

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Octavo®

William Blake

The Book of Urizen

London, ca. 1818

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The Book of Urizen

Commentary by Nicolas Barker

The Book of Urizen, originally entitled *The First Book of Urizen*, occupies a central place in William Blake's creation of his "illuminated books," both chronologically and in the thematic and structural development of the texts. They are not "illuminated" in the sense that medieval manuscripts are illuminated—that is, with pictures or decoration added to an existing text. In Blake's books, text and decoration were conceived together and the printing process, making and printing the plates, did not separate them, although he might vary the colors from copy to copy, adding supplementary coloring as well. Like the books themselves, the technique for making them came to Blake by inspiration, connected with his much-loved younger brother Robert, whose early death in 1787 deeply distressed William, though his "visionary eyes beheld the released spirit ascend heavenward through the matter-of-fact ceiling, 'clapping its hands for joy.'" The process was described by his fellow-



Plate 26 of *The Book of Urizen*, copy G (ca. 1818).

engraver John Thomas Smith, who had known Robert as a boy:

After deeply perplexing himself as to the mode of accomplishing the publication of his illustrated songs, without their being subject to the expense of letter-press, his brother Robert stood before him in one of his visionary imaginations, and so decidedly directed him in the way in which he ought to proceed, that he immediately followed his advice, by writing his poetry, and drawing his marginal subjects of embellishments in outline upon the copperplate with an impervious liquid, and then eating the plain parts or lights away

with *aqua fortis* considerably below them, so that the outlines were left as a stereotype.¹

From a technical point of view, there was nothing very novel about this. Blake had been apprenticed to the engraver James Basire in 1771, and would have learned all the techniques in professional use. Using acid to create a three-dimensional surface to a copper plate was an ancient practice. The plate could be coated with wax and a design created by working on it with a needle; the acid would penetrate where the needle had cut through the wax and eat away the surface of the plate. Next the plate would be covered with ink, which was then wiped away; a sheet of paper would be laid on it and run through a rolling-press which would transfer the ink from the hollows in the plate to the paper. This is an intaglio process.

Etching with acid could also be used to create a relief plate. In this process the design is created by drawing or writing on the plate with a resist, such as gum arabic. The acid then eats away the parts not so treated, and the plate, when inked, only prints the surface untouched by the acid. This was the technique used by Blake, with individual touches of his own: he might vary the level of the plate and its recesses by reapplying the resist and acid a second or third time; and rather than dip the plate in a tray of acid, he would build a frame round the edges of the plate with an acid-resistant wax, such as tallow, and add acid to the surface, controlling its action on the plate within the frame. The plate thus created could be inked in one or more colors and a print created by the same process; individual prints could be worked on by hand in other water-based colors, opaque or transparent.

If Blake's techniques for giving his designs physical form were complex and individual, so were the designs themselves. If much scholarly work has been devoted to identifying the technical aspects of Blake's work (only to find that it was essentially empiric, varying from plate to plate), much more has been spent on the sources of his inspiration. A great deal has been learned in the process, which began ninety years ago with the publication of Joseph Wicksteed's *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job* (London: Dent, 1910), continuing with Geoffrey Keynes' *A Bibliography of William Blake* (New York: Grolier Club, 1921) and edition of *The Writings of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch

1. John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and His Times: Comprehending a Life of That Celebrated Sculptor; and Memoirs of Several Contemporary Artists, from the Time of Roubiliac, Hogarth, and Reynolds, to That of Fuseli, Flaxman, and Blake* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), Vol. II, p. 461.

Press, 1925), S. Foster Damon's *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (London: Constable, 1924), and Mona Wilson's *The Life of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1927). It has grown in volume enormously in the last thirty years, and a new biography is needed, taking account of all the influences, written and visual, that have been discovered in the process. These have made possible not one but several new views of the meaning and sequence of the "illuminated books," and it is clear that there is much still to be discovered, not least about why Blake chose to express his visions in this form.

