

Mr. B. and the Cherubim: A Critical Examination of William Blake's A Descriptive Catalogue of 1809

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It is ironically prophetic that William Blake (1757-1827) should have selected Milton's phrase, "Fit audience find tho' few" as an appropriate quotation for the advertisement for his only one-man show that was held in his brother James's hosiery shop in 1809.¹ For, indeed, Blake attracted few visitors to his exhibition and no sympathetic response to the arguments he launched in the accompanying guide book, *A Descriptive Catalogue*.² Blake's *Catalogue* provides us with the artist's most extensive writings on art. On the following pages is an assessment of the *Catalogue* and its relation to the sixteen works in the exhibition.

Many arguments have been offered on what impelled Blake to organize an exhibition which failed so totally to arouse the support he wanted for his approach to aesthetics and subject matter.³ My reading of the text and analyses of the works indicate that Blake conceived of the exhibit and its *Catalogue* as a public forum from

which to state his basic artistic premise that style and content could not be divorced, that only the successful union of these two elements, coupled with visionary insight, could produce truthful art. All of the works Blake selected for exhibition may be classified as history paintings; that is, they portray some significant human event. In Blake's time the history painting was considered the consummate achievement of the painter. Only the most gifted could portray these lofty and complicated themes. Though antagonistic toward the Royal Academy and its aesthetic theories, Blake nonetheless was aware of this tradition and elected to present his visions of "historical reality" in the most prestigious and respected format available to him.

Blake's self-proclaimed role as prophet is apparent in his art, in both painting and poetry, for the two are inextricably bound together. He hoped to edify mankind, much as the medieval carvers whose work at

Westminster Abbey he had admired so passionately as a young man had used their art as didactic devices. Blake's prophecies, written and visual, though often dismayingly perplexing, are based on a highly personal view of history, a mixture of his own revelations and contemporary, antiquarian theories about the origins of civilization, especially in Britain. In reading the text of the *Catalogue* one is struck by the desperate sincerity of the language with which Blake attempts to persuade mankind of the truth of his "historical inventions." The arguments launched with such volatile power in the *Catalogue* and the unorthodox novelty of his paintings and drawings were lost on his contemporaries. The exhibition was a financial and critical disaster.⁴ Robert Hunt scathingly derided the exhibition in the show's only lengthy review.⁵ Blake intended his art to fill a void, aesthetic and pedagogical. To him the art works he saw about him were but empty exercises in an "abominable style," failing totally to reveal any of the great, hidden truths of human existence, the *raison d'être* for art itself. He announces in the *Catalogue* that "the times require that everyone should speak out boldly; England expects that every man should do his duty in Arts, as well in Arms, or in the Senate."⁶ One must not forget that the exhibition took place during the Napoleonic Wars, and, though Blake violently objected to war as a perversion of energy, his hatred for Napoleon whom he envisioned almost as an anti-Christ incited this call to arms. It is not accidental that the arts lead this list of civic responsibilities. For Blake, art was the signal sign of civilization. Had Blake not seen, in visions, "The Cherubim," the great lost works of art created by the Biblical

patriarchs?⁷ "The Cherubim" mirrored spiritual truth and reflected the high state of man's existence before his Fall and divorce from the single essence of divine energy. During that brief interlude of peace between France and England in 1801, Blake had written to John Flaxman: "The Kingdoms of this World are now become the Kingdoms of God & his Christ, & we shall reign with him for ever & ever. The Reign of Literature & the Arts Commences. Blessed are those who are found studious of Literature & Humane & polite accomplishments. . . ."⁸ These inflated notions of the artist's role are even more explicitly stated in his *Public Address*, ca. 1810, in which Blake proclaims, "Let us teach Bonaparte, and whomsoever else it may concern, That it is not Arts that follow & attends upon Empire, but Empire that attends upon & follows the Arts."⁹

Blake felt keenly his artistic isolation, often producing a strident language that smacks of paranoia. His inability to attract support for his singular notions colored his assessment of the state of art. Several times in the *Catalogue* he complains of sinister forces which are actively working against him. In his entry for Number VI, *A Subject from Shakspeare* [sic], he writes that the work has been molested by "blotting and blurring demons,"¹⁰ and in Number IX, *Satan calling up his Legions, from Milton*, he notes that the effects he was seeking were perverted because of the interference of Venetian and Flemish painterly approaches. Blake accuses fictional demons, Old Masters and his contemporaries, such as Stothard and Reynolds, of attempting to deprive mankind of his artistic and spiritual lessons. In the advertisement for the exhibition Blake

states, "There cannot be more than two or three great Painters or Poets in any Age or Country; and these, in a corrupt state of Society, are easily excluded, but not so easily obstructed." 11

Blake pleads in the preface to the *Catalogue* with the public to be wary of the perfidity and sterility of ideas emanating from the Royal Academy. He "appeals to the Public, from the judgment of those narrow blinking eyes, that have too long governed art in a dark corner." 12 The tone throughout the *Catalogue* is aggressive and assertive. Blake felt that with his exhibit he had provided fuel for those who thought him mad and, more importantly, that he had vanquished all opposition. In his *Notebook* there appears a short apology for the *Catalogue* which reads in part:

Who cries, 'all art is fraud,
and genius a trick,
And Blake is an unfortunante
Lunatic?'
I've given great provision to
my Foes,
And now I'll lead my false
friends
By the nose. 13

The essential quality which separates Blake's art from that generally produced in Britain, with the exception of a few artists like Fuseli, is its visionary character. Six years before the exhibition, Blake explained in a letter to Thomas Butts, one of his few patrons, the spiritual basis of his art:

Now I may say to you, what perhaps I should not dare to say to anyone else; That I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London unannoy'd, & that I may converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams &

prophecy and speak Parables unobserv'd and at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals. . . . 14

It is this fusion of artistic inspiration and prophetic mission which gives such vitality to Blake's writings and art. In his *Annotations to the 'Poems' of Wordsworth* (1826), he observes:

