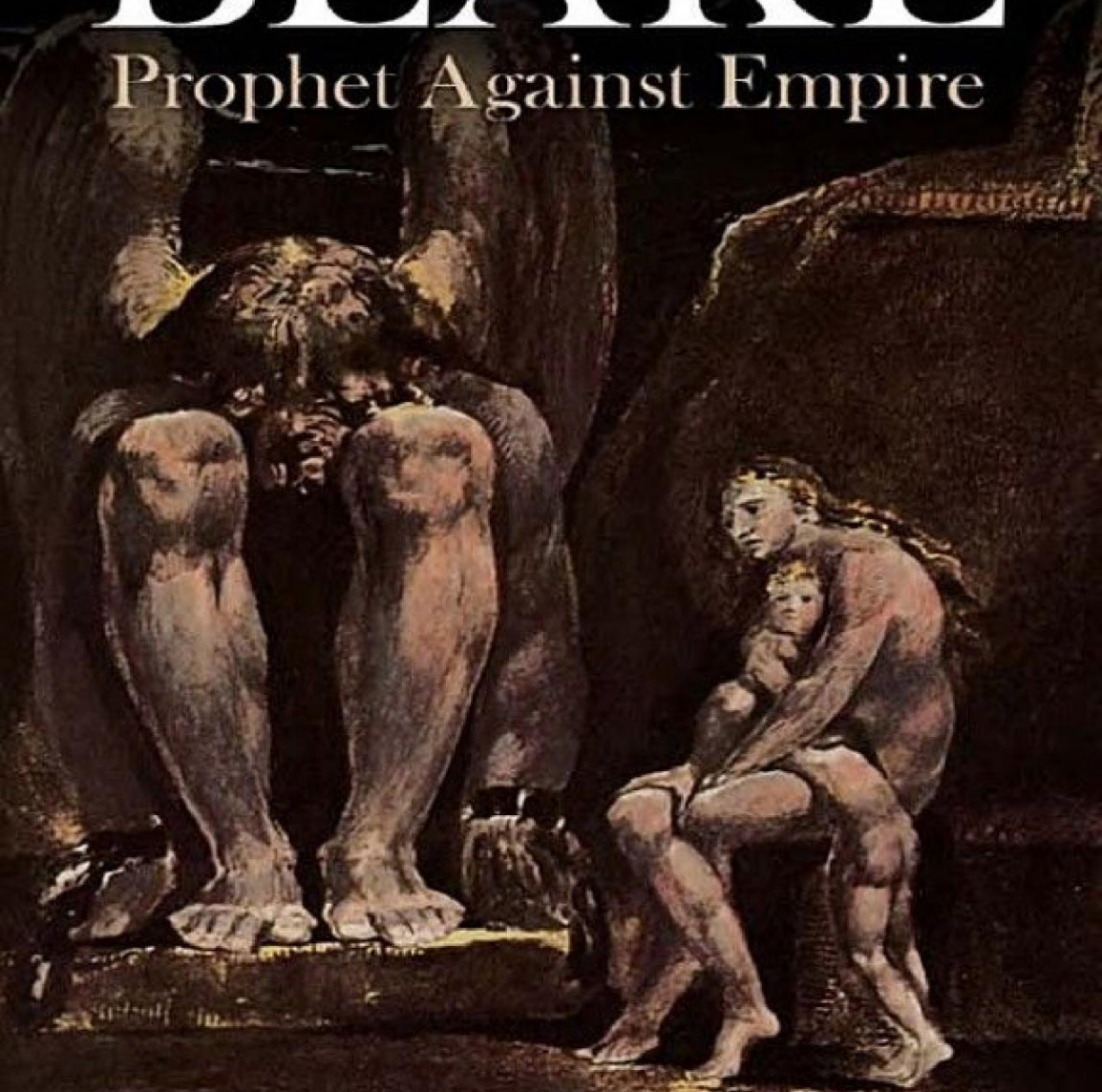


BLAKE

Prophet Against Empire



DAVID V. ERDMAN

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Preface to the Third Edition

THE SEVEN years since publication of the Second Edition have seen a proliferation and intensification of Blake scholarship that have kept the study of his life and work and times an ever renewing delight. Historical documentation of the period has also grown increasingly sophisticated and extensive. No attempt has been made to incorporate all the new information and ideas, however. The new information alone in the thick volume of *Blake Records* (1969) by G. E. Bentley, Jr., some of which would involve contention about matters of dating and biographical interpretation, could change the shape of several chapters. My revisions have been limited to brief corrections of error or changes of perspective or brief notes of new material.

An Appendix has been added to contain notes of revision that overflow their pages. It includes as well several digests of recent studies that strikingly revise or enlarge the record of Blake's relations to contemporary and historical sources. The Index, which contained many erroneous page numbers in the Second Edition, has been thoroughly revised.

I am grateful to the many scholars whose work has enriched this edition, particularly to those who have supplied matter for the revisions and the Appendix. I must apologize to those whose suggestions and new material did not find room within the allotted space.

Crane Neck Point
June 1976

D.V.E.

Preface to the Second Edition

SINCE 1954 the study of Blake's life, works, sources, and associations—and of the intellectual and social history of his times—has altered and enlarged the intellectual context of this book. The temptation to revise entirely has at times been strong; in a paragraph or footnote here and there this edition is responsive to the urge to make a new assessment. But on the whole I have (with the encouragement of friends and critics) kept the main structure and in fact the text of this volume very much as they were. New biographical and bibliographical information relevant to Blake's interpretation of history has been incorporated as unobtrusively as possible. Quotations of Blake's writings have been corrected in the few places necessary and also brought closer to the original spelling and punctuation.

A few important and several minor readjustments have been necessitated by revised dating. We now know that the Blakes moved from 27 Broad Street in 1785, little more than a year after the partnership of Parker & Blake was formed; that they moved to Lambeth not in 1793 but in 1791—thanks to the rate-book investigations of Paul Miner. Details in the style of Blake's lettering support other evidence that *A Divine Image* is an early, not a late, trial Song of Experience; that the "Argument" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is an original part of the work, not an addition. And the work of G. E. Bentley, Jr., and my own investigations have taught me that the stages and chronology of the manuscript of *The Four Zoas* are less definable than I had supposed.

To accommodate these and other revisions, some paragraphs have been moved forward or backward; some have been left standing, with notes of explanation. New material has generally been added in the notes, though occasionally by incorporation into the main narrative. Stanbury Thompson's discovery and publication of the *Journal* of John Stedman must be credited for the most fascinating new information, both about Blake's relations with author and publisher and printer and about his London, Stedman being a sort of Ginger Man. G. E. Bentley's notes have been useful for details here and there,

particularly for the missing documentary link in the tale of Cromek's serpentine behavior. Many revisions and amplifications of historical particulars derive from the publications and conversation of E. P. Thompson and Lucyle Werkmeister. Martha England and Nancy Bogen have assisted in the revision of chapters dealing with *An Island in the Moon*; Mrs. Bogen and Mary S. Hall have communicated important discoveries about the sources and meanings of *Tiriél*. I have drawn afresh upon an ancient correspondence with Palmer Brown, and received much clarification from exchanges with S. Foster Damon and W. H. Stevenson. At the last minute Stanley Gardner's "Literature in Perspective" *Blake* has added some vivid London details.

Too late for more than hasty perusal of its splendid and numerous illustrations came Kathleen Raine's *Blake and Tradition*.

For continuing help and encouragement I am grateful to Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Northrop Frye, George Goyder, and F. W. Bateson; for criticism and particular advice, to Robert F. Gleckner and Edward J. Rose. For a variety of helpful suggestions and particular services I am indebted to Morton Paley and Ruthven Todd; also to Morchard Bishop, Harold Bloom, J. T. Boulton, Martin Butlin, Patrick J. Callahan, Kenneth Neill Cameron, Anne Freedgood, John E. Grant, William F. Halloran, Sally Hyde, Robert Kolker, Anne T. Kostelanetz, Lewis Patton, Vivian de Sola Pinto, Charles E. Robinson, Eric Robinson, Irene Tayler, and Michael Tolley. For indulgence as well as assistance I must also thank William L. Coakley, Marilan Lund, and Eugenia McGrath of the New York Public Library, and Cecelia Grimm and Lillian Silkworth of the State University of New York; and, beyond definition, the five persons of my dedication.

D.V.E.

Crane Neck Point
June 1969

Preface to the First Edition

WITH the growth of interest in Blake as a poet of social vision the need has grown for a methodical study of his thought and art in relation to the history of his own times. Recent studies have related Blake's work to the Enlightenment and to the general context of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. But "General Knowledge is Remote Knowledge," as Blake was wont to insist, and we miss much of the vitality if not the sublimity of his "Sublime Allegory ... addressed to the Intellectual powers" as long as we remain only remotely acquainted with the "acts" of his age which he considered it his poetic duty "to record and eternize."

Today it is not uncommon to find Blake regarded as the greatest of the Romantic poets or as the poet who means most for the modern world because of his awareness of the implications of history in the industrial epoch. Yet many of his shrewdest observations upon modern life are misconstrued, his pointed prophecies are treated as intentionally nonprophetic, his ironies and caricatures are taken for sober absurdities, and his unmistakably topical allusions are interpreted so carelessly that we have one decade mistaken for another, a counterrevolution for a revolution, a cabinet change for a riot, an orphan asylum for a madhouse, a recruiting officer for an agriculturist, and—most fundamentally—an indictment of war for an indictment of industry.

Like his contemporaries Goya and Beethoven, Blake saw the age of the spinning jenny and the balloon and the citizen army not primarily as an age of rising industry but as one of increasingly prodigious war and uncertain peace. He felt the cannonfire and the mud of Valmy almost more acutely than did Goethe, who was on the scene. "Industrial Revolution" is a concept produced by the rational intellect in a later generation to describe a single component of the changes in Blake's lifetime (1757–1827). It misleads twentieth-century readers such as the one who mistakes the poet's wry observation on the economics of cavalry supply—"the horse is of more value than the man"—for a lament about horsepower. War and Peace is the pattern

Blake saw as he watched “the New Age” with mingled delight and terror. For him the human question was framed not in terms of improved production but as a choice or an issue between the peaceful Looms of Jerusalem, weaving clothing and a symbolically lucent atmosphere, and the Mills of Satan, casting steel cannonbarrels and filling the sky with the smoke of battles and of burning towns. Factory smoke was not a major ingredient of the cloud over London.

In order to get close to the eye-level at which Blake witnessed the drama of his own times—the level at which history is “nothing else but improbabilities and impossibilities, what we should say was impossible if we did not see it always before our eyes”—I have read the newspapers and looked at the prints and paintings and sampled the debates and pamphlets of Blake’s time. As Blake would say, I have “walked up & down” in the history of that time. And I have learned to read the idiom of current allusion with sufficient familiarity to detect its presence even in Blake’s obscurer pages, where workshops are dens of Babylon and royal dragoons are punishing demons and the House of Commons is a windy cave. I have become familiar, too, with Blake’s use of sources in the ironic manner which historians of painting call witty quotation. Burke having said of Marie Antoinette, “surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision,” Blake exclaims: “The Queen of France just touched this Globe And the Pestilence darted from her robe.” Or Blake pivots a prophecy of Armageddon on an allusion to Milton which requires our recognizing a cosmic jest which reverses the predicament of Nature in Milton’s Nativity *Hymn*. Sometimes the mere homeliness of Blake’s method of reading white for black has baffled us, as in his elaboration of an emblem of *The Gates of Paradise* from a satiric political print, or as in his choice of the name Los (loss) for his visionary *prophet* in a world of *Paradise Lost*.

Blake thought of himself as a prophetic bard with a harp that could prostrate tyranny and overthrow armies—or, more simply, as an honest man uttering his opinion of public matters. And although he often veiled his opinion or elaborated it into a complex symbolic fabric having little to do with public matters on many of its levels of meaning, it has been possible to trace through nearly all of his work a more or less clearly discernible thread of historical reference. Many of the proposed identifications of Blake’s Minute Particulars are, I trust, firmly established as to source and context and evident meaning, though sometimes extensive documentation has been necessary in

separate articles or in footnotes; some of the identifications derive their probability chiefly from their consistency with the rest; some of those made quickly in the opening chapters must be judged in the light of evidence cumulatively supplied in the sequel.

What I have attempted is a bold survey of the history of Blake's time as it swirls about and enters into the texture of his emblematic painting and poetry. Part One is concerned with the impact of the American Revolution and of London Patriotism on Blake as a youth; Part Two with his drift into cynical and then devotional social attitudes during the commercial decade that followed. Part Three deals with his exuberant response to the French Revolution; Part Four with his prophetic editorials, pictorial and poetic, against the English Crusade and the Pitt Terror. Parts Five, Six, and Seven follow Blake as he "follows the wars" of 1793–1802 and 1803–1815 and is wrenched from his prophetic course by the brief interval of peace between these wars. The final years of Blake's life, devoted chiefly to painting and engraving, are touched only briefly in an Epilogue.

My large indebtedness to the work of previous scholars, especially the commentaries of S. Foster Damon and of D. J. Sloss and J. P. R. Wallis and the studies of Jacob Bronowski, Mark Schorer, Northrop Frye, and Geoffrey Keynes, is not at all adequately acknowledged in the notes, I am afraid.

For patient and critical reading of various drafts of my manuscript, I am deeply indebted to Howard O. Brogan and Northrop Frye. I wish to thank Geoffrey Keynes for many services and for permission to quote from his letters; Howard Wandrei and Paul La Porte for drawings; Max Gartenberg for the suggestion of the Blake-Barlow relationship; Palmer Brown for a valuable correspondence and for his transcript of *An Island in the Moon*, also the Fitzwilliam Museum for permission to quote from this transcript of the MS in their possession; Lord Abinger and the Duke University Library for permission to quote from the unpublished diary of William Godwin, and especially Lewis Patton for use of his transcript of the diary.

For critical advice, particular services, and general encouragement I am grateful to Joseph Warren Beach, Charles G. Osgood, Mark Schorer, H. M. Margoliouth, Ruthven Todd, Samuel H. Monk, William P. Dunn, Huntington Brown, Theodore Hornberger, William Riley Parker, Ernest Tuveson, Herman Ramras, Miss Grace Marie Graham, Miss Marjorie White, Miss Josephine Miles, Leslie L.

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For generous grants in aid I wish to thank Henry Allen Moe and the Trustees of the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and Theodore C. Blegen and the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota. I have had the additional advantage of a light teaching schedule during my year at Duke University. I am indebted to the librarians of the University of Minnesota, especially Mrs. Vera Clausen, Miss Virginia Doneghy, Mrs. Yvonne Van Der Boom, Mrs. Edna Rodabaugh, and Mrs. Evelyn B. Thompson; of the Detroit Public Library, especially Miss Gamel; of the Pierpont Morgan Library; of the Yale University Library, especially Miss Barbara D. Simison; of the Harvard College Library, especially Miss Carolyn E. Jakeman, Miss Mabel A. E. Steele, and Mr. Philip Hofer; and of Duke University Library, especially Emerson Ford. For permission to reproduce pictures I am indebted to the National Gallery of Art, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Harvard College Library, the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, and the Duke of Hamilton. For permission to make use of material in published articles I must thank the respective editors of the journals listed.

I am indebted to James Sisson and Bruce Teets for help in proofreading, and to Mrs. Victoria S. Bohan for assistance in preparing the index; and to Benjamin F. Houston of Princeton University Press for his patient and sympathetic editorial guidance. And most of all, for critical advice at every stage and for such miracles of self-denial "as both astonish & comfort me," I am indebted to my wife.

D.V.E.

Durham, North Carolina
March 1953

Explanation of Notes

1. The following abbreviations are employed for Blake's works:

- A. *America*
- D.C. *A Descriptive Catalogue*
- E. *Europe*
- F.R. *The French Revolution*
- F.Z. *The Four Zoas* (earlier title, *Vala*)
- I. M. *An Island in the Moon*
- J. *Jerusalem* (plate numbers of variant [Chapter 3](#) given in brackets[])
- M. *Milton*
- M.H.H. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
- Marg. *The Marginalia*
- N. *Notebook* (the Rossetti MS)
- P.A. *Public Address* (in N.)
- P.S. *Poetical Sketches*
- T. *Tiriel*
- T.S.B. *Then She Bore Pale Desire*
- V.D.A. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*
- V.L.J. *Vision of the Last Judgment* (in N.)

2. Roman numerals indicate chapter or scene or "night" divisions marked or implied by Blake.

3. Arabic numerals indicate plate or page and line numbers, thus: A.5:2 means *America*, plate 5, line 2. But numerals with *F.R.* refer simply to lines. For Blake's marginalia to Lavater and to Swedenborg they indicate numbered paragraphs or sections.

4. When useful, reference is given to pages in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, Garden City, 1965; third printing, 1968, indicated by the letter "E"—followed by reference to pages in *The Complete Writings of*

William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, London, 1966; fourth printing, 1968, indicated by “K”; but the text quoted is, in its particulars, the former. (This Keynes pagination is also that of the Nonesuch edition, first set in 1957.)

ABBREVIATIONS FOR MOST FREQUENTLY CITED REFERENCES

Antal	Frederick Antal, <i>Fuseli Studies</i> , London, 1956
Barnes	Joshua Barnes, <i>History of Edward III</i> , London, 1688
<i>B. Bibliog.</i>	G. E. Bentley, Jr., and Martin K. Nurmi, <i>A Blake Bibliography</i> , Minneapolis, 1964
Bisset	Robert Bisset, <i>History of the Reign of George III</i> , 2 vols., London, 1816 (1803)
Blackstone	Bernard Blackstone, <i>English Blake</i> , London, 1949
<i>Blake Records</i>	G. E. Bentley, Jr., <i>Blake Records</i> , Oxford, 1969
Blunt	Anthony Blunt, <i>The Art of William Blake</i> , New York, 1959
<i>B.M. Satires</i>	Mary Dorothy George, <i>Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum</i> , 8 vols., London, 1935–1947
<i>BNYPL</i>	<i>Bulletin of The New York Public Library</i>
Bronowski	Jacob Bronowski, <i>William Blake: A Man Without a Mask</i> , London, 1944; reprinted as <i>William Blake and the Age of Revolution</i> , New York, 1965, for which page nos. are added in brackets
Damon	S. Foster Damon, <i>William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols</i> , New York, 1924
Damon's	
<i>Dictionary</i>	S. Foster Damon, <i>A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake</i> , Providence,

1965

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- Whitley, *Artists* William T. Whitley, *Artists and Their Friends in England: 1700–1799*, 2 vols., London, 1928
- Wright Thomas Wright, *Life of William Blake*, 2 vols., Olney, 1929

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How I did secretly Rage! I also spoke my Mind.

Part One
THE AMERICAN WAR

1. War Unchained

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757–1827) lived through sixty-nine years of wars and revolutions, political, industrial, and intellectual. But the first big fact about his life is that he grew up in a time of peace and never lost the feeling that England was a green and pleasant land, potentially the mart of peaceful nations; that London's towers were a fit dwelling place for the Lamb of God. Without regular occupation until the age of ten when he entered drawing school, "sweet [he] roamed from field to field"; saw angels in a sunlit tree at Dulwich and among haymakers at dawn; bathed in the ponds near Willan's farm and in the Thames; haunted the printshops and the few accessible art collections; read the poets and prophets from Isaiah to Milton; recorded his joy in songs of laughter; and stored up impressions for the later building of Jerusalem. Blake's vision of paradise is no lost traveler's dream but the sunny side of eighteenth-century London life as experienced by a boy given to roaming the adjacent fields and living in an indulgent family in a Broad Street on a square named Golden.

All the biographers rightly emphasize Blake's happy boyhood; yet in their discussion of his youthful "visions" they tend to isolate themselves from Blake by treating him as quaint or mystic. They generally fail to take into account the graphic artist's professional interest in "seeing through the eye" or to recognize that the community of London artists which was Blake's only college was a milieu that encouraged visionaries—not those who had "ineffable" but those who had vivid and distinct revelations. Hogarth, scarcely a mystic, saw visions; and many other artists, including Cosway, who taught at Pars's Drawing School and was intimate with Blake for many years, boasted of ghostly visitors who sat for their portraits.¹ Blake came to insist, however, that his paintings were drawn from *intellectual* visions, not corporeal hallucinations. But a greater failing of the biographers, the archetype of whom is the Carlylean Alexander Gilchrist, is that they have no eye at all for the wider framework around the national peace which England enjoyed between Blake's

fifth and seventeenth years. Yet the story of Blake's early intellectual growth is in part the story of his learning to see the larger web of commerce and war within which "peace" was often mere hallucination.

Britannia with trident in hand was the emblematic image (soon to go out of fashion in the iconology of political engraving) of the peace attained in 1762 after The Great War for the Empire, as scholars now call it. British naval power had driven France out of America and the richer plunder depots of India, and had hastened the Spanish Empire toward its ruin. It was a peace, as the slightly older poet Chatterton sardonically observed in 1770, "modelled in gingerbread, and ready to fall in pieces at the slightest touch."² And the statue's base was the triangle of commerce in slaves, sugar, rum. But surely Blake's attention as a boy was not focused on the foundations of his paradise.^{2a}

A sudden altering and sharpening of focus did come, however, with the second big fact in Blake's life, the American Revolution and the American War, which made the golden sunlight on the Thames a cheat and shook to ruin Jerusalem's arches over Primrose Hill and Marybone (*J.27*). Blake reached maturity during the American War; as soon as the war was over he printed poems and exhibited paintings full of the war's "dark horrors," and ten years later he drew upon one of these paintings for the frontispiece and title page of his epic prophecy *America*, in which he told the story not so much of the American Revolution as of its impact on London in those war years. Yet this mountainous fact which Blake said "passed before" his face and signified "a mighty & awful change" (to Flaxman, September 1800) has been utterly ignored or misunderstood.

The difficulty comes at least as much from a failure to enter imaginatively into Blake's times as it does from a failure to enter Blake's imagination. Thus an assumption as to "the sterility" of Blake's environment can lead even an acute observer of Blake to abandon a valuable hypothesis about the irony in his early dramatization of England's commercial warriors.³ As for Gilchrist, once he has established Blake as an engraver for the antiquaries he ignores the larger world in which they all lived and accepts as comprehensive the statement that after his twentieth year Blake's energies were "wholly directed to the attainment of excellence in his profession."⁴ When Gilchrist says, "These were *not* favourable days

for designing, or even quiet engraving,” he is merely referring to one June week which he treats in anecdotal isolation; yet the week in question epitomizes, as we shall see, the intimate and enduring relationship of the prophetic journeyman engraver to the citizens of London who sympathized with America in the days of “Wilkes and Liberty.”