Blake was born in an era of a new sensibility, and he was clearly aware of the new current of interest in the literature of the past, typified by Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). Brought up a Christian but also a Nonconformist (his mother may have been a follower of the apocalyptic doctrines of the still active sect of the seventeenth-century radical Lodowicke Muggleton), the Bible was and remained the central source of inspiration, textual, verbal, and artistic, to him. Milton's *Paradise Lost* was almost as important and pervasive. He turned away from the certainties of a material universe to a spiritual world, from the realism of Reynolds and the rationalism of Locke and Newton to the visionary figures of Michelangelo and the mysticism of Emanuel Swedenborg and Jakob Böhme. But it was the more immediate and practical impact of revolution, the War of American Independence, the Industrial Revolution that was blackening "England's green and pleasant land," and, immediately, the French Revolution, that formed the background and inspiration of Blake's prophetic books. In the foreground were a number of significant figures: Thomas Paine was only the most notorious member of the group that included the Swiss artist Henry Fuseli (who translated the *Aphorisms* of the physiognomist Johann Lavater), the radical bookseller Joseph Johnson, the rationalist philosopher William Godwin, and the "English Platonist" Thomas Taylor, all of them known to Blake. If he did not accept Paine's *Age of Reason*, his religious views became increasingly antinomian and Gnostic. All this colored the visions that came to him after Robert's death.

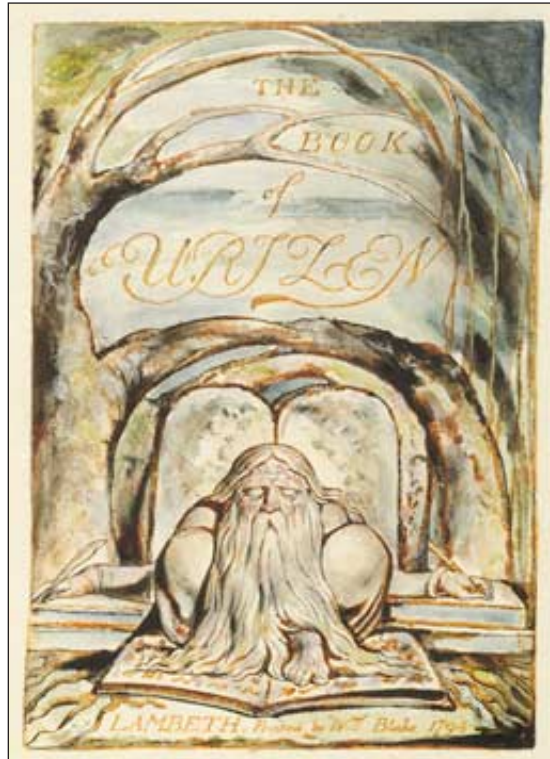
Color was at once the essence of the visions and the major problem in transmitting them. The last decade of the eighteenth century had seen an upsurge in the number of books published with color plates, not unconnected with the sudden availability of French émigrés whose only marketable skill was an ability to draw. Such luxury products were far beyond Blake's means; the two compositions that had reached ordinary print, *Poetical Sketches* (1783) and *The French Revolution* (1791), had hardly got further. It was not economics, however,

but the plain incapacity of conventional media to express the unity of word and image that he needed that led Blake to develop his own methods. He began in black and white with *All Religions Are One* and *There Is No Natural Religion* in 1788, but color was essential to *Songs of Innocence*, which first appeared the following year. This most familiar and accessible of the illuminated books can be read in two ways: as simply the poetry that it is, and also as a statement of Blake's rejection of rationalism, with constant reference to Swedenborg's distinction between the spiritual and natural worlds, emanating from an invisible God. This vision was disturbed in Blake's mind by the violence of the times, expressed in *The French Revolution* and in the next of the illuminated books, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. If the first of these deals literally with violence, the second is a Miltonic pilgrimage from the world of the Old Testament (from which Blake distances himself) to a lyrical world inhabited by mythical figures, among them Urizen, here equated with the Roman god Jupiter, and Orc, new-born, who represents energy. The whole is interspersed with Blake's own aphorisms, parodying Swedenborg, some of which, such as "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression," have become famous.

