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Dating Blake's Script: the "g" hypothesis

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4. DATING BLAKE'S SCRIPT: the "g" hypothesis

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G. E. Bentley, Jr., has urged me, at a welcome time and in the public interest, to spell out in more detail the grounds for the theory I advanced in a summary note in Studies in Bibliography in 1964 (pp. 51-54) and, even more cryptically, in 1966 in the textual notes of the Doubleday Blake (pp. 738, 744, 745), the theory based on the discovery that one of Blake's "accidentals," the shape of the letter g in his script, had twice undergone such deliberate change as to be anything but accidental.

I observed that up to about 1790 Blake in the lettering of his Illuminated Books or engraved inscriptions employed a lower-case g of the conventional kind, with the serif ("the little nubbin at the top" as Bentley calls it) pointing to the right (g); that he invented a different letter, with the serif pointing idiosyncratically to the left (g) "in about 1791, employed [it] with unwavering consistency for fourteen years, and then as suddenly and with ruthless consistency discarded" it in 1805:

"Thel, dated 1789 but containing (as others have observed) a Motto and a concluding plate that seem late additions, uses the conventional and manuscript g's --except in the Motto and the last plate [pl. 1, 8], where the new [left-facing] g takes over. The Marriage . . . was the product of several years [as most scholars agree]. The old g rules up through Plate 3, and in 5-6, 11-13, 21-24 [here I correct a numerical error in SB]; the new g in 4, 7-10, 14-20, and in the 'Song of Liberty' (25-27). This overlap narrows the date of change to late 1790 or early 1791. Every serified g thereafter points leftward, even in inscriptions made for Cumberland or Hayley, including the inscription 'June 18, 1805 . . . Bridge Street' in the plates for Hayley's Ballads. After that date Blake not only abandoned the leftward g but corrected it in reissues! In the 1807 reissue of these Ballads the date is not changed, but the g in 'Bridge Street' has a new rightward serif. Blake's Gates of Paradise, etched 'For Children' in 1793, with leftward g's, was reissued many years later with some further etching, during which the g's [on pl. 13, 14, 16] were given new, right-facing serifs, opposite visible remains of the old. In late issues of Songs of Experience, for example in the Rosenwald and Fitzwilliam copies [copies Z, AA, to be seen in the Blake Trust facsimile and in color slides, respectively], when Blake retouched the lettering he added new serifs beside the old."

Bentley is puzzled at my claim to see conventional g's in the main part of Thel. I should have explained more analytically that the lowercase g's in Thel are of a rather neutral kind that can be found occasionally in any period, with no serif and no loop in the tail and an oval head (g), but that in plates 3-5, 7 of Thel occur hybrid g's with more rounded head and a slight but rightward serif (g). These I counted in with the conventional g's, but perhaps the argument should be put, here, as resting on the absence of the new, leftward g's. Another type of serif-less g's, with curled tail and round--but bald--head (g) will puzzle us later on.

To fill out the picture, Bentley suggests a table of evidence to see whether it is accurate to say that there are "no exceptions" to my hypothesis in any clearly dated work--and to see what applications may be made that clarify the dating of uncertainly dated work. A first step, partly supplied by Bentley in correspondence, would be a tabulation of all writings containing g's of any kind, according to dates traditionally assigned, on however little authority. But since an immediate second step would be the elimination of items containing only serif-less g's (Bentley sketched out a list of engraved captions containing only neutral g's which shows the

as available to Blake in all periods--though seldom in captions that may not have been lettered by someone else), and a third step the removal for separate treatment of items of infirm date or of ambiguous serif, I've chosen to begin at this point, with a table of unambiguous and fairly certainly (if not always pinpointably) dated exhibits, followed by a table of works or inscriptions of uncertain date and/or ambiguously drawn g's.

It should be understood that no writing by Blake, in pencil, pen, burin, or graver, has been excluded from this survey. If few instances of pen or pencil writing are listed, it is because they are the only occurrences of serified g's I have found in all Blake's manuscripts.

