

Art, Word and Image

Two Thousand Years of Visual/Textual Interaction

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Blake's Illuminated Word

JOSEPH VISCOMI

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

I

William Blake, the British Romantic poet who penned the immortal lines above, was also a professional engraver, an original printmaker and a painter of great visionary power. He was born in London in 1757 to Catherine and James Blake, a hosier who kept a shop at 28 Broad Street. Except for the three years spent in Felpham, Sussex, under the patronage of William Hayley (1800–3), he lived his entire life in London, where he died in 1827. His parents, recognizing his artistic ability early, enrolled him at the age of ten in Henry Pars's drawing school, where he learned to draw the human figure by copying from plaster casts of ancient statues. At fourteen, he began his seven-year apprenticeship under James Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society. Basire's style of engraving emphasized line over tone and was by then already considered old-fashioned, yet it fitted well with – or helped to shape – Blake's lifelong preference for firm outline, which he associated with his heroes, artists like Michelangelo and engravers like Albrecht Dürer.¹

Engraving, the period's primary means for reproducing images – from paintings to book illustrations – had long been a commercial business, particularly in England, where engravers were perceived more as craftsmen than artists. Blake found this hierarchy – and his second-class status – deeply annoying. To him, 'Painting is Drawing on Canvas & Engraving is Drawing on Copper & Nothing Else & he who pretends to be either Painter or Engraver without being a Master of Drawing is an Impostor' (E 574). The technique itself had undergone major changes since its origin in the Renaissance, when the first, or 'ancient', engravers, like Dürer, transferred designs (often their own) and cut them directly into the metal plates with their burins, hatching lines for shading as in pen and ink drawings. In Blake's day, to save time and labour, this 'pure engraving' was entirely replaced with a 'mixed method', which combined etching and engraving. 'Modern' engravers polished, cleaned and covered the copper plate's surface with an acid-resistant ground, onto which the composition's outline was transferred and traced with a needle to expose the underlying copper to acid, which etched the design into the copper. Engravers

used their burins to deepen these lines and to fill in the forms in an elaborate 'dot and lozenge' pattern (dots incised in the interstices of crosshatched lines, characteristic of bank-note engraving) that enabled them to represent mass and tone more convincingly than the more linear style of Blake's heroes, whose works were often dismissed as 'Hard Stiff & Dry Unfinishd Works of Art' (E 639). As an apprentice, then, Blake learned the graphic fashions of the day as he learned to both etch and engrave and to work in various styles with needles, grounds and acid, as well as with burins, scrapers and burnishers. He would also have learned to ink and wipe the resulting intaglio plates and to print them on a rolling press, the machine that forces the dampened paper into the incised lines to pick up the ink.

Upon completing his apprenticeship in 1779, at the age of 21, Blake became a journeyman copy engraver, making his living by working on projects for London book and print publishers like Thomas Macklin, Harrison and Co. and Joseph Johnson. Throughout the 1780s, Blake was one of several engravers who helped to popularize the work of Thomas Stothard, a versatile commercial artist and a prolific book illustrator whose delicate designs influenced Blake's own for *Songs of Innocence* (1789). In 1779 he had also begun studying seriously to be a painter, enrolling in the Royal Academy of Art's School of Design. Founded ten years earlier and led by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Royal Academy provided formal training and annual exhibitions. Blake began exhibiting there in 1780, with *The Death of Earl Goodwin*, one of a series of watercolour drawings on the early history of England that also included such subjects as *The Landing of Brutus*, *The Making of Magna Carta* and *The Penance of Jane Shore*. In 1784 Blake exhibited a pair of thematically related works, *A Breach in a City the Morning after the Battle* and *War Unchaind by an Angel; Fire, Pestilence, and Famine Following*, depicting the ravages of war. The following year, he exhibited four works: *The Bard, from Gray* and three drawings illustrating the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers, the latter reflecting Blake's increasing interest in Old Testament subjects. In all these drawings, Blake adheres to the prevailing neoclassical style as interpreted by such contemporary artists as James Barry.

During these formative years, Blake, with no formal education, was also writing poetry. His *Poetical Sketches*, a collection of poems he had written as a teenager, was privately printed for him as a 72-page pamphlet in 1783. Blake had been attending the literary salons of Ms. Mathew, singing his songs to the delight of other artists and writers in attendance, a few of whom took note and raised the money to have a selection of his poems set in type. Blake was given the unbound sheets but apparently made no concerted effort to sell them, for most were still in his studio when he died. The prefatory 'Advertisement' (p. ii) may have given him pause:

The following Sketches were the production of untutored youth, commenced in his twelfth, and occasionally resumed by the author till his twentieth year; since which time, his talents having been wholly directed to the attainment of excellence in his profession, he has been deprived of the leisure requisite to such a revisal of these sheets, as might have rendered them less unfit to meet the public eye.

Conscious of the irregularities and defects to be found in almost every

page, his friends have still believed that they possessed a poetic originality, which merited some respite from oblivion. These their opinions remain, however, to be now reproved or confirmed by a less partial public. (E 846)

Blake's early poems echo English precursors from Spenser to the mid-eighteenth century, not unexpectedly for juvenilia of the period, but they also demonstrate a keen willingness to experiment with form and language and to explore politically daring themes like tyranny, revolution and liberty, themes at the heart of his mature poetry and mythology.

Blake's companion throughout these eventful years was Catherine Boucher (1762–1831), the daughter of a market gardener, whom he had married in 1782. Their marriage was by all accounts happy and she became a perfect helpmate for the artist. Blake taught her to read and write as well as to draw and operate the rolling press – to be, in effect, his perfect assistant, known in the printing trade as a 'devil'. In 1784 the Blakes set up a printing and publishing partnership with James Parker, another former Basire apprentice, at 27 Broad Street, next to the family's hosier shop, now run by his older brother James. In *An Island in the Moon*, a satire of the Mathew set that he wrote around this time, Blake depicts himself as 'Quid', a publisher planning an outrageously expensive and impractical project 'in three Volumes folio', with 'all the writing Engraved instead of Printed & at every other leaf a high finishd print'. He would 'Print off two thousand' and 'sell them a hundred pounds a piece'. Though described as 'Illuminating the Manuscript', the project was poking fun at those connoisseurs who would spend such great sums on the fancy illustrated books of the day – more than most working men made in a year – because they feared 'whoever will not have them will be' seen as 'ignorant fools & will not deserve to live' (E 465). His real publishing business, however, was far more modest; after producing only two 'finished prints' on mythological themes, both engraved by Blake after Stothard, it had broken up, apparently by the end of 1785.

Three years later, in their new home at 28 Poland Street, the engraver, painter and poet invented relief etching, a printmaking technique that enabled him to combine his three arts in unprecedented ways. He announced it 'To the Public' in his Prospectus (1793) as 'illuminated printing' and defined it explicitly as a 'method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet' and as a 'means to propagate' the 'Labours of the Artist, the Poet, the Musician' without the added costs of publishers, typesetters, illustrators and engravers. Indeed, 'even Milton and Shakespeare could not publish their own works', he says, a 'difficulty' solved by his 'method of Printing both Letterpress and Engraving in a style more ornamental, uniform, and grand, than any before discovered' (E 692).

