**William Blake Returns to Illuminated Printing: A Close Reading of Blake’s Letter to Dawson Turner, 9 June 1818**

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**ABSTRACT**

William Blake’s letter to Dawson Turner, dated 9 June 1818, is a fascinating document for what it says, implies, and excludes. Turner is explicitly requesting small monoprints of the kind Blake executed in 1796 for Osiaz Humphry, a selection of designs from illuminated books without text, now known as the *Small Book of Designs* and the *Large Book of Designs*. Blake expresses no interest in producing them and directs Turner away from a selection of color prints to a selection of illuminated books and large monoprints, which he refers to as “Large prints” and first produced as a group of twelve in 1795. Blake acknowledges that he can reprint the books and monoprints “at least as well as any I have yet Produced.” With very few exceptions, Blake had not printed illuminated books in twenty-three years, a color print in twenty-two years, or a monoprint in thirteen years. Turner provided the opportunity for Blake to resume illuminated printing, which he did that year but not for Turner. He did not resume color printing or monoprinting. Blake’s letter allows us to question the meaning of—and reasons for—the hiatus and resumption of illuminated printing and whether Blake preferred illuminated printing to color printing or monoprinting. Blake’s letter to Turner raises questions that must be addressed if we are to understand why Blake stopped printing his early poetry, what returning to it means, and Blake’s idea himself as a graphic artist in the last decade of his life.

“Lackingtons, I see have a copy of the 1st edition of Blake’s Blair’s Grave at a price that seems to me cheap”

(Dawson Turner, 21 December 1817, to William Upcott)

“Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War only”

(Blake, *Laocoon*, c. 1827)

**I. The Letter to Dawson Turner**

On 9 June 1818, William Blake writes Dawson Turner of Greater Yarmouth, Norfolk:

Sir

I send you a List of the different Works you have done me the honour to enquire after —unprofitable enough to me tho Expensive to the Buyer Those I Printed for Mr Humphry are a selection from the different Books of such as could be Printed without the Writing tho to 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

£ / d

America 18 Prints folio 5.5.0

Europe 17 do folio 5.5.0

Visions & 8 do folio 3.3.0

Thel 6 do Quarto 2.2.0

Songs of Innocence 28 do Octavo 3.3.0

Songs of Experience 26 do Octavo 3.3.0

Urizen 28 Prints Quarto 5.5.0

Milton 50 do Quarto 10.10.0

12 Large prints Size of Each

about 2 feet by 1 & ½ Historical

& Poetical Printed in Colours

Each 5.5.0

These last 12 Prints are unaccompanied by any writing

The few I have Printed & Sold are sufficient to have gained me great reputation as an Artist which was the chief thing Intended. But I have never been able to produce a Sufficient number for a general Sale by means of a regular Publisher It is therefore necessary to me that any Person wishing to have any or all of them should send me their Order to Print them on the above terms & I will take care that they shall be done at least as well as any I have yet Produced

I am Sir with many thanks for your very Polite approbation of my works

Your most obedient Servant

William Blake

9 June 1818

17 South Molton Street

(Erdman [hereafter E] 771; illus. [1a.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.a.jpg) [b.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.b.jpg) [c.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.c.jpg) [d.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.d.jpg))

Dawson Turner (1775–1858) was by this time a very successful banker and botanist, the author of numerous illustrated botanical treatises in English and Latin. He was a Fellow of the Linnean Society since 1797, of the Royal Society since 1802, and “was elected to Academies in Edinburgh, Dublin, Stockholm, Rouen, Caen, Leipzig and Berlin” (Goodman 11). He was also a collector of books, prints, paintings, and, when he wrote to Blake, of manuscripts and autographs. By 1818, Turner had begun his career as an antiquarian and was writing the letters that formed his *Account of a Tour in Normandy*, published in 1820. The *Account* was illustrated with drawings of tombs, sepulchers, bas reliefs, and statuary executed by the great architectural draughtsman and Norwich landscape watercolorist, John Sell Cotman, his friend and protégé*.*[[1]](#endnote-2)

Blake at the time was sorely in need of work, either from collectors, print and/or book publishers, or a patron. John Linnell (1792-1882), Blake’s last patron, was a landscape and portrait painter as well as a self-taught engraver. His painting student, George Cumberland, Jr., the son of Blake’s dear friend George Cumberland (1754-1848), introduced him to Blake. In an undated letter, Junior wrote his father to tell him that “Linnel has promised to get him some work” (BR2 340). Linnell hired Blake to help him on his engraving of Mr. Upton, a Baptist preacher. He records in his diary for 24 June 1818 that he had brought “the Picture of Mr Upton & the Copper Plate—to begin the engraving” (BR2 340–41), indicating that he and Blake had already met, completed their negotiations, and prepared the materials for the project, raising the possibility that they met before Blake answered Turner.[[2]](#endnote-3)

Linnell summed up Blake’s previous four years as his having “scarcely enough employment to live by at the prices he could obtain[;] everything in Art was at a low ebb then. Even [J. M. W.] Turner could not sell his pictures for as many hundreds as they have since fetched thousands” (Bentley, *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. [hereafter *BR2*] 341). Between 1814 and 1816, Blake had engraved Flaxman’s designs for *Hesiod*, all thirty-seven plates, in light stipple outline, for which he was paid £5.5 apiece, totaling just under £200 for about three years-worth of work (Essick, *Commercial Engravings* 100–101). In 1816, he supplemented his income with a commission from Wedgewood—no doubt arranged by Flaxman, who designed for them—to execute drawings of earthenware and porcelain bowls and to engrave eighteen plates after them, for which he was paid £30 (96). These sums average out to around £75 a year for the period, a bit less than £00 the average printer, compositor, or other like tradesmen made a year. Blake’s income was to sink further, to around £50 per annum for much of the last decade of his life, though that came with more security in the form of Linnell’s patronage and agency. Blake appears to have suffered a complete absence of engraving commissions in 1817 (the last plates for *Hesiod* were signed 1 January 1817). In 1818, Blake had finished two very uncharacteristic engravings in stipple, dated 2 March 1818 and now exceedingly rare, for Christian Borckhardt after his *Child of Nature* and *Child of Art*. By the end of 1818, Blake would, as a journeyman engraver, complete just two more engravings, both for Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* (BR2 822), which may have been commissioned after the letter to Turner.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Thomas Butts (1757-1845), Blake’s first major patron and the person most responsible for Blake having a career as a painter, commissioning over 200 temperas and watercolors between 1799 and c. 1816, was buying infrequently now—if at all. Butts’ first acquisition appears to have been *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* copy F, c. 1794 (Viscomi “Signing” [hereafter “Signing”] 385). His last commission appears to have been the twelve designs of *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, executed on paper dated 1816, which corresponds with Blake’s visit to the bibliographer T. F. Dibdin (1776-1847) in the summer of 1816 to discuss “the minor poems of Milton” (BR2 327). The twelve designs of *Paradise Regained*, executed in the same manner and on the same paper, were acquired by Linnell in 1825 (BR2 00), apparently executed in 1816 on speculation.

Any commission from Turner would surely have been welcomed—even etching drawings of tombs, sepulchers, bas reliefs, and statuary, as Blake had done when assisting his master James Basire (1730-1802) in the 1770s for the Society of Antiquities and Richard Gough’s *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* (1786). Turner, however, had something else in mind and did not contact Blake to etch Cotman’s drawings, which Mrs. Turner and their daughters were to do (Goodman 00). He “enquire[d] after” Blake’s “different Works,” specifically “Those . . . Printed for Mr Humphry,” which Blake identifies as “a selection from the different Books of such as could be Printed without the Writing.” Blake is here referring to the *Small Book of Designs* copy A and the *Large Book of Designs*, which Blake created by early 1796 for Osiaz Humphry (1742-1810), a renowned miniaturist (PP 00). In addition to the “selection,” Humphry owned *America* copy H, printed in 1793; *Experience* copy H, one of four copies color printed in 1794 while *Experience* was in progress; and *Europe* copy D, color printed recto-verso in 1794 (PP 00).[[4]](#endnote-5)

The *Large Book of Designs* is a miscellany comprised of eight etchings and relief-etchings printed in colors, and the *Small* *Book of Designs* copy A is a miscellany comprised of twenty-three illuminated plates printed in colors. The leaves of the large book (34.5 x 24.5 cm) are the size of Humphry’s copy of *Europe*, to which they were bound. The vignettes comprising the small book were mostly the size of the plates in Humphry’s copy of *Experience*, but were printed on slightly larger leaves (26 x 19 cm.), which, like those comprising an illuminated book, were stabbed to form a separate volume. Thirteen plates in the small book were from *Urizen*, the one illuminated book from 1794 that Humphry did not own, and were supplemented with a few vignettes from *The Book of Thel*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, from 1789, 1790, and 1793 respectively, copies of which Humphry also did not own.[[5]](#endnote-6) For the books of designs, in other words, Blake selected designs that he knew were not in Humphry’s collection.

By 1818, Humphry’s illuminated books and books of designs were in the collection of William Upcott (1779-1845), his son and Turner’s close friend and fellow collector of autographs**.**[[6]](#endnote-7) They were—or were among—"the different Works” which elicited Turner’s “very Polite approbation” and enquiry to see if more of their kind were to be had. We cannot be sure if “Large prints” were among the “different Works”; Turner may have known *of* them, but he seems unlikely to have seen an example. Upcott did not own any of the large monoprints, and Butts, who owned eleven, seems unlikely to have shown Turner his Blake collection. One to three other collectors appear to have acquired monoprints from Blake between 1806 and 1810 (“Signing” 00), but, like those in Butts’ collection, none of these monoprints shows signs of being a print, and five of them were signed “Fresco W Blake inv.” Had Turner seen a monoprint, he would have experienced it as a drawing (watercolor or body color on paper), like John Ruskin had, or painting, like Dante Rossetti and Alexander and Anne Gilchrist had, and not have recognized it as a print.[[7]](#endnote-8) Knowing that the colors were printed presupposes a well-informed source or witness, somebody informed of that fact by Blake—which raises a question to be examined below: Were large color prints actually among the “different Works”? Or did Blake include “Large prints” and describe them as “unaccompanied by any writing” to interest Turner in less “compromised” (and more expensive) replacements for the “selection” of the smaller color prints that were also “without the Writing”?

Blake’s letter to Turner is one of only six letters by Blake extant between 1806 and 1818. It is only one of three documents penned by Blake that lists illuminated books and their prices, and the only document other than Blake’s March 1806 account with Butts (BR2 763) that mentions the large color prints. This twelve-year period resembles the twenty-year period between 1779 and 1799, when Blake began his career as an engraver, became a publisher of commercial and original prints and his own poetry, exhibited watercolor drawings at the Royal Academy, invented illuminated printing, produced fourteen illuminated books, sold many copies of most of them, invented monoprinting, illustrated Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* and Thomas Gray’s *Poems*, and began to paint designs in tempera of subjects from the Old Testament for Butts. From this rich period of production only six letters are extant; none records a sale of an illuminated book; one, in 1799, mentions the “small Pictures from the Bible” and records an attempt at selling a drawing, and another, a week later, records Blake’s intemperate response to the customer rejecting that drawing (E 702-4). The invoices of Butts, a professional clerk, and Linnell, a business-savvy artist, and the incomplete account books of Flaxman are the only primary records of sales and prices extant. From secondary sources we learn that the Rev. Thomas paid £10.10 in 1801 for the eight watercolor designs of Milton’s *Comus* and Rev. Jebb paid £10.10 in 1830 for *Songs* copy W (Gilchrist, *Life of Blake*, I 00, 00).

Personal letters are often a significant source for understanding the intentions and motivations of artists and writers. Unfortunately, they are missing for nearly thirty of Blake’s forty-eight years as a professional engraver, artist, and poet. Given this paucity of documentation, Blake’s letter to Turner stands out and, by contrast, may appear more significant than it is. But I think not. It marks the moment that Blake was willing to return to a body of work that he had, with very few exceptions, not touched in twenty-three years. He had not printed copies of *Thel*, *Visions*, *Europe*, or *Urizen* since 1795; nor had he printed copies of works not mentioned in his letter: *There is No Natural Religion*, *All Religions are One*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*, *Book of Los*, *Book of Ahania*, or *Song of Los*. Blake had not printed etchings or relief etchings in colors since 1796, or created another large color-printed design since 1795, or reprinted any of the large monoprint matrices since 1805, when he reprinted *Newton* and *Nebuchadnezzar*. Blake’s letter expresses a change of mind about a large body of his early artistic work, a change of mind that made possible his resurgence in his final decade as poet, publisher, original printmaker, and painter.

As a biographical document, Blake’s letter to Turner is fascinating for what it says, implies, and excludes. It raises questions that must be addressed if we are to understand Blake’s idea of himself as a graphic artist in the last ten years of his life, why he stopped printing nearly all of his early works, and why he resumed illuminated printing but not color printing or monoprinting. The core questions are: Is Blake genuinely reluctant to reprint books of designs? If so, why? Is he sincere in defending the aesthetic integrity of his illuminated books, or does he use the idea of indivisibility as a ploy to redirect Turner to more expensive works?

Before addressing these questions, we need first to discern Turner’s motives for writing Blake.

**II. Dawson Turner, Autograph Collector**

According to A. N. L. Munby, the development of Turner’s interest in manuscripts and autographs owed much to Upcott, whom Turner had met by 1816.[[8]](#endnote-9) The slightly older Upcott, the major collector of autographs of the day, “encouraged the neophyte with advice and with gifts and exchanges of duplicates. By early 1818 the collection was large enough to be left in London with Upcott for the provision of an index” (36). In a letter of 17 January 1818, Upcott criticized “his pupil’s methods”:

Shall I be candid and tell you my real opinion? I *do not* approve of it. I have looked over many collections—but have never seen them so arranged—pasting so many on a leaf in so promiscuous a manner—and in every position but the right—offends the eye, at least such an eye as mine, excessively. Why not allow a leaf to each name—two would look far preferable—and would prevent the dreadful *mutilation which many have suffered from the Binder’s Knife*. You say that you have sufficient for two volumes more; *class* them . . . Let each letter have a guard, so that it may be read at the back. When it happens that you have only a signature, I would still give it a page and if you can add a portrait, the interest must be materially increased.

(Munby 36, italics added)

The fellow bibliophiles and collectors became lifelong friends. Upcott, whom Turner referred to as “indefatigable” in his obituary notice in *Gentleman’s Magazine*, November 1845 (541), had acquired over 35,000 autographs by his death, including a visionary autograph/drawing by Blake signed/drawn on 16 January 1826 (illus. [2](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/2.jpg)). Turner was to acquire over 40,000 autographs by the time of his death in 1858.[[9]](#endnote-10)

Bentley suggests that Turner may have learned of Blake from Upcott, who may have “talked about his father’s friendship with Blake and his collection of Blake’s works, urging Turner to write to Blake himself” (BR2 330). Bentley bases his suggestion on a letter of 21 December 1817, in which Turner asked Upcott for a favor: “You took, I think, from Yarmouth a list of 2 or 3 books to be got for me. Lackingtons, I see have a copy of the 1st edition of Blake’s Blair’s Grave at a price that seems to me cheap,” by which he meant £2.12.6 for the bound volume (BR2 330).[[10]](#endnote-11) Turner, however, could have learned about Blake from his dear friend Thomas Phillips (1770-1845), the portrait painter who painted Blake’s portrait in 1805 for the frontispiece to *The Grave* (1808) and whose portrait of Earl Spencer Blake had engraved c. 1813 (BR2 822). Phillips, who was known to have been impressed by Blake’s *Grave* designs (BR2 265), travelled through France with Turner, visiting the Louvre with him in the autumn of 1815 and drew Turner’s portrait in 1816, which Mrs. Turner etched (Goodman 26). Another friend was Dibdin, the bibliographer, whom Turner met c. 1815 (Goodman 73). As noted, Dibdin met Blake in the summer of 1816, if not earlier, by which time he owned an early copy of *Innocence* (BB 410) and possibly *Thel* copy J and *Visions* copy G (BB 128, 474). Turner, as art, print, book, or autograph collector, may have heard about this fascinating multi-talented artist-poet before writing Upcott in December 1817, and he may have seen one or more illuminated books, possibly in Dibdin’s collection, before seeing the “different Works” in Upcott’s collection. However, he probably had not seen any works printed in colors until he examined Upcott’s copies of *Experience* and *Europe* and the two books of designs.

