"The Tyger": Genesis & Evolution in the Poetry of William Blake
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There is the Cave, the Rock, the Tree, the Lake of Udan Adan,
The Forest and the Marsh and the Pits of bitumen deadly,
The Rocks of solid fire, the Ice valleys, the Plains
Of burning sand, the rivers, cataract & Lakes of Fire,
The Islands of the fiery Lakes, the Trees of Malice, Revenge
And black Anxiety, and the Cities of the Salamandrine men,
(But whatever is visible to the Generated Man
Is a Creation of mercy & love from the Satanic Void).

(From *Jerusalem*)

One of the great poetic structures of the eighteenth century is William Blake's "The Tyger," a profound experiment in form and idea. The sibilants and occlusive consonants which permeate the poem and the consistent repetition of diphthongs and vowels give "The Tyger" a singular force. The word "tyger" itself begins with an explosive consonant which is followed by an emphatic vowel and a pseudo-onomatopoeic "grrr"; the word uniquely integrates a visual object along with a relevant auricular effect.

While it is difficult to attribute any specific occasion or literary source to the striking imagery of the flaming beast wandering among the starry, spear-like globes of heaven in "The Tyger," Blake early became interested in the starry forest hung with fruit and in a heavenly war. In "Gwin, King of Norway" (*Poetical Sketches*) "blazing comets in the sky" cause stars to drop "like fruit" through the "fierce burning night." In addition, it is possible to trace tenuous parallels in *Ossian* and in *Paradise Lost*. In *Fingal*, from which Blake took the obscure character Matha in 1789 (and Utha from *Carric-Thura* in 1794), "Spears fall like the circles of light, which gild the face of night." Near the time "The Tyger" was being composed, Blake was

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1 The MS. of "The Tyger" contains no watermarks. David V. Erdman (*Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, Princeton, 1954, p. 174) conjectures that the
evidencing interest in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, and he may have noted lines 544-547 concerning the “Ten thousand Banners [which] rise into the Air / With Orient Colours waving”; and with them “rose / A Forest huge of Spears.” Blake almost surely alludes to these specific lines in 1794 in *The Book of Urizen* (K223:27-30), and it is perhaps significant that later “Tygers” are seen in the likeness of “terrific men . . . laughing terrible among the banners” (*FZ*, K344:120-122). Swedenborg in his *Heaven and Hell*, from which Blake derived one of his own titles, notes that animals correspond to the affections of man (par. 110): “Some [hells are], like vaulted caverns occupied by wild beasts in forests,” and there “are also dark forests, in which infernal spirits prowl about like wild beasts” (par. 586). Blake also paraphrases part of a paragraph from Swedenborg’s *The True Christian Religion* (par. 388; cf. *MHH*, K155, 157) in which “lions, panthers, tigers, and wolves” symbolize “The cupidities of those who seemed like satyrs and priapi.”

Blake was fond of Ovid, probably at an early date, and in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid makes reference to the “monstrous beasts of huge size, which lay scattered over the spangled face of heaven.” Phaethon must make his way through “dangerous ambushes and among monstrous wild beasts: even though you keep to the path, and do not wander from it, still you will have to go past . . . the jaws of the raging Lion [Leo] . . . .” Blake may well have had these lines in mind when writing the following passage of the *Marriage*:

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And the just man rages in the wilds [heavens]
Where lions roam.
Rintrah roars & shakes his fires . . .

Once meek, and in a perilous path,
The just man kept his course along
The vale of death [the voids of space].
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poem was composed in “1792 or early 1793.” And it was written at Lambeth rather than at Poland Street as has been assumed previously, the Poor Rate Books for Hercules Buildings, Blake’s residence, confirming that he was at the Lambeth address at a date no later than March 1791.