In eighteenth-century book production, word and image – letterpress and engraving – were executed separately, in different media and by different hands. Technically, integration of word and image was possible in conventional (intaglio) etching, as Blake himself demonstrated in 1793 with a small emblem book, but the economics of publishing had long defined intaglio printmaking as image reproduction and letterpress as text reproduction, making all illustrated books the product of much divided labour. Even Quid, who envisioned a deluxe set of volumes in which words and images were in the



same medium – both engraved – and the text, with ‘a high finishd print . . . at every other leaf’, excessively illustrated, assumed that images would be separate – and presumably executed by different people. Setting type with wood blocks placed word and image on the same leaf, but they remained unintegrated and production remained divided. But in illuminated printing, text and image were executed together, on the same surface, with the same tools, by the same artist. Instead of needles, burins and the other metal tools of the graphic artist, Blake worked on copper plates with quill pens, small brushes and an ink impervious to acid (probably the standard stop-out varnish used in etching). He wrote text backward (a skill he would have practised as a trained copy engraver), illustrated it and etched the uncovered metal below the surface in nitric acid to leave the integrated design of text and image standing in relief. Blake and his wife printed the plates in coloured inks, on a rolling press and tinted most impressions in watercolours.

2 *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy Y, plate 3 (*Innocence* title-page).

II

To appreciate just how radical Blake’s invention is, we need only compare an illuminated poem as conventionally printed with its original form. ‘The Tyger’, for example, one of the most anthologized poems in the English language, is known to most readers in its letterpress form, as in the epigraph to this essay:

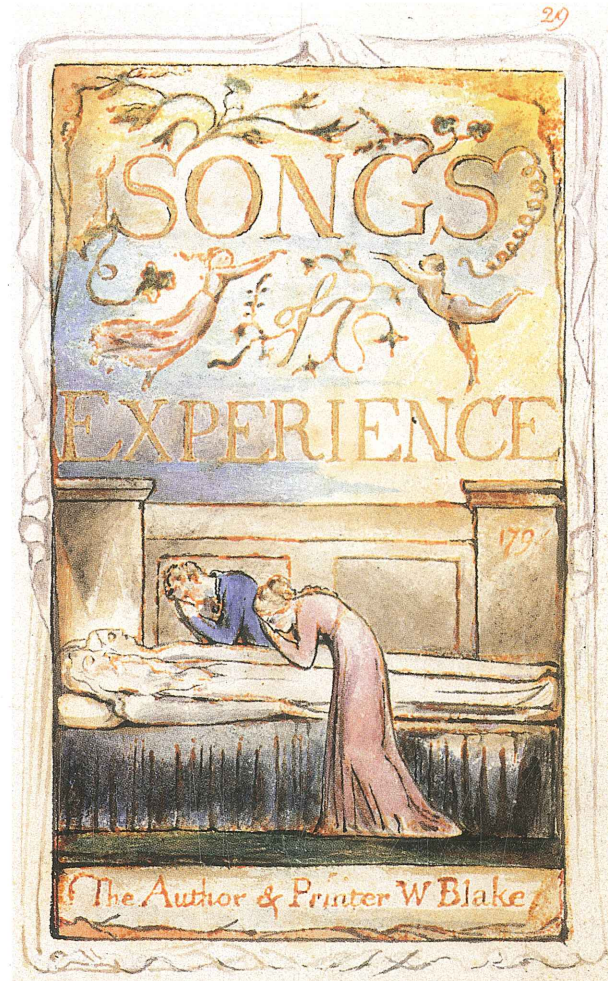
Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
 In the forest of the night;
 What immortal hand or eye,
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (E 24)

While these lines may evoke the image of an illuminated beast no matter what the font or its size, their being set in type translates Blake’s original (illus. 1) into another medium and distorts his intentions. Immediately, we see that Blake’s text is calligraphic, finished in watercolours and strengthened in pen and ink, features that contribute to the meaning of the whole. Not only is text pictorial, but it is also integrated into a design, unfolding down the page, structured and underscored by tree branches and culminating in a surprisingly inscrutable but tame-looking tiger that further complicates the reading. The typographic translation clearly misrepresents the original artefact, a hand-coloured impression of words and images printed from a relief-etched plate of about 11 x 6.3 cm onto thick wove paper. The small design, with its 9-point roman text,

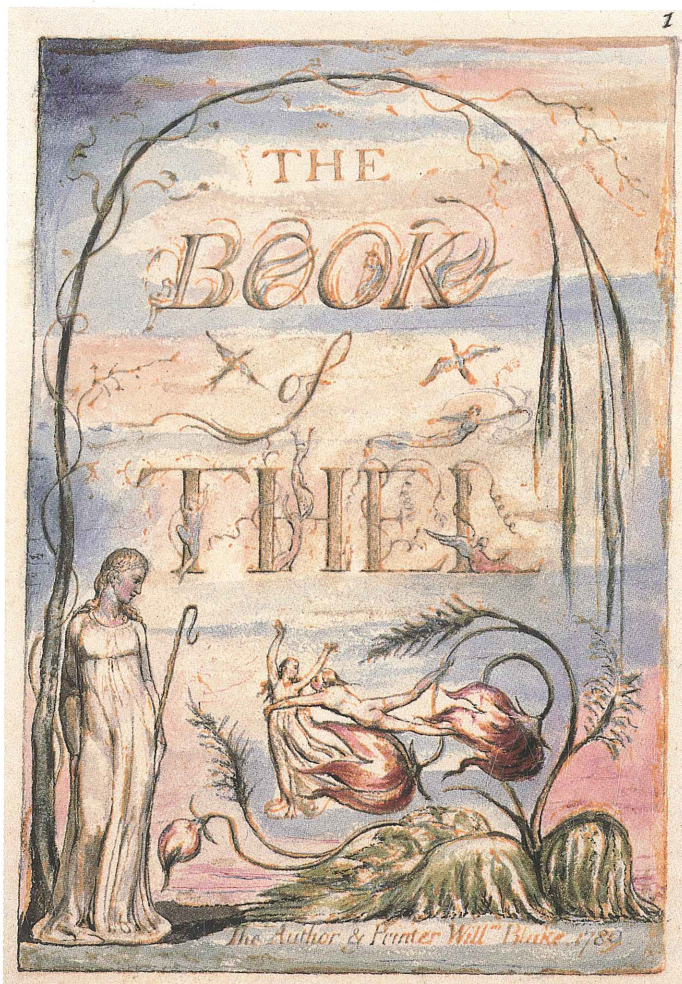
requires the reader to hold the book close, creating an intimate and sensual reading experience impossible to duplicate except with the finest facsimiles.

Though he never explained the technique, Blake did describe his 'infernal method' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as 'melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid' (E 39). He claimed to have learned it in 'a Printing house in Hell', where he 'saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation' (E 40) and discerned its major (much allegorized) stages, from cleaning the copper to writing and illustrating the text, etching the design, printing the plates and binding the prints into books. According to John Thomas Smith, however, it was his recently deceased brother Robert, in a vision, who directed Blake toward this discovery. Robert, whom Blake was teaching to be an artist, died in February 1787; Blake, who had remained constantly at his bedside for two weeks, collapsed into a continuous sleep that lasted three days and nights after his death (G 1: 59). The following year, Robert appeared to him in a vision and instructed him in a new method of printing his works without 'the expense of letter-press' (BR 460). Appropriately, one of Blake's first experiments in this medium was *The Approach of Doom*, a print in imitation of one of Robert's wash drawings. While the combination of word and image is a prominent feature of illuminated printing, it appears not to have been the impetus for the invention. Rather, illuminated poetry evolved out of relief etching, which appears to have been motivated by Blake's desire to reproduce the appearance of wash drawing. The very tools of pens and ink that enabled Blake to produce original drawings in metal probably inspired him to use the new technique to write and print words as well.