"One Power alone makes a Poet . . . Imagination, The Divine Vision." 15

The visionary artist alone can perceive the true nature of things and events. In his *Public Address* Blake makes a distinction between invention (or vision) and imitation. Imitation is worthless; copiers of nature, he names Rembrandt and Reynolds, cannot hope to capture truth which resides as much in the world of spirit as in revealed nature. He goes on to say, "Imagination is My World; this world of Dross is beneath my Notice & Beneath the Notice of the Public." 16

Blake's belief that the artist is the unique receptacle of truth is perhaps most extravagantly stated in his annotations to a print of the *Laocoön* (ca. 1820): "Jesus & His Apostles & Disciples were all Artists. Their Works were destroy'd by the Seven Angels of the Seven Churches in Asia, Antichrist Science" and elsewhere, "A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian. You must leave Fathers & Mothers & Houses & Lands if they stand in the way of Art." 17

Blake clearly felt that his gifts for revelation were unique and gave to his work a power denied most of his colleagues. In a letter to John Flaxman in 1800 he stated his conviction that he had enjoyed a spiritual pre-existence which allowed him to recall the past with utter clarity; it is this past which he illustrated in the exhibition. He says

that his mind is filled with “. . . books & pictures of old, which I wrote & painted in ages of Eternity before my mortal life. . . .”¹⁸ And five years later he repeats much the same idea to William Hayley, adding what he hopes to accomplish with his visions:

I speak of Spiritual Things,
Not of Natural; Of Things
known only to Myself & to
Spirits of Good & Evil, but
Not known to Men on Earth.
. . . It will not be long before
I shall be able to present the
full history of my Spiritual
Sufferings to the Dwellers
upon the Earth & of the
Spiritual Victories obtain'd
for me by my Friends.¹⁹

In the *Catalogue* Blake calls the works he selected for exhibition “Historical Inventions” and these were intended to reveal partially his visionary concept of history and art. How do these visions manifest themselves? In his entry for Number IV, *The Bard, From Gray*, he describes the concrete images from the spiritual realm which haunt his mind: “A Spirit and a Vision are not, as modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour, or a nothing: they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that mortal and perishing nature can produce.”²⁰ The clarity of Blake’s vision is reflected in his drawings with their emphasis upon delineated contours and precise description of parts.

Blake intentionally excluded portraiture from his exhibition. The Pitt and Nelson paintings, Numbers I and II in the *Catalogue*, are elaborate historical allegories, and in his work, *The Bramins — A Drawing*, Number X, he illustrated Sir Charles Wilkins (?1749-1836), translating the *Bhagavadgītā*, not as a contemporary,

antiquarian scholar but as a nude prophet, akin in spirit to the Patriarchs who inhabit Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling. Blake had little use for portrait painters; he dismisses them with a terse, “Of what consequence is it to the Arts what a Portrait Painter does?” in his *Marginalia* on Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art*. Blake’s low opinion of Reynolds and others who based their fame on taking fashionable likenesses is two-fold. On the one hand he found reprehensible artists who were “applauded & rewarded by the Rich & Great.”²¹ Blake’s pronounced democratic viewpoint was repulsed by the elitist character of such patronage. In addition, the subject matter was not significant enough for Blake. He writes to his brother, James, in 1803, complaining about the commission to execute a series of small, historical portraits for William Hayley. Blake struggled long on these works and the letter expresses his bitterness about the energy and time expended on the series. “The truth is, As a Poet he is frighten’d at me & as a Painter his views & mine are opposite; he thinks to turn me into a Portrait Painter as he did Poor Romney, but this he nor all the devils in hell will never do.”²²

Those strange visions thrust upon the public in 1809, to be analyzed below, fall into several distinct categories. Five focus on Biblical history. This is revealed human history; the subjects are well known, sanctified by time and tradition, and they require no elaborate explanation by the artist. His hope in showing so many Biblical themes, almost a third of the total number, is explained in his entry for Number XIV, *The Angels hovering over the Body of Jesus in the Sepulchre — A Drawing*, in which Blake says he wishes to awaken the



Fig. 1. William Blake, *Soldiers casting Lots for Christ's Garment*. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

British to the paucity of monumental, religious art, compared to religious monuments in Italy. He hoped his works would be enlarged to ornament the altars of England.

Choosing to analyze the Biblical themes as they are presented in the *Catalogue*, the first is Number XI, *The Body of Abel found by Adam and Eve; Cain Fleeing away who was about to bury it, fleeing from the face of his Parents — A Drawing*. The original displayed by Blake has been lost. A finished tempera drawing most likely based on this lost design is in the Tate Gallery and is dated around 1825. A preparatory sketch for this later version is in the Geoffrey Keynes Collection.²³ Number XII, *The Soldiers casting Lots for Christ's Garment — A Drawing*, has survived (fig. 1). This watercolor with grey ink wash is in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, measuring 16-1/2 x 12-5/16 inches. It is signed with the artist's initials and a date of 1800. David Bindman has suggested that the composition appears to be derived from Poussin's *Crucifixion* (1645-1646), now in the Wadsworth Atheneum. Blake may have seen the original when it went on the block at Christies in May of 1794 or may have known the 1762 Bonzonnet-Stella engraving.²⁴ Perhaps it is equally important to note the unusual interpretation of this event, for Christ and the two thieves are seen from the rear and the foreground space is filled with the gambling soldiers. Before Christ are His mourners facing us and beyond them a great mass of citizens peer over the walls of Jerusalem, the city indicated by a strange forest of gothic spires! Number XIII, *Jacob's Ladder* (fig. 2) has no explanatory text in the *Catalogue*. The watercolor is in