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All references to Blake’s works are to Geoffrey Keynes’ *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (London and New York, 1957); the number preceding the colon is the page number, that following the colon the line number. Abbreviations used are *FZ* (*The Four Zoas*), *MHH* (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), *BU* (*The Book of Urizen*), *EG* (*The Everlasting Gospel*), *BA* (*The Book of Ahania*), *M* (*Milton*), *J* (*Jerusalem*), *VDA* (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*).
These lines were written prior to the composition of "The Tyger" and—unless the parallels are accidental—help to substantiate Blake's reading of Ovid's "spangled beasts" near to the time he was consciously or unconsciously correlating imagery for his poem on the tiger.

Also, one should not ignore the obvious, that Blake could have seen a real tiger in eighteenth century London. Between 1763 and 1771 there was a "magnificent tiger . . . dying in Castle Street" according to John Hunter, the famous surgeon with whom Blake may have been acquainted in later years. David Henry's anonymous work, *An Historical Description of the Tower of London, and its Curiosities*, contains a list of animals in the Tower, the editions of 1771 and 1792 confirming that at both dates, and undoubtedly the time intervening, there were tigers to be seen. Also a new tiger was brought from Bengal in 1791 for the Tower menagerie. On two occasions Blake virtually lived across the street from tigers on exhibition, once while at 23 Green Street (1782-1784) and later in his declining years at Fountain Court, Strand. It is evident, then, that the probable influences which affected Blake at the time he composed "The Tyger" were varied and extensive; yet the aesthetic import of the poem is not so much in the elements which sponsored its genesis as it is in the internal order of the poem itself.

Although "The Tyger" possesses a lyrical clarity, its undertones make it one of Blake's most "tentative" poems, and its sinuosities have divided scholars into two opposing camps. Damon, for instance, states that "The problem of The Tyger is, quite simply, how to reconcile the Forgiveness of Sins (the Lamb) with the Punishment of Sins (the Tyger). So it is evident that the climax of The Tyger: 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' is not an exclamation of wonder, but a very real question, whose answer Blake was not sure of." 3 Martin Nurmi, on the other hand, states that the question is a "positive rhetorical climax." 4 Erdman, in astutely associating the tiger with the revolutionary politics of Blake's time, also concurs that the poem is a rhetorical vehicle of affirmation. 5 Kathleen Raine, who relates Blake's

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9 "Blake's Revisions of 'The Tyger,'" *PMLA*, LXI (1956), 677. Nurmi states that the revision of stanza two in the MS. belongs to the first phase of development in the poem and claims, erroneously, that Wicksteed (*Blake's Innocence and Experience*, 1928) is also of this opinion (see Wicksteed, p. 250).
thinking to Paracelsus and Boehme, concludes that "the answer to the dramatic climax of the poem is, beyond all possible doubt, No." A more recent commentator, John Grant, states that nothing in the poem is "obviously affirmative" and conjectures that the creator of the tiger is Nobodaddy-Urizen, the god of the fallen universe. Admittedly, there are isolated foci that support the above views in Blake's poetry, the validity of which will not here be decided upon. The Procrustean demands on the poem by commentators have, in expanding areas of meaning, confused the relevant issues and limits of the lyric. The tacit hypothesis of many scholars is based upon the theoretical assumption that Blake knew exactly what he was doing in the poem (the piece was written and corrected in grey ink, indicating the probability that it may have been composed at a single sitting), that he had complete control over his material. This simply was not the case. Although Blake at this time was a knowledgeable poet, once he concluded "The Tyger" he did not "burden" its manual execution with any preoccupation. What was conceived in fear and trembling, to use words of Blake in another context, was executed with indifference.

"The Tyger" has faulty syntax, corrupt punctuation—even by eighteenth century standards—contains at least one crucial solecism, and fluctuates between ambiguous tenses. The design of the poem also has received variant commentary, interpreters stating that the face of the tiger represents a mask, a Gioconda smile, and neuroses. One scholar misreads calligraphic mannerism for symbolism. Blake's poem is a great lyric, but it is not a perfect lyric in terms of minutiae either in composition or design.