Table 1

RIGHT-SERIF g (Conventional)	LEFT-SERIF g (Idiosyncratic)
No Natural Religion [1788]	Thel pl 1 (Motto), 8 (Finis)
All Religions are One [1788]	Marriage pl 4, 7-10, 14-20, 25-27
Innocence (tp 1789) pl 2-27, 34-36, 53, b	Visions (tp 1793)
Thel (tp 1789) pl 3-5, 7 (hybrid g's)	For Children (1793) pl 2, 13-14, 16
Marriage pl 2, 3[1790], 5-6, 11-13, 21-24	Job (18 Aug 1793)
	Edward & Elenor (18 Aug 1793)
	America (tp 1793)
	Experience (tp 1794) 30-33, 37-51
	Europe (tp 1794)
	Urizen (tp 1794)
	Ahania; Song of Los; Bk of Los (tps 1795)
	Cumberland: Thoughts on Outline (Jan 1795)
	pl 2, 3, 5-16, 18, 19, 22
	Moore & Co carpet adv [1797-98]
	Naval Pillar (1799)
	Little Tom (Oct 5 1800)
	Designs to...Ballads, fp (June 1 1802),
	Lion (August 3 1802)
Hayley Cowper III (25 March 1804)	Hayley Cowper II (1803) fp, Weatherhouse
	(Nov 5 1802) (1st, 2nd, 3rd eds)
Hayley Ballads (1805), Eagle [revised?],	Hayley Ballads (1805), Eagle (June 18 180
Lion, Horse (all inscr. June 18 1805)	[reprod. in Russell; Lion and Horse not
Milton (tp 1804, no g's)	seen]
Jerusalem (tp 1804, no g's)	
Title page design for <u>The Grave</u> (1806)	
Hoare <u>Inquiry</u> (1806)	
Canterbury Pilgrims (Oct 8 1810)	
Hervey [ca 1810]	
Joseph of Arimathea, 2nd state [ca 1810]	
Mirth [1816-20] 2nd state	
Laocoon	
On Homers Poetry, on Virgil	
Ghost of Abel (1822)	
The Hiding of Moses [ca 1823]	
Wilson Lowry (1825)	
Illustrations of the Book of Job (1826)	

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 Ballads he switched back. Even this chart omitting uncertain cases, however, contradicts my assertion of June 1805 as a moment of sudden and ruthless reversal. Indeed only one copy, not now located, has a left serif; the latest leftward serifs fully in evidence are in the three 1803 editions of Hayley's Cowper, in plates inscribed Nov 5 1802 in vol II; the "moment" of change is the 16-month interval between that date and March 25 1804, the date inscribed on right-serif plates in vol III. Yet the 1805 Eagle plate demonstrates the ruthlessness I spoke of. Blake did not simply mend the serif on the one g concerned; he re-engraved the whole line, "Publ. June 18 1805 by R. Phillips. N^o 6 Bridge Street Black Friars," to get it right. Possibly this was a single errant plate, revised not for the 1807 reissue but at once; I wish I knew.) This second state of the plate is also more highly finished if comparison of the Russell plate with a B.M. copy is valid.

The dubious evidence of a g in the frontispiece of volume I of the Cowper, inscribed Nov 5 1802, points to a distinction that complicates matters. It is serifless (bald: g) in the 1st edition; in the second (NYPL copy) under scrutiny it reveals a trace of an entering stroke on the right side (here exaggerated: g) not made as the usual serif by a separate stroke but a fine line made as the burin approached to cut the loop of the letter. (It is Bentley who reports the first edition bald; perhaps the only change is in deeper inking of the plate.) In any event, I take this as an instance of the neutral g, not a firm and determinate right serif. But the distinction I refer to as illustrated here is that between Blake's relief etching, where the lettering was first drawn in ground (varnish), thick in line including serifs, and his (or other engravers') incised inscriptions, cut directly into the copper. Bald or almost bald g's occur occasionally in all periods, in both media. The serif requires an extra stroke of the pen, burin, or needle, apparently easier to forget with the tools of incising than with the pen or brush. In Blake's final period, when he was printing from relief plates made in his leftward, Lambeth period, he did not tamper with the copper plates but simply retraced the letters on the paper after printing, leaving the old serifs at the left, as printed, but inserting new ones at the right. (I do not mean to imply that he did this in all post-Felpham copies; many he printed without retouching. I should have said that whenever he retouched, he changed the g serifs.) Such retracing was not satisfactory, or necessary with intaglio printing, however; the easy and more attractive method there was to burnish the plate and recut the letters. This process left more or less faint traces of the earlier shapes, as we see in mended inscriptions in For the Sexes [ca 1818]: remnant left serifs and added right serifs, plates 13-14, 16. Still simpler was to close up the copper where the serif had been, leaving them bald. (Though bald g's never serified are common in inscriptions, from those in "Original Shaving" in May-Day in London, June 1 1784, to those in the 1811 Chaucer.)