We tend to think of English opposition to the American War as a matter of a few bold speeches by Chatham, Burke, Fox, and Wilkes, without considering that these politicians, though out-numbered in a Parliament dominated by “King’s friends,” were voicing the sentiment of a majority who looked upon the King’s attempt to suppress the American trade as a display of arbitrary power. In English trading centers the war was never popular. Even during the middle years, when many merchants were enjoying large war contracts, the London Common Council persistently voted against recruiting volunteers to fight for the King. All the London members in the House of Commons between 1774 and 1784 consistently opposed the war policy and said they were speaking for their constituents.⁵ The modern historian discovers with some surprise that most of the satiric prints which served as the graphic editorials of the day were pro-American, representing America as the land of liberty and virtue, England as that of corruption and slavery, and King George as a cruel and obstinate tyrant.⁶ We should not be surprised to find that Blake shared the common view nor to find in some of his earliest work the germs of his later republicanism.

Hardly a sterile environment for such ideas was the London whose printshops featured such “comic history painting” as *The State Blacksmiths forging fetters for the Americans* (1776), *Poor Old England endeavouring [with a scourge] to reclaim her Wicked American Children* (1777), and *The Horse America, throwing his Master* (1779). Critics, however, with rare exception have assumed that the poetry, and most of the history painting, produced by Blake during the American Revolution express chiefly a simple romantic nationalism and a youthful enthusiasm for kingly war, although some passages are recognized as strongly anti-war. This topsy-turvy interpretation is due in part to Blake’s somewhat indirect way of expressing his sympathy with the American “Patriots,” but also in large part to neglect of the historical context. Failure to recognize the element of London radicalism in his early work has sent readers of

Blake off to a bad start and has also distorted the general picture of eighteenth-century British culture, through omission of Blake's important contribution to the democratic side.⁷

The history of Blake's famous picture *Glad Day*, more properly called *The Dance of Albion* or *Albion rose* (Plate I), will furnish a startling example of how Blake's "sublime allegory" can be missed and misread. In 1780 in the fifth year of the war, when Blake was twenty-two and free both from his apprenticeship which had ended the year before and from "Matrimony's golden cage" which he would enter two years later, he drew a bold picture transforming a textbook diagram of the proportions of the human figure⁸ into a terrific social utterance. Along came his Victorian biographer eighty years later; decided to call it "Glad Day," though one would think the facial expression in this picture rather sober than glad; and saw no connection with those June days which he elsewhere remarked as unfit for quiet engraving. Blake himself, however, had recorded the connection between this drawing and the American Revolution and the Gordon Riots of 1780.

In *America* Blake describes the spirit of rebellion as crossing the Atlantic to Great Britain and inspiring, particularly in London and Bristol, open demonstrations against the war, which temporarily deranged the guardians of the status quo and hastened the coming of peace. Amid "fires of hell" and "burning winds driven by flames" of Revolution,

The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammerd
mail,

And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood a naked multitude.

(A.15:4-5)

Historians have come to realize that an important ingredient of the June riots was wrath against "the unfortunate management of the War against the American Rebellion."⁹ For several days the multitudes were in control of the streets of London, and there were uprisings in Bristol and other towns. Wearing the blue cockade of Wilkes and Liberty, crowds sacked and burned "Papist" chapels and the houses of ministers, magistrates, bishops, lawyers; they burst open jails and released the prisoners. As for the "howl of anguish," the *Annual Register* describing the flames ascending from the prisons, from the

hated ha'penny toll-houses on Black-friars Bridge, from alcohol blazing in a demolished distillery, mentions "the tremendous roar of the authors of these horrible scenes," continuing all the night (the fifth day).

The mixture of motives in the rioters' minds remains obscure. "Government and the Rioters," observed a contemporary, "seemed to have felt an equal disposition, by drawing a veil over the extent of the calamity, to bury it in profound darkness";¹⁰ and they succeeded. "No Popery!" was the cry, and it seemed somewhat out of date. But there was a link to government efforts to win Catholic support and Catholic troops for the armies in America. It was Lord Gordon's view that recent Catholic relief bills had been devised "for the diabolical purpose of arming the Papists against the Protestant Colonies in America."¹¹ There was also an urge among "lower classes" to imitate the Reform agitation of "respectable gentlemen" who had been meeting and speaking all spring.

"'The Rights of the People'—'The Majesty of the People,' were then the fashionable expressions, and several gentlemen went so far as to say, that Ireland had only obtained her independence by the force of 60,000 bayonets, and that if Parliament did not comply with their Petitions, it would be necessary to take the same means to enforce them. Such was the temper of these Meetings...."¹²

And it was at this time that the Society for Constitutional Information was formed, of which we shall hear more later.

Alarmed conservatives—the blue-stocking Mrs. Montagu for one—thought the riot was intended to force capitulation to "the conditions of peace with America on the terms offered by the Congress, the French and Spaniards." Horace Walpole pondered the rumor that "Some Americans, perhaps, taught by the lessons we have given them of burning towns," had "joined in the opportunity," but he was more impressed by the force of "a thousand discontents."¹³

Gilchrist, who states that "Blake long remembered" his having been in "the front rank" of the crowd that burned and opened the gates of the great fortress and prison of Newgate on June 6th, is careful to qualify Blake's participation as "involuntary," just as later he is careful (and patently incorrect) to absolve Blake of sympathy with the French Revolution after 1792. Jacob Bronowski's observation is probably nearer the truth, that "Blake did not grow afraid of the crowd,

then or later.”¹⁴ We may let “involuntary” stand, for any physical participation, but it seems clear that Blake shared the sentiments of Gilchrist’s “triumphant black-guardism” insofar as “the mob” believed that freeing their fellows from Newgate was a step toward freeing Albion from an oppressive war.

Thomas Wright makes the pregnant observation that “these terrific scenes—the flaming houses and chapels and the occurrences at the jail—affected [Blake] extraordinarily, and gave him ideas for many a startling print in *Europe, America* and the other Prophetic Books.”¹⁵ But for Wright too the “striking” 1780 drawing is only “Glad Day” or “Jocund Day.” Blake did not, indeed, find any quiet time to engrave *that* picture for many years. When he did he identified it with the inscription “WB inv[enit] [i.e. made the original drawing] 1780.” The picture has attained wide popularity, but its topical significance has never been observed. On a mountain top, arms in a gesture of tremendous energy and confidence, stands the “naked multitude” portrayed as a single giant in keeping with Blake’s theory that “Multitudes of Men in Harmony” appear “as One Man.”¹⁶ The hair is twisted into flame-like points.

Gilchrist saw a personification of sunrise, Wright the exhilaration of youth aglow—making nothing of the lines Blake engraved under the picture some time in 1800 or later:¹⁷

Albion rose from where he labourd at the Mill with Slaves

Giving himself for the Nations he danc’d the dance of Eternal Death.

(E660/K160)

The symbolism of this inscription derives from Blake’s paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence in *America*, though it is a later symbolism than that of *America*, for Albion is here more than a place name: he is “Albion the ancient Man” of *The Four Zoas*, that is, the eternal Englishman or, more broadly, the people. Blake is saying that in 1780 the people of England rose up in a demonstration of independence, dancing the dance of insurrection (apocalyptic self-sacrifice) to save the Nations (Blake’s term in *America* for the Colonies). Albion’s facial expression must be read as that of one offering himself a living sacrifice.

Albion’s dance comes from, and serves as a characteristic Blakean reversal of, the following passage in Burke’s 1796 *Letter to a Noble*

Lord. Recollecting “the portentous crisis from 1780 to 1782” precipitated by the Gordon riots, Burke shudders at the thought of how close England came to revolution at a time when “wild and savage insurrection quitted the woods and prowled about our streets in the name of Reform.” Had the horrid “comet of the Rights of Man ... crossed upon us in that internal state of England,” or had the changes called for by the Reformers “taken place, not France, but England would have had the honor of leading up the death-dance of democratic revolution.” We begin to see the kind of London Blake’s ideas developed in.¹⁸

2

Blake’s testimony in 1800 as to his intellectual life preceding the American War is brief but suggestive. “Now my lot in the Heavens is this, Milton lov’d me in childhood & shew’d me his face. Ezra came with Isaiah the Prophet, but Shakespeare in riper years gave me his hand; Paracelsus & Boehmen appear’d to me, terrors appear’d in the Heavens above And in Hell beneath, & a mighty & awful change threatened the Earth. The American War began. All its dark horrors ...,” and so on. The change was mighty and perhaps sudden but not unexpected. In the Heavens it was presaged by Paracelsus & Boehme.¹⁹ One gathers that Blake’s reading in these murky seers corresponded to a growing awareness of social conflict “in Hell beneath” (for his language in this letter is adapted to the views of a “dear friend” who wished to purge him of his Jacobinism). The large place assigned by Boehme to evil in the cosmos as necessary to the manifestation of God’s goodness; the emphasis of Paracelsus on reversal and change, on the interaction of the opposites forming the alchemical unity of generation: Blake would not incorporate these things into his own world-view until much later, but even now they must have lent a larger and at times fearful significance to his formal studies of “the exact rules of proportion” and the “Most Exact grounds and Rules of SYMMETRY.”²⁰

So, too, the mounting tension between peaceful citizens and a tyrant king must have entered his awareness with considerable force even before the war, for his response to its outbreak assumes at once the language of extreme contrasts, as we shall see. In *America*, a fully organized account written in the light of the French Revolution, Blake anticipates the modern historian in the belief that the American

Revolution took place in the minds of men in the decades preceding the war.²¹ He may not have recognized what was happening at the time, but it will repay us to consider what evidences of threatened change must have appeared on at least the fringes of Blake's consciousness as he entered the "riper years" of his teens. Further on we will have to examine more closely the questions that occupied his mind as an "Ingenious Practitioner in the Art of Symmetry."

The American War climaxed a decade during which the tradesmen and householders of London, such as Blake's father, a hosier, and Blake's master, an engraver—though we have no knowledge of their sentiments in particular—had become more than usually aroused in defense of their chartered rights and had exercised their voting strength to control local institutions and elect "Wilkites" to Parliament through the exceptionally democratic franchise systems of the cities of London and Westminster and the county of Middlesex. From Blake's tenth to his twenty-second year this London area was the central rallying-ground, outside the American colonies, of resistance to the court. George III, who had come to the throne in 1760, liked to call himself "the sovereign of a free people," but he had moved steadily toward personal rule, and his apparent ambition to crush the spirit of independence wherever it might appear caused grave alarm. Two revolutions had taught kings of England to respect the people, and George III did not attempt to ignore their Parliamentary representatives. He simply bought them. Taking over the Whig machinery of bribery and electoral manipulation, he effectually disintegrated the Whigs and surrounded himself with "friends." During this process an odious general warrant was issued in 1763 to destroy the gadfly opposition of John Wilkes's editorials in the *North Briton*. The dragnet application of the warrant wounded the dignity of some forty-eight compositors and printers and other shopmen, and when Wilkes declared that his resistance to the court was testing the liberty of "all the middling and inferior set of people," London agreed and its juries demanded stiff fines of the law officers who had conducted the arrests. As for Wilkes himself, "accident made him a patriot," as he said. And while there lingers some doubt as to how thorough a patriot she made him, the fact is that in the following years "Wilkes and Liberty" came to mean civic and Parliamentary reform, freedom of the press, freedom from the press gangs, a larger loaf, and solidarity with the "Liberty Boys" of Boston and Philadelphia. The shopmen of London chose John Wilkes for sheriff and alderman and

mayor, and he checked abuses in law-court, meat-market, and debtors' prison. When they elected him to Parliament, in 1768, they shut up shop and took over the streets for two days, a genial and triumphant crowd, covering the city with liberty emblems. Benjamin Franklin, a witness of this demonstration, opined that if the King had had a bad character and Wilkes a good one, George would have been dethroned.²²

There had been similar rejoicing in 1766 when the American Stamp Act had been repealed—bells ringing from dawn to midnight, flags flying from every ship in the Thames, candles in every window. Both rejoicings misgauged the royal stubbornness. George in turn misgauged that of his subjects and proceeded with further steps to school them in obedience. The new member of Parliament for Middlesex went to jail, and when crowds assembled in protest, fighting broke out and royal troops fired among the people, slaying seven. “His Majesty highly approves,” an officer announced, and angry murmurs spread. Word went round that this “Massacre of St. George’s Fields” had been premeditated. Again and again the voters named Wilkes their representative but were overruled with doubtful constitutionality by the King’s majority in the House of Commons. As the conflict between King and City deepened it also widened, and Patriots began to organize in other English towns and in the colonies across the Atlantic. “The fate of Wilkes and America must stand or fall together,” wrote an ardent correspondent from Boston.

Then in Blake’s twelfth year came the “Boston Massacre” of 1770, in which three citizens were slain by royal musketeers. In London the Patriot press carried graphic illustrations of the fatal scene,²³ and both cities grew increasingly defiant of royal tyranny. Lord Mayor Beckford momentarily *replied*, politely but audibly, to the King’s rejection of a City petition. In the following year a Wilkite mayor countered royal efforts to increase the standing army with press-gang methods by prosecuting officers of the crown for using press-warrants in the city. Among the throngs who cried “Wilkes and Liberty” some were beginning to add “and no King.” In the fall of 1774 Wilkes and twelve patriot “Apostles” were elected to Parliament on a platform of electoral reform and NO WAR! Popular celebration exceeded previous street demonstrations and no officials risked firing upon the crowd this time. When open war did come it was commonly referred to in London as “the civil war,” with the implication that geography did not

make the cause remote. Commenting on the King's address to Parliament in February 1775, Wilkes exclaimed: "It draws the sword unjustly against America!"

When news of Lexington and Concord reached London late in May, it was the patriot version, signed by Arthur Lee, that first filled the papers: that Major Pitcairne had fired the first shot to force unwilling English troops to shed fraternal blood. The *Gazette* urged the public to suspend belief, and an official version was circulated that rebel Sons of Liberty had fired first, from behind a wall. But it was the English shot that was heard round the world; Blake would never forget that it was "Satan" who "first the black bow bent" (*J.52:17*). Affidavits were sent from America and circulated widely to support the patriot account; George Washington's covering letter with one set of these expressed a sentiment common on both sides of the Atlantic:

"Unhappy it is ... to reflect that a Brother's Sword has been sheathed in a Brother's breast, and that the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with blood or Inhabited by Slaves. Sad alternative. But can a virtuous Man hesitate in his Choice?"²⁴

Indignant pamphlets on the bookstalls used the same high rhetoric, frequently drawing upon the strongest phrases from the Old Testament and Shakespeare.²⁵ Blake wielded the current idiom in his own way when he composed the following indictment of an English king for launching an unjust war in the name of justice. No London patriot could have missed its modern ring even though Blake designed it ostensibly as a "Prologue" for an unwritten play about civil war in the days of King John:

"Justice hath heaved a sword to plunge in Albion's breast; for Albion's sins are crimson dy'd, and the red scourge follows her desolate sons! Then Patriot rose; full oft did Patriot rise, when Tyranny hath stain'd fair Albion's breast with her own children's gore.... The stars of heaven tremble: the roaring voice of war, the trumpet, calls to battle! Brother in brother's blood must bathe, rivers of death! O land, most hapless! O beauteous island, how forsaken! ... The aged senators their ancient swords assume!²⁶ The trembling sinews of old age must work the work of death against their progeny; for Tyranny hath stretch'd his purple arm, and 'blood,' he cries; ...— Beware, O Proud! thou shalt be humbled; ... O yet may Albion smile again, and stretch her peaceful arms ...!" (E430/K11).

Blake wrote this and several other *Poetical Sketches* in the same vein, justifying the insurrection of Patriots against Tyranny and warning certain unnamed “Kings and Nobles of the Land” to look out for the wrath of God and the people. Though addressed to conflicts of the past, the words throb with living emotion and the poet breaks in time and again to exhort a royal audience—as if he were writing an open letter to King George—and to pray for sufficient eloquence to “dispel Envy and Hate, that thirst for human gore” (*Imitation of Spenser*).

The speaker of the *Prologue to King John* can seldom pull himself away from the present tense. The speaker of the *Prologue, intended for a dramatic piece of King Edward the Fourth* is almost unhinged with prophetic wrath against the “Kings and Nobles” who have caused a sinful war and must “answer at the throne of God.” His desire for prophetic power is explicit:

O for a voice like thunder, and a tongue
To drown the throat of war!

Gwin, King of Norway opens directly with a call to “Kings” to “listen to my song,” and the message is a bloody one, full of intense sympathy for husbandman and merchant, shepherd and workman who must take up arms to resist Gwin’s “cruel sceptre” (E409/ K11).

Blake’s later account, in *America*, tells the same story of popular opposition. Tyranny having consulted his Privy Council or “call’d the stars round his feet,” “George the third” calls upon “his Lords & Commons” to vote for war. When Parliament does so (in the session of 1774–1775) “its shining pillars split in twain,” signaling not simply the divided vote but the fact that Parliament has abrogated its function as a representative body. The pillars split and the roofs crack because “the valley mov’d beneath.” Here “valley” signifies “the people”: they have moved in one direction while their “dismal” representatives have moved in another. Blake dwells on the ominous silence of the people out of doors in response to the official drum-beating and flag-waving. “Arm’d clouds arise terrific round the northern drum” in pursuance of the vote for an army increase, but “the world is silent at the flapping of the folding banners.” The whole valley of the Thames is darkened by “clouds of smoke from the Atlantic” betokening the increase of “American” patriotism in England. According to Blake the Colonies also refused “the loud

alarm” until the King sent over his “punishing Demons.”²⁷

How immediate Blake’s response was we do not know; the *Poetical Sketches* were not printed until 1783, the year of the peace treaties, and we know only that some were written before and some during the war. We should hardly expect a chronological order in the lyrics and fragments of blank verse and cadenced prose that fill the volume, for they seem to be loosely arranged according to these respective types; nevertheless the sequence from laughing songs, one of which we are told was “written before the age of fourteen,”²⁸ to grim prophecies, such as the *Prologue to King John*, is as marked as the change from peace to war during the time Blake was writing; and manifestly the anti-war pieces reflect the launching and first years of the war rather than the patriots’ victories that ended it.

The progression of the volume is then a kind of weather chart of Blake’s ripening years. Most of the first sixteen poems are idyls of the untroubled life; their author loves to “strike the silver wire” or sound his “fresh pipe” in songs of mirth and peace: “I love the jocund dance, The softly breathing song... the laughing vale ... the pleasant cot ... our neighbours all, [and] Kitty.” Sorrow, even in the Gothic ballad *Fair Elenor*, is personal and romantic; the only tyrant exhorted is Winter. Nearly all the remaining sketches, from *Gwin* to *Samson*, depict or reflect a state of war and deal with the tyrants that oppress nations. Possibly some of the more pensive selections were written before the war: *Contemplation*, *Blind-Maris Buff*, and *An Imitation of Spenser* touch on bloodshed and misery but without the social urgency of the prologues or *Samson*. Two others must be put aside for the moment as enigmas: the fragmentary drama, *King Edward the Third*, and *A War Song to Englishmen*. The rest express an intense, even propagandists abhorrence of war-making kings. These sketches, indeed, corroborate Blake’s later assertion that he responded to the “dark horrors” of the war with “nervous fear.” According to *King Edward the Fourth* “the senses are shaken, and the soul is driven to madness” at contemplation of the fury and slaughter unleashed by kings and nobles. According to *King John* “each heart does tremble, and each knee grows slack” at the prospect of civil war. And in *Samson*, a prose poem full of bitter words against the oppression and slaughter of nations, the poet prays to the white-robed Angel of Truth to “guide my timorous hand to write as on a lofty rock with iron pens the words of truth, that all who pass may read.”

The contrast between iron pens and timorous hand is to be noted, for it epitomizes the conflict between bardic duty and personal caution that will emerge later as an important symptom of Blake's frustration as a prophet without an audience. The *Poetical Sketches* were never published except among friends, perhaps as an early result of the nervous fear that often inhibited Blake's utterance. In the *Sketches* the prophet speaks plainly enough for "all who pass" and can well have expected—and even feared²⁹—that his contemporaries would grasp the historical parallels. It is instructive to note that on at least one later occasion he did quietly call attention to the prophetic timeliness of the *Prologue for Edward the Fourth*.³⁰

Surely Gilchrist was right when he said that Blake was "a fervent propagandist" of the idea of "the supreme despicableness of war ... in days when war was tyrannously in the ascendant" (p. 47), but he was speaking only of Blake's two paintings exhibited in the spring of 1784. The poems he dismissed as "a boy's poems."³¹ And he did not notice that the paintings recorded not only the war's end, *A Breach in a City the Morning after the Battle*, but its beginning: *War unchained by an Angel—Fire, Pestilence, and Famine following*.

¹ Richard Cosway (1740–1821) became a teacher in Pars's school some time after 1760; Blake attended from 1768 to 1772. I am not certain that their time there overlapped. For their later relations see below.

Blake spoke to Crabb Robinson of having the faculty of vision "from early infancy," but the only anecdotes we have of early visions "savor of too much telling," as Miss Lowery observes, p. 1.

² Item signed "Decimus" in the *Middlesex Journal*, May 26.

^{2a} This is not to say he was unaware of what Stanley Gardner calls "the commonplace misery and arrogance that hung in the air he breathed." Gardner's chapter on "Blake's Westminster" (pp. 18–28) supplies details of his neighborhood. "Round the corner from Blake's house was Carnaby Market ... includ[ing] a slaughter-house, with women among its butchers, and the voice of the cattle ... stayed with Blake all his life.... In the Pawlett's Garden burial ground [nearby] was the St. James's Workhouse, 'capable of containing 300 poor people. When ... sick, they are removed to the infirmary ... near Broad Street.' ... The [workhouse] inmates were strictly controlled ... put to tasks of weaving, spinning.... In 1782 ... hardly a hundred yards west of Blake's home ... a School of Industry for older children from the workhouse.... after strict training and regular religious discipline the boys were sent to sea or apprenticed, and the girls 'placed out in service'." On the other hand, when Blake "came out of his front door and walked a few yards south down Marshall Street he came to Golden Square, 'which is very small, but neat, and is adorned on the inside with grass plats and gravel walks, and is surrounded with handsome iron rails'. In the middle was a statue, claimed to be of

George [II] a different world ... a cosmopolitan gentry At times the foreign legations moved into Golden Square.... Some streets were ‘much inhabited by the French’, who had places of worship, as did Anabaptists, Presbyterians, and Independents. Dominating all this was royalty and the church Opposite the parish church of St. James, Piccadilly, the young and extravagant Lord Melbourne had built his mansion, now called Albany...”

³ See Frye, p. 180.

⁴ Gilchrist, p. 31, quoting the *P.S.* advertisement. See Deborah Dorfman, “Blake in 1863 and 1880: The Gilchrist *Life*,” *BNYPL*, LXXI (1967), 216–244, for a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the original and the revised Gilchrist.

⁵ David S. Reid, “An Analysis of British Parliamentary Opinion on American Affairs ...” *Journal of Modern History*, xviii (1946), 202–221.

⁶ *B.M. Satires*, v, xviii–xxii. Prints next mentioned are nos. 5328, 5397, 5549. For “an almost incredibly violent attack on the king, the Ministry, and the conduct of the war” see no. 5470.

⁷ An omission being rectified by E. P. Thompson, who argues: “Against the background of London Dissent, with its fringe of deists and earnest mystics, William Blake seems no longer the cranky untutored genius that he must seem to those who know only the genteel culture of the time. On the contrary, he is the original yet authentic voice of a long popular tradition.” Thompson, p. 52.