Turner’s very detailed description of Upcott’s rooms in his obituary notice indicates repeated visits, but the date of his first visit is unknown, other than it necessarily having occurred before he wrote Blake, perhaps when he left his autograph collection or retrieved it in January 1818.[[11]](#endnote-12) Whenever and however he first heard of Blake, Turner probably did not receive Blake’s response until months after it was sent. He was travelling in Normandy in June, July, and August of 1818, composing the thirty letters that make up his two-volume *Account*, returning home suddenly to take over a branch of the family bank mismanaged by his brother (*Account* vi). He is not known to have acquired any works by Blake, perhaps because he was otherwise occupied when the opportunity presented itself.[[12]](#endnote-13) Or perhaps Turner’s real objective was to secure Blake’s autograph.

In 1818, according to Munby, “Turner’s autograph collection was regarded as an agreeable hobby and not the subject of large expenditure, which up to the second decade of the century was devoted to his picture gallery” (36) and botanical collection (Dawson 232). Munby suggests that Turner’s passion for collecting autographs took hold early in 1820, when he acquired a share of the great Cox Macro’s manuscript collection (37).[[13]](#endnote-14) Turner, however, began collecting autographs around 1815, taking it seriously enough, as noted, to show his collection to Upcott by January 1818 and, in February, to acquire with Upcott a collection of Napoleonic documents (Munby 36–37). Moreover, Turner used James Heath (1756–1827), the Historical Engraver to the King, who was a well-established and successful London line engraver, Blake’s exact contemporary, to secure autographs of famous painters with whom Heath had worked. When Heath first provided Turner with autographs is not clear, but engraver and collector began corresponding in the fall of 1817 (Heath 77). The practice of acquiring autographs indirectly, by using surrogates to collect them, became quite common as autograph collecting became popular. Upcott notes its increased popularity in a letter to Turner on 13 January 1826: “With the public great is the rage just now for everything *autographic*. . . . Not a week passes but some new collector introduces himself to my notice and sighs for a *rummage* over some of my indigested bundles of old papers—and, when in the humour, I give them a momentary degree of temporal gratification—and send them away rejoicing” (qted. in Munby 8).[[14]](#endnote-15)

Upcott’s autograph of Blake’s was acquired indirectly in 1826. It is in the second of two albums of signatures entitled “Reliques of my Contemporaries,” which consisted of signatures of artists and writers written between 1820 and 1828.[[15]](#endnote-16) Blake signs in as “One who is very much delighted with being in good Company,” referring to the other signees of the album, not to a social gathering at Upcott’s apartment. Indeed, Blake thanks Samuel Leigh, bookseller, who appears to have hosted the album at the time (Erdman, “Reliques” 586). The album passed among Leigh, John Thomas Smith, then keeper of prints in the British Museum, and William Hone, a bookseller and political satirist, and others—all of whom helped Upcott secure the album’s autographs. While unlikely, Turner conceivably sought Blake’s autograph and nothing more. Or, if that was not his original intention—and his receipt of a second, now untraced letter from Blake suggests that it was not (see note 10)— the autograph could have become his objective when in hand and may explain the absence of other Blakes in his collection.

Turner was a credible collector, a person to be answered, and not a member of “that troublesome and increasing sect,” as Southey termed “autograph collectors” (Munby 10). Unfortunately, we cannot be sure of Turner’s initial intentions or how specific he was about Blake’s various works without his letter. We can, however, deduce Blake’s hopes from his response. He identifies some of his “different Works,” all of which are original works of graphic art and finished in colors, grouping them into three categories: books of designs, illuminated books, and large color prints, aka monoprints. He presents the latter two kinds of work as alternatives to the one kind of work that clearly interested Turner.

**III. The Books of Designs and “Large prints . . . in Colours”**

Blake’s “Large prints . . . in Colours” are monoprints. They are quite literally *printed paintings*—pictures painted in thick water-miscible colors on flat surfaces (most of which were millboards given a gesso ground) and transferred by printing press to dampened paper where they were finished in watercolors and pen and ink.[[16]](#endnote-17) Blake’s method for printing colors to produce paintings was radical and new. Contemporary printmaking and painting treatises do not mention it. Blake referred to them as “prints” in his 1806 receipt account with Butts (BR2 764) and again in his letter to Turner. These are the only documents extant in which he mentions them. He appears to have reconceived them as paintings around c. 1808 or 1809, signing five of them “Fresco W Blake inv.” (“Signing” 00). Today, the monoprints are referred to as “color printed drawings” and “large color prints,” descriptions which are not quite accurate. They are drawings printed in colors on paper, the conventional support of drawings and watercolors, but because the colors are thick and opaque, impressions look and feel like paintings. An accurate description would be “color printed painting,” a painting made by applying colors to a support indirectly and directly, by transferring colors and finishing.

They are also referred to as “monotypes” (Blunt 58, Lister, *Infernal* 58), which is technically incorrect. Monotypes, like monoprints, are images made or constructed on a matrices that are printed onto paper. Unlike conventional prints, no two impressions of the same design can be exactly the same because painting matrices and finishing impressions involved a high degree of improvisation, hence the oxymoronic “*mono*print” and “*mono*type.” Monotypes, however, are purely improvisational images because they are printed from matrices without fixed forms or lines (Grabowski 187). Once the matrix is cleaned, the design ceases to exist. Proof that Blake’s designs are monoprints—that outlines were fixed on matrices—liess in the form of “1804” watermarks in impressions of *Newton* and *Nebuchadnezzar* (Butlin, “Newly” 101). The outlines for these designs were necessarily fixed and present on the matrices to have been repainted and reprinted long after the matrices were made.

The monoprints have long been recognized, “from a purely artistic point of view,” as Blake’s “most successful compositions” (Blunt 62). Indeed, they are “probably the most accomplished, forceful, and effective of Blake's works in the visual arts” (Butlin 2). They are generally thought to have evolved from Blake’s *Small Book of Designs* and *Large Book of Designs,* which are groups of small monoprints. Both books are dated 1794 (Butlin 260, 262) and as such appear to be Blake’s first attempts at printing illuminated plates *as* independent designs and printing independent designs in colors. Butlin describes the books of designs as marking when “the illustrations literally broke free” of accompanying texts and 1794 as the year when “the distinction between books and independent works was beginning to break down” (“Physicality” 3). The idea that Blake moved from small to large monoprints is reasonable, but the books of designs were printed after the monoprints, probably in early 1796 as a special project for Ozias Humphry (PP 00). They are, in effect, the monoprints writ small. Humphry’s commission seems simple enough: a selection of original images not already in his collection, printed in the style and general leaf sizes of his copies of *Experience* and *Europe.*

The twelve large monoprint designs of 1795 and the thirty-one small monoprints “selected” for Humphry were independent designs, both groups “unaccompanied by any writing” and neither group forming a narrative.[[17]](#endnote-18) Blake reprinted three of the large monoprints in c. 1795-1796 and two in 1805 (“Signing” 00). He stopped printing illuminated books in colors after *Song of Los* in 1795 and the smaller illuminated plates as independent designs in c. 1796.[[18]](#endnote-19) In 1818, Blake tells Turner that he was willing to reprint the large designs but shows no interest in replicating the smaller group. Instead of *explicitly* refusing Turner’s request for a “selection,” however, Blake implies that the cost of filling it was unacceptable to him and, probably, to any serious book collector, because doing so required extracting plates from books and vignettes from plates, actions analogous to taking a metaphorical “Binder’s Knife” to the illuminated books. Such cutting up of books and pages for Humphry, however, was apparently not a problem. Did Blake compromise the aesthetic integrity of his illuminated books and/or himself in 1796? Or had Blake’s conception of illuminated books changed by 1818? Given the more complicated manner in which the thirty-one small monoprints were printed and finished, the two books of designs were probably priced higher than their four source books, though comprising fewer than half as many plates. With Humphry, Blake was both creative and practical. Was it not possible to be so with Turner?

Blake’s refusing Turner may indeed express a change of mind regarding his books’ aesthetic integrity, an idea that will be examined below. Alternatively, it may express Blake’s hopes for more money by redirecting Turner to more expensive works, an idea also to be examined below. What can be ruled out is the idea that Blake was concerned about the labor and time replicating the “selection” would require. Admittedly, the labor would have been substantial, with Blake needing to mask out texts, apply colors to the printable designs (to the relief and shallows of relief etchings and to the surface of etchings), print the plates, and, most important, define forms in the spongy cauldron of printed colors using watercolors and black pen and ink outlines. Labor would not have been an issue because nearly all of it was done. As he had with the large monoprints, Blake pulled two impressions per matrix, one after the other without replenishing colors, which gave him enough impressions to compile two copies of *Small Book of Designs*. Blake compiled the first pulls to form copy A for Humphry, but he hadn’t compiled the second pulls that comprise copy B until *after* 1818, which included color printed impressions of *Urizen* plates 9, 12, and 22, all full-plate designs not in copy A that were remainders from the 1794 printing of *Urizen*.[[19]](#endnote-20) The impressions comprising copy B, in other words, were on hand in 1818, which is confirmed by their having been inherited by Catherine Blake (1762-1831) and passed on to Frederick Tatham (1805-78) after she died.[[20]](#endnote-21)

The idea that copy B was not yet assembled when Blake wrote Turner appears self-evident by its absence from Blake’s list of things to sell, but also by the four frame lines around each design (illus. [3,](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/3.jpg) [4](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/4.jpg)). This style of framing designs appears not to have been used before *Songs* copy R (illus. [5](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/5.jpg)), which Blake sold to Linnell in August 1819 (BB 420); Blake also used this framing style for *Songs* copy V (illus. [7](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/7.jpg)), which he sold around 1821 to James Vine, Linnell’s friend (BIB 00, 00).[[21]](#endnote-22) The compilation of *Small Book of Designs* copy B, in fact, parallels that of *Songs* copy R, which was originally printed c. 1795 with *Songs* copy A as part of a deluxe set of illuminated books (BIB 00). The impressions comprising *Songs* copies R and A were first and second pulls, respectively, with the second impressions slightly lighter than the first (illus. [6](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/6.jpg)). The *Innocence* and *Experience* impressions for both copies R and A were originally printed and numbered as independent volumes without the combined title plate and without plate 52 (“To Tirzah”), which was not executed till later in 1795 (BIB 00).[[22]](#endnote-23)

The two sections of *Songs* copy A remained separate until the twentieth century (BB 00). Blake combined the two sections of *Songs* copy R when he sold them to Linnell. He added the combined title plate and “To Tirzah,” touched up the coloring and texts, renumbered the impressions 1-54, replaced (or added) “The Tyger” with an impression printed c. 1811, and added four frame lines rather than the single line he had used in ten copies of six titles printed c. 1818 (see below). Blake appears to have compiled the *Small Book of Designs* copy B impressions in 1819, around the time he reconfigured *Songs* copy R, using the latter work as his model. He touched up the coloring, numbered the impressions sequentially, added four frame lines in the same style, wrote inscriptions under each design, and stabbed the impressions like an illuminated book. The second pulls of the *Large Book of Designs* were never compiled to form a second copy. Two of them were sold with *Song of Los* copies B and E (Butlin 285, 284), but at least three must have been still on hand in 1818 (Butlin 264, 265, and 281), because they were later acquired by Linnell.

Had Blake wanted to fill Turner’s request for a “selection” of color prints, he could have easily done so by retrieving and refreshing what was on hand and reprinting a few missing plates. Proceeding so would have required *much* *less* effort than printing and finishing an illuminated book and, perhaps most significantly, would have substantially decreased the turnaround time for the project, meaning that Blake would see money all the sooner. His not proceeding so is puzzling. Does it prove that he was honestly indignant about “cutting up” illuminated books? Or, does it suggest that Blake was hoping to make as much money from Turner as possible? Was he, in other words, directing Turner to other works potentially more lucrative than two books of designs? Blake not compromising does not surprise, but being overtly concerned with money does. This latter trait, however, was not unprecedented.

**IV.**  **“Money in these times is not to be trifled with” (E 746)**

Charles Henry Bellenden Ker (c. 1785–1871), an English barrister and legal reformer who expected his father, John Ker Belleden (John Gawler (1764-1842), the botanist) to inherit the Roxburgh title from his second cousin, ordered two drawings from Blake, c. 1808. They arrived in mid-August 1810. On 20 August 1810, Ker wrote Cumberland, who apparently introduced him to Blake, acknowledging the two drawings and an invoice for £21. He tells Cumberland:

Now I was I assure you thunderstruck as you as well as he must know that in my present circumstances it is ludicrous to fancy I can or am able to pay 20 Gs. for 2 Drawings not Knowing Where in the World [to] get any money. Nor do I at all conceive I am obliged to pay for them—now he desired in his note that the money was paid in a fortnight or part of it—intimating he should take hostile Mode [?] if it was not—now if he thinks proper to pursue the latter he is welcome and I wish you to call on him and shew him this and also that he may be informed of the grounds on which I meant to resist the payment[;] first as to the time when they were ordered which in his letter to me he admits was even then 2 years ago—therefore at that time I was not of age—next a young gentleman who can prove the terms of which they were ordered—these will be the grounds on which I shall rest if he insists on immediate payment and you can tell him my Attorney . . . is Mr Davis 20 Essex Street Strand—but of course the moment either by any success[?] of my father & I am enabled I shall pay him. You will act as you think best[.]

(BR2 302–3)[[23]](#endnote-24)

Cumberland did not reconcile the dispute and received another letter from Ker on 27 August 1810:

Blake—I wrote at last to propose 15Gs. no—then to pay the price any mutual friend or friends shd put on them—no—then I proposed to pay 10.1 first & 10.1 3 months afterwds no—and then he arrested me—and then defended the action and now perhaps [his?] obstinacy will never get a shilling of the 20 L. [he ori]ginally intended to defraud me of . . .

(BR2 303)

According to Bentley, Blake appears to have “gained his cause,” and since Bentley could not find any record of a case coming to trial in the Public Records Office, he thinks that Ker may have “settled out of court” (BR2 303).

Blake probably received Ker’s order for two drawings in mid 1808. At the time, he was painting original designs on gessoed canvas in an opaque water-based medium of his own invention. He called these paintings “frescos.” Unlike watercolors, the paints had body, which enabled “frescos” to compete visually with oil paintings—to appear like “pictures” rather than “drawings” (E 549). Stylistically, however, Blake used the medium to produce a kind of hybrid design, one that had the body of oil paintings and the firm, distinct outlines of watercolor drawings, a combination characteristic of his monoprints as well.[[24]](#endnote-25) Around this time, Blake probably had begun preparing for his solo exhibition of “frescos” and watercolor drawings to be held at his brother’s hosier shop in May 1809. In December, he tells Cumberland that he was preparing “to print an account of my various Inventions in Art <for> which I have procured a Publisher” (E 770). This may refer to the *Descriptive Catalogue*, which accompanied the exhibition and discusses the significance of his new painting medium. If not, the “account” is unaccounted for.

