Savior, silver, psalms, and sighs, and flash-burn offerings

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Invocation

Lord, I believe.

Help thou mine unbelief[1] and I
Will give away my sins or keep them close to know you;[2]
Will seek you in the best[3] and brokenest of books;
Will cling hard, let loose, bring forth flesh and fruit,[4] if this will please;
Will more-than-tithe my time and talent, open windows;[5]
Make room for oil and balsam, if you'll pour;[6]
Will labor, useless, to admit,[7] but leave a spare under the mat,
Create diversions, throw down ropes;
Will pray and fast and follow and hope;

Will stand and wait.[8]

What price, Lord, poetry?

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1. Mark 9:24.
2. Alma 22:18.
3. D&C 88:118 and 109:7.
4. Genesis 4:3–5.
5. Malachi 3:10.
6. Luke 10:33–34.
7. John Donne, "Holy Sonnet XIV," line 6.
8. John Milton, "On His Blindness," line 14.

PART I: Read, love, write.

> *To read with intelligent charity . . . . [T]o speak of works rather than texts, of personal acts*–answerable *acts . . . . To read lovingly because of and in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the author and guarantor of love*[9].

> *Charity seeks to produce a banquet to which all are invited, a feast from which none will depart unfulfilled. However, it must also be said that while charity can be extended, its reception cannot be compelled; and those who wish to eat from the banquet without knowing the host may remain ever discontented.*[10]

I came to literature late.
Not reading, mind:
As a child, I read voraciously, like end-of-world.
I was a natural. A Burmese. I consumed,
I swallowed whole in great gulps hours at a time.

The selection wasn't great. My father, bless him,
was a reader of westerns: Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour—
whatever wrenched him from the great dull parade of life and chores and children
into some false history where he could be tall and lean
and out of the garden, out of the office, out of the car, gunslung, hatted,
not to be trifled with.

My mother, Lord love her, was more sentimental:
Jack Weyland, Anne McCaffrey, *Readers' Digest*, Carol Lynn Pearson
(no slouch, mind, but a bit much for a young boy to handle)—
the stuff of sweet and melancholy lives, wretched but lithely so,
romantic but morally so, bodices intact, at least as far as I know:
I never got past Weyland.

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9. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 1.
10. Ibid., 41.

There were bright spots for a kid with polymathemagical pretensions:
Madeline L'Engle, Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper.
Later, from The Library: Ray Bradbury, who saved my life, and
Stephen King, who scared the devil right out of me. Twice.

Not much poetry except what I picked up
at school and sermon. The usual suspects:
Carroll, Seuss, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Frost,
The Conference Poet, indifferent footprints in indifferent sand.[11]

I turned tomato when it sang to me
in quiet, recess corners, with all looks askance;
or, more often, hunched and fidget-eyed and tense at a first-row English desk;
it sang to me the same.

I wrote it, too, self-consciously and on the bias.
Wrote stale and stilted, forced, instructive verse,
dishonest for its integrity, its faithfulness to the bright side.
My sense of righteousness made authenticity impossible.
The righteous manage merely doggerel.

This would not do, this would not do, dalmation foot in daschund shoe:[12]
So I pulled a late Hopkins,[13] and went down the rabbit hole.[14]

For ten years I cut my lengthening teeth on
shards of glass, fragments of iron, the promise of heart attacks,

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11. Mary Stevenson, "Footprints in the Sand."
12. Sylvia Plath, "Daddy," lines 1–2.
13. In the "terrible sonnets," written in Dublin during the final years of his life (1884–89), Gerard Manley Hopkins examines the limits of his faith, and reaches the limit of his characteristic enthusiasm as both a manifestation of a faith-oriented optimism and a deep, personal, and charismatic tendency to see God's presence omni-locally.
14. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Chap. 1.

on acid and bile, and my own fillings.
I took a turn in hell to hound the devils and bedevil the hounds.[15]
And it was easy.
Those dark places, the pits of all different colors
of despair and worry and doubt
are easier on the sensibilities than the pools of tranquil light,
than the better truths that speak so well to hearts
but fail to strum the fingers.