the British Museum, measuring 14-5/8 x 11-1/2 inches. Though undated it most likely was executed in 1800 as it parallels imagery found in a poem addressed to Anna Flaxman, wife of John Flaxman; the drawing was in her possession at the time of her death. It was exhibited in 1808 at the Royal Academy, the last time Blake attempted to combat the official style with his own inventions. Angelic figures accompanied by innocent children drift up and down a spiral staircase. This motif is unique and prompted Anthony Blunt to suggest that Blake may have seized the motif from Francesco Salviati's *Bathsheba* fresco of the mid-sixteenth century in the Palazzo Sacchetti, Florence. Blake may well have seen a print or a drawn copy after the Salviati design or may have alighted on the solution independently, for he never ventured to the Continent, feeling it totally unnecessary for his artistic education. Number XIV, *Angels hovering over the Body of Jesus in the Sepulchre — A Drawing* (fig. 3) formerly in the Sidney Morse Collection, is a watercolor measuring 16 1/4 x 11 3/4 inches. The symmetrical, restrained composition is powerful, the hovering angels forming a pointed arch over the recumbent figure of Christ. The general arrangement recalls Plate II of Blake's illuminated poem *Europe, A Prophecy* (1794) and Blake's preparatory pencil sketch and watercolor drawing of *Four and Twenty Elders Casting Their Crowns Before the Divine Throne* (1804) in the Tate Gallery. Number XV, *Ruth — A Drawing* (fig. 4) is a watercolor illustrating that touching moment when Ruth abandons her homeland to follow and serve her mother-in-law, Naomi. The drawing is in the Southampton Art Gallery and

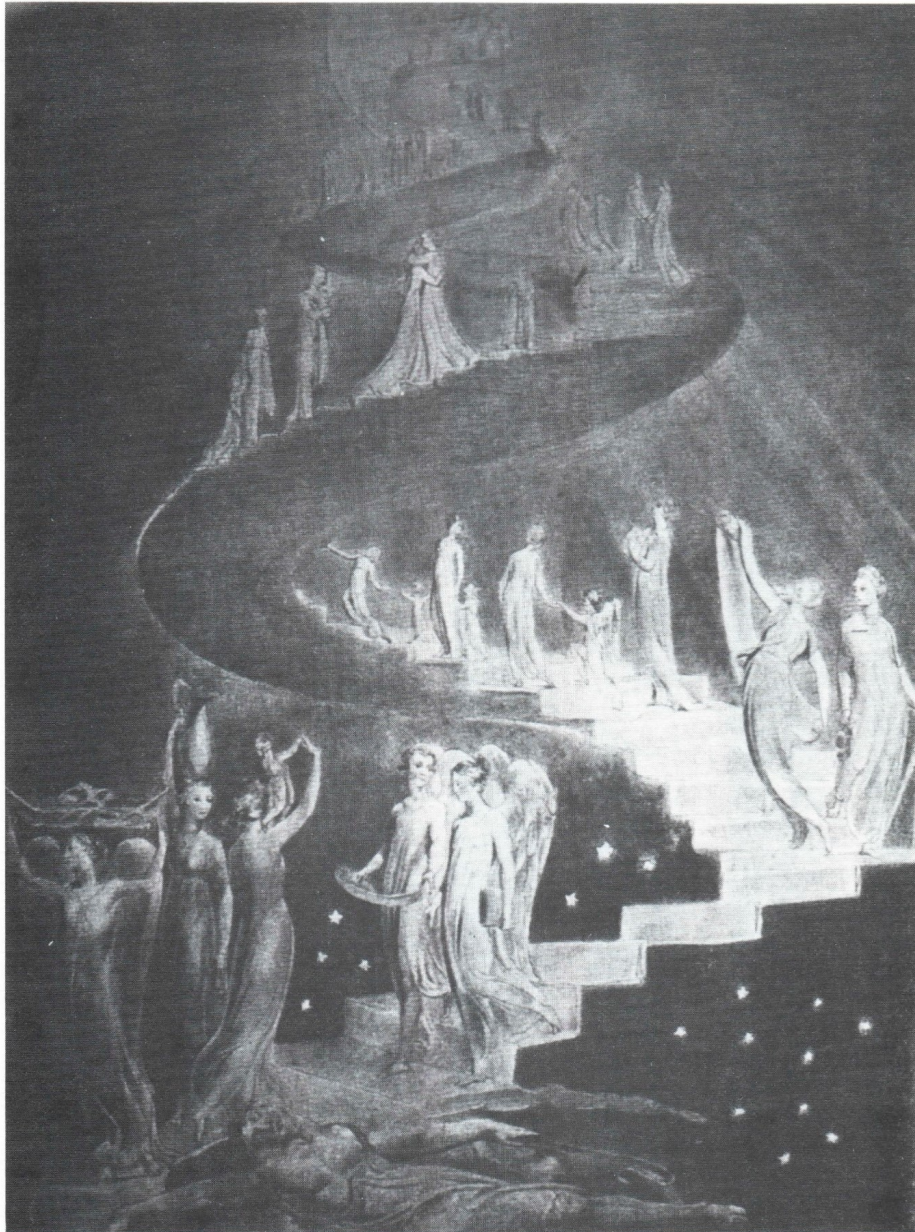


Fig. 2. William Blake, *Jacob's Ladder*. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.



Fig. 3. William Blake, *Angels hovering over the Body of Jesus in the Sepulchre*. Location unknown, formerly Sidney Morse Collection.



Fig. 4. William Blake, *Ruth — A Drawing*.
Reproduced with kind permission of
Southampton Art Gallery, Southampton,
England.

measures 14 x 12½ inches. It is signed and dated 1803. Colored prints of this design have survived and have often been confused with the drawing, certainly the work exhibited by Blake in 1809. The artist reserves the entry of this work to castigate practitioners of oil painting. He is especially vehement about the Venetians and Rembrandt, and full of praise for the drawings of Dürer, Michelangelo and Raphael who agree with his "great and golden rule of art, as well as of life is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art."²⁵ This statement requires comment. Though Blake's linearity is formally related to the neoclassic style of the late eighteenth century, he imbues line with a symbolic charge. The clarity and purity of line is in direct proportion to the clarity and truthfulness of the idea illustrated. Earlier, describing James Barry's *Satan Sin and Death*, he commends Barry's "hard and wirey line of rectitude, with its depiction of the ineffable figure of Death. . . ." ²⁶ It is doubtful that Barry would have comprehended Blake's mystic definition of line, but it is central to the understanding of Blake's art to see the inseparability of his style and content.