Ker’s drawings were commissioned at a particularly busy and creative time for Blake. Unfortunately, they are unidentified and nothing owned by Ker is recorded in Butlin or Bentley. Perhaps preparation for the exhibition factored into their much delayed delivery—and the exhibition’s failure lay behind Blake’s rude behavior. More mysterious are the prices. At the time, Butts was paying £1.1 per watercolor drawing of Biblical subjects and for monoprints (BR2 764), the same price he was paying for temperas, starting in 1799 (E 704). Over the next ten years, Butts appears to have paid between one and two guineas per work, which included monoprints, watercolors, temperas, and frescos (BR2 770). Ker’s drawings, at £10.10 each (which Ker later claims to have been £15.15 each, see below), had to have been substantial.[[25]](#endnote-26) The timing, prices, and description of them as “drawings,” presumably because they were designs on paper, suggests that they may have been monoprints, aka color print drawings, which Blake reconceived around this time as “pictures” (“fresco”) and thereby increasing their monetary value. Impressions of *Elohim* and *Nebuchadnezzar* (Butlin 290, 324) are untraced and their earliest histories are unknown, raising the possibility that one or both were the “drawings” acquired by Ker.[[26]](#endnote-27)

Whatever their medium or subjects, Ker did not like them. In an undated letter to Cumberland, Ker writes: “I think it right to tell you this as you recommended me, and you may fancy, that as I disputed with your friend Blake I may with Stothard[.] But Blake is more knave than fool and made me pay 30 [sic] Guineas for 2 Drawings which on my word were never orderd and which were as [word illeg: unportus(?)] as they are infamously done” (BR2 303–4).

In 1803, William Hayley (1745-1820) also recounts an episode in which Blake appears to have behaved atypically, to have been as uncompromising as he would be with Ker. Hayley tells Flaxman that

Blake has made two excellent drawings of Romney one from his own large picture the other from our dear disciples Medallion—I thought of having both engraved for a single quarto volume of his Life—but Blake surprised me a little in saying (*after we had settled the price* of 30 Guineas for the first the price which He had for the Cowper) that Romneys head would require much Labor & he must have 40 for it—startled as I was I replied I will not stint you in behalf of Romney—you shall have 40—but soon after while we were looking at the smaller & slighter drawing of the Medallion He astonished me by saying I must have 30G for this—I then replied—of this point I must consider because you will observe Romney’s Life can hardly [sell del] circulate like Cowpers & I shall perhaps print it entirely at my own risk—so the matter rests between us at present—yet I certainly wish to have both portraits engraved.

(7 August 1803, BR2 157, italics added)

Blake’s engraving of Romney’s *Shipwreck* appears in Hayley’s *Life of Romney* (1809), but the medallion portrait of Romney was engraved by Caroline Watson and Blake’s portrait of Romney was not included.[[27]](#endnote-28) Blake’s firm and higher than usual prices and refusal to compromise cost him money, because Hayley hired Watson to execute seven plates (BR2 193ff), a few of which may have gone to Blake.

Blake’s tempestuous relations with patrons and others was apparently no secret, as evinced by Nancy Flaxman’s note to her husband in July of 1816 about their “Friend” C. H. Tulk:

I have had some discourse with our Friend about Blakes book & the little drawings—It is true he did not give him anything for he thought It would be wrong so to do after what pass’d between them, for as I understand B—was very violent[.] Indeed, beyond all credence only that he has served you his best friend the same trick [some] time back as you must well remember but he bought a drawing of him, I have nothing to say in this affair[.] It is too tickilish, only I know what has happened both to yourself & me, & other people are not oblig’d to put up with B s odd humours—but let that pass[.]

(BR2 326)[[28]](#endnote-29)

Even in the best of times, Blake could prove difficult to work with. For example, he was hired by the Rev. Dr. Trusler, Cumberland’s neighbor, in 1799 to execute a drawing representing “Malevolence.” Trusler gave Blake detailed instructions about what he envisioned—because Blake had “begged” him for his “Ideas” and “promised to build on them” (E 701).[[29]](#endnote-30) Instead, Blake drew inspiration from *Europe* plate 3 and *Night Thoughts* plate 5 (Butlin 341) and told Trusler that he

attempted every morning for a fortnight together to follow your Dictate. But when I found my attempts were in vain. resolvd to shew an independence which I know will please an Author better than slavishly following the track of another however admirable that track may be[.] At any rate my Excuse must be: I could not do otherwise, it was out of my power!

(E 701)

Blake tells Trusler—*whom he hopes to sell a “number of Cabinet pictures”*—what he wants to paint, rather than making the design he was hired to make. After Trusler returned the drawing, along “with a Letter full of Criticisms” (E 703), Blake defends himself in one of his longest and most insulting letters extant, noting “that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care” (E 702). While we admire Blake’s independence and fiery temperament, we also marvel on how arrogant and obtuse he could be—and, perhaps, from Nancy Flaxman’s perspective, how infuriating.[[30]](#endnote-31)

These strange and fascinating cases put Blake’s negotiating skills—or lack thereof—as well as obstinacy in a new light. We know how generous Blake could be with friends and patrons; he sold remarkable copies of *America* and *Europe* to Linnell in 1822 at £2.2 each instead of £5.5s, their price in the letter to Turner. He sold Butts eight highly refinished monoprints in 1805 for £1.1 each, five times less than their 1818 price. Despite such generosity, Blake apparently could be more aggressive—passively and actively so—in such exchanges than is generally realized. Perhaps Blake’s untraced (follow up?) letter to Turner provides another example of such intransience. That possibility cannot be ruled out conclusively, which is why, for the sake of thoroughness, I raise it here. But it seems unlikely in light of other possible reasons for Blake to steer Turner away from the “selection” to the more expensive works.

**V. Idea of Aesthetic Integrity**

Blake’s forgoing an easy-to-fill commission in hopes of making more money seems both uncompromising and risky. One quickly hears the old adage of “a bird in hand is worth two in the bush.” Blake was either foolish or greedy, or he refused Turner for some reason other than money. We necessarily return to the idea of aesthetic integrity, to Blake’s the-whole-is-greater-than-its-parts rationale for not wanting to extract plates from books or vignettes from plates. Blake claims that the images exist with and because of the poetry; to separate them would compromise both. Conversely, the illustrations are “Printed perfect” when they “accompany [their] Poetical Personifications & Acts.” Blake apparently thought a print and book collector would be sympathetic to such a rationale.

Recall that Blake’s illuminated books were produced with very little division of labor. Blake was author, illustrator, designer, etcher, and, with his wife, printer and colorist. He used relief etching, the technique responsible for nearly all the illuminated books, as well as etching, the medium responsible for *Gates of Paradise*, *Book of Los*, and *Book of Ahania*, as pure analog technologies; he *drew* and *wrote* on the same space with the same impervious liquid, pens, and brushes in interacting operations, etched designs in printable relief, and printed them on a rolling press. His texts were not cast off and reset into discreet bits of metal type by compositors to form pages, then printed by letterpress printers on a platen press on large sheets of paper that were folded to form gatherings and book pages. His illustrations were not drawn by other artists, nor reproduced by professional engravers, nor printed in a different shop to be inserted into gatherings trimmed and bound by yet another set of hands. Instead of the conventional division of labor characteristic of book publishing, Blake’s illuminated plates function as mixed-media sites in which poetry, calligraphy, drawing, design, and coloring all come together, invented and executed with the same set of tools—same hands, eyes, and mind. When Blake refused Turner’s request, he appears to address the indivisibility of his labor, to treat the illuminated books holistically. He appears to consider their images “perfect” when properly contextualized and as fragments when not.

Questioning Blake’s verity in this matter seems obtuse. Indeed, his rationale has not been questioned because it sounds both logical and modern. He appears to imply what we now think is self-evident, that separating illuminated words and images distorts their meaning *and* the aesthetic experience of reading them. Blake appears to anticipate today’s critical consensus that his poetry should be read *as* image, preferably in facsimile but at the very least in its original and complete pictorial form with all illustrations intact, and not in letterpress translations, which distort Blake’s original object and intention. Consequently, Blake’s rationale for refusing Turner has not appeared strange to modern readers.

From the perspective of an artist (or “Artist”), however, it is strange indeed. Full-page images and vignettes from the illuminated books can function autonomously, as is evinced by the recreations of the vignette on *Marriage* plate 4 (illus. [8](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/8.jpg)) as a watercolor drawing, c. 1793 (Butlin 257, illus. [9](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/9.jpg)), and then in 1795 as the monoprint of *Good & Evil Angels* (Butlin 324, illus. [10](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/10.jpg)). The vignette’s meaning depends on the *Marriage*’s rich network of images and ideas, but as a drawing and painting, the image functions autonomously. So, too, the other illuminated images when repurposed as independent designs. Richard Thomson (1794-1865), Upcott’s friend and fellow librarian, writer, and antiquarian, described them for J. T. Smith’s *Nollekens and his Times* (1828), noting that the *Large Book of Designs* was a folio of engravings printed and colored “with a degree of splendour and force, as almost to resemble sketches in oil-colours.” He described the *Small Book of Designs* as “a small quarto volume . . . of various shapes and sizes, coloured as before, some of which are of extraordinary effect and beauty” (BR2 621). Smith concurred, and admits “that until I was favoured by Mr. Upcott with a sight of some of Blake’s works’ several of which I had never seen, I was not so fully aware of his depth of knowledge in colouring” (BR2 618).

Blake’s “system of colouring,” he says, “was in many instances most beautifully prismatic” (BR2 618). *Albion rose* (Butlin 262.1, illus. [12](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/12.jpg)) and *Joseph of Arimathea Preaching to the Inhabitants of Britain* (Butlin 262.6, illus. [13](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/13.jpg)), both from the *Large Book,* fit this description. Smith knew Blake’s painting techniques and recipes for grounds and colors (BR2 622), but he had not seen small monoprints before, what he referred to as “Blake’s coloured plates.” He asserted as “fact” that these prints “have more effect than others where gum has been used,” which is to say, impressions printed in opaque colors mixed with glue had body and were visually more forceful than those finished in transparent watercolors, which are comprised of pigments mixed with gum arabic.

Thomson, Smith, Upcott, and no doubt Humphry enjoyed the color printed designs as beautiful, autonomous artifacts. Turner, when given the opportunity to view the “selection,” did the same, as do viewers today. These small color prints do not suffer aesthetically for being decontextualized, nor do Blake’s “Detached Specimens” from *Jerusalem*—which Blake presumably expected to hold their own when displayed at the Associated Painters in Watercolors exhibition of 1812, alongside the frescos of *Canterbury Pilgrims*, *Spiritual Form of Nelson*, and *Spiritual Form of Pitt*.[[31]](#endnote-32)

The argument that book illustrations are aesthetically compromised without their texts is an odd argument for any artist to make about images, and one must wonder how serious Blake was in making it. The two positions are not mutually exclusive. Blake could believe in the integrity of his illuminated designs while also recognizing their autonomy. Images can and do—and, one could argue, *must*—stand on their own, at least formalistically. Blake selected images for Humphry apparently thinking that their aesthetic integrity was not compromised. His thinking so in 1796 does not necessarily contradict his reason for *not* thinking so in 1818, and vice versa, but it should give pause, particularly in light of the 1812 “Detached Specimens” and his assembling of the *Small Book of Designs* copy B shortly after Turner’s request.

The core question—did Blake really refuse Turner’s request for books of designs because he did not want to separate images from texts—remains unanswered. We must re-examine the letter for further clues, which I believe lie in his reflections on past projects.

**VI.** “substantial numbers,” “general sales,” “regular Publishers,”

Blake tells Turner he was never able to produce any of his “different Works” in “substantial numbers” or in “general sales” by “regular Publishers,” information of interest to collectors of books and prints, suggesting that Blake knew to whom he was talking—or, at the very least, confirms that “different Works” referred to Blake’s graphic art and not paintings. Blake acknowledges the absence of these signs of commercial success presumably to emphasize the rarity of his own wares, stress their customized nature, and justify their prices. This is a far cry from how he advertised his illuminated books and original prints in 1793, when in his Prospectus he proudly takes on the roles of publisher as well as inventor, author, and printer.

Among the “Subjects of the several Works now published and on Sale at Mr. Blake’s, No. 13, Hercules Buildings, Lambeth” were two large engravings and six illuminated books. Blake also lists *The Gates of Paradise* and *The History of England*, describing each as “a small book of Engravings. Price 3s,” even though the latter is not extant and appears not to have been completed. He listed *Songs of Experience* while it was in progress, as “Octavo, with 25 designs, price 5 s,” when at the time, as evinced by four highly finished copies printed in colors, it had only seventeen plates (as noted, one of these copies went to Humphry and another to Cumberland). He had advertised *Experience* as the companion to *Songs of Innocence*, also “with 25 designs, price 5 s,” though copies printed in 1789 had thirty-one plates and those issued in 1794 had twenty-eight plates.[[32]](#endnote-33) He also announced “two large highly finished engravings (and two more are nearly ready),” which were to “commence a Series of subjects from the Bible, and another from the History of England.” In addition to his works, Blake promoted himself, stating that

Mr. Blake's powers of invention very early engaged the attention of many persons of eminence and fortune; by whose means he has been regularly enabled to bring before the Public works (he is not afraid to say) of equal magnitude and consequence with the productions of any age or country.

(E 692)

The Prospectus expresses Blake’s confidence in himself, his irrepressible excitement in his works, and his pride at being independent, fully self-reliant as both artist and publisher. He states that “The Illuminated Books are Printed in Colours,” by which he means in colored inks (greens, yellow ochre, and raw sienna mostly), and not in opaque colors used in color prints and monoprints, which he began printing in 1794 and 1795 respectively. Moreover, they are printed “on the most beautiful wove paper that could be procured.” He boldly declares that “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 692).[[33]](#endnote-34)

Blake points proudly to his stock of works, real, inflated, and envisioned and asserts that he will produce works without advanced monies, without subscriptions or commissions. In the prospectus-like letter to Turner, Blake hopes to secure a commission. He denies having stock—which is not true (see below) and the existence of which proves his point of insufficient “general sales”—and faults its absence on his having had to work outside the normal channels of publishing, as though doing so was not by choice, one he had made twenty-five years earlier with great fanfare.

Blake did not need to reference the absence of “publishers,” “numbers,” and “sales” to justify his works’ high prices, unprofitability, or rarity. Blake could have said:

…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.

(E 783–74)

This was Blake’s response to Cumberland’s request for illuminated books in April 1827, when Blake was printing *Songs* copy X “for a Friend at Ten Guineas” and probably *Marriage* copy I, both for T. G. Wainwright, a strange man, forger and poisoner, but no stranger to Blake, having apparently acquired *Milton* copy B from Blake in 1826 (BB 319). When Blake wrote Cumberland he and Catherine were living in two small rooms at 3 Fountain Court (1821–1827), where by this time he had printed five copies of *Songs* and three copies of *Jerusalem*, and had *Songs* copy W, *Visions* copy N, and *Jerusalem* copy E in stock. He was recalling the years between 1790 and 1795 at 13 Hercules Buildings, in Lambeth, where in multiple rooms he and Catherine printed over 00 copies of illuminated books, most by printing numerous impressions per plate from which they would compile copies as needed. Having sufficient counter space facilitates this practice as well as the drying of leaves.[[34]](#endnote-35)

In 1818, when Blake wrote Turner, the Blakes were living in two small rooms at 17 South Molton Street (1803–1821). Here, between 1818 and 1821, Blake produced beautiful new copies of *Thel*, *Marriage*, *Visions*, *Songs*, *Urizen, Milton*, *For the Sexes*, and *Jerusalem*, and he refinished copies of *Marriage*, *Songs*, and *Small Book of Designs*. While cramped living quarters may have encumbered production, they did not make it impossible. Nor are they the reason late copies of books cost many times more than early copies. As explored below, they were reconceived as books of paintings rather than books of poems, and probably with well-heeled collectors in mind; as a consequence, they cost more to produce in time, labor, and materials.