Most commentators agree that the "denouement" of the poem begins with the star-spear-tear imagery of the fifth stanza, but the various interpretations disagree violently as to its concise meaning, and the concentering stanza in the popular as well as in the technical literary sense has become a catastrophe. To find the meaning in "The Tyger" is, as Blake says, rather "like looking for Epigrams in Homer." Although invaluable deductions have been presented, most studies of the poem are either too parochial or too general to be definitive, and in exploring and implementing the widening nuances of the poem, a constructive rapprochment is necessary.

"The Tyger" has never been fully related to Blake's symbolic

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books. Although its meaning must be found within its own structure, the lyric has points of reference that go beyond its immediate center, and no conclusion can be deduced properly concerning the "coordinates" of the poem until it has been related to the vast symbolic context of Blake's myth.

The tiger is mentioned by Blake in his first set of published poems; and almost thirty years later, on the final pages of Jerusalem, his last great symbolic poem, Blake still found the beast a significant image. He refers to the tiger in thirty-seven passages in his poetic works. An examination of the early tiger imagery will demonstrate that his famous lyric was not an impromptu correlation of images but rather an elaboration of elements which began at least as early as 1789.

The word "tyger" occurs twelve times in eight poems prior to Blake's publication of "The Tyger" in Songs of Experience (1794). It is first mentioned in Poetical Sketches (1783), and on the last page of the An Island in the Moon (circa 1784-85) Blake speaks of "that noble beast the Tyger," associating the animal with the face of a woman. In "Night" of Songs of Innocence (1789), "wolves and tygers howl for prey" (sheep), and in "The Little Girl Lost" "Leopards, tygers, play/Round" the child, "While the lion old/Bow'd his mane of gold..." In "The Little Girl Found" the child is seen "Among tygers wild." In Tiriel Tiriel is described as undergoing bestial metamorphoses, the tiger being one of his transformations. Also in this poem Hela, the goddess of sexual instinct, leads...
Tiriel "where wild beasts resort," but "from her cries the tygers fled."\(^{10}\)

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (circa 1790-1793) "the tyger, the horse, the elephant watch the fruits [of imagination]," and "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction."\(^{11}\) It is in *The Marriage* that the flaming forehead of Leviathan is "divided into streaks of green & purple like those on a tyger's forehead"; and the monster tinges the "black deep with beams of blood, advancing toward us with all the fury of a spiritual existence." Blake compares the tiger with the camel in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) and notes their opposing "philosophies." In another passage in the *Visions* Blake describes the tiger as a fiery creature of the heavens, a clear prelude (along with the passage concerning Leviathan) to the imagery of "The Tyger." It should also be added that Orc, the god of revolution, is created in terminology reminiscent of "The Tyger" in *A Song of Liberty* (about 1793), and in *Europe* (1794) Blake associates the fleeing stars and dawn with Orc, and tigers "suck the ruddy tide."\(^{12}\)

The tiger (a non-Biblical beast), lion, wolf, and leopard all have similar meanings in Blake's imagery, and the wolf specifically is associated with the term "experience" in "King Edward the Third" of *Poetical Sketches*. In *The Four Zoas*, Blake clearly uses the lion rather than the tiger as the symbolic creature of experience: "... in Climes of happy Eternity / Where the lamb [innocence] replies to the infant voice, & the lion to the man of years / Giving them sweet instructions. ..."\(^{13}\) The lion, as well as the tiger, is a flaming beast of the voids in Blake's mythology; both are associated with "wrath" and "wis-

\(^{10}\) Cf. *The Mental Traveller* (circa 1803), K427:99-100.

\(^{11}\) Blake may have seen James Barry's painting, *The Story of Orpheus Reclaiming Mankind from a Savage State*, in which a tiger is seen running down a horse in the distant background. Barry, whom Blake knew and admired, completed this work and others for the Society of Arts by 1784, and Blake specifically refers to Barry's pictures at a later date (circa 1808). For a possible allusion in *An Island*, see Erdman, p. 38.

