

The prints of Georges Rouault

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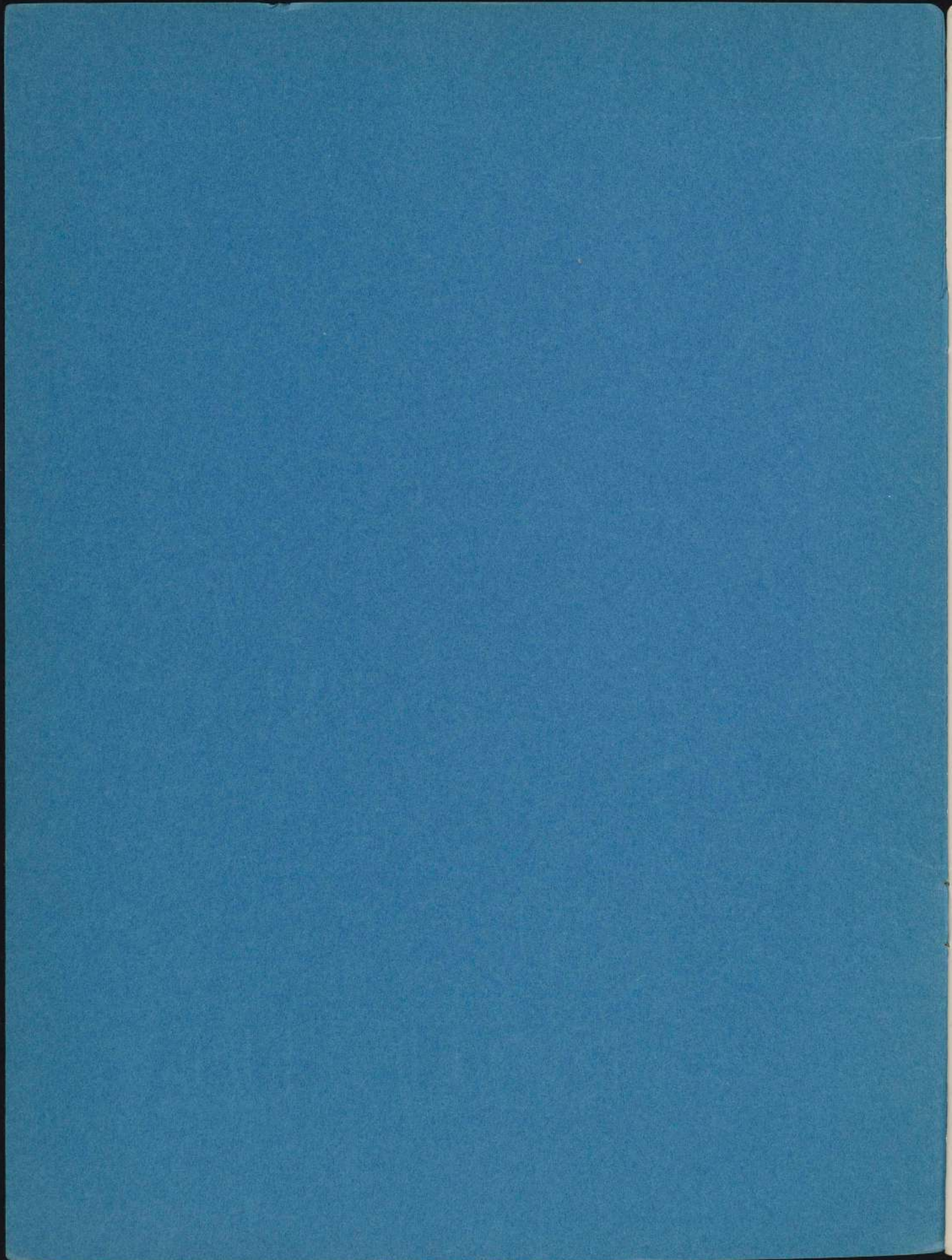
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THE
PRINTS
OF
GEORGES
ROUAULT



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**THE PRINTS OF
GEORGES ROUAULT**

MONROE WHEELER

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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THE PRINTS OF GEORGES ROUAULT

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The illustrations on the cover and title page are etchings from *Miserere et Guerre*.

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M. W.

FOREWORD

In one way, at least, Rouault stands alone: no other contemporary painter has devoted so much time to the making of prints as he. In the last twenty-five years, Georges Rouault has made scores of lithographs, hundreds of etchings, both in color and black and white, and many hundreds of drawings for wood-engravings. His prints are all the work of his mature years — he did not turn his attention to them until he was forty — and they are in many ways as remarkable as his canvases; some of his critics believe more so. In any case, they provide an opportunity to observe many phases of his talent; the most recent color



Photograph by Pierre Matisse, 1936

etchings, for example, reveal the brilliant late palette which appears in canvases painted during the same period, most of which have not yet left his studio. Thanks to the artist and his publisher, Ambroise Vollard, the present showing includes many prints from work in progress which have never before been exhibited.

Rouault is what is now called an expressionist — that is, a lyrical painter of inward vision and introspective drama. Therefore, by way of introduction to his work, it seems best to offer a brief account of his life — a life full of a strange disquiet, a desperate search for a means of expression more philosophic and more mystical than is usual in modern art. His beloved friend and teacher, Gustave Moreau, was a mythological painter and Rouault has dreamed of and striven to portray the personages of a twentieth century mythology. Rouault's writings are full of allusions to music, theology and classic poetry — one finds in them scarcely a reference to modern history, or class injustice or the ghastly alternatives of European war and peace. Yet paintings and prints prove clearly that in these very themes he has found the material of

poetry which he has sought ever since his student years with Moreau. It is a point worth insisting upon in these days when critics and public complain of the irrelevance and social insignificance of the modern French school.

In Rouault's graphic work we see this aspect of his art even more clearly than in the occasional exhibition of his paintings. Here is a particularly eloquent and uncompromising expression of the attitude of a great-hearted modern man toward the victims of civilization and toward its warlords and overlords. *Misere et Guerre* (Cover; title-page; plates 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15), with an altogether different pictorial rhetoric, is our own *Disasters of War*, the portrait of disaster in our period and our world: not the cruelty, atrocity and destitution which the camera has made very familiar, but, instead, spiritual catastrophe: human pride and humiliation, self-pity and a rather morbid longing for an unknown God.

In the following sketch, the quotations from Rouault's own writings and conversation are taken from the admirable studies of Charensol, Salmon, Puy and Chabot and the comment of the celebrated Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain. The serious student should read them in the original texts; they are all listed in the excellent Rouault Bibliography to be found in René Huyghe's *Histoire de l'Art Contemporain: La Peinture*, Paris, 1935.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Georges Rouault was born during the last French Revolution, known as the Commune. In the spring of 1871 the invading German army withdrew; an extreme rev-

olutionary government established itself in Paris (with Courbet as Director of Fine Arts). Paris was promptly besieged by the Versailles government. By May it was evident that the Commune could not last, and its enthusiasts began to express their desperate disappointment; they tore down the Vendôme Column, and mined and blew up the Tuileries Palace. On May 27th a stray shell struck the Rouault house in the Belleville quarter; the young expectant mother was thrown out of bed; the family moved her down into the cellar, and there she gave birth to the son who was to become a tragic painter. (The next day the forces of law and order triumphed. Courbet was sentenced to re-erect the Vendôme Column at his own expense; his inability to do so drove him into exile, and even compromised for many years his reputation as a painter.)

Surely it is romantic to suppose that public alarms and troubles at the time a man is born have any great effect upon his sensibility and intellect. But Rouault's birth at such a fateful moment in the history of modern France reminds us that he is not the kind of Frenchman whom foreigners think of as typically French. He is not a Frenchman of security, moderation and logic. He is a spiritual explorer, a mystic fighter — like Villon, Pascal and Rimbaud.

