

Before the "words ... written higgledy-piggledy" (on which more below) comes the "relevance of the statue to his own beliefs," an ideational impetus that—according to Bentley—bridged commissioned to creative illustration. (Presumably the same stimulating "relevance" underlies Paley's similar, if more restrained, statement some thirty years later: "Doing [the *Cyclopædia*] work evidently put [Blake] in mind of the *Laocoön* as a possible subject for one or more of his own creations" [55].) If we want to know why Blake lingered on *Laocoön*, then, we might start by asking what the statue represents that would have resonated with Blake's position(s) in his final years.

- 58 Blake knew Dryden's *Virgil* well (he quotes from it on N89), and whatever else the ancient sculpture meant to him, book 2 of the *Aeneid* must have touched his fascination with the *Laocoön* group. In *Virgil*'s rendition, *Laocoön* advises his fellow Trojans not to retrieve the horse left beyond the gates of Troy, for suspicion that it partakes of some Greek plot or ambush. "Somewhat is sure design'd, by fraud or force," he warns in Dryden's English, "Trust not their presents, nor admit the horse" (lines 62-63). Because "Heav'n the fall of Troy design'd" (line 72), and because *Laocoön*'s shrewd counsel threatens to hinder that outcome, the gods then send a pair of serpents "along the swelling tide" (line 217) to avenge his so-thought interference with their will. With these snakes *Laocoön* and his sons grapple and die. Although the Trojans remain naïve throughout the episode ("Proclaim[ing] *Laocoön* justly doom'd to die" [line 301]), *Aeneas* concedes after the fall that *Laocoön* had uttered a "portent" (line 264) that the others were unfortunate to ignore:

Or had not men been fated to be blind,
Enough was said and done t'inspire better mind.
(lines 73-74)

In other words, against spiteful gods and simple peers, *Laocoön* had spoken in that "which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy" (E 1). "A Prophet is a Seer," Blake says, "not an Arbitrary Dictator," one who announces not "such a thing shall happen let you do what you will" but "Thus/If you go on So/the result is So" (E 617). Urgent and rhetorical, Blakean prophecy—like *Laocoön*'s alarm—articulates the future implied by the present, exposing it for active navigation (avoidance or pursuit) with clearer vision, or "better mind."

- 59 In the Old Testament, as for *Laocoön* in the extreme, prophetic often entails both polemic and exilic, where the prophet admonishes a wayward people who repudiate him in turn as maniacal or apostatic or altogether not worth hearing.⁵⁷ This side of "Prophetic character" (E 3) preoccupied Blake in both his later work⁵⁸ and his later relation to the contemporary art world, which—it must have been clear by 1815—simply would not have his Bible of Hell. Though "Blake had always been handicapped in his attempts to show his pictures under the auspices of the institutions of his time" (Bentley, *BR*[2] 281), the decade leading up to the *Cyclopædia* project was especially sullied by insult and disappointment. In 1805, for example, he was enlisted by Robert Cromek to illustrate a high-profile edition of Robert Blair's *The Grave*—a job that, because Blake was to design and engrave the pictures, promised both monetary and reputational reward. But it delivered neither. For while his designs were well received, Blake executed his preliminary engraving in an unfashionable white-line method that displeased Cromek, who rejected the plate and promptly demoted Blake to the unremunerative position of designer only. In the *Descriptive Catalogue* to his 1809 Broad Street exhibition, Blake—incited in part by the Cromek incident—expressed both anger at those who had "neglected" or "cried down" his output and faith that "the works now exhibited" would at last teach the public to see the "recondite meaning" of his "visions" (E 538, 531).⁵⁹ Instead the exhibition earned a mixture of indifference and

57. "To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear? behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of the Lord is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it" (Jeremiah 6:10). Compare Abraham Heschel: "The [Hebrew] prophet is an iconoclast Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions. ... The prominent theme is exhortation, not mere prediction" (12, 14).

