

An Overannotated “Auguries of Innocence”

By Alexander S. Gourlay

ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY (agourlay@risd.edu) teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design.

1 RECENTLY, in reviewing two new editions of Blake, I used “Auguries of Innocence” as a test case to assess the explanatory notes provided by the editors. I chose the poem because it seems to me particularly susceptible to—and in need of—intervention of the kind provided by editorial annotation.¹ Each individual augury poses an intellectual problem of some kind. Many are apparently designed to exercise and strengthen the visionary capabilities of the reader, usually depending on a critical unstated fact or idea, but the supplementary information provided in existing editions of this work is sparse and more often occludes than illuminates. I thought it might be useful to some future editors as well as readers to create an “edition” of this poem with explicit versions of every note I could think of, not as a paradigmatic textbook text of the poem (it’s too thorough, though far from exhaustive) but as a resource from which editors could select the information that would be most helpful to their readers. I invite corrections, expansions, refutations, and other responses.

“Auguries of Innocence”²

*This poem was written out in Blake’s neatest ordinary handwriting in a twenty-two-page manuscript collection of poems often called the *Pickering Manuscript*, after an early owner. The poems were probably composed c. 1800–03 and this fair copy created shortly thereafter. The structure of the poem—a loosely organized compilation of paradoxes, puzzles, and predictions—is unique in Blake’s work. The closest*

1. In his E editions David V. Erdman reorganizes the poem by subject matter and theme; the unfortunate result is to de-emphasize the visionary procedures involved in favor of moral, practical, and philosophical implications.

2. In ancient Rome, augury was a system of civic divination, a means of learning the thoughts of the gods, and was regarded in the Christian era as a form of impious prying (Grant 490). It was based particularly on observation of the flight patterns, calls, and actions of various species of birds, which were considered to be the messengers of Jupiter,

analogue is probably the Proverbs of Hell in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, but those are thoroughly ironized as reflections of the habitual ideology of the devils in hell; further, their primary significance is as an implicit critique of conventional “heavenly” ideology. By contrast, the ideas about the world expressed in the auguries are at once more Blakean and less important in themselves than the promotion of the paradoxical mental processes by which they are understood. Unlike such ironic exercises as the Songs of Innocence and of Experience, which often sustain multiple readings involving very different ways of thinking about their subjects and speakers, “Auguries” establishes little or no distance between its speaker and its author. There are no specific real or fictional human characters except generic types (the miser, the butcher),³ and although heaven and hell are invoked throughout, God with a human form appears only at the end.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour⁴

as well as meteorological phenomena and other prodigies of nature. Roman augury was also associated with forms of divination that involved animal sacrifice. It was used on momentous public occasions such as the installation of rulers, hence the term “inauguration,” and also at the beginning of military ventures. Because auguries could have political consequences, only a tightly controlled group of priests was allowed to interpret the signs. Blake dismissed the ancient Romans as “slaves of the Sword” (E 95), victimizers and victims of a pervasive and pernicious imperial culture of war; by adding “of Innocence” to “Auguries” in the title he suggests a distinction between his benign visionary practice and the corrupt Roman form.

3. Arguably, “Caesar” in line 98 is Julius rather than a generic Caesar.

4. The first four lines are the only ones in alternating rhyme; the rest are in couplets or quadruplets (that is, double couplets). The woven rhyme pattern indicates that these lines should be taken together as a quatrain, a four-line unit of thought, rather than as contrasting pairs like the next four related lines. Blake’s tetrameter couplets, a form he used very sparingly, mimic both the distichs in which classical fortunes were often expressed and the couplets of neoclassical poetry; more positively, their binary nature suggests the two elements of divination, with the first line usually supplying the signifying phenomenon and the second the significance of it, often in another dimension of reality.