In noting the absence of “publishers,” “numbers,” and “sales,” the hallmarks of professional success for writers and engravers, Blake appears not only to mark his outsider status and define his wares in contrast to commercial works but possibly also to voice long held resentment about the book and print trades—the Johnson’s, Macklin’s, and Boydell’s of his day—feelings of neglect that he had expressed as early as 1799 in a letter to Cumberland (E 704):

As to Myself about whom you are so kindly Interested. I live by Miracle. I am Painting small Pictures from the Bible. For as to Engraving in which art I cannot reproach myself with any neglect yet I am laid by in a corner as if I did not Exist & Since my Youngs Night Thoughts have been publishd Even Johnson & Fuseli have discarded my Graver.

(26 August 1799 to Cumberland; E 704)

Blake took the lack of engraving commissions personally, but it was really a matter of business, which was depressed generally because of the war with France.[[35]](#endnote-36) He spun this dearth of commissions quite differently one week earlier in his first letter to Trusler:

To Engrave after another Painter is infinitely more laborious than to Engrave ones own Inventions. And of the Size you require my price has been Thirty Guineas & I cannot afford to do it for less. I had Twelve for the Head I sent you as a Specimen, but after my own designs I could do at least Six times the quantity of labour in the same time which will account for the difference of price as also that Chalk Engraving is at least six times as laborious as Aqua tinta. I have no objection to Engraving after another Artist. Engraving is the profession I was apprenticed to, & should never have attempted to live by any thing else If orders had not come in for my Designs & Paintings, which I have the pleasure to tell you are Increasing Every Day. Thus If I am a Painter it is not to be attributed to Seeking after. But I am contented whether I live by Painting or Engraving.

(E 704)[[36]](#endnote-37)

Blake learned the art of engraving to make a living. Like most engravers, he never gained financial independence by publishing his own designs and never earned more than a living wage from publishers as a journeyman engraver. His heyday was in the 1780s and early 1790s, when he was regularly employed by print, book, and magazine publishers. In 1784, he acquired a printing press and started a print selling business with James Parker, a fellow from his apprentice days. The partnership, which lasted only a year, published two engravings by Blake after Stothard (both printed in colors). Blake retained the press, which enabled him to proof his engravings, something most engravers used professional printers for, and to publish his own books and designs. Equally important, it enabled Blake to experiment with printing colors from the surface and shallows of relief etchings and the surfaces of etchings, experiments that led to a new method for producing illuminated books and to the large monoprints (PP 00). In short, Blake used the rolling press as a creative tool. Also, unlike most of his fellow engravers, Blake produced original prints, which are prints invented and executed by the same person. And, unlike most of his fellow painters, Blake was also a trained graphic artist, a genuine pientre-graveur.

Blake listed two original engravings in his 1793 prospectus, *Job* and *Ezekiel* (the latter dated 1794, the one he noted as forthcoming). In 1795, he was planning to add at least four more original designs to his stock, including the etching *Albion rose* and relief etching small *Pity* (PP 00). These independent designs, like the monoprints, were produced purely on speculation, with none produced—let alone selling—in large numbers: small *Pity* exists in a unique pull; *Albion rose* has four extant impressions; *Job* has only two impressions in its first state; and *Ezekiel* has only one impression in its first state (Essick 00). In comparison, the first printings of illuminated books seem large; for example, in 1789 Blake printed enough impressions of *Innocence* in black, green, yellow ochre, and raw sienna to form at least twenty-three copies.[[37]](#endnote-38) Of course, this number of printed copies is “large” only relative to his other prints.

The largest number of books sold at one time appears to have been the seven titles acquired by George Romney. All but one were from a set of ten large paper copies printed c. 1794-95, after the *Book of Urizen* and before the *Books of Ahania* and *Books of Los.* This project required at least sixty-six large Imperial sheets (with each sheet quartered), more than twice the amount of paper required of all the other 1794 works. This considerable outlay of paper suggests that Blake received advanced monies from the project’s primary beneficiary, George Romney. The deluxe set may have been even larger, requiring as many as eighty-eight sheets if, as seems likely, five untraced copies of illuminated books recorded as “from the Library of John Flaxman” and executed “*in a peculiar style like original Drawings”* came from the deluxe set.[[38]](#endnote-39) Also in 1795, after the deluxe set, Blake printed eight copies of *Songs* in dark brown ink without wiping the borders on octavo size leaves cut from Imperial paper of the kind used for the deluxe set. This simplified mode of inking made plates easy and quick to print. These copies appear to have been printed to replenish stock of *Songs*, possibly underwritten with monies from Romney’s commission.

Blake was well employed as an engraver during 1789 and 1795. He could afford to finance the production of illuminated books on his own—until the projects got too big, like the deluxe set, which necessarily changed Blake’s business model, from paying production costs himself and selling copies from stock to recoup some of his costs, to using advanced monies to pay production costs and printing second copies of those commissioned and/or other titles for stock.[[39]](#endnote-40) This is how he produced the *Small Books of Designs* copies A and B and the *Large Book of Designs*, with its second pulls as independent designs, financed by Humphry’s commission. Blake used this business model in c. 1802 to print three copies of *Innocence* and two of *Experience*; in c. 1804 to print three copies of *Innocence*; and again in c. 1811 with three copies of *Milton* with two copies of *Innocence* (BIB 378).[[40]](#endnote-41) He proposed it to Turner and would continue using it in his last decade, with a few important exceptions. He produced new illuminated works, *Ghost of Abel* and *On Homers Poetry* and printed his masterpiece, *Jerusalem* copy E, out of pocket, the last work no doubt as a labor of love, telling Cumberland that it cost his “Time the amount of Twenty Guineas” but that he had finished only one and was unlikely to “get a Customer for it” (E 784). What made these exceptions possible, though, was the patronage/security of Linnell.

Blake never realized large print runs or sales for any of the illuminated books or original designs. However, he hadn’t given up hope of one day doing so. In January 1803, nine months before he returned to London from Felpham, where he lived since fall of 1800 in a cottage under Hayley’s patronage, he outlines a few get-rich-quick schemes to his brother James:

The Profits arising from Publications are immense & I now have it in my power to commence publication with many very formidable works, which I have finishd & ready A Book price half a guinea may be got out at the Expense of Ten pounds & its almost certain profits are 500 G. I am only sorry that I did not know the methods of publishing years ago & this is one of the numerous benefits I have obtaind by coming here for I should never have known the nature of Publication unless I had known H & his connexions & his method of managing. It now <would> be folly not to venture publishing. I am now Engraving Six little plates for a little work of Mr H’s for which I am to have 10 G<uineas> each & the certain profits of that work are a fortune such as would make me independent supposing that I could substantiate such a one of my own & I mean to try many.

(E 726)

Blake appears not to have published anything of his own upon returning to London, other than the three copies of *Innocence* c. 1804. In 1805, after years of little design and engraving work other than five plates for Hayley and three for Flaxman (BR2 821), he must have been excited by a commission from R. H. Cromek (1770-1812), an engraver-turned-publisher, for both the designs *and* engravings for a deluxe edition of Robert Blair’s *The Grave*. Published in the fall of 1808, *The Grave* was to become Blake’s best-known work in the nineteenth century, reviewed both positively and negatively and the work all his obituaries mentioned. Blake, however, would have recalled it in 1818 with disappointment and anger. Cromek revoked the commission for the engravings, where the good money lay, giving it to Louis Schiavonetti (1765-1810), because he thought the white-line etching technique that Blake wanted to use to reproduce the designs—as exemplified by *Death’s Door*, c. 1805—would have damaged sales. Blake apparently refused to compromise and lost the commission.[[41]](#endnote-42) Disappointment with Cromek quickly turned to feelings of betrayal: Blake believed that the publisher had stolen his idea for the painting and engraving of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Pilgrims* and had given it to Stothard and Schiavonetti.[[42]](#endnote-43) Blake saw himself as under attack, writing in his *Notebook*, about 1810: “The Canterbury Pilgrims / Engraved by William Blake tho Now Surrounded / by Calumny & Envy” (E 571).

Stothard’s *Canterbury Pilgrims* was painted in 1807, but the engraving, started by Schiavenetti and going through four other engravers, was finished by James Heath in the fall of 1817, when he sent a proof to Turner.[[43]](#endnote-44) Heath, for whom engraving was “business, not personal,” had “publishers,” “numbers,” and “sales,” benefitted from smart collaborations with famous artists and large sales of separate prints, including his engraving of West’s *Death of Nelson* (1811), published in an edition of 3000 impressions and yielding over £6000, divided between him and the artist.[[44]](#endnote-45) Heath was again in the public eye in 1818—and possibly on Blake’s mind when writing Turner. Farington, for example, noted in his diary for 17 February 1818 that the Stothard plate was printed in an edition of 500 impressions along with 200 proofs (vol. 15, p. 5159-60)—numbers that dwarfed those of any of Blake’s personal projects.[[45]](#endnote-46) Blake’s thoughts on Heath’s engraving of Stothard’s *Canterbury Pilgrims* are not extant. Indeed, between 1816 and early 1825, there are only three extant letters, including the one to Turner. Still, his feelings and thoughts are not difficult to imagine. In the *Public Address*, c. 1810, Blake contrasts the style of his *Canterbury Pilgrims* to that used by professional engravers, as exemplified by Heath:

In this Plate Mr B has resumed the style with which he set out in life of which Heath & Stothard were the awkward imitators at that time it is the style of Alb Durers Histories & the old Engravers which cannot be imitated by any one who does not understand Drawing & which according to Heath & Stothard Flaxman & even Romney. Spoils an Engraver for Each of these Men have repeatedly asserted this Absurdity to me in condemnation of my Work & approbation of Heaths lame imitation Stothard being such a fool as to suppose that his blundering blurs can be made out & delineated by any Engraver who knows how to cut dots & lozenges equally well with those little prints which I engraved after him five & twenty Years ago & by which he got his reputation as a Draughtsman.

(E 572)

Blake was not entirely correct about the engraving style of *Canterbury Pilgrims*; it is a hybrid of dots and lozenges similar to Heath’s, Woolett’s, and other first-rate “modern” engravers and various kinds of parallel hatching and stippling used by Durer. But it is not like Durer’s pure engraving style, which Blake was not to emulate successfully until the Book of Job engravings of 1823-26. Blake’s animus, however, toward Cromek and Heath, the trade they represented and the graphic arts in general, was very real. “Publishers,” “numbers,” and “sales” had lost their appeal by 1808, as was clearly demonstrated that December by Blake refusing to publish a set of seven to twelve illuminated books for a guaranteed sale.

**VII. Recollections**

Turner’s enquiry in 1818 forced Blake to recall the books of designs of 1796 and other works that he produced as a publisher, engraver, and original printmaker—and probably those works he had hoped to produce. In addition to recalling Humphry and Cromek, Blake probably recalled a request similar to Turner’s made about a decade earlier, received on 18 December 1808 from Cumberland, for between 112 and 180 small color prints. This exchange is worth examining closely because it helps to explain the long hiatus in illuminated printing and Blake’s reasons in 1818 for wanting to resume printing illuminated books.

In 1808, Cumberland owned seven relief etched books and *For Children*, an intaglio emblem book, which made his collection of illuminated books the largest at the time.[[46]](#endnote-47) He had shown these “incomparable etchings” to an “acquaintance” who

was so charmed with them, that he requested me to get him a compleat Set of all you have published in the way of Books *coloured as mine are*—at the same time he wishes to know what will be the price of as many as you can spare him, if all are not to be had, being willing to wait your own time in order to have them *as those of mine are*.

With respect to the money I will take care that it shall be reced[?] and sent to you through my Son as fast as they are procured.

(BR2 278, italics added)

Cumberland’s emphasizing that the books were to be colored like his own indicates that they were to be printed in the manner of his copy of *Experience* (now part of *Songs* copy F), *Europe* copy C, and *Song of Los* copy D. These were almost certainly the last three illuminated books that he acquired from Blake. All three were printed in thick colors on one side of the leaf, like the books of designs, and as “coloured plates have more effect than others where gum has been used.” They were far and away the most powerful and impressive of Cumberland’s illuminated books and fit perfectly Thomson’s descriptions of the books of designs.[[47]](#endnote-48) The collector’s terms of acquisition were very favorable to Blake, with the would-be-purchaser willing to buy color prints from stock or wait for new copies to be printed in colors. Cumberland’s seven relief-etched books comprised 112 plates and, printed in colors, could have netted around £30.[[48]](#endnote-49) A “compleat Set” of books color printed would have added another sixty-nine plates from four illuminated books, adding at least another £15.15.[[49]](#endnote-50) Cumberland’s acquaintance was potentially worth over half a year’s income for Blake.[[50]](#endnote-51)

Blake thanked Cumberland the following day for his “kind ardour in my cause,” but told him no, that he was too busy painting to “Engage in reviving [his] former pursuits of printing” (E 769). Blake states that he had

so long been tuned out of the old channel into a new one that it is impossible for me to return to it without destroying my present course[.] New Vanities or rather new pleasures occupy my thoughts[.] New profits seem to arise before me so tempting that I have already involved myself in engagements that preclude all possibility of promising any thing.

(BR2 279)

Blake defines his “present course” as “Designing & Painting” (BR2 280), by which he meant illustrating Milton’s poems in watercolors—he had executed twelve designs of *Paradise Lost* for the Rev. Thomas in 1807 and another, larger set for Butts in 1808, and he may have started the six designs of *Ode on the Morning of* *Christ’s Nativity* for the Rev. Thomas, dated 1809 (Butlin 538).[[51]](#endnote-52) He continued to paint designs in watercolors of biblical subjects for Butts and in his new “fresco” technique, including the *Canterbury Pilgrims*. “New Vanities” presumably referred to his plans to exhibit “frescos” and a few watercolors in May 1809, works on which he pinned his hopes of “New profits.” In addition to preparing works for an exhibition, Blake was presumably writing its accompanying *Descriptive Catalogue* and, possibly, as noted, an “account” of his “various Inventions in Art” (E 770). With the exception of a few copies of *Innocence* and *Experience*, he hadn’t touched any of his illuminated books in thirteen years. Blake understandably did not want to take on more projects at that moment or disrupt his momentum.

His refusal in 1808 to print illuminated plates in colors—or even check his stock for color prints or copies of illuminated books—anticipates his refusal of Turner’s request for a “selection” of small monoprints. With Cumberland, Blake turns down sure money from printing old works in the hope of realizing “new profits” from new work; with Turner, Blake turns down sure money from color prints in stock in the hope of realizing profits from old works newly printed. With Cumberland, Blake was clearly not holding out for higher prices. His primary concern was to continue his present course of work without interruption or compromise. A similar sense of purpose can be inferred from his response to Turner, but so can a willingness to compromise—to resume illuminated printing, but not color printing. The evidence supporting this claim lies, ironically, in the number of saleable illuminated books, color prints, and monoprints then in stock, the number of books he was willing to reprint rather than refinish, and the amount of money he could have potentially made and was willing to forego.

**VIII STOCK IN 1818**

Blake informs Turner about three kinds of works: what he was not willing to sell, could *prepare* to sell, and had *ready* to sell. He eliminates the prospect of books of designs, lists eight illuminated books, and acknowledges “12 Large prints in Colours,” noting that they are “unaccompanied by any writing.” In the following paragraph he states that “any Person wishing to have any or all of *them* should send me their Order *to Print them* on the above terms & I will take care that *they* shall be done at least as well as any I have yet Produced” (italics added). These instructions are confusing. “Them” and “they” presumably refer to both illuminated books and large color prints and imply that both *needed* to be reprinted. Or Blake wanted Turner to think so.