The first relief etchings to incorporate text were the ten very small plates of *All Religions are One* and the equally small twenty plates of *There is No Natural Religion*, philosophical tractates executed in 1788 on perception and the imagination, or what Blake called the 'Poetic Genius'. The following year he used the technique to publish poetry, beginning with the 31 plates of *Songs of Innocence* and eight plates of *The Book of Thel*, demonstrating in both works a mastery of his new medium missing in the earlier tractates. The italic letters forming 'Songs of Innocence' are alive, bursting into flame-like vegetation (illus. 2). They support children playing, an angel reading and Blake, as the piper from the 'Introduction', 'piping songs of pleasant glee' (E 7). Blake returned to a



3 William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*: copy Y, plate 29 (*Experience* title-page).



4 William Blake, *The Book of Thel*, copy O, plate 2 (title page).

illustration introducing key ideas or events in the narrative. Thel, a young shepherdess on a quest, receives advice from a personified Lily, Cloud and Clod of Clay; in the end, she flees from a 'voice of sorrow' that rises from 'her own grave plot' (E 6). The slender tree arches protectively while also suggesting a tombstone, anticipating Thel's descent in the netherworld to her own gravesite in the final plate. The letters support a piper with crook, an angel reading, a figure writing and a naked male figure climbing the T of 'Thel', whose name refers to 'wish' or 'desire' and whose book is about the awakening of – and retreat from – desire. Wearing a long gown and holding a shepherd's crook, Thel gazes at a nude man embracing a woman around the waist, figures who suggest the 'raptures' of the Cloud and the 'fair eyed dew' (E 5) during their courtship.

In 1790 Blake moved to 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, then a London suburb, where he wrote, designed, etched, printed and coloured his next ten illuminated books, starting with the 27 plates of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Through the voice of the 'Devil', Blake parodies and attacks the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg and biblical history and morality as constructed by the 'Angels' of the established church and state. Energy and passion are positively valorized; reason and temperance are characterized as restraints on spiritual insight and self-expression. Blake pictures himself in plate 10 recording the Devil's voice, writing the 'Proverbs of Hell', ten of 70 of which are shown above him, with pictograms and other interlinear decorations. Blake writes from infernal inspiration, eyes firmly focused on the scroll across his lap (illus. 5). The image mirrors the acts in plate 12 of Isaiah and Ezekiel, who, recognizing

similar iconic use of lettering five years later in the title page to *Songs of Experience* (illus. 3), which is designed as a counterpart to *Innocence* (also paired visually are the frontispieces and, thematically, numerous poems). The space where grown children are brought together by the death that also separates them appears especially dark and enclosed compared to the open and lively space where children, in the security of a guardian, are brought together by a book. That death is equated with experience is indicated by the bare roman capitals of the word 'Experience' mirroring the shape of the dead bodies, much as innocence is equated with life by the word 'Innocence' being filled with energy as it stems from a fruit-filled tree.

Blake expresses a similar playfulness in the mix of italic and roman lettering in the title page of *The Book of Thel* (illus. 4), which also serves as the book's frontispiece, in that it is a full-page

'the voice of honest indignation' as 'the voice of God', 'cared not for consequences but wrote' (E 38). Blake's contrary, sitting on the other side of the Devil, straining to copy his texts instead of going to the origin himself, represents imitation. He prefers the outward form or the letter of the law to its spirit or origin. These were Swedenborg's failings, according to Blake, who had become disillusioned with the Swedish mystic after a year or more of reading his works.

Over the next three years Blake executed 80 engravings for the publishers. He returned to illuminated printing in 1793 with the eleven plates of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, producing at least eleven copies in its first print run. Oothoon, *Visions's* victimized heroine, can be seen as Thel's contrary, in that she seeks to fulfil desire, but is raped on her way to her lover. She adds her eloquent lament on the themes of slavery and the rights of women,

themes prominently addressed by authors published by the radical Joseph Johnson, for whom Blake often worked as an illustrator and engraver and who displayed copies of Blake's illuminated books in his shop. In plate 7, Bromion, Oothoon's lover, sits tightly enclosed within himself, disconnected and self-pitying, rejecting Oothoon, who hovers within a wave, shackled and restricted like a slave, pleading that he open his mind and heart and recognize that she remains pure and that he need not be ruled by patriarchal codes (illus. 6).

For *Children: The Gates of Paradise*, an emblem book comprising eighteen small intaglio etchings accompanied by brief inscriptions on the human condition, also appeared in 1793. The imprint on plate 2, the title page, reads 'Published by W Blake No 13 Hercules Buildings Lambeth and J. Johnson St. Pauls' Church Yard.' Blake later revised the work as *For the Sexes* (c. 1820). Also produced in 1793 were the eighteen plates of *America a Prophecy*, which, at approximately 24 x 17 cm each, form Blake's the largest illuminated book to date, the texts of which appear more organically integrated with illustrations and interlinear decoration (illus. 7) and less blocked out above or below a vignette than the texts in *Thel*, *Marriage* and *Visions*. Like *Gates*, the first copies of *America* were purposely printed in dark inks and left uncoloured because pages were designed in terms of strong black and white forms. The first of Blake's 'Continental Prophecies', *America* treats the American Revolution as an event with mythological as well as historical dimensions. Thomas Paine makes an appearance here, as do Washington, Franklin and other American luminaries, but so do new figures from Blake's personal mythology: Urizen, representing



5 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, copy C, plate 10.



Wave shadows of discontent? and in what houses dwell the wretched
Drunken with woe forgotten, and shut up from cold despair.

Tell me where dwell the thoughts forgotten till thou call them forth
Tell me where dwell the joys of old? & where the ancient loves?
And when will they renew again & the night of oblivion past?
That I might traverse times & spaces far remote and bring
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain
Where goest thou O thought! to what remote land is thy flight!
If thou returnest to the present moment of affliction
Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings and dew and honey and balm;
Or poison from the desert wilds, from the eyes of the envious.

Then Branion said, and shook the cavern with his lamentation

Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine eyes have fruit;
But knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth
To gratify senses unknown? trees beasts and birds unknown,
Unknown, not unperceiv'd, spread in the infinite microscope,
In places yet unvisited by the voyager, and in worlds
Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres unknown?
Ah! are there other wars, beside the wars of sword and fire?
And are there other sorrows, beside the sorrows of poverty?
And are there other joys, beside the joys of riches and ease,
And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?
And is there not eternal fire, and eternal chains,
To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?

Then Oothoon waited silent all the day, and all the night,

Appear to the Americans upon the cloudy night.



Solemn leave the Atlantic waves between the gloomy nations
Swelling, belching from its deeps red clouds & raging fires,
Albion is sick. America faints! enrapt the Zenith grew.
As human blood shooting its veins all round the orb'd heaven
Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood
And in the red clouds rose a Wonder o'er the Atlantic sea;
Intense! naked! a Human fire fierce glowing, as the wedge
Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were fire
With myriads of cloudy terrors banners dark & towers
Surrounded; heat but not light went thro' the murky atmo-
-sphere

The King of England looking westward trembles at the

VISION



reason as restriction, first mentioned in *Visions* but first pictured in *America*, and Orc, the fiery revolutionary, who act out the conflict on a cosmic scale.