Rouault's mother was a Parisian. Her father collected prints — even those of Daumier and Manet — and fervently wished his grandson to be a painter. In early childhood Rouault began to draw. But when he was fourteen, his father, a Breton cabinet-maker employed in the Pleyel piano-factory, apprenticed him to a maker of stained glass for fifty centimes a week. Though Rouault regarded this as

drudgery, his later life-work testifies to his love of the sumptuous bits of 12th and 13th century windows brought to the studio to be mended: almost all of his paintings have the same medieval blood-reds and nocturnal blues, and the heavy framework of drawing in them is like the ribbons of lead which hold the ancient glass together.

When his employer sent him on errands, he went on foot and kept his bus fare to buy paints; however, lest he be reproached for wasting his employer's time, he would run along beside the bus. For his ambition to be a painter did not abate. Having worked twelve hours, he would walk in the evening from his mother's house to the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs at the other end of Paris to draw from the antique and from life. On Sunday he would go to the Louvre, or spend the day in front of a mirror making sketches of his own nose or mouth, thousands of them, by his own account. "When art was for me the Promised Land (and until death it always will be) Forain aroused in the child I then was, with a black and white drawing, a gleam, an inward perception of a rare thing . . . which, after the chore of 'drawing well' in my evening class, gave me hope. If I was happy, it was that I felt in myself an infinite echo of this word, or that gesture, or the attitude of a passer-by. I lacked means of expression; I was ignorant; but I was aware of a welling-up within myself."

When he was eighteen his vocation could no longer be denied. The stained-glass maker offered to raise his wages, but he enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where Gustave Moreau was his teacher.

For many years the reputation of Gustave Moreau has been at a very low ebb.

Cézanne lost his temper whenever a good word was said for him; the malevolent Degas made fun of him; and their followers have ignored him entirely. But in his own day Moreau had a certain prestige. Those who mistrusted his free, forward-looking instruction respected his painting, so nearly anecdotal and academic; and those who had no taste for what Degas called "gods wearing watch-chains" loved him for his liberal professorship. His kind heart and great classic culture kept him without prejudice. He not only bravely endorsed his students' search for the pictorial idiom of the future, but as a somewhat academic artist he was able to exercise some influence to their advantage upon certain officials of the fine arts administration and upon certain collectors.

Rouault was his favorite pupil, and in due time Rouault had the honor of Moreau's personal friendship. The thoughtful old man understood the impassioned and melancholy youth and clearly foresaw and dreaded his difficult future. He knew and said that Rouault could do nothing but continue to serve his own vision, his own intensity, and his love of strange effects in color and texture; that he would doubtless work in an increasing solitude, without appreciation and without prosperity. Against the judgment of the other professors Moreau encouraged Rouault to compete several times for the Prix de Rome: to no avail, although in 1894 Rouault was awarded the Prix Chevenard.

In 1897 Moreau died. Rouault has never ceased to mourn him. It was more than a matter of personal love and loneliness: he had lost the man who would and could say a good word for his art, and who, as it

developed, might have assisted the many to understand it and encouraged the few to want and buy it.

At the same time Rouault lost a dear brother-in-law, and his parents went to live in Algeria with his sister. There began for him a period of indescribable solitude and sorrow during which Moreau's words, "each of us must suffer and learn for himself," were his only consolation. He underwent a violent moral crisis and experienced "what cannot be explained by words. . . . If there is bitterness in my art, it is doubtless due to this period of my existence. It was then that I understood Cézanne's words, 'C'est effrayant, la vie!'"

His success at the Beaux-Arts and the influence of Moreau's friends had opened his way to a successful academic career, but his inner anguish unfitted him for conformity of any kind. "I started to make pictures of an outrageous lyricism that disconcerted everyone . . . but it was not the influence of de Lautrec or Degas or the moderns which inspired me to do them, but an inner need, and the desire, perhaps unconscious, not to fall into the rut of conventional religious painting. For years I wondered how I had been able to live. Everyone deserted me, despite polite protestations. People even wrote me insulting letters. It was the moment to remember the words of my master: 'Thank heaven for not having success, at least not until as late as possible. Then you will be permitted to reveal yourself utterly and without constraint.'" When Moreau died, he bequeathed to the City of Paris his home and some 6500 of his own paintings and drawings for a museum. Not long after, Rouault, as the favorite pupil, was made curator of the

Museum, at a salary of about \$400 a year — a position he holds to this day. Once a week, in the house near the Gare St. Lazare, he receives Moreau's admirers in an office hung with his master's copies of Correggio.

But his new position did not dispel his melancholy and the "bitterness" continued for years without much change. By the time he had begun to suffer less boyishly, and to live less miserably, his habit of mind had been formed; and his heart was full enough of bitter subject-matter for an entire life-work. "The emotions of those long tragic years were stored up in me. A sort of outburst then occurred, and I began to paint with frenzy" — a frenzy that has endured ever since, slowing gradually in tempo but never stilled.

His family returned from North Africa. He fell ill and expected to die, but he still thought only of painting. He went to Evian, recovered and returned to Paris. At that time his religious experience grew more passionate. Rouault knew well the novelist Huysmans, the man whom Moreau had influenced most obviously, a stylist and sensationalist who became a devout Christian, and Rouault thought seriously of taking monastic vows. (His friend Suarès has frequently referred to him as "the monk of modern art.") Another of his Catholic friends was Léon Bloy, a minor writer famous for his irremediable poverty and frightening anger.

Rouault, too, is an angry man: "I am bold, but I have the timidity and stupid angers of a child." With rage and yet with almost hysterical sadness he avenges himself on his contemporaries for their indifference to his work. It is a typical contemporary trouble — this esthetic warfare between the omnipotent public and the

artist, who, though helpless and always in apparent retreat, still has the last word. A given work of art fails: the artist represents the stupidity of the public and from his resentment quite frequently derives the emotional context of his next work: horror, hatred or bravado. It may be that what he considers his lack of worldly success is the chief cause of the unremitting sadness in Rouault's work; certainly that sadness has, more than anything else, militated against his finding popular favor. He had, thanks to Moreau, a good start. He attracted attention as a student, was awarded a medal, received a prize. He knew Moreau's friends and admirers. He says himself that he might have been successful. But evidently the prospect of success, arousing in him an irritable longing, inspired, also, an infinite disgust.

In 1902 Rouault helped to found the Salon d'Automne, and more or less regularly exhibited there, or with the Fauves or the Indépendents; but he was never a member of any group or coterie. He married, he had four children — and he painted. In 1910 he had a one-man show at the Galerie Druet; but little came of it. It was not until 1924, the year of his first important exhibition, also at the Galerie Druet, that a museum bought a picture — the Musée de Grenoble. At that time he was also awarded the Legion of Honor, presumably not so much because of his contribution to modern painting as for his years of faithful service as curator of the Musée Gustave Moreau. "One passes one's life," he has written, "imperfectly deciphering humanity and nature in a spirit of humility and love. How can that be told to the lazy young kings of art? Scarcely are they born, and we are expected to proclaim their transcendent

genius which, in two or three years, will already be dying."

BOOKS AND PRINTS

Shortly before the war, Rouault, despairing of winning success through exhibitions of his paintings, contracted to sell a large part of his artistic production to Ambroise Vollard, whose clairvoyant speculation in Cézanne and Renoir had made him one of the most powerful art merchants of the period. Some years before, Vollard had begun to engage a few of the most eminent modern artists to make special portfolios of prints, and also to illustrate with original prints costly books to be published by himself¹; it was not long before he set Rouault also at this work.