With the possible exception of *Elohim* (Butlin 290), none of the “12 Large prints” needed to be *reprinted*, because in stock were the following impressions:

*Satan Exulting over Eve* (292B untraced)

*Christ Appearing* (Butlin 327)

*Pity* ( Butlin 312)

*Hecate* (Butlin 318)

*Good & Evil Angels* (Butlin 324)

*Newton* (Butlin 307B untraced)

*Nebuchadnezzar* (Butlin 302)

*Naomi Entreating Ruth* (Butlin 300)

*Lamech* (Butlin 298)

*God Judging Adam*/*Elijah and the Fiery* *Chariot* (Butlin 296)

*House of Death* (Butlin 322)[[52]](#endnote-53)

All of these impressions were inherited by Catherine Blake and then most of them—if not all—by Tatham (“Signing” 00). The last two listed were from the c. 1795-96 printing; the others were from the 1795 printing. Any one or all could have been refinished to look as good as any “yet Produced” (PP 00). Indeed, in 1805, in addition to printing new versions of *Newton* and *Nebuchadnezzar*, Blake refinished six impressions printed in 1795, penciled in titles under all eight images, signed them all with his monogram, and dated all of them “1795.” *Good & Evil Angels* 323 (illus. [11](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/11.jpg)), for example, the second pull, closely resembled *Good & Evil Angels* 324 (illus. [10](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/10.jpg)), the first pull, before Blake substantially refinished the composition, clearly identifying one angel as “evil” and thereby removing the ambiguity of the struggle for the child. He so entirely refinished *Elohim* 289 that it now has very little printed color showing (Robertson 00). Blake also refinished the nine monoprints—all from the 1795 printing—that he appears to have sold between 1806 and c. 1810, presumably upon sale (“Signing” 00).

Blake also implied that he would need to reprint the illuminated books, but this was not true for all of them. Blake’s stock comprised unsold works from first printings, and not from his having added works in the interim to maintain (let alone increase) stock. It included individually numbered copies of *Innocence* and *Experience* from c. 1795 that were to form *Songs* copy R, refinished and sold to Linnell in 1819; *Marriage* copy H from 1790, refinished and sold to Linnell in 1821, *America* copy D from 1793, sold to Robinson in 1825, and *Milton* copy B from c. 1811, which appears to have been the copy sold to Wainwright, c. 1826 (BB 00, 00, 00, 00). Given that the provenances of most copies of *Thel*, *Visions*, and *Urizen* are unknown, he may have had unsold copies of these as well. What was true of refinishing monoprints was equally true of illuminated impressions. In 1806, instead of setting up his press and printing new impressions, Blake created the magnificent *Songs* copy E for Butts by refinishing poorly printed impressions from 1789, 1794, and 1795 printings (BIB 00). He did the same for Linnell’s copies of *Songs* and *Marriage*. Blake could have transformed old copies (at least four he lists for Turner were on hand in 1818) to look as good as his best works. Had he done so, he would have cut his production costs, time, and labor, and much needed funds would have been his that much sooner.

Rhetorically, Blake conflates or equates books and large color prints: “The few I have Printed & Sold are sufficient to have gained me great reputation as an *Artist* which was the chief thing Intended.” As with the pronouns “them” and “they,” the antecedent of “few” is ambiguous, referring either to books, prints, or both. The following sentence fails to clarify: “I have never been able to produce a Sufficient number for a general Sale by means of a regular Publisher.” Compared to commercial book publication, the number of illuminated books that Blake published—approximately 150 copies of twelve titles between 1789 and June 1818, with all but 00 occurring by 1795—was financially negligible.[[53]](#endnote-54) He printed an even smaller number of large monoprints—thirty-three impressions of twelve designs—presumably selling twenty-one by c. 1810, possibly to three different collectors (PP 00, “Signing” 00). Referring to “regular publishers” does not clarify his meaning, because large painted prints, such as polygraphs, color-printed stipples, mezzotints, and aquatints were costly projects usually requiring publishers to have advanced monies and good distribution (PP 00). The “few” works “Printed & Sold” without the assistance of a “regular Publisher” seem, then, to refer to both illuminated books and monoprints.

His statement “that they shall be done at least as well as any I have yet Produced” acknowledges the uniqueness of each artifact—despite their being prints. That he refers to the monoprints as “prints,” though, adds to the confusion. He described them as “prints” in his 1806 account with Butts. However, as noted, he also identified five of them as “fresco” c. 1808-1810. He describes/categorizes the “12 Large prints” as “Poetical & Historical,” which echoes “Poetical and Historical Inventions,” his description in the *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809 for “Paintings in Fresco” (E 529). Does referring to them as “prints” in 1818 mean that Blake had changed his mind yet again about what monoprints were? Blake may have continued to perceive his color-printed inventions as “frescos” but acknowledged them as “prints” because Turner did, though, as noted, Turner seems unlikely to have seen one or even known about them. Blake more likely referred to them as prints because Turner was specifically interested in graphic art and these, like the book of designs, were “unaccompanied by any writing,” a peculiar description of a 18 x 24 inch color print in horizontal format. Blake evidently paralleled the two kinds of works to interest Turner in less compromised (and more expensive) replacements for the “selection” of the smaller color prints that were also “without the Writing.”

As we will see, Blake *was* directing Turner away from the “selection” of small monoprints, but not to large monoprints. Circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that money was not driving this project and that Blake was hoping to print illuminated books rather than either small or large monoprints.

**IX. “personal, not business”**

In 1808, Blake told Cumberland that he had “long been turned out of the old channel” and did not want to “Engage in reviving my former pursuits of printing” illuminated books. He had not printed any of his early works except *Songs* since 1795. He tells Cumberland that he was too busy with other projects and wanted to devote himself exclusively to “Designing & Painting” (BR2 279-80). The 1804 date on the title plates of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, books in progress till at least c. 1811 and 1820 respectively, suggests a disengagement with everyday practices of illuminated printing—writing texts on plates, etching and proofing plates—during most of this period. The very few illuminated books produced between 1796 and 1818 suggests the same. By the middle of 1818, however, Blake did not have the security of Butts’ patronage or hopes of a successful exhibition that made refusing Cumberland’s request possible. For the previous three years he had been working as a reproductive engraver to make ends meet. One would think that after such employment combined with a long hiatus in illuminated printing that Blake would jump at the opportunity to print *any* of his original works for money. This is business, not personal. Yet, as we have seen, he was not willing to prepare books of designs, the one work Turner explicitly requested, the easiest and quickest work for him to have turned around, and the work by which he might secure other orders from Turner. Instead, Blake offers him two other kinds of “different Works,” hoping to effect a compromise in which he would print new copies of illuminated books but not in colors.

Blake credits both his early illuminated books and monoprints—all produced by 1795—as the works meriting him his reputation as an Artist. However, the amount of information he provides for illuminated books compared to the monoprints suggests that he favors them over the large color prints. He identified each book by title, number of images (“prints”), size, and price—the same elements he used in the Prospectus, only referring to designs here as “prints.” He described their texts, when “Printed perfect,” as accompanying “Poetical Personifications & Acts.” He describes the monoprints by category—large prints in colors—but does not differentiate them or identify them by titles, as he did in his 1806 Butts account: *Christ appearing*, *God Judging Adam*, *God Creating Adam*, *Good & Evil Angels*, *House of Death*, *Newton*, and *Nebuchadnezzar* (BR2 764). These titles were specific or descriptive enough to pique interest, whereas the categories/adjectives “Historical & Poetical” were not. Instead of promoting large color prints assertively as a coherent group or identifying the designs comprising the group, Blake merely acknowledges their existence, general dimensions, and price per design, making a well-informed selection from a non-differentiated group of individual objects impossible.

Turner no doubt picked up on Blake’s reluctance to recreate the books of designs and on being directed to select whole books rather than a “selection” from them. But what did he make of Blake’s offer of “12 Large prints”? Or the minimal amount of information given? Are these “prints” engravings? Aquatints? Mezzotints? Stipples? Chalk engravings? Polygraphs? Lithographs? Etchings, like Mrs. Turner’s? These kinds of prints also reproduced *historical* and *poetical* subjects at relatively large sizes and *in colors*. Blake did not specify his medium presumably because he could not; the term “monoprint” had not yet been invented. Titles would have identified subjects, and the subject—as Wordsworth would say about poetry in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—was indeed important! The subject sold the print. In the commercial reproductive print market, the medium was subsumed to the subject, whether it was an historical event, like Heath’s *Death of Nelson*, an heroic figure, a famous painting, an ancient monument, or a specific place. Calling every printed image a “print” is almost insulting to a collector and connoisseur of prints.

How odd of Blake to offer to sell individual designs in colors for £5.5s each—a price none appears to have realized until 1865 and the same price as *America* with its eighteen folio size prints to be finished in watercolors—but not to identify titles and subjects of the designs. Blake was not shy about describing, even puffing up, his works and their value. Indeed, given his ability to promote himself and works—amply demonstrated in his letters, advertisements to his exhibition and the *Descriptive Catalogue*, *Public Address*, descriptions of the *Vision of the Last Judgment*, and prospectuses for illuminated books and the Chaucer engraving—the minimal information that Blake provides about these “Large prints” seems a lapse in salesmanship or intentional misdirection. And how peculiar, after emphasizing himself as an “Artist,” not to have pushed the 18 x 24 inch horizontal pictures, his large printed paintings, masterpieces in the medium. In other words, by excluding pertinent information about the monoprints, Blake not only undercut the efficacy of his advertisement, impeding the “Person wishing to have any or all” of the prints, but he also made the books appear like better value for the money.

The idea that Blake preferred illuminated books is also suggested by the number of illuminated plates he was willing to print relative to monoprint matrixes. As a set, the eight illuminated books Blake listed comprised 181 plates. If Blake intended to print other titles in addition to the ones Turner ordered and/or second copies for stock, as he was to do when he printed ten new copies of six titles later that year—a project resulting from one or two commissions (neither from Turner, see below)—then he was expressing his willingness to print upward of 360 impressions. If Blake sold an entire set of eight books, he would have grossed at least £37.16, minus expenses for paper, glues, gums, oil, and pigments. Had he refinished copies in stock, as he was to do for Linnell three years later, combined with new copies of, at most, *Thel*, *Visions*, and *Urizen*, he would have printed only forty-seven plates for the same amount of money. Hence, Blake’s intention **not** to refinish and sell books from stock—to print *more* plates rather than *fewer*—is significant.

Had making sure (and/or quick) money been Blake’s intention (a normal transaction between artist and customer), he would have filled Turner’s request for a “selection” of color prints by preparing *Small Book of Designs* copy B; if it was to make as much money as he could, then he would have pushed the twelve large color prints in stock at £5.5s. each, valued at £63 for the group—probably his most valuable asset at the time. He needed to sell only three monoprints to equal the profit of the two books of thirty-one or so designs, which could have netted at least £15.15 or more if priced as before (presumably relative to their source books). He could have made £15.15 selling three or four illuminated books, but that would have cost him *much* more in time, materials, and, especially, labor, all of which he apparently welcomed. That is the point here. With key illuminated books in stock, Blake did not *need* to reprint all the illuminated books that he listed; he appears to have *wanted* to print new copies, and there is no reason not to believe him, because, when given another chance shortly after Turner’s request, he did so. Over the next decade, Blake printed over twenty copies of eight titles, but he did not print any relief etching, etching, or gessoed millboards in colors, the absence of which supports the idea that he had at this time come to prefer illuminated books to all manner of color prints. He eventually refinished the second pulls comprising *Small Book of Designs* copy B, even though he had no buyer, but appears not to have refinished the monoprints in stock, with the possible exception of *Hecate* 318.

Blake’s refusing the “selection” of color prints and focusing more on illuminated books than monoprints suggests that he either made a poor business decision or money was not his primary or only objective. The desire to do more than what would bring in the most or quickest money suggests that returning to illuminated printing was personal, not business. The “old channel” was potentially more than a means of making money. He could not return to printing impressions per plate as he had between 1788 and 1795, the mode of production that enabled him to stock copies of various titles, but he could return to printing multiple titles in the same style and printing sessions, as he did for Romney in c. 1795. He could use Turner’s commission to underwrite the cost of printing the copies ordered plus second copies to replenish stock for future sales. He would sell Turner “different Works,” but on his terms: instead of printing relief-etched plates or gessoed millboard matrixes in colors or refinishing those already printed, he would print entire books and finish them as watercolor designs in the manner he had been using to illustrate Milton’s poems.

Blake was indeed redirecting Turner to illuminated books, not because they were potentially more lucrative or because he believed in their indivisibility, but because, for whatever reason, he preferred printing books to his other kinds of works. In 1808, illuminated printing must have seemed like a step backward, not forward. In 1818, he was proposing a business transaction, surely, but one that had the potential to re-center his life by allowing him to print original works. Between June 1818 and his death in August 1827, Blake did indeed experience a resurgence as poet, engraver, original printmaker, printer, publisher, and painter—in effect, a return to the diverse productivity and creativity of the 1789-98 period with renewed passion for printing and painting invigorated by Linnell and, soon, the Ancients.

Blake’s preference of one genre over the other may simply have been a matter of taste. Illuminated printing produces a very different kind of artifact than color printing, with different textures and visual effects—as Smith noted. The uncolored illuminated print was an outline that could be colored any way Blake wanted, from light washes to translucent layers of colors; a color printed design—new or old—gave Blake a textured colored ground that required finishing in watercolors and pen and ink outlining, limiting Blake’s choices compared to the white paper of the uncolored print. Perhaps it was a matter of touch, with Blake preferring to color flat white grounds to painting over thickish colored grounds, or watercolors to body colors for these smallish works. Or perhaps he lost interest in delineating forms by printed colors, as opposed to defining forms directly by painting, albeit at the expense of visual effects possible only by applying paint indirectly, effects like those making up the seabed in *Newton* 306.

Supporting the idea that monoprinting fell into disfavor with Blake is the curious fact that no monoprint was in his exhibition, despite his reconceiving them as frescos around that time. His late frescos, those executed after 1818, were painted in thinner layers of paint than those executed for the exhibition (Townsend 00), supporting the idea that Blake had come to favor a flatter, less spongy or reticulated surface. Blake had the monoprint of *Naomi Entreating Ruth* on hand in 1809, but he chose to borrow the watercolor version of the subject from Butts for the exhibition. He used it to contrast the “bounding line” of drawing against the indefinite “dawbs” and “blots and blurs” of pictures, which sounds critical of the color-printed surfaces of monoprints (see PP 00).

**X. REPUTATION AS AN ARTIST**

Turner's enquiry seems straightforward enough, yet something appears to have compelled Blake to remind Turner that he was an *artist* and that the different *printed* works that Blake had to offer were “intended”— indeed, were “sufficient” — to “have gained” the engraver a “great reputation as an Artist.” Was Blake being defensive in light of having printed only *Experience* among the seven books represented among the “different Works” in Upcott’s collection? Or for having overlooked nearly 80% of his illuminated books? Or for a multi-year hiatus from all original printmaking? He was an out-of-work painter out of the public’s eye, employed as an engraver not a designer or painter, whose public “reputation as an Artist” was mixed.

In 1808, he received both praise and criticism for his designs for *The Grave* and recognition for transitioning from engraving to “designing and painting.” The review of the *Grave* in the *Antijacobin Review* notes that

Mr. Blake was formerly an engraver, but his talents in that line scarcely advancing to mediocrity, he was induced as we have been informed, to direct his attention to the art of design; and aided as his friends report, by visionary communications with the spirits of the Rafaeles, the Titians, the Caraccis, the Corregios, and the Michael-Angelos of past ages, he succeeded in producing the “Invention” before us; as well as some others on similar principles . . .