The books that followed—*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *For Children: the Gates of Paradise*, and *Songs of Experience*, the last mirroring and answering *Songs of Innocence* from the sadder fallen state of mankind—show hope fading and a harder universe. Urizen is the god of reason, who binds the world and with it himself by imposing universal laws. The next books, *America* (the new world) and *Europe* (Blake's world within a reflection of history from the Nativity to the French Revolution), with *The Song of Los* (in two parts, "Africa" and "Asia") elaborate this myth, creating a history in which the figures of Urizen and Orc seem to shadow Milton's Satan and Christ. Throughout these works, the outline of Blake's imaginings becomes firmer, and *The Book of Urizen* finally gives form to the beginning of it all, the creation. Here again, Blake is shadowing the work of one of his earlier influences, Swedenborg, whose theogony was set out in *Arcana Coelestia*, an extended commentary and meditation on the biblical books of Genesis and Exodus. *The Book of Urizen* was, like Genesis, an account of the Creation. It was originally *The First Book...*, because Blake must have intended a sequel, an Exodus, now represented by *The Book of Ahania*, while *The Book of Los* recounts the same events as *The Book of Urizen*, as seen by Los. For some reason Blake seems to have been dissatisfied with these two, which now only survive in single copies, whereas there are eight of *Urizen*.

The eight copies all differ from each other, and were produced over a long period. The earliest were printed in 1794–95; the Rosenwald copy in the Library of Congress (copy G), reproduced here, is printed on paper water-marked 1815, and is the latest known; it is also the most finished. However, it is not formally complete; when Blake offered a copy for sale in 1818, he listed 28 plates, of which this copy has 27 (a transcript of the missing leaf, containing the text that falls between that on plates 3 and 5 of copy G, is included at the appropriate place in the transcription). The differences do not end

there, because in addition to the leaves with text on them (which number 17 in this copy), there are 10 purely pictorial plates that appear in differing places in all the copies, thus complicating the task of divining the subject matter and relating it to the text. One copy, in the British Museum (copy D), has the leaves all numbered by Blake, and its order is thus considered canonical, although it lacks two leaves. The Rosenwald copy agrees with it as to the text, and the arrangement of the picture pages is not very different. The two surviving complete copies,



Title page of *The Book of Urizen*, copy G (ca. 1818).

copy A at the Yale Center for British Art and copy B at The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, differ more significantly—in particular, in the order of the text pages. It is clear that the eight copies, despite a text divided like a biblical book into chapters and verses, represent an idea, in text and pictures, in more or less unresolved motion over twenty years.

The book invariably opens with a title page, showing the bearded figure of Urizen, seated and writing simultaneously with both hands on books open to left and right of him, behind him two stones with semicircular tops; like Moses, he is a lawgiver, and like Moses, his laws are set in stone. When the text begins, however, they are not yet written. Urizen is one of the Eternals, who are horrified as he creates the Newtonian universe, fixing both space and time. In chapter II,

the Eternals gather round the rock where stands Urizen, brazen book in hand, with eternity condensed into the four elements. They cast him out, and he falls like Satan into a hell of his own making. Enter Los, sent by the Eternals to watch Urizen, to whom, with great pain and suffering, he gives bodily form. He is himself so incarcerated, and in union with the female principle, Enitharmon, who gives birth to Orc, the spirit of energy. Los conspires with her to chain Orc to a mountain. Urizen now stirs, and the beings that emanated from him in Eternity are reborn from the four elements and plants and animals as his children. He curses them and wanders over the world, weeping over its pain, his greatness diminishing as he casts “The Net of Religion” over it, holding it up even as it binds him to the earth. The end sees his son Fuzon calling together all the remaining children of Urizen (IX:8–9):

And they left the pendulous earth:
They called it Egypt, & left it.

And the salt ocean rolled englob'd.

Some shreds of hope are expressed in the little birds flying upwards, interspersed in the text, and in the redeeming figure of Orc, a baby now grown to a boy, alone but now free on a bare mountaintop.

