

## Deciphering Blake's

## "The Angel that presided o'er my birth"

BY DAVID W. ULLRICH

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With Angels planted in Hawthorn bowers  
And God himself in the passing hours  
.....

With my Father hovering upon the wind  
And my Brother Robert just behind

(Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802)

- 1 THE stimulus for this investigation of manuscript variants in one of Blake's Notebook poems arises from an unlikely quarter: Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965). Vonnegut's use of Blake is purposeful. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the narrator states (by way of Kilgore Trout) that "William Blake" was "[Eliot] Rosewater's favorite poet" (99), and in a 1977 interview in the *Paris Review* Vonnegut specifically notes, "I was thirty-five before I went crazy about Blake."<sup>1</sup> In *Rosewater*, Eliot Rosewater, traumatized by his experience in World War II, dedicates his life and extraordinary wealth to a compensatory form of philanthropy for the population of Rosewater, Indiana. Eliot has written his personal manifesto on the step risers leading up to his office to remind himself and his clients of his life's purpose and personal vision. His manifesto is identified in Vonnegut's text only as "a poem by William Blake" (65).<sup>2</sup> The poem is traditionally referred to by its first line, "The Angel that presided o'er my birth," as rendered in Keynes's Nonesuch edition, almost certainly Vonnegut's source. Sacrificing Blake's rhyme scheme, Vonnegut sepa-

rates the three-line poem into twelve sections, one for each riser:

The Angel  
that presided  
o'er my  
birth said,  
"Little creature,  
form'd of  
Joy & Mirth,  
Go love  
without the  
help of  
any Thing  
on Earth."

Restored to its original stanzaic form, Blake's poem, a triplet in fairly regular iambic meter and monosyllabic rhymes, reads as follows:

The Angel that presided o'er my birth  
Said, "Little creature, form'd of Joy & Mirth,  
"Go love without the help of any Thing on Earth."  
(Keynes, *Complete Writings* 541)

- 2 In tracking down "The Angel that presided" in Blake's canon, I have identified three transcriptions of the poem. Keynes (1957), Erdman (1965, rev. 1988), and Bentley (1978) each record a different transcription of Blake's revisions.<sup>3</sup> The variant readings are not trivial; each version significantly alters the poem's meaning. Moreover, the editors disagree on interpreting Blake's handwriting in a crucial word.
- 3 As an orientation point, Erdman's facsimile edition, *The Notebook of William Blake* (1977), identifies the poem as "Poem 98," found on page 32 of Blake's Notebook (Notebook N32 and N32 transcript). Erdman estimates the date of composition as "after Oct. 1807" but "before PA" (*Public Address*) or "before May 1809" (Notebook 56). Cross-referencing key words of "The Angel that presided" in *A Concordance to the Writings of William Blake* indicates that no other version of this poem exists; in other words, Blake never incorporated it into another, larger poem. Illus. 1 reproduces the poem; illus. 2, 3, and 4 reproduce the transcriptions from Keynes, Erdman, and Bentley, complete with their editorial annotations.

1. Vonnegut comments, "I couldn't play games with my literary ancestors, since I had never studied them systematically. My education was as a chemist at Cornell and then an anthropologist at the University of Chicago. Christ—I was thirty-five before I went crazy about Blake ..." (Hayman et al. 72). Vonnegut was born in 1922. "Thirty-five" years later, 1957, Keynes's Nonesuch edition of Blake's *Complete Writings* was published.

2. Eliot's father offers a rebuttal to his son's manifesto by quoting "another poem by Blake" (65), stanza 3 of "The Clod & the Pebble."

3. This essay does not address the different editorial policies regarding the punctuation or modernization of Blake's poem.



However, even the reproduction of the original does not provide a definitive answer as to which version is most likely correct, as Blake's informal handwriting is very difficult to transcribe, especially in inked-over layers.

- 4 Substantial differences occur in the concluding line of the poem. Keynes transcribes the last line as "Go love without the help of any Thing on Earth." In his editorial annotations, he records Blake's revisions, which, as shown in illus. 2, consist of deleting "thou art formd for Mirth" and replacing it with "formd of Joy & Mirth."<sup>4</sup> However, Keynes makes no comment on Blake's hypothetical revision of "Thing" to

"King," which both Erdman and Bentley later append (illus. 3 and 4). Moreover, he evidently sees no reason to replace "love" with "live," as Bentley is compelled to do later (illus. 4).