⁸ In Vincenzo Scamozzi, *Idea dell’ Architettura Universale*, Roma, 1615, II, 40. Noted by Anthony Blunt in *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, II (1938), 65.

⁹ J. Paul De Castro, *The Gordon Riots*, London, 1926, p. vii, considers this “a greater influence in stimulating the Riots than has been recognized.” Cf. *B.M. Satires*, v, xxiii.

¹⁰ Sir N. W. Wraxall, *Historical and Political Memoirs, 1772–90*, London, 1884, 1, 335.

¹¹ George Lord Gordon, *Innocence Vindicated*, Londo, 1783. The Catholic relief (for Canada) in the Quebec Act of 1774 was viewed as a carrot to draw Catholic Canadians to the Tory side, accompanying the club of coercive acts against Massachusetts. In 1778 a British Catholic relief bill was passed, the repeal of which was the rallying demand of the 1780 demonstrations. R. W. Postgate, *That Devil Wilkes*, London, 1929, p. 229, summarizes the popular fears: “Had not the Quebec act legalized Roman Catholicism as part of an attack on the Americans? Were not Catholic armies being raised in Canada, Scotland, and Ireland? Was it not well known that Catholics ... had inserted themselves as the chief agents of tyranny in many of the highest places?”

¹² Such was the recollection of Thomas Walker, in the *Courier* of July 12, 1794—an interesting confirmation of the recollection of Blake, finishing *America* in the previous summer.

¹³ De Castro, pp. 231–232, 241.

¹⁴ Bronowski, p. 36 [62]. It may be noted that Blake was in the streets during the fifth day and at the center of the action; the day when, according to Thompson in a discussion of recent studies of the Gordon Riots (pp. 71–72), “some of the ‘better sort of

tradesmen' faded away, while journeymen, apprentices, and servants—and some criminals—thronged the streets.”

¹⁵ Wright, 1, 8. One might note A. pl. 10; E. pl. 18. “That Blake, who detested the government, ever regretted the experience is unlikely.” Wright’s neglected volumes are full of these undigested apperçus.

¹⁶ V.L.J.76: E546/K607. This is Blake’s later language, but he could have formed the concept in 1780. A handbill called *The Scourge*, quoted in Holcroft’s *Narrative of the Late Riots*, London, 1780, urges “the necessity of ... persevering and being united as One Man, against the infernal designs of the Ministry.” —I cite this not as a source but as evidence of currency of the idea.

¹⁷ See my note, “The Dating of William Blake’s Engravings,” *Philological Quarterly*, xxxi (1952), 337–343, and *Blake Newsletter*, June 1969. On E804 I wavered to an earlier date, from a hasty dating of the script and forgetting the lateness of the “Albion” symbol.

¹⁸ Even *Albion rose* can be seen in Establishment terms, however; Anthony Blunt, who reads Blake’s *Nelson* painting as not ironic, suggests that the 1780 drawing “probably” illustrates *King Edward the Third* iii.1–5, “... the bright mom Smiles on our army....” (Blunt, p. 5, n. 13.)

¹⁹ The dates of publication of *The works of Jacob Behmen the Teutonic Theosopher*, London, 1764–1781, do overlap the beginning of the American War (vols. I & II, 1764; vol. III, 1772; vol. IV, 1781). Blake was evidently attracted by the striking symbolic “figures” designed by Dionysius Freher but first engraved for this edition. Blake told Crabb Robinson that “Michael Angelo could not have surpassed them” (Symons, p. 290). Unsigned, but in the general style of line engraving practised by Basire, they are sufficiently complicated to have been talked of in the trade—e.g. the plate of ten layers which unfold from the zodiac, to man in Eden, to the Logos.

Possible evidence of an interest in theosophical writings is the fact that in 1779 the name “Mr. William Blake” (if our Blake’s then suitably humble beside “William Sharp, Esq.,” “Jacob Bryant, Esq.,” et al.), appears in a list of subscribers to *Discourses on Various Subjects* by Jacob Duché, a preacher who had come to London from Philadelphia in 1777 (having lost hope in the patriot cause), who had long been interested in “the mysticism of Jacob Behmen and William Law” (as may appear in the *Discourses*), and who was to become “interested in the visions of Swedenborg” in the early ’80s. Sharp, who engraved the frontispieces and “also apparently took care of the publishing details” (*B. Bibliog.*, p. 305), moved on to Swedenborg. So did Blake, but perhaps not until 1787 or 1788; see below.

²⁰ Here and in the next paragraph I quote from the title pages of two drawing-school texts we may suppose Blake to have used: Alexander Browne’s *Whole Art of Drawing*, 1660, and his frequently reprinted *Ars Pictoria*, 1675. For Blake’s copying of figures from the latter see Collins Baker, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, iv (1940–1941), 359 ff.

²¹ See analysis below of the *Preludium of America*; cf. Arthur Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History*, New York, 1922, p. 162.

²² For many of the details on Wilkes and Wilkism I am indebted to Postdate, *That Devil Wilkes*, and Dora Mae Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, New

Haven, 1930.

²³ See engraving in *Freeholder's Magazine* for May 1770. Three 1770 London issues of Paul Revere's engraving *The Fruits of Arbitrary Power: or The Bloody Massacre* are recorded in W. L. Andrews, *An Essay on the Portraiture of the American Revolutionary War*, New York, 1896. Couplets and Bible verses appended to some copies strike a note similar to that of Blake's John and Edward Prologues (see below).

²⁴ Washington to G. W. Fairfax in London, May 31, 1775.

²⁵ See for example *A Second Appeal to the Justice and Interests of the People on the measures respecting America*, London, 1775, p. 51.

²⁶ On February 2, 1775, the House of Commons voted an Address to the King promising support with their own lives and fortunes against America.

²⁷ A.b and 10:4: E57, 54/K204, 200. "Valley" as a symbol for "people" is found earlier, in *F.R.*: "the voice of the people arising from valley and hill," "the voice of vallies, the voice of meek cities," "the valleys of France shall cry to the soldier, "Throw down thy sword and musket..."

For evidence that in 1776 various reformers were considering a plan to replace Parliament with a national Association representing all Englishmen, see H. Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People, 1779–80*, London, 1949, p. 263.

²⁸ From the testimony of Benjamin Heath Malkin in 1806 and the anonymous Advertisement in *Poetical Sketches* we may date the poems between 1770 and 1779, when Blake's apprenticeship ended in August. The prose sketches at the end may be of relative early composition; the opening group of season may have been prepared late, as an archway into the collection.

²⁹ Wilkes's associate John Horne (later Horne Tooke) was charged with seditious libel for uttering what all the papers had published—the American version of the killings at Lexington and Concord. *Howell's State Trials*, xx, 723.

³⁰ In one variant of his engraved print *Our End is Come*, 1793, denouncing in effect the King and Ministers then attacking France, Blake used for a caption a line and a half from this earlier denunciation of the King and Nobles attacking America, with page reference to the *Sketches* for anyone who possessed a copy. See below, Plate IV. For the variant captions, see E660.

³¹ Many readers have recognized the anti-war sentiment of some of the *Sketches* but have found jingoism in some and thought it to be Blake's. Bronowski is unique in asserting that Blake "always held" a strong feeling against war "in the whole context made by the American war and the England of his time" (p. 32 [58]), and Bronowski is the only critic who calls attention to the Wilkite radicalism of Blake's England; but he says nothing at all about any of the *Sketches* except *Gwin*.

2. The Fierce Americans

“Pull down the tyrant to the dust,
“Let Gwin be humblèd,”
They cry; “and let ten thousand lives
“Pay for the tyrant’s head,”

AMONG the *Poetical Sketches* the ballad *Gwin, King of Norway*, addressed in a precautionary plural to “Kings” who are to “listen to my song,” is of considerable interest as Blake’s earliest and plainest account of a revolution and as evidence of how far he entered imaginatively into the drama of civil conflict. The geography is sufficiently obscure so that the “nations of the North” oppressed by King Gwin may easily be compared to the nations of North America oppressed by King George.¹ Their economic plight is represented as driving them to desperation; the Nobles feed upon the hungry Poor:

The land is desolate; our wives
And children cry for bread;
Arise, and pull the tyrant down;
Let Gwin be humblèd.

The people’s cry rouses the sleeping giant Gordred, a kind of unchained Prometheus, whose shaking of the hills immediately produces a “num’rous” armed multitude, rushing along under “troubl’d banners.” Wives and children follow, “weeping loud,” yet willing to sacrifice ten thousand lives for “the tyrant’s head.” That would not be an unusual price, according to the history books. The Scots who resisted Edward III at Halidon Hill, for example, were said to have lost 30,000 in the process of slaying only fifteen of the King’s men. But kings who listen to Blake’s song are to understand that an armed and roused populace are not deterred by long odds: the women and children become “furious as wolves,” the men “Like lions’ whelps, roaring abroad, Seeking their nightly food.”

Led by their giant champion the nations roll up to the palace. Gwin is not directly said to tremble (as “the King of England looking westward trembles” at a similar vision in *America*). But “his palace shakes,” his chiefs “stand around the King” like “reared stones around a grave,” and seize their spears. The consistency of Blake’s view of history is indicated in his use of this same scene for similar moments in *The French Revolution* and *Our End is Come* (Plate IV).

The people’s army is made up of minutemen: the husbandman from the plow, the merchant from “the trading shore,” the workman exchanging his hammer for “the bloody bill.” In a similar passage in *Samson* (E436/K40) “the shepherd bears a sword; the ox goad is turned into a spear! O when shall our Deliverer come?” In *Gwin* the rising up of the oppressed behind the “troubled banners” of their Deliverer “Gordred the giant” parallels the hope that some American champion would prove the Samson of the New World. After a brief declaration of war by King Gwin and a declaration of insurrection by Gordred, who is a kind of George Washington and Tom Paine in one, the “raging armies” rush at each other to produce a sea of blood, hills of slain, “famine and death,” and “cries of women and of babes” surpassing any horrors to be found in Chatterton or Macpherson. The King, nevertheless, is kept in the limelight so that all the actual slaying seems to be done by him: “beneath his arm like sheep they die.” And the prophet cries out:

O what have Kings to answer for
Before that awful throne!

Ghosts of the thousands Gwin has slain “glut the throat of hell” and groan “for vengeance.”²

The revolutionary act of justice that follows is relatively surgical. The giant Deliverer severs the King’s head with “the first blow.” The tyrant’s remaining armies flee the land. The poet’s message to kings is unmistakable.

2

Gwin as a prophecy promises the destruction of both the king and his armies. The fact that King George survived the conflict moved Blake in 1793 to write a full account of it in *America, A Prophecy*³ to point to the spiritual continuity of the American and French

Revolutions and to suggest that the ruin of kings was coming ever closer to the home of tyrant George. *America* is colored by that purpose and by the maturing of Blake's thought in the light of historical developments. Yet despite a luxuriant elaboration of symbolism, to which we must attend later on, *America*, like *Gwin*, tells essentially the story of a simple struggle between rulers and "oppressed." A comparison of the two will demonstrate how largely *Gwin* is an imaginative interpretation of the American Revolution, will illustrate the continuity and development of Blake's revolutionary sympathies, and will serve to give proper emphasis to the central importance in his life and works of the events of the 1770's.

The story in *America* (E51/K197) opens with tyrant and patriots facing each other across the Atlantic on the world stage:

The Guardian Prince of Albion bums in his nightly tent,
Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow to America's shore:
Piercing the souls of warlike men, who rise in silent night.

As in *Gwin*, responsibility for open war is put squarely upon the King, whose ambition is indicated by the "sullen fires"—an echo perhaps of Paine's epithet in *Common Sense*: "the sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England." As desperation forces the oppressed in *Gwin* to become "sons of blood," in *America* the threat of "blood from Albions fiery Prince" pierces the souls of "Washington, Franklin, Paine & Warren, Gates, Hancock & Green," forcing them to rise and meet as "warlike men."

Washington points to the threat of war ("a bended bow") and to the shackling legislation from England intended to turn the people of the Colonies into the whip-driven slaves of a modern Pharaoh.

... Friends of America[!] look ... a heavy iron chain Descends link by link from Albions cliffs across the sea to bind Brothers & sons of America, till our faces pale and yellow; Heads deprest, voices weak, eyes downcast, hands work-bruis'd, Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of the whip Descend to generations that in future times forget.

(A.3:6–12)

Blake derives this speech (unlike anything the silent general ever uttered) from a poetic fiction by Joel Barlow in which Washington addresses the patriot armies as he assumes command near the

smoldering ruins of Charlestown after the battle of Bunker Hill;⁴ but Blake includes Warren, who died in that battle, among the warlike men with Washington and seems to fuse this scene into Barlow's picture of the first patriot Congress a year earlier. Thus the war has begun spiritually but not yet corporeally.⁵

Hearing Washington's "strong voice" from America, the wrathful Prince of Albion assumes "a dragon form" (pictured on plate 4: see Fig. 1) and clashes his scales. At this point an early draft of the poem shifts to the meeting of Parliament which split in voting for war—a passage we have already discussed. The "Prince of Albion" (Barlow's term) undergoes a Hyde-Jekyll transformation, dropping his scales, glowing eyes, and other features that "Reveal the dragon thro' the human" before entering the House as "George the third."⁶ Meanwhile (to return to the final version of the poem) a tremendous event is taking place in America. The theory of freedom is emerging into practice. With vast birth pangs a new "Wonder" arises, naked, gigantic, and "Intense!" Surrounded by "cloudy terrors" and dark banners similar to the "troubl'd banners" around Gordred—a similarity that reveals the continuity of Blake's visions—this new spirit of revolution is "a Human fire fierce glowing."

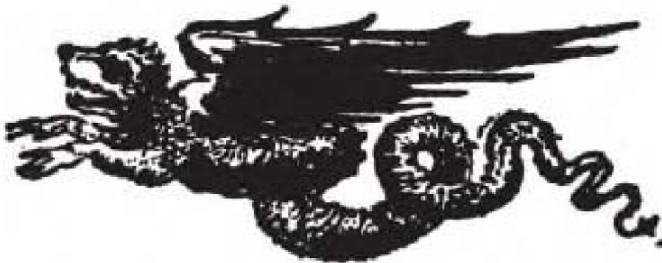


Fig. 1.

The physically gigantic Deliverer has grown into the gigantic moral power of the glowing spirit of humanity. Yet this spirit supplies "heat but not light" to the "fierce Americans" (A.4:11; 15:12) and appears to the trembling "King of England" as a "Spectre ... horrid" who proceeds to recite the Declaration of Independence in the form of a sequence of images or what Blake will come to call "Visionary forms

dramatic” (J.98). Such language is proper to emancipated humanity, but its beauty is wasted on the jaundiced King.

It is important for us to recognize this passage (*America*, plate 6) as Blake’s poetic paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence because he frequently alludes to it by repeating one or two of its central images, as we have seen him do in the engraved inscription to *Albion rose*. The page is illuminated with a picture of a naked young (resurrected) man sitting on the grave of his dead past and gazing confidently into the heavens. The passage is too long to quote in full, but Blake’s method can be indicated if we place his nuclear images beside the corresponding phrases of the Declaration. That document holds that all men are endowed with “certain inalienable rights,” including:

life—“The morning comes ... The grave is burst.”

liberty—“Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field”;
“Let the inchained soul ... look out”; “let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge.”

and the pursuit of happiness—“Let him look up into the heavens & laugh ... Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years”; the reunited family “look behind at every step & believe it is a dream. Singing. The Sun has left his blackness, & has found a fresher morning.”

it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government . . . having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny—“For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease.”

The King, burning “wrathful,” replies with what today would be called “red-baiting”:

... Art thou not Orc ... serpent-form’d ...
Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, hater of Dignities;
Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of Gods Law;
Why dost thou come to Angels eyes in this terrific form?

(A7:3–7)

—an outburst that seems based on the royal proclamation of August 23, 1775, denouncing “Rebellion ... Treasons and Traitorous

Conspiracies ... against Us, Our Crown and Dignity.”

Only after another declaration by the fierce-glowing Spirit of Rebellion, who accepts the name Orc,⁷ and further blowing of the war trumpet by Albion’s Prince or Angel, does the Angel of Boston finally throw off allegiance to monarchy (robe and scepter), setting an example which the other twelve Angels follow.⁸ The action moves across Blake’s stage on several levels and transcends chronology, so that this exchange of challenges seems to precede the mustering of British troops; yet the first scene is filled with the smoke of British naval bombardment even though the command to fire is not heard till plate 14.^{8a} Blake is experimenting with the process of dramatic rearrangement of detail begun in his major source, Barlow’s epic *Vision of Columbus* (1787), in which all the bombardments and burnings of colonial towns throughout the war are portrayed as a simultaneous action preceding the battle of Bunker Hill. Blake distributes the lurid images of Barlow’s vision of bombardment through several passages of *America*.⁹

Another early page at this point describes the arming of Albion’s Angel in London:

... silent stood the King breathing damp mists:
And on his aged limbs they clasp’d the armour of terrible gold.
(A.c:5–6)

The age is as figurative as the armor. George was only 37 in 1775, but tyranny was old.

Rebellion “gath’ring thick In flames as of a furnace on the land from North to South,” a fire kindled by British guns but in effect a furnace of resistance, soon routs “the thirteen Governors that England sent.” They rush out of Governor Bernard’s house, “Shaking their mental chains,” to grovel at the feet of Washington.¹⁰ And while they lie writhing, all is not well with the King’s troops. “My punishing Demons,” he has complained, “cannot smite the wheat, nor quench the fatness of the earth. They cannot smite with sorrows, nor subdue the plow and spade.... For terrible men stand on the shores, & in their robes I see Children take shelter from the lightnings.”¹¹ Now, giving up the conflict, all

The British soldiers thro' the thirteen states sent up a howl
Of anguish: threw their swords & muskets to the earth & ran From
their encampments.... (A.13:6–8)

Thus briefly does Blake summarize the military story, emphasizing the British surrenders (chiefly at Saratoga, 1777, and Yorktown, 1781). He then develops the political history from the Boston tea party (“mariners of Boston ... unlade”) to the collapse of royal authority in London, a matter for later discussion.

It is evident that there are important differences between *Gwin* and *America*, but none that imply any basic shift of sympathy. *Gwin*, written in anger before the victory of the rebelling “nations” was in sight, prophesies the downfall of royalty but pictures no relief for the blood-drenched and “overwhelm’d” land. *America*, written after the formation of republics in America and France, exults both in the failure of royal efforts to smite the wheat and overwhelm the people and in the solidarity of the farmers and citizens who “all rush together in the night in wrath” (A.14:19).

In *Gwin* the insurrectionary acts of the people are subordinated to the heroic deeds of their Deliverer, a champion in the Biblical tradition.¹² In *America* the champions are Washington, Paine, Franklin; scribe, builder, mariner—“terrible men” in the eyes of a tyrant, but not supermen. Their strength is in their united rising and in the force of the human fire that inspires them. It is notable that the British surrenders are pictured as a kind of mass desertion by the common soldiers, “seeking where to hide From ... the visions of Orc,” and that their generals are not mentioned, although in the illustrations there is a revolutionary trial of the King by warlike patriots, comparable to Gordred’s beheading of Gwin.¹³

In both prophecies Blake warns kings, nobles, and bishops: If you go on binding the nations, oppressing the poor, and ravaging the countryside with war, the result must be revolt. The people will overthrow war, pull down the temples of tyranny, and bring you to judgment. The means of judgment differ some-what. In *America* the patriots themselves hold the fiery sword and the balances (plate 5) and their resistance to the code of kings is itself a judgment of kings. In the inconsistent theology of the *Poetical Sketches* there is a “god of war” who takes part in the battle and drinks blood, and the armies of Gwin and Gordred are said to be “like balances held in th’ Almighty’s

hand.” But at the same time the “stench of blood makes sick the Heav’ns,” and kings will have to answer for the bloodshed “Before that awful throne.” In the *Prologue for King Edward the Fourth* we are told first that the nations are driven into war by God’s “frowns”—but then that kings, nobles, and ministers of God have “caused” the war and that the poet hopes for their sake that God will “hear it not.” This contradiction will never be entirely resolved, but in *America* Blake sharply distinguishes the god of war, Urizen, and his Satanic Angel the Prince of Albion, from the Christ-like god, Orc, who is divine yet human and whose sword promotes peace.

Before we go on to *King Edward the Third*, the maturest of the *Sketches* and the one most intricately and surprisingly related to *America*, but also the most enigmatic, it is time to return to the valley of the Thames in the years when it was “dark with clouds of smoke from the Adantic” (A.b), for we should now be ready to re-examine the supposedly cloistral isolation of Blake’s apprentice years to see at how many windows the noise of London Patriotism must have entered his world.

¹ In imagery and phrasing Blake’s *Gwin* (E409–412/K11–14) owes something to Chatterton’s *Godred Crovan*, ballad of a Norse tyrant’s invasion of the Isle of Man. See Lowery, ch. vii. But there is no popular uprising in Chatterton, while in Blake the king is not the invader but the oppressor of certain “nations” which he rules.

² For a comparably violent analogue see *The Closet*, a satiric print of Jan. 28, 1778, which charges the King and his ministers with tyranny and with responsibility for savage atrocities in America. *B.M. Satires*, no. 5470.

³ “1793” is the date on the title page, but *America* had undergone considerable revision—as witness the surviving plates of an earlier draft—and may have been several years in preparation.

⁴ Max Gartenberg has called my attention to Blake’s use of Barlow’s *Vision of Columbus: A Poem in Nine Books*, Hartford and London, 1787. In Book V, while “banner’d hosts around him roll,” Washington calls on patriot chiefs and daring bands to resist the invaders lest “following millions” as the “endless years descend” be forced to “Bend the weak knee, in servile chains consign’d, And sloth and slavery overwhelm mankind.” See my note, “William Blake’s Debt to Joel Barlow,” *American Literature*, xxvi (1954), 94–98.

Washington’s speech in *America* may also owe something to Washington’s letter of 1775 quoted above.

⁵ Blake’s transformation of the narrative symmetry of chronology into scenic or thematic symmetry is a subject outside the scope of the present volume. The present purpose is to extract and bring into focus the imbedded narrative matter.

⁶ In the final draft King George is not named. His “dragon form,” especially as pictured (Fig. 1), suggests the grinning dragons on the banners of the Men of Kent and other British regiments, from which the name Dragoon Guards is derived. See below, p. 74, n. 35.

Patrick J. Callahan has found a likely (but more bull doggish) dragon, confronting a segmented serpent (“JOIN OR DIE”) across the top of a Colonial newspaper.

Kathleen Raine calls attention to a “dragon of the moon” in Agrippa (not very like) and an “emblem of matter” in Thomas Vaughan’s *Lumen de Lumine* (1651) which does resemble Blake’s dragon in head, wings, scales, and arrow-pointed tail (though *not*, as she carelessly says, in “paws”—for Vaughan’s are vulture’s claws and Blake’s human hands). Attending more to alchemical symbols than to Blake’s, she gets Urizen and Orc mixed but does ask the useful question whether this dragon is a basilisk. (*Blake and Tradition*, Princeton, 1969, I, 115, 117, figs. 50, 52, 53.) The fitting and Blakean irony is that the dragon form of the King is that of a basilisk or king-killer; his assumption of it symbolizes his own destruction.

