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Dr. Erdman's hypothesis in *Blake Newsletter*, III (1969), 8-13 concerning the way Blake formed the letter "g" is fascinating and provocative. It offers a most promising method for dating otherwise undatable works, and deserves careful study and verification. It is certainly the most effective, simple, analytical device yet applied to Blake's handwriting.

The g-string of evidence assembled by Dr. Erdman and friends seems quite conclusive (if we exorcise a few ghosts) at the later terminus. From 1793 until late in 1802 Blake used an idiosyncratic "g", with the nubbin at the top turned to the left, in *For Children* (17 May 1793), "Job" and "Edward & Elenor" (18 August 1793), *Visions* (1793), *America* (1793), *Songs of Experience* (1794), *Europe* (1794), *Urizen* (1794), *Albion* (1795), *Song of Loe* (1795), *Book of Loe* (1795), G. Cumberland, *Thoughts on Outline* (1794 and 1795), Moore & Co. carpet ad [1798-99], J. Flaxman, *Naval Pillar* (1799), W. Hayley, "Little Tom" (5 October 1800), W. Hayley, *Designs to a Series of Ballads* (1 June, 3 August 1802), Hayley, *Couper*, II, 1st and 2nd editions [pace Dr. Erdman, there is no "3rd ed."] (5 November 1802). So far as is known, Blake never used this idiosyncratic "g" after 5 November 1802; thereafter all the "g"s are neutral or conventional, with the serif to the right, beginning with Hayley's *Couper*, III (25 March 1804), Hayley, *Ballads* (1805) [the work was listed in the idiosyncratic column on p. 9 in error, as Dr. Erdman points out in his "postscript"] P. Hoare, *Inquiry* (1806), and so on. At this final terminus the evidence is clear and unambiguous: Some time between late 1802 and early 1804 (allowing for the fact that the imprints were engraved some time before the dates they recorded), Blake abandoned his leftward, idiosyncratic "g" for the conventional one he had used in his first works in illuminated printing.

At the other terminus, however, the evidence is by no means so clear. In *No Natural Religion* (1788), *All Religions Are One* (1788), and *Songs of Innocence* (1789), all the "g"s are conventional, conservative, right-facing. However, in *TheL* which is dated "1789" on the titlepage, pl. 3-5, 7 use a neutral "g", while pl. 1 and 8 have the idiosyncratic "g". Similarly, the *Marriage*, which is not clearly dated but which is usually assigned to 1790-93, has the conventional "g" on pl. 2-3, 5-6, 11-13, 21-24 and the idiosyncratic one on pl. 4, 7-10, 14-20, 25-27. Clearly, some time between 1788 and May 1793 Blake changed his lettering style. The questions are: When did he make the change, and did he make it abruptly, without wavering, or uncertainly, using both styles at the same time. I do not think that either question can be answered clearly and confidently.

Dr. Erdman says: "The general pattern, as Bentley agrees, is clear enough. While *TheL* and *The Marriage* were in progress Blake switched from conventional to leftward serifs, and while at work on the 1805

*Ballade* he switched back." I am sorry to say that I do not think the evidence demonstrates clearly this "general pattern". Not only did the switch back occur about 1803 rather than in 1805, but there is evidence to suggest that Blake did not use the new, idiosyncratic style exclusively when he developed it. Dr. Erdman says that "there is no ambiguity or indication of possible wavering in the lettering of this [early] period", but both *The I* and *The Marriage* seem to provide just such ambiguities, with differing lettering styles on contiguous plates. Dr. Erdman argues: "Against the explanation that Blake was trying both kinds of g's [at the same time] is the fact that no individual plate contains a mixture of kinds"; however, *Marriage* pl. 7 has a rightward serif on its first "g" and a leftward serif on all the rest! Surely this suggests that Blake used both styles at the same time.

The great difficulty in dating the first use of the sinister "g" is that no works in Illuminated Printing can be clearly dated between *Songs of Innocence* (1789), which uses only conventional "g"s, and *For Children* (May 1793), which uses only idiosyncratic "g"s. The evidence seems to me to indicate no more than that the lettering change took place between 1788 and May 1793. Before I would be willing to accept a more precise date for the change, I would want to see one style of "g" or the other used exclusively in a work clearly dated in 1789-1792. Perhaps other G-men can find such evidence. So far as our present evidence shows, the change to exclusive use of the idiosyncratic "g" could have occurred in 1789 or in May 1793 or some time in between.

As a consequence, I am most reluctant to try to redate parts of *The I* and *The Marriage* on the basis of this lettering. Indeed, the evidence of *The I* suggests to me that Blake was using the idiosyncratic "g" as early as 1789.

I have followed patiently what Dr. Erdman calls "the tug and push of the evidence", but I am not persuaded "that we are pretty tightly wedged into a date somewhere in the middle of 1791 for the [initial] change", for no work with either style of "g" is clearly dated in 1790, 1791, or 1792. Uncertainties of dating and of the authorship of the lettering, in the marginal years, seem to me to make it difficult to draw conclusions as precise as these. Until we have absolutely firm dates at these marginal years, we cannot confidently say exactly when the change took place or whether Blake's practice at the margin was uniform or variable. And until we can say with confidence when the change took place, we cannot alter conventional dates (such as the "1789" on the titlepage of *The I*) with confidence on the basis of their "g"s.

\*Editor's note: Erdman protests that the first "g" on M&H plate 7 does not have a conventional serif; it is in effect a defective letter and cannot be taken as evidence either way.

It should be noted as well that the undated works which contain the telltale "g"s--"A Divine Image", "To Tirzah", *Važa* pp. 8, 10, 12, 67, the Moore & Co. carpet ad with the conventional "g", and "Job" first state, *America* cancelled plates, and "The Accusers" first state with the idiosyncratic "g"--can now be dated with more confidence than heretofore, but that the form of their "g"s does not alter the dates conventionally assigned to them. Thus far, no appiecards are upset by the "g" hypothesis. This, of course, is merely a matter of luck, and the formation of the "g" will remain as an important test for new or unnoticed inscriptions. My chief point here is that the chronological limits within which the idiosyncratic "g" was used are as yet only vaguely defined. A dating more precise than 1789-93 to ?1803 will be highly speculative without better evidence than we have at present.