- 5 In the facsimile edition, Erdman scrupulously documents any differences between his editorial decisions and Keynes's previous transcription. Following the general editorial practices outlined in "Explanation of the Transcript" (*Notebook* [65]), one can infer that, in Erdman's opinion, Blake wrote "King" over "Thing" in his revision of the poem (illus. 5).

Poem 98

*The Angel that presided oer my birth*

*Said Little creature ~~thou art formd~~ <sup>Joy & M</sup> ~~for~~ <sup>of</sup> Mirth*

*Go love without the help of any <sup>King</sup> ~~Thing~~ on Earth*

5. David V. Erdman, ed., with the assistance of Donald K. Moore, *The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile*, rev. ed. (N.p.: Readex Books, 1977) N32 transcript.

Erdman notes that "Poem 98" was "begun and revised in grey ink ... then further revised and completed in black" (N32 transcript, note). This implies that Blake's hypothetical revision of "Thing" to "King" was sufficiently persuasive to Erdman's eye—perhaps even color coded, so to speak—to warrant an alternative reading to Keynes's transcription. His choice of "King" over "Thing" seems compelling. In fact, Erdman selects "King" in his first (1965) edition of Blake's work (493), which precedes the *Notebook* facsimile, and he retains "King" in his revised (1988) edition (see illus. 3). In each edition, he provides the textual note "King] mended from Thing (but not very clear)" (781, 864). (Bentley's editorial choice concurs with Erdman's in this respect.)

- 6 To complicate matters further, other editions of Blake's work vary in their choice of "Thing" or "King," even when relying on the same source. For example, Stevenson's *Blake: The Complete Poems* (2007), which "tak[es] account of Erdman's work on the Notebook" (xiii), selects (a modernized, lowercase) "king" while noting "altered probably from Thing" (626). However, Johnson and Grant's *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (2008) chooses "Thing" (385), even as they, too, state that their "selections [from the Notebook] are based on Erdman's edition, compared with the Erdman-

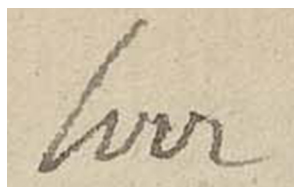
Moore facsimile" (379n).<sup>5</sup> Ostriker's *William Blake: The Complete Poems* (1977) uses editorial brackets—" [Thing] King"—to indicate "a word ... emended in the manuscript" (10); hence, she favors "King" (626).

- 7 Of course, Erdman's selection of "King" over "Thing" changes the poem dramatically, and these implications will be explored shortly. However, one more editorial issue must be addressed. While Keynes and Erdman both record without comment "Go love," Bentley substitutes "live" for "love," also without comment, noting only "[Thing [altered to] King[?] on Earth...]" (see illus. 4). Bentley's question mark after "King" suggests that he, like Erdman, is not completely certain of the alteration. However, by the same logic, his lack of editorial comment with respect to "live" suggests that he is absolutely certain that "live" (not "love") is the only viable choice, since he does not feel compelled to editorialize. (Stevenson, Johnson and Grant, and Ostriker all select "love" over "live," probably following Keynes and Erdman.)

4. I have omitted Keynes's apostrophe in "formd" because it is not present in Blake's text.

5. In reference to their selection, Johnson and Grant explain that they "attempt to present each work at an optimum stage of realization by eliminating early drafts and, occasionally, what we consider to be uninspired afterthoughts" (379n). Presumably they suppress "King" because they judge it to be an "uninspired afterthought."

- 8 Bentley's decision is singular and demands scrutiny. Although I am not an expert in manuscript interpretation or in Blake's handwriting, I offer a few observations. The choice between "live" and "love" comes down to deciding whether Blake uses an "i" or an "o" (illus. 6).

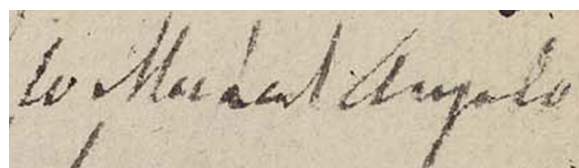


6. "The Angel that presided," enlargement of "live/love" in line 3. © British Library Board, Add MS 49460. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive <<http://www.blakearchive.org>>.