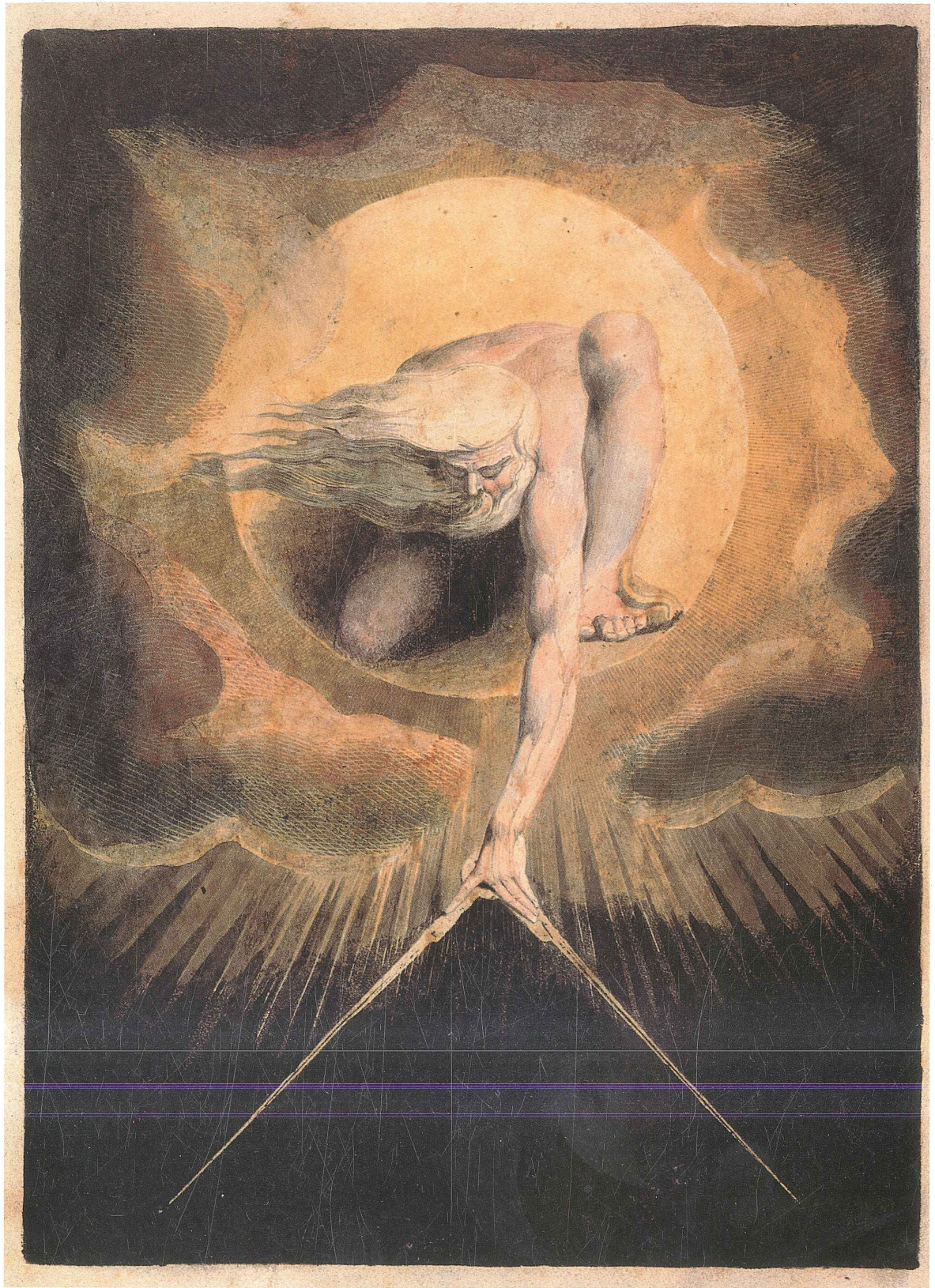
For these early books, Blake printed the plates as book pages, wiping the plate's borders of ink to conceal the rectangular shape that signals copper plate and 'machine' (that is, the press); he printed on both sides of the leaf so there would be facing pages, as in conventional books, and, except for *Gates* and *America*, coloured the illustration lightly, leaving the text uncoloured. Plate 10 from *Marriage* copy C (illus. 5) exemplifies this style. The visual result, as Robert N. Essick has noted, is an oxymoronic 'printed manuscript'.² Indeed, no two impressions from the same relief-etched plate are exactly alike, because each impression was printed and coloured by hand. However, impressions printed in the same press run are materially and stylistically alike, sharing inks, papers, palette and placement of colours. Impressions pulled in different press runs and periods differ extensively because they were printed and coloured in different styles (for example, illus. 1 and 5). Consequently, each copy of each book is assigned a letter to designate its uniqueness. Clearly, for Blake, the print was not an exactly repeatable image.

By the autumn of 1793, having printed his books in small press runs, sometimes changing the ink and the size of paper during the run to diversify stock, Blake and his wife offered the books for 'sale at a fair price'. He advertised them along with original engravings in his Prospectus:

1. Job, a Historical Engraving. Size 1 ft. 7½ in. by 1 ft. 2 in.: price 12s.
2. Edward and Elinor, a Historical Engraving. Size 1 ft. 6½ in. by 1 ft.: price 10s. 6d.
3. America, a Prophecy, in Illuminated Printing. Folio, with 18 designs: price 10s. 6d.
4. Visions of the Daughters of Albion, in Illuminated Printing. Folio, with 8 designs, price 7s. 6d.
5. The Book of Thel, a Poem in Illuminated Printing. Quarto, with 6 designs, price 3s.
6. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, in Illuminated Printing. Quarto, with 14 designs, price 7s. 6d.
7. Songs of Innocence, in Illuminated Printing. Octavo, with 25 designs, price 5s.
8. Songs of Experience, in Illuminated Printing. Octavo, with 25 designs, price 5s.
9. The History of England, a small book of Engravings. Price 3s.
10. The Gates of Paradise, a small book of Engravings. Price 3s.

The Illuminated Books are Printed in Colours, and on the most beautiful wove paper that could be procured.

No Subscriptions for the numerous great works now in hand are asked, for none are wanted; but the Author will produce his works, and offer them to sale at a fair price. (E 693)