58. Blake's address of *The Ghost of Abel* "To Lord Byron in the Wilderness" (like the dated signature ["1822 W Blakes Original Stereotype was 1788"] that underlies the drama) recalls the isolating speaker-designation of *All Religions are One* ("The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness"), the tractate where Blake first theorized "the Spirit of Prophecy" (E 270, 272, 1). In allusive and direct ("What doest thou here Elijah?") ways, that dedication identifies Byron with the prophet Elijah, who was run repeatedly into "the Wilderness" for his vocal (and eventually violent) rebellion against the idolatries of Ahab and Jezebel (see 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2). Byron was similarly and famously castigated for the alleged blasphemy of *Cain: A Mystery*, whose hostility to orthodox notions of atonement Blake would have endorsed (see Robinson 2: 371)—and to which *The Ghost of Abel* was a yes-and, or perhaps a yes-but, response. For more on the Blake-Byron-Elijah connection, see McGann, "Blake and Byron" 621–25; McKeever; and Tannenbaum.

59. To avoid a controversy that I have no space to take up with care, I have omitted information about a second betrayal—pertaining to the Canterbury Pilgrims design—that Cromek may have committed between the *Grave* commission and the Broad Street exhibition. For a thorough commentary on it, see the *Blake Archive* exhibition "William Blake's Canterbury Pilgrims," especially galleries I and II.

derision that accentuated Blake's "obscurity and isolation" (Bentley, *BR*[2] 229) with greater force than ever before.⁶⁰ Dispirited, Blake then withdrew into what Bentley calls the "dark years," an adamant retreat from public exchange that endured, to one degree or another, until at least 1818 (*Paradise* 335-62).

- 60 We should not overstate the extent to which Blake "lived in a world which distrusted and despised him," as Ackroyd (369) flatly proclaims. Blake was loved and supported at various times, in various ways, and by various people, however small their number.⁶¹ But more perhaps than any other period in his life, the years surrounding the *Cyclopædia* commission (which is to say the context for his early dealings with Laocoön) seem really to sanction the title of John Higgs's recent biography: it was *William Blake vs. the World*. In Virgil's Laocoön, then, and in the Rhodian statue that depicts the same scene, Blake must have seen a compact reflection of himself: a "Voice of one crying in the Wilderness"—one cast out, indeed castigated, by a powerful audience with no regard for his "Sacred Truth" (E 1, 270).
- 61 Alone among previous scholars (to my knowledge), Irene Tayler identified Blake with the Virgilian Laocoön almost fifty years ago; but focusing on *Marriage* and the 1790s, a period of lesser ostracism for Blake, she could not see the special pertinence that Laocoön would have taken on after roughly 1805.⁶² Nor did she register the apparent paradox

60. The event seems to have been poorly—and not sympathetically—attended (see the *Blake Archive* headnote to the *Descriptive Catalogue*). Its one published review esteemed Blake an "unfortunate lunatic" who had violated London with so much "nonsense, unintelligibility, and egregious vanity" that his "personal inoffensiveness" alone "secure[d] him from confinement" (quoted in Bentley, *Paradise* 332-33). Note how the vocabulary evokes both deviance ("lunatic") and isolation ("confinement").

It makes a remarkable contrast with the unqualified praise elicited—and the quarter of a million tickets sold—by the William Blake exhibition that ran at Tate Britain from 11 September 2019 to 2 February 2020. For sale statistics and a summary of published reviews, see Higgs 6-11.

61. Throughout Blake's life there were patrons (most supportively Thomas Butts); distant enthusiasts (Wordsworth, Coleridge); Catherine Boucher, wife and helpmeet, "ever ... an angel" (Bentley, *BR*[2] 655) by his side; etc. But from 1818 there were also "the Ancients," a small group of "young admirers"—John Linnell and others—who found in "the Interpreter" Blake "a serenity and an inspiration which transformed their lives." The Ancients heartened Blake significantly but could not rescue him from "deep ... obscurity" (Bentley, *Paradise* 363-64). Still, it is tempting to suppose that Blake may have noticed in them the prospect of his own wiser, analeptic Aeneas—the salvific philologist who would soon come doubly, triply, quadruply in Rossetti, Gilchrist, Swinburne, Yeats.