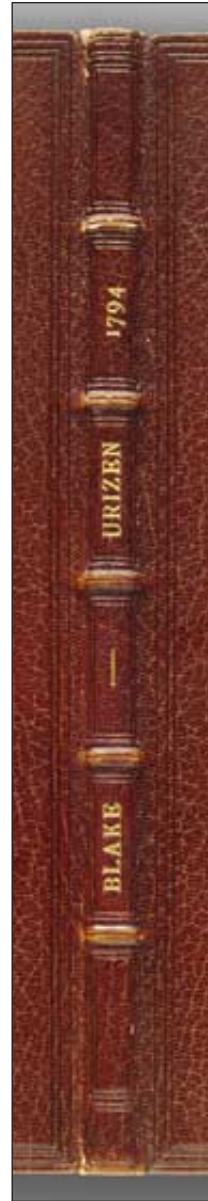
The Rosenwald copy is printed in orange (others are in brown and green), but also elaborately hand-colored with brush and watercolor pigments, heightened with gold and silver. All the details, some obscure in the earlier copies, are here elaborated and made clear, as if Blake had come to some final determination about the order and function of both the text and the pictures of *The Book of Urizen*. As such, it has an heroic splendor, and forms, with its two sequels, a grand finale to the first part of Blake's great prophetic vision.

Nicolas Barker retired as the Head of Conservation at the British Library in 1992. He continues to serve as advisor to libraries and museums in the United Kingdom and in North America, as well as to the British National Trust in its project of cataloguing the libraries of the hundreds of country houses in its care, the riches of which remain almost unknown. His many books include the standard biography of Stanley Morison (1972), accounts of Aldus Manutius and early Greek types, and a study of Besler's *Hortus Eystettensis* (1994). The friend and executor of the great Blake scholar, Geoffrey Keynes, he has reviewed and published many books on Blake, and has written the standard bibliography of Blake's friend and patron, William Hayley. Since 1966, he has edited *The Book Collector*, the world's leading journal of scholarly bibliophily.

Binding & Collation

Binding Bound by the Club Bindery in 1908 in brown morocco, “BLAKE — URIZEN 1794” in gilt letters running up spine, raised bands.

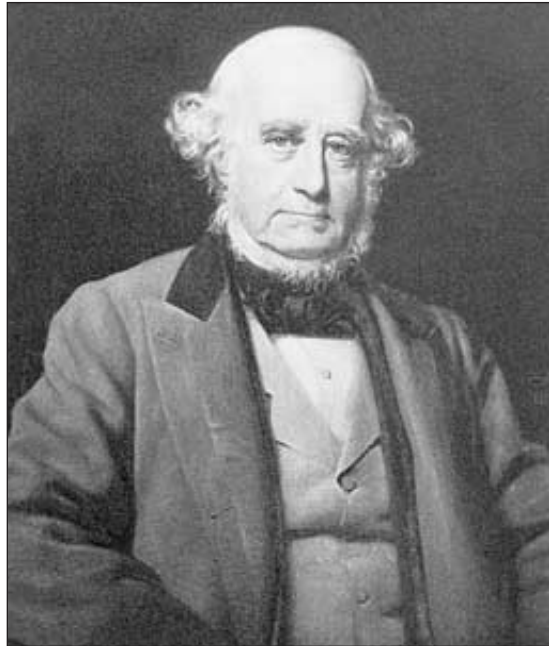
Collation 17 plates bearing text in orange ink, 10 full-page illustrations, in all 27 plates relief-etched and hand-colored, numbered by pen in Blake’s hand 1–27 corresponding to Bentley-Erdman-Keynes numbers 1, 2, 3, 9, 5, 12, 6, 14, 7, 8, 22, 10, 11, 16, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 27, 24, 25, 26, 28; plate 4 lacking. Wove paper, 11³/₈ x 9 inches (289 x 230 mm), watermarked Ruse & Turners/1815 on seven plates.



Provenance

Like genealogical research, the tracing of a book's provenance is often an unprofitable exercise, of interest only as part of some wider prosopographical endeavor. Past owners are often unremarkable, and possession of a book is no indication of its having been read, or otherwise influential. This copy of *The [First] Book of Urizen*, however, can be shown to have affected the study and appreciation of the works of William Blake at every stage in its passage from collection to collection.