Rouault had already begun, in 1910, to experiment with monotypes, a favorite technique of Degas, and had published privately a color lithograph, *Les Chevaux*. During the war he began his first two assignments for Vollard: etchings and wood-engravings for the publisher-dealer's own work, *Réincarnations du Père Ubu* (plates 10, 11), and the series of fifty-seven gigantic etchings entitled *Miserere et Guerre* which, although based on a text of André Suarès, were obviously made for wall display.

Meanwhile he devoted more and more time to literary composition of an obscure, rhapsodic and prophetic kind, which he illustrated with lithographs (*Souvenirs Intimes*, *Paysages Légendaires*), and with color etchings and wood-engravings (*Le Cirque de l'Etoile Filante*) (plate 7). He made many superb color etchings and wood-engravings for two other texts of his friend Suarès,

¹ See *Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators*, The Museum of Modern Art, 1936.

Le Cirque and *Passion* (plate 2). Some of this work has been published; and some, with Vollard's characteristic perfectionism and caprice, has been promised from month to month for many years. For example, Rouault finished the *Misere et Guerre* etchings in 1927, but they have not yet been issued.

Rouault has also worked for other publishers, as our check-list shows, but had it not been for the vast means and fanatical perseverance of Vollard — and, it might be added, a degree of servitude on the part of the artist — the several great series of etchings, which constitute one of the most audacious and laborious technical undertakings in the entire history of the graphic arts, might never have been made.

As to the texts he has illustrated, Rouault has, for the most part, restricted himself to those for which his own previous paintings might almost have served as illustrations. The prints, like the canvases, are portraits, real and imaginary: circus people, judges, prostitutes. He has also done landscapes (plate 5) and female nudes who might inhabit an imaginary Tahiti (plate 4). But throughout his work there is one recurrent theme: a great creature, at once superhuman and subhuman, sitting and staring as though enthroned in pompous evil. In the infinite dejection common to all, in their look of fatality, his various types overlap: the ruler has prostituted himself; the prostitute bizarrely rules; the clown weeps and the *Salvator Mundi* appears as lowly as any beggar. For forty years he has kept returning to the same sort of solitary figure: mask, bust, half-length or full-length: the daughterless King Lear, the mute paranoiac Pagliacci — or the unfor-

gettable true portraits of himself, Moreau, Verlaine (plate 16) and Baudelaire (plate 17). His writings show that he has not been easy in his own mind about this persistent preoccupation; not happy like Matisse; not arbitrary or arrogant like Picasso. A greater humanity, a more original personal trouble, has loomed over him, overshadowing every print and painting like a thunder-cloud. He has said: "Human greatness is the negation of what we generally think of as great and admirable."

Moreau is no doubt to be credited with some of this discontent. Through him, Rouault came in touch with an older tradition of pictorial art than that which progressed from the Barbizon nature-painters to present-day abstraction — the tradition of the mystical, the poetic, the mythological. His literary work, written in an enigmatic style derived from Rimbaud, reveals his interest in a kind of apocalyptic philosophy and his preoccupation with Greek mythology. Rouault is too proud and too modern to attempt the solution of his problem through a shortcut, as his master did: with gods and goddesses and cabalistic jewels. In his beautiful series of faces and figures there is a wild earnestness, an unexplained excitement, a mood of Dostoevsky — just as in Moreau there was a mood of Flaubert. There is a recollection of negro sculpture and of the medieval windows he saw as an apprentice. There is the influence of Daumier — which Rouault never admits. And, seen at its best in the color etchings, there is the gem-like palette of Moreau.

Emotion fiercely personal has given this art its great originality; it is as unique as the intellect and feeling which have produced it. Rouault's failure to

"express himself" entirely has given him humility; his implacable quarrel with the public has given him ferocity. His cult of Christ has endowed him with endless patience and all-embracing compassion. In a letter to Suarès, he wrote: "I believe in suffering; with me it is not feigned; that is my only merit."

TECHNIQUE

When asked how he made his etchings, Rouault is said to have replied, "They give me a copper plate, and I just dig into it." It will be seen that "etching" is but a secondary process in the prints he so designates. In his paintings he combined oil, tempera, gouache, pastel, water-color and India ink in an infinite variety of ways; when he turned to print-making he showed the same copious ingenuity and disrespect for all conventions. Nothing could possibly be more baffling to the amateur of prints than to define the means by which, for example, the *Misere et Guerre* series was executed.

First his preliminary drawing is reproduced on the copper plate by the photo-mechanical process of heliogravure. He then uses almost every instrument known to the engraver, and every acid known to the etcher in order to render to his satisfaction the tones and values of his unique images. He engraves with a burin; he shades with a roulette, a rasp and often with emery paper. Sometimes he applies the acid directly to the copper with the aid of a brush, without any covering of wax, to produce those famous blacks of varying intensity or to get the smooth or granular surfaces which please him. In

short, he uses nearly every technique save that of aquatint, which the final result often resembles.

In the complicated color etchings for *Le Cirque de l'Etoile Filante* and *Passion*, the process is the same, but, many plates being required, he employs expert assistants with whom he collaborates closely: he uses them like extra implements.

The lithographs are not made with crayon alone. He makes his first sketch upon the stone with brush in lithotint (plate 1). Afterward, with the crayon, he shades his blacks and grays as usual, but he also uses a scraper and emery paper. He occasionally makes transfer-lithographs also, as in the case of his extraordinary self-portrait.

Wood-engraving is one métier which Rouault did not attempt to master; when they were required he undertook to collaborate with Aubert, perhaps the most skillful technician of our time, who also made Picasso's wood-engravings for Balzac's *Le Chef-d'Oeuvre Inconnu*. After many years of new starts and revisions during which Rouault has studied and corrected every proof, they have produced several hundred blocks for the books whose titles are given in the following list — block as brilliant in their way as the lithographs and etchings. For although there have been many masters of black and white, it may be said that there has never been so great a master of black alone. I can think of no other artist who has obtained variations so like color, so liquid and so luminous that certain of these great etchings achieve the effect of black and white reproductions of oil-paintings.