(November 1808, BR2 265)[[54]](#endnote-55)

Robert Hunt’s review of the *Grave* in the *Examiner* criticized Blake’s designs, even when complementing them, and adds insult to injury by complementing Schiavonetti:

In fine, there is much to admire, but more to censure in these prints. There are some ideas that awaken the warmest and best feelings of the heart, others which cherish the worst. Whatever is simply natural, such as ”the death of a wicked strong man,” is powerfully conceived and expressed; but nearly all the allegory is not only far fetched but absurd, inasmuch as the human body can never be mistaken in a picture for its soul, …The work owes its best popularity to the faithful descriptions and manly poetry of Robert Blair and the unrivalled graver of L. Schiavonetti.”

(August 1808, BR2 261)

Blake did receive a few good reviews of *Grave*. According to the review in *The Scots Magazine*,

We do not recollect to have any where seen so much genius united with so much eccentricity. The author shews throughout a turn of mind altogether his own. A solemn and mystic character, a habit of mind continually dwelling upon the abodes of death and the invisible world, an intimate familiarity with those ideas, which, to common minds, appear the most distant and visionary, appear to fit him peculiarly for the singular task he has here undertaken…

(November 1808, BR2 274)

Moreover, West, Cosway, Flaxman, Lawrence, and Stothard were among the signees who bore testimony to the “extraordinary excellence” of Blake’s *Grave* designs in a public advertisement in 1805 (BR2 332), and Fuseli was well known to have praised them in his Introduction to the *Grave*.[[55]](#endnote-56)

In 1810, Juninus notes Blake’s transition to painter as positive. In a dialogue in *The Repository of Arts* for September 1810, he notes that Blake “seems to have relinquished engraving, and to have cultivated the higher departments of designing and painting with great success. His works shew that he must have studied the antique with considerable attention” (BR2 305). Blake would have welcomed Juninus’ complement but disagreed with the idea that one medium was “higher” than the other. Indeed, Blake’s bold assertion to Turner that he made his reputation as an *Artist* with “different [*printed*] Works” counters the idea of hierarchy in the arts. To his statement to Trusler—“I am contented whether I live by Painting or Engraving”—Blake could have added: if I am executing my own designs, then medium does not matter. In fact, he did make this point numerous times in his Public Address, which bears repeating: “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). With this bold assertion Blake erases the idea that painting is *inherently* superior to graphic arts and provides the grounds for his boast that his early original graphic works made his name as an Artist.

These early illuminated books and probably the books of designs were known among a select group of well-known artists, as an entry in Farington’s diary makes clear. On 19 February 1796, Farington wrote that “West, Cosway & Humphry spoke warmly in favour of the designs of Blake the Engraver, as works of extraordinary genius and imagination.—Smirke differed in opinion, from what He had seen, so do I” (BR2 68–69; *Farington Diaries*, vol. 1, 141–42). Indeed, what had they seen? Where? Had any one of them visited No. 13, Hercules Buildings to see the monoprints or *Night Thought* watercolor designs? Or were they referring to works they had seen in the possession of collectors?

Farington identified Blake as “the Engraver*,*” perhaps condescendingly, but probably only to imply the *graphic* nature of the designs Humphry and friends praised. Between 1794 and 1796, Romney, Humphry, Cumberland, Flaxman, and presumably other artists and friends within their extended circle were collecting colored and color-printed illuminated books. Cosway and Humphry shared Romney’s very high opinion of Blake (BR2 68, 250, 31) and they and the others may have seen Romney’s collection of illuminated books, which included the stunning *Visions* frontispiece (illus. [14](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/14.jpg)) among his “One Hundred and Sixty drawings.”[[56]](#endnote-57) Humphry’s collection was also mighty impressive, comprising eighteen “drawings” (*America* copy H) and sixty-five color prints, including the books of designs’ thirty-one small monoprints. Blake was an artist among artists.

Most of these illuminated books were announced to the Public in the Prospectus. The numbers of works published and sold did not need to be large to reach a sizeable audience. The base line was works on paper, like drawings and manuscripts, not commercial prints and books. Blake expressed his intention to make his reputation as an artist using hand-colored designs comprised of calligraphic texts and illustrations that were actually prints but looked like washed drawings and manuscripts pages, each design original and each version unique. Illuminated prints retained the aesthetic quality of the one-of design while, as multiples, ensuring a larger audience for Blake than actual drawings or manuscripts, which in turn helped Blake establish and spread his reputation as an artist.

**XI. Illuminated Printing in Blake’s Last Decade**

Blake was somewhat disingenuous about his stock of books and monoprints, but he was honest about being willing to produce new copies of the books as fine as any to date. Though Turner appears not to have placed an order, somebody did, because Blake printed ten copies of six titles around this time. On the same 1815 Ruse & Turners paper in the same printing and coloring style and apparently near to one another in time, he printed *Thel* copies N and O, *Marriage* copy G, *Visions* copies N, O, and P, *Songs* copies T2 and U, *Urizen* copy G, and *Milton* copy D, for a total of 262 plates. This is not the same list offered to Turner, who was offered copies of *America* and *Europe* and not offered *Marriage*. One or more of these copies was presumably commissioned, the advanced monies of which would have financially underwritten the production of the set. The commission may have come from James Boswell, who acquired *Songs* copy U, or, more likely, from James Vine, a friend of Linnell’s, who acquired copies of *Thel* and *Milton* from this printing (BIB 334).

No doubt, upon first visiting Blake in his studio/apartment, Linnell saw how original Blake was as a graphic artist. He also realized how poor the Blakes were. Soon after their meeting, Linnell, a graphic artist himself, would have certainly supported—and encouraged—Blake’s desire to resume illuminated printing to produce saleable goods. Linnell told Cumberland, Jr. that he “promised to get him some work” (BR2 340). He and Blake visited Vine, presumably for this purpose, on 10 July 1818—just one month after Blake offered books to Turner (BR2 342). Instead of printing just the work or works commissioned by Vine and/or Boswell, Blake used the commission to reprint his early poetry plus *Milton* and replenish his stock of books, as he probably had hoped to do with a commission from Turner.[[57]](#endnote-58)

Blake’s rationale for refusing Turner a “selection” seems infused with a re-evaluation of his reputation and past works, a re-evaluation that may have stimulated (or perhaps reflected) a desire already present to re-engage with old works in new ways. By mid 1818, after three years of journeyman engraving for Flaxman, Rees, and Wedgewood, the stars began to realign in Blake’s favor. First, Turner’s interest in Blake’s early works lets Blake know that he was not forgotten and elicits a positive response from him; second, Linnell’s interest in Blake’s well-being and belief in him secures customers for his wares. With other people’s money he could print new copies of his early illuminated books and sell them at premium prices to discerning collectors.

Taken together, Blake’s letters to Cumberland in 1808 and Turner in 1818 reveal that Blake remained uninterested in printing illuminated plates in colors. He was now willing, however, to print copies of his early illuminated books. From this point onward, 1818-1827, colored copies of illuminated books went far beyond “what he had previously done.” Referring to them as “elaborately finished” fails to do them justice. The pages do not resemble lightly-washed manuscripts or drawings, like the first copies, 1789-93, or “oil sketches” like color printed copies, 1794-95, or the hand colored large paper copies of 1795, or either book of designs. They look like highly finished watercolor drawings, printed and colored with great control in bright reddish and orangish inks with translucent washes and stippling brushwork, with texts and figures carefully outlined in pen and ink. The attention to detail was sustained throughout, and the designs often contained shell gold and framed in a single thin red line or floral borders to emphasize their autonomy as paintings. The resulting ornate, beautifully colored impressions reveal a renewed vigor and commitment to the illuminated books, as evinced by “Spring” from *Songs* copy U, part of the 1818 project of reprinted illuminated books (illus. [15](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/15.jpg)). In comparison, “Spring” from *Innocence* copy S, printed c. 1811 (illus. [16](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/16.jpg)) is lackluster, a print that Blake took through the motions—and this impression was actually given a higher finish than works printed in 1789, such as copy G (illus. [17](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/17.jpg)) or *Thel* copy E (illus. [18](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/18.jpg)). Together they suggest that J. T. Smith, when he dismissed Blake’s coloring “where gum was used,” had not seen late copies of illuminated books. Or, for that matter, Blake’s illustrations to Milton’s *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (illus. [19](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/19.jpg)).

*Songs* copy U and the other copies from this reprinting project marked a new chapter in Blake’s life. “In the Summer of 1818” Blake had indeed “turned a corner . . . Thereafter he was loved, admired, and often supported by the enthusiastic group of young artists who called themselves the Ancients” (BR2 340). The next nine years resembled the first period of illuminated printing, 1788-95, with Blake once again poet, painter, and printmaker. He formed *Songs* copy R for Linnell in 1819, apparently after selling copies T and U from the 1818 printing; he refinished *Marriage* copy H in 1821, also for Linnell, which suggests that *Marriage* copy G from 1818 had been sold. He had *America* copy D still on hand, but it was printed in black ink and uncolored, so he printed new, matching copies of *America* (O) and *Europe* (K) for Linnell in 1822. Blake finished *Jerusalem* by 1820 and printed four monochrome copies, including copy C, which went to Linnell in installments; copy B, which consisted of the first twenty-five plates, all finely colored; and copy E, Blake’s masterpiece in illuminated printing. He could afford to produce copy E and some of the late frescos entirely on speculation as well as the new relief etched poems of *On Homers Poetry* and *Ghost of Abel* in 1822.

Between 1825 and 1827, Blake reprinted *Songs* six more times and *Marriage* once. He also finished printing the 100 plates of *Jerusalem* in 1827 just before he died to form copy F. During these years Blake also executed twenty-two *Book of Job* watercolors for Linnell and the twenty-one Job engravings published by Linnell in 1826. In April 1827, Blake referenced *Songs* copy X, telling Cumberland that he was “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*” (E 784, italics added). With his health failing and other projects then in progress, Blake recognized that he had “little hope of doing any more of such things.” His “other Work” included seven large pure engravings after Inferno designs from the 101 Dante illustrations that he had recently executed for Linnell, the *Laocoon* engraving and its wall of inscriptions, the Genesis manuscript (0 pages), the twenty-eight drawings of *Pilgrim’s Progress* (on speculation, inherited by Catherine, then Tatham), and the very large fresco of the *Vision of the Last Judgment* that was in progress when he died and which contained “upwards of one thousand figures, many of them wonderfully conceived and grandly drawn” (BR2 617).

Blake did not, however, create another large color-printed design after 1795, or reprint any of the large monoprint matrices after 1805. Nor did he print etchings or relief etchings in colors after 1796, which explains why the *Book of Los*, *Book of Ahania*, and *Song of Los* were not among the books reprinted after their initial printings. The first two books were etchings and their frontispieces and tailpieces exist only as color prints, because the designs were painted on the surfaces of the plates without printable etched outlines. *Song of Los*, Blake’s most unorthodox illuminated book, has four text pages printed in relief and four full-page illustrations printed from gessoed millboards, exactly like their larger monoprint cousins (Viscomi, “Annus Mirabilus” 00). These illustrations exist—and can only exist—as color prints. All three 1795 books were designed in terms of color printing and, unlike the relief etched books, could not be printed without colors.

**XII. The Meaning of Blake’s Hiatus in Illuminated Printing**

Very few illuminated books and no color printed works were produced between 1796 and 1818. Why? Why did Blake extend these hiatuses in 1808? Why did he resume illuminated printing in 1818 but not color printing and monoprinting?

At first, so few illuminated books printed over so much time does not seem credible. Given the visual differences among copies of the same title, illuminated books were long thought to have been “produced only one copy at a time, as [Blake] got commissions” (Davids and Petrillo 00). Assuming so created the impression that illuminated printing was a constant presence and central fact in Blake’s creative life, with a few books printed each year. Differences among copies of a book were interpreted as revisions and signs of independent production. However, the material similarities among copies (type and size of paper, type of ink and colors, first and second pulls of designs, repeated inking accidentals among impressions, palettes and style of coloring) revealed that copies could be grouped into early and later production styles. Focusing on the similarities, not differences, revealed that the early copies were produced in small print runs between 1789 and 1790, and again between 1793 and 1795, and that color printed books were produced in 1794 and 1795.

Blake appears to have concluded his illuminated book project after *Urizen*, in late 1794 or early 1795, with a set of large paper copies of his canon to that date. None of these copies were color printed. He turned from illuminated books to producing independent prints, starting with *Albion rose* and small *Pity* (Butlin 00, 00) in 1795. He printed the etching *Albion rose* in colors, which led to a new mode of illuminated printing. Instead of printing the intagliate lines, Blake used them to guide the colors applied to the plate’s surface. He used this technique in 1795 to produce the *Book of Ahania* and *Book of Los*, finishing the Urizen cycle started in 1794.[[58]](#endnote-59) The printing of *Albion rose* in colors also led to the larger monoprints. *Song of Los*, which overlapped with the monoprints, completed the continental prophecies. It was Blake’s last illuminated book of the period and the last book color printed. Its four full-page designs were printed in colors from gessoed millboards, like the large monoprints.

The differences among early copies of an illuminated book were the inevitable result of Catherine and William printing numerous impressions per plate, compiling the leaves to form copies, and coloring them by hand. The differences between early and late copies of the same title are due to distinctly different printing and coloring styles; the differences among late copies of the same title are due to each copy being custom made. The early copies were produced for stock and without subscription, with their costs underwritten by Blake’s engraving commissions. By 1795, Blake had illuminated books, independent designs, and monoprints in stock and turned to other projects, effectively ending the first period of illuminated printing. There was no point in replenishing what he had multiple copies of until demand caught up with supply. The monoprints overlapped with the *Night Thoughts* designs, which Richard Edwards had commissioned c. 1795, and together these painting projects appear to have pulled Blake away from illuminated printing. Over the next two and half years, Blake executed 537 large watercolor designs in a radically new format and forty-three engravings. This project was followed by 116 similarly designed illustrations to the poems of Gray that Flaxman commissioned for his wife Nancy. This project was followed by designs from the Bible painted in tempera for Butts, starting in 1799. By the end of the decade, though, engraving commissions were drying up, prompting Blake’s departure from London in the fall of 1800 for Felpham, under the patronage of William Hayley, which Flaxman helped to arrange. In Felpham, Blake designed and engraved illustrations for Hayley’s biographies and books of verse. He continued to paint temperas for Butts, but he also continued the hiatus in illuminated printing, color printing, and monoprinting, with the possible exception of a few copies of *Innocence* c. 1802 and the relief etched broadside of *Little Tom*.

The dream of Blake’s 1793 Prospectus of publishing original graphic art works and continuing to sell them from stock was short lived. The idea of Blake’s stock being depleted or diminished without being replenished seems strange. The idea that he needed financial incentive, that he produced books in response to outside forces instead of his own agency, surprises and seems to contradict his claim that he would produce illuminated books independent of commissions and his comments maligning commerce. Blake’s statements about the antipathy of art and commerce, however, were made at the end of his life, long after he had made many valiant attempts, some successful, to engage in the fine and commercial art markets of his day. His inventions of relief etching, monoprinting, and “fresco,” were responses to aesthetic as well as market forces. The first catered to the taste for drawings, or, more specifically, the market for printed facsimiles of sketches and drawings. The second and third inventions responded to the taste for pictures in water miscible paints that were affordable and could visually compete with oil painting. Blake believed his “frescos” were superior to oil painting because they were “pictures” with body that retained the determined line of drawing, which, according to Blake, oil muddies up (E 00).