⁷ “... the word *orca* ... is applied to any monster or creature of the imagination [and] occurs in Milton,” we are told in Hoole’s *Orlando Furioso*, 1783, for which Blake made an engraving. Noted by Palmer Brown.

Orc is a common name for a whale, either the grampus or the killer, and the name suggests Orcus, Hell’s inexorable reaper (of kings). Blake makes a classical allusion in *Tiriell* iv.76 to “vacant Orcus,” and it is notable that Carlyle refers to the September 1792 slaying of royalist suspects as a bursting forth of “Night and Orcus ... as was long prophesied.” Orc is born in or above the Atlantic deeps, and in the Preludium he speaks of his ability to appear in many forms, “sometimes a whale ... anon a serpent.” On pl. 4 there is something like a whale (Wilkism perhaps?) lying beside the King on Albion’s shore: and that is what the pictured King is looking at, although the text has him “looking westward ... at the vision.” The revolution is too close for comfort.

The Biblical Leviathan is also both whale and sea serpent, but Blake always paints him as sea serpent, “War by Sea,” a separate thing from the Orc symbol. In the social body, Orc is not the heart (*cor*) as some have thought, but the genitals (*ὄρχις*), as Blake makes pretty clear.

⁸A.11–12. If Blake is following Barlow at this point, Boston’s Angel is Samuel Adams, concluding a speech in the First Congress (1774) with a thundering appeal for “INDEPENDENCE.”

^{8a} And even as Boston’s Angel speaks, the American Angels, “indignant burning with the fires of Orc,” are flying “thro’ the dark night” (pl. 11)— and beneath these words a naked youth rides a soaring pen swan, suggesting a combination of Paul Revere, Adams, and Tom Paine, “the scribe of Pennsylvania” who, on pl. 14, “casts his pen upon the earth” only to use it as a weapon.

⁹Comparison to Barlow makes clear that the “Demon red, who burnt towards America” when Boston’s Angel took his stand with Washington, was not Orc but one of Albion’s “punishing Demons” or redcoats (or the King in his dragon form) guiding the navy which, in Barlow’s synoptic vision, cast a shadow on the American shore from the St. Lawrence to Georgia, pointed black batteries to the peopled shore, and then poured

“bursting flames,” “stormy thunders,” and “shells o’er-arching” into American ports until flames mounted “from realm to realm” in “smoky volumes” and “heavy wreaths,” to kindle heaven. Compare Blake: “the Demon red ... burnt towards America [while] in black smoke [the] thunders and loud winds rejoic[ed] in its [the Demon’s] terror, Breaking in smoky wreaths from the wild deep [here is naval cannonfire] & gath’ring thick In flames as of a furnace [here are the burning towns] on the land from North to South” (A.12:9–12). Yet even these flames, since they terrify the British governors but not Boston and Washington, become metamorphosed into the flames of rebellion. The addition of *plague* fires (there are none in Barlow) completes the transformation: but that is matter for a later chapter. I have written a more elaborate analysis of the choreography and dynamics of *America* in “*America: New Expanses*,” *Blake’s Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. D. V. Erdman and J. E. Grant; Princeton, 1970.

¹⁰ A.12:12; 13:1–5. Here Blake reaches back to the fall of Francis Bernard, who was sent to govern Massachusetts in 1760 but had to be recalled to England in 1769. His “fatal deficiency in political tact and insight undoubtedly assisted to hasten the war” (D.N.B.), and Blake has chosen his “house” as a fitting residence for all the governors who continued his fatal policy.

¹¹ A.9:3–10. Barlow’s Washington sheds light here: the covetous invaders “see your fields to lordly manors turn’d, Your children butcher’d, and your villas burn’d.” The “lightnings” from which Washington protects the children must be “the long lightnings” which burn from British “musquets.”

¹² Perhaps a reflection of the primitive character of Wilkism as a some-what amorphous rallying of masses behind a champion.

¹³ A.5, discussed below.

A poetic response to the American War that presents several analogies to Blake’s is that of Thomas Day, 1748–1789. His *Ode for the New Year 1776* predicts ruin to follow from Albion’s drinking “her Children’s gore” Conquest claps her wings over the patriots, but justice will smite the guilty. Compare Blake’s Prologues. Then in *The Devoted Legions*, March 1776, he predicts doom to the campaign against the Carolinas. In this poem he calls Britain “Rome” and uses the framework of Gray’s *Bard to prophesy* the terrors that await aggressive rulers; he, as bard, will die. The scene presented in *The Desolation of America*, December 1777, is comparable to the desolation pictured in Gwin and Samson. Day’s group of three Americans fleeing the invaders, an aged father, a mother, and a daughter, is like the group frequently drawn by Blake.

It is possible that Blake knew, certain that he admired, Day. Irene Tayler has noted that in 1796 Blake gave him memorial honors by inscribing “Thomas Day” on a metaphoric gravestone in the design for the fourth page of *Night Nine* of *Edward Young’s Night Thoughts*.

3. Republican Art

Renew the Arts on Britains Shore ...

And War shall sink beneath thy feet.¹

“REPUBLICAN ART” is a phrase that flows casually from Blake’s pen in the last year of his life, summarizing the aims of that life in a letter to his republican friend, the artist George Cumberland. In a broad general sense we may use the phrase to characterize the new interest in national and popular art which accompanied the widespread enthusiasm for peaceful progress just before and during the American Revolution, an interest which Wilkes himself responded to with considerable vigor, and an interest which must be reckoned as a central one in Blake’s formative years. Yet our information about these years is so meager that to the important question of how soon Blake found out that “an Angel” at his birth had, as he declared in 1810, commanded him to renew the arts in an essentially republican fashion, we must reply with a chapter of inferences and associations that say more about Blake’s world than about Blake himself.

Shortly before his thirteenth birthday—at the commencement of his third year of attendance at Pars’s Drawing School if we may trust his own usually careful dating—Blake set out to cultivate “the two Arts, Painting & Engraving,” and thereafter “during a Period of Forty Years never suspended his Labours on Copper for a single day.”² This choice of vocation was novel but forward looking, and James Blake was doing well enough in his hosiery shop to be able to encourage his headstrong son. English painting, long neglected, had begun to come into its own, and in this same year a Royal Academy of Art was being formed. The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Commerce, and Manufactures was offering prizes to young painters; and exhibitions of contemporary English art, a very new thing, were attracting the public. A new and rapidly expanding domestic and continental trade in engraved prints promised much to the youth who could both draw and engrave. Two years later, in August 1772, Blake began his seven-year apprenticeship to James Basire, engraver to the London Society of Antiquaries and to the new Royal Academy, and within a year he was able to etch and engrave an entire plate himself, after a fashion.³ In 1774 he was assigned by his master to copy, for the Antiquaries, the monuments of ancient British dynasts.

Blake’s association with the Antiquaries has been taken to connote something conservative and even rather desiccated in his early environment,

but the Society itself was young,⁴ and some of its members were exploring the sources of culture and history in the spirit of a national renaissance. They constituted the inevitable special audience for whom the scrivener's apprentice Thomas Chatterton prepared his Bristowe "antiquities," and their somewhat democratically biased interest in the relics of British history stands in a similar incubative relationship to the historical paintings and poems of the engraver's apprentice Blake.

There were, of course, dull fellows among the Antiquaries. There was Thomas Astle, for example, who read old documents not for the meanings of the words but for the shapes of the letters, who pored over pictures of the "monuments of the Etruscans" to make out "the Pelasgian language and characters,"⁵ and who appears, possibly, in Blake's caricature "Etruscan Column the Antiquarian," a pedant overflowing with "an abundance of Enquiries to no purpose" and engrossed in the contemplation of "his eternal fame."⁶ A more human and visual interest in historical remains was displayed by the antiquarian Sir Joseph Aylofffe, who arranged in the summer of 1775 to have some tapestries removed in Westminster Abbey so that Blake could copy the hidden Gothic portraits of King Sebert and Henry III. Aylofffe too was full of pedantry, but his objects were sometimes sensational. In May 1774 he obtained permission to open the tomb of Edward I and remove the cerecloth and the crimson facecloth (which felt like cobwebs) to see whether the extant busts of Edward were *like*. Sir Joseph concluded that they were very like, if one assumed that the nose had shrunken from the size shown in the portraits. And while Basire's apprentice made some sketches, Aylofffe examined the body, discovered that the king's old nickname "Edward Longshanks" had had no physical basis, and ordered the coffin top and stone slab replaced.⁷

Blake's biographers have assumed that he glowed with "a reverent good faith" toward the kings and queens whose relics he copied, but it is possible that his feelings were more akin to those of the republican Shelley when he considered the "wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command" which an antique and presumably republican sculptor had recorded in the stone effigy of Ozymandias, once king of kings.

Other Antiquaries, busy recovering neglected folksong and "antique" poetry, brought live coals of inspiration to Blake. His first and later poems owe much to the antiquarian Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, an anthology begun in 1765 and augmented in 1775 with express indebtedness to the rich library of the Antiquary Society. In Blake's elevated conception of bardic power we can see the influence of Percy's thesis, hotly debated in the society, that Saxon minstrels and other ancient poets enjoyed tremendous political and moral eminence.⁸

A very different influence, drawing Blake toward the related but almost

contradictory concept of *esoteric* cultural power, came from the antiquarian Jacob Bryant, in whose *New System or Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, published in 1774–1776 with plates engraved in Basire’s shop, scholars are now finding both Blakean pictorial motifs and some clues to Blake’s own system of mythology.⁹ Bryant applied to Egyptian, Grecian, and other myths the fruitful principle that “there was always a covert meaning,” and he could prove, for example, that Noah and Dionysius and Prometheus were one and the same patriarch. Whereas to “Etruscan Column” Chatterton’s fictitious “Rowley” poems were “paltry, flimsy stuff” (*I.M.i*), Bryant could recognize their power—and “antiquity”—at once.

Blake, we know, accepted the antiquity or “eternal” worth of *both* Rowley and Chatterton—and of Macpherson’s Ossianic fragments, which were another sensation among the Antiquaries. Blake would come to boast of his own writings as “poems of the highest antiquity” or true “British Antiquities”—and to draw on Bryant for hints of their “mythological and recondite meaning.”¹⁰ The idea in Blake’s *America* that a portion of the infinite would have been lost if America had been “o’erwhelm’d by the Atlantic” recalls Bryant’s interest in relics of the antique nations lost in the Deluge and also suggests Bryant’s reading of Acts 17:26 as a text against the desire of kings to overrun other nations. One of Blake’s apprentice engravings illustrates Bryant’s allegorical interpretation of the flood.¹¹ More generally the influence of all these “Antique

Borers”¹² was to impress Blake with a sense of the rich contemporaneousness and spiritual homogeneity of the art and lore of all ages and nations. “The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven,” he would argue, “are the same thing, as Jacob Bryant and all antiquaries have proved” (*D.C.v*).

Finally there was the directly republican antiquarianism of Thomas Hollis, “a gentleman of ample fortune and ... virtuous morals” who chaired the exhibition committee of the Society of Arts and was, according to Walpole, “the most bigoted of all republicans to a degree of being unwilling to converse with men of other principles.”¹³ Hollis was a collector of portraits and records of Milton and of “liberty-coins” and other relics of resistance to tyranny. He edited a number of American pamphlets, corresponded frequently with “the colonists, those faithful friends to liberty,” and as early as 1765 sympathized with American dreams of independence. He looked upon Wilkes, in spite of “irregularities” which he dismissed “as spots in the sun,” as the champion of true Britons—“a great, and yet free, though a sunken, falling people” if their weak king and his knavish advisor were allowed to pursue the path of ruin.¹⁴

Hollis died in 1774, and during the next six years his *Memoirs*, full of Milton portraits engraved by Cipriani and copies of coins and documents engraved by Basire’s apprentices, were prepared for the press by a committee

of Antiquaries. Blake must have seen some of these materials and heard a good deal about Hollis; he is said to have engraved some of the plates in the *Memoirs*. Hollis idolized Milton as the “assertor of British liberty.” “Milton lov’d me in childhood & shew’d me his face,” said Blake, whose sympathies, a friend recalled, were “not with Milton as. to his puritanism” but as to his “love of a grand, ideal scheme of republicanism.”¹⁵ Once Crabb Robinson asked the man who had seen Milton’s face “which of the three or four portraits in Hollis’ *Memoirs* is the most like. He answered, ‘They are all like, at different ages. I have seen him as a youth and as an old man with a long flowing beard.’”¹⁶ We are not told which face Milton showed to Blake in childhood, but we may be sure that the Milton he encountered in the vortex of Thomas Hollis was Milton the republican, anticipator of Wilkes and Liberty.

In that vortex were the cousins John and Timothy Hollis and a Fellow of the Society whose activities were more republican than antiquarian—Thomas Brand, an early sponsor of Basire,¹⁷ who became Thomas Brand Hollis on inheriting the Hollis estate. He was an associate of Tooke, an admirer of Paine, and an organizer of London reform societies. In the ’80s and ’90s we find several of Blake’s friends in close association with all the Hollises.¹⁸

Closer socially at least to the apprentice Blake were his fellow craftsmen, but their lives and thoughts are even more lost in obscurity than Blake’s. Inevitably he became more or less intimate with various painters, engravers, and patrons of the arts “from their Intimacy with Basire, my Master.” Years later he could recall the names and styles of famous and obscure engravers and remember which journeyman had etched this or that plate for a master who cunningly reaped the glory and the profits. He had grown to hate or at least to rant against the “Ignorant Journeymen” who were employed in preference to himself; he appears from the first to have despised the “Trading Dealers” who exploited them (*P.A.*51). Anonymous apprentice work was a different matter, and Blake never seems to have rebelled against Basire, though he refused “to take part with his master against fellow apprentices” who did.¹⁹ Presumably the etchers and engravers who, like Blake, never attained the status of wealthy masters, and even some of the latter, constituted one element in the artisan radicalism of London. But we know little about these men, and our list of the engravers known to Blake is limited chiefly to the few he disliked.

We do know that the engraver William Sharp was, in the 1790’s, a leading member of the London Society for Constitutional Information, a Reform club which links Wilkism with later English Jacobinism. And we know that in 1780, when that society was first formed, Sharp painted and engraved a political picture of George Washington with liberty cap and don’t-tread-on-me rattlesnake. By 1787 Sharp had joined the Society of London Swedenborgians, with whom Blake also associated for a

while in 1789;²⁰ and Sharp and Blake were fairly intimate later when Sharp had turned again from fading hopes of reform to the radical or at least plebeian mysticism of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott, though Sharp was unable “to make a convert of Blake” to the cause of Joanna. They may frequently have walked the same path; yet we have little to link their names in the ’eighties except such facts as that Sharp was one of the chief engravers of the work of Mortimer, intensely admired by Blake, that Sharp was a friend of Blake’s friend Flaxman, and that Sharp and Blake in 1780–1786 both engraved many pictures after Thomas Stothard, with whom we know Blake was intimate. Stothard evidently shared Sharp’s interest in Reform, for in 1782 he designed and Sharp engraved “an enormous plate” which could hardly have escaped Blake’s notice, “thickly strewn with inscriptions, emblems, etc., sets for ‘The Declaration of Rights,’” inscribed: “To the Society for Constitutional Information.”²¹ And one summer while England was at war with France (1779–1782) a curious mistake linked Stothard and Blake and another painter, Ogleby, as suspected spies “surveying for purposes mimical to the safety of Old England.” On a sketching excursion up the Medway they were put under arrest in an improvised tent of sails and oars (sketched by Stothard, who depicts Blake as the camp cook) until cleared by a message from “certain members of the Royal Academy.”²²

Rather more can be made of Blake’s collecting habits and his interest in, if not intimacy with, Mortimer and other contemporary painters. His father allowed him enough pocket money to collect prints, and Blake frequented bookstalls, printshops, and auction rooms where works of art, genuine and spurious, could be seen as they passed from one private collection to another. The auctioneer Langford came to regard him as “his little connoisseur; and often knocked down to him a cheap lot.”²³ Blake is said from the first to have been interested exclusively in pictures “of the historic class,” especially the symbolic and heroic paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo, Dürer, and Hemskerck. “I cannot say that Rafael Ever was from my Earliest Childhood hidden from Me. I saw & I Knew immediately the difference between Rafael & Rubens”—a difference one gathers that had to do with grandeur and ideality of style as well as firm and determinate “outlines.”²⁴ Among contemporary artists he was interested chiefly in Barry, Mortimer, and Fuseli (all born 1741), painters who could invent a sublime allegory or treat history with poetic vigor. Benjamin West was the most prolific history painter of the day, but Blake “lookd upon him with contempt” as he “hesitated & equivocated with me” in an argument about drawing.²⁵ And Blake probably shared Barry’s scorn of West for using historical subjects to flatter the reigning monarch.²⁶

John Hamilton Mortimer, who lived for a time above Langford’s auction rooms, was a forceful eccentric who dressed in scarlet and gold, made a show

of “waiting for the inspirations of Genius,”²⁷ and died in the last year of Blake’s apprenticeship at the close of a brief career that illustrated Blake’s defensive assertion: “Painters are noted for being Dissipated & Wild.”²⁸ In theme and manner Blake’s early paintings owe much to Mortimer’s heroic and ethical treatment of British history in such work as *King John Signing Magna Charta* and *St. Paul Preaching to the Britons*. Mortimer’s monsters also “foreran the monsters of Blake,” as Geoffrey Grigson observes, and his fresh and raw interpretation of Shakespearean metaphor was a new kind of literal translation pointing toward Blake’s way of designing literally out of Shakespeare and Milton.²⁹ Mortimer’s “comic history painting” also influenced the development of pictorial satire away from the static emblem to the flexible caricature of Gillray and Rowlandson, a development of which Blake was doubtless well aware.³⁰

James Barry, “the really Industrious, Virtuous & Independent Barry” as Blake called him when he aired the bitter Irishman’s grievances as if they were his own (*P.A.60*), was originally a protégé of Edmund Burke, though somewhat to the left of Burke in philosophy and politics. Barry championed the republicans not only of America but of Ireland and was a democrat on such questions as African slavery and the rights of women, though often arrogant in tone. He knew Wilkes, was associated in an eating club with Price and Priestley, dined frequently with Holcroft, was a close friend of the republican Hollises, particularly Timothy, and became one of Godwin’s intimates as early as 1783.³¹ In his own profession

Barry was one of the more articulate champions of “the true sublime style of historical art,” constantly searching for the means “of extricating historical painting out of the confused mass of meaner arts with which it is indiscriminately jumbled.”³²

Blake came to think of himself as a direct continuer of the ethical and historical tradition of Mortimer and Barry, and he has a good deal to say about Barry in his Reynolds marginalia, but we do not know how soon the two became friends. There exists a copy of Barry’s 1783 *Account* of his murals for the Society of Arts containing a “wonderfully vivid and vigorous” portrait of Barry by Blake (Fig. 2) “which, from internal evidence, seems to be a sketch from life in pencil, slightly fortified with India-ink when he got home from the exhibition.”³³ Since Blake’s sketch is not drawn in the book but only tipped in, it is only a guess that Blake owned this copy of the *Account* or that he knew Barry at the time of the exhibition. Yet the guess is strengthened by the probability that one of the songs in Blake’s *Island in the Moon* (1784) owes its inspiration to Barry’s grumbling at the meager exhibition receipts. Much earlier Blake must have known Barry’s paintings and could hardly have escaped hearing of the man who wanted Parliament to vote, as Walpole put it, that he “should decorate Westminster Hall with

giants.” That ambition, at any rate, became Blake’s own.



Fig. 2. James Barry

In the early 1770’s Barry’s allegorical *Mercury inventing the Lyre* and *Adam and Eve* were criticized for insufficiency of drapery but were “much admired by the imaginative,”³⁴ among whom we must include Blake—for we learn what happened to Barry’s *Pandora*, painted for Burke and exhibited in 1775 with a challenge of comparison to Raphael, from Blake’s marginalia in which he repeats without question Barry’s evaluation of his own work: “Barry Painted a Picture for Burke equal to Rafael or Mich Ang or any of the Italians. Burke used to shew this Picture to his Friends & to say I gave Twenty Guineas for this horrible Dawb....”³⁵ (An example of Barry’s grand manner is given in Fig. 3.)

Barry’s first academic lecture as professor of painting (March 1784) discloses antiquarian interests similar to, and perhaps influential upon, Blake’s. Even the ancients’ “wildest productions of imagination” contain concealed truths “not unworthy of the patient investigation of artists and philosophers,” and Barry has his own theories about the Titanic antediluvian

Atlantides, whose art was superior to that of succeeding nations but whose land was over-whelmed by the Atlantic ocean.³⁶

In 1776 Barry produced two paintings dealing with the recent imperial war in Canada and the current war with the Colonies.



Fig. 3. Barry, *King Lear*

One, now lost, was issued as an engraved print with the title, *The Rise of America, with the Decline of Europe*, described by an unsympathetic editor as “an allegorical design he etched at the heat of the American War, when those who espoused the cause of the colonists suffered their imaginations to run riot in the sunshine that was to bless America, and to lament the eternal gloom that was spreading on this side of the Atlantic” (*Works*, 1, 318). The other, *The Death of General Wolfe*, was one of several treatments of the same theme, of which the most famous was West’s. Barry’s is relatively simple and realistic compared to West’s operatic set crowded with dignitaries who had not been on the field but could purchase a place on the canvas. At the end of the American War, when Ireland was celebrating the British concession of a separate Irish Parliament, Barry, completing his murals consecrated to “the

melioration, liberties, and reform of mankind,” chose the legislative “remedy for the disorders in Ireland” for “the business of my principal group of Legislators in Elysium” (II, 574).

Even West, by birth an American, had a certain romantic pride in his native land, though divorced from politics and somewhat second hand. The figure of a handsome Indian in his and Barry’s Wolfe paintings has been traced to a Niagara Falls scene by Fuseli,³⁷ though Barry probably painted several Indians in his lost *Rise of America*, if it represented “a combat of naked men.”³⁸ The red skin of the Indians in these pictures is a symbolic equivalent of the almost vermilion flesh of the “warlike naked Britons” in Blake’s lost fresco, *The Ancient Britons*, which Blake explains as “the flush of health in flesh, exposed to the open air”—a dramatic contrast to the flesh of “modern Man” who, “stripped from his load of cloathing ... is like a dead corpse.”³⁹

This fresco belongs to a later decade but a decade in which Blake looked back on his youth and observed that his interest in Mortimer and Barry, and subsequently Fuseli, had aligned him with the underdog and rebel in the art community:

“While Sr Joshua was rolling in Riches Barry was Poor & Unemployd except by his own Energy; Mortimer was calld a Madman & only Portrait Painting applauded & rewarded by the Rich & Great. Reynolds & Gainsborough Blotted & Blurred one against the other & Divided all the English World between them. Fuseli, Indignant, almost hid himself. I am hid.”⁴⁰

Henry Fuseli, a Swiss painter of the macabre-sublime who “had a considerable share in furnishing” Blake’s mind, had been a radical humanist in his youth in Zurich, from which he had fled after a “bold attack on corruption and oppression in high places.” In London in the 1760’s he had published a pamphlet in defense of Rousseau, but his subsequent career was largely a-political, though “his look [was] lightning, his word a thunderstorm.”⁴¹ Returning in 1779 from a long sojourn in Italy, Fuseli in the next decade became intimate with Blake, who relished his exuberant combination of high-flying fancy and mordant profanity and appropriated many of his ideas on the theory and history of art. Fuseli’s paintings were poetical if not historical, and his work formed a prominent part of the print-dealer John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery. But these and his Milton paintings were “almost hid” because of the lack of any truly public or permanent exhibition hall.