We say the dark things are unspeakable,
but speak them nonetheless, prolifically,
our mouths as pouring wounds, our tongues two-edged[16] to bleed them.

We say God is ineffable,
and duly mumble praises into clasped hands and folded sleeves
and into these we parrot and we plead.

Evil can be articulated, but good
evades articulation by hiding away in
the saccharine, the cliché, the musical arts.
You have to dig deeper for it—the silver, the gold.
Find it, brush it clean with the gentled caution of an archaeologist and then
prize it out with the rough-just violence of a dental surgeon.
It resists you all the while.
The light is timorous and strong.
It prefers the shroud of mystery, the distance, the comfort of silence,
the corners of the eye, the traitor's palm.[17]

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15. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, "Canto VI"; John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 11.65; and from Welsh and English mythology, *Cwn Annwn* and the Gabriel, Ratchet, and Yell hounds of the Wild Hunt.

16. Revelation 1:16; see also Isaiah 49:2, Hebrews 4:12, Rev. 2:16, Rev. 19:15, D&C 6:2.

17. With "silver": see Matthew 26:15 and Zechariah 11:12–13.

And so I worked at it, apprentice to the spirit voices in my heart and head.
(This is a list—not comprehensive—of things I wrote about:

Sex
Love
The difference
Desire
Other poets
Death
War
Arab women
Censorship
American women
Jealousy
Abinadi
God
Jesus
Satan
Going bald
Getting fat
Losing sleep
Sensuality
Hurrying up
The days of the week
Albatrosses
Vultures
Weather
Joseph Smith
Prayer
Altars
Sacrifice
Devotion
Doubt
Sin
Repentance
Grace
Pirates
Teeth

Tattyboogles
Fix-it Men)

This is what I learned along the way.

i.
Poetry is not merely verse, nor is it merely not-verse.
It is, rather, an introduction of language to the senses,
a point of access rather than a meaning,
an act of recognition, a precise imprecision,
an opening, and radiant.

ii.
This is why so much verse is not poetry.

iii.
Every poet is a rhythmatist, a taker of pulses,
a diagnostician of dis-ease and joy, of sorrow and exultation,
of despair and hope alike.

iv.
Poetry is a vocation, a drunk-dialing mistress, and fickle.
She requires, among other things,
pith,
presumption,
integrity,
impotence,
zest,
alertness,
facility,
sensibility,
hope,
humility,
and arrogance.

v.
Poets are bards and prophets, yes; but also
wastrels and pickpockets,
orators and clowns.

As often bawds as bards.
As often minstrels.

vi.
Poetry is Nonsense. Conscience. Science. Incense.

vii.
Poems are pearls.[18]

PART II: No man can serve two masters.

> *[T]he [literary] canonicity of the Bible becomes the matrix for the conscious, even programmatic, creation of a secular . . . culture. In the medieval and Renaissance tradition, any transvaluing of biblical texts is played out locally, hedged in by the limits of poetic genre. In the formative European phase of modern . . . literature . . ., the transvaluation is global . . . ; it involves, with the passage of time and for increasing numbers of . . . writers, an impulse to displace entirely the doctrinal canonicity of the Bible with its literary canonicity. . . .*[19]

> *From a doctrinal point of view, this is . . . blasphemy, substituting man for God in the biblical text . . . , but the poet does it without noticeable compunction, for in his sense of the literary canonicity of the Bible, considerations of doctrine are suspended.*[20]

You hazel mote![21] You hazel beam![22]
You cursing, crude, blaspheme machine!

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18. Matthew 13:45–46.
19. Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 50–51.
20. Ibid., 50.
21. Hazel Motes is the protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's *Wiseblood*. Motes, disaffected from the Church but drawn to preaching as a vocation, founds "The Church of Christ without Christ," blaspheming his way to an inexorable invocation of Christ, donning a barbwire cilice, and ultimately practicing a radical form of Catholicism despite himself.
22. Matthew 7:3.