The opening quatrain constitutes a sort of quick-start guide to augury, implying that we readers are all potential augurs, a more inclusive prophetic class than was found in Rome: in *Milton* (E 96), Blake quotes Numbers 11.29: “Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets.” His instructions are paradoxical. In order to see an insignificant grain of sand as a sublime object comparable to the whole earth, with its towering Alps and vast oceans, or a tiny, evanescent, sweet-smelling wildflower as a heaven, one might try to shrink oneself to stand on the edge of the grain’s equivalent of the Pacific, or slow time enough to render the flower’s fragile beauty as durable and extensive as that of heaven. Instead, Blake instructs us to “hold” the infinities of time and space in proportions that correspond with the size and

A Robin Red breast in a Cage	5
Puts all Heaven in a Rage ⁵	
A dove house filld with doves & Pigeons	
Shudders Hell thro all its regions ⁶	
A dog starvd at his Masters Gate	
Predicts the ruin of the State ⁷	10
A Horse misusd upon the Road	
Calls to Heaven for Human blood ⁸	
Each outcry of the hunted Hare	
A fibre from the Brain does tear ⁹	
A Skylark wounded in the wing	15
A Cherubim does cease to sing ¹⁰	
The Game Cock clipd & armd for fight	

lifespan of a human being, at which point human consciousness transcends scale, rendering both time and space imaginatively manageable (rather than obliterating these illusions). Grant explains that the visionary mode of “Auguries” is not full-bore prophecy, which is apocalyptic in effect, but an intermediate form that promotes incremental understanding by those still in this world (493). Accordingly, the main thrust of most of the auguries is to reveal inversions, paradoxes, and other phenomena that undercut ordinary material reality, which is right side up, subject to gravity, and stuck in the slow sequence of time.

5. Like any bird, the robin is a creature of the skies, so heaven has a special interest in its happiness or unhappiness; there are also numerous popular sayings that are relevant, such as “Little Cock Robin and Little Jenny Wren, / Are God Almighty’s little Cock and Hen” (Holloway 90), or legends associating the bird with various good deeds on behalf of Jesus.

6. Doves and pigeons are homing birds that in Blake’s day were kept in open dovehouses, to which they would return even if carried many miles away, so their situation is only apparently similar to that of the caged robin. Tradition has it that immediately following his death on the cross Christ descended into hell to redeem Adam, Eve, Moses, and other virtuous persons, an event called the Harrowing of Hell; it was accompanied by an eclipse and an earthquake that Dante blames for the state of the infernal bridges. Heaven is offended at the caging of a robin, but hell convulses (and perhaps loses a soul or two) when innocent birds are allowed to live as they prefer. See, however, Perkins 11; he believes that the doves and pigeons are victims.

7. A dog fulfilling its duty to its master but denied food is a microcosm of misrule, analogous to an abused citizenry harboring revolutionary resentments that could topple the government.

8. It seems possible that Blake was thinking about Hogarth’s “Four Stages of Cruelty” set of engravings when he wrote “Auguries”: it features a battered, broken-down coach horse neighing in pain, children as animal torturers, bats and owls symbolizing benighted error, tortured cattle, misused lambs, cockfighting, and other instances of cruelty also present in the poem. The four pictures also include a prophetic boy in plate 1 and an overall symmetry in which instances of cruelty are answered with cruelty in retribution: an eye for an eye. Blake’s poem often breaks out of the cycle of cruelty by inverting a cruel reality rather than merely mirroring it.

9. Brain fibers are neurons, recognized in Blake’s day as components involved in mental activity. Connoisseurs of the hunt relished the final cries of the doomed prey when surrounded by dogs; Blake suggests that every hunt makes the hunter a little bit stupider.

10. Larks are unusual among songbirds in that they sing and fly at the same time, and skylarks fly so high that they can be heard but not seen. They are thus invisible singing flyers like cherubim (used as singular

Does the Rising Sun affright ¹¹	
Every Wolfs & Lions howl	
Raises from Hell a Human Soul ¹²	20
The wild deer wandring here & there	
Keeps the Human Soul from Care ¹³	
The Lamb misusd breeds Public strife	
And yet forgives the Butchers Knife ¹⁴	
The Bat that flits at close of Eve	25
Has left the Brain that wont Believe	
The Owl that calls upon the Night	
Speaks the Unbelievers fright ¹⁵	
He who shall hurt the little Wren	
Shall never be belovd by Men	30
He who the Ox to wrath has movd	
Shall never be by Woman lovd ¹⁶	
The wanton Boy that kills the Fly	
Shall feel the Spiders enmity	
He who torments the Chafers sprite	35
Weaves a Bower in endless Night ¹⁷	
The Catterpillar on the Leaf	
Repeats to thee thy Mothers grief ¹⁸	

here but actually a plural of “cherub”). When one invisible singer can’t fly, another invisible flyer won’t sing.