To sum up the implication of Blake’s early interests, we may say that they propelled him along what would prove to be a path of poverty and neglect, for without public patronage Republican art could not flourish: “We want a Fair Price ... & a General Demand for Art.”⁴² The general availability of art was an item in the social program of the Enlightenment, put forward in the

Encyclopedia, and in France its realization was to be one of the early fruits of the revolution.⁴³ The angel at Blake's birth, foreseeing as much, told him ruefully that if England should refuse the arts and "scorn the immortal Muse," France would save Blake and his works "from the Ungrateful shore."

The pessimism of the angel's statement, written down some fifty years after Blake's birth, must be considered apocryphal. And even when Blake was "hid," he did not pack up and go to Paris.⁴⁴ As late as 1800 Blake and Cumberland were full of hope that Parliament would carry forward the artists' comprehensive "plan for a National Gallery."⁴⁵ They were probably even more hopeful in the days when the proposal was being agitated by Barry, in the Academy and in such pamphlets as his *Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England*, 1774, and by Wilkes, in Parliament.

It was perhaps but an accident of Wilkes's chequered career that he should have been president of the committee responsible, in 1760, for the first exhibition of contemporary art in England. And few artists may have participated in the exhibition held by the obscure "Polite Artists of Great Britain" in 1768, featuring a painting of Wilkes for the edification of "every lover of liberty."⁴⁶ But Wilkes's speech in Parliament in 1777, proposing the collection of a national gallery and the development of the twenty-year-old British Museum into a great free public library, was an integral part of the radical bourgeois movement for which he spoke. Wilkes made the point that the promotion of painting would stimulate the profitable commercial arts of engraving and publishing and might even lead to the introduction of the art of tapestry weaving. And he dramatized his campaign for public viewings by protesting a current example of monarchic indifference. The original Raphael cartoons for tapestries for the Sistine Chapel had long been on public display in Hampton Court Palace—a rare exception to the general inaccessibility of art—until George III ordered them locked away in private rooms in Buckingham House.⁴⁷ "They are entirely secluded from the public eye," protested London's champion, "yet, Sir, they were purchased with public money before the accession of the Brunswick line." They should properly be regarded "as an invaluable national treasure, as a common blessing, not as private property," Wilkes argued.⁴⁸

In the same speech he suggested that public patronage begin with the employment of a half dozen British painters to adorn the bare interior of St. Paul's. This project had been proposed in 1773 by Barry and supported by Burke and later by West. But the Bishop of London of those years had vetoed the project as "savouring of Popery," and despite Wilkes's hope that the new bishop would be more receptive to the idea, the opposition of clergy and "King's friends" defeated all the Patriot's proposals. At this the impatient Barry, "Unemployd except by his own Energy," undertook single handed his

vast mural project in the hall of the Society of Arts, on the promise of reimbursement from future receipts. To complete this work he had to live on "Bread & Apples," as he told Blake; cease to exhibit at the Academy; and decline, in 1782 before the murals were finished, an 'invitation from the American Congress "to paint the actions of General Washington."⁴⁹ By this time Blake had passed the zenith of his own first phase of historical painting, to which we must now give some attention.

2

Blake's early history paintings belong to a time around the close of his apprenticeship in 1779, but he did not begin adding explanatory symbolic inscriptions to his engravings until late in the 1790's, and he did not have occasion to write out his theories about art until he was preparing a catalogue for his own exhibition in 1809. Yet at that time it was Blake's belief that his artistic opinions were "exactly Similar" to those he had held "when very Young."⁵⁰ And for a check on his early artistic interpretation of history we have the *Poetical Sketches* and the early prose fragment on the passions, *Then She Bore Pale Desire*, a work highly relevant to the psychological ironies of the paintings.

From first to last Blake sets the republic of art above the empire of the sword and pits Joy against the Pride of Kings. Always for him historic art must be heroic, rich in prophetic or allegoric meaning, displaying "the historical fact in its poetical vigour so as it always happens" (*D.C.v*). For instance it must portray a wicked man's death as both a public ornament and a warning to other wicked men: "an Ornament & an Example."⁵¹ *The Death of Earl Goodwin*, Blake's first work exhibited at the Royal Academy (May 1780), is a warning example of the sudden death that overtakes the strong wicked hypocrite. Like Gwin, Goodwin is condemned before the throne of God by the ghosts of his victims, "I pray God that this morsel I am going to eat may choak me at this moment, if I had any hand in the death of that Prince," the eleventh-century earl is reported to have said; whereupon the morsel "stuck in his throat and choked him immediately, to the great astonishment of the Standers-by."⁵²

For less headstrong tyrants, we learn from the *Prologue to King John*, "lingering Fate is slow" but nevertheless certain as soon as the "iron heart is smitten." Two of the early paintings show us historical moments when tyrants' hearts are being smitten by divine and popular judgment in favor of their victims. These are *The Ordeal of Queen Emma* and *The Penance of Jane Shore*, the former a direct sequel to Mortimer's *Edward the Confessor seizing the Treasures of his Mother* (i.e. of Queen Emma).

The story of Edward, "to whom is given the glorious tides of Saint and Confessor," as the historian Rapin sarcastically observes, is one of violence

and rapacity. When he came to the throne he stripped his mother of all her treasures (the theme of Mortimer's picture), and then to cover his own crime he accused her of adultery (the theme of Blake's). He "caused her to be accused of Incontinence with Alwin, Bishop of Winchester" and then "was so hardhearted as to make her undergo the Ordeal trial ... to walk barefoot and hoodwink'd over nine red-hot Plough-shares."⁵³ Blake pictures Emma, hoodwinked, coming across the hot ploughshares nicely—to the amazement of King Edward and the Archbishop her accuser, and a numerous court. Mortimer's influence, it will be noted, extends beyond manner to the suggestion of a congenial political subject.

The story of Jane Shore is a chapter in the ruthless career of the Duke of Gloucester who, on his way through plots and assassinations to the throne, found it expedient to accuse of sorcery the one-time mistress of Edward IV in order to implicate other enemies. Because "he could alledge nothing in proof of these accusations," he changed the indictment to adultery, which nobody could deny "since the whole Court was witness she had been kept by the late King, and afterwards by the Lord Hastings. Whereupon she was delivered over to the Bishop of London, and condemned by the Ecclesiastical Court to do open penance in St. Paul's Church in a white Sheet, with a Wax-Taper in her hand, before all the people" (1, 635).

"In all this Action," we are told—and this is the theme of Blake's painting—"she behaved with so much modesty and decency, that such as respected her Beauty more than her fault, never were in greater admiration of her, than now." Blake's Jane, modestly robed in her sheet, is triumphant over her accusers, the discomfited bishop and duke and duchess.⁵⁴

In neither Emma nor Jane is Blake picturing injured innocence any more than in his later picture of *The Woman taken in Adultery* and befriended by Christ. His theme rather is the exposure of royal and episcopal hypocrites who cry whore to cover their own greedy political whoredoms. These paintings and Blake's later curious definition of kings as "accusers of adultery" (as in the inscription of *Our End is Come* or *The Accusers*) serve to explain each other. The code of sin is a political fraud used by ambitious tyrants; in 1793 King George will go to war with France to defend the honor of Marie Antoinette.

Another kind of blow at the hard heart of a tyrant is delivered in Blake's interpretation of *The Bard, a "Pindaric Ode" by Thomas Gray*, exhibited in 1784 and again, with commentary, in 1809. Here a tyrant and his armies are smitten directly by the artist as prophet. Indeed the picture and comment epitomize Blake's desire for the power to drown the throat of war. The story concerns Edward I, conqueror of Wales, who ordered the execution of all the Welsh bards to prevent their keeping alive the spirit of popular resistance. According to the legend as elaborated by Gray (in 1757), one bard escapes the slaughter and later accosts King Edward and his army from an inaccessible

rock. Defiantly striking his harp, and supported in “dreadful harmony” by the ghosts of his slain companions, the bard prophesies the doom of Edward and his entire line:

On a rock, whose haughty brow
Frown'd o'er old Conway's foaming flood,
Robed in the sable garb of woe,
With haggard eyes the Poet stood;
Loose his beard, and hoary hair
Stream'd like a meteor to the troubled air.

Weave the warp, and weave the woof,
The winding sheet of Edward's race.⁵⁵

The effect of the bard's words, as Blake portrays it, is like the effect achieved by Tom Paine, that “worker of miracles” whom Blake admired for being able “to overthrow all the armies of Europe with a small pamphlet,” i.e. *Common Sense*.⁵⁶ It is presumably the sort of effect Blake wanted when he prayed, in *Samson*, for power “to write as on a lofty rock with iron pens”:

“King Edward and his Queen Elenor [explains Blake] are prostrated, with their horses, at the foot of a rock on which the Bard stands; prostrated by the terrors of his harp on the margin of the river Conway, whose waves bear up a corpse of a slaughtered bard at the foot of the rock. The armies of Edward are seen winding among the mountains.... Mortimer and Gloucester [Edward's chief warriors] lie spell bound behind their king” (*D.C.iv*).

The living bard dominates the scene, literally weaving a great twist of sheeting on his harp; we remember it was Edward's winding sheet that the Antiquaries partially removed in 1774.

Essentially what the history painter of Barry's or Blake's sort does is to assert the moral and social power of the inspired bard, a power to overwhelm evil rulers and summon together patriots. He also soars beyond the representational school of West and Copley who, in Blake's eyes, simply apply the blotting and blurring of Reynolds and Gainsborough to historical subjects. “Weaving the winding sheet of Edward's race by means of sounds of spiritual music and ... articulate speech is a bold, and daring, and most masterly conception,” declares Blake. And since “the public have embraced and approved” such conceptions in poetry, “shall painting be confined to the sordid drudgery of fac-simile representations?” The repeated exhibition of *The Bard* is a characteristically devious announcement of Blake's dedication of his powers to the weaving of tyranny's shroud. In poetry he uses the same image— in 1792 to describe the harlot's curse which “weaves around the marriage hearth” (*N.109*) and later to prophesy that licensed corruption,

concentrated in the harlot's cry, will "weave Old England's winding Sheet" (*Auguries of Innocence*). These London harlots are descendants of Jane Shore, testifying to the tyrannous hypocrisy of a whole society.

Shelley in 1819 will use Gray's image to taunt the *Men of England* with a prophecy that if they do not stand against tyranny they will weave their own "winding-sheet, till fair England be [their] sepulchre." Both Blake and Shelley give Gray's theme a more revolutionary twist than Gray intended. For while his bard unsparingly indicts the Edwardian dynasty, he hails the coming Tudors of Welsh ancestry as a virtual return of King Arthur, and leaps into the river Conway confident that there will always be a King of England.

Blake sees no Arthurian strain in the present monarchy but adapts the Welsh prophecy of the return of Arthur to his own hope for a golden future. In his notes on *The Ancient Britons*, a painting which also featured the swan-song of a patriotic bard "singing to his harp" in defiance of armed invaders, Blake describes the return of "the Sun of Britain" as a thing yet to come, presumably through a Last Judgment or its political equivalent (*D.C.v*). In this use of Celtic traditions of resistance to English tyranny, Blake had precedents in the popular movement, as Bronowski has pointed out. Welsh counties supporting Wilkes in 1771 compared themselves to "Ancient Britons" who did not bow to kings. Many of "those who fought George III's court.... Freemasons, the Ancient Family of Leeches, the small men who made Wilkes & Liberty a symbol for their discontent, took the Ancient Britons for forefathers of their brotherhoods" (p. 3 [23]).

3

Now day arose, the Golden Sun his mighty Race began, Refreshing the Cold earth with beaming Joy. But Pride awoke nor knew that Joy was born ... forth Came Ambition Crawling like a toad.... Then Nineveh & Babylon & Costly tyre....⁵⁷

Blake's study of moral indictment as a political stratagem, by the accusers of Queen Emma and Jane Shore, suggests that even in his early twenties he had gone some distance in his analysis of the behavior of oppressors, and this impression is confirmed by the prose fragment which begins, "then She [Fear] bore Pale desire."⁵⁸ This rather cryptic manuscript is interesting in this connection for two reasons. As an allegorical genealogy of *Pride and Shame* and *Policy* and "the Kingdoms of the World & all their Glory," it shows Blake revolving the problem of man's fate in terms that link imperial pride and individual frustration. As a document of response to the American Revolution it reveals Blake as one of those whose imaginations did, to quote Barry's editor, "run riot on the sunshine that was to bless America" and at the same time "lament the eternal gloom that was spreading on this [European] side of the Atlantic." To bring out these contemporary implications—but not in any sense to suggest a "source"—I shall compare this document with

Paine's *Common Sense*.

Both Paine and Blake, living in a culture that still discussed politics in moralistic and Biblical terms inherited from the English Civil War, viewed the American Revolution as a sort of mass resurrection or secular apocalypse that would overthrow poverty and cruelty and establish a new Eden in which the arts flourished and habitations were illuminated, to use Blake's language, not by destructive fires but by the joys of the noonday sun.⁵⁹ According to Paine the doctrines of original sin and hereditary succession were two sides of the same coin. Before the days of kings there had been no wars: "it is the pride of kings which throws mankind into confusion." King-making and idolatry were in the first instance disaffection from the King of Heaven. The resultant government by kings "is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise. For were the impulses of conscience clear ... and irresistibly obeyed, Man would need no other law-giver." A survey of the history of monarchic England shows it filled with civil wars and rebellions; a survey of the globe shows Freedom driven out of Asia, Africa, and most of Europe and compelled to seek refuge in America to "prepare in time an asylum for mankind."⁶⁰

Blake, surveying the spiritual history of humanity, sees Innocence driven out by the Pride of Kingdoms, the earth overrun with the numerous progeny of Pride and Shame and Fear, and Conscience and the light of Reason fouled:

"Pride bears [Ambition] in her Bosom, and the Gods all bow to it. So Great its Power that Pride inspir'd by it Prophetic Saw the Kingdoms of the World & all their Glory ... built with Murder. Then Babel ... with thousand tongues. Confusion it was call'd.... Conscience came from heaven. But O who listens to his Voice.... Conscience was sent a Guard to Reason, Reason once fairer than the light, till fould in Knowledges dark Prison house. For knowledge drove sweet Innocence away. ... Pride against her father [the King of Heaven?] Warr'd & Overcame ... bound him, then usurpd oer all the Gods."

The force cutting through this long reign of Power and Murder and Confusion is the sunshine of Joy, now appearing in the west.

Thus far in history Joy's periods of influence have been extremely brief. He first refreshed the cold earth in the day of the rising of the Golden Sun, presumably in the Eden of eternity. But Pride and her progeny arose and overran the earth. Joy's second appearance is an interlude in the chronology of Kingdoms built with Murder. He comes not as a sun but as a cloud overshadowing for a moment the Empire of Rome, "Emblem of Pride." Viewed historically, the life of Christ is but a brief threat to tyranny, and Rome swiftly consolidates the power of empire, now "Miterd and crown'd with triple crown."⁶¹

Joy's third appearance signifies the new freedom and pursuit of happiness in America preceding tyranny's latest attack. The Sun of Joy is seen rising in

the direction of “the Setting Sun” and shedding a “Sweet Influence oer the Earth” which threatens the reign of Pride “here” in “her City.” Here Rome and London, interchangeable symbols of empire, seem to merge as in Blake’s later symbolic writings. “Pride feared for her City, but not long, for looking Stedfastly, She saw that Pride Reignd here.” In the sequel of this passage, which weaves most bewilderingly away from these general historical terms to personal analysis and *perhaps* back again, Blake indicates that the primary source of the Envy, and Hate that breed in his city, in London during the darkness of war against the American sunshine, is Pride’s fear of losing dominion—a fear that will become obsessive in Blake’s later imperialist, Urizen.

It is from this fear that “Satire, foul Contagion,” is engendered, and while Blake writes as if his own satiric impulse were inspired chiefly by envy of others who “in Contentments downy Nest do sleep,” it can hardly be far from the truth to add that among these “others” are the kings, nobles, and ministers who cause war and oppress the poor. It is particularly the “Envy and Hate, that thirst for human gore” that Blake wants to destroy “with potent spell,” according to *An Imitation of Spenser*. And when he cries, in the manuscript, “could I at Envy Shake my hands, my notes Should Rise to meet the New born Day,” he may be taken to mean, in full context, that if he could attain sufficient independence to afford to shake his fists at “Sr Joshua & his Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves,” under whose “Opression” he later said he had spent “the Vigour of [his] Youth & Genius,”⁶² he should declare his republican zeal as boldly as any. This is sheer extrapolation, resting partly on a late reminiscence. But two things seem incontestable: that Blake felt the inspiration of a new dawn many years before the French Revolution, and that he wished for but did not find the boldness to express his dangerous hopes.

We can now push a little further the question of how Blake felt about proud kings of England when he copied their brazen effigies for the Antiquaries. The drawings that he made in warm months in Westminster Abbey and engraved in Basire’s shop in winter remain essentially enigmatic as they lie before us in the large black prints of the Antiquary Society’s *Vetvsta Monument a* and Gough’s *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*. The faces are manifestly full of power and vigor, however, in contrast to the vacuity in those engraved earlier by Vertue and Gravelot for Rapin’s *History*. Blake undoubtedly took the regal forms of Eleanor and Philippa and Edward III in the chapel of Edward the Confessor to be as real and powerful exemplars of “the historical fact” as George III and Queen Charlotte. And he may indeed have labored with such absorption among the royal tombs that he became “himself almost a Gothic monument.”⁶³ But we need not assume with Gilchrist (p. 15) that Blake saw in the bard-cursed Edwards and their queens and councilors only “noble grandeur,” “austere sweetness,” and “gracious stateliness.” It is more likely that he could not view them “unalarmed.”⁶⁴

We come closer to Blake's actual feelings when we study the residual effects in later art and poetry of his early intimacy with the extinct dynasts in their canopied tombs. In the description in *America* of the joint assembly of the Houses of Parliament to listen to the King's speech, for instance, three levels of association are blended—the historical reality of 1774–1775, the conclave of fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* (“th’ Angelic seats”), and the familiar Gothic statuary of Westminster Abbey (“forms art-bound”):

... George the third holds council, & his Lords & Commons meet:
... dismal visions mope around the house.

On chairs of iron, canopied with mystic ornaments
Of life by magic power condens'd; infernal forms art-bound
The council sat; all rose.... the dark house was rent,
The valley mov'd beneath; its shining pillars split in twain,
And its roofs crack across down falling on th' Angelic seats.⁶⁵

If Blake had imagined the statues of Plantagenets and Tudors in the Abbey coming to life in response, at last, to the stone angels who hold moldering trumpets of judgment above their heads, he might have described them thus. The dwarfish statuettes such as the small bustos of Edward I and Edward III, on the marble canopies, are indeed life “condens'd” into mystic ornaments by the magic power of art. And the effigies too are infernal forms art-bound. Yet Blake is not describing the Abbey but the nearby House of Lords, which he must have known was actually barren of statuary. The living rulers are the “dismal visions” and “infernal forms” alluded to in this passage.

It is not simply that Blake sees the present in images of the antique. It is rather that he seems to be saying to king, lords, and commons: You war-makers are not living in the spirit of the present. You are reenacting the oppressions and aggressions of ancient times. You are the ghosts of warriors long since relegated to inferno or bound down in miracles of art by the sculptor and the bard. I must bind down your infernal forms once more, for I too can prostrate tyrants with my art.⁶⁶ You, George the Third, however young you may seem, are really a snowy bearded old man; your “eyes Reveal the dragon thro’ the human”; you are an apparition out of the feudal past, in your hard heart another ambitious Edward.

The lofty rock on which Blake took his bardic stand was located at once in the middle ages and in eighteenth-century London. His own account of what happened when George held council and blew the loud war trumpet is that the conflict finally reached a revolutionary crisis not in America but right in his own city—in the riots of 1780, which melted the bolts and hinges of Blake's soul as we have seen, and in a whole cluster of apocalyptic phenomena which

he pictures in *America* as bringing the war to an end if not liberating the citizens of London. From the quiet connotations of the paintings and the faded and meager relics of biographic record, let us turn once more to the vivid, teeming pages of the poems.

¹N.79: E471/K557 (ca. 1810). “War” first read “Armies”

²N. 117: E557/K587; cf. E560. I take it that Blake refers to the autumn of 1770.

³The *Joseph of Arimathea* “Engraved by W. Blake 1773” and until recently taken as evidence of precocious skill proves to have been crude enough in its first state. See Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies*, London, 1949, pp. 45–46 and pl. 14; also my note in *Philological Quarterly*, xxxi (1952), 337–353.

⁴Incorporated 1751. There had been an earlier Society, but this was a new beginning.

Basire was also engraver to the Royal Society of London. For a list of the simple illustrations made for its *Philosophical Transactions* during Blake’s apprenticeship, see William S. Doxey, *BNYPL*, LXXII (1968), 252–260.

⁵Astle, *Origin and Progress of Writing*, London, 1803 [1784], p. 230. The illustrations were engraved in Basire’s shop.

⁶*I.M.i*: E440/K44. The identification of Blake’s “Antiquarian” as Astle remains conjectural. George M. Harper has suggested the Rev. John Brand, a friend of Flaxman’s but not otherwise associated with Blake (Harper, *Neoplatonism of William Blake*, Chapel Hill, 1961, p. 40). Damon (*Dictionary*, p. 130) adds details about Brand; but the antiquities he was interested in were popular superstitions, not Etruscan art. More likely to talk about Pliny, Giotto, and Etruscan remains were George Romney and P. F. H. d’Hancarville; see Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, Princeton, 1967, pp. 156, 163.

⁷Ayloff’s account appears in *Archaeologia*, III, 1775. Blake’s drawings and engravings of the Seberty and Henry III are extant. Several drawings of the mummy of Edward I remain in the Antiquaries’ library. At the time, or later, Blake made for himself “two or three noble sketches” of Edward (according to Flaxman in a letter of Aug. 12, 1805). See Paul Miner, “The Apprentice of Great Queen Street,” *BNYPL*, LXVII (1963), 639–642, but also Keynes, *Blake Studies*, rev. 1971, p. 25 and pl. 10.