The hiatuses in illuminated printing, color printing, and monoprinting were probably meant to be temporary. They do not reflect loss of interest in these techniques—at least not initially. Admittedly, for *Thel*, *Marriage*, *For Children*, *Visions*, *America*, *Europe*, *Urizen*, *Book of Ahania*, *Book of Los*, and *Song of Los*, created between 1789 and 1795, to not have been reprinted for over twenty years gives the impression that they were not important to Blake as works of art or poems after that first burst of production. When they were created, illuminated printing was at the heart of Blake’s creative life as writer and artist. The immediate causes for its cessation sound pedestrian, but are probably true; supply exceeded demand, other projects required full attention, and prohibitive costs of production required that at least one copy being pre-sold before publication. The choice to replenish stock, in other words, was not Blake’s, which explains why Blake did not replenish stock once it was diminished or depleted. He could not tie up monies in stock or speculate on sales. The monies here are relatively small, but not small relative to Blake’s income at the time. Moreover, the illuminated poetry project itself had culminated in 1794 with *Urizen* and diminished in intensity in 1795 with three books that were smaller, technically experimental, and visually unlike their counterparts. In focusing on new projects and media, such as monoprinting and designing and painting the illustrations of *Night Thoughts* and Gray’s Poems, Blake was following the natural momentum of art making. It calls to mind Picaso’s response to that dreaded question: what is your favorite artwork? He answered: the next one.

Interpreting the hiatus in illuminated printing in its initial stages as Blake commenting critically on his mode of publishing or most of the poems he had published seems mistaken. By 1808, however, Blake was explicit about his idea of himself as a designer and painter and his lack of interest in reprinting his canon. He refused Cumberland’s offer of a commission that would have earned a half a year’s worth of income and provided copies for stock and further income. From Blake’s point of view, the disruption in “Designing and Painting” was not worth the money—or, put another way, the money was not worth compromising his schedule. Blake’s excitement about “new vanities,” “new pleasures,” and “new profits” (E 770) was well founded. He was on a mission to “exhibit to the Public, in an Exhibition of my own, my Designs, Painted in Watercolours,” which he considered “as the greatest of Duties to my Country” (E 528). Blake hoped to attract customers for his engraving of *Canterbury Pilgrims*, show the nation examples of “portable frescos” suitable for public buildings, and argue for public patronage.

Blake understandably did not want to take on more projects at that moment or disrupt his momentum. Blake’s absolute dedication to Art, no matter what the cost, his not being tempted by money, and conviction in himself without external validation in the form of numbers and sales are some of the things that make Blake an icon among artists today who know nothing of his politics, ideas about god, or radical Christianity. Blake’s refusal to compromise is spun positively by admirers of Blake—in the face of financial need Blake still chooses to do his own thing above all else. To turn away needed income/work is brave, principled, and heroic—or impractical, arrogant, and reckless. Blake behaves like a successful artist who has the luxury of choosing his projects. Was this the Blake who infuriated Nancy Flaxman? The uncompromising artist acting as though he was financially secure when he wasn’t? If we hold Blake responsible for his and his partner’s financial wellbeing, then to have closed the door completely on the commission—on refusing to effect some kind of compromise that would have enabled him to take it on later, after the exhibition—appears irresponsible and selfish.

Declining Cumberland’s request was probably not as difficult as it sounds, because Blake had the security of Butts’ patronage and hopes of better things to come. Thinking that the “old channel” of illuminated printing was his past, not his present or future, also made his decision easier. Nevertheless, his financial situation was never so secure that he could realistically dismiss a commission, especially one with such generous terms. Engraving, after all, and by extension the graphic arts in general, was his primary means of making a living. Bentley estimates that over his lifetime Blake made £4,790 from engraving versus £370 from illuminated printing. Between 1800 and 1809, he estimates that engraving brought in £640, painting £460, and illuminated printing £30 (*Market* 105). What looks like devotion to art looks like financial negligence from the domestic front.[[59]](#endnote-60) Engraving was the means Blake chose to make a living and was the means he had resorted to when Turner found him and Linnell hired him. He was an out of work painter relying on his skills as a journeyman engraver to make a living. He had been out of the public eye for years.

In 1818, with no security or prospects, Blake probably felt no choice but to respond positively to Turner’s enquiry in hopes of soliciting as large of a commission—but with as little compromise—as possible. He was now willing to resume illuminated printing, but remained uninterested in printing books in colors and not very interested in printing monoprints. This was the compromise he was brokering with Turner and the compromise he practiced when he did print illuminated books in 1818 and afterwards. He produced no new small color prints, though he eventually refinished the second pulls of the *Small Book of Designs*. He did not reprint or refinish any large color prints, with the possible exception of *Hecate* 318, though whether that was due to lack of interest on Blake’s part or the part of others is not known.

The labor history of illuminated printing reveals large gaps in the production of books, reveals that during the period between 1795 and 1818 Blake had put aside his main body of poetry and worked primarily—and primarily by choice—as designer and painter. Prints, books, even new poems took a back seat. The *Vala/Four Zoas* manuscript unfolded between 1796-1807; *Milton* unfolded over seven or more years and *Jerusalem* over sixteen, despite both drawing heavily on the *Four Zoas* manuscript. Work on these texts-in-progress probably waxed and waned and they were relegated to unpaid side projects, presumably out of necessity, as he attended to other projects.[[60]](#endnote-61) The hiatus continued, perhaps of its own inertia or by Blake’s—or collectors’—lack of interest in Blake’s early poetry.

That all changed with Turner’s letter of enquiry and Blake’s willingness to revive his former pursuit of printing, which in turn would, with the support of Linnell, enable him to re-center his creative life around his poetic canon and original works of graphic art. His return to illuminated printing in general and his early books in particular appears a matter of luck—and the world’s good fortune—rather than careful planning. And perhaps to Blake’s surprise, a matter of good fortune for him too. What may have started out as a job became a rebirth, a renewal of passion for his early works and their medium.

**XIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The hiatus in illuminated printing began in 1795, reasonably enough, when all saleable illuminated books were in stock and Blake began working on the monoprints and *Night Thoughts* designs. When he wrote Dawson Turner, he hadn’t printed any of his early works except the sections of *Songs* in twenty-three years. His return to this body of work seems serendipitous, a matter of two events occurring in June of 1818: a collector’s enquiry that did not result in a sale, and an engraving job that introduced him to John Linnell. Maybe Blake was already thinking about returning to his early body of work, but with some stock left and minimal employment, he was unlikely to resume illuminated printing without outside capital. Then again, maybe not. In 1808, when outside capital in the form of a commission was offered, he refused it. Now, in 1818, Blake was willing to revive early works that, Blake says, were from their beginning more about his being an “Artist” than realizing large profits from “sufficient numbers” and “general sales.”[[61]](#endnote-62) Was he imagining that a commission from Turner would help to re-establish him as author, printer, and artist? Or was he willing to accept the job out of financial necessity only to rediscover, to his own great surprise, the beauty and power of his early works? Whatever his intention at the time of writing Turner, by the time he got to resume illuminated printing at this scale, his renewed passion for the medium and its products were clearly in evidence.

What Turner wanted to buy should not have mattered to Blake as long as he bought some things. But apparently it did, because Blake was subtly influencing the decision—ruling out books of designs, offering in their place illuminated books and monoprints, but actually preferring the former over the latter. His providing more information about the books than monoprints and willingness to print more plates for less money, along with the contour of subsequent productions of illuminated books and absence of color printing over the next decade, all support the idea that Blake had come to prefer illuminated books to monoprints.

Blake’s comments in the *Laocoon* paint the true artist as necessarily an outsider and art as undermined by commerce. Yet Blake had spent a lifetime trying to prove these ideas wrong. By the time Blake inscribed the maxims about art and commerce, he was done fighting the market. He had fought a good fight and lost. He could reflect on a life filled with honorable attempts and earnest struggles to combine commerce and art while staying true to himself and conclude that it was not possible. For Blake, commerce compromised Art by involving numerous people in its invention, execution, and distribution. “Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War only” (E 275). But this was not his attitude in 1793, 1808, or 1818. He resigned himself to this extremist position only in the last years of his life, under Linnell’s patronage, which kept him busy with commissioned projects, many from Linnell himself, but also enabled him once again to paint, print, and engrave as he liked.

How do we describe Blake’s relation to work and market? Did he become an artist to earn a living? Or was he an artist who, unfortunately, had to earn a living? The latter description/concept presents and helps to establish the Romantic idea of artists as rebels or outsiders living and creating by their own rules, indifferent to audiences and society’s modes for securing them. This Blake inhabits a visionary world of his own making and makes works only for himself, the public be damned. This is the Blake of English and American popular culture, the artist Crabb Robinson described as having "preferred. . . to be a martyr for his religion, i.e. Art, to debasing his talents by a weak submission to the prevailing fashion of art in an age of artistic degradation" (BR2 00).

Robinson’s idea of Blake was promoted in Gilchrist’s *Life of Blake*: “*Pictor Ignotus*,” which, in a Carlyean spin, presented Blake’s isolation and commercial failures as signifying heroic struggles against a repressive culture. This “Pictor Ignotus” is unknowable, is autotelic and impenetrable, hostile to publishers, indifferent to numbers and sales, and unwilling to engage in commerce or participate in public forums to promote himself. But the historical Blake, no less a visionary artist, declined Cumberland’s 1808 request for a set of illuminated books in part to focus exclusively on his forthcoming exhibition, which was meant to show the Public his new paintings and to teach it a thing or two about real art. He was reaching out, not withdrawing from the public, and hoping, as he said, for “new profits.” Reading *Laocoon* statements as describing Blake’s attitude toward early illuminated books distorts the historical Blake, who sought an audience and money from his books and from his artworks in general.[[62]](#endnote-63) That he was not very good at attracting audiences or realizing money is another issue.

Blake’s relationship with patrons and customers could be tempestuous, as evinced by his exchanges with Trusler, Ker, Hayley, and Tulk. Having to rely on others to realize one’s visions does not breed gratitude. The balance between prolific and devourer that Blake encouraged in the *Marriage* became over wrought over time and his resentment made itself felt, perhaps in rude behavior like he showed Ker, but certainly in verse, explicitly in the Notebook, where he pens scathing lines attacking critics and publishers and identifies “Patronage” as the “first part of painting”—and its second and third (E 515). Location, location, location indeed. Never mind invention, execution, imagination. It’s complicated; artists want the attention of people whose attention they resent needing. Blake was fortunate in having two selfless, unpatronizing patrons in Butts and Linnell, but they could not protect him completely from the market. Blake willingly accepted making financial sacrifices to be able to paint as he needed and wanted. That he would rely on patrons of modest means necessarily required sacrifices on his and Catherine’s part. Their threshold for deprivation was certainly higher than most, as is evinced by Blake using their two room apartments (1804-1827) as living and work space and sharing it with a large rolling press.

At first, Blake appears to direct Turner towards illuminated books and away from a “selection” of plates from them to retain the illuminated books’ aesthetic integrity. In light of his inventory, precedents, and, possibly, emotional state, other motives suggest themselves for his reviving illuminated printing and preferring illuminated books over small and large monoprints. By returning to the “old channel” of illuminated printing, Blake was able to embrace his past and embark on a future filled once again with “Designing & Painting” and original graphic art. Indeed, he could bring his well-honed and developed skills as a watercolorist and painter to his earlier graphic inventions and designs. He could, by printing new versions of his early illuminated works, revive his life and “great reputation as an Artist.”

ILLUSTRATIONS

[1a. Letter to Dawson Turner, 9 June 1818. Rosenbach Foundation.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.a.jpg)

[1b. Letter to Dawson Turner, 9 June 1818. Rosenbach Foundation.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.b.jpg)

[1c. Letter to Dawson Turner, 9 June 1818. Rosenbach Foundation.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.c.jpg)

[1d. Letter to Dawson Turner, 9 June 1818. Rosenbach Foundation.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/1.d.jpg)

[2. Visionary autograph/drawing by Blake, signed/drawn on 16 January 1826. New York Public Library, Berg Collection.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/2.jpg)

[3. *Small Book of Designs* copy A, plate 7 from *Book of Urizen*. British Museum.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/3.jpg)

[4. *Small Book of Designs* copy B, plate 7 from *Book of Urizen*. Tate Britain.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/4.jpg)

[5. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy R, plate 8. Fitzwilliam Museum.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/5.jpg)

[6. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy A, plate 8. British Museum.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/6.jpg)

[7. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy V, plate 8. Pierpont Morgan Museum and Library.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/7.jpg)

[8. *Marriage* *of Heaven and Hell* copy D, plate 4. Library of Congress, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/8.jpg)

[9. *Good & Evil Angels*, watercolor drawing, c. 1793 (Butlin 257). Cecil Higgins Museum.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/9.jpg)

[10. *Good & Evil Angels*, monoprint, 1795 (Butlin 324). Private Collection.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/10.jpg)

[11. *Good & Evil Angels*, monoprint, 1795, refinished 1805 (Butlin 323). Tate Britain.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/11.jpg)

[12. *Large Book of Designs*, *Albion rose* (Butlin 262.1). British Museum.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/12.jpg)

[13. *Large Book of Designs*, *Joseph of Arimathea Preaching to the Inhabitants of Britain* (Butlin 262.6). British Museum.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/13.jpg)

[14. *Visions of the Daughters of* Albion copy F, plate 1 (frontispiece), 1793; color printed 1794. Pierpont Morgan Museum and Library.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/14.jpg)

[15. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy U, “Spring,” 1789, printed 1818. Princeton University Library.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/15.jpg)

[16. *Songs of* *Innocence* copy S, “Spring” 1789, printed c. 1811. Cincinnati Museum of Art.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/16.jpg)

[17. *Songs of* *Innocence* copy G, “Spring” 1789. Yale Center for British Art.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/17.jpg)

[18. *The Book of* *Thel* copy E, plate 6, 1789/90. Beinecke Library, Yale University.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/18.jpg)

[19. “Milton in his Old Age,” plate 12 of *Il Penseroso* c. 1816 (Butlin 543.12). Pierpont Morgan Museum and Library.](http://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/BlakeReturns/Images/19.jpg)