Five of the paintings exhibited are tributes to poetic visionaries like himself who have illuminated man's history. The first of these is Geoffrey Chaucer, whom Blake characterizes as a "great poetical observer of men, who in every age is born to record and eternalize its [mankind's] acts."²⁷ Number III, *The Canterbury Pilgrims from Chaucer* (fig. 5) is at Pollok House, Glasgow. Blake's animosity toward the London publisher R. H. Cromeck and the artist Thomas Stothard, whom Blake jointly accused



Fig. 5. William Blake, *The Canterbury Pilgrims, from Chaucer*. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of Pollok House (Stirling Maxwell Collection), Glasgow, Scotland.

of stealing and publishing his Chaucer design, is the main thrust of this entry. He dismisses Stothard's work with "All is misconceived, and its mis-execution is equal to its misconception."²⁸ Blake's sensitive critique of Chaucer's tale has been long accepted by scholars but its perceptiveness is no more exceptional than the parallels Blake is able to draw between his own art and that of Chaucer. Suggesting the universal lesson to be learned from truthful art, Blake describes Chaucer's tale thus:

The characters of Chaucer's Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations; as one age falls: another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again.

. . .²⁹

Blake and Chaucer are among those



gifted to see and understand more than most mortal men, to comprehend the great schemes of the Divine. In Blake's writing and art we find that his personal visions find expression in the form of the epic. He freely uses events of history (particularly those of the British people) as materials for his parables on the human predicament. Relying on visions and his personal conception of history, he magnifies his experiences into an original cosmology. History, like human nature, is explained in symbolic language, corresponding to the various states of universal generation which have their counterparts in the temporal stages of human life. The great cycle begins with total oneness with God or the divine agent and is then marked by the Fall. The separation from the single essence has characterized most of human history; man has existed in a state of chaos and cultural inertia. The Fall, however, has not been absolute

nor continual, for throughout history prophets or seers, such as Chaucer and Blake, have provided mankind with glimmerings of the lost truth.

The second poet/visionary to whom Blake pays tribute is Shakespeare. In Number VI of the *Catalogue*, *A Subject from Shakspeare* [sic]: *A Spirit vaulting from a Cloud to turn and wind a Fiery Pegasus*, has been lost. Blake takes the subject from an obscure passage of Act IV, *Henry IV: Part One*. He extends the title in explanation of his interpretation: "The Horse of Intellect is leaping from the Cliffs of Memory and Reasoning; it is a barren Rock: it is also called the Barren Waste of Locke and Newton." The work, like so much of Blake's verse, communicates his hatred for rational thought inherent in much of the writings of these two seventeenth century thinkers and subsequent eighteenth-century enlightenment writers.



Fig. 6. William Blake, *Satan calling up his Legions, from Milton*. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London.

Another figure who stimulated Blake's admiration is that highly original illuminator, John Milton. The largeness and brilliance of Milton's visions profoundly affected Blake's poetry and art.³⁰ Number IX, *Satan calling up his Legions, from Milton* (fig. 6) is dedicated to the seventeenth-century poet. He calls it an "experimental picture"; it is tempera with varnish on canvas and measures 24¼ x 16½ inches, unsigned and undated. The work is in very poor condition; it is barely possible to detect Satan atop a molten pinnacle, his body highlighted with gold. The composition recalls Number II, *The Spiritual Form of Pitt guiding the Behemoth* (fig. 7), and other of Blake's apocalyptic designs such as *The Last Judgment* or *The Spiritual Condition of Man*; all seem roughly organized in imitation of Michelangelo's Sistine *Last Judgment*. Another affinity exists between the Milton painting and the Pitt allegory for both are among several works in the exhibiton which are very hard to read; the confused and deteriorated "experimental" character of these works seems to refute Blake's arguments for clarity. Though obviously proud of his "portable frescoes" with his newly-devised techniques, Blake asserts that several have suffered from the work of demons who have blotted his imagery.

Two remaining works pay tribute to more recent visionaries. The Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg's *True Christian Religion* inspired Number VIII, *The Spiritual Perceptor*, no longer extant. Swedenborg's belief in a universal mythology appealed to Blake. The complicated cryptograms employed by Swedenborg in his critique of the Old Testament to describe Christ's mental history prior

to His actual birth accorded with Blake's belief that the Bible was but one source of recorded history. Blake firmly believed that non-Christian writings possessed lost truths, a notion he found attractively expressed in Jacob Boehme's *Mysterium Magnum* (1623). Blake also believed, as did Boehme, that the memory of every man's acts followed him into eternity and there formed a reservoir of all human knowledge which could be tapped by those with mystical insight. Blake differs, however, from both Swedenborg and Boehme in that he is non-sectarian. He is not concerned with rectifying the ills of the Christian church, but with a broader philosophical concept. Seeking truth outside traditional European writings drew Blake to contemporaries like Sir Charles Wilkins, who is the subject of Number X, *The Bramins — A Drawing*, noted earlier. Blake's interest in Hindu creation myths and other facets of exotic Indian culture is not unique.³¹

Thematically linked with the above is Number IV, *The Bard, from Gray*.³² In this vision the ancient Welsh bard is seen as the last survivor of his kind, his brethren having been willfully slaughtered by King Edward I. Unquestionably, Blake felt a kinship with the bards, for like them he was capable of understanding the past and the future and had been persecuted by the evil and the unknowing. *The Bard, from Gray* seems, however, more closely allied with the remaining five works of the exhibition, all of which deal with Britain's history.