62. Despite Tayler's differing time frame, the conceptual bases for her identification of Blake with Virgil's Laocoön are similar to my own: for example, "In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake might be thought of as a kind of modern Laocoön whose angelic contemporaries were

that both complicates and informs my own identification here: that around the same time (post-Felpham unto death), Blake was evolving a rather vitriolic aversion to the Greek and Roman cultures from which Laocoön, Rhodian and Virgilian, most immediately derived (see Paley 60-61 and Eaves, *Counter-Arts* 133-35). In other words, while the *Cyclopædia* encounter with Laocoön came, on the one hand, amidst great "obscurity and isolation," on the other it coincided with the fomenting of great contempt for Laocoön's classical pedigree. A direct result of "a series of [Christian] conversionary experiences" "in the early years of the nineteenth century" (Paley 60-61), the latter development persisted, even intensified, across several prose expositions—for example, the "Preface" to *Milton* (c. 1804-11), *A Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), *On Homers Poetry [and] On Virgil* (1822)—whose anticlassical terms are familiar by now and frequently quoted: "Greece & Rome" were not "parents of Arts & Sciences as they pretend" but "destroyers of all Art," "The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero ... all Men ought to contemn," and so on (E 270, 95). (I will return to the conceptual significance of these remarks below.) If Blake did recognize himself in Laocoön, as I contend that he must have, it was through a glass darkened by such anticlassical scorn.

- 62 Far from rebutting or reneging on it, moreover, the Laocoön plate issues perhaps the seminal expression of Blake's anticlassicism. Eaves has called the plate "the most concentrated statement" of "what is unprecedented in Blake's [cultural] theory," namely that "the narratives of religion and art go beyond convergence into coalescence" (*Counter-Arts* 133). "Coalescence" not only with each other, in the case of the Laocoön plate, but with the social and political praxes that express aesthetico-spiritual commitments on the ground. Thus for Blake, and all throughout the aphorisms on the Laocoön plate, to practice imperial politics or (neo)classical aesthetics or "Natural Religion" (in pagan or Enlightenment form) is necessarily—and reprehensively—to practice all three.

There are States
in which all
Visionary Men
are accounted
Mad Men
such are
Greece & Rome
Such is
Empire
or Tax

(E 274)

busy appeasing goddesses, embracing deceptive images, and hypocritically trembling for Blake himself, in view of the eternal lot they figured he deserved" (76).

Each antagonist here maps tidily onto the others such that “Empire” *et alia* become “interchangeable” (Eaves, *Counter-Arts* 133), their common sins pooled in the group noun “States,” the simpler to condemn the lot at once. More: “Christianity is Art / & not Money,” Blake writes nearby, and “Money” equals “Caesar or Empire or Natural Religion,” and “Where any view of” these “exists Art cannot be carried on. but War only” (a kind of death-in-life, since “The whole Business of Man Is / The Arts”) (E 273-75). The “whole Business” of the Laocoön plate, meanwhile, or at least of its “textual surround” (Paley 87), is to diagnose that manifold dereliction—over and over, from as many angles as the open surface will accommodate.

- 63 One anticlassical inscription, “Empire against Art” See Virgils Eneid. / Lib. VI. v 848” (E 274), should be hung over every entrance into the Laocoön plate, not because “Empire against Art” fairly summarizes the argument, nor because “See Virgils Eneid” summons Virgil himself to trial, but because “Lib. VI. v 848” takes the viewer to where, in Dryden’s *Aeneid*, Blake would have found ample support for the coalescence of religion and art and politics outlined above. “Virgils Eneid. / Lib. VI” famously relates the *katabasis* of Aeneas, his descent into the underworld, which he organizes in order to meet again with his beloved father, Anchises. Traditionally a painful route to some prize or higher wisdom (whose value the text tends to uphold),⁶³ the *katabasis* rewards Aeneas with knowledge of the rich and glorious future of Rome, proleptically detailed by Anchises over a long series of individual portraits. Absent from that revelation, however, so sunk beneath land and power (“Roma / imperium terris ...” [lines 781-82]), is any emphasis on the flourishing of the artistic imagination. Indeed, around “v 848,” where Blake locates the sharpest offense, Anchises commands Aeneas to leave the verbal and the visual arts to those less heroically endowed.