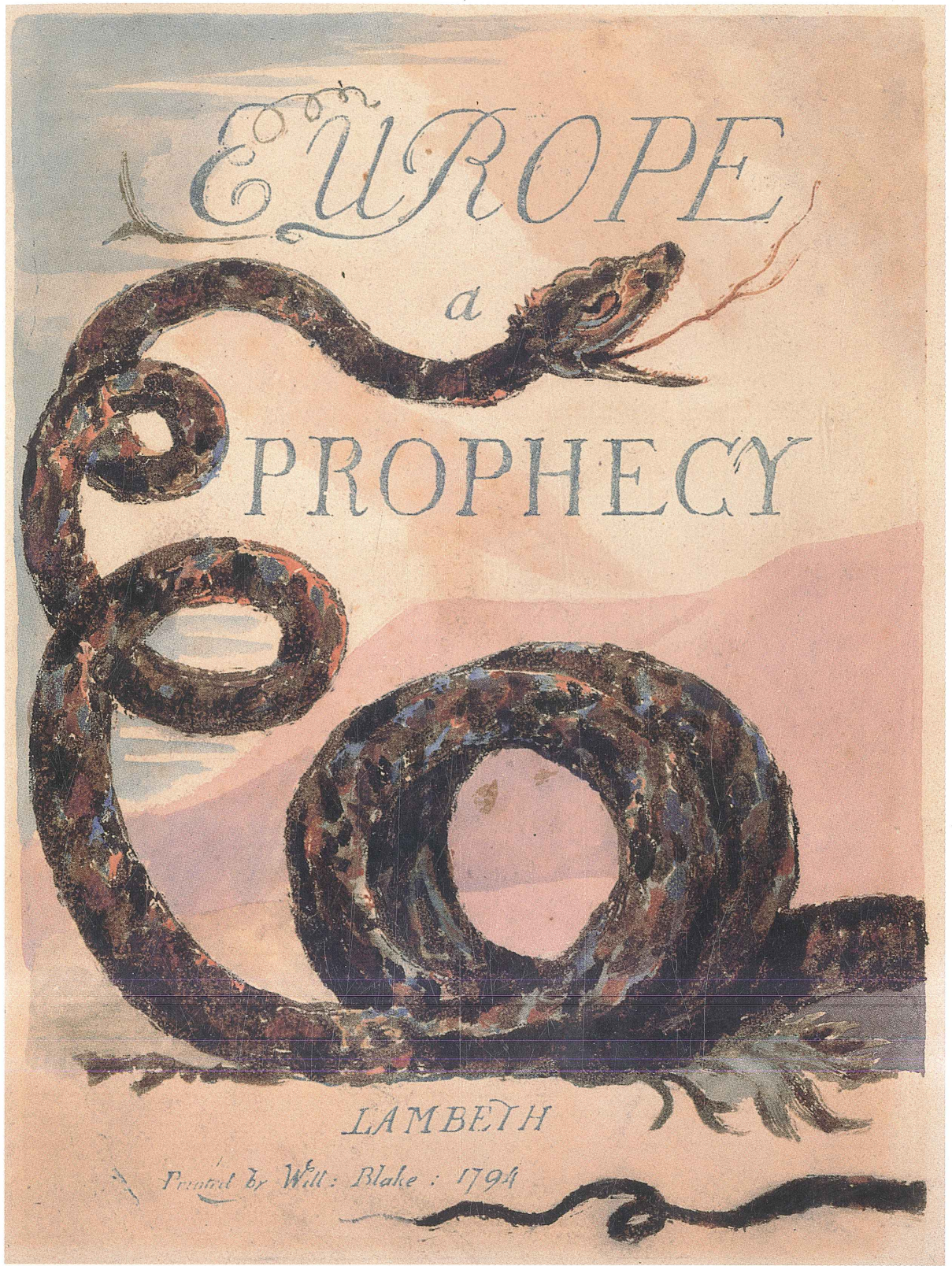


8 William Blake, *Europe a Prophecy*, copy E, plate 1 (frontispiece).

Though Blake advertised the *Songs of Experience* in 1793, the book was still in progress and was not completed until 1794, the date on the title page (illus. 3), though no date appears on the general title page joining the two works as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, with the subtitle of 'Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. Most of the *Experience* plates were etched on the versos of the *Innocence* plates, which saved Blake the cost of copper and allowed him to make back his initial investment with fewer copies per press run. He did the same with *Europe a Prophecy*, also 1794, continuing his 'Continental Prophecies' by using the versos of the *America* plates, ensuring that the two books were the same size. The *Europe* designs were executed in the same style as those in *America*. However, in 1794, Blake also began to colour-print his plates: that is, he began to add colours to the relief and shallow areas of the etched design and to print ink and colours together to produce images with opaque and thick colours, like oil sketches, rather than lightly washed manuscript pages. These he would finish in watercolours and pen and ink. Blake colour-printed the first eight copies of *Experience*, joining four with copies of *Innocence* printed in 1789 to form the first copies of the combined *Songs*, and he returned to *Marriage* and *Visions* to print two copies of each in this manner. Although Blake designed *Europe* to be printed in monochrome, he colour-printed all six copies of its first press run; its magnificent frontispiece, known as 'The Ancient of Days' (illus. 8), is one of Blake's most iconic images. It is also one of his most ironic, in that the Jehovah-like figure creating the world is Urizen and his seemingly creative act symbolizes man's fall from eternity and into the world of materialism, represented by the coiling serpent on the facing title page (illus. 9).

Blake etched his next book, also in 1794, mostly on the versos of the *Marriage* plates. To facilitate colour-printing, he etched in shallow relief the 28 plates of *The First Book of Urizen*, although only two of eight extant copies contain them all, and he sequenced the ten full-page illustrations differently in each copy. With its double columns of text and divisions into chapters and verses, the format of *Urizen* indicates its close relationship to the Bible. The poem is in many respects a heterodox rewriting of Genesis, one in which the creation of the universe is seen as a fall into materiality and its abstract laws. In the title page, which also functions as a frontispiece, Urizen writes his laws blindly and mechanically with both hands on both sides of an open book, the enrooting pages of which double as graves and echo the tablets/tombstones behind him (illus. 10). In copy G, the last copy, produced c. 1818, he erased 'First' from the title and covered it up with a tree branch. The text of Urizen's book, open and displayed to the reader in plate 5, comprises unreadable characters signifying chaos and meaningless confusion (illus. 11). (Blake used the same motif in the frontispiece of *The Song of Los*, showing Urizen kneeling under a globe that is inscribed with strange illegible markings.) Two related poems, telling the story of Urizen from other perspectives, are *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*, which followed in 1795. These are briefer and less lavishly illustrated than *Urizen*, and their texts are etched in intaglio rather than relief, with colour-printed frontispieces, title pages and tailpieces.

Later that year, Blake returned to his 'Continental Prophecies', producing the eight plates of *The Song of Los*, which is divided into sections entitled 'Africa' and 'Asia'. All six extant copies (A-F) were colour-printed in a single press run. While



9 William Blake, *Europe a Prophecy*, copy E, plate 2 (title-page).



10 William Blake, *The First Book of Urizen*, copy G, plate 1 (title-plate).



In living creations appeared
 In the flames of eternal fury,

3. Sundering, darkening, thundering,
 Rent away with a terrible crash
 Eternity roll'd wide apart
 Wide astunder rolling
 Mountainous all around
 Departing; departing: departing;
 Leaving ruinous fragments of life
 Hanging, frowning cliffs & all between
 An ocean of waters unfathomable

4. The roaring fires ran o'er the heavens
 In whirlwinds & cataracts of blood
 And o'er the dark deserts of Urizen
 Fires pour thro' the void on all sides
 On Urizens self-begotten armies.

5. But no light from the fires, all was
 darkness
 In the flames of Eternal fury

6. In fierce anguish & quenchless
 flames

To the deserts and rocks he ran
 To hide, but he could not; combining
 He dug mountains & hills in vast strength
 He piled them in incessant labour
 In howlings & pangs & fierce madnels
 Long periods in burning fires labouring
 Till hoary, and age-broke, and aged,
 In despair and the shadows of death.

7. And a roof vast petrific around,
 On all sides he frigid: like a wamb;
 Where thousands of rivers in rains
 Of blood pour down the mountains to cool
 The eternal fires beating without
 From Eternals; & like a black globe
 View'd by sons of Eternity, standing
 On the shore of the infinite ocean
 Like a human heart struggling & beating
 The vast world of Urizen appeared.