You false and flimsy prophet with your false and flimsy dreams!
Profane the sacred, and
make sacred the profane!
Enshrine the word in magic! Compel a following!
Re-cast the Aleph word as if a foul and primal scream!
He'll, if He laughs, laugh last and long, for
Damn! was first His word and
Hell! was first His word and
Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the Saints! were first His words (and Jesus! first of all).
God! was his, and other words I dare but do not say
except in secret mind (not in that way);
All words were His and are and doubly so
and all words lead us home and you,
your hazel blindness, with your Christless reverie
cannot commit a faithless but a faithful blasphemy.

No man can serve two masters,[23] after all.
No man can serve at all, it seems to me, but used:
no fork-tongued minion, no eunuch-mute,
no blind waiter[24] for things is ever aught
but his.

Consider the portraits of poets:

one sits, a full and flowing text formed at his nib
gazes heavenward, beatific, illuminated, haloed
as a dove of Holy Spirit rays transfigurative
from a window or a corner of the ceiling;

one sits, half-slumped, despondent over work undone,
undoing, paper scattered, often blank, ink-blotted,
and a bottle of some spirit or other open on the desk
as if Jack Daniels were a djin and, rubbed, would grant a poem;

23. Matthew 6:24.
24. Milton again: "Blindness," line 14.

one looks, not gazes, masterful at the portraitist and
therefore at the viewer of the piece, across what time and space
there is between them, and assumes he is the better,
inspirited by his own Gift, Great, Narcissus at the pool.

Each has his weakness, each his gift and graft
But all are poets—revelator, drunkard, self-regarder—
And none can hide by twist or turn or suicide.
To be true to the gift if not the graft is to be true to the Giver-Grafter,
and
He knows them all, and by this shall all men know,
Shall know the righteous from the wicked,
Shall know the wicked from themselves and
The wicked in themselves, and the divine:
The poet, seer and prophet, most of all.

PART III: Monkey: wrench.

> *[T]he words of the biblical texts are willfully wrenched from their original setting and flaunted by the poet in a context that is disparate from, or even antithetical to, the biblical one.*[25]

> *Nevertheless, the imaginative response to the Bible of writers in a wide variety of languages bears witness to a power of canonicity that is not limited to doctrine or strictly contingent on belief in the inspired character of the texts involved.*[26]

> *[E]ndless interpretability rather than absolute truth [is] the principal criterion of the canonical.*[27]

I will not make strained, untenable, or senseless
comparisons between this work and work,
though poetry makes use of metaphors.

25. Alter, 45.
26. Alter, 60–61.
27. Alter, 77.

I will not deny that it is work, for it is not always opium dreams[28]
and givens; does not always come wrapped in a bow;
At times resists, especially faith.

For poetry isn't just
Assigning colors to things:

To say "pink expectation"
(Though the marriage there

Suggests the flush along
The neck and cheekbones

Of a young heart
Looking for its lover).

It isn't just
The parsing of a glimpse

Or feeling into figure,
The making of a shape.

It is the intersect
Of these things and

Of rhythm, the purblind
Consternation of the grammar

Of the mind, the languid,
Seasalt tripping of the tongue

In licking waves
And airborne keening songs.

It is a fallen craft and fierce.

28. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan."

It can be sullied, sure, and warped.

It can be wrested, wrenched, heaved ho and hollowed out,
Made pornographic, violent, and to, no doubt,
a range of other things may bow its head.

But if the gift is gift it will be said
She knows her way around a poem:
Can calibrate the senses like a drum,
Mete salt and cinnamon in pinch and dram,
And whisper all the while in flaming tongues.

For there is more in heaven and on earth, Horatio,
than your pinhead dreams conceive,[29]
are worlds in worlds and grains on grains,
are surplus joys and bounteous pains,
and each one needs a pitch and heart and host.