Let others better mould the running mass
Of metals, and inform the breathing brass,
And soften into flesh a marble face;
Plead better at the bar; describe the skies,
And when the stars descend, and when they rise.
But, Rome, ’tis thine alone, with awful sway,
To rule mankind, and make the world obey,
Disposing peace and war by thy own majestic way;

63. Compare the foreknowledge that Odysseus receives from Tiresias in the *Odyssey* book 11; the drive, and ultimately the failure, of Orpheus to retrieve Eurydice from Dis and Proserpina in the *Metamorphoses* book 10; the shocking but remedial perspective that Dante attains throughout the *Inferno*; and, more obliquely, the “ruins” “shored” by the sallow “fragments” that make up *The Waste Land*. That Blake was illustrating Dante at the same time that he was completing the Laocoön plate should be noted on exactly these grounds.

To tame the proud, the fetter’d slave to free:
These are imperial arts, and worthy thee.
(*Aeneid* [trans. Dryden] 6.848-57)⁶⁴

That Blake had the Dryden translation in mind we can infer from *On Virgil*, which had aped the dictional and syntactic quirks of these lines some years prior: “Let others study Art: Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War & Dominion” (E 270, my emphasis). Not necessitated by the original Latin, these and other stylistic liberties invite a sort of synecdochic leap from “Virgils Eneid. / Lib. VI. v 848” to the artless Roman Empire to the empire state of mind as such. “Let others,” for instance, mandates a programmatic eschewal of sculpture and poetry where other translations opt for some version of the automatic “others will.” And where Virgil had labeled the addressee “Romane” (or “Roman”: one token of a type), Dryden substitutes the name of broadest “Rome” itself. Although the echoing “better” in Dryden purports to describe the artistic acumen of “others,” the run-up to “thine alone” and “worthy thee” implies rather that Aeneas-Rome, in just the buried sense Blake exhumes in *On Virgil*, “has somewhat better to do” than they (my emphasis).⁶⁵ With “imperial arts” Dryden then furnishes (for Blake) an easy-target oxymoron whose internal contradiction had already been glossed in earlier lines: Aeneas-Rome will “free” “the fetter’d slave” and “make the world obey”? That would release bondage into bondage, the only condition possible (Blake would add) once “War & Dominion,” power and property, have undermined imaginative exertion.

- 64 But at the same time the diction in Dryden hints at how we might rescue the Blake-Laocoön pairing despite, or in fact on the basis of, the anticlassicism that emanates from the Laocoön plate and the later Blake in general. Juxtaposed—via Blake’s citation of the *Aeneid*—with “Empire against Art,” the noun phrase “imperial arts” becomes self-subversive, and unravels until the noun (“arts”) can break free

64. According to the *Fabulae* of Hyginus, Anchises was the brother of Laocoön—which would make our spurned Trojan priest the uncle of Aeneas, founder of Lavinium and hero of Rome <<https://topostext.org/work/206#135>>. In such light the “War & Dominion” (E 270) of the Roman Empire appears in stark, contrastive juxtaposition with the prophetic character of Laocoön’s alternate tradition.

65. Compare all the above to, for example, Mandelbaum: “For other peoples will, I do not doubt, / still cast their bronze ... / ... remember, Roman, these will be your arts” (lines 1129-30, 1135); and Heaney: “Others, I have no doubt, with a more delicate touch / Will beat bronze ... / ... But you, Roman, / Remember: to you will fall the exercise of power” (lines 1150-51, 1155-56). In the later lines, notice how Mandelbaum uses a neutral predictive “will be,” while Heaney even suggests, with the connotation of “to you will fall,” that “the exercise of power” may be no real prize or accolade after all. (Paley [99] quotes from the Fairclough translation, which similarly reads “Others, I doubt not, shall ... O Roman.”)

from the adjective (“imperial”) that neutralizes it. By a similar process, proximity to the literal fettering of Laocoön collapses “the fetter’d slave to free” into either cluelessness or canny insincerity: from the Greco-Roman agenda itself “the fetter’d slave” waits to be “free[d].” The “Spiritual War” delineated in the opposite corner of the plate, “Israel deliverd from Egypt / is Art deliverd from / Nature & Imitation” (E 274), broaches the same liberatory deliverance in terms that link it to the broader “dialectical history” of art (Eaves, *Counter-Arts* 136) that Blake promulgated in the anticlassical period. In brief, Blake believed that Greek and Roman artists were not “authors” but imitators “of ... sublime conceptions”: working from “Mnemosyne, or Memory, and not ... Inspiration or Imagination,” they copied (attenuated, bastardized) “wonderful originals” of earlier, Christian-Hebraic invention (E 531).⁶⁶ This was, as Eaves explains (and as slurs such as “Stolen and Perverted” [E 95] suggest), a lapse or “fall into” mimesis, a “temporary victory” for classical imitation that Blake trusted would “finally end in reconquest” by Christian “Inspiration or Imagination” (*Counter-Arts* 136, my emphasis). Just now I wrung out the specters of liberation and deliverance because for Blake the Laocoön group, “as ... copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple,” had clearly been trapped in that mid-lapsarian second phase. What it needed was a sympathetic latecomer who, recognizing the prophetic party line of Laocoön, could “free” him from classical confinement, from the “States / in which all / Visionary Men / are accounted / Mad Men” (E 274).