There does not appear to be a superscript dot over the vowel, as one would expect with an "i," which might favor "o" and Keynes's and Erdman's "love." However, Blake's punctuation is, as one might expect, inconclusive. For example, although a dot appears over the "i" in "birth" and "King/Thing," there is no dot in "presided," "Said," "Little," "Mirth," and "without" (see illus. 1). On the other hand, supporting Bentley's choice of "live," the vowel does not appear to be a closed loop or even a semi-closed loop, whereas "o" is written in either a completely or mostly closed loop in almost all other words in the poem, including "oer," "formd," "of" (written over "for"), "Joy," "Go," "of" (again), and "on."

- 9 The lone exception, "without" (illus. 1), is potentially crucial for two reasons. First, the descending stroke of the undotted "i" resembles the cursive shape of the descending stroke of the vowel in question in "live/love," supporting Bentley. Second, however, the "o" is more open than any other "o" in the poem, supporting Keynes and Erdman. This may be especially relevant, as the cursive shape of the "ou" in "without" could approximate the "ov" in "love," although the "o" is less open and more fully articulated than the "i/o" in "live/love." Moreover, other instances of "without" in the Notebook vary from the fairly open example in "You dont believe ..." (Erdman, *Notebook* N21: Poem 143,

line 9; E 501)—which resembles the "without" of "The Angel that presided"—to an unambiguously close-looped "without" in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (Erdman, *Notebook* N83: 24, line 4; E 560), whose "o" does not resemble the "o" in "The Angel that presided." Thus, "without" does not provide conclusive comparative evidence as to the issue of "live" versus "love." In addition, and trying to be both fair-minded and comprehensive, I note that of the approximately fifty-seven instances of a decipherable word containing an "o" on page 32 of the Notebook, the vast majority—as many as fifty-three—have a closed or mostly closed "o."<sup>6</sup> However, the "o" in "to" from Poem 158 ("These Verses," line 2: "to Michael Angelo"; E 512) presents an important exception; it resembles the "o" of the word in question in "The Angel that presided" and shares the same "v"- or "u"-shaped quality, although this "o" is not followed by another stroke/letter (illus. 7).<sup>7</sup>



7. "These Verses," enlargement of "to Michael Angelo" in line 2. © British Library Board, Add MS 49460. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive <<http://www.blakearchive.org>>.

- 10 More broadly, in the eleven instances throughout the Notebook where Blake uses "live," the specific formation of the letter "i" and the overall cursive shape of the word more closely resemble the letter and word in question in "The Angel that presided" than do the thirty-eight instances of "o" in "love" and the overall cursive shape of the word.<sup>8</sup> On occasion, unambiguous examples of "live" include the extra ascender/descender that produces the "u" or "v" effect, as in "My Spectre" (Erdman, *Notebook* N13[3]: Poem 71, stanza 8, line 3; E 475-77) (illus 8).<sup>9</sup> Finally, as is the case with the "o"s on page 32, the majority of the thirty-eight instances of "love" contain an "o" that is completely or mostly closed. Thus, it appears that Bentley's "live" has as much le-

6. I say "approximately fifty-seven" instances for the following reasons. Blake crossed out many words on this manuscript page, and others are illegible; some of these contain the letter "o." I do not include any of these words; thus, there is some noise in the data. Nevertheless, the tally does suggest that, at least on p. 32, when Blake writes an "o" he commonly does so in a closed or mostly closed shape.

7. The "to" in Poem 99 ("Florentine Ingratitude," line 1; E 511) and the initial "o" in "fool" (line 3) are open, although less obviously so than the "to" in Poem 158 ("These Verses").

8. My methodology was to generate a list for "live" and "love" from Nelson Hilton's concordance to Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose* at the *Blake Digital Text Project* and then locate and examine each example in Erdman's facsimile edition of the Notebook. There may be some minor discrepancies in the total number generated for each word (especially for "love") because of the complexities of the Notebook and my own imprecision. Nevertheless, one can conclude that "live" is a viable alternative to "love."

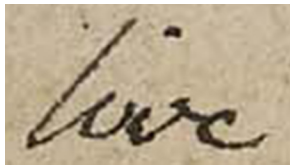
9. See the following relevant examples of "live" from Erdman's facsimile:

N4(10) and transcript: Msc 6, lines 1 and 2;

N22 and transcript: Poem 78, line 40;

N111 and transcript: Poem 18, a, line 4.