\(^{12}\) It has been suggested that the drawing of the head of a tiger on p. 6 of Blake's notebook was a study for "The Tyger"; this is improbable, as above this sketch is a second drawing of a tiger preparing to leap upon a figure. This second sketch was used for a design in William Hayley's *Designs to a Series of Ballads* (1802), and from this it would appear that both the drawings are related. The head of the tiger in the notebook is snarling, as is the figure above it, but in the illustration of "The Tyger" the beast shows no snarling expression.

dom." The lion, along with a reference to the "coward" sheep, is mentioned on the same page as the initial draft of "The Tyger" in the manuscript notebook. Hence, although the traditional juxtaposition of the lion and the lamb occurred to Blake, ultimately he was to use the tiger as his great symbol of experience.14

The lamb and tiger are symbols of a psychomachia, "Contrary States" as Blake calls them. "The Lamb" is a catechism, an antiphony of question and answer. The final stanza of this poem is primarily resolved with intransitive verbs, indicating a conjunction of subject and object—creator and created. A syntactical as well as a philosophical immobility has been achieved in "The Lamb." In "The Tyger" Blake never overcomes the dialectic of the transitive, the action of subject upon object. "The Lamb" is a paean of the categorical imperative, while the poem on the tiger is a lyrical agon. One poem concludes with a benediction—the engraved plate of "The Lamb" does not even contain question marks to its interrogations—the other itself ends with a question mark.

Yet, it is not the tiger that is the subject of "The Tyger" so much as it is the tiger's creator; the word "dread" in the manuscript is three times applied to the "criminal hero" that frames the beast in the fiery heavens. It takes a tiger-god to create a tiger-beast. The most frequent word in "The Tyger," including articles, is "What" (not always capitalized, and occurring 14 times). Without exception the word refers to the creator of the beast or to his implements, and it always initiates a question. Finally, Blake asks: Is Agnus Dei also Tigris Dei?15 The solution is not an easy one. In the symbolic books both Urizen, the fallen god of Reason, and Los, the generative artificer of redemption, have associations and characteristics which are similar to the winged, masculine Demiurge of the tiger.

14 The word "lion" is used more than twice as often as the word "tyger" in Blake's poetry, and approximately half of all the tiger references are coupled with a reference to the lion. At one point it is possible that Blake considered using the lion for his supreme symbol, for in MHH "Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burden'd air" (K148:1), and in Europe the beast is addressed as "O lion Rintrah, raise thy fury from thy forests black!" (K240:2)—forests of the night as K241:18 confirms. Note also Europe, K240: plate 8:8-12, K242:24.

15 "What dread feet" referred initially in the manuscript to the creator, and Blake did not correct the ambiguity in the engraved version (an ambiguity caused by the rejection of the stanza that was to follow in the manuscript) until about 1802. In M, K515:21-28, the tiger is created by Theotormon and Sotha, sons of Los, in "compassionate thunderings." In J, K713:16-21, the sons of Los are "starry characters" (constellations) which create "the lion & wolf, the bear, the tyger & . . . / the wolly lamb . . ."
Urizen wars against “terrible monsters Sin-bred” (BU, K224:28-30), and he explores his “dark desarts” (K225:14) and “forsaken mountains” (K234:1), the starry forests of the night. In plate 23 of Urizen, Urizen is shown with his globe of fire, and a lion of the starry voids faces him. He has “vast forests” which are “shut in the deep” (K223:23-25), and in The Four Zoas the steeds of light call Urizen’s “lions to the field of blood; they rouze thy [Urizen’s] tygers / Out of the halls of justice. . . .” 16 Urizen’s lions also “Howl in the burning dens; his tygers roam in the redounding smoke / In forests of affliction. . . .” 17 The “desarts,” the starry voids of night which belong to Urizen, “shake their slumbers off, they wave in awful fear / Calling the Lion & the Tyger . . .,” and the fury of Urizen “Hardens the Lion & the Bear [in the abysses among the stars]; trembling in the solid mountain / They view the light & wonder; crying out in terrible existence. . . .” 18