Absolutely central to Blake's conception of history is the primacy of the British people in the origins of human civilization. Captain Wilford in 1799 published his *Chronology*



Fig. 7. William Blake, *The Spiritual Form of Pitt guiding the Behemoth*. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London.

of the *Hindoos* [sic] which offered an explanation essentially identical to Blake's. Wilford maintained that all civilized life came from Britain after the Deluge. Similarly, Sir Charles Wilkins in the *Asiatic Record* asserted that the Hindus knew of Britain as the home of the Pitris, the fathers of the human race. Clearly Blake was not alone in his bizarre notions of history. This kinship with other writers is even more pronounced when one examines contemporary antiquarian reconstructions of England's Druidic past. Blake's fascination with Druids was keen; two of the works in the exhibition were based upon Blake's visions of England's prehistory: *The Bard, from Gray* and Number VI, *The Ancient Britons* (since lost). The latter work is extraordinary in Blake's *oeuvre* because of its sheer size; it measured ten by fourteen feet, far larger than any known work by the artist. The monumental scale of this painting reminds one of Blake's remarks in his entry for the Pitt allegory (Number II), in which he comments, "The Artist wishes it were now the fashion to make such monuments, and then he should not doubt of having a national commission to execute these two Pictures [the Nelson and Pitt allegories] on a scale that is suitable to the grandeur of the nation."³³ Blake's projected monuments, he tells us, were to be one-hundred feet high, duplicating the majesty of the "Cherubim", those lost colossal works of art created by the Biblical Patriarchs that Blake had seen in visions. This intention of creating a gigantic public art must not be ignored; one associates Blake with his modest watercolors and book illuminations. Clearly he imagined an entirely different kind of art as well. It is easy to

sympathize with those few visitors at the exhibition who stood in amazement before Blake's visions and tried to imagine them on such a colossal scale.³⁴

Both the *Bard, from Gray* and *The Ancient Britons* owe much to the Welsh triads, collections of verse reputed to have been composed in England's druidic past.³⁵ Blake's actual sources remain obscure but he may well have been inspired by such works as Edward Williams's *Poems: Lyrical and Pastoral*, published in 1794. In his catalogue entry for *The Ancient Britons* Blake tells us that he has in his hands authentic ancient British poems. Blake may have been referring to Williams's work, a collection of poems which Williams claimed to have found in a sixteenth-century manuscript compiled by Llewelyn Sion, a Welsh bard; or Blake may have been alluding to any of the similar collections then in circulation. These miscellanies, believed to contain the products of a rich oral poetic tradition, recall the popular "forgeries" of MacPherson and Chatterton which greatly excited Blake's admiration.

In the same year of Blake's exhibition, Edward Davies published his *Celtic Researches: Mythology and Rites of the British Druids*. Like Blake, Davies believed in a lost universal society and maintained that the original seat of all human learning was Britain. Another contemporary who shared many of Blake's beliefs was Jacob Bryant, to whom Blake pays tribute in the *Catalogue*.³⁶ Between 1774 and 1776 Bryant published his three-volume study, *A New System, or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology wherein an attempt is made to Divest Tradition of Fable, and Reduce the Truth to Original Purity*. (How that

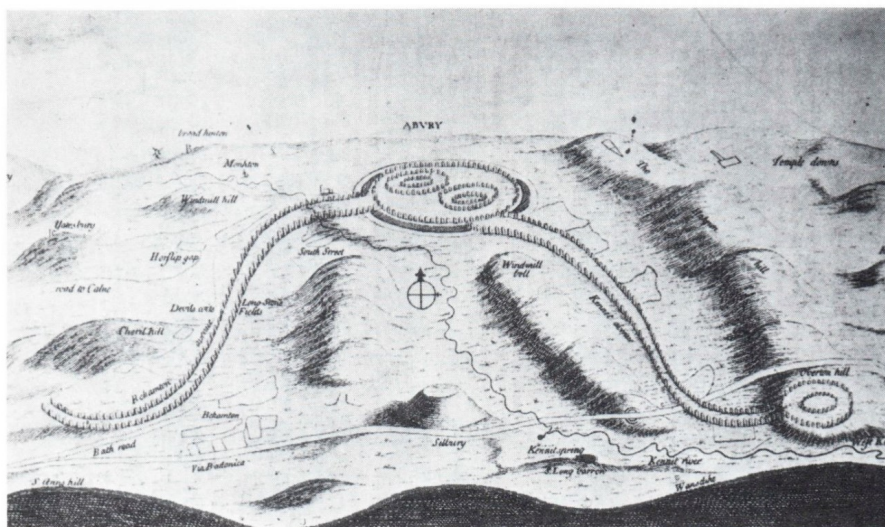


Fig. 8. William Stukeley, Plate from *Abury, A Temple of the British Druids*, published 1743.

title must have appealed to Blake.) All three writers would argue that Adam and Noah were Druids.³⁷

In an effort to lend historical verisimilitude to his Druidic theme in *The Ancient Britons*, Blake describes the scene of the battle thus: "The dead and dying, Britons naked, mingled with armed Romans, strew the field beneath. . . . Distant among the mountains are Druid Temples, similar to Stone Henge."³⁸ Visions of Stonehenge occur repeatedly in Blake's art. Undoubtedly Blake was aware of William Stukeley, who more than anyone else encouraged interest in these ancient monuments. Stukeley had read John Aubrey's manuscript, *Monumenta Britannica*, 1659, and was especially struck with a chapter entitled "Templa Druidium." It was Aubrey who first associated Stonehenge, Avebury, and other sites with Druidic rites. Stukeley did

archeological field work between 1716 and 1723, and in 1740 published *Stonehenge, A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids*, followed in 1743 by *Abury, A Temple of the British Druids*. A plate taken from the latter (fig. 8), shows Stukeley's reconstruction of the entire temple complex in the form of a giant serpent. This serpentine vision is used by Blake in his last plate of *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820 (fig. 9). Another plate from *Jerusalem* illustrates the "Mythological Trilithon" (fig. 10). This print also suggests Stonehenge. The three small figures which have been identified by some Blake scholars as Bacon, Newton and Locke suggest the poetic time continuum, or "poetic vigor", to use Blake's own phrase, which characterizes so much of his art, the unexpected juxtaposition or blending of historical personages and events.