8. "My Spectre," enlargement of "live" in stanza 8, line 3.  
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gitimacy as Keynes's and Erdman's "love." Of course, readers are encouraged to examine the illustrations—as well as the relevant examples throughout the Notebook—and draw their own conclusions.

- 11 Before I risk any interpretive analysis, some cautionary observations are in order. The poem's brevity, its seemingly ambiguous placement on the manuscript page with respect to either the central drawing and/or the surrounding poems, even the problem of its genre—all these factors warrant caution rather than hasty speculation.<sup>10</sup> For example, Erdman catalogues the poem under "Satiric Verses and Epigrams," and "The Angel that presided" certainly seems epigrammatic. But is it satiric? Should it be regarded as one of Blake's "angry epigrams" (Johnson and Grant 379n)? Finally, Erdman dates the poem between October 1807 and May 1809, which places it years later than its most logical companion poems, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Can "The Angel that presided" (c. 1807-09) shed light on *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) or provide a context by which to appreciate more fully Blake's complex relationship with his deceased brother Robert, as suggested below?
- 12 Blake's revisions, both those agreed upon and in question, imply an authorial indecision as to the poem's meaning, most dramatically evidenced in Blake's interrogation of the original "Thing" and probable decision that "King" is more appropriate. The consequences of his contemplating such a change produce internal reverberations throughout the poem. Hence, the competing drafts reconstruct the evolution of Blake's decision-making process in articulating to himself the poem's meaning and record his conflicting assessments as to where to locate the poem within his poetic vision.

10. For a discussion of the composition of the page, see Bentley's footnote "Page 32: Order of Composition" (*Writings* 2: 942). He notes that "The Angel ..." and "Sir Joshua ..." [i.e., "Florentine Ingratitude"] ... were written in the same large hand and brownish ink respectively above and below the central pencil sketch" and that "These Verses" was inserted later, "in the last clearly free space above the design and below 'The Angel ...'" This pencil sketch is almost exactly the same (in reverse) as the pl. 6 illustration from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. While the discussion is beyond the scope of this essay, based on the two mirrored drawings, I suggest that a connection exists between "The Angel that presided" and *Visions* in terms of the struggle for individual self-expression (exemplified in the "Little creature" and Oothoon) in the face of repressive opposition (as seen in the forces of "Thing/King," the rapacious violence of Bromion, and consuming jealousy of Theotormon).

- 13 Specific, non-controversial aspects of Blake's first draft bear commentary. His only use of "presided" (or its cognate) occurs in this poem (Erdman, *Concordance* 2: 1474). Literally meaning "to sit before," "preside" suggests that the angel serves as witness, guardian, and authority (i.e., "president") (see *OED*, "preside," etymology and def. 1). Thus, although Blake begins the poem with the guardian-angel motif, "a familiar image in eighteenth-century hymns" that he satirizes in the *Songs* (Lincoln 186), he is probably not being satirical in this instance. In addition, the "Little creature" of the original draft resists an explicitly anthropomorphic interpretation and could equally refer to the two-day-old infant of "Infant Joy" or to the "Little Lamb." The undifferentiated "any Thing on Earth" also supports a more generalized interpretation of "Little creature." These factors suggest that Blake had in mind the more nascent and integrated state of innocence when initially composing the poem.
- 14 To focus now on revisions that editors have not questioned, Blake's replacement of "thou art formd for Mirth" with "formd of Joy & Mirth" signals a shift in thinking away from defining and limiting the little creature's purpose in life in favor of elaborating upon its genesis, which logically refers back to its "birth." Blake's first revision, read metaphorically, identifies the little creature's parents—its two ontological essences—as "Joy" and "Mirth." Born of such a lineage, the creature should, naturally as it were, "Go love/live" and not need (or actively resist) the "help" of "any Thing on Earth," since a higher authority has already been established at its birth. These initial revisions suggest that Blake originally conceived of "The Angel that presided" as a rather static descriptive sketch representing a "Little creature" in a state of innocence, but subsequently revised the poem to emphasize the interconnections among the creature's symbolic parentage, the moment of its entry into the world, and its lifelong moral imperative to "Go love/live."
- 15 More broadly, the revised poem establishes a binary opposition between "The Angel" and "any Thing on Earth," the two forces vying to shape the little creature's life. In this initially revised version, however, "any Thing on Earth" risks becoming an empty signifier, abstracted into a limitless number of possible vague and amorphous referents. As a consequence, "Thing" and "Earth" almost elide into a single entity, and Earth is portrayed as in conflict with both the angel and the little creature, and hence is restricted to relatively sinister connotations. Within this textual fabric,