- 65 In both compositional process and semiotic display, the Laocoön separate plate executes exactly that liberatory maneuver, restoring Laocoön and his sons to the Christian-Hebraic station that (according to Blake) was and shall be rightfully theirs. That restoration assumed an almost material quality across multiple stages of composition, as Blake first duplicated (in the *Cyclopædia* project) then repurposed (in the Laocoön separate plate) what had become, by the early nineteenth century, a sacred vessel of the enemy

66. Compare the Son of God’s denial of classical learning in *Paradise Regained* (4.334–39):

All our law and story strewed
With hymns, our Psalms with artful terms inscribed,
Our Hebrew songs and harps in Babylon,
That pleased so well our victors’ ear, declare
That rather Greece from us these arts derived;
Ill imitated ...

But the notion well predates Milton. Bede insists upon it in his eighth-century *De schematibus et tropis* (169), having learned it from even earlier church fathers; and Eaves reminds us that Blake probably took his “animosity toward the Greeks and the Romans” from the “New and Old Testaments” themselves (*Counter-Arts* 135).

“Empire” itself. As Paley has shown, the Rhodian Laocoön not only played exemplar in (neo)classical aesthetic theory but was seized from the Vatican by Napoleon in 1796, paraded noisily through Paris in 1798, and displayed proudly in the Louvre until the emperor’s fall in 1814–15 (69–70). This is to say that, when Blake began his sketches for the *Cyclopædia* commission, the Laocoön sculpture had recently undergone a sort of metaleptic recapitulation of its own scene: a neoclassical *Empire français* detaining an icon of the classical cosmos detaining a prophet. What Blake learned to draw at the Royal Academy, what he produced for the Flaxman article shortly after, and (according to the common textual history) what he “almost certainly” (*Blake Archive* headnote) set down on the Laocoön plate as many as ten years before the “textual surround” all would have sagged under the weight of such imperial baggage. But everything changes when Blake builds around the classical incumbent a body of anticlassical, anti-imperial aphorisms that articulate an alternate ideology, a cognitive “State” in which Laocoön might have been valued as “Visionary,” not ousted as “Mad.” In the long, composite transmutation of the *Cyclopædia* sketches into the Laocoön separate plate, language arrives like a *deus ex machina*, plucking Laocoön and his sons from the Virgilian gyre to score them new life in more hospitable environs.

- 66 Compositional sequence alone acts out this redemptive phase of Blake’s art history in miniature. But from what Paley calls the “complex series of tensions” (100) between text and image emerges a fuller conceptual analogue to that history, one that simultaneously reimagines the cultural-historical ancestry of Laocoön and facilitates his contemporary (re)instatement to that lineage. All three phases—Hebraic origin, Greco-Roman fall, Christian salvation—are available in one leading contrivance, that elaborate rededication of the statue as יהוה & his two Sons (*ad finem*). Because their “zone” beneath the image (associated with titles and captions) reserves a synoptic capacity, upon arrival the names “יהוה” (Yah[weh]) and “Satan” and “Adam” actively bend the classical toward the biblical trio. But because Laocoön and his sons are strapped with such cultural freight as classical, they never bend to the point of breaking. The central figure retains the narrative identity of Laocoön, martyr for the “Spirit of Prophecy” (E 1), even as it transmigrates into a new, Christian-Hebraic framework—where it urges us to calibrate the (dis)continuity between each character and his cognate, between Greco-Roman backslide and Christian recovery.⁶⁷ Art-historical denouement thus

67. “Character” appears here with some deliberation. In recent decades media theorists and narratologists have begun to think through the possibilities of “transtextual” and “transmedial” characterization—that is, the movement of a single character between more than one textual representation (for example, Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey* and in

ushered in, the next titular detail then backfills the prelapsarian first term, retrojecting an Ur-sculpture whose speculative existence in “*Solomons Temple*” installs the Rhodian Laocoön in a medial position between two Christian-Hebraic apotheoses.⁶⁸ A close viewer has no choice in response but to sample (as Blake would have it) the full course of Christian art history.