Apparently Blake worked mainly in Basire’s shop until 1774, when two more apprentices were added and he was given the outside assignments. Symons, p. 313.

⁸See Dr. Pegge’s retraction of his objections to Percy’s introduction, *Archaeologia*, III. For Blake’s debt to Percy’s *Reliques*, see Lowery, pp. 160 f.

⁹See Ruthven Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, London, 1946, pp. 29–60, and Keynes, *Blake Studies*, pp. 42–49 and pls. 10–12. But the greater importance of Edward Davies’ *Celtic Researches*, London, 1804, is noted by Frye, p. 173, and by Todd. On Davies and Blake see also Edward B. Hungerford, *Shores of Darkness*, New York, 1941. For Bryant’s and possibly Blake’s interest in a modern student of Boehme, see above, p. II, n. 19.

¹⁰*D.C.v*, ii: E533, 522/K578, 566. Lowery, p. 235, makes the curious mistake of supposing Blake to refer to the possession of some Chatterton originals; but Blake expressly declares that *he* has written these antique poems as an inhabitant of Eden.

¹¹Todd, *Tracks*, pl. 12.

¹²To Cumberland, Dec. 6, 1795—possibly a punning allusion to old-fashioned engravers.

¹³Whitley, *Artists*, II, 117–119.

¹⁴[Francis Blackburne and others], *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis*, London, 1780, I, 110, 275, 289.

¹⁵*ibid.*, I, 112; Blake to Flaxman, 1800; Gilchrist, p. 327, quoting Blake's friend John Linnell apparently.

¹⁶Symons, p. 295. (Symons' *Blake* contains a handy compilation of the early notices of Blake by B. H. Malkin, H. C. Robinson, J. T. Smith, and others.)

¹⁷Basire as a student in Rome had copied Raphael pictures under the eyes of Stuart, Reynolds, and Brand, who appear to have promoted his appointment as engraver to the Society of Antiquaries around 1760. See J. Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, London, 1815, III, 717.

¹⁸See n. 31 below.

¹⁹Symons, p. 313.

²⁰Just possibly as early as 1787; see below.

²¹W. S. Baker, *William Sharp*, Philadelphia, 1875, pp. 20, 68, 73, 86; Wright, I, 156. Sharp was very active in the S.C.I. from March 1792 to the trials of 1794, and during that time he became intimate with Tooke and Holcroft and Godwin; his name appears frequently in Godwin's manuscript diary until the record of his death in 1824. See below, [Ch. 7](#).

²²Wright, I, 8–9, and pl. 3. Morchard Bishop thinks Blake is more probably the reclining figure in a three-cornered hat.

²³Symons, p. 313.

²⁴Marg. to Reynolds, xiv–xv: E627/K447.

²⁵P.A.53: E562/K593. Here again Sharp, West's engraver, hovers in the background. West, however, came to think highly of Blake's art. See Joseph Farington's *Diary*, London, n.d., 1, 141, Feb. 19, 1796.

²⁶A word must be said of Edgar Wind's conjectures about "the very puzzling relation which connects Burke with Barry and thereby indirectly with Blake," in "The Revolution of History Painting," *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, II (1938), 116–127. Their political allegiances are indeed "wrought with contradictions," as Wind says, if West is to be taken for "a loyal democrat" because he was an American and if Barry is to be thought of as an opponent of "West's mitigated realism and its democratic appeal." The latter idea rests on the legend that Barry painted a *Death of Wolfe* with all the figures nude, in protest against the realism of West's *Wolfe*, so that Blake's *Nelson* appears to be in the same tradition. Actually Barry's *Wolfe* is more realistic than West's (and in that sense more "democratic") and its figures are not nude. It has recently been rediscovered and reproduced by J. Clarence Webster in "Pictures of the Death of Wolfe," *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research*, VI (1927), 35. See Barry, *Works*, London, 1809, I, 230. The legend seems to have been erected by West's inventive biographer John Galt upon an error in Edward Edwards, *Anecdotes of Painters*, London, 1808. See note 38 below.

²⁷See Marg. to Reynolds, 47: E635/K457.

²⁸*ibid.*, 15: E633/K454.

²⁹"Painters of the Abyss," *Architectural Review*, CVIII (1950), 215–220. See also W. Moelwyn's illustrated survey of "Blake's Shakespeare," *Apollo*, LXXIX (1964), 318–325.

³⁰*B.M. Satires*, v, p. xii. For Blake's debt to Gillray, see below; for Blake on Rowlandson, see letters to Dr. Trusler and to Geo. Cumberland, Aug. 23, 26, 1799.

³¹Barry, *Works*, 1, 49, 327; II, 533 n., and passim; Whitley, *Artists and Art*, passim. A dated list of first acquaintances, in Godwin's unpublished diary, includes John Hollis in 1782, Tim Hollis

and Barry in '83, and Brand Hollis in '84. From 1788, when Godwin began to make daily entries, until 1805 there are over a hundred references to Barry, In 1791–1792 Godwin and Barry got together to “talk of aristocracy,” “talk of counter revolution,” “talk of Paine, read on truth”; Godwin went to Barry’s lecture of Feb. 18, 1793; and Barry was the most faithful caller in the days when Mary Wollstonecraft was dying, in September 1797. Among those with whom Godwin occasionally encountered Barry are the Hollises, the Opies, Henry Richter, William Sharp, Joseph Ritson, Sir Francis Burdett, John Thelwall, and Arthur O’Connor. But Godwin and Barry usually saw each other alone or with Holcroft.

³² *An Inquiry*, etc., London, 1774, pp. 132–144. Full title below, p. 43.

³³ H. Buxton Forman, in Gilchrist, p. 370.

³⁴ Whitley, *Artists*, 1, 284, 294. Blake’s notebook couplet,

Ghiottos Circle or Apelles Line
Were not the Work of Sketchers drunk with Wine,

(E504/K542)

may have been influenced by a newspaper couplet of 1778 shortly afterwards said to have been written by Barry of and to himself (*Artists*, 1, 339–340):

Homer revives in Milton’s mighty line,
And great Apelles lives again in thine.

³⁵ Whitley, *Artists*, 1, 310–311; Marg. to Reynolds, cxx: E631/K541.

³⁶ *Works*, 1, 308–309, 352–354 n.

³⁷ Webster, *loc.cit.*

³⁸ Edwards refers to a Barry picture of 1776 as representing an American battle as “a combat of naked men.” I take this to be the *Rise of America*, but Whitley, *Artists*, I, 376, assumes it to be *Barry’s Wolfe*, a picture neither of combat nor of naked men. See above, note 26. Edwards himself seems to have misread his notes, for when he writes of the *Wolfe* (p. 298) he says in error that Barry “chose to paint the figures as nudities” and supposes he did so “with a view of demonstrating his knowledge of the human form.” This hypothetical demonstration has become, with Galt and later critics, Barry’s campaign against West’s democratic realism!

³⁹ *D.C.v.*: E536/K581. Crabb Robinson at the time described Blake’s naked Ancient Britons as “almost crimson” and later remembered their color as “very like that of the Red Indians.” Mona Wilson, *William Blake*, London, 1948, pp. 220–224.

⁴⁰ Marg. to Reynolds: E624/K445. Though in the early 1770’s Barry was rising to Academic fame, collectors fought shy of his subject paintings and he was “desperately in need of commissions.” Whitley, *Artists*, 1, 294.

⁴¹ Eudo C. Mason, *The Mind of Henry Fuseli*, London, 1951, p. 18, quoting Lavater in 1773. For Fuseli’s *Remarks on the Writings and Conduct of J. J. Rousseau*, London, 1767, see excerpts below (see Index). This is now available in an extensively annotated reprint, with German translation, and introduction by Eudo C. Mason: *Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, Kleine Schriften Nr. 4*, Zürich, 1962.

Before August 1779, i.e. while his address was still Basire’s, “Lincolns Inn,” Blake owned a copy of Fuseli’s translation of Winckelmann. See Keynes, *Blake Studies*, pp. 47–48.

⁴² Marg. to Reynolds, ii: E626/K446.

⁴³ Joseph Billiet, “The French Revolution and the Fine Arts,” in *Essays on the French Revolution*, ed. T. A. Jackson, London, 1945, pp. 197–208.

⁴⁴ “Now Art has lost its mental Charms” N.79: E471/K557.

⁴⁵ To Cumberland, July 2, 1800.

⁴⁶ Whitley, *Artists*, 1, 165–167, 192–193.

⁴⁷ In 1763; they were moved again in 1787 to Windsor Castle.

⁴⁸ Whitley, *Artists*, 1, 325–327; cf. *F.Z.v.64:15–18:E337/K310*: “O did I close my treasuries ... And darken all my Palace walls ... [and] hide ... holy workmanship!”

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 1, 375.

⁵⁰ Marg. to Reynolds, 244; late insertion: E650/K476. Blake’s early notes are lost.

⁵¹ *P.A.17: E567/K598*. The meaning of “so as it always happens” is not that history repeats itself but, on the contrary, that actual happenings are always so surprising, so full of “miracle” and “improbabilities and impossibilities” that the only way we can believe in the reality of history is to “see it always before our eyes.” That is why the poet or true historian must give us the facts in full “poetical vigour” and not try to rationalize them into a dull consistency.

⁵² Rapin, 1, 134. My reasons for using Rapin’s *History* as a gloss are given below. Here note that Blake and Rapin agree in the spelling *Goodwin* as against Chatterton’s *Goddwyn* or the usual *Godwin*. Blake’s sketch for this painting is reproduced in Kerrison Preston, ed., *The Blake Cpllection of W. Graham Robertson*, London, 1952, pl. 55.

⁵³ Rapin, 1, 131. For clarity I have modified Rapin’s punctuation here and elsewhere. *The Ordeal* is reproduced in Wright, 1, pl. 5, and in Blunt, pl. 4b.

The “reasoning historian” David Hume dismissed this and similar anecdotes as “the inventions of the monkish historians ... propagated and believed from the silly wonder of posterity” (*Works*, 1, 134). Blake’s preference was like that of William Morris—for “uncritical or traditional histories” (*Collected Works*, xxii, xiv). Cf. p. 67, n. 23.

⁵⁴ *The Penance* is described and reproduced in Preston, pp. 74–76, pl. 20. Preston overlooks the hunched back of the “old man, leaning upon a staff,” who must be Gloucester. See also Blunt, pl. 42 and p. 9, where my interpretation of Blake’s intent is “confirmed” yet generalized into “hypocrisy in sexual matters.”

⁵⁵ *The Bard*, ii, iv. From Gray’s “dreadful harmony” to Blake’s “fearful symmetry” is only a step, but a rather tremendous one.

⁵⁶ Marg. to Watson, 12–13: E606/K391.

⁵⁷ *T.S.B.*: E766, 437/K40–41, the first sentence a deletion.

⁵⁸ Usually dated ca. 1777 from its closeness in language to *P.S.*

⁵⁹ Jack Lindsay, *Perspective for Poetry*, London, 1944, p. 26, speaks of Blake as building “his basic myth forms around the Christian world-view, restoring integrity to that world-view by his revolutionary identification of himself with the crucified masses.” For Blake’s sources (somewhat sketchily reconstructed) in the antinomian and revolutionary tradition “tenaciously held by the descendants of the small tradesmen and artisans who had formed the extreme left of the Commonwealthmen,” see A. L. Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel*, London, 1958. See Thompson, especially Part I, for a documented reconstruction of the radicalism in Paine’s and Blake’s England An extended study of Blake’s antinomianism and possible relation to the Muggletonian

dissenting sect is being prepared by Thompson.

⁶⁰Paine, 1, 4–10.

⁶¹This theme is developed in *Europe*; see especially the figure of State Religion in pl. 6.

⁶²Marg. to Reynolds: E625/K445.

⁶³Malkin, in Symons, p. 315. The original drawings and the copper plates have survived. For photographic comparison of the drawings with the monuments (of Edward III, Philippa, Elinor, and Richard II) see Miner in *BNYPL*, LXVII (1963), 639–643.

⁶⁴Blake told Grabb Robinson he was made sick by Wordsworth's writing of passing "unalarmed" the thrones of Jehovah and his shouting Angels. Symons, p. 258. See Blake's notes on Wordsworth's Preface to *The Excursion*, E656/K784.

⁶⁵A.b:9–24: E57/K204.

⁶⁶Malkin said of Blake's interest in the Abbey tombs that "all the ornaments appeared as miracles of art, to his Gothicised imagination." Symons, p. 314. For Blake's assertion that he could work miracles like those of Christ and Tom Paine, see Marg. to Watson, 12–13: E606/K391.

4. The Enormous Plagues

ANOTHER reading of *America*, this time with attention to the *consequences* of war unchained, will lead us to the tragic precedent in English history upon which Blake bases both the cosmic dialectics and the imaginal pattern of his vision of the American War as a Last Judgment upon England. That precedent in brief is the supposed relation between English aggressions during the Hundred Years' War and the appalling visitation of the Great Pestilence in 1348. Blake first read about this Judgment when he was gathering material for his unfinished play *King Edward the Third*, as we shall see. That play and another Poetical Sketch and one or two early paintings prove to be fragments of a first halting attempt to record with iron pens a vast political Truth which kings of England should heed. To understand the potential fusion of those fragments it will serve us well to work backward from *America*, where we can see the work completed and the panoramic movement of the Great Plague presented in a swift, compacted symbolism which must be the result of its having lain for more than a dozen years in what John Livingston Lowes might call Blake's mind's volcanic cauldron.

Some contemporary analogues will introduce the theme on the level of mere metaphor. In the mirthful postwar *Criticisms on the Rolliad*, a Whig satire written by the antiquary George Ellis and others, one of King George's ministers, Dundas, is said to have schemed during the war to reduce the Americans by "Starvation": "He like some Angel, sent to scourge mankind, Shall deal forth plagues," not "to produce an actual famine in America" but "to prevent the Americans from eating ... thereby insuring their reduction without bloodshed."¹ In the more bitter wartime caricature print, *The Closet*, cited above, another of the King's ministers, Lord George Germain, is shown giving instructions to kill and kill "Tho Nature's Germins tumble all together, Evⁿ till Destruction Sicken."

Blake too pictures the attack upon America as a dispatch of British angels "arm'd with diseases of the earth" in an attempt to smite the wheat and quench the fatness of the land. And this may be understood,

like the bacteriological warfare conducted by Jehovah, as both fact and symbol. The American patriots “heard the voice of Albions Angel give the thunderous command: His plagues obedient to his voice flew forth out of their clouds Falling upon America, as a storm to cut them off” (A.14:3–5). The attack was literally an effort to destroy the Colonial economy and figuratively an inciting of “domestic insurrections amongst us,” of which the framers of the Declaration of Independence complained. The metaphor of disease blends easily with the metaphor of fire, especially if one is drawing as Blake and his contemporaries did upon the Biblical and medieval confusion of fire and pestilence. On the simple political level Blake’s metaphor is the jargon of the day. The town-burning naval fire is symbolic of political incitement, though this point does not happen to be made by Barlow; the American disease becomes the French disease; “Republicanism,” writes an American in Paris in the spring of 1789, “is absolutely a moral Influenza from which neither Titles, Places, nor even the Diadem [the crown] can guard their possessor ... the Lord preserve us from a hot summer.”²

It is the reversal of the scourge upon the scourger till Destruction itself sicken that interests the ingenious practitioner of the art of symmetry. In this sense the pattern of *America* is simple but dialectical. The King seeks with divisive diseases (“Fury! rage! madness!”) to infect the Americans, but his hurled flames produce an opposing flame in “the fierce rushing of th’inhabitants together.” If the plague of disunity had overcome the “citizens of New-York ... mariners of Boston ... scribe of Pennsylvania ... [and] builder of Virginia,” “Then had America been lost.” “But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire,” and America is saved.³ And now the whole process reverses. The King’s attempt to quench the “Human fire” of revolt “as a sea o’erwhelms a land in the day of an earthquake” begins to overwhelm England.

His punishing Demons are themselves punished. And the rulers who sowed the wind reap the whirlwind when the divisive plagues “recoil” and roll back “with fury On Albions Angels” to produce a bloody epidemic of civil disaffection that sweeps throughout the British Isles:

... then the Pestilence began in streaks of red
Across the limbs of Albions Guardian, the spotted plague smote
Bristols

And the Leprosy Londons Spirit, sickening all their bands:
The millions sent up a howl of anguish ...
The plagues creep on the burning winds driven by flames of Orc,
And by the fierce Americans rushing together in the night
Driven o'er the Guardians of Ireland and Scotland and Wales
They spotted with plagues forsook the frontiers....

The “naked multitude” refuse to fight; the King and his Guardians lie
“Sick’ning” (A.15).

There are no hints in Barlow for this development, nor for Blake’s rain of blood and other apocalyptic manifestations. These go back, ultimately, to the book of Revelation. But Blake’s immediate source is Joshua Barnes’s *History of Edward III* (1688). Blake is concentrating the dispersed images of Barnes’s leisurely but panoramic account of the movement of the Black Death through the Continent and over the British Isles into a visionary synopsis (with some blend from Barlow) of the spread of disaffection through the Isles in 1780–1782.

Compare this sequence of phenomena in Barnes’s *History*: a “Dreadful Comet ... a Pillar of fires ... frequent and terrible Earthquakes”; “It rained Blood in Germany, and Comets, Meteors, fiery Beams”; the plague originated in Asia in “a certain Igneous Vapor, or Sulphurous Fire, horribly breaking forth from the Earth; or ... descending from Heaven ... rowling along in smoaky globes of horrid Stink and Pestilential Fire ... whereby the Air became so infected, that there fell down Millions of young Serpents, and other venomous Insects”; “black Nodes, or Spots ... over all the Body” were symptoms; in England the disease “began in the Sea-port Towns ... ran up to Bristow ... about the first of November it reached London”; “in Wales [it] raged extreamly ... and among English in Ireland”; “the Scots ... made a warlike Rendezvous ... to invade the North-Borders” but suddenly were infected and fled (pp. 428–440)—to the following sequence of phenomena in *America*: “red meteors round the land of Albion”; “red clouds & raging fires” belching from the deeps; “Red rose the clouds ... in vast wheels of blood”; “the terror like a comet” “with beams of blood” “in black smoke thunders and loud winds ... breaking in smoky wreaths from the wild deep, & gath’ring thick in flames”; “diseases ... forty millions, must’ring in the eastern sky”; “plagues flew forth out of their clouds, Falling ... as a storm ... as a plague wind fill’d with insects ... as a sea ... in the day of an

earthquake”; “the plagues ... rolld”; “the spotted plague Smote Bristols ... Londons Spirit”; “plagues creep on the burning winds ... Driven o’er the Guardians of Ireland and Scotland and Wales. They spotted with plagues forsook the frontiers” (A.3:16–15:14).

The political moral is explicit in the source. Barnes calls the Black Death a judgment on England for the aggressive wars of Edward III. Blake treats disease in the eighteenth-century body politic as a similar judgment upon the England of George III. Blake’s *King Edward the Third* makes a beginning at the same moral. But we must not leave *America* until we have observed the minuteness with which Blake selects those elements which serve as receptacles of contemporary detail: we shall then see whether the same way of rewriting medieval history does not operate, at least crudely, in *Edward* as well.

2

A single inaccuracy in one law, may shake the frame of
the whole community.

—*Annual Register*, 1781

When the pestilential fires of Orc reach Britain they have a threefold effect—upon the multitude, whom they cause to howl and throw off their hammered mail and stand naked; upon the rulers including king, bishops, poet laureate, and priests, whom they cause to lie writhing or to hide in caves as self-evident reptiles; and upon the female spirits, whom they release from the fetters of religion in renewed youth.

We have seen how the naked multitude howled and danced the dance of revolution. Literally the throwing down of arms by all the “bands” (*troops* is the modern word) suggests the mass desertion of Britain’s fighting men, a matter of record. The appalling rate of desertions “at different periods of the war” and especially at its end almost brings tears to the army’s historian, Sir John Fortescue. Blake must frequently have seen in London streets the “hapless” soldiers he writes of in *London*, human molecules of the complete disintegration of the army that occurred in 1783 as the peace was signed. Following the “instant and simultaneous flight of almost every man who was intitled to his discharge,” says Fortescue, it was impossible *for the next ten years* to recruit troops enough to back up Pitt’s occasional “firm

attitude” towards France or Spain or Russia. Recruits secured by fair means or foul soon deserted; a decree of death to deserters had no effect; the Empire had to rely for its belligerency on 12,000 subsidized Hessians available on demand.⁴ As for Ireland and Scotland, in these nations with longstanding grievances (“their banners seard With fires of hell [which] deform their ancient heavens with shame & woe”) serious mutinies occurred as early as 1778. By 1782 rebellion in Ireland reached the proportions of a revolution, and in Scotland a “contagion” of debate over Reform “reached the north like the influenza which accompanied it,” as Burns’s publisher remembered.⁵

The particular mention of Bristol and London is appropriate, not only for the riots but because these two merchant cities were most deeply involved in the American trade and remained in sullen opposition throughout the war. The *Remonstrance* of the mayor and council of London in 1781, declaring to King George “our Abhorrence of the Continuation of this unnatural and unfortunate War,” may be cited in evidence of the leprosy of London’s spirit a year after the riots. And for Bristol a battle of flags which accompanied a bye-election early that year appears symptomatic. In over two months of polling, the “Liberty” candidate, whose position was accurately represented by the display of “the American colours on some of our churches,” was narrowly defeated by Treasury support of his Tory rival but was shortly afterward elected mayor.⁶

Of the plight of “the ancient Guardians Fainting upon the elements, smitten with their own plagues,”⁷ Blake supplies many examples. The King, “Albions Guardian,” goes out of his mind, “Pale quivering toward the brain his glimmering eyes, teeth chattering ... convuls’d” (A.15:7–8). George III did suffer a mild mental depression at the end of the American War, which Blake writing ten years later could have known about, though his first prolonged illness came in 1788; and in his fits of madness the King was obsessed with anxiety over loss of “my American colonies.”⁸ The bishops lie sickening, “Londons Guardian, and the ancient miter’d York, Their heads on snowy hills, their ensigns sick’ning in the sky” (9–10). As a matter of fact not long after the news of Cornwallis’ surrender both Bishop Lowth of London and Bishop Newton of Bristol did sicken and die, though York did not. The laureate “Bard of Albion” also feels “the enormous plagues,” and a cowl of flesh grows over his head “& scales on his back & ribs” (16–17). He does not die but is exposed. The actual laureate, since the year

of Blake's birth, was William Whitehead, who regularly supplied the newspapers with odes on the King's birthday and on New Year's. This allusion should be kept in mind for *Edward the Third*.

The priests also "Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc," because "The doors of marriage are open ... Leaving the females naked and glowing with the lusts of youth" (19–22). And actually in 1781 there was a crisis in the marriage law which not only disconcerted the priesthood but, according to the *Annual Register*, shook "the frame of the whole community." By a ruling in the Court of King's Bench the wording of the Marriage Act of 1751 was interpreted as making void all marriages performed in chapels erected since passage of the act. As Lord Beauchamp exclaimed in Commons the next week, the ruling made thousands of children bastards and denied parish relief settlement to "illegitimate" families throughout the land. All London was agog. Neighborhood gossips had a thirty-year crop of "adulterous" unions to speculate upon. Here was accusation of adultery on a mass scale.