11. A gamecock has its wings clipped so it can’t fly away from the fight, and it has razor-sharp blades augmenting its talons; in civilian life it is a rooster, herald and companion of the sun.

12. The howling of wild beasts was often represented in the eighteenth century as a manifestation of infernal energy (see chapter 2 of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*), but here it is a redemptive phenomenon related to the Harrowing earthquake; like the doves and pigeons, these animals are doing what they want to do.

13. Deer were the property of the king, and only the upper classes were allowed to hunt them; picturesque deer wandering at will are apparently not quite as good for our souls as sublimely howling wolves.

14. Mistreatment of the lamb is an offense against the human/animal social order. See Hogarth’s “Four Stages of Cruelty,” plate 2, where a drover gratuitously clubs a lamb on the way to Smithfield Market, where the butcher awaits.

15. Bats and owls, whose element is darkness, were traditionally regarded as emblems of ignorance and error. Blake’s lines evoke the phrase “bats in the belfry” and suggest that the faithless skeptic’s questions are as empty as the hooting of an owl: “Who? Who?”

16. Lines 29-32 invite consideration together as a study in contrasts. Tiny, fierce, and fearless, wrens are traditionally gendered female; the huge patient ox, though neutered, is usually considered male. In many places in England it was illegal to sell the meat of an ox unless it had been tenderized by torturing the animal to exhaust itself, causing lactic acid to build up in its muscles before death (Houghton 1: 289). This cruel practice was a popular sport for its own sake, known as bull-baiting, often involving bulldogs and firecrackers.

17. “Sprite” means spirit or soul. The chafer, or cockchafer, is a large beetle that lives underground for the first part of its life. When it emerges as an adult it is famously inclined to fly toward candles and other lights at night. In the prophetic dimension the tormentor of chafers pays for his cruelty by preparing a chamber for himself in eternal darkness, enacting the light-loving chafer’s life cycle in reverse.

18. The particular grief of mothers is the pain of childbirth, traditionally assigned after the Fall to Eve and her daughters, along with

Kill not the Moth nor Butterfly
 For the Last Judgment draweth nigh¹⁹ 40
 He who shall train the Horse to War
 Shall never pass the Polar Bar²⁰
 The Beggars Dog & Widows Cat
 Feed them & thou wilt grow fat²¹
 The Gnat that sings his Summers song 45
 Poison gets from Slanders tongue²²
 The poison of the Snake & Newt
 Is the sweat of Envy's Foot²³
 The Poison of the Honey Bee
 Is the Artists Jealousy²⁴ 50
 The Princes Robes & Beggars Rags
 Are Toadstools on the Misers Bags²⁵
 A Truth thats told with bad intent
 Beats all the Lies you can invent
 It is right it should be so 55
 Man was made for Joy & Woe
 And when this we rightly know
 Thro the World we safely go
 Joy & Woe are woven fine
 A Clothing for the soul divine 60
 Under every grief & pine
 Runs a joy with silken twine²⁶

The Babe is more than swadling Bands
 Throughout all these Human Lands
 Tools were made & Born were hands 65
 Every Farmer Understands²⁷
 Every Tear from Every Eye
 Becomes a Babe in Eternity
 This is caught by Females bright
 And returned to its own delight²⁸ 70
 The Bleat the Bark Bellow & Roar
 Are Waves that Beat on Heavens Shore²⁹
 The Babe that weeps the Rod³⁰ beneath
 Writes Revenge in realms of Death
 The Beggars Rags fluttering in Air 75
 Does to Rags the Heavens tear
 The Soldier armd with Sword & Gun
 Palsied strikes the Summers Sun³¹
 The poor Mans Farthing is worth more
 Than all the Gold on Africs Shore. 80
 One Mite wrung from the Labrers hands³²
 Shall buy & sell the Misers Lands
 Or if protected from on high
 Does that whole Nation sell & buy
 He who mocks the Infants Faith 85
 Shall be mock'd in Age & Death
 He who shall teach the Child to Doubt
 The rotting Grave shall neer get out

the fallen work of spinning and weaving. Presumably the caterpillar's weaving of its cocoon and its traumatic emergence (from the cocoon's perspective) are reminiscent of the mother's labors. Images relating weaving and the woven body are scattered through the poem.