- 67 Yahweh-as-Laocoön/Laocoön-as-Yahweh. Entertaining the thought experiment involves reading into the pair a “dependent relation” (Eaves, *Counter-Arts* 135) that parallels the conceptual structure of Blake’s wider anticlassicism. As Eaves has demonstrated, however preeminent were Christian aesthetic practices, Blake could locate no “ready-made Christian *theory* of art to oppose to the classical,” and so he “concocted” one on his own “from neoclassical theories viewed antagonistically.” “In a profound sense,” Eaves writes, “Christian art [for Blake] is whatever neoclassical art is not,” which means—because antithesis presupposes thesis—that only a prior (neo)classical referent can organize Christian self-definition (*Counter-Arts* 135–36, my emphasis). Though not quite “antagonistic” in the sense of “actively opposed, hostile” (*OED* 1), Laocoön and Yahweh similarly derive from established assumptions about each other a set of new, emergent identities. As soon as Blake slides “י” under the Laocoön statue, for example, every proximate mention of the Judeo-Christian God inevitably gathers the Laocoön narrative into its propositional ambit. “Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists Their Works were destroyd” translates the sharp foresight of Laocoön into art, his assassination into fatal censorship, petty gods and shortsighted Trojans into “the Seven Angels of the Seven Churches in Asia. Antichrist Science” (E 274). With that foot in the door, an intricate network of such connections develops without difficulty—beyond what explicitly mentions God or Jesus, as each contact reaches out to other contacts in the same semantic field. Once enrolled (via “Jesus”) as an artist, for instance, Laocoön goes (via “Art”) for baptism under such inscriptions as “The Old & New Testaments are / the Great Code of Art,” which assimilate his be-

Tennyson’s “Ulysses”) and/or more than one representational medium (for example, Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad* and in the Petersen/Benioff film *Troy*). For a broad view of the subfield, see Bertetti, Richardson, and Thon. How I treat Laocoön/Yahweh as a transmedial and transtextual character has most in common with how Kenneth Burke theorizes “identification”: “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (21).

68. Aside from literary/scriptural precedents such as the Philistines’ plundering of the Ark of the Covenant in 1 Samuel 4–6, real empirical ambiguity regarding the provenance of the Rhodian Laocoön sculpture would have bolstered (if not legitimated) speculations such as Blake’s here. See Paley 83–84.

havior into the scriptural teachings of Christianity. That combinatory (or “coalesced”) religious and aesthetic affiliation in turn opposes Laocoön, as both art and Christianity are opposed throughout, to “Money” and “Empire” and “War and Dominion” (E 274). A summative remark such as “Empire against Art” then comes implicitly to read as “Empire against Laocoön,” a fair circle back to square one, where what doomed Laocoön was his valiant rebellion against the oppressive determinism of the classical cosmos.

- 68 Not only does the Laocoön statue (and all it subsumes) act upon the aphorisms that surround it: the aphorisms act equally upon each other and, as my last interpretive turn above represents, upon the statue that beat them to the opening punch. From these loops of signification, later language feeding back into earlier image, proceed the most tactful and demonstrative strokes of Blake’s anticlassical argument. Notice how the injunctive allusion to Genesis 12:1 (running up the left margin) interprets God’s sending Abram “out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house” as a release into the isolated chaos of creativity: “You must leave Fathers & Mothers & Houses & Lands if they stand in the way of Art.”⁶⁹ What “stand[s] in the way” of Laocoön’s “Art,” the full success of his prophetic warning, except the “Fathers & Mothers & Houses & Lands” of the Greco-Roman world? With that tyranny metonymically implied by the serpents that enforce it, the allusion ultimately orders Laocoön to *revise his own statue* such that it depicts not an overthrow of his “Voice of one” by the pagan gods but vice versa. That hypothetical clinamen sits on the imaginative horizon of the Laocoön plate, an image of a productive future beyond classical constriction (“The unproductive Man is not a Christian” [E 274]), of the very transcendence of Greece and Rome that Blake sought to secure for Laocoön.⁷⁰
- 69 What should be clear by now is that, whatever the Laocoön plate accomplishes ideationally, it exploits an inflective poetics all but identical to that of the composite Notebook page. Diverse aphorisms, debuting *post factum*, downplay, modulate, and accentuate certain aspects of Laocoön’s significant potential. Bends and charged proximities in the