“help” is in danger of losing its ironic force. Thus the poem breaks down. The little creature cannot fulfill the angel’s mandate to “Go love [live] without the help of any Thing on Earth,” since the poem’s rhetoric unintentionally prohibits the creature’s interaction with the world at large, which the mandate “Go love/live” requires. For example, Thel’s exploratory dialogues with the Lilly, the Cloud, and the Clod of Clay run counter to the angel’s caution. Blake’s sensitivity to these complications may have prompted his further revision of the poem.

16 The hypothetical final revision of “Thing” to “King” (endorsed by Erdman and Bentley) resolves these textual conflicts and provides coherence within the poem’s fabric. No longer an indeterminate “any Thing on Earth,” the revised “King” suggests, even anticipates, that political and, by extension, social constructs of authority and power will challenge the little creature in fulfilling both the angel’s directive and its ethical birthright. Receiving “help” from such sources is now unambiguously and forcefully ironic. In this version, the cautionary nature of the angel’s directive is clear, not confused, as we recognize that the little creature will need to be vigilant in resisting all forms of such “help” in its efforts to fulfill its life’s purpose. Furthermore, Blake’s initial revision distinguishing between “formd for Mirth” and “formd of Joy & Mirth” now becomes crucial and clarifies that the little creature will participate (love/live) in the world in a mutually reciprocal manner. Born of “Joy & Mirth,” it will “Go love/live” and the recipients of its affections will respond in kind. Finally, “King” suggests that Blake now conceives of the little creature as anthropomorphic, but still retaining its universal qualities as an every-child. Now, “Earth” is represented positively, as an environment promoting regenerative love and as a fecund world ready to facilitate the angel’s imperative; it is clearly distinguished from “King” and his social corruptions.

17 “The Angel that presided” juxtaposes “Angel” and “King” in what is, for Blake, a surprisingly adversarial manner. “King” suggests a political reading that takes readers close to the world of “London,” its “blood down Palace walls,” and even Blake’s celebrated caricature of George III in *Europe a Prophecy*. The orthodoxy, repression, and requisite satire associated with “King” remain, but “Angel” carries none of Blake’s typical associations of conventional religion and pious morality, as satirized in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Rather, as Hazard Adams suggests, this angel is “a Reprobate angel who reminds the child that all responsibility and power reside in him [i.e., the child]” (436); hence, the angel is purposefully unconventional.

18 Thus, the angel of the final version of the poem comes very close to Blake’s personal and complex understanding of angels, either guardian or guiding, as recorded, for example, in his letters to William Hayley (6 May 1800) and Thomas Butts (22 November 1802) (E 705, 720-23). Blake’s letter to Hayley is especially relevant, as he responds to the death of Hayley’s only son, Thomas Alphonso, and reminisces about the death of his brother Robert in February 1787: “Thirteen years ago. I lost a brother & with his spirit I converse daily & hourly .... I hear his advice & even now write from his Dictate” (E 705). Blake wrote “The Angel that presided” in the notebook that he inherited from his brother and, significantly, he “kept the Notebook near at hand all his life, filling it over the years ...” (Erdman, *Notebook* 1). Hence, the angel does indeed provide a lifelong dictum, if not a literal dictation, by which the little creature is instructed to “Go love/live,” and by which William is inspired to write (and draw). Thus, Blake fulfills the angel’s directive within (and beyond) the memorialized space of the Notebook. Such speculation has legitimacy, since “William thought of Robert as a fellow spirit and even as a spiritual guide” (Bentley, *Stranger* 6) and as an “affectionate companion” who shared his interests and enthusiasms” (Ackroyd 84). It would be too reductive a critical interpretation—and one antithetical to Blake’s synthetic imagination—to suggest that the angel represents the guiding voice of Robert exclusively directing William, the little creature. Rather, the angel and the little creature enjoy a symbiotic and inspirational relationship within Blake’s imaginary landscape. They can be considered “fellow spirit[s]” or “reciprocal” images of each other, similar to the “mirror” images that Blake produces in *Milton* (1804-c. 1811) of “William” and “Robert” receiving “inspiration” from Milton (Bentley, *Stranger* 6, 98),<sup>11</sup> or the “profiles of William and Robert Blake” that are “jestingly and competitively drawn” and appear “in the last page of *An Island in the Moon* (1784)” (Erdman, *Notebook* 9).