19. Moths and butterflies were classical symbols of the soul in which emergence corresponds with death (see previous note); killing one in the face of imminent judgment is unwise.

20. In an 1804 letter to William Hayley, Blake deplores the pernicious training of warhorses (E 739). The polar bar is the gate of heaven, probably envisioned here as a steeplechase obstacle that would defy even the best-trained leaper.

21. Though they might wish to do better, widows and beggars can't feed their companion animals well.

22. The gnat sings a nasty song before it bites, like the gnattering tongue of personified slander.

23. Envy motivates Satan in *Paradise Lost*, so it is appropriate that the snake and newt (an amphibian mistakenly believed to be a poisonous reptile), which were cursed after the Fall to crawl on their bellies and war with Adam's feet, should get their poison from the sweat of envy's foot.

24. Like the artist, the honeybee is productive but sometimes inclined to sting. Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* describes the driving spirit of the Renaissance masters as *paragone*, comparative/competitive struggle between arts and artists.

25. This origin story for poison takes some unpacking. Instead of heeding the parable of the talents (Matthew 25.14–30), the miser distorts the economy by hoarding his wealth in money bags in his cellar. From the damp, dirty bags grow poisonous toadstools of economic inequality, represented by the contrast between the prince's elaborate garments and the beggar's miserable rags. Any royal person wears fine clothes, but around 1803 the wastrel Prince of Wales was a particularly ostentatious dresser.

26. This extraordinary pair of double couplets represents corporeal pain and pleasure as the warp and perpendicular woof of the fabric

of the material body, the garment of the soul. Silk is the gentlest and smoothest of fabrics, so silken strands would be appropriate for bodily pleasures.

27. The set of two related couplets resonates with the last eight lines and others—for instance, swaddling bands are another fabric enclosing and limiting the soul—but the expected further point is elusive. The words of Jesus in Matthew 6.25 are probably relevant: "Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?"

28. The four lines 67–70 continue the theme of birth in terms suggesting a connection with "The Mental Traveller," a poem on nearby pages of the Pickering Manuscript.

29. Classical augurs interpreted animal sounds as messages from heaven, but innocent auguries work differently. The howling of wolves and lions in lines 19–20 saves souls from hell; these diverse animal cries of increasingly fierce beasts (lamb, dog, bull, lion?) are heard in the alternative perspective of heaven as a kind of cresting wave of sound.

30. The rod of punishment, as in "Spare the rod"

31. The soldier is the human counterpart of the armed rooster of lines 17–18. The sun can cause sunstroke, often accompanied by palsy shakes, a phenomenon particularly associated with British soldiers, who trained to go out in the noonday sun by marching around in summer heat. In this case the prospect of an armed human strikes (as in "stroke") the sun with palsy.

32. A mite is a tiny coin of little value, though it was not used for an actual coin in Britain or Judea. Lines 79–80 discredit absolute intrinsic value, following the parable of the widow's mite (Mark 12.41–44). The gold sands of the Gulf of Guinea were famously the source of much of the gold used to make the coins called guineas.

He who respects the Infants faith Triumphs over Hell & Death	90	Shall weave Old Englands winding Sheet ⁴⁰ The Winners Shout the Losers Curse Dance before dead Englands Hearse ⁴¹	
The Childs Toys & the Old Mans Reasons Are the Fruits of the Two seasons ³³		Every Night & every Morn Some to Misery are Born	120
The Questioner who sits so sly Shall never know how to Reply ³⁴		Every Morn & every Night Some are Born to sweet delight	
He who replies to words of Doubt Doth put the Light of Knowledge out	95	Some are Born to sweet delight Some are Born to Endless Night	
The Strongest Poison ever known Came from Caesars Laurel Crown ³⁵		We are led to Believe a Lie	125
Nought can Deform the Human Race Like to the Armours iron brace ³⁶	100	When we see not Thro the Eye ⁴² Which was Born in a Night to perish in a Night ⁴³	
When Gold & Gems adorn the Plow To peaceful Arts shall Envy Bow ³⁷		When the Soul Slept in Beams of Light God Appears & God is Light	
A Riddle or the Crickets Cry Is to Doubt a fit Reply		To those poor Souls who dwell in Night	130
The Emmets Inch & Eagles Mile Make Lame Philosophy to smile ³⁸	105	But does a Human Form Display To those who Dwell in Realms of day	
He who Doubts from what he sees Will neer Believe do what you Please If the Sun & Moon should Doubt			
Theyd immediately Go out	110		
To be in a Passion you Good may Do But no Good if a Passion is in you ³⁹			
The Whore & Gambler by the State Licencd build that Nations Fate			
The Harlots cry from Street to Street	115		

33. "Toys" are the fanciful thoughts that accompany play. The two seasons are youth and age.