69. “Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing” (Genesis 12:1–2). Blake almost certainly invoked these instructions as a Judeo-Christian counterpoint to the classical prolepsis delivered by Anchises in *Aeneid* book 6: Abram’s Canaan to Aeneas’s Latium.

70. “Image” as opposed to “picture,” in Mitchell’s technical sense: “Pictures [are] the concrete, representational objects in which images appear.” “[It is] the difference between a constructed concrete object or ensemble ... and the virtual, phenomenal appearance that it provides for a beholder” (*Picture Theory* 4 and n5).

“textual surround” not only evidence incremental composition but catalyze semiotic chain reactions that—in the ultimate object of the plate—force classical authority to testify against itself: to admit, that is, to having hamstrung its own most perceptive individuals. In other, more properly antagonistic words, Blake recruits Laocoön and his sons to Team Christianity by enclosing them in language that, drawing on the energy of juxtaposition, teases out their implicit anticlassicism. So integral to such an integral (and well-defined) stance, the inflective method, however exploratory or even accidental in the Notebook, gets authorized as deliberate between the metal and burin of the Laocoön separate plate.

- 70 Thus when McGann calls the Laocoön plate an “aesthetic self-reflection,” presumably in reference to the “struggle” it envisions between institution and imagination, he goes right unwittingly in a second sense as well (“Blake and Byron” 625-26). For that identification with Laocoön, the persecuted poet-prophet, partakes of a larger anticlassical polemic whose semiotic machinery Blake had assembled and refined over four decades of practice in his most dutiful document. This straightforward observation surfaces here as my own, but in truth Blake scholars have circled (without broaching) it for years, breaking down the Notebook or the Laocoön plate in terms that might serve the other as aptly.

... the shape of the text, which must follow the outline of the [image], fill the spaces within the drawing, or accommodate itself to the areas left unoccupied. (James 228)

Blake’s non-linear assemblage offers a collation of loci that can be “hooked up” to other texts in ways that are not predetermined and so do not lock it into a causal frame that contains its signification. (J. Wright 116)

With such referential ambiguity even possible, how accurate can it be to say that “the design” of the Laocoön plate is “unique even in Blake’s corpus” (J. Wright 103), or that “there is nothing even in Blake” like the “textual surround” (Paley 87), or—in the *Blake Archive* headnote I have already fussed over—that the Notebook is “an integral work ... unlike any other that [Blake] left us”?⁷¹ Like the twins in *The Comedy of Errors*, the Notebook and the Laocoön plate have seemed singular because, in the wide world of Blake scholarship, they have been kept in nominal seclusion, too

71. Nor can it be exactly correct to say that the Laocoön plate is “the only example of [Blake’s] featuring a substantial amount of his own text and an image not of his own invention” (Paley 57), since some early pages in the Notebook (for example, N1, N8-9) feature texts by Blake written over, around, and among images drawn by his brother Robert.

remote for recognition. But side by side at last they look like fated bookends, graphic and poetical doppelgangers, with the whole of Blake unfurled between them.