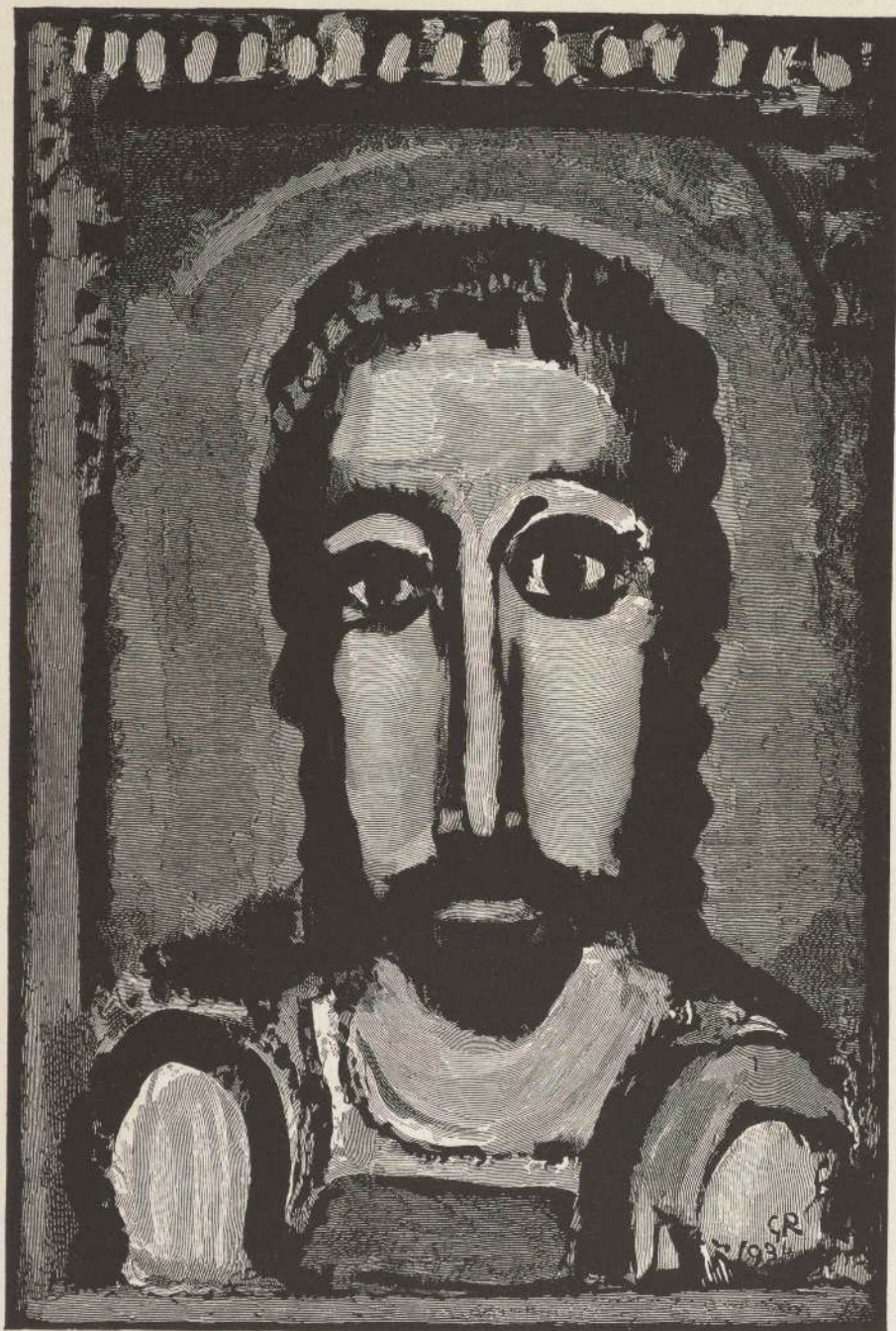
CHRONOLOGICAL CHECK-LIST OF PRINTS AND BOOKS

The dating of Rouault's prints is impossible to establish with entire exactitude for it has been his practice to commence a great many of them at one time and finish them gradually. He himself, in certain instances, is unable to remember the dates. We are indebted to his daughter, Miss Isabelle Rouault, for the following approximate list.

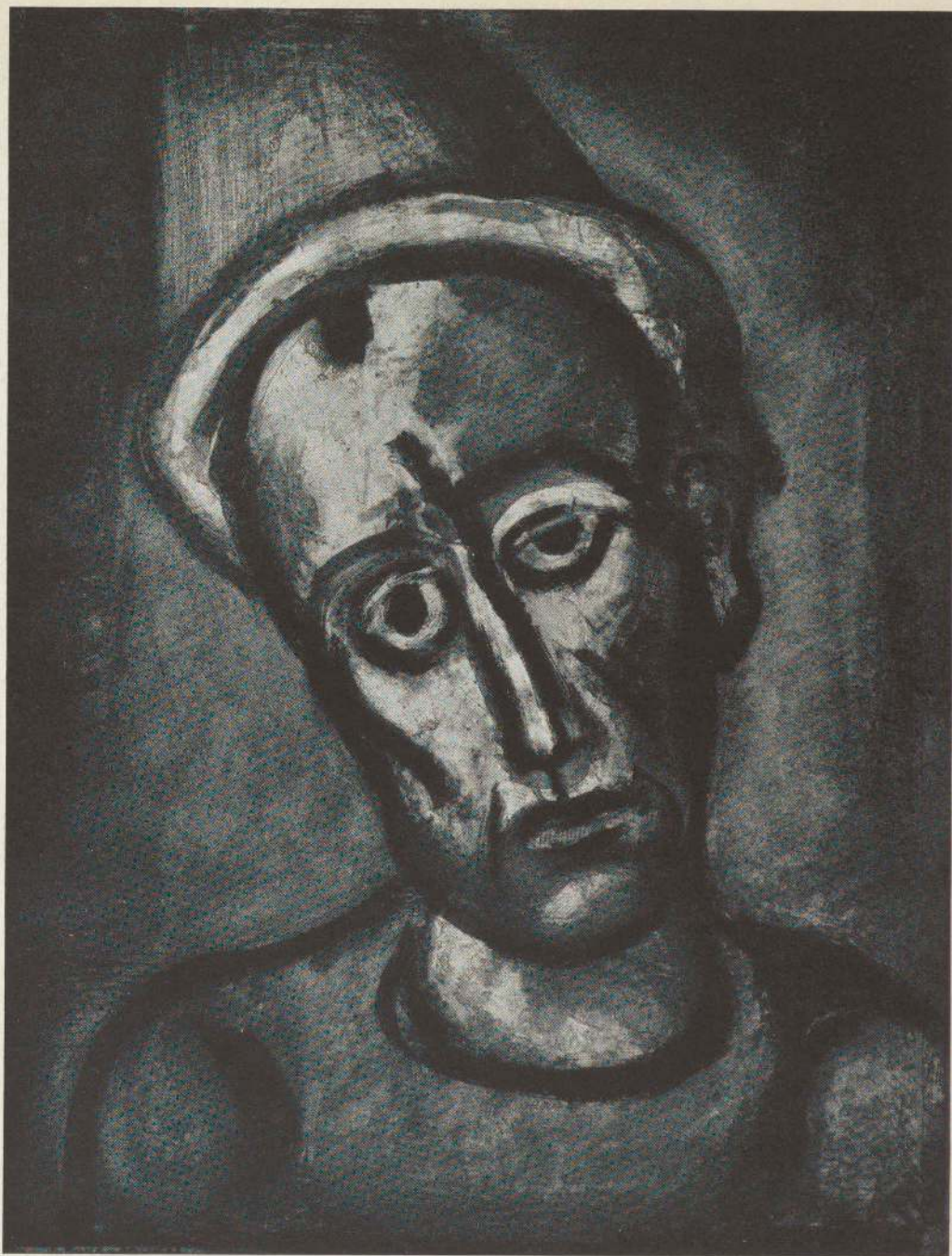
- 1 Les Chevaux. Color lithograph. Privately issued by the artist through Clot, Paris, N.D.
 - 2 Church, Henri. Les Clowns. 3 drawings. Aux Deux Amis, Paris, 1923.
 - 3 Rouault, Georges. Souvenirs Intimes. 1st edition: portrait lithographs of Moreau, Huysmans, Bloy, Suarès and Rouault. 2nd edition: lithograph of Baudelaire. Frapier, Paris, 1927.
 - 4 Groteques, Pitrieries, Plutocratie, Saltimbanques (variously called). Proposed series lithographs never completed, although early states were issued. Frapier, Paris, 1924-1927.
 - 5 Maritain, Jacques. Maitres et Petits-Maitres: Georges Rouault. 4 lithographs. "Editions Polyglotte." Frapier, Paris, 1926.
 - 6 Les Peintres-Lithographes de Manet à Matisse. Album. 2 lithographs by Rouault (Christ-en-Croix [1925], Pieta). Frapier, Paris, N.D.
 - 7 Rouault, Georges. Paysages Légendaires. 6 lithographs, 51 drawings. Porteret, Paris, 1929.
 - 8 Petite Banlieue. Series of 6 lithographs. 100 sets, of which 2 were hand-colored by the artist. Quatre Chemins, Paris, 1929.
 - 9 Self-portrait. Black and white lithograph. Quatre Chemins, Paris, 1929.
 - 10 Self-portrait. Color lithograph. Quatre Chemins, Paris, 1929.
 - 11 Arland, Marcel. L'Ordre. 1 color facsimile. Editions de la N.R.F., Paris, 1930.
 - 12 Arland, Marcel. Les Carnets de Gilbert. 1 lithograph, 8 facsimiles of gouaches (5 in color, 3 in sepia). Editions de la N.R.F., Paris, 1931.
 - 13 Vollard, Ambroise. Réincarnations du Père Ubu. 22 etchings, 102 wood-engravings by Aubert, after Rouault. Vollard, Paris, 1933.
- UNPUBLISHED
- 14 Suarès, André. Miserere et Guerre. 57 large etchings. (Completed by Rouault between 1915 and 1927.) Vollard.
 - 15 Rouault, Georges. Le Cirque de l'Etoile Filante. 17 color etchings, 82 wood-engravings. (Completed by Rouault in 1935.) Vollard.
 - 16 Suarès, André. Le Cirque. 7 color etchings, 26 wood-engravings. Vollard.
 - 17 Suarès, André. Passion. 17 color etchings, 82 wood-engravings. Vollard.
 - 18 Baudelaire, Charles. Les Fleurs du Mal. 30 color etchings. Vollard.
 - 19 Automne. Lithograph. Vollard. (1933)
 - 20 St. Jean-Baptiste. Lithograph. Vollard. (1933)
 - 21 Portrait of Hindenburg. Lithograph. Vollard. (1933)
 - 22 Portrait of Verlaine. Lithograph. Vollard. (1933)