34. The philosopher George Berkeley called himself the Querist, but Blake was probably thinking of all philosophy that avoids positive declaration, including Socratic questioning.

35. Laurel or bay leaves, used in wreaths, crowns, and cooking, were erroneously thought to contain a deadly poison. Aside from the title, this is the most overt reference in the poem to Roman culture.

36. In his visual art Blake often represents knights and other warriors in scale armor—made of small metal plates—which suggests reptilian scales.

37. This doubly sly couplet depends on Isaiah for the antithesis of plow and sword: "And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2.4). Ceremonial swords covered with precious gems were on display at the Tower of London; Blake indicates that when the culture sees fit to decorate the plow, a tool of peace, productivity, and generosity, rather than the sword, a tool of war, destruction, and imperial theft, then the sustaining arts of peace will have the better of the deadly arts of envy.

38. An emmet is an ant, and an inch is to an emmet what a mile is to an eagle, but while these examples extend Blake's theory of relativity to extension in space, it is not clear why philosophy is lame or smiling. A scholarly scoundrel might seek refuge in the thought that Blake wrote *Dame Philosophy*, but the word is unambiguously "Lame." The thought is clear enough: "Scalar perspective changes everything."

39. The probable distinction here is that a passion that is in you governs your mind, whereas your mind governs an assumed passion.

Works, Some Cited

Freeman, Kathryn S. "Auguries of Innocence." *A Guide to the Cosmology of William Blake*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. 31.

Gourlay, Alexander S. "More on Blake's 'Auguries.'" *Notes and Queries* 58.4 (Dec. 2011): 522-23.

Grant, John E. "Apocalypse in Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence.'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 5.4 (winter 1964): 489-508.

40. These lines make clear the perniciousness of some weaving, often implied above; Blake's pictures for "The Bard," a poem by Thomas Gray, show how the last Welsh bard weaves a bloody prophecy that expirates the line of his persecutor, Edward I.

41. The cries of the harlots and gamblers are the urban counterparts of the bird songs interpreted by classical augurs. Most eighteenth-century burials were of naked bodies wrapped in a winding sheet or shroud. See also the note on line 127. The reference to dancing before the hearse is probably an allusion to King David dancing naked before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6).

42. Seeing "through the eye" rather than with it means that one is not deceived by its limitations as a means of perception.

43. An allusion to the gourd plant or castor bean that God caused to grow miraculously overnight, sheltering Jonah while he waited for the destruction of the repentant city of Nineveh in fulfillment of the prophecy God had ordered him to deliver to the city (Jonah 4). The gourd, like the body and bodily eye, is a short-lived shelter for the soul, which slumbers while our consciousness is in the fallen world. Some conventional theologians suggest that God sent a gourd-destroying worm in the morning to make a point to Jonah about the value of all living things; Blake seems to be saying something much more complicated about the reasons why Jonah has so much trouble being a good prophet. One stage in casting off Jonah's errors is to recognize that the eye sees light, which it takes for God, but God is better seen by the imagination as a "Human Form."

Holloway, William. *A General Dictionary of Provincialisms*.
Lewes: Sussex Press, 1839.

Houghton, John, rev. Richard Bradley. *Husbandry and Trade
Improv'd*. 3 vols. London, 1727.

Milne, Anne. "Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence' as/in Radical
Animal Politics, c. 1800." *Beastly Blake*. Ed. Helen P. Bruder
and Tristanne Connolly. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan-Springer,
2018. 65-85.

Miner, Paul. "Blake: The Complexity of Allusions." *Notes and
Queries* 58.1 (March 2011): 63-65.

Perkins, David. "Animal Rights and 'Auguries of Innocence.'" *Blake* 33.1 (summer 1999): 4-11.