- 71 Even with likeness, however, the story does not end. For as climax or culmination of what the Notebook began, the Laocoön plate also brings the poetics of inflection to a newly concretized fruition. Revisit, for a first example, the opening, entitling gambit. If Blake fastened his anticlassicism to the conviction that Greek and Roman artists remembered rather than created, that they stood on (and often obscured) a prior Hebraic foundation, then the switch from “Laocoön” to “יה” in the caption would give a solid body to that belief. I mean that Blake exposes (what he takes to be) the Christian ground beneath classical feet by quite literally laying it there, so that Laocoön and his sons are shown to rest upon a measure of their derivation. Not that they, with eyes vertically averted, discern it themselves; but nor can they apprehend what their sightlines aim toward instead. The rightmost son—Satan?—is repelled in the hips from “All is not Sin that Satan calls so” and in the shoulders from “All that we See is Vision,” but he cannot “See” past the haunting blunder that rolls with both evasions: “Satans Wife The Goddess Nature is War & Misery & Heroism a Miser.” Similarly, Yahweh-Laocoön appears to yearn upward but in vain, his gaze obstructed by the Greek name Ὀφιοῦχος or *Ophiuchus* or “serpent-holder,” which curves just concave enough to cover his field of vision. On the other side hangs מלאך יהוה, Hebrew for “Angel of Jehovah” (E 273)—the proper, destined identity of Laocoön, waiting to be reclaimed if he can get beyond the Greek that denies him it.

- 72 What Blake has done here (with rather astonishing subtlety) is incorporate the material circumstances of composition, where one inscription imposes territorially on another, into the ontology of the Laocoön plate’s represented world. As both signifiers (graphic forms) and signifieds (mental referents), the aphorisms behave as objects or entities, inhabiting the same empirical realm as the men portrayed in the pictorial center. Hence, the leftmost son can sever the overhead sentence with his forearm, separating “Tree of Misery” from “propagating / Generation & Death” as if to claim the latter for himself; and indeed, his balletic bend traces the cyclical path of such propagation. An analogous precept encases the upstretched fist of Yahweh-Laocoön—

Without Unceasing Practise nothing can be done Practise
is Art
If you leave off you are Lost

—to establish a polysemous relation that on the one hand describes his motivation against the serpents, who seek to

cease his practice; and on the other guarantees that, were he finally to slip their hold, he would not lack an elastic obstacle to struggle (to “Practise”) against. That would be the precept itself, with which Yahweh-Laocoön’s fist would promptly collide upon vanquishing the enemy *de ses jours*. Therefore, despite its liberatory momentum, the language also traps Yahweh-Laocoön in the continuous expenditure of energy to which Blake’s Milton, standing in for Blake himself, had earlier proudly committed: “I will not cease from Mental Fight” (E 95). Such conceptual premises turn physical on the Laocoön plate, into beings or articles or environments that others, in the above and similar ways, might approach or flee or embrace or combat or ...

- 73 The Laocoön separate plate puts forth, then, not only a poetics but a *drama* of inflection, where the interaction of juxtaposed discursive units doubles as the stuff of plot, of mimetic action. Unlike his brother, who dips and swerves around the language, Yahweh-Laocoön’s leftmost son leans into the stack of propositions behind him, at whose base is spread the sturdiest axiom on the plate: “The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination. that is God himself.” Maturing from a poetics into a drama of inflection moves Blake’s art toward a realization of precisely that “Etern[ity],” for it places corporeal “Man” amongst the psychic and expressive agents who (for Blake) always were his equal. Or better. More than collecting a “statement of [Blake’s] very late views” (Tayler 72) on “art, the imagination, the divine and the human, and empire” (Paley 57), more than authorizing by engraving the layout of the Notebook, and more than repurposing the same to advance an anticlassical invective: the Laocoön plate incarnates the principles of the inflective method to discover, on the far side of the Notebook’s “Vortex,”⁷² a triumphant literality for “Living Form.” This “Living Form,” Blake says after all, “is Eternal Existence,” perception cleansed of “Grecian” or “Mathematic ... Memory” (E 270). By locating in the Laocoön plate a formal consummation of what the Notebook had ventured before it, I hope to have shown that the main line of Blake’s “Unceasing Practise” (E 274), however “higgledy-piggledy” (BB 268), runs exactly through the five-dozen leaves of that hand-me-down “stationer’s commodity” (Erdman, *Notebook* 2). Or at any rate (to opt for a whimper) that we have done no good in assuming otherwise.

72. and when once a traveller thro Eternity.
Has passd that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind
His path, into a globe itself infolding; like a sun:
Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty,
While he keeps onwards in his wondrous journey on the earth
Or like a human form, a friend with whom he livd benevolent.
(*Milton* plate 15 [Erdman numbering, E 109; Bentley plate 14])

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