It might be argued that the reference to the opening of the doors of marriage is a purely philosophical assertion that one result of revolution is the overthrow of a perverted moral code fettering individual freedom. Orc's announced purpose is to stamp to dust the "stony law" of the ten commandments, "to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof, That pale religious litchery, seeking Virginity, May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty ... for every thing that lives is holy" (8:5–13). But we must not underestimate Blake's acquaintance with historical detail. Even his description of the priests "in rustling scales" (note the modulation from rustling robes)⁹ rushing to hide from the fires may owe something to the speech of the Whig leader Charles Fox, reported thus in the newspapers:

"He observed that by the newly discovered blot in that law [he called the whole Marriage Act 'tyrannical and absurd'] most of the clergy in the kingdom had been ignorantly guilty of felony by the celebration of marriages in the new chapels; so that (as he laughably continued) we might expect to see most of our prelates, either transported to America, or sent in their lawn sleeves to work on board the ballest lighters [floating prisons on the Thames]."

Lord Beauchamp quickly brought in a bill to mend the breach, and Fox, in an effort at drastic, Orc-like reform, introduced a bill to reduce legal marriage requirements to the simple formality of civil

registration. Fox's bill was actually passed by the House, though subsequently thrown out by the Lords. A crack had appeared in the stony law which a prophetic bard did not forget.¹⁰

The total effect of the raging of the "red flames fierce" over "the hills, the vales, the cities" of Great Britain was that for a time "The Heavens melted from north to south." Yet ultimately the revolt did not succeed as it had in America; the human fire was damped down "with clouds & cold mists"; and "Angels & weak men" were once more able to "govern o'er the strong" (16:1–14). In a disconnected fragment Blake wrote: "So The British Colonies beneath the woful Princes fade. And so the Princes fade from earth"; but they had not faded from England.

3

Yet death is terrible, tho' borne on angels' wings!

—*King Edward the Third*

Blake often painted pictures of the Great Plague in gruesome detail, whether in an Egyptian or medieval setting or in that of the London of 1665—which doubtless had for him a political association with the Restoration.¹¹ The key to the unfinished *King Edward the Third* is the great Death which lies in wait for the warriors of Edward's ill-starred invasion of France, a "successful" and proud invasion followed by retreat and then by the Black Death over Britain and then by a conflict so perpetual that it came to be called the Hundred Years' War. But since Blake wrote only six short scenes of this drama, the key lies buried in other fragments of the story, which we shall come to in due course, and in his sources and their later use in *America*, which we have observed.

The enigma of the *Edward* fragment is further enhanced by the fact that it lacks the sort of editorial prologue written for King John and King Edward IV in which the poet announces his moral and hints at modern parallels. There are many indications of Blake's general prophetic intent in these scenes; yet if we forget to ask what historical climax they point toward we may be quite puzzled that Blake's Edward and his brave and battle-ready warriors appear to be undertaking their invasion of the vineyards of France under favorable auspices, to be marching with jingoistic complacency toward a great

slaughter of enemy troops, and to be getting by with what they represent to each other as glorious and fully justifiable murder. They are Englishmen with a God-given “right to France” as well as a “right” to be “sovereigns of the sea.” They rejoice at an opportunity to worship the English goddess, Liberty, by slaughtering enemies who, not being English, are “in chains.”

The reader who accepts the *Poetical Sketches* as the advertised product of “untutored youth,” or even the reader who views them as the serious work of riper years—for there is a good deal of Shakespeare in *Edward*, and Blake says that Shakespeare only “in riper years gave me his hand”—can easily mistake these scenes for the author’s personal expression of a “boylike” delight in “the picturesqueness of war.”¹² Even one reader who discovers that in the fourth scene the author does not share the warriors’ ambition but for the moment at least sees through their chatter about rights and liberty, has been inclined to jump to the conclusion that Blake’s suddenly revealed cynicism is the result of a “flash of revelation” which is unrelated to the rest of the work and must have come “as swift and momentary to Blake as it comes to his readers now.”¹³

Revelation was available to Blake, however, both in the terrors of his own times and in his historical sources. He did not have to wait for the pamphlets of Thelwall¹⁴ and Wollstonecraft and Paine in the 1790’s to find Edward III cited as the archetype of aggressive, frustrated “ambition.” According to Gray’s *Bard*, of which we hear verbal and thematic echoes in Blake’s play, this Edward’s particular share in the general curse upon his whole dynasty was to serve as “the scourge of Heaven” against France, then to be surrounded by “terrors” of Flight and Sorrow and Solitude, and finally to lie unpitied on his “funeral couch,” a mighty conqueror at whose passing no one shed a tear.¹⁵ According to the pseudo-Shakespearean *Raigne of King Edward the Third* Edward’s dubious purpose in France was “to hack and hew poor men.”¹⁶ For details Blake had to go to prose histories of Edward’s reign, and even the most favorable of these showed it filled with aggressive wars, cruel executions, and hypocritical manifestos.

Barnes, for example, though often laudatory, itemizes the “many Rapes, Murders and Robberies” of Edward’s armies; makes plain that his generals were little better than brigands; and describes the sacking of towns as the main achievement of the campaign in France. In the “march” alluded to at the end of Blake’s first scene, Barnes’s Edward

simply “overran the Country far and near ... Burning and Spoiling whatever he met with” and putting inhabitants to the sword without mercy (pp. 346–351). Sometimes the invaders won, “and sometimes they lost, as the Course of War is; but the Country always suffer’d” (p. 401). We might ascribe to some hypothetical author the naïve “patriotism” that could transform these rapes and sackings into a pretty tale adorned with the platitudes of the author of *Rule, Britannia!* about “Kings supported by almighty Love.” But such naïveté is not conceivable in the author of *Samson*, *King John*, and *Gwin*, an author who deeply and strongly sympathizes with oppressed and harried villagers against “bands of enemies” laying waste their land and rioting on their flocks. Any idea that Blake is “indulging” in youthful jingoism in his portrayal of Edward’s pillagers is far wide of the mark.¹⁷ Rather, since the American War as a civil war suggested parallels in the reigns of John and Edward IV, we might suppose that as a war with France, which it became in 1778, it suggested to Blake—as it did to his contemporaries—the wars of Edward III. The “historical fact” of Edward’s effigy he knew in Westminster Abbey. The story of Edward’s career he probably first encountered in the painters’ history book, Rapin, before he went for more detail to Barnes.¹⁸

The *History of England* translated in 1723–1731 by Nicholas Tindal from the French of Rapin de Thoyras, a Huguenot who had served under William III, sounded a critical note toward kings that suited well the rising spirit of bourgeois democracy in Blake’s England. As one reviewer observed, Rapin showed “that the people have their rights as well as kings their prerogatives” and furnished “the people of England with the best material against the two most evils under the sun, i.e. superstition and tyranny.” The work of Rapin “should be in the hands of every Englishman, and engraven on his heart.”¹⁹ It soon was. Sold in illustrated weekly numbers, with engravings by Basire’s predecessors Vertue and Gravelot, Rapin’s *History* was an enormous popular success. It promoted a widespread interest in national antiquity, inspired a school of English history painters from Kauffmann to Blake, and opened the era of English commercial engraving.²⁰

Painters liked Rapin for his full visual detail and his practice of enriching his narrative with set pieces or dramatic scenes. Angelica Kauffmann cited volume and page of Rapin under the titles of her

history paintings exhibited in 1776.²¹ Blake's early history paintings can nearly all be traced to corresponding passages in Rapin, and the Antiquaries were following leads suggested by Rapin when they sent Blake to Westminster Abbey and other graveyards to draw the effigies of kings and queens such as Edward III and Philippa.²² Some of the Antiquaries liked Rapin for his democratic bias. For example, one of the compilers of Hollis' *Memoirs* contrasted historians who write "for the use of kings, or rather tyrants"—among whom he included Hume, Echard, and Smollett—with Rapin and others who write "for the use of the people."²³

After the American Revolution Benjamin West painted at the King's command the scenes of Edward's glorious victories, for these in the short run at least had been more gratifying than the "victories" of Burgoyne and Cornwallis. We cannot ascribe to Blake, however, any similar interest in glorifying the founder of the Order of the Garter. Toward the end of his life when he was obliging the astrologer John Varley with pictures of the spirits that visited his inward eye, Blake, according to report, questioned the spirit of Edward III about "the butcheries of which he was guilty in the flesh," and Edward's "detestable" reply was that what Blake and his friends called carnage was "a trifle unworthy of notice"; that "destroying five thousand men" was "merely removing them from one state of existence to another."²⁴ Blake had never any doubt there really was such a king, indifferent to the slaughter of thousands, but we must not read Edward's indifference as Blake's.

Edward the Third has been said to reflect the manner of Shakespeare's plays but to have none of their dramatic quality.²⁵ If we recognize that Blake was setting up his heroes in order to knock them down later or let them be knocked down by the fury of God's judgment, we can see why he could draw heavily on Shakespeare for the blustering talk of warriors before battle yet show no interest at all, here or in any later writing, in the elements of dramatic action.²⁶ Intending a vast moral pageant rather than a drama of conflicting human wills, Blake neglects action for insight and for the preparation of a prophetic contrast between the glorious anticipation and the appalling results of armed conquest. The title of Blake's 1784 painting, *War unchained by an Angel: Fire, Famine, and Pestilence following*, may be taken as a panoramic outline of his general theme. The Angel which seems to serve God in employing Edward as the

scourge of France will reveal the full measure of God's judgment when the wind changes and the fire kindled in France redounds upon Bristol and London. The historical "victory" of Crécy will be followed by the Black Death, the melting away of Edward's power, and, in the ensuing reign, "Cruel and Unnatural Civil War" (Barnes).

Thus if we take it to be Blake's general intention to make the most of the historical ironies pointed out in his sources, we can understand that his effort in the opening scenes is to present a reasonable facsimile of boastful princes and generals and gullible infantry preparing to "reap rich harvest in the fields of Cressy," as his king expresses it. King Edward, addressing his army just landed on the coast of Brittany, prays to God to "let Liberty blaze in each countenance, and fire the battle" in which "cries of blood" will "tear horror from heav'n." He boasts of "English courage" and congratulates his generals on being "conquerors everywhere" and having "such an army of heroes" as never before "shouted to the Heav'ns, nor shook the field." Edward's son, the Black Prince, a Hotspur without brains, chatters that "It is my sin to love the noise of war" and day-dreams happily about the "thousand deaths" soon to be heaping "this fatal field of Cressy." Sir Thomas Dagworth, one of Edward's generals, makes a great show of wanting a real battle, and when he is satisfied that the King will order one his "heart dances" and he feels like "the young bridegroom going to be married." Finally a minstrel inspires the troops with a bloodthirsty song pronouncing it their destiny to found an "empire of the sea" on "gore" and on a perpetual use of sword and spear.²⁷

These are plausible imitations. They are not the real thing—partly because Blake is not entering into his warriors' feelings with any delight but is attempting to represent the awful voice of war which, as we know from his other *Sketches*, he wishes to silence. Again and again the impulse to *expose* the sentiments of his dramatis personae interferes with the imperfect effort to give them verisimilitude. Blake abandons his characters as human beings in order to plant ironies in their speeches—a tendency that will get so completely out of control in later prophecies that his warriors will become "mountains" too gigantic for any human stage and will express their delight in the pursuit of war in language that approaches the "fi-fo-fum" variety. The irony of vision is not the irony of satire. Satire would exclaim: These are human beings acting like beasts of prey. Vision insists: These really are beasts! Our problem in reading *Edward* is not simply to account for the characters' expression of delight in bloodshed but to

account for the fact that much of the hidden irony which underlies that expression remains hidden.

Edward's opening lines, for example, contain a buried indictment of war's horror similar in phrase and image to Blake's Edward IV Prologue which charges kings with causing and drawing upon themselves "the whirlwind of fury" "from the Throne of God." Edward III, having prayed to the God "to whose fury the nations are But as dust," assumes that his prayer is answered and that God's fury will operate only against the French. We know that his troops will vanquish the French, yet that in the end his own career will demonstrate the truth of his announcement that without divine aid the implements of war prove but "idle trophies of the vanquisher." His boasts—that English Liberty will carry his warriors safely through the ruin and confusion of battle and that conquest supported by God is not hollow—constitute an ironic inversion of the Welsh bard's prophecy that the conquests of the Edwards will prove hollow and that even their virtues will not save them from ruin and confusion.²⁸ With the play unfinished, the vulnerability of these boasts remains unexploited—as does also, in the third scene, the vulnerability of Edward's inadvertent admission that the Englishmen's "right to France" rests only upon their boldness as conquerors; of the Prince's self-condemnation as one whose "vast Ambition" overflows all bounds of moderation; and of his mentor Chandos' promise of a life untroubled by "the voice of Conscience" to the soldier who makes a good adjustment to his bloody occupation.

More self-evident perhaps is the Machiavellianism of Chandos' recipe for transforming defensive patriotism into aggressive militarism: "Teach man to think he's a free agent," let him "build himself a hut and hedge a spot of ground," and he will defend them as "his by right of nature." Once "thus set in action," the same home-lover can be inspired to fight for "glory" and even to invade France if under the impression that he does so "to enlarge his castle." In the summer of 1778 the Bard of Albion was urging British troops to fight in France to "guard their sacred homes."²⁹

The irony in the fourth scene is explicit and has not gone unnoticed. General Dagworth accuses his man William—who talks like Blake³⁰ stepping onto his own stage—of being "an endless moralist" and "a natural philosopher" who knows "truth by instinct, while reason runs aground." The general seems to feel called upon to defend the French

campaign before this “moralist” —but he cannot. His bombast before the troops, his talking about Liberty to give them “noble hopes,” collapses into an evasive opportunism. Honest William refuses to view in a romantic light the antics of armed men mouthing “right” and “Liberty.” To him their war games are foolish: “When we were in England at the tournament at Windsor and the Earl of Warwick was tumbled over, you ask’d me if he did not look very well when he fell? and I said, No, he look’d very foolish.” And their wars are sinful:

William. Then, Sir, I should be glad to know if it was not ambition that brought over our King to France to fight for his right?

Dagworth. [It was.]

William. Then if ambition is a sin, we are all guilty in coming with him, and in fighting for him.

Dagworth. Now, William, thou dost thrust the question home.³¹

The question thrust home is the condemnation of aggression implicit throughout the play. It is a sin to love war. The King of England’s right to France is supported not by divine aid but by Ambition, defined by Dagworth as “the desire or passion that one man has to get before another in any pursuit after glory.” In Blake’s “Pale desire” MS he traces all the evil “Glory” of the kingdoms of the world to the same source:

“... forth Came Ambition, Crawling like a toad. Pride Bears it in her Bosom, and the Gods all bow to it. So Great its Power that Pride inspir’d by it Prophetic Saw the Kingdoms of the World...”(E437/K41)

Here Ambition is a crawling thing. In the play William asks if it is “a little creeping root that grows in ditches?” The image suggests that Blake has in mind a letter of 1340, quoted in his sources, from Pope Benedict to Edward III, berating him for ambitiously asserting a right to France:

“Those that hear as much are amaz’d, ascribing it not to discretion, but rather to Simplicity and Vanity. Finally We judge it ought to be more strictly consider’d, that such a Title, wanting both Reality and Advantage ... is feared to Be a Poysonous Root, which will probably ... bring forth Fruits of Bitterness and Sorrow.”³²

The climax of all the talk about Liberty as a glorious lure to “lead them on to battle” comes with the introduction of two suitably bloody chants by a hired “minstrel.” This court poet, announced in scene four

by a sort of Shakespearean clown named Peter Blunt, is a corrupt descendant of the ancient bards.

Peter. Yonder's a musician going to play before the King; It's a new song about the French and English, and the Prince has made the minstrel a 'squire, and given him I don't know what [a pension, according to Barnes], and I can't tell whether he don't mention us all one by one; and he is to write another about all us that are to die, that we may be remembered in Old England, for all [that] our blood and bones are in France ... and I came to tell your honour, because you love to hear war-songs.

The minstrel is Blake's bridge back to the eighteenth century, for his "song about the French and English," which fills the sixth scene, is at least as appropriate to the modern as to the medieval theme of conquest, while his other song, "about all us that are to die," is Blake's parody of the battle songs of modern Britain.

This second song is printed not in the text of the play but three pages further on as a separate *War Song to Englishmen*—a typographical mischance which has encouraged the mistaken impression that not only General Dagworth but Blake himself loved "to hear war-songs," although the reference to both songs as the minstrel's is plain enough in Peter's speech.

In the real thing, King George's laureate urges Britons to be "Proud of Edward's victories," to emulate his attacking armies and "navies powerful," and to "Waste no zeal in idle breath" but "rouse to deeds of death!"³³ Blake's minstrel chants more sadistically: "Prepare your hearts for Death's cold hand!" The one cries, prepare to kill; the other, prepare to be killed—and wish you had "three lives" to give all at once.

The minstrel's other song, printed as the sixth scene of the play, is an inflammatory potion issued on the dawn of battle to the "Warriors met at the King's Tent." They are exhorted to go out and work as fierce slaughter upon the French as did their own Trojan ancestors upon the early giants of Albion. These were "savage monsters," according to the minstrel, "wild men, Naked and roaring like lions"—an outrageous idea as we know from Percy and other Antiquarians, who taught Blake that the ancient Britons were "naked *civilized* men, learned, studious, abstruse in thought and contemplation ... overwhelmed by brutal arms" (*D.C.v.*). Be as brutal as your invading ancestors, urges the minstrel, through whom Blake is saying: You ARE

as brutal as your ancestors, “Heated with war, fill’d with the blood of Greeks,”

O sons of Trojan Brutus, cloath’d in war,
Whose voices are the thunder of the field,
Rolling dark clouds o’er France, muffling the sun
In sickly darkness like a dim eclipse,
Threatening as the red brow of storms, as fire
Burning up nations in your wrath and fury!

It is *in this context* that the glory of British maritime power is celebrated, the beauty of “Liberty” based on the armed might of Albion’s sons and daughters who “shall rule the empire of the sea” like “eagles [of] prey”:

Our sons shall rise from thrones in joy,
Each one buckling on his armour; Morning
Shall be prevented by their swords gleaming,
And Evening hear their song of victory!
Their towers shall be built upon the rocks,
Their daughters shall sing, surrounded with shining spears!

Liberty shall stand upon the cliffs of Albion,
Casting her blue eyes over the green ocean;
Or, tow’ring, stand upon the roaring waves,
Stretching her mighty spear o’er distant lands...³⁴

To sing surrounded by spears. To have each morning sun anticipated or outshone by swords. If the picture of Liberty stretching her mighty spear o’er distant lands appears fine, the minstrel’s own parallel words negate it: “Burning up nations in your wrath and fury!”

To grasp the full ironic contrast, however, we should have the unwritten sequel to these opening scenes—first the furious war unchained³⁵ at “Cressy,” and then the “Fire, Pestilence and Famine following”—a sequel indicated not only in *America* but in the narratives of Barnes and Rapin, in the titles of Blake’s war paintings, and in *The Couch of Death*, one of the *Poetical Sketches*.

After the “total defeat” of French forces at Crécy, Edward conducted a ten-month siege of Calais during which British soldiers died by the tens of thousands, “chiefly by the rage of the Bloody Flux,” ominous of future pestilence. At the conclusion of the siege Edward’s tyranny was displayed—and driven by defiant mockery into a “Conqueror’s Rage”—in a moving scene chosen by Blake as the subject for an early drawing, *The Keys of Calais?*³⁶ “Six illustrious Burghers” in their manner of yielding the city’s keys to their conqueror risked “the Sacrifice of their Lives,” according to Rapin, appearing “bare-footed, in their Shirts, with Halters about their Necks,” symbolic of the harsh terms of surrender. Edward was “so highly incensed” that he commanded the defiant burghers to be beheaded, and though he finally called off the execution at the behest of his son and tearful queen, he suffered no real change of heart. “A few days after *Edward* had made his Entry into *Calais*, he turned out all the Inhabitants ... to people it with English.”³⁷

Blake also deals with a siege such as that of Calais in his painting, *A Breach in a City the Morning after the Battle*, exhibited in 1784 with *War unchained*. In the breach in the city wall lie dead and dying warriors, wept over by wives and parents. Later use of the same figures and wall in the title page and frontispiece of *America* reinforces the impression that Blake had the American War in mind in the first place. In *America* the breach is occupied by the gigantic form of a naked angel (Orc) who will prevent an utter sacking of the city but is manacled (compare the haltered burghers of Calais) because in the old world tyranny still reigns.³⁸

The title of the companion painting, *War unchained ... Fire, Pestilence and Famine following*, suggests that the climax of the Crécy-Calais war was the apocalyptic Black Death which swept England in the following year; and this is the cadence of the histories and of *America*. Barnes (p. 416) sends up the curtain on this act with a suitably prophetic flourish:

“Now doth King *Edward* the Third seem to stand in the full Zenith both of his Age and Glories: He had but just past the 35 Year of his Life, and yet was crown’d at Home in his Family with a Lovely Row of Hopeful Children, and a Vertuous and Beautiful Consort; in his Kingdoms with Peace and full Prosperity: And abroad he was renowned above all the Kings of the Earth for his Noble Victories by Sea and by Land, in *Scotland, France and Bretagne*; for set battles, or

taking of Towns; for Kings slain, Kings routed, and Kings taken captive....

“For now ... it seem’d as if the Golden Age was reduced to *England*; and a New Sun began to shine in our Horizon: So great Riches and Plenty, the usual Attendants of Conquest, being generally diffused over the face of the whole Land. For there was scarce a Lady, or Gentlewoman of any Account, which had not in her possession some precious Household-stuff, as rich Gowns, Beds, Counterpains, Hangings, Linen, Silks, Furs, Cups of Gold and Silver, Porcelain and Chrystal, Bracelets, Chains and Necklaces, brought from *Caen*, *Calais*, or other Cities beyond the Sea. And yet as the Roman Historians complain, that they were overcome by the Luxury and Fashions of the Nations they conquer’d: So from this time the Native Candour and simplicity of the *English* Nation did visibly empair; and Pride, Superfluity and Vanity began to lift up their hatefull Heads; till they provok’d the Author of the World to visit this Land also with his awakening Judgments.”

Blake had a sufficiently broad hint here for his last act. Here was the “plenty” which in his minstrel’s prophecy was to be the fruit of imperial conquest, and here was God’s judgment following. To shift to a less prolix historian, Rapin (1, 426–427):

“God permitted not these Disorders to go long unpunished. A terrible Plague, after raging in *Asia*, and part of Europe, spread itself into *France*, and from thence into *England*, where it made such Desolation, that one half of the Nation was swept away. *London* especially felt the Effects of its Fury, where, it is observed, in one Year above fifty thousand Persons were buried in a Churchyard belonging to the Cistercians.”