It should be noted here that Kathleen Raine has called attention in part to the associations of Urizen and the tiger in Blake’s later symbolic books; she concludes that the fiery beast of the voids is a symbol of evil created by an evil power. She also makes the interesting observation that the tiger is representative of the “selfhood,” one of Blake’s symbols of the diabolical and fallen universe. Blake frequently speaks of the Spectre (i.e., selfhood) as having bestial and fiery characteristics (J, K667:32-33) and he specifically associates the Spectre with the lion (M, K531:16-21) and the wolf (J, K625:1). In Milton (K515:21-28) the Spectre and tiger are created by the same forces in the starry heavens, both wander through the starry forests of night, and both are described as “dishumaniz’d.” In Jerusalem the “Spectres”

16 K292:37-38. The “halls of justice” are the dens of night and the abysses of the brain, and this passage refers not to the tigers being released or freed from the halls, as one commentator claims, but rather to the tigers as representatives of Urizen’s will and hence symbols of repression. Cf. FZ, K320:5-11; EG, K757:24-27; FZ, K283:135-140 and K281:32-44.


are "like wild beasts in the forests of affliction," and they "rage in forests." 19 Although Blake had not fully conceived his inconography and symbolism of the Spectre at the time he composed "The Tyger," the associative implications are valid and for the most part have been ignored. The significance of this symbolism in reference to "The Tyger" will be evaluated at a later point in this study.

Los, the god of redemption, also is associated with the tiger in Blake's symbolic books, but the most pertinent connection of the beast with Los (insofar as "The Tyger" is concerned) is not so much with the specific references which Blake makes to Los and the tiger as it is with the parallel imagery that exists in The Book of Los and in passages of the later symbolic books. Morphologically, this imagery is exactly the same as that in "The Tyger."

Los probably was an incipient symbol in Blake's mind by 1793, and since The Book of Los was issued one year after the Songs of Experience, it is not surprising to find that the work contains imagery that is strikingly similar to that of "The Tyger." Los stands "In the void between fire and fire," and the fires are

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\text{driv'n by his hands} \\
\text{And his feet, which the nether abyss} \\
\text{Stamp'd in fury and hot indignation. (K257:43-48)}
\]

The "Immortal" builds "Furnaces; he formed an Anvil, / A Hammer of adamant" (K259:21-22) and, as "the Prophet Of Eternity," he beats on his "iron links" (the stars). From the

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\text{infinite fires,} \\
\text{The light that flow'd down on the winds} \\
\text{He siez'd, beating incessant, condensing} \\
\text{The subtil particles in an Orb.} \\
\text{Roaring indignant, the bright sparks} \\
\text{Endur'd the vast Hammer; but unwearied} \\
\text{Los beat on the Anvil, till glorious} \\
\text{An immense Orb of fire he fram'd.20} \\
\text{Oft he quench'd it beneath in the Deeps. . . .}
\]

\[
\ldots \text{Again} \\
\text{Siezing fires from the terrific Orbs [stars],} \\
\text{He heated the round Globe [the sun], then beat,}
\]

19 K671:60-73. For further parallels see K671:66-67 and K686:30-35. Cf. the notebook poem beginning "My Spectre around me night and day" (K415-417); M, K521:3-5, K528:45-46.

20 Blake's allusion is to Paradise Lost, VII, 352-357.
While, roaring, his Furnaces endur'd
The chain'd Orb in their infinite wombs.

. . . Los heated the glowing mass,21 casting
It down into the Deeps: the Deeps fled
Away in redounding smoke; 22 the Sun
Stood self-balanc'd. And Los smi'ld with joy.

But no light! for the Deep fled away 23
On all sides, and left an unform'd
Dark vacuity. . . . (K260:27-50)

The sun is the fiery heart of Urizen, and it is similar to the molten
"well of sanguine woe" in the manuscript of "The Tyger."