Consider Iris.[30]

Hale priestess, limber in tendon and synapse,
Loose of tongue and loose of clacking finger,
Unkempt and unkept by will or will,
She clambered down the ditches and the wells
Of human thought, and brought us back the skulls
Of clowns and princes, dense with soil still,
As if the fertile brains of them could linger
Or death were just imagination's lapse.

And then she left, her memory grown faint from feint
And with that memory all sane restraint.

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29. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* I.v.165-67.
30. Iris Murdoch—a writer, theorist, and philosopher—declined in her last years under the onset of Alzheimer's. Her last novel, *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995), which bears the imprint of the progress of her disease more notably than anything else she wrote, is also the most interesting, free as it is of the constraints of thinking within which we all work.

She left a something richer, shorn of cover,
Bare and naked as an angry lover,
Her failing brain and tongue a revelation
Of the black, fragile soil of our condition:
The dilemma that awaits all kings and clowns.
Dear Iris, how we miss your trembling bones.

Dear Iris, how we miss that dark conceit of illness
that stripped you bare, and bare, made you more glorious
in ash and sackcloth evening; and you, in potsherd[31] final days,
were witness to innumerable ways.

Were witness, best, to this: that only life—
troublesome, meddlesome, quarrelsome life—is life,
and only life is word, and word is merely shard and shell
the skin and saint to graze and gall[32]
like God and Gilead.[33]

PART IV: The Incidental Jesus

> *Though the aim of many of the Christians who interpret Christ as the Messiah of a culture is the salvation or reform of that culture rather than the extension of Christ's power, they contribute greatly to the latter by helping men to understand his gospel in their own language, his character by means of their own imagery, and his revelation of God with the aid of their own philosophy.*
>
> *We cannot say, 'Either Christ or culture,' because we are dealing with God in both cases. We must not say, 'Both Christ and culture,' as though there were no great distinc-*

31. Job 2:8.
32. Acts 8:23 and Alma 36:18. In these verses, "gall" refers to "bile" or "poison," but the word is also synonymous with "bark" or "scrape," and thus conveys the sense of a painful wound. (See also "potsherd" above.)
33. Jeremiah 8:22.
34. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 103.

> *tion between them; but we must say, 'Both Christ and culture,' in full awareness of the dual nature of our law, our end, and our situation.*[35]

Some say he's fled the scene, our Yahweh god, our cow crib Lord and Savior,
gone off to ground or seed, gone off to exile on some pleasant beach to pout,
or to some bee-loud,[36] puttering place he tailor-made for his retirement.

Some say he never was, and what we have are remnants of blood-and-bone-old
and begetting need to track and trace our origins, to gloss our fretful lives.

I say He's there. He's ever there in archetype and myth.
Scrape away the vanity and whimsy of the Greeks and there,
the Sun God, Godson, bearded, blessèd Christ is hid beneath
Apollo's youthful face, and on the Aztec stone, and in the folds
of Buddha's flower and in that roughshod daddy dance of poems.[37]

The achtung[38] shout, the water-whisper:
both are His; and yes, the mighty wind
and the still small alike [39]
for He's a wild and wounded word
and for endowment knows the will and way of all
the cripple-scratch and low-lurk sons and daughters of the Fall.

He's there.
He's ever there.

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35. Ibid., 122.
36. William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," line 4.
37. Theodore Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz."
38. Again, Plath's "Daddy."
39. 1 Kings 19:11–13.

In churches that forsake or bracket or deny Him He's the hinge
and oil. That much we can surmise: the oil, the blessing,
consecrating Christ.

He's there in fumbling darkness and in horror, gain and loss.
He's in the prize and cost.

He's in the slave-built pantheon to lusting gods of seasons and of stars.
He's in blood-bought cathedrals not built to honor Him.
In notes of pain and praise He is, in brush-strokes right and raw.
He is in written word and spoken, word-possessing Word,
in ring of bell and chisel in places flung and far,
in Florida and Florence he is there.