To interpret precisely the meaning of



Fig. 9. William Blake, Plate from *Jerusalem*.

The Bard, from Gray or *The Ancient Britons* seems impossible, for they, like so much of Blake's verse, are composed of a constantly shifting cast of characters whose symbolic relationships and roles vary. The three ancient Britons are identified in the *Catalogue* as the Beautiful, the Ugly and the Strong, interpreted by Frye as equivalents to his mythical heroes, Orc, Urizen and Tharmas.³⁹

The Druids are described in antiquarian literature in one of two ways. They may be seen as brutal savages, engaging in loathsome, sacrificial, often cannibalistic rites, or they may be seen as a gentle race of forest-dwelling poets, or bards as in the previously mentioned work by Williams, or in narratives such as John Ogilvie's *The Fane of the Druid* (1787). The benign interpretation is seen in Blake's *The Bard, from Gray*, but elsewhere in Blake's writings one

finds him describing the Druids as an alien, destructive force.

Blake's firm conviction that England had once been the fountainhead of all knowledge contributed to his disdain for and suspicion of classical art. In the *Catalogue* he explicitly refers to the inferiority of Greek and Roman art when compared to the lost splendors of "The Cherubim." Writers such as Davies argued that the classical writers and philosophers like Pythagoras and Diogenes Laertius referred to the Druids as the teachers of mankind. This may help explain Blake's observation in *Jerusalem* in which he claims that Greek philosophy is only a remnant of Druidic culture.

All of the above histories, as well as Blake's *Catalogue*, have one thing in common; all are attempting to accommodate the ever-growing body of historical knowledge, regardless of its accuracy, to that suggested by the

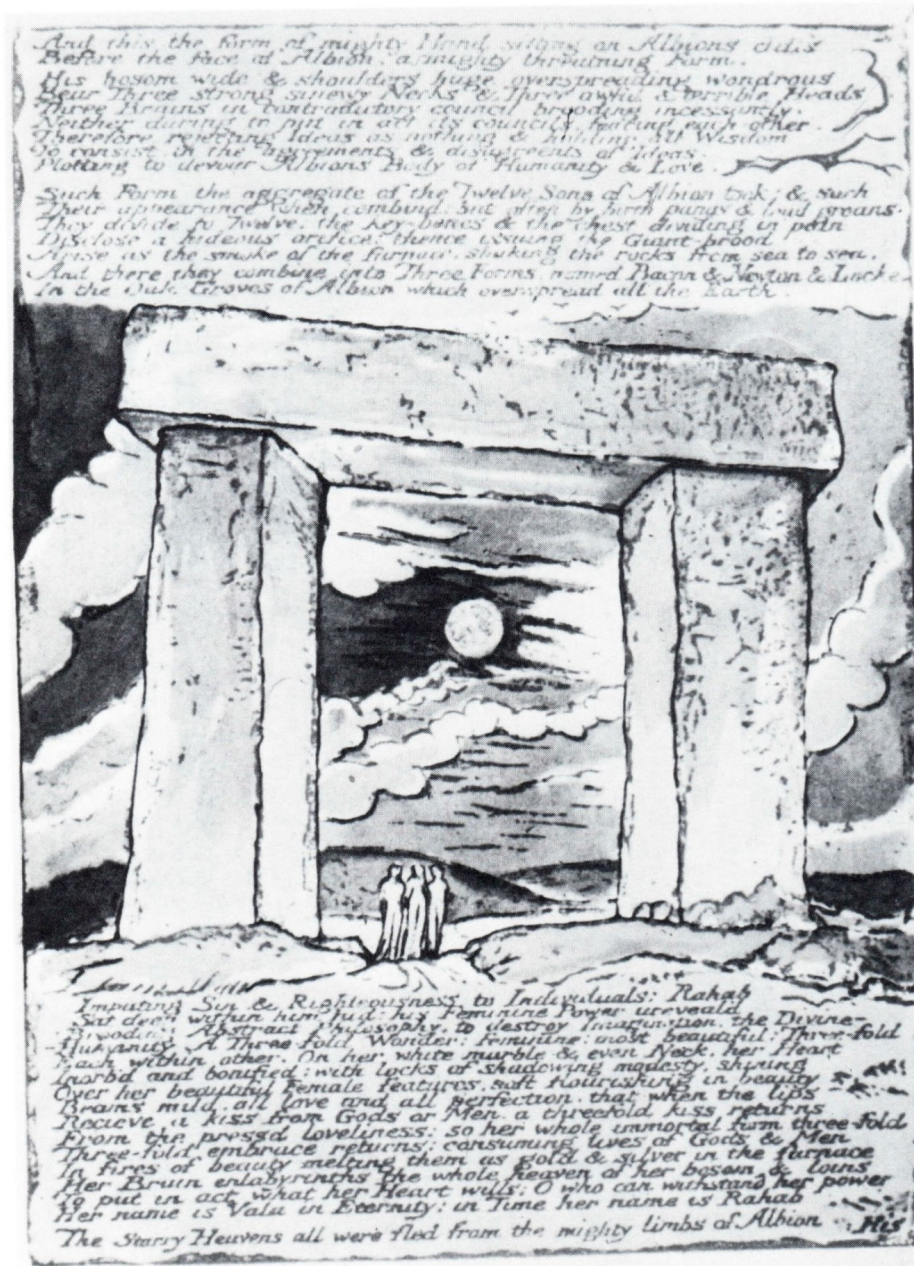


Fig. 10. William Blake, *The Mythological Trilithon*, from *Jerusalem*.