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1. Turner hired Cotman in 1812 at £200 annum to teach his wife and eldest four daughters drawing and etching. Cotman moved to Norfolk, where he made his living as a drawing master, watercolorist, and etcher of antiquities and architectural designs. In 1817, Cotman accompanied Turner and his family on a tour in Normandy, which they visited again in 1818 and 1820. These visits to the continent resulted in Turner’s *Account of a Tour* and his *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy*, which appeared in 1820 and 1822 respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. The Upton engraving is dated 1 July 1819. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. For a record of Blake’s known incomes during his life, see “Blake Accounts” (BR2 757–812) and Bentley’s *Desolate Market* (104). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Blake and Humphry may have met in 1793 or 1794 through their mutual friend George Cumberland, who was among Blake’s earliest collectors and collecting illuminated books at the same time as Humphry. At the time, Cumberland owned copies of *America*, *Europe*, and *Experience* from the same printing sessions as Humphry’s, along with copies of *Innocence*, the *Book of Thel*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *For Children: the Gates of Paradise*, and *Song of Los*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. The *Small Book of Designs* comprised *Thel* plates 2, 6, 7, and 4; *Marriage* plates 11, 16, 14, and 20; *Visions* plates 10 and 3; and *Urizen* plates 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 19, 23, 24, and 27. The *Large Book* comprised *Urizen* plates 14 and 21; *Visions* plates 1 and 7; *America* plate d; *Joseph Preaching to the Inhabitants of Britain*; *Albion rose*; and the *Accusers*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Humphry went legally blind in 1797 and thus Upcott may have actually acquired the Blake works before his father’s death in 1810. His father bequeathed to him his miniatures, pictures, drawings, and engravings, as well as a very extensive correspondence with many leading men. He apparently derived his passion for collecting from his father (DNB 00). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Ruskin referred to them as “large drawings” (*Works*, vol. 36, 32–33). Gilchrist, Dante Rossetti, and others thought they were paintings, either in oil or tempera, despite their knowing that some designs existed in more than one version. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Upcott’s earliest letter to Turner is dated 21 May 1816 (Munby 36). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. William Hone, satirist, writer, and bookseller, referred to Upcott as the “Emperor of Autographs” (Erdman, “Reliques” 585). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. *A General Catalogue of Books, Now on Sale, by Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, Finsbury Square. Part II.* (London, 1817); lot 9,916, Blair, *The Grave*, royal 4to, russia, g.e., £2.12.6 (1808). Bernard Barton wrote Allan Cunningham, an early Blake biographer, about Turner and Blake: “My friend Major Moor (an intimate & of Southeys) a Gent. Resident near here, says that Dawson Turner of Yarmouth was acquainted with Blake, corresponded with him he believes & has many or several of his drawings or plates” (24 February 1830; BR2 508). Turner appears to have had at least two letters, including the one of 9 June 1818 and one that was included in his copy of *The Grave*, mentioned in the Sotheby’s catalogue of Turner’s collection, 7–23 June 1853, but is now untraced. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. In his obituary of Upcott in 1845, Turner described the sub-librarian’s “subterranean caverns at the London Institution” and “his confined rooms in his antiquated residence at Islington, every inch of wall was covered with paintings, drawings, and prints, most of them by Gainsborough or Ozias Humphrey, and all indicative of good taste and judgment” (473). Upcott’s collection of his father’s paintings and drawings was mostly kept together. The Blakes, however, were put up for auction at R. H. Evans and Sons, 15–19 June 1846. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. On evidence unknown to me, Sybille Erle states that “There are records of Blake selling a set to Thomas Butts in 1805 and another one to Dawson Turner in 1818” (4). This is apparently a misreading of Butlin Cat. I 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Turner’s collection of autographs was auctioned at Puttick and Simpson, 16-20 June 1859. Lot #501 was Turner’s “Catalogue of Autographs in his Library 4to. 1822. ‘Curious, as showing the growth of the Collection—containing in 1822, less than 400 letters—in 1858, upwards of 40,000’.” [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. The interest in autographs, of course, precedes the popularity of collecting them. The first books with print facsimiles of famous autographs were John Fenn’s *Original letters, written during the reigns of Henry VI. Edward IV. and Richard III. by various persons of rank or consequence; . . . with notes, . . . and authenticated by engravings of autographs, paper marks, and seals* (1787), followed by John Thane’s *British autography: a collection of fac-similes of the handwriting of royal and illustrious personages, with their authentic portraits* (1788). Thane’s personal collection of autographs sold at Sotheby’s on 21 May 1819, the first auction to be exclusively devoted to autographs (Munby 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. The albums are in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. For a detailed description of them and Blake’s entry, see Erdman “Reliques” 581–7 and Munby 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. The first monoprint was printed from a shallowly etched relief etching; the next two were from unetched plates, and the rest from gessoed millboards (see Viscomi, “Annus Mirabilus.” [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. The consensus in Blake studies is that the designs “were planned by Blake as a single series,” that “all the subjects . . . bear on themes connected with Blake’s interpretations of the early history of the world as it is set forth in the Lambeth Books” (Blunt 58). For a counterargument proposing that they are autonomous designs, see Viscomi, *Printed Paintings*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. There are traces of a second printed color in a few plates in *America* copy M, a proof of *Milton* plate 13, and in a few proofs of *Jerusalem*, but there was no systematic color printing of relief etchings or etchings after 1796. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. The Princeton University Library’s impression of *Small Book of Designs* copy B (Butlin 261.9) is the second pull of *Urizen* copy J. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. The impressions sold at Sotheby’s on 29 April 1862, lots 191 through 194, as part of a large collection of Blake’s work that once belonged to Tatham but was sold to an unknown collector, apparently through Joseph Hogarth, the print seller, in the 1840s (*Printed Paintings*, Appendix 4). Lots 191 through 194 were comprised of eighteen “Subjects from his published works, *highly finished in colours*” (lot 191). Lot 191 had five images; 192 and 193 were “Others 5,” and 194 was “Others, *highly characteristic* 3.” The phrase “*highly finished in colours*” and its variants were used to describe the five monoprints in lots 182, 186, 188, 189, and 190. Butlin records only eleven designs from copy B (261), with one of them having been sold by Catherine Blake (261.4) and the other ten belonging to Tatham. Eight missing color-printed impressions from copy B resurfaced in 2007 (Butlin and Hamlyn); at least five impressions remain untraced. The eight rediscovered impressions probably came from lots 191 and 194, which were acquired by Col. Weston and Smith, respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. In *Songs* copy V, the wide space, between lines 2 and 3, is thinly washed in a light color. Vine met Blake through Linnell and may have asked for his copy of *Songs* to be presented like Linnell’s *Songs* copy R. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. *Songs* copy A is missing the combined title plate because *Innocence* and *Experience* were stabbed and numbered separately; it is also missing plates 50, 51, and 52. Plate 52 is “To Tirzah,” which was not ready for *Experience* until later in 1795, printed with *Songs* copies I, J, K, L, M, N, and O. Plates 50 and 51 were probably in *Songs* copy A as the last two plates (presumably numbered as 00 and 00) but were removed (BIB 00). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Ker was writing while the “Roxburgh Cause” was still pending in the House of Lords, which was decided against his father John Gawler (John Belleden Ker) on 11 May 1812. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. The paints were similar to those Blake used in 1794 and 1795 to print illuminated plates in colors, in 1795 to produce the large color print drawings, and 1796 to produce the books of designs. He also used a similar paint for the tempera paintings that he executed for Butts between 1799 and 1803. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. BR2 records the amount for the two works as £31.10 (770), in which case these were the most expensive works that Blake is known to have sold in his lifetime, at £15.5 each. Flaxman recorded paying £11 for a “drawing” of the *Last Judgment* in 1806 (767; Butlin 640). This work sold at Christie’s 1 July 1828 as “A singularly grand drawing of the Last Judgment, by Blake” (lot 61). The drawing is untraced and its size and medium are unknown. It sold for only 6 shillings, yet this is about five times per watercolor drawing comprising Blake’s illustrations of Gray’s *Poems*, whose 116 designs sold for £8 (lot 85), or about 1.4 shillings. Blake’s watercolor drawings at auction before the Butts’ auctions of 1852, 1853, and 1854 were averaging £1.5 shillings (*Printed Paintings*, Appendix 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. We do not know the individual prices of most work acquired by Butts, because the receipts record sums given to Blake “on further account.” Bentley has examined the receipts against what we know that Blake received and estimated that Butts acquired around 200 designs for between one and two guineas each over a twenty year period (BR2 00). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. The engraved portrait of Romney engraved by Blake has been recently rediscovered; see Crosby. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. The “friend” of the Flaxman’s appears to have been C. H. Tulk, and the “little drawings” were probably *All Religions are One* plate 1 and *There is No Natural Religion* copy M, which Tulk owned. The drawing may have been Butlin 128 or 151 (BR2 326). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Viz a viz Trusler, Blake positions himself as Reason: in *Marriage*, he says that Jesus “prays to the Father to send the comforter or Desire that Reason may have ideas to build on” (plate 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Blake’s alter ego in *An Island in the Moon*, his prose satire from 1783, was “Obtuse Angle.” [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. The *Jerusalem* plates exhibited were probably the plates in blue ink (6, 28, 35, 37, and 51) and/or raw sienna (25, 32, 41, 47). See Essick, “1812 Exhibition”; for another plate treated as an autonomous watercolor, see Essick, “*Jerusalem*, Plate 51.” *America* copy M was printed in blue ink and may have been printed with the blue ink proofs of *Jerusalem*, c. 1812. No matching copy of *Europe* is extant, making copy M an anomaly if printed alone. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. *Innocence* was originally thirty-one plates, then twenty-eight, twenty-seven, and twenty-six as it lost “A Little Girl Lost” and “A Little Girl Found,” “School Boy,” and “Ancient Bard.” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Blake’s characteristic confidence and optimistic tone was clearly present in the January 1803 letter to his brother James and the December 1808 letter to Cumberland. We see Blake satirize these traits in himself in *An* *Island in the Moon*. The “Manuscript” that Quid intends to publish is “Engraved instead of Printed & at every other leaf a high finishd print all in three Volumes folio,” printed in an edition of “two thousand” and sold for “a hundred pounds a piece.” All volumes, apparently, printed on speculation, for “whoever will not have them will be ignorant fools & will not deserve to live” (E 465). At the end of *Marriage*, Blake takes on the mantel of the confident publisher and announces “The Bible of Hell” as a work “the world shall have whether they will or no” (E 44). “The Bible of Hell” probably refers to the “Proverbs of Hell” (see Viscomi, “Evolution of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,” part I). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Between 1790 and 1800, while in Lambeth, Blake produced most of the copies of *Marriage*, *Visions*, *America*, *Experience*, *Songs*, *Europe*, *Urizen*, all of the copies of *Song of Los*, *Book of Los*, *Book of Ahania*, the books of designs, and all but three of the monoprints. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Leigh and Robert Hunt’s mother described the state of publishing in 1799 thusly: “The engraving of Pictures is at present but a dull business. The war occasions a scarcity of cash, people in general find it difficult to obtain the necessary comforts of life, and have not a surplus of money for elegances” (BR2 84). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. In 1804, he tells Hayley: “I curse & bless Engraving alternately because it takes so much time & is so untractable. tho capable of such beauty & perfection” (E 743). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. See BIB 376; since its publication in 1993, *Innocence* copy W has resurfaced, which was printed in black ink on rectos only with copies U and V. The plates were in their first states. Subsequent printings were printed in colored inks on both sides of the leaves. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Copies of *Thel*, *Vision, America*, *Europe*, and *Urizen*, were bound in one volume (Willis and Sotheran, *A Catalogue of Superior Second-Hand Books . . .* London, 25 June 1862, lot 116). The expected pattern of production for the deluxe set of books would be at least two copies per title, which in turn suggests that Flaxman’s copies of *Thel*, *Visions*, and *Urizen* were the second copies from that project. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Underwriting one’s creative work with one’s day job is still the norm among the vast majority of people who identify themselves as writers, musicians, and artists—including some famous and influential (e. g. T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, W. C. Williams). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. *Innocence* copies O, R/Y, *Innocence* of *Songs* copy P, and *Experience* of *Songs* copies P and Q in c. 1802; *Innocence* copies P and Q and *Innocence* of *Songs* copy Q in c. 1804. He may have used it c. 1811 with *Milton* copies A, B, and C with *Innocence* copy S and *Innocence* of *Songs* copy S (BIB 378). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Blake faced the same problem in 1821with Thornton’s *The Pastorals of Virgil* (BB 627). He showed the publisher four designs executed as relief etchings, which were rejected. Blake redid them as white-line wood engravings, similar in style to *Death’s Door*, which the publisher also rejected. Three of them were recut by professionals but the other seventeen were saved by the intervention of Linnell, Lawrence, and other artists vouching for their genius. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. For conflicting accounts of Blake’s dealings with Cromek, see essays by Dennis Read, G. E. Bentley, Jr., and Arleen Ward. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. All together five engravers worked on the plate: Cromek, Luigi Schiavonetti, Niccolo Schiavonetti, William Bromley, and Heath. By 1820, Turner was helping to finance projects for James Heath and his son Charles (Heath, III 89–102). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Heath and Blake were apprenticed in the same period and began their careers engraving designs after Stothard for the book and magazine publishers, including the *Novelist Magazine* and *Wit’s Magazine.* Blake argues in his *Public Address* of c. 1810 that Stothard owed his reputation to Blake’s engraved plates; in the public eye, however, Heath had made Stothard’s reputation (Heath, I 8, 15–16, 22–33ff). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Heath’s biography provides a fascinating and revealing counterpoint to Blake’s life as an engraver. One encounters nearly all the same names, addresses, publishers, dealers, even many of the same projects, as one does in Bentley’s *Blake Records*, but one quickly sees that Blake’s great skill as an engraver does not match his business savvy. Heath, on the other hand, was a professional and highly skilled engraver who was able to realize the full rewards of his profession by consistently focusing on business. The need to realize himself as an Artist was not in Blake’s best financial or professional interest—as Flaxman recognized (BR2 94–5). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. Cumberland’s illuminated book collection was larger than Butts’; it was as large as Romney’s and represented more diverse styles. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Cumberland’s copies of *For Children* and *America* were monochrome; his *Thel*, *Innocence*, and *Visions* were lightly washed in watercolors and are good examples of “where gum has been used” (Smith, BR2 622). They were also, along with *America*, printed recto-verso, appearing more like pages in a book than independent designs. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Excluded from this set are the eighteen small etchings comprising *For the Sexes*. The evaluation is based on the prices given in the letter to Turner, whose price for *Songs* was used in 1806 for *Songs* copy E sold to Butts. Even so, printing colors required more time and attention in the printing and as much in the finishing to merit a higher price than works not color printed—in which case a value added tax of £1 per work for being printed in colors seems reasonable. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. Four books published by Blake in colors but not in Cumberland’s collection are: *Marriage* (27 plates) and *Urizen* (28 plates) in 1794, and *Book of Ahania* (5 plates) and *Book of Los* (6 plates) in 1795. *Urizen* was priced £5.5 in the letter to Turner, and one could expect that *Marriage*, printed on the recto of the *Urizen* plates, would have been priced the same. *Ahania* and *Los* would be similar in price to *Thel*, approximately £2.2 each. Presumably, color printed versions of these works would cost more than their Prospective prices. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. Bentley, *Desolate Market* 00, estimates that the Blakes earned between 50 and 100 pounds a year from 1808 to 1827. CHECK [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Blake executed ninety illustrations of Milton’s poems between 1801 and 1816. . [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. Explain untraced 307B and 292B. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. See Viscomi, BIB Chapters 23–29; this excludes *Jerusalem*, *Homer*, *Ghost*, and *Laocoon*, all produced after 1818. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. Blake signed no commercial engravings between 1806 and 1814 (between Hayley’s *Ballads* and Flaxman’s *Hesiod*; BR2 152n, 305). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. See also William Carey, “Critical Description and Analytical review of ‘Death on the Pale Horse’,” *Repository of Arts, Literature, Manufactures*, 1 May 1818, BR2 330-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. This phrase comes from Isaac D’Israeli, who acquired Romney’s illuminated book collection and described it to Dibdin as comprised of “One Hundred and Sixty drawings” (Viscomi, “Myth” 54). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. Mrs. Blake sold *Visions* copy N to James Ferguson, c. 1829, with Tatham serving as her agent. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
58. *Ahania* and *Los* are different media, size, and length than *Urizen*, raising questions as to whether they were in mind in 1794 at the time of *Urizen* or created specifically for the new medium of color printed etchings. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. Devotion required sacrifice. When the shelves were bare, Catherine Blake silently put a coin on an empty plate to signal that food cost money and money and food were absent (*Life*, I 00). She no doubt encouraged Blake to answer Turner’s letter. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. If Tatham burned many Blake manuscripts as reputed (BR2 00), then writing may have played a larger role in Blake’s life between 1795 and 1827 than the long gestation period of *Vala*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem* would suggest. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
61. The low prices for illuminated books in 1793 and monoprints in 1805 attests to this. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
62. Being able to print/publish his poetry was important to Blake, but it was not the factor motivating him to create illuminated printing. The argument that it was and counter argument that it was not are discussed in detail in *Blake and the Idea of the Book*. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)