Blake inspires a particular devotion, and his works have always remained concentrated in the hands of a comparatively few collectors in each generation, from John Linnell and Thomas Butts to Geoffrey Keynes, Graham Robertson, Frank Rinder, and Robert Essick. This style of connoisseurship is often more graphic than literary, more closely allied to print collecting than to bibliophily. It was taken to



Richard Monckton Milnes, First Lord Houghton.

excess by the first authority to describe this particular copy of *Urizen*, Allan Cunningham, in his “Family Library” set of *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (London, 1830). He regarded Blake as a talented draftsman and engraver whose “visionary fits” produced “utterly wild” verse with which he “seasoned” his plates. Cunningham appears to have read this copy of *Urizen* (recognizable by its unique number of leaves) with some little attention, for he prints a more detailed account of the book than he offers for other of Blake’s works. *Urizen*, he concludes, “has the merit or fault of surpassing all human comprehension.” For his facts (as opposed to such opinions) Cunningham relied on friends and associates of Blake, such as John Linnell and John Varley. This *Urizen* was then presumably in the hands of one of these several unacknowledged sources. Not until its anonymous sale at Sotheby’s on January 20, 1852, does the

book at last acquire an identifiable owner. It was purchased at the sale by Richard Monckton Milnes, later first Lord Houghton, for £8 15s.

Monckton Milnes (1809–85) was apparently introduced to Blake’s works in 1838 by the aged poet Walter Savage Landor, who had himself only recently come across them in a bookshop. With his usual enthusiasm, Landor described Blake to Milnes as “the greatest of poets.” Monckton Milnes was then a well-connected, well-traveled youth of agreeable and irresistible effrontery, a college friend of Tennyson and Thackeray who had become a minor poet and a minor parliamentarian in an age (now almost unimaginable) in which to be literate was an asset in politics. His acquaintance, like his sympathies, was vast. He took the name Baron Houghton on his elevation to the peerage in 1863, but long before had acquired many other nicknames. His friend Thomas Carlyle insisted that Milnes deserved to be appointed to “the office of perpetual president of the Heaven and Hell Amalgamation Society.” Another phrase, “The Bird of Paradox,” aptly summarized his unwearied pursuit of the conventionally incompatible. The term was coined by his close friend Sir William Stirling-Maxwell, like Milnes a literary man, a book collector, a celebrated host, and a Member of Parliament. Together with the Belgian antiquary Sylvain Van de Weyer, they formed the Philobiblon Club in 1853 in order to assemble the dozen or two most refined book collectors of the day for congenial company and private publication.

Milnes had long had an interest in the Romantic poets, editing the essential *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats* in 1848, and the works of Thomas Love Peacock in 1875. Inspired by Landor, Milnes had also hoped to produce a Blake anthology. As he wrote to the Irish poet Aubrey De Vere in the 1830s, “Have you ever seen any of Blake’s poetry? I think of publishing some selections from him which will astonish those who are astoundable by anything of this kind.” The projected book never appeared, but Milnes did form perhaps the finest collection of Blake’s works in his generation. Books from his library inspired the twin monuments of Blake scholarship and criticism of the mid nineteenth century: Alexander Gilchrist’s *Life of William Blake, “Pictor Ignotus.” With Selections from His Poems and Other Writings* (London, 1863), and A.C. Swinburne’s dazzling *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (London, 1868), a volume that had its origin in the draft of a review of Gilchrist’s *Life*. That biography, with its second volume of “selections,” made Blake’s writings widely available for the first time, although with a Victorian “Golden Treasury” favoring of the short memorable lyrics over the unwieldy

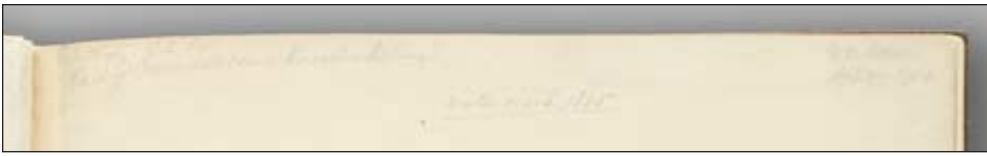
prophetic books. This was the Pre-Raphaelite “life,” defining Blake for a new generation. Dante Gabriel and William Rossetti saw it through the press after Gilchrist’s death, editing, revising, and supplementing extensively. Gilchrist had already borrowed his original texts from Monckton Milnes, and the Rossettis borrowed again: the extent of the Houghton collection is evident from their *catalogue raisonné*.