Patriarchal writers of Jewish history. The practice seems associated with two types of writers: those who, under the influence of the Enlightenment, tried rationally and scientifically to explain man's past and to put legend, Biblical and otherwise, in proper perspective, and romantics like Blake, who sensed in exotic or lost civilizations the inherent mystery and chaos of the universe.

Medieval art and literature fascinated Blake. He saw the period as one steeped in faith and imagination. Two of the works in the exhibition deal with England in the Middle Ages: *The Canterbury Pilgrims* which has been discussed above and, Number XVI, *The Penance of Jane Shore in St. Paul's Cathedral*, a poignant tale which attracted several artists. Blake's *Penance of Jane Shore* is a pen and ink with watercolor wash drawing in the Tate Gallery, measuring 9-5/8 x 11-5/8 inches. This early work, dating from Blake's student days (ca. 1778-1780), has a delicacy and sweetness which is foreign to the bold, mystic character of his mature style. The scene is not simply the public humiliation of Jane Shore, the mistress of Edward IV who was forced to do public penance by Richard III, but suggests Blake's distaste for the sexual hypocrisy which he saw in society. The subject has been correctly linked to Nicholas Rowe's drama of the same subject first performed in 1774. Interestingly, in 1773, Reynolds exhibited *Mrs. Harteley as Jane Shore* at the Royal Academy.

Lastly, the first two paintings described in the *Catalogue* chronicle in symbolic language Blake's own time and foreshadow the future. Both works are in the Tate Gallery. Number I, *The Spiritual Form of Nelson guiding the Leviathan* (fig. 11), is varnished

tempera on canvas, measuring 30 x 24-5/8 inches. The work was begun around 1805 and finished shortly before the exhibition. Number II, *Pitt guiding the Behemoth* (fig. 7), is painted in the same technique, measures 29-1/8 x 23-3/4 inches and is dated 1805. These works have been variously interpreted as entirely symbolic or as apocalyptic visions meant to describe recent events in mythical terms. Given the thrust of Blake's arguments in the *Catalogue*, his constant attempt to relate the past to the present and the meaningful readings given to Blake's verse by scholars such as Erdman, Keynes and Frye, the latter would seem most probable. It was surely not accidental that these were the first two works in Blake's *Catalogue*. Even Blake's contemporaries sensed he was saying something about the conduct of the war and the guiding roles of the Prime Minister and Admiral Nelson. Hunt accused Blake of "whitewashing the war policy associated with Pitt and Nelson."⁴⁰ Nothing could be further from the truth. Blake, a confirmed political radical, had long opposed England's war with France, as he had opposed Great Britain's repressive campaigns against the American colonies. Though repulsed by the tyranny of Napoleon, Blake continued to support the republican ideals formulated by Paine and by the American and French revolutionaries. The Nelson and Pitt paintings are visualizations of the libertarian themes found in his prophetic books. Bronowski observes that Blake shrewdly judged the temper of the times and realized his radical views were in direct conflict with the increasingly repressive and chauvinistic patriotism of wartime England. From



Fig. 11. William Blake, *The Spiritual Form of Nelson guiding the Leviathan*. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London.

1791 when Blake and his publisher, Joseph Johnson, decided not to print his *French Revolution*, Blake increasingly shifted from the relatively straightforward language of his earlier works to the mystical obscurities of his written and visual prophecies late in his career. Blake could continue to attack those forces which he felt stifled the positive forces of imagination and energy, the equivalents of personal and political liberty.⁴¹ Northrup Frye's definition of evil as Blake would have understood it would seem to describe what we see in the Nelson and Pitt allegories. Evil is "self-restraint or the restraint of others — evil arises from passivity, the negative refusal to perform a creative act which results in frustrating either one's own development or that of others."⁴² The passive figures of Nelson and Pitt directing the governmental and military machinery of war are surrounded by a cyclonic field filled with chaos and confusion. These allegories, like *America* and *Europe*, demand the banishment of war and repression. Pitt is seen in oriental garb, with a Buddhist halo, singular imagery which transports the contemporary reference into a larger realm, suitable for Blake's parable of evil at work. Blake tells us that these works "are compositions of a mythological cast, similar to those Apotheoses of Persian, Hindoo [sic], and Egyptian Antiquity, which are still preserved on rude monuments, being copies of some stupendous originals now lost or perhaps buried till some happier age."⁴³ Implicit in this statement is the existence of a lost art ("The Cherubim"), which will remain unknown until man has achieved a level of purity. Until then he will be denied access to Beauty and Truth.

Blake's hostility to the notable historians of the period was acute. In his entry for *The Ancient Britons* Blake condemns Hume, Gibbon, and Voltaire as "twisters of causes and consequences." He proclaims that their penchant for reason has blinded them to real truth. Their works are false, personal opinions that have no correspondence to the actual historical cycle. Blake exhorts, "Away with your reasoning and your rubbish!" He warns his readers that those who ignore the spiritual agency, the improbable, because it does not fit within their organized systems, are fools. Twice in the *Catalogue* warnings are issued to his fellow artists. In the entry for Number VIII, *The Spiritual Perceptor*, he writes that any artist who mistakenly shuts "the doors of mind and of thought by placing Learning above Inspiration. O Artist! you may disbelieve all this, but it shall be at your own peril."⁴⁴ In the following entry, *Satan calling up his Legions, from Milton*, he again states that if duped into accepting the loathsome preachings of the academicians young artists will be in jeopardy for their very souls. The continuous argument of these two passages is further evidence that the *Catalogue* was conceived as a single argument. Each painting or drawing with its accompanying text adds to the cumulative lesson. For those sympathetic to his arguments Blake reveals significant moral, historical and artistic truths. In the last lines of the *Catalogue*, Blake confidently informs his readers that his arguments are unassailable and that he can retire to bed confident of the utter veracity of his art.

NOTES

¹ See Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies: Essays on His Life and Work* (Oxford, 1971). See especially Chapter 8, pp. 66-73, where Keynes cites all known extant copies of the *Catalogue* and the several advertisements connected with the 1809 exhibition.