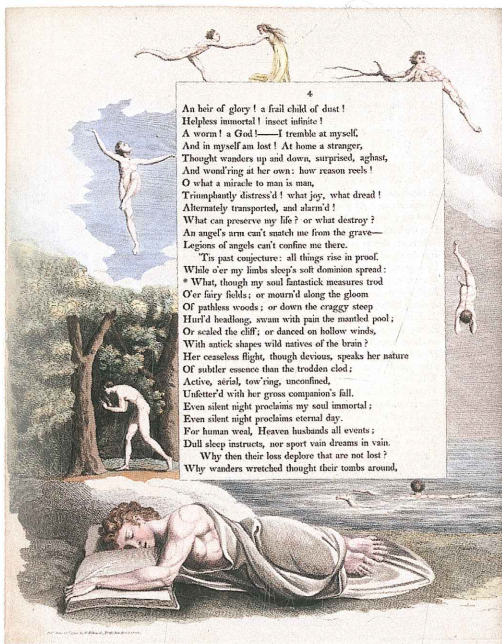
8. And Los round the dark globe of
 Urizen,
 Kept watch for Eternals to combine
 The obscure separation alone;
 For Eternity stood wide apart



12 William Blake, *The Song of Los*, recreated design for plates 3–4 based on copy B.

working on this book Blake was also experimenting with colour-printing techniques that would enable him to print paintings from gessoed millboards onto thick wove paper, which he then finished in watercolours and pen and ink. The resulting twelve large colour-printed drawings (monotypes, approximately 54 x 42 cm), all executed in 1795, are among Blake's greatest achievements as an artist. Though certainly influenced by his earlier experiments in colour-printing illuminated books, they also influenced the conception and execution of *The Song of Los*. Plates 1, 2, 5 and 8 are full-page monotypes, printed in colours from both sides of two gessoed millboards, where the designs were outlined probably in pen and ink, filled in with colours and printed – the same technique used for the large colour-printed drawings. These beautiful illustrations were an afterthought, however, added to the text plates comprising 'Africa' and 'Asia', which Blake had initially conceived and executed on two oblong pieces of copper as autonomous but related designs. Blake initially divided his text for each section into two columns within a horizontal – or 'landscape' – format, a format used for paintings and prints but not in his time for the text of books (illus. 12).

'Africa' and 'Asia', as originally executed, fuse poetry, painting and printmaking in ways even more radical than in the other illuminated books. They function autonomously as painted poems or written paintings, with text superimposed on a landscape design. Each design could have been matted, framed, viewed and read



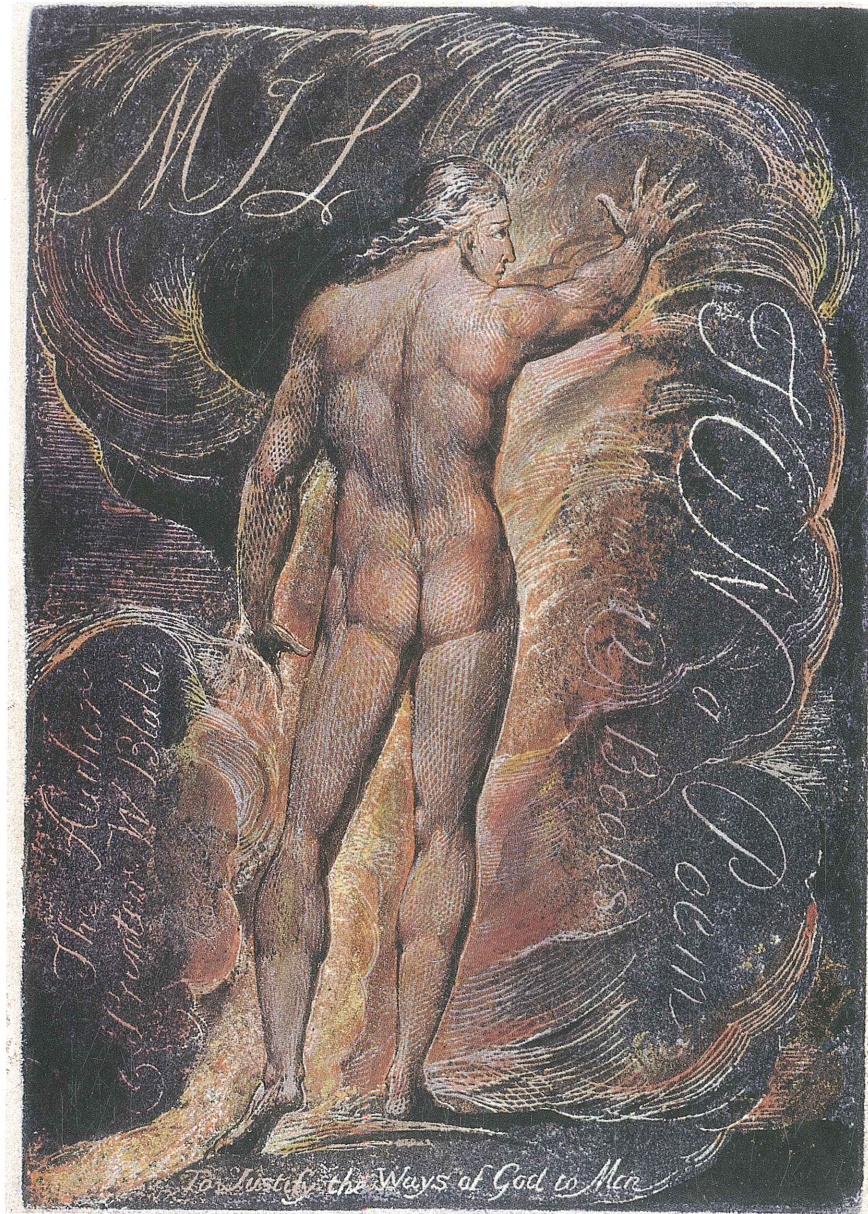
like a separate colour print or painting. Together, they suggest an ancient scroll (illus. 13), the predecessor of the printed codex, and thus a fitting medium for the Eternal Prophet. They did not, however, function so well as book pages. By masking one side of the design, probably with a sheet of paper, Blake was able to print each text column separately. Hence, he transformed a coherent horizontal design 27.2 cm wide into two seemingly independent vertical designs or pages approximately 13.6 cm wide.

13 William Blake, *The Song of Los*, digitally recreated design for plates 3–4 and 6–7 as pages stitched together to form a diptych; based on copy E.

14 William Blake, *The Complaint, and the Night Thoughts*, plate 3.

By 1795, with a stock of illuminated books, Blake began to redirect his considerable energies toward other projects. Over the next five years he executed 537 watercolour illustrations to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, each surrounding – or seemingly lying behind – an off-centred text, engraving 43 of them for the only volume printed of the projected four. At least 27 copies of this volume were hand coloured (illus. 14). Using the same format, Blake executed 116 illustrations to Thomas Gray's *Poems*, which were commissioned in 1797 by his friend, the sculptor John Flaxman, as a gift for his wife Ann. The *Night Thoughts* project also influenced Blake's subsequent writings, as is most directly reflected by his dividing his long manuscript poem, *Vala*, into nine 'Nights', the same number and type of divisions in Young's poem. Blake's epic, which evolved into *The Four Zoas*, an exploration of the fourfold division of fallen consciousness, remained in manuscript, heavily revised and accompanied by designs that, like his *Night Thoughts* illustrations, surround the text. Blake eventually abandoned the poem, probably around 1807, but used material from it in his last two illuminated books, *Milton a Poem* and *Jerusalem*.