19 Further support for this hypothesis can be found in Hayley’s October 1801 poem, identified as “William Hayley to the Spirit of His Son” (“My Angel Artist in the skies”) (Keynes, *Letters* 36). The first stanza serves as an instructive gloss to both “The Angel that presided” and Blake’s continued belief that his dead brother Robert served as an inspirational guide for his artistic productions. (The stanza could easily apply to the sometimes “eccentric” Blake and Robert’s “inspir[ing]” and “controul[ing]” influence.)

My Angel Artist in the skies,  
Thou mayst inspirit & controul  
a Failing Brother’s Hand & Eyes  
Or temper his eccentric Soul.

11. See *Milton a Poem* pls. 29 (“William”) and 33 (“Robert”) (objects 31 and 36 in copy C in the *William Blake Archive*).

Blake was probably acquainted with this poem, given the close relationship between Blake and Hayley at this time. The second stanza specifically links Blake's artistic productions to Hayley's own dead son:

Now to the feeling Blake attend,  
His Copies of dear Cowper view  
And make his Portraits of our Friend  
Perfect in Truth as Thou art true.

- 20 These biographical, textual, and material contexts shed light on the revisions of "The Angel that presided" from its original, more sentimental version to its final, more political version. Moreover, the editorial choice between "love" and "live" accentuates these differences and becomes the deciding factor, tipping the scale in favor of either a sentimental or political interpretation.
- 21 For example, "Go love" draws attention to the trace elements of biography in "The Angel that presided." Thus, while the angel's imperative "Go love" presupposes the shared communitarian values and holistic relationships found in the idyllic world of *Innocence*, these values themselves are based upon the kind of close-knit, non-eroticized love exemplified by "favourite" brothers (Bentley, *Stranger* 6) and upon the symbiotic and highly integrated relationship of a literal brotherly love. "Go love" also emphasizes serving "the other" and not empowering "the self." Brotherly love, either real or idealized, provides a rationale for restraining, or domesticating, the fiercely independent vision and exacting moral code commonly associated with Blake's character and writings, since "Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brothers face" (*The Four Zoas* p. 133, line 25; E 402). Limiting one's will to power out of respect or compassion for another must inevitably occur for one to participate, imaginatively, in the prelapsarian world of the little creature or in the landscape of *Innocence*. From another perspective, "Go love" stresses that the nurturing, even regenerative responsibilities implied in the angel's charge are born of the little creature's symbolic parents, "Joy & Mirth," and not imposed by "any King," which certainly squares well with Blake's dissenter upbringing (Bentley, *Stranger* 7; Ackroyd 17, 18). "Go love" also suggests that the "help" offered by "any King" be understood more as an interpersonal betrayal by the civic father-figure than as a political offense against the corporate body politic. In this version, the celestial angel may have difficulty moving beyond merely presiding over the little creature's moment of birth as it moves into the world to fulfill the angel's mandate, and the baptismal-like power of "Go love" may diminish as the creature develops into adulthood.
- 22 On the other hand, the imperative "Go live" compels the little creature into the experiential world of action, conse-

quence, and personal development, and away from the secure, but ultimately static, worlds of innocence and brotherly love. For Blake, the directive "Go live" implies an unwavering commitment to one's personal vision and acting accordingly, regardless of the consequences. Under such conditions, "Go live" inevitably conflicts with either the initial "any Thing" or the revised "any King." In the first version, "any Thing" may refer, obliquely, to the kind of well-intended, if misguided, physical punishment that Blake experienced as a child (as a little creature) when he confided to his "affectionate" and "sympathetic" but "concerned" parents about his recurring visions of angels (Bentley, *Stranger* 3, 5, 19-21). These "thrashing[s]" appear to have been infrequent, although one source notes that "his father ... severely whipped him several times" on account of his visions (Samuel Palmer, quoted in Bentley, *Blake Records* 10). Whatever their duration or intensity, for Blake they "became a source of perpetual discontent" (Ackroyd 21). Blake may have felt uncomfortable expressing these ambivalences directly in a poem that champions a "reprobate" angel and his directive, and therefore used the generic "Thing" to oppose the visionary angel, only to revise (and suppress) "Thing" for "King" later. Thus, he transforms a painful reminiscence linking his honest accounts of his visions of angels with a rare instance of parental censorship into a metaphoric, public statement about "any King." Under these pressures, "any King" broadens to include any repressive governing, legislative, or moral authority—any oppressor, kingly or otherwise.