Swinburne’s *William Blake*, like his tastes in literature, both fine and coarse, owed much to the tutelage of Monckton Milnes—he introduced him to Landor, revered as “the most ancient of the demi-gods,” and gave him the freedom of his library. Offhand remarks in Swinburne’s letters reveal the extent to which *Urizen* (assuredly read in Milnes’ copy) had influenced the young poet’s vocabulary and worldview. Other books from Milnes’ library entered into the making of Swinburne’s essay on Blake, which would have been a very different book without the hyperwarburgian synaesthesia induced by immersion in that very diverse collection.

Milnes married late, to the younger daughter of the second Baron Crewe. Their only son, Robert Offley Ashburton Crewe-Milnes (1858–1945), succeeded his father as second Baron Houghton at the age of 27, and on the death of his uncle, the third Baron Crewe, in 1894, inherited the Crewe estates. A year later he was permitted to assume the family title of Earl of Crewe. He shared many of his father’s qualities and tastes—poetry, politics, and book-collecting—but was much more of a statesman and rather less of a literary man and bibliophile.

He sold a portion of his father’s Blake collection at Sotheby’s on March 30, 1903, in eighteen lots that included not only books and engravings, but two large portfolios of original watercolors for Milton’s *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and the Book of Job. Our copy of *Urizen* was bought by the leading London book dealer, Bernard Quaritch, for £307, presumably on behalf of W.A. White. (The book was in White’s possession in Brooklyn three weeks later at a 5% increase in price—the small profit and quick return strongly suggesting a commission bid.) White added his name and a record of the cost to the first and last flyleaves, arranging for its present binding in brown morocco at the Club Bindery (1908).

William Augustus White (1843–1927) was perhaps the greatest collector of the works of Blake of all time. The actor and artist Graham Robertson, who had a superb collection of Blake paintings, described him as “the great Mr. White, whose collection of Blake books and MSS was the despair of



Pencil notations by W.A. White on the first flyleaf of *The Book of Urizen*.

other collectors.” As senior partner in the family firm of New York investment bankers, White began serious collecting in 1885, devoting his attention to Shakespeare, the Elizabethan poets and playwrights, and William Blake, of whose works he was (along with E.W. Hooper) the first significant American collector. He freely shared his treasures, lending them to scholars and for exhibition: Henrietta Bartlett’s several authoritative bibliographical surveys of Shakespeare owe much to his collection, as does American appreciation of Blake as an artist. He was the chief lender to the Grolier Club Blake exhibitions of 1905 and 1919, and the leading force behind the Club’s publication in 1921 of Geoffrey Keynes’ *A Bibliography of William Blake*.

In his later years White sold certain duplicates at auction (1911 and 1920) and a few Elizabethan rarities privately (at what he considered extravagant prices) through A.S.W. Rosenbach to Folger and Huntington in the 1920s. After his death, his remaining Shakespeare quartos were sold to his Alma Mater, Harvard; the family gave the folios to Princeton. Most (but not all) of the Blake books were retained by his daughter Frances White Emerson. She gave the original watercolors for Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* to the Print Room of the British Museum in 1928; the rest of her collection was sold at Sotheby’s in 1958, the year after her death. The remainder of her father’s books, including this copy of *Urizen*, had been entrusted by the estate to Rosenbach to sell on consignment in 1928. The bookseller, as it happened, had just acquired the ideal customer, Lessing J. Rosenwald.

Rosenwald (1891–1979) was a print collector at first, but Rosenbach had sold him a few important illustrated incunables in October 1928 that were to form the foundation of one of the finest American collections of illustrated books. Soon after, on May 1, 1929, Rosenwald bought several Blake books from the White estate, including not only this copy of *Urizen* (for roughly \$5,000), but three others that had also belonged to Monckton Milnes: *Jerusalem*, *The Ghost of Abel*, and *The Book of Ahania*. Rosenwald gave the book, with a great many others, to the Library of Congress in 1945, although he retained possession until his death. Like its previous owners, he encouraged the use of his collection. Many of the William Blake Trust facsimiles

executed by the Trianon Press (1952–78) were made from Rosenwald’s copies, giving students for the first time access to extraordinarily accurate facsimiles and ensuring that Blake’s designs will always henceforth be considered in company with his text. THE EDITORS