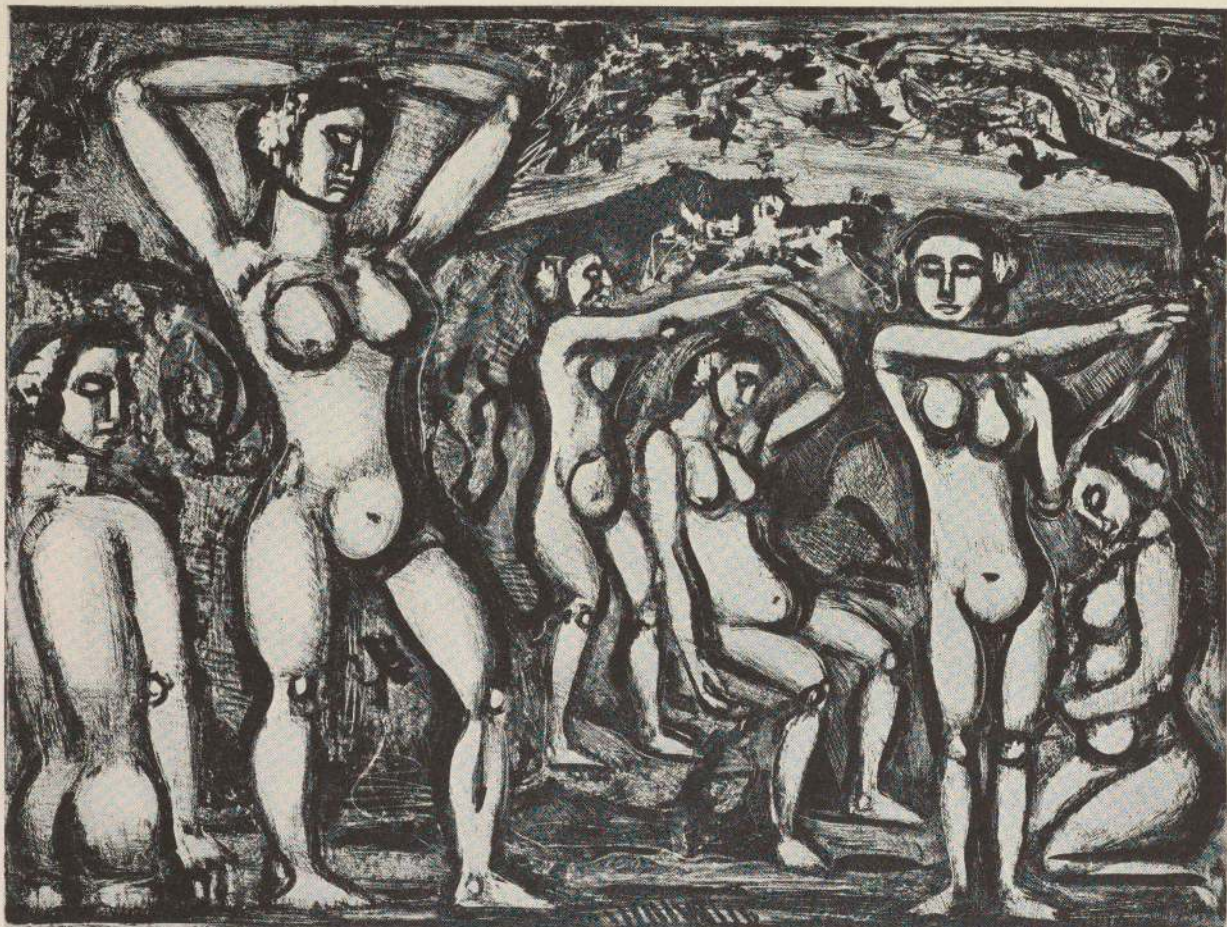
1. *Acrobat*. Lithograph, 1st state. About 1925.



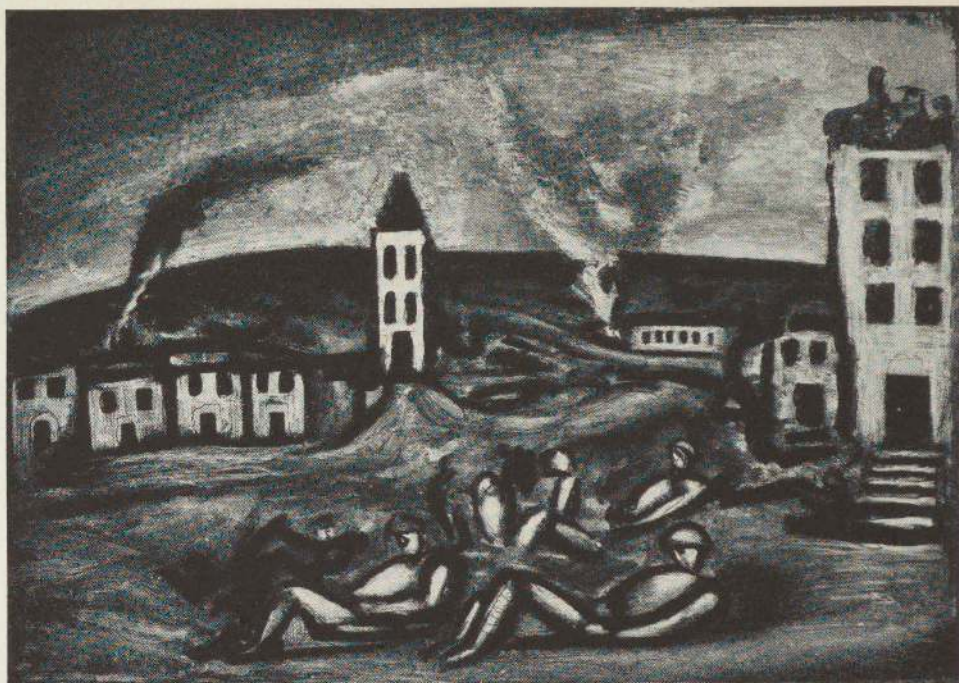
2. *Passion*. Wood-engraving. 1934.



