Approaching Poetry

What is the point of analysing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything the more interesting it becomes: listening to music or looking at paintings with someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see – or what we’re reading – is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure. That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it. But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another: why, for example, did the poet choose to write a sonnet rather than an ode, a ballad, or a villanelle? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time. In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice. Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.

Read and compare the two versions of William Blake’s ‘Tyger’ printed below. The one on the left is a draft, the other is the final published version.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
[Could] [Dare] frame thy fearful symmetry?

[In what] [Burnt in] distant deeps or skies
[Burnt the] [The cruel] fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder & what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat
What dread hand & what dread feet

[Could fetch it from the furnace deep
And in the/thy horrid ribs dare steep
In the well of sanguine woe?
In what clay and in what mould
Were thy eyes of fury roll’d?]

In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What [the arm]
[arm][grasp] [clasp] dread grasp?
[Could] Dare its deadly terrors [clasp]
[grasp] clasp?

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What Immortal hand [or] & eye
Dare [form] frame thy fearful symmetry?

Tiger, tiger burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? And what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The most obvious difference between the two is that stanza 4 of the draft does not survive in the published version, and an entirely new stanza, ‘When the stars throw down their spears’, appears in the finished poem. Significantly this introduces the idea of ‘the Lamb’, a dramatic contrast to the tiger, as well as the idea of a ‘he’ who made the lamb. One similarity between draft and final version is that each is made up entirely of unanswered questions. But if you look at the manuscript stanza 5, you can see revisions from ‘What’ to ‘Where’, and the struggle with the third line, where Blake eventually decided that the idea of an arm was redundant, subsumed in the notions of grasping and clasping. The two