I stand at the feet of the David
I stand at the feet of the David
I stand at the feet of the David
I stand at the feet of that Greek-limbed youth
Lovely of feature and form[40]
Earnest of gaze
Whose ill-proportioned hands—God's hands
Drop from his shoulder
Hang slack and ready about his thigh
The first things to grow to manliness, I guess
As they prepare to throw that fatal stone
And silence mocking millions

He has never killed a man
Has never killed a symbol or a sign
Just a bear and a lion on a rocky slope
Somewhere above the city that awaits his blessing and his name

Buonarroti[41] imagines him

40. Hopkins, "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw flame." lines 13–14.
41. Michelangelo.

Mid-transformation
A youth regenerate
Starting with that loose right hand
God's hand that holds the stone
God's hand that fits it to the sling
God's hand that hurtles it
To pound Goliath's glaring flesh
Hands heavy now because
Goliath was God's son, too
And God's instrument

God's lyric hands at play
To soothe the troubled tempers of the king
God's heavy hands about the thigh
Because God's hands defiled by
Adulterer and liar
Instructing other hands to slay Uriah
Who was God's son, too
But not God's instrument
And later, hands that hollowed out Bathsheba's bed
That carved her body like two tongues of flame[42]
And shadowed her with Trojan subterfuge
And did her violence, too
Would lift to Heaven in grief
So heavy, oh, so heavy, oh
Absalom! O, Absalom, my son[43]
My Son! O, David! Samuel! God
Those hands are heavy with it all
But here rest loose and ill-proportioned
Dropping from the shoulder
Against the thigh of a Greek-limbed youth
Lovely of feature and form
Cradling a fatal sling and stone
As I stand at the feet of the David

42. Acts 2:3.
43. 2 Samuel 18:33.

He's here. He's the infection of a feeling for every thing, every one.
He's in ten thousand places, our Kingfisher Christ,
and playing,[44] virtuous.

PART V: What price, poetry?

> *[D]istinguish liturgies as rituals of ultimate concern: rituals that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life . . . . [E]xpanding our conception of what counts as "worship" is precisely the point.*[45]

> *Athletes, musicians, writers, gardeners and lovers all attest to the experience the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow"–the times when our work and play so absorbs and attunes our energies that we lose track of time. For a little while time seems to both expand and contract, becoming spacious rather than constricting, making room for our creativity and activity, and we lose the self-consciousness that wraps itself around most of our waking hours, even as we become fully awake and alert to the possibilities of what lies in front of us.*[46]

And if he plays in us, Creator Christ, moves in us as feast,[47]
what price, then, poetry? What's altar-bound, at least?

It's not all cheese and crackers,

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44. Hopkins, "As kingfishers," line 12.
45. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 86–87.
46. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 267.
47. The phrase "moveable feast" is owed most recently to Hemingway's eponymous novel, and in his sense suggests a rather Wordsworthian (as in "Lines") notion of a memory that nourishes; it originated, however, in Christian usage for a feast day whose date changes yearly because it must fall on a specific day or days of the week, like Easter.

nor laurels and sweet wine.[48]
Sometimes it's coalfire-burning lips[49] and tongues,
weeping and wailing and gnashing of knees.[50]
It's not all torch and temple,[51] nor moments sacrosanct.
Sometimes it's begging on the steps or poolside,[52]
sometimes transfiguration, and sometimes Pentecost.
In any case, *je me présente à l'altare*, *au bureau de change*,
Al cambio. Che cambio, *io*? *Das ist mein wort und wert*,
Das ist, *mm zain*, *mein sein*,[53] a sign I do not seek
that comes unbidden, searing making shattering,
potent from behind a thousand veils
and I am followed by, harrowed by, the sins of the world,
defiling a temple and shining a light on the defilement
on the danger on the dirt floor of the decrepit cabin in the hollow wood.
A poet lives with cockroaches and rats as often as with angels
and there are angels among us, even as there are cockroaches and rats
and perhaps these aren't exclusive categories.
That, too, is poetry.