The creation of the flaming sun and the creation of a flaming beast
have similar associations in Blakean symbolism,23 and the similarity of
the imagery in The Book of Los and "The Tyger" is too central to
ignore. The words as they occur in Los are hands, feet, Immortal,
Furnaces, Anvil, Hammer, iron links (a chain of stars), fram'd, Deeps,
Siezing, and smi'ld.25 This is the identical and crucial vocabulary that
is utilized in "The Tyger."

In the later symbolic books Los is, among other things, a con-
stellation, having "naked limbs glittering upon the dark blue sky,
his knees / Bathed in bloody clouds, his loins in fires of war where
spears / And swords [stars] rage . . ." (FZ, K334:42-44). He also
labors in the "City of Golgonooza," the center of artistic activity,
located in the starry "Forests of Entuthon" (M, K514:43) in Ulro,
which "is the space of the terrible starry wheels" (J, K632:51).
Blake also locates in the forests of Eututhon the Lake of Udan-Adan,
a "Lake not of Waters but of Spaces (FZ, K346:224-225), that is,
the "deeps" of the voids. Entuthon, Ulro (the bloody, uterine heavens
which Blake clearly conceived of before "The Tyger" was written),
and Udan-Adan (the quenching trough) represent a late nomenclature,
but they have relevance to "The Tyger" as extensions of its central
symbols.26

21 Cf. VDA, K195:5.
22 Cf. FZ, K320:8-9, K335:110-111; Paradise Lost, II, 888-892.
23 In MHH (K156) it is the head of Leviathan, striped like a tiger's, which
causes the deeps to flee.
25 Cf. M, K515:15-17, especially the "smiles" in line 18.
26 For further parallels between Los and "The Tyger" see J, K630:1-4 and
Blake connected the tiger in one way or another with Urizen (reason), Los and Enitharmon (time and space), Luvah (love), Orc (the genitals), Fuzon (fire), Theotormon (theology-tormented?), Sotha (the war-giver), Palamabron (pity), Bromion (science), Rintrah (wrath)—the last five being Sons of Los. The beast wanders in the brain of man, is associated with Milton's fallen Archangels of Heaven, and the Seven Eyes of God (including Lucifer and Christ); it symbolizes the passions and sexual love; but it also represents mercy and the forgiveness of sins. It is apparent that the tiger was not an image of single-linear development in Blake's mind (either before or after the composition of his greatest poem), and it was given variant and paradoxical emphases as Blake desired. These emphases are noted here not to confuse the issue but rather to indicate that there is no simple equation to the symbology of the beast. Consequently, it is necessary to turn to still another facet of meaning and counter-meaning in “The Tyger” before the nucleating emphasis of the poem can be resolved.

One of Blake's most crucial passages in “The Tyger” is his imagery concerning the stars throwing down their spears and watering heaven with their tears. In order to comprehend the significance of this passage it is necessary to understand clearly Blake's symbolism concerning the stars.

In The French Revolution (1791) Blake utilizes imagery which has symbolic parallels in “The Tyger.” The stars are described as “tears” (K136:56) and are seen “weeping thro' dismal winds” (K140:134); “monsters of worlds unknown” swim through “deeps” watching to be delivered (K141:158-159).

... terrors, bred from the blood of revenge and breath of desire
In bestial forms, or more terrible men; till the dawn of our


28 Cf. MHH, K156, in which “animals sprung from corruption” flew, or rather swum, in the infinite deep... Here the deeps and skies are synonymous. Some commentators have interpreted “deeps” in “The Tyger” as meaning pits, or depths below; however, it was an habitual practice with Blake to refer to the heavens as deeps. See, e.g., M, K514:51, K498:21-26, K507:22; also FZ, K306:31, K310:189, K354:517.

peaceful morning [when the stars have thrown down their spears],
Till dawn, till morning, till the breaking of clouds . . .
Till man raise his darken'd limbs out of the caves [i.e. forests] of night. (K144:215-218)