Throughout *Milton*, Blake experimented with new etching techniques that emulate the appearance of white-line wood engraving and black-line woodcut and which give the book a rough, primitive appearance. The lines in the title page (illus. 15), for example, were drawn with a needle through an acid-resistant



15 William Blake, *Milton a Poem*, copy D, plate 1 (title-plate).

ground and etched into the plate, as in intaglio etching, but because the plate was printed in relief, that is, from the surface, the uninked incised lines printed white, as in a negative. Delineated in a combination of white and black lines, 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. The title page is dated 1804, but it was not until around 1811 that Blake produced the first three of its four extant copies, and he continued working on the fourth until around 1818. The three-directional text of the title page announces 'a Poem in 12 Books', a clear reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as is the inscription along the bottom of the plate, 'To Justify the Ways of God to Man'. The poem, however, is divided into two parts: in the first, Milton, inspired by a bard's song, descends from heaven and returns to earth in order to correct the errors he had left behind; in the second, Milton's female 'emanation', Ololon, also returns to earth, and the poem culminates in their apocalyptic union.



16 William Blake,
*Jerusalem: The
 Emanation of the Giant
 Albion*, copy E, plate 37.

Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion, at 100 plates Blake's longest illuminated book, is also dated 1804 on its title page, but was not printed in its entirety until about 1820. The plates were etched in relief, with many designs in white-line etching, 60 of which may have been completed by 1807; a few examples were exhibited in 1812. The poem tells of efforts to awaken the self-divided and sleeping giant Albion and reunite him with his female 'emanation', Jerusalem, the two separated at the fall from Eternity into the material world. Albion's cruel sons and daughters and the nature goddess Vala impose obstacles and temptations, but Los (the artist's imagination and Blake's alter ego and builder of the City of Art) eventually triumphs, with the help of Jesus, who is more prominent here than in any of Blake's other illuminated books. In plate 37, a white-line etching transformed in copy E into black line by its elaborate colouring, Jesus assists Albion, who faints as – or because – the bat-winged Spectre hides the sleeping, butterfly-winged Jerusalem (illus. 16).

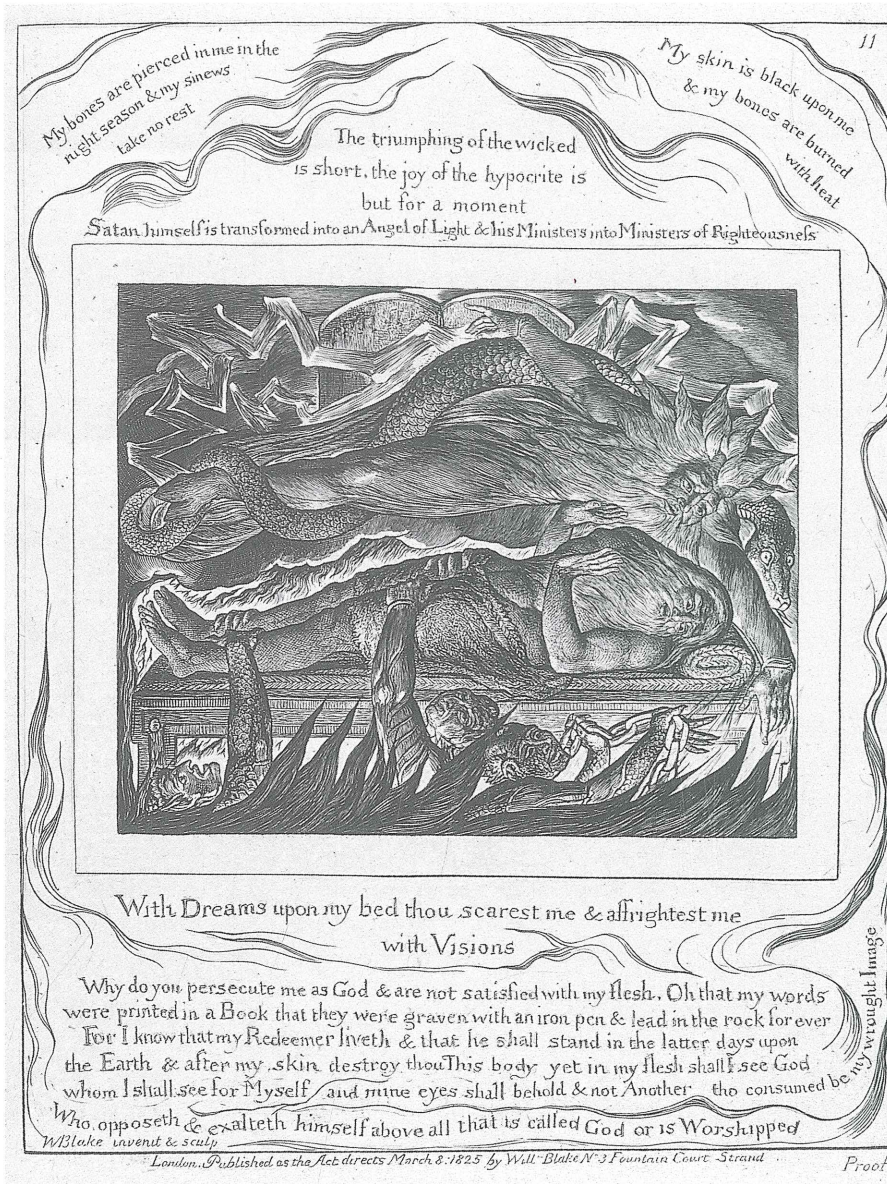
III

On 12 April 1827, around four months before he died, Blake wrote to his lifelong friend George Cumberland to thank him for trying to sell copies of his recently published engraved illustrations to the Book of Job. The 22 Job engravings are 'pure engravings', executed entirely with burins and without preliminary etching, with tone subordinate to line and texture, with lines amassed in parallel strokes rather than in the conventional 'dot and lozenge' pattern, and with biblical texts engraved throughout the border designs (illus. 17). Blake's emulation of the ancient engravers produced his greatest work as an intaglio printmaker, but it was a masterpiece few were willing to buy. Cumberland thought the illuminated books would sell better, but the prospect of printing new copies did not excite their maker:

... having none remaining of all that I had Printed I cannot Print more Except at a great loss for at the time I printed those things I had a whole House to range in now I am shut up in a Corner therefore am forced to ask a Price for them that I scarce expect to get from a Stranger. I am now Printing a Set of the Songs of Innocence & Experience for a Friend at Ten Guineas which I cannot do under Six Months consistent with my other Work, so that I have little hope of doing any more of such things. (E 783-84)

Blake's 'Corner' was two fair-sized rooms in the Strand – much less space than the 'eight or ten rooms' (BR 560) in Lambeth, or the first-floor apartment in South Molton Street which he moved to upon returning from Felpham and produced *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. He was working on his Dante watercolour illustrations and engravings, among other things, and was not set up for printing the illuminated plates. The steep increase in the cost of his books is due to the style in which he was then producing them, which required more labour and time. Blake printed the plate borders, printed on only one side of the leaf, and elaborately coloured the impression, strengthening lines in pen and ink, often adding gold leaf and emphasizing the rectangular printed shape with frame lines or border designs drawn around the plate (illus. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 16). The impressions now looked more like miniature paintings than 'printed manuscripts'.