Two problem inscriptions may be discussed in this connection, before we return to the question of dating the beginning and ending of the left-serif period. The Accusers, originally inscribed "Our End is Come . . . 1793," in its latest state has g's in "Judge" and "Judgment," which in some copies appear to be bald. But in some a clear left serif is visible in Judge (a) and a slight left serif in Judgment (d). The implication is that the inscription was incised during the leftward period and the serif removed in later printings. I would like to believe that the outcry against the Judgment of Accusers was Blake's response to his accusation and having to stand trial for sedition; i.e., that the Notebook "Grey Monk" lines and the inscription of this plate were made in August 1803 or thereabouts. This will fit into that 16-month moment.

The inscriptions of Albion rose (the date of which I have been guilty of moving about impulsively) has one g, in "Giving," quite bald in some prints but showing a faint trace of a right serif in others. This is maddeningly ambiguous, though it does seem to put the inscription outside the Lambeth-Felpham era. When Blake added right serifs, he did it firmly. But to posit a deleted serif would require putting the original inscription impossibly early (pre-Lambeth, so to speak). I have been guilty of this anachronism, in my Doubleday notes, forgetting the language of the inscription (but see SB, p. 54). It is not only that dancing the dance of Eternal Death and giving oneself for the Nations are concepts and language of the Milton period (see esp. pl 14:14) but that the concept of Albion as a person does not otherwise precede Milton. Up through the works of 1795 Albion is a land; only in additions to the ms of Vala does the "Eternal Man" change to "Albion." Appealing again to biography, Albion's rise, with the dated recollection that the drawing was made in or of "1780" (riots for America), would nicely fit the bread-riot year 1800, with rumors of peace--and the Blakes' "rising" to Felpham? One would need to examine bald-g copies to see if they represent an earlier state of the engraving and test this hypothesis, which requires that the right stroke was added in a later state.

The most surprising discovery of conventionally serified g's where they would not be expected bears also on the question of the time of return from leftward g's. These are the six left-serif g's on pp. 8, 10, 12, 67 of the Vala manuscript. They occur in different layers of the script (defined as copperplate hand and modified copperplate hand; not in Blake's usual manuscript hand, which never employs serified g's of either kind), thought to be wide apart in date. (This is unclear; no g's with serifs, except these few, occur in the copperplate hands either, but a serified g is not out of keeping in hands that imitate print as these do.) Presumably they show work on the ms toward the end of or after the Felpham period--but this is much less startling than my initial, mistaken deduction that their date had to be post June 1805. For discussion of the complications of the problem, see pp. 738, 744, 745 in the Erdman-Bloom text (and Bentley's edition of the ms and my critique of it in Library 1964[1968]). Finding the Cowper inscriptions (which Bentley and I did independently in pursuit of more data of g's) is a great relief; I mean to say, the revised date of transition (back from June 1805 to 1803-04) makes the whole g hypothesis a lot easier to live with.

I still think it important that most of our assumptions about the Vala ms need to be blown sky high before we can understand the nature of the "evidence" we have concerning its inscription let alone its composition. One assumption was Bentley's, that "once Blake had abandoned his beautiful, rounded copperplate hands for his more hurried usual hand, he never reverted to the earlier style of writing" (p. 159). 1805 was an impossible date for copperplate hand preceding all usual hand ms; 1803 is still an improbable one, even Nov 5 1802 (but there he was, in a long inscription under Cowper's Weather-house, using sturdy leftward g's over that date). I see him returning to the fine hand in fine spirit, after his triumphant acquittal but determined on conquering from within the conventional ways, and introducing these rightward g's into his beautiful, rounded copperplate.

To turn now to the first turning to leftward g's in our table, it is hardly disputable that the Motto and last plate of Thel are in a different style of lettering from the rest of the work; nor is it against expectation to find that the "1790" page of MHH (pl 3) is in an earlier style than "A Song of Liberty" (25-27); it is surprising to find a scatter of plates in both styles all through the work. Against the explanation that Blake was trying both kinds of g's is the fact that no individual plate contains a mixture of kinds. Just as analysis of the script and content of Thel (which I'll not go into here) bears out the assumption that the left-g plates

are the latest parts, so analysis of MHH (hard to communicate, since it involves much looking and comparing) lends support to a similar assumption. We have not to do (as we may have in the case of Thel) with any marked thematic or tonal change, nor with much appreciable stylistic change except in the letter g. What happened, I suggest, is that after Blake had a complete version of The Marriage (probably minus the "Song") on copper, he began thinking of improvements and amplifications--all his Illuminated works show this sort of revision--and made them by inserting new plates, onto which old and new matter were inscribed (at a time when he had changed his g). Consider. Plate 4 is inserted to introduce the Devil, already required by the texts of 3 & 5 but perhaps lacking at first; pl 7 begins as straight continuation of 6, where the Proverbs began; presumably the remaking of 7-10 was to accommodate additional proverbs. Plates 14-20 consist of four self-contained sections, the Printing House of 14 being a development of material in the Memorable Fancy of pl 6-7. What one must suppose about the new g is either that some technical accident produced one, and he adopted it, or that he created it as part of the design of some contemporaneous work, perhaps Songs of Experience or America, and carried it over into other "repair" jobs in his workshop--Thel and MHH.