In *The French Revolution* also the armies are described as shining "through heaven, tinging morning with beams of blood" (K139:111) and hence are "starry troops" which throw down their swords and muskets. In *America* (1793) this motif is repeated, the soldiers again throwing down their arms "to the earth," running from their "dark castles" (voids of night), and seeking to hide from Orc (K201:6-9), who has obvious affinities to the tiger. The soldiers, then, are clearly characterized as stars (cf. K201:1) and their throwing down of "swords & muskets to the earth" recapitulates the action of the stars throwing down their spears in "The Tyger":

The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammer'd mail,
And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood, a naked multitude.\(^{20}\)

In *America* also "The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen [stars] leave their stations";

. . . The Sun has left his blackness & has found a fresher morning,
And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night;
For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease. (K198:13-15)

This new dawn is "regeneration" and the over-all image pattern is an exact analogue of that in "The Tyger." \(^{31}\)

In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) Blake presages the context of the star imagery of "The Tyger" by describing the rising sun in the following terms: "does not that mild beam blot / The bat,

\(^{20}\)K202:4-5. In *FZ* (K311:222-225) Urizen "call'd the stars around my feet in the night of councils dark; / The stars threw down their spears & fled naked away./ We fell." See also *America*, K204:5-7, and the notebook poem beginning "When Klopstock England defied" (K186-187). The imagery in *FZ* refers to the fall of man to a lower sphere, whereas in "The Tyger" the stars throwing down their spears announced the coming of the dawn (regeneration).

\(^{31}\)In *FZ* (K364:261-266) Blake uses similar imagery; also "A Song of Liberty" (K159-160) and *America* (K198:2-5 and K202:1-K203:5).
The imagery of the starry tears and spears, the caves of night, the monsters of the deeps, the beasts of heaven, the coming of the morn, and the fading of the stars—found in the above poems which were composed before Blake published “The Tyger”—is integral to the syntax of Blake's great lyric. With this in mind, it is appropriate to turn back to “The Tyger” itself.

An attempt to reconstruct Blake's intents and purposes at his time of composition in the manuscript is necessary. In the first draft of “The Tyger” Blake uses or contemplates using the word “dare” five times; in each case the word clearly suggests audacity. However, this represents only the first version (K172), in which, as the manuscript documents, Blake had not yet written of the stars and spears nor had he associated the creator of the lamb with the artificer of the tiger. In the star-spear stanza (the second phase, K173:26-30) Blake first wrote: “... did he laugh his work to see”; he then replaced part of the line with “dare he smile,” and then again changed “smile” to “laugh.” After an intervening line, Blake wrote “Did he who made the lamb make thee.” Then, above the word “Did,” he wrote “Dare,” with “Dare” obviously being his last consideration at the moment of composition. “Dare he laugh his work to see” and “Dare he who made the lamb make thee” were too connotative, embodied an indictment, and turned the poem in a direction which Blake, ultimately, neither intended nor allowed. In engraving the lines Blake rejects the references to “Dare” and replaces them with the less ominous word “Did” (this also being the case with the third phase of the manuscript poem, K173:15-16). There is, I believe, significance in these revisions.

Since, in the first draft of “The Tyger,” the concept of redemption or association of the artificer of the tiger with Christ did in no way enter into the schemata of the poem, Blake simply asked what dread being dare create such a deadly beast. The questions are real questions. It is, however, in the second phase (the star-spear addition) that Blake turns the poem from a purely interrogative medium to a subtly achieved rhetorical thesis. What begins as a poem of pure ontology ends in metaphysical casuistry. If Blake's questions are

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rhetorical his “answer” must be found in the affirmative implications of his imagery in the fifth stanza. In this stanza Blake answers and asks questions simultaneously, and the answer is itself part of the very question he asks:

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

The profundity of “The Tyger” is that its meaning is bound in a perpetual crisis, and it would be a mistake to conclude that Blake’s answer of affirmation came with an easy facility. The fact that the answer (the redemptive imagery of dawn) is actually part of the climactic question itself exemplifies the tenuous problem which Blake encountered in his great poem. However, those who ignore the important adverbial phrase and Blake’s qualifying imagery of the dawn, which is as much answer as we are going to get from the rhetorical lyric, push the poem in a direction that its context does not allow.