3. *Miserere et Guerre*. "Who does not frown?" Etching. Trial proof. About 1922.



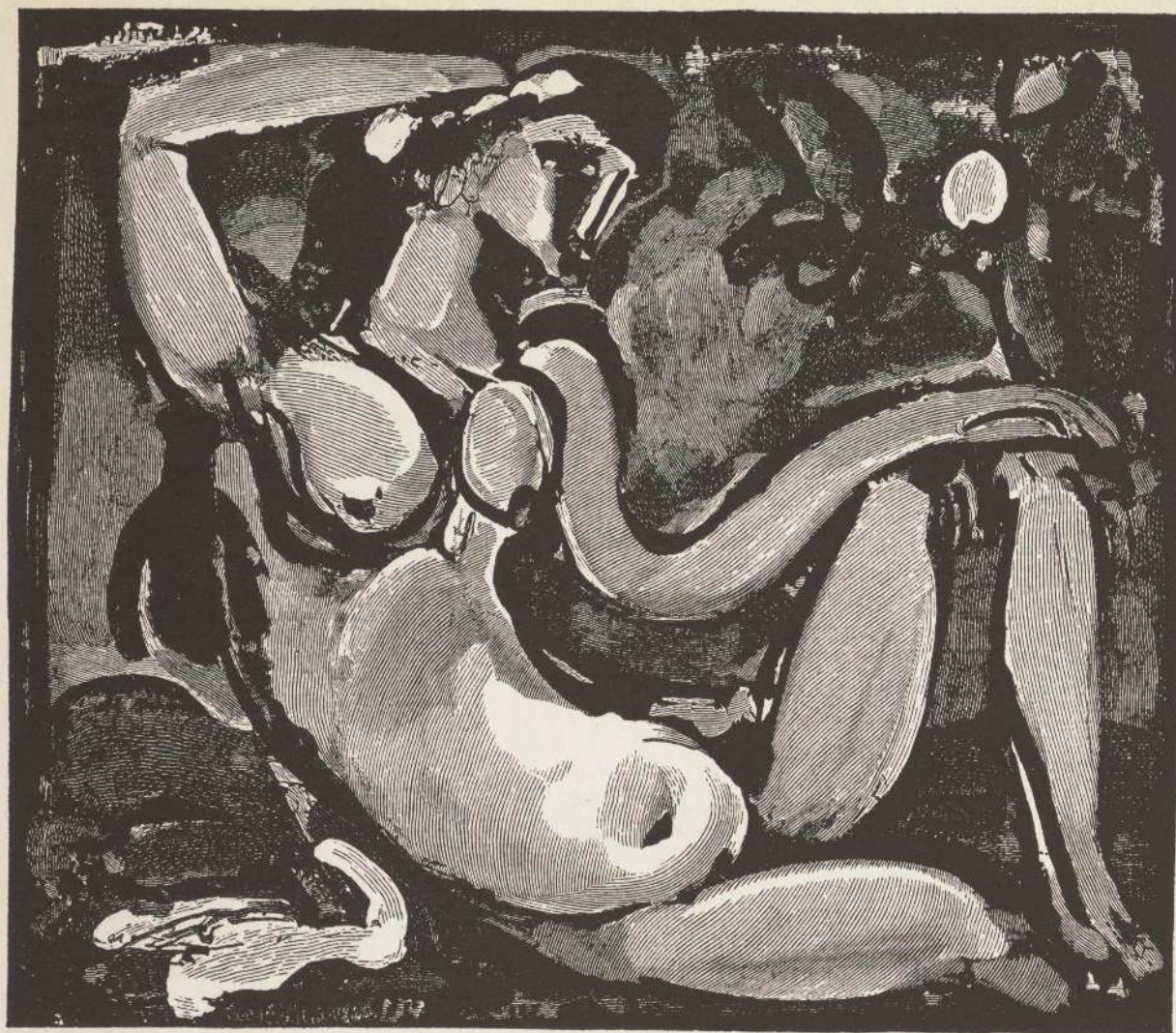
4. *Autumn*. Lithograph. 6th state. 1933.



5. *Miserere et Guerre*. "Man is a wolf to man." Etching. Trial proof. 1927.



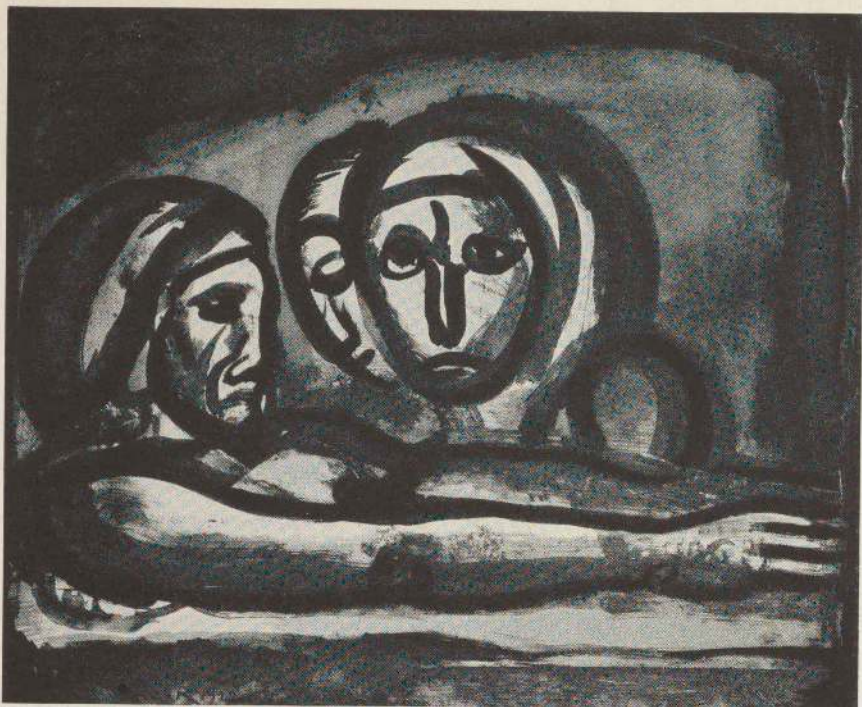
6. *Miserere et Guerre*. "From the depths we cry to Thee, O Lord." Etching. Trial proof. 1927.



7. *Le Cirque de l'Etoile Filante*. "Ophelia." Wood-engraving. About 1935.



8. *Miserere et Guerre*. "This will be the last, little father." Etching. Trial proof. 1927.



9. *Miserere et Guerre*. "In the press, the grape was trampled." Etching. Trial proof. 1922.



