Any optimism that Blake might have imbibed from the effervescence of thinking and writing by himself and others that was prompted by news of the French Revolution was shortly to be dealt a devastating blow. His enthusiasm is said to have come to an abrupt end at the time of the September massacres in 1792, when he tore off his revolutionary cockade and never wore it again.

It is to this event, the disappointing sequel – at least in political terms – to the intellectual ferment that had been brewing over the previous few years, that the increasing bitterness of his writings around 1793 may be due. Blake could not renege on the excitement and enthusiasm he had felt during the previous years; he was forced to admit, on the other hand, that his fellow-citizens showed few signs of allowing themselves to be possessed by new ideals in the shaping of their society. On the contrary, since they remained largely under the control of those who wished to manipulate them, the future looked bleak. Early in 1795 his friend George Cumberland wrote of fears that England would soon be living under an absolute government or be plunged into a civil war. Neither prospect would be inviting to Blake: either would intensify the imprisonment from which his fellows seemed powerless to escape.

The most notable link between public events and his private life that Blake made during the subsequent period was in his letter to Flaxman of September 1800, where, as will be recalled, he mentioned the ‘dark horrors’ of the American War and continued,

... Then the French Revolution commenc’d in thick clouds
And My Angels have told me that seeing such visions I could not subsist on the Earth,
But by my conjunction with Flaxman, who knows to forgive
Nervous Fear.
Despite his disenchantment, the events in France had in certain respects affected his attitude to the world permanently. As we have seen, the man who published the *Poetical Sketches* in 1778 had shown little or no sign of dissent from the political views regarded as orthodox in the England of his time. Towards the end of the century, however, events had been taking place that were likely to imprint themselves lastingly on his memory: apart from the Gordon Riots, when his involuntary position at the front of the mob had enabled him to see at first hand the storming of Newgate jail and the release of hundreds of prisoners, he must have been affected by the burning in March 1791 of the Albion Flour Mills near Blackfriars Bridge. The destruction of these huge, steam-powered mills, which had opened only a few years before and already achieved considerable fame as a tourist attraction, had a momentous impact in the city: Horace Walpole recorded that, apart from the hundred thousand pounds’ worth of damage caused, the Palace Yard and part of St James’s Park were left covered with half-burnt grains. It was to be recalled some years later by Coleridge, who had then been still at school. Although Blake left no record, it is inconceivable that he did not know of it – nor, indeed, that he could have failed to make a connection with his own, already invoked, figure of Albion. Given such public events about him, it is not surprising that their impact should have been reflected in notes of an intensified realism.

Perhaps, also, the effect of painting Innocence in such vivid colours was to invoke – almost automatically, in so spirited a man – a complementary sense of ways in which children responded to the forces of oppression from their earliest years by subtly growing into practices of deceit and submitting themselves to secret, self-enclosed pleasures. And as the idea grew of following the *Songs of Innocence* with a contrasting *Songs of Experience*, based on this alternative, more cynical vision, Blake’s movement towards such a collection must have gained impetus from his disillusioned reaction to the current political situation. With the two concepts brought together to form a fuller sequence, moreover, their linking helped to fulfil Blake’s insistence that contraries needed to be in tension with one another. ‘Innocence dwells with Wisdom,’ he wrote, ‘but never with Ignorance’; and again, ‘Unorganizd Innocence, All Impossibility’.

In the preceding years, around 1794, his poetic and literary powers were at their peak. The quality of his writing at this time becomes all the clearer when one looks at the notebook drafts and sees the processes by which he reached his final versions: the ruthless parings and bendings into place are undeniably improvements. In ‘The Tyger’, for instance,