² William Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue*, (London, 1809), p. 61. The author wishes to thank the Beinecke Library staff of Yale University for its assistance. The so-called "Copy F: Beckford-Hamilton Palace Copy", at Yale was used for the preparation of this article.

³ Many have argued that Blake's pique at R. Cromek and T. Stothard's "theft" of his design for *The Canterbury Pilgrims, from Chaucer* sparked Blake's decision. Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake* (London, 1927), p. 207, contends that the *Catalogue* is an artistic manifesto eulogizing Raphael and Michelangelo at the expense of Rembrandt, Rubens and the Venetians. Northrup Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton, 1958), pp. 409-10, suggests seven motivations, all of which are valid: (1) demonstration of the success of his fresco technique, (2) the need for public art in Britain, (3) the disadvantages of working in oil, (4) insights into the political events of his time, (5) an outline of the British archetypal myth, (6) elaborate criticism of Chaucer and English poetry, and (7) the bringing of Swedenborg and the *Bhagavadgita* to the public's attention.

⁴ The exhibition opened in mid-May on the ground floor of his brother's shop at 28 Broad Street, Golden Square, London. Though scheduled to close on September 29, it remained open for an extended period.

⁵ Hunt's review appeared in *The Examiner* on September 17, 1809, and reads in part:

If beside the stupid and mad-brained political projects of their rulers, the sane part of the people of England required fresh proof of the alarming increase of the efforts of insanity, they will be too well convinced from its having been lately spread into the hitherto sober regions of art — When the ebullitions of a dis-tempered brain, are mistaken for the sallies of genius, by those whose works are exhibited as the soundest

thinking in art, the malady has indeed attained a pernicious height, and it becomes a duty to endeavor to arrest its progress. Such is the case with the productions of WILLIAM BLAKE.

For the complete review and a collection of responses to the exhibition see Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, I, II (London, 1880).

⁶ William Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake with Variant Readings*, ed., Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1966), p. 584.

⁷ Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 565. Here Blake explains how he has been taken in visions to "the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia" where he had seen the colossal, lost works of art created by these lost civilizations.

⁸ Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 810.

⁹ William Blake, *The Notebook of William Blake Called the Rossetti Manuscript*, ed., Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1935), p. 102.

¹⁰ Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 51.

¹¹ Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 561.

¹² Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, iii.

¹³ Blake, *Notebook*, pp. 86-87.

¹⁴ William Blake, *The Letters of William Blake*, ed., Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1956), p. 84. The letter written from Felpham is dated April 25, 1803.

¹⁵ Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 782.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 600.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 776.

¹⁸ The letter is dated September 21, 1800. See Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 802.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 862.

²⁰ Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 37.

²¹ Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 445.

²² The letter is dated January 30, 1803; Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 819.

²³ Geoffrey Keynes, *Pencil Drawings by William Blake* (London, 1956). The author illustrates the sepia pencil preparatory sketch in his collection.

²⁴ David Bindman, *William Blake, Catalogue of the Collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 23.

²⁵Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, pp. 63-64.

²⁶Robert Wark, "A Note on James Barry and Edmund Burke," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, XVIII (London, 1954), pp. 382-385.

²⁷Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 14.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁰Blake's enthusiasm for Milton was shared by many of his contemporaries; for a discussion of this see C. H. Collins Baker, "Some Illustrators of Milton's *Paradise Lost*," *The Library* (June and September 1948).

³¹Any number of publications about Indian antiquities appear in the late eighteenth century; most notable are: Alexander Dow's *History of Hindostan* (London, 1768); Theodore Maurice's seven volume study, *Indian Antiquities* (London, 1793-1800); and Edward Moore's *Hindo Pantheon* (London, 1810). Indicative of Blake's fascination with exotic societies is Number VII in the exhibition *The Goats, an Experimental Picture*. Blake merely states that the subject is taken from the *Missionary Voyage*. Blake's picture was inspired in fact by James Wilson's *A Missionary Voyage to the South Pacific in the Years 1796, 1797, 1798 in the Ship Duff* (London, 1799). The specific passage illustrated by Blake can be found on pp. 129-130, where the nude island girls climb aboard the ship, are given skirts of leaves which are eaten by the goats, soon after the ship has arrived at Resolution Bay in the Marquesas.

³²The tempera painting is in the Tate Gallery. A pencil preparatory sketch exists in the Philadelphia Museum of Art; both the verso and recto surfaces have Bard sketches.

³³Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 5.

³⁴Keynes, *Blake Studies*, p. 80. Keynes quotes Robert Southey's criticism which appeared in *The Doctor* written long after the exhibition. For a good summary of nineteenth-century reactions to Blake's *Catalogue* see Deborah Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century, His Reputation from Gilchrist to Yeats* (New Haven, 1969), pp. 14-15, 103, 259-260.

³⁵Northrup Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, pp. 172-173. Here Frye nicely characterizes Blake's enthusiasm for Bardic literature. He writes:

Thus in various ways an immense expansion of literary interests was bringing to the attention of poets much that had been left outside the direct line of development from Homer to Pope. The Arthurian and Eddic myths, which we have seen to be integral to Blake's symbolism, were discovered or re-habilitated. The whole poetic scene was filled with Welsh and Scandanavian translations and adaptations, not wholly out of fashion even when Blake opened his *Descriptive Catalogue* in 1809 with an imitation of Welsh triads.

³⁶Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 43.

³⁷Other writers sharing this idea are David Jones in his translation of Paul-Yves Perzon's *The Antiquity of Nations*; Rowland Jones's *The Origins of Language and Nation* (London, 1764) and James MacPherson's *History of Great Britain* (London, 1773).

³⁸Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 50.

³⁹Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p. 272. For an analysis of the many facets of romantic enthusiasm for Druidic literature and culture, see Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (New York, 1975).

⁴⁰Dorfman, *Blake, Nineteenth Century*, p. 14.

⁴¹J. Bronowski, *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* (New York, 1965), pp. 69-85.

⁴²Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p. 293.

⁴³Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 2.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 53.