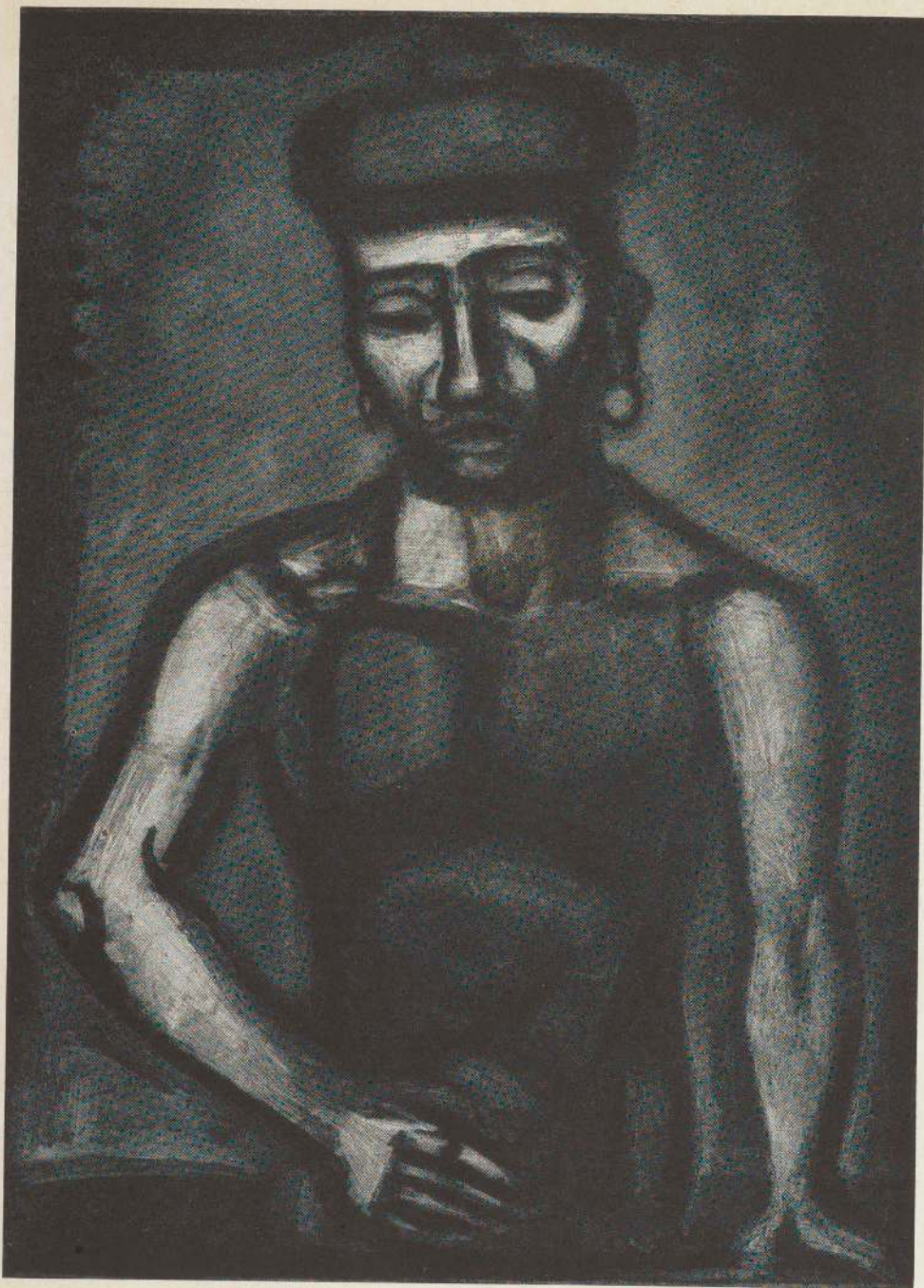
10. *Réincarnations du Père Ubu*. Etching. 1928.



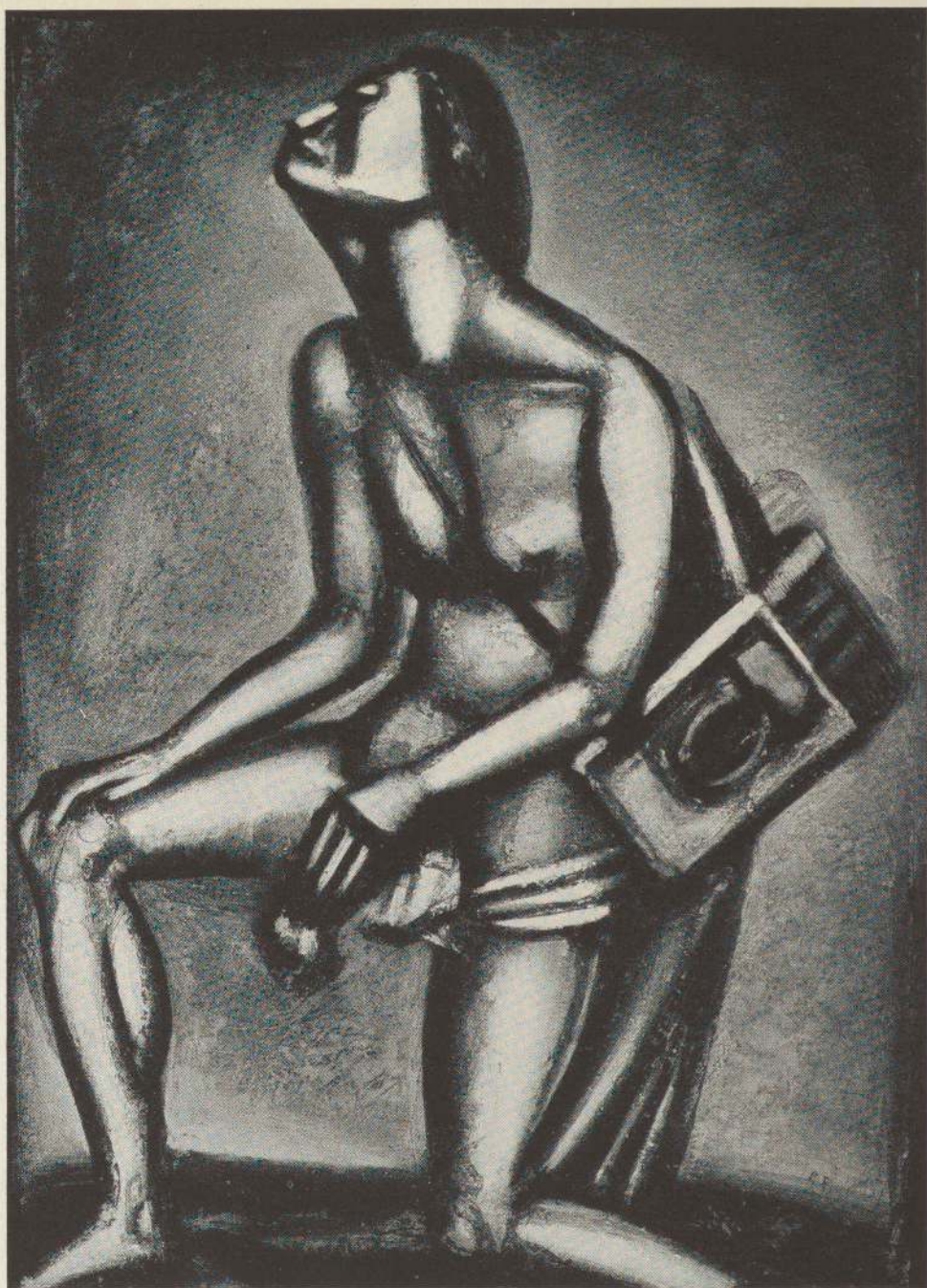
11. *Réincarnations du Père Ubu*. Etching. 1928.



12. *Clown and Acrobat*. Lithograph. About 1926.



13. *Miserere et Guerre*. "Jean-Marie." Etching. Trial proof. 1923.



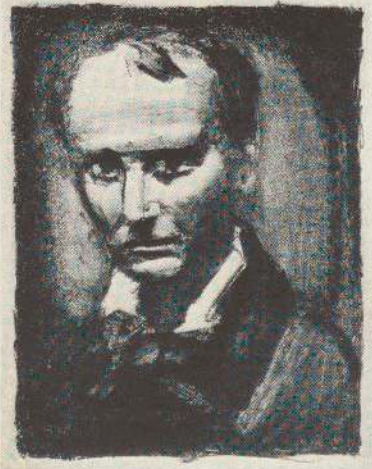
14. *Miserere et Guerre*. "Orpheus." Etching. Trial proof. 1926.



15. *Miserere et Guerre*. Hors serie. "La Vierge Noire." Etching. Trial proof. 1927.