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48. Found in Acts 2:13, among other places, the phrase "sweet wine" is used to mock the apostles at Pentecost, suggesting a state of drunkenness. I note that the word for "prophet" is, in Hebrew, very close to the word for "raver," so there may be something to the allegation. However, sweet wine—*tiyrosh* in Hebrew—means "new," and therefore non-alcoholic, wine, but it can also refer by association to the outpouring of God's Spirit.
49. Isaiah 6:7.
50. Matthew 13:42.
51. Genesis 15:17.
52. In John 5:1–14, the lame man waits at the pool in Bethesda in search of a miracle and receives healing from Jesus.
53. French, Italian, German, Arabic, and German, respectively: "I present myself at the altar, at the currency exchange,/At the exchange. What do I change? This is my word and worth,/This is, it is so, my being . . . ." The translation of "*mm zain*" from Arabic is difficult, as there is no direct equivalent. It is heavily idiomatic, and can be used for "okay," "no worries," "it's cool," and a host of other related expressions. I use it here because it works lyrically and suggests casual and therefore familiar assent.

Poetry is prophecy, sometimes.

And what is prophecy but funneled Word?
A narrow, sedimenting stream? A drought of possibilities?
What is poetry but prophecy gone slack, pricked, and let?
Blown back at God like kisses or like curse?
A ruminant verse in verse
that shakes the gleam and wink of what is golden
and opens the unopenable dark?
What is music but poetry given its head
and room to breathe and groove, inflected
With paroxysms of color, dressed in murmuring?
dressed in murmuring and praise?
dressed in praise and prayer?

What price, then, poetry? What pay, you paltry thing?[54]
Savior, silver, psalms, and sighs, and flash-burn offerings.

Benediction

O, May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish for us the work of our hands,[55]
establish us the work of His hands.
O, for a muse of fire[56] and the wish of my heart:[57]
That all people were poet enough to love the word
as I have come to love it—wistful, besotted, harrowed
and given to it as to covenant or virtue received and treasured like a gift,
a gift horse with a broken jaw that runs, when it runs, like fire

54. From Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium": "An aged man is but a paltry thing,/A tattered coat upon a stick" (lines 7–8). The line in Yeats is in turn evocative of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men": "Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves/In a field" (lines 33–34).
55. Psalms 90:17.
56. William Shakespeare, *Henry V* I.Prologue.1–2.
57. Alma 29:1.
58. D&C 13:1, but also and especially 2 Cor. 5:21, one of the subtlest and most beautiful paradoxes in scripture.

and sings, when it sings, like an offering made in righteousness,[58]
crackling and sighing in foundry and flame.

Oh for a symbolic and a contrite act
that could break the wall and bridge the crack and doom,
forestall the Judge and clear the empty room.

What price, then, poetry?
It's a cliché, but sometimes it writes you,
makes creates you,
flings matter into null and void,
fills in the cracks and creases
heads down, palms up for blessing and for sup
but that, too, comes at cost.

What price, then, poetry? What its cost?
Though much is gained by it, what, too, is lost?
The same as any other gift or gain:
a friendship here and there, some naïve trust,
perhaps, or moments meant for other lusts.
And self, yes, self, is also altar-bound,
broke, blown and burned and bled upon the ground;
but, overthrown, made also rise and stand
then ravished[59] by the Better Maker's[60] steady, sudden hand.[61]

59. Again, Donne's "Holy Sonnet XIV," lines 1-3 and 14.
60. This expression, from the Italian "*il miglior fabbro*," originates with Dante's praise of Arnaut Daniel de Riberac, the Provençal poet (*Purgatorio* XXVI.117). It is repeated in the dedication of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, a multi-layered allusion indeed, as Pound was also fond of Arnaut Daniel's poetry.
61. While there is no explicit allusion here, I have in mind Blake's companion poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," especially the latter.