Though dubious about their prospects, Blake listed six books he was willing to reprint: *America*, *Europe* and *Urizen* for £6 6s., *Visions* for £5 5s., *Thel* for £3 3s., and *Songs* for £10 10s. In a letter to Dawson Turner in 1818, he lists these books for one to two pounds less, and *Songs* for £6 6s., the price he charged his patron Thomas Butts for copy E in 1806. These prices are many times those advertised in the Prospectus (E 693). Such high prices, Blake's control over all stages of production, and even Quid's name and desires, have led some critics to assume an economic motivation behind the invention of illuminated printing. Alexander Gilchrist, Blake's first biographer, assumed that illuminated printing was a financial turning point, providing the 'principle means of support through his future life' (1:69). According to Northrop Frye, Blake wanted to 'make him[self] independent of publishers as well as of patrons, so that he could achieve personal independence as both poet and painter at a single blow.' W.J.T. Mitchell adds that 'Blake clearly had high hopes that "Illuminated printing" would make his fortune.'³



17 William Blake, *The Book of Job*, plate 12 ('Job's Evil Dreams').

This assumption, however, ignores the fact that approximately 75 per cent of Blake's stock, or 125 illuminated books (including copies of *Innocence* and *Experience* that were initially produced or issued separately) of 168 extant copies of illuminated books (excluding the late works of one plate, *On Homers Poetry* and *Laocoön*, and two plates, *The Ghost of Abel*), were produced between 1789 and 1795 and almost certainly sold at the prices nearer those listed in the prospectus of 1793 than the much higher prices recorded in 1818 and 1827. Indeed, in 1789, when he first began using relief etching to publish poetry, Blake had produced 22 copies of *Innocence*, presumably selling them for the Prospectus price of five shillings a copy, which would have grossed £5 10s., minus the approximately £1 1s the book probably cost to produce.⁴ The income from the 40 or so copies of the other five books advertised in the Prospectus would have realized under seventeen pounds. The total value of his stock of books produced through 1793, in other words, was the equivalent of the labour required to engrave just one medium-sized separate plate for the publishers – which was the equivalent of about three months' income.⁵ Of the 111 engravings of various sizes that Blake had produced between 1789 and 1795, he had executed 80 between 1790 and 1793, which suggests that he concentrated on

illuminated printing during 1789–90 and 1793–5, intervals that correspond exactly with the books' printed dates; and, more importantly, suggests that he underwrote the cost of his original productions with his commercial work and that his new, original work could not free him financially from commercial engraving or patrons.

The huge increase in the 1818 and 1827 prices relative to those of 1793 reflect a change in Blake's idea of the book, from books of poems to series of hand-coloured prints, from prints as pages to prints as paintings. For example, the £3 3s. for *Innocence* in 1818 translates as approximately 2s. 5d. per print, which was the average price for an octavo-sized hand-coloured print, according to print catalogues of Boydell, Macklin and other print dealers. We do not know when Blake began charging the higher prices; the earliest known example is 1806, when Blake assembled *Songs* copy E from impressions printed in 1789, 1794 and 1795 because his stock of copies was already depleted. Most of these remaining impressions were poorly printed and forced Blake to rewrite texts carefully in pen and ink and to recolour the designs. This extra labour transformed *Songs* copy E into a series of splendid miniature paintings and no doubt accounts for its higher price. It influenced the printing and colouring styles of late copies of the books, the print-runs of which were limited to just two or three copies.

From the perspective of the writer, Blake's ability to publish himself is extraordinary; from the perspective of a painter and an original printmaker accustomed to controlling all stages in the production of an image, it is a matter of course, less about wanting such control for its own sake than about wanting to control form, more a matter of aesthetics than economics or ideology. With that aesthetic freedom, however, came the personal freedom from publishing conventions, class structures and other variety of institutional control. The tools of writing, drawing and sketching encouraged him to improvise, to integrate invention and execution in ways defeated by conventional printing and publishing. They enabled him to take a poem and maybe a vignette and to design the page directly on the copper plate as though he were drawing on paper. Blake's twenty years of drawing experience made this possible and the exigencies of the technique made it necessary, because the methods used by engravers to transfer designs did not technically work in relief etching. Moreover, except for a few full-page white-line etchings, Blake had no technical need to transfer a page design or any of its parts, since he was engaged neither in cutting it into the plate nor in translating it into different kinds of lines.

Blake realized very early that his new medium's autographic nature made the poem the only prerequisite for executing plates, that *rewriting texts* was also an act of visual invention, and thus that the medium could be used for production rather than reproduction. With no page designs to transfer or reproduce, the placement and extent of text, letter size and line spacing, as well as placement and extent of illustration, were invented only during execution. For single-plate work, like most of the *Songs*, Blake usually started with text and illustrated around it, visually composing the page design while executing it. For units of plates within a narrative, like *Marriage*, he could begin with a vignette, knowing he had enough room for the text to spill over to subsequent plates, and end with a vignette if there was room, as he did with *Marriage* plate 10 (illus. 5). This method of designing meant that Blake did not know what lines

or stanzas would go on what plate, or how many plates a poem, section or book would need. Working without models allowed each illuminated print and book to evolve through its production in ways impossible in conventional book-making. As in sketching and drawing, illuminated printing allowed execution to generate invention, as well as enabling Blake to begin etching plates for a book or series before it was completely written, as he surely did with *Urizen*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.

The idea that an artist's first and spontaneous thoughts are most valuable because they are closest to the original creative spark, often obliterated by high finishing, had become very popular in the late eighteenth century, creating a taste for drawings and sketches and motivating printmakers to invent intaglio techniques, such as stipple, chalk engraving and aquatint, to reproduce them in facsimile and to simulate their various media and their visual characteristics and textures (for example, chalk, crayon and pen and wash). Such prints, however, were meticulously executed with needles, roulettes (a textured wheel used to roughen the plate's surface to produce tonalities), and other metal tools, their spontaneity a carefully crafted illusion. Blake, on the other hand, by actually using the tools and techniques of writing and drawing, had solved the technical problem of reproducing autographic pen and brush marks in metal. He was, quite literally, producing, not reproducing, 'printed manuscripts' and 'printed drawings'. In doing so, he created a multimedia site where poetry, painting and printmaking came together in ways that were both original and characteristic of Romanticism's fascination with spontaneity and the idea of the sketch.

Blake's illuminated books were produced as fine limited editions. They were not invented to secure financial independence, and they didn't. On the other hand, they did provide the means for Blake to express and publish himself without interference from the tastes of others. And though Blake stated in his Prospectus that his method cut production costs, the savings lay primarily in the author providing the manuscript, design and labour gratis. The method itself, while autographic in nature, was still labour intensive and not a cost-effective means of production. And while printing relief-etched plates was not difficult, it was slow compared to printing books in the standard way, because unlike type or stereotype, the relief-etched plate could not be inked on the bed of the press. Considering how few copies Blake produced during his early press runs, one can see why he told Turner that he was 'never . . . able to produce a Sufficient number for a general Sale', and why the books proved 'unprofitable enough to [him] tho Expensive to the Buyer' (E 771). But from the perspective of an artist accustomed to producing unique works, such as paintings and watercolour drawings, the books provided aesthetic freedom as well as wider audiences and greater opportunities to make his reputation, which he acknowledged to Turner: 'The Few I have Printed and Sold are sufficient to have gained me great reputation as an Artist which was the chief thing Intended.' He also insisted, though, that printing illuminated plates 'without the Writing' was at 'the Loss of some of the best things For they when Printed perfect accompany Poetical Personifications & Acts without which Poems they never could have been Executed' (E 771).