- 23 The political implications of "Go live" and "any King" are clarified by reference to Blake's similar phrase, "So spoke an Angel at my birth," from the unfinished Notebook poem "Now Art has lost its mental Charms" (Erdman, *Notebook* N79; E 479). "Now Art has lost" creates a decidedly real-world context in which the angel fears that "France shall subdue the World in Arms." This angel's mandate compels the persona (who, in "Descend[ing] ... upon Earth," presumably matures into an adult) to "Renew the Arts on Britains Shore" so that "works of Art" will "meet" (that is, conquer) "Armies" and "War." Significantly, however, and with a typical Blakean twist, if "thy Nation" (i.e., Britain) refuses the "Arts," then "France shall the arts of Peace restore" and "save thee from the Ungrateful shore" of Britain. Thus, artistic production transcends political allegiances, national boundaries, and military might. The similarity of the two phrases creates a symbolic, perhaps even evolutionary, relationship between the little creature and his angel's mandate to "Go live without the help of any King on Earth" and the unnamed adult figure in "Now Art has lost," who fulfills the implied trajectory of the first angel's directive to "Go live" by realizing the second angel's imperative to "Descend ... upon Earth" and become an artist opposing political strife, war, and "any King" through artistic production.

- 24 Finally, “The Angel that presided” and “Now Art has lost” stress the importance of the explicit audience’s commitment to realize the angel’s otherworldly directive through the real-world action of embracing one’s independent vision and corresponding call to artistic production. Within the specific context of vision and vocation, Blake’s letter to Hayley suggests that his memory of Robert and Robert’s “Dictate” continually guide him in his past and future artistic creations. In fact, Robert continues to inform Blake’s artistic consciousness as late as the 1811 and 1818 printings of *Milton*. Thus, “The Angel that presided” can perhaps best be understood as a timeless metatextual promise that Blake makes to himself through the reciprocal, mirrored image of a guiding angel-brother and his “Dictate.” In this context, the angel’s spoken imperative to “Go love/live” serves not only as an example of Blake’s commitment to memorialize Robert, but also as a self-confirming validation of his previous creative work and his dedication to a personal vision. Importantly, the angel’s directive also functions as Blake’s pledge to remain vigilant in fulfilling these promises through future artistic efforts and in spite of the intrusions of kingly authorities, thus placing Blake in much the same position as the little creature.
- 25 In conclusion, “The Angel that presided” illustrates in a succinct, and therefore manageable, way the difficult issues confronting editors in transcribing Blake’s manuscripts and in making informed, but sometimes conflicting, decisions. These decisions, in turn, define and shape the interpretive possibilities open to a given text, as demonstrated in the alternative readings produced by “Thing” versus “King” and especially “love” and “live.” Within this more interpretive perspective, “The Angel that presided” serves as a concise personal manifesto for Blake, providing him with a lifelong directive to “Go love/live” by opposing “any King” through artistic production; it also attests to the importance of guiding angels and their spoken “Dictate” in Blake’s imaginative landscape. Moreover, the poem highlights the importance of the Notebook as a talismanic metonym for Robert and as a memorialized space providing continual inspiration for Blake’s various creative experiments. The poem illustrates how his artistic creations can be understood as ongoing collaborations between “fellow spirit[s]” with, at times, William transcribing, as it were, Robert’s guiding “Dictate,” almost literalizing Blake’s claim that “even in this world by it I am the companion of Angels” (letter to Hayley, 6 May 1800; E 705). The nuances implied in “The Angel that presided o’er my birth” extend our knowledge of Blake’s complex, idiosyncratic, and visionary understanding of angels and their influence on his imaginative world. Finally, it is a testament to the power of this short poem that, so many years later, it helped inspire Vonnegut to transform his own personal tragedy and loss into a lifelong credo opposing “any Thing” (or “any King”)

through artistic production—a vision that is both profoundly sacred and profoundly secular.

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