Suggesting the first possibility is the curious glancing horizontal stroke above the serif of the first g on pl 7. Since Blake in the text at this point is being self-descriptive of his etching of this plate, could this mark his first new serif, a fresh, idiosyncratic fling, created and adopted at once? (Plate 4, amplifying the introduction to these Proverbs, can easily be a subsequent insertion.) As I have suggested, there is no ambiguity or indication of possible wavering in the lettering of this period such as there appears to be in the engraved inscriptions of 1802-05. Wherever it appears the new style is clear, consistently adhered to; there seems to me every indication that Blake committed himself to it at once. But can we date the moment of commitment?

Taking late 1790 (Blake was born in November) or early 1791 as firmly given by the date reference in MHH 3 (supported as a reference to 1790 by marginal inscription in the Butts copy), we have a date we cannot push back for the continuance of conventional g's. On the other side a date probably not earlier than mid-1791 for the leftward plates 15, 17-20 is established, I think, by the strong evidence of use in these plates of passages in Swedenborg's Apocalypse Revealed (1791; the time of year can be found when we locate contemporary advertisements of its publication; does anyone know?). (The passages noted by Désirée Hirst in Hidden Riches, pp. 218-223, have more extensive echoes in MHH than Miss Hirst calls attention to.) These arrows point to 1791 (or later) as the time of the shift; it would be very convenient biographically to find it coincided with the move to Lambeth (which we now know occurred in early 1791). A date for Thel's Motto etc as late as this does not seem improbable.

Another document that fits in here is A Divine Image, a sort of Song of Experience that first turned up when someone was, after Blake's death, printing a set of the Songs and found this poem on the back of one of the plates. Keynes's printing it after the Songs as an "Additional Poem" has obscured the fact that it is really a rejected poem; and indeed it turns out to have conventionally serified g's. Robert Gleckner, in PMLA Sept 1961, without benefit of the g theory, made a strong case for an early date of composition by studying the evolution of texts from "The Divine Image" (TDI) to "I heard an Angel singing" (Angel) to "The Human Image" (THI) to "The Human Abstract" (THA), fitting A Divine Image (ADI) between the first two. I doubt if the sequence is that clear; ADI could come between Angel and THI; but then Gleckner mistook the dates of Notebook use as 1793 (they should be 1791-92 for the poems concerned). His sequence would put ADI in 1791; the alternative would put it in early 1792. In any case, here is a plate in conventional style well into 1791, it

would seem. Add a further document, the canceled plates of America, in style and composition and symbolic drawing surely many months earlier than the final America: but with leftward g's.

If you have been following, patient reader, the tug and push of the evidence, I believe you will see that we are pretty tightly wedged into a date somewhere in the middle of 1791 for the change. I think that a survey of other elements of Blake's graphic style from Songs of Innocence through Songs of Experience would show Thel, even the original part, later than all Innocence songs but the Bard; A Divine Image contemporaneous with the revised plates of MHH.

And if we now take the hypothesis of g as confirmed, with a first switch in 1791 and a second in 1803 (or 1802-04-05), the remaining uncertainly dated works or inscriptions may be located in tabular form. Let me include in it those we have been discussing.

Table 2

a. CONVENTIONAL g probably PRECEDING mid-1791

A Divine Image

b. CONVENTIONAL g probably FOLLOWING 1803(ca)

To Tirzah

Vala i pp 8,10,12; Night VI title

Joseph of Arimathea inscription

c. IDIOSYNCRATIC g between mid-1791 and 1803

Job undated 1st state (precedes state dated Aug 18 1793)

America, 3 canceled plates

Thirialatha

Accusers inscription (first state)

The Reposing Traveller (Hagstrum pl 17)

You will see that I have been unable to settle the case of Albion rose, inclining to a straddle of 1800-1803. Another lost item, of a very different nature, is the reported conventional g in the Latin inscription of the plate for Catullus, Poems (1795) which I have not seen: without examination I can only express the hopeful confidence that GEB is right in calling the inscription one for which Blake may not have been responsible.

Are there any questions? Any additional points?