Blake does go beyond the question of his poem, but he does not do so with didactic heaviness. The obvious should be remembered in that Innocence and Experience show the “Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.” The eaters of Good and Evil take “Qualities” (i.e., meekness and wrath) and create from them “Negations.” “Negations are not Contraries: Contraries mutually Exist...” (J, K639:33). Blake seeks a universe in which “Contrarieties are equally true” (J, K677:14). It is the unimaginative world in which the tiger’s qualities are “frozen to unpensive deadly destroying terrors” (M, K525:1). Blake’s poem is in part a fabliau about the body electric, and the tiger is a testimony against the prurient laws of allegory and negation. It is only Nobodaddy who would wish the beast to be a burnt offering in the forests of “prime evil,” not the gods of redemptive dawn. Whatever the tiger is, it is not a creature courted by incapacity; he is an animal of Bacchus. If we “Deduct from a rose its redness,” or from a tiger wrath, we “rectify everything in Nature as the Philosophers do... & God will be compell’d to be Eccentric if he Creates, O happy Philosopher” (K81). It is a wise philosopher who knows his own tiger, and Blake rejected categorically the idea that a tiger should ask a lamb “how he shall take his prey” (152). The tiger is numbered among the transgressors, a thing of energy devoted to destruction from his mother’s womb. This, as Blake says in the same context On Homer’s Poetry, is the beast’s “Character: its
Goodness or Badness is another consideration" (K778). This is the meaning of what has been called the "central ganglion of Felis Tigris" (Wicksteed, 197).

It must not be assumed that Blake opposed the philosophy of the lamb lying down with the tiger; indeed, the conclusions of The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem (all of which carry references to the tiger in their final pages) culminate in this ethic. "Wrath was follow’d up and down / By a little ewe lamb" when "none impure were deem’d" (Book of Los, K256:8-24). What Blake rejects is the moral judgment which refuses to recognize that the tiger is not a "lamb." Blake had conceived of the beast-man in the form of Nebuchadnezzar in The Marriage and engraved the following line: "One Law for the Lion & Ox [we may legitimately insert tiger & lamb] is Oppression." The tiger is an immense world of delight closed by the lamb's senses five; to impose the philosophy of one upon the other is ignorance, but to recognize mutually their divine aspects is wisdom.

In "The Tyger" Blake is not dealing, however, with a parable in which a beast brings forth sweetness (at least not in this world); the tiger is a beast of noctis irae, and more than anything else Blake is affirming the holiness of the tiger. To paraphrase Blake, to make a tiger holy is not to make him more of a lamb for being holy. "The Tyger" is not a poem on Good and Evil (although philosophical implications certainly exist); it is a poem on the holiness of creation. The tiger flammenpracht is a holy organism of God in the morning of wisdom, for everything that lives is Holy. Blake is perfectly willing to emphasize that the tiger is a monstrous wild beast (even Spectre, if you will) in the corporeal world, but the lyric that begins with terror of night and the voids of Tohu Bohu ends with the signal of dawn, the recognition of the holy aspects of creation, and the tacit blessing of the beast by the What-god. "The Tiger" begins in the fallen world of generation, but it clearly forecasts the approach of eternity in which the tiger will "Humanize" (J, K746:43-44). Blake envisions the tiger as a beast capable of wrath (in this world) and mercy (in the wisdom of the other), a creature bathed in the blood of the Lamb—both literally and symbolically. In "The Tyger" Blake has created the most highly intricated physiologus in the English language, and the poem concerns the rhetoric of affirmation in the face of mystery.

K158. Recall that "tygers . . . [are] dishumaniz’d men" (FZ, K314:116). The placement of Nebuchadnezzar's feet in the design in the Marriage is the same as in the engraving of "The Tyger." The line in the Marriage (repeated in two other works) is based upon Isaiah 11:7, "and the lion shall eat straw like the ox."