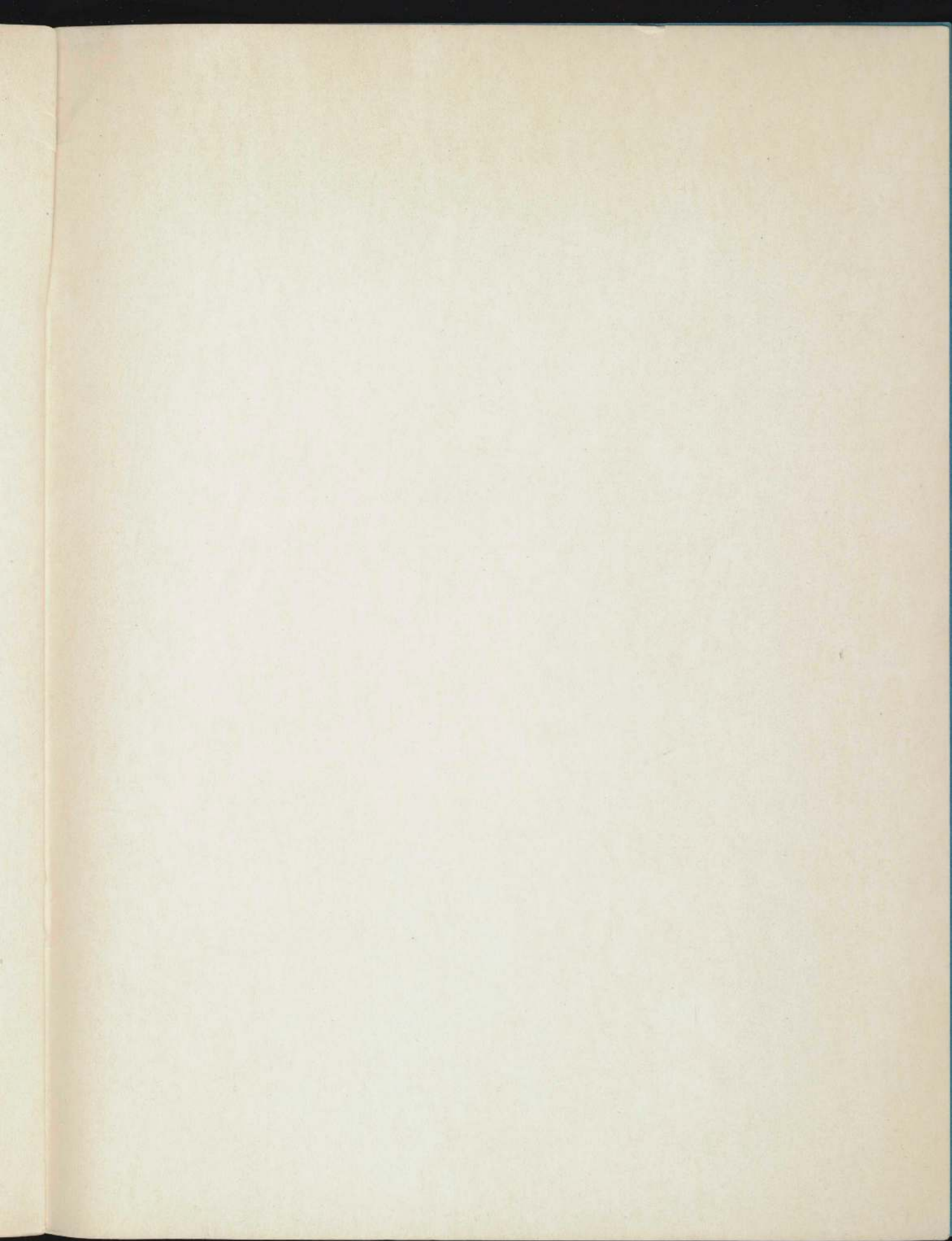


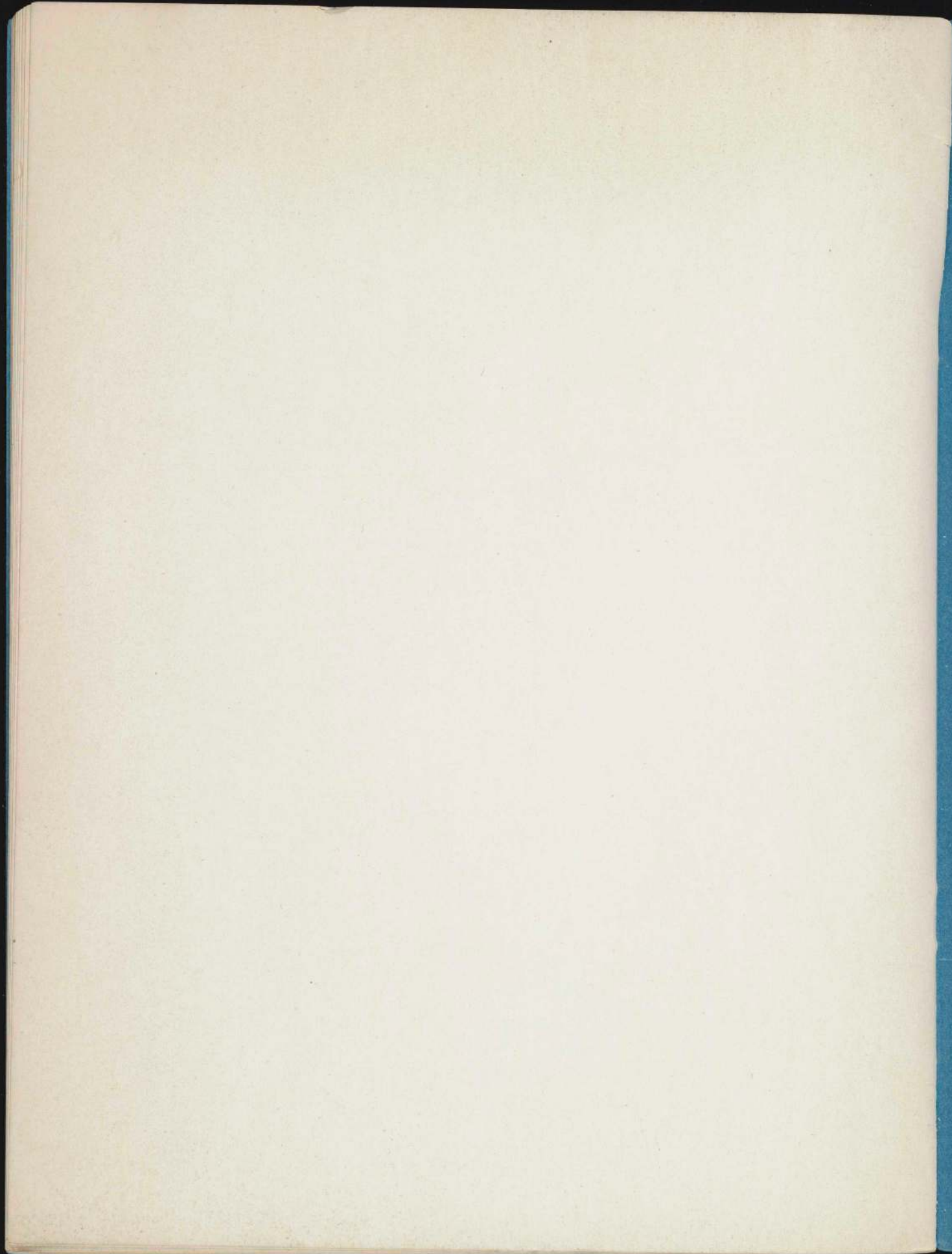
16. *Verlaine*. Lithograph. 4th state. 1933.



17. *Baudelaire*. Lithograph. 1927.

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