Neglect of crops and cattle led to widespread famine, and fires raged unchecked through the stricken villages. The fiery sequel to aggressive war, itemized in Blake’s early painting and in the text of *America*, reappears frequently with similar prophetic significance, as in the final plate of *Europe* where the result of British war against France is indicated as a general conflagration. Likewise in periods of renewed war (1794, 1805) Blake painted realistically horrible illustrations of *Plague*.

But the literal Plague had not, after all, pulled down or even humbled the Proud, and Blake’s first literary treatment of it, in the *Poetical Sketches*, emphasizes moral rather than political aspects.

“When the Wars were again renewed between England and France,” says Barnes, “King Edward seem’d nothing the weaker for all the great loss of his People in this Plague: For the Common Sort of France was as much exhausted hereby as England, and in a manner all King Edward’s expert Barons and Captains remained still alive to be another Plague to that Nation” (p. 440). Yet if the Plague had failed to revolutionize society, it had, according to the historian, effected a revolution or reformation in moral and psychological values; and it is this aspect that we find in *The Couch of Death*, a delicate sketch in cadenced prose.³⁹

This lyric meditation, blending images from Milton, Barnes, Chatterton, and the Bible,⁴⁰ is written in a melancholy mood induced apparently by Blake’s habit, in his monument-copying for the Antiquaries, of walking “through dreary places ... and in church-yards; and ... sitting by Sorrow on a tomb-stone,” to quote an adjacent Sketch.⁴¹ As he returns from a day’s walk, perhaps to one of the outlying churchyards, the poet’s imagination is stirred by the English twilight: “The veiled Evening walked solitary down the western hills, and Silence reposed in the valley; the birds of day were heard in their nests, rustling in brakes and thickets; and the owl and bat flew round the darkening trees.”⁴² His mind turns to Barnes’s description of the year after Calais when the Black Death “proceeded to decimate all Mankind, or rather to destroy Nine of Ten thro the whole World.”⁴³ Blake evidently recalls the historian’s observation that “as the Scripture says of the Pestilence that it walketh in Darkness or invisibly ... this Plague also walked, or rather flew...” He imagines a sickbed scene: “In former times, on such an evening, when ... our ancestors, who now sleep in their graves, walked on the stedfast globe, the remains of a family of the tribes of Earth,⁴⁴ a mother and a sister were gathered to the sick bed of a youth; Sorrow linked them together ... they stood by the bed like reeds bending over a lake, when the evening drops trickle down.” Like Shelley’s west wind, the plague served both as destroyer and preserver of relationships, breaking asunder human ties that were corroded, linking together those based on enduring values. Blake must have read how the plague was “so contagious, that [some] Parents forsook their Children, and Wives their Husbands [while others] being awaken’d to the quick by so dreadfull an appearance of Death at their Elbow, are said to have piously set themselves to bewail their sins [and] even [to have] rejoiced as they

were dying.”

He imagines a family linked together not only by Sorrow but by a common fate. “Beneath me bums eternal fire! O for a hand to pluck me forth!” wails the plague-stricken youth, and his mother assures him that she too is “infected”: “The youth lay silent—his mother’s arm was under his head; he was like a cloud tossed by the winds, till the sun shine[s], and the drops of rain glisten, the yellow harvest breathes, and the thankful eyes of the villagers are turned up in smiles.”

The ideal of a peaceful life beyond the reach of plague and famine and tyranny hovers on the margin of this vision. Though our attention is focused on the individual and the family we are aware of the larger society of villagers thankful for a “yellow harvest.” The recovery of individual innocence, paradise regained, is the same theme as the Final Judgment of all souls, taken singly. Barnes reports that “Innocent children being at the point of Death, did for the most part joyfully set forth the Praises of God: And ... Sinners themselves ... even willingly waited for Death.”

Blake’s elegy continues: “Such smiles were seen upon the face of the youth; a visionary hand wiped away his tears, and a ray of light beamed around his head! All was still.... The sorrowful pair lift up their heads, hovering Angels are around them, voices of comfort are heard over the Couch of Death, and the youth breathes out his soul with joy into eternity.”

Both historian and poet interpret the Black Death as due to the sins of its victims; yet if these sins originated in the sinful war policy of the King and the sinful Luxury of the nobility, why do king and nobility escape death, and for what sin do the masses die, “Nine of ten through the whole World”? Barnes does not say. Blake has put the argument in *Edward the Third*: “if ambition is a sin, we are all guilty in coming with [the King], and in fighting for him.” In *The Couch of Death* those infected by the disease, both son and mother, take the guilt upon themselves (“My ways are sinful,” “the arrows of sin stick in my flesh”); yet there is a suggestion in the image of arrows that some outside force has drawn the bow. Sin-and-repentance is here only the husk of an old formula; what bring joy and courage to the youth and mother are their rushing together and the replacement of a vision of hellfire by a vision of a new world of peace and golden harvests. Already, as in his paintings of Queen Emma and Jane Shore, Blake is moving toward his mature conviction that the whole doctrine of sin is

a social and political fraud.⁴⁵

5

Lord Bishop, what was rash in me, is wise
In you; I dare not own the plan. 'Tis not
Mine. Yet will I, if you please,
Quickly to the Lord Mayor, and work him onward
To this most glorious voyage....

— Lord Percy in *King Edward the Third*, scene two

In the year after Crécy and during the siege of Calais the Regent, Prince Lionel of Clarence, called a Parliament “for the Common Peace and Wealth of this Kingdom” and then directed it not toward peace but toward war, with a sensational revelation of French plans to invade England.⁴⁶ Blake’s second scene, ostensibly dealing with this occasion, is a nice example of his modification of fourteenth-century matter to suit eighteenth-century issues. The specific modern parallel is the government’s announcement, in the spring Parliament of 1778, of a secret French-American treaty. Blake replaces the early court’s need of financial assistance from the merchants with the modern government’s need to persuade merchants that a war which interfered with commerce was really good for commerce.⁴⁷ And he moves the royal convocation to a time before Crécy to relate it causally to the attack upon France.

Blake’s Prince, the Duke of Clarence, opens his court with the pious declaration, not borne out by his subsequent martial announcement, of a royal wish to promote the peaceful arts of agriculture and commerce while the King “toils in his wars” on the other side of the channel. The “glory” of the King’s victories will “not be dimm’d with clouds of care,” says the Regent, if Edward, looking homeward,

... sees commerce fly round

With his white wings, and sees his golden London,
And her silver Thames, throng’d with shining spires
And corded ships; her merchants buzzing round
Like summer bees, and all the golden cities

In his land, overflowing with honey.... (ii:9–14)

When he gets down “to business,” however, Clarence acknowledges that there are clouds on the horizon, that the French with “small ships of war ... Infest our English seas, devouring all Our burden’d vessels” (compare the raids of American and French ships in English coastal waters in 1779), and that “The merchants do complain, and beg our aid.” The court’s problem is to persuade the merchants to arm and “bestir themselves” against the enemy, to do battle for the recently asserted right of Britons to be “sovereigns of the sea.”⁴⁸

Blake’s interpretation of the relationship between court and city is clearly modern. By the time France and Spain had been drawn directly into the American war, the Wilkites had quarreled among themselves and lost the mayoralty (in 1778) to a wealthy contractor, and the anti-war coalition of merchants and artisans had suffered the defection of several merchants influenced by war profits and royal graft. The buzzing of London’s merchants was more like that of wasps than that of “summer bees”; the sudden prosperity of a few only intensified the bitterness of others who were forced into or close to bankruptcy.⁴⁹ Beside Clarence’s words of innocence about “golden cities” and wartime commerce free of “care” we must read the words of experience in Blake’s contemporary manuscript on *Pride and Strife*:

“Strife, Shapeless, Sitteth under thrones of kings, like Smouldring fire, or in the Buzz of Cities flies abroad. Care ... Covet ... Strife ... Revenge ... Policy ... Guile & fraud ... live in the Smoke of Cities, on Dusky wing breathing forth Clamour & Destruction. Alas, in cities wheres the man whose face is not a mask unto his heart?”⁵⁰

In the 1790’s when Blake wrote of the Thames as “dirty,” he was returning to this theme, not discovering it for the first time.⁵¹ Under the shadow of war, the Thames is not silver but dirty, the wings of commerce are dusky, not white, and the city is more smoky than golden. Blake’s picture of London as a golden hive has been traced to Thomson’s *Liberty and Summer*, in which “generous commerce” is hailed as a pursuit “for Britons, chief ... reserved,” but the implicit irony has gone unnoticed.⁵²

Blake’s Queen and lords spiritual and temporal preparing in court to lead the merchants into war are as cheerily rhetorical as are the King and his generals and minstrel preparing on the battlefield to “Let war

stain the blue heavens with bloody banners.” In each situation a youthful prince—Edward at Crécy, Clarence at court—“plays with danger, as the innocent child, Unthinking, plays upon the viper’s den” (as Prince Edward says of himself) so that we see the wisdom of William’s observation that the ambitious “may do a great deal of harm without knowing it.” In contrast Sir John Chandos and the Bishop, the advisers of these gullible and thoughtless youths, are revealed as men of cunning (vipers).

We are explicitly warned in an aside that the “unfleg’d” Clarence is being “imposed on by the closer sort!”⁵³ His notion that commercial England can dwell in peace while the King toils in his wars is not only contrary to Blake’s iterated thesis, in *Gwin* and *King John* and *Samson*, that war compels workmen to abandon their tools and merchants to “leave the trading shore.”⁵⁴ It is also contrary to the manifest intent of his advisers. The Bishop⁵⁵ utters for the Regent’s benefit a comfortable homily on the filial relationship of Commerce to Agriculture and assures the “Sweet Prince” that “the arts of peace are ... no less glorious than those of war, Perhaps more glorious to the philosophic mind.” “O my good Lord,” gushes Clarence, quite taken in, “true wisdom drops like honey From your tongue, as from a worship’d oak!”⁵⁶ But when the talk gets around to war, the Bishop quickly adjusts “the philosophic mind” to the sentiments of *Rule, Britannia!* and proposes to arm merchant vessels. Chandos’ transition from defense of the cottage to extension of the castle is matched in the logic of the Bishop: from his first argument that agriculture is fostered by the promotion of trade it is but a step to his conclusion that trade is fostered by a war for sovereignty of the sea.

In 1778 authorized privateering and licensed monopolies were the persuasion used with ship owners, although in the House of Lords the Bishop of London wrapped in ethical sanctions his assertion that England had resources “enough to build a fleet large enough to protect this nation” by attacking France.⁵⁷ Blake’s Bishop, anxious to persuade the merchants to arm and “help themselves,” suggests the sanctions of national pride and of Britain’s divine and natural right to rule the waves,

... our right, that Heaven gave
To England, when at the birth of nature

She was seated in the deep, the Ocean ceas'd
His mighty roar; and, fawning, play'd around
Her snowy feet, and own'd his awful Queen.⁵⁸

Here Blake parodies such imperial fantasies as those of James Thomson and William Mason.⁵⁹

At this point the blunter parasite, Lord Percy, who has seemed opposed to putting pressure on the merchants, drops his mask to reveal that he is eager to share in what takes shape as no mere defensive armament but a glorious privateering campaign on which he will venture his “whole estate.”

6

Had Blake managed to complete this broadly conceived history play, its unity with the simpler and more directly fervent sketches must have been self-evident. Even as it stands the work yields to analysis a consistent pattern of variations on the theme of a contrast between words of peace and deeds of war. The simple ideal expressed in *Prologue to King John*—of a golden haired Albion *not* stretching her spear o'er distant lands but “stretch[ing] her peaceful arms,” “her citizens” thronging about the gates, her sons joying “as in the morning,” her daughters singing “as to the rising year,” and “her mariners” singing upon the sea: all exulting in peace without tyranny⁶⁰—is mirrored in illusory forms in *King Edward the Third*: in the minstrel's perverse vision of an armed *pax Britannica*, the sons “in joy” buckling on armor, the daughters singing “surrounded with shining spears”; in General Dagworth's hollow promise of peace through war and his irresponsible declaration that the blood of those who “spend their sweet lives” in France will irrigate English prosperity; and in the honeyed thesis that London can be a peaceful hive even while English armies are sowing “the fiery whirlwind of swift war” in other lands.⁶¹

Blake significantly omits merchants from his list of war makers (kings, nobles, and ministers of God); but he is already cynical about their buzzing. He will seldom be found to condemn cities and commerce in themselves or without qualification, but when they are dusked with war clouds he will not say they are sunny and golden. Unless commerce is peaceful, he implies, it is not beautiful. Merchants

do not rush into war. But kings and councilors, spurred by a love of combat and an ambition to rule the ocean and the nations, bring about a state of war. Bloodshed and plunder are sanctioned and glorified by corrupt ministers and minstrels. Mayor and merchants are then drawn into the business, and all share the profits of “rich harvest” and “glorious voyage.”⁶²

By the time *Poetical Sketches* was printed, in 1783, the wars were over, Tyranny had been shaken but not humbled,⁶³ the buzz of cities had begun to increase, and Blake himself had entered commerce and had got married. Before the end of the next year he wrote a complexly ironic satire, now called *An Island in the Moon*, upon the notions and ambitions of citizens of the busy hive—a satire which we may take both as an index of Blake’s postwar experiences and as an answer to any lingering doubt as to his subtlety of mind or his awareness of the strife that sitteth under thrones of kings or flies abroad in corded ships.

¹*The Rolliad*, Dublin, 1796, p. 23. These satires were begun in 1784; a complete text was first published in 1791.

² Gouvemour Morris, *A Diary of the French Revolution*, Boston, 1939, 1, xli.

³A.14:10–19: E55/K201. Here with symbolic economy, Paine (the scribe), Jefferson (the builder), and Boston Sons of Liberty (the mariners) are employed as types of humanity.

⁴*History of the British Army*, New York, 1899, III, 498–521. Many bands were literally sick. Scurvy reduced the garrisons of Minorca and Gibraltar to handfuls of wasted men. Thousands died in Jamaica.

⁵William Creech, *Edinburgh Fugitive Pieces*, Edinburgh, 1815.

⁶ See *London Chronicle* of March 3, 1781. Whether the American flags were a form of baiting is not clear, but they did not make “Cruger and Liberty” less popular with the multitude, who on one occasion demanded that a British victory flag hoisted by the Tory candidate’s supporters on a harbor vessel “be struck” and were answered by fire from a swivel-gun that killed two and wounded eleven men and three children. The war was not remote.

Cruger’s popularity rested on vigorous pro-American speeches in Parliament. Standard political histories are simply not reliable in these matters. They *assume* that the loss of the 1780 election by Cruger and Burke meant a change of sentiment in Bristol; yet we know from the papers of John Robinson, Treasury secretary, that the election was purchased. Only in a recent special study has the point been made that the election upset “had little or no connection with any change in local feeling on national issues.” Reid, *Journal of Modern History*, xviii (1946), 204.

Now (1968) it appears that Cruger in 1779, and possibly earlier, had been secretly receiving a government subsidy. Can he have somehow *thrown* the election? See Lewis

Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754–1790*, Oxford, 1964, II, 280.

⁷ A.16:17–18, at the end of the poem, where the fainting is looked back on from the perspective of 1793 by “France Spain & Italy.”

⁸ See Manfred C. Guttmacher, *America’s Last King*, New York, 1943.

⁹ The bard and priests appear in reptile form because the legendary plague winds were filled with reptiles and “other insects.”

¹⁰ The emancipated “females naked and glowing with the lusts of youth” who “run from their fetters reddening” seem to be some kin to the women in the old ballad whose nakedness shows through the magic mantle of chastity and who run “Fast, with a red rudd,” to escape the laughing males. One version of this ballad, “The Boy and the Mantle,” appears in Percy’s *Reliques*, which we know Blake read.

¹¹ See especially E. pl. 14 and the water colors *Pestilence, Plague, and Death of the Firstborn*. In Blake’s list of subjects in N.116, probably for his lost “History of England, a small book of Engravings,” we find this sequence: “18 Ch I beheaded. 19 The Plague. 20 The fire of London.”

¹² Lowery, p. 127. Cf. Mark Schorer’s difficulty with the “confused and contradictory” sentiments he reads in the poems (Schorer, pp. 188–192). And cf. Frye, pp. 179–180.

¹³ Article signed “A.K.C.” in *Poetry Review*, 1916: “suddenly we are aware that this Victory is a painted hag, Liberty cross-eyed, and the rest of our good company not so reputable as they seemed.”

¹⁴ Cf. John Thelwall in “Pretences for entering into the present War,” *The Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1795: “Edward III claimed the Crown of France. But though England was depopulated, though France was converted into one scene of slaughter and desolation, what lasting triumphs did we obtain? Let the distractions which followed those mad projects of ambition dictate to us a more wise and prudent conduct for the future. Instead of preventing civil discord all our attempts at conquest have produced that discord.”

¹⁵ *The Bard*. Blake’s echoes are discussed below. See his illustration of Gray, ca. 1797, in which Edward III soars, whip in hand, above the fields of France pursuing villagers who represent Amazement, Flight, Sorrow, and Solitude (see Plate II).

¹⁶ *The Raigne*, 1596, was published by E. Capell in his *Prolusions*, London, 1760. It is Froissart versified and chronologically scrambled. See Lowery, p. 110.

¹⁷ Such is the interpretation of Margaret L. Plunkett, “The Political Philosophy of William Blake,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, xxx (1931), 27–39.

¹⁸ Blake follows Rapin in spelling, emphasis, and general pattern; but he needed Barnes for some details. His knowledge of Barnes is also evident in *The Couch of Death* and *America*. It should be noted that the ultimate source, Froissart, has nothing at all about the Pestilence.

¹⁹ *London Magazine*. 1732, cited in John Pye, *Patronage of British Art*, London, 1845, p. 52. On his title page the author of the *History* is plain “Mr. Rapin de Thoyras,” and so I have kept him though he appears in catalogues as “de Rapin-Thoyras, Paul.”

²⁰Pye ascribes the opening of “a field for engraving in England” in the first instance to the success of Vertue’s Rapin. It pointed the way for Hogarth and Boydell.

²¹Kauffmann lived in Golden Square from 1769 to 1781, when she moved to Rome. Her two paintings from Rapin in 1776 were *Lady Elizabeth Gray imploring of Edward IV the restitution of her deceased husband’s lands*, a subject akin to Blake’s *Queen Emma and Jane Shore*, and *The tender Eleanora sucking the venom out of the wound which Edward I, her royal consort, received with a poisoned dagger from an assassin in Palestine*, a subject which Blake too painted in his *King Edward and Queen Elenor*, ca. 1779, though the only extant version is an engraving dated 1793. Part of the pathos is the subsequent early death of Eleanora after her unworthy husband’s assassination of the bards. Blake possibly considered this an ironic prelude to the Welsh episode.

²²Ayloff cites Rapin concerning the body of Edward I. *Archaeologia*, III (1775), 377.

²³I, 210. Blake in 1809. (D.C.v) scolds without discrimination Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Echard [Eckhart], Rapin, Plutarch, and Herodotus as “reasoning historians.”

²⁴Reports quoted in Wright, II, 96–97 and Lowery, p. 226.

²⁵Richard Garnett cited in Lowery, pp. 121, 130, who notes many Shakespearean echoes.

²⁶And Blake is interested less in the “official” than in the unofficial sentiments of *Henry V*, for example. He is the sort of reader of Shakespeare who sees in that play some of the “underlying irony” discussed by D. A. Traversi, *The Importance of Scrutiny*, New York, 1948, pp. 120–140, and by Allan Gilbert, “Patriotism and Satire in *Henry V*,” *Studies in Shakespeare*, Miami, 1952, pp. 40–64.

²⁷*King Edward* iii:137; i:11–12, 7; iii:71–76, 232, 222–223, 144–145; vi:11, 42: E415–429/K17–32.

²⁸*King Edward* i:1–20. Gray’s bard declares to Edward I that helm and hauberk’s twisted mail and royal banners will prove idle “Though fanned by conquest’s crimson wing.” Blake’s Edward admits that twisted mail, forged helm, and brazen shield are, without divine aid, “idle trophies of the vanquisher.” Gray’s bard calls for ruin and confusion to seize the ruthless Edward I; says that his son will die mid shrieks of death as his wife tears his bowels and bears Edward III, and that the latter will scourge France only to find that “terrors round him wait!” Blake’s Edward III, undertaking to scourge France, anticipates confusion, cries of blood that tear horror from heaven, and yelling death.

²⁹See William Whitehead’s *Ode* of June 4, 1778.

³⁰And like “Williams” in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, whose function is to call attention to war’s wickedness. Cf. Gilbert, *loc.cit.*

³¹Scene iv: E425–4267/28–29.

³²Barnes, p. 161. Yet there may also be an echo of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, ch. 69: “Ambition is a weed of quick and early vegetation in the vineyard of Christ.”

³³Whitehead, “Verses to the People of England,” in *Odes*, 1774.

³⁴ Cf. Whitehead's "New Year Ode for 1759":

Already Albion's lifted spear,
And rolling thunders of the main,
Which justice' sacred laws maintain,
Have taught the haughty Gaul to fear.

³⁵ At their royal tents before battle, the King of France erected his banner of *Oriflambe*, signifying no mercy except to king and prince, and King Edward "caused also his *Burning-Dragon* to be raised up, which signified as little Mercy to be shew'd to the *Frenchmen*" (Barnes, p. 356). With the same significance before the American War, Albion's Prince "bums in his nightly tent" and arises in "dragon form" (A.3:1–15).

³⁶ Barnes, pp. 389, 399.

³⁷ Rapin, II, 426. Blake's water color, described in Preston, *The Blake Collection of W. Graham Robertson*, p. 174, and now in the Beinecke Library, Yale, emphasizes the tension between the irate king, clad in garish red mantle and golden mail, and the arm-entwined burghers and the pleading queen and prince. (But the halters are already off the necks of Blake's independent burghers: human unity against the king is to triumph.)

³⁸ An early version of *A Breach*, perhaps that of 1784, has now turned up, in the collection of Charles J. Rosenbloom (pl. 93 in Frederick Cummings and Allen Staley, eds., *Romantic Art in Britain, 1769–1860*, Philadelphia, 1968; also in Erdman and Grant, eds., *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, 1970). One can see that the version hitherto considered early (Preston, pl. 56; Blunt, pl. 8b) must be of the 1790's.

A still later version inscribed "inv WB 1805" and sold to Butts under the title *War*, Blake has added the Orc figure to the heap of bodies in the breach; he is reduced in stature and wingless but otherwise the same naked curly-headed youth. Reproduced in Schorer, opp. p. 254.

³⁹ E432–433/K35–36.

⁴⁰ For the Chattertonian and Biblical influences, see Lowery.

⁴¹ *Contemplation*, which rejects the temptation to escape from Misery and Discontent by fleeing to the countryside. The "clamour" that "brawls along the streets" and the "destruction" that "hovers in the city's smoak" are the London poet's birthright; his genius compels him to roam "on lofty rocks," the rocks of truth. Compare *London*.

⁴² Compare Milton's garden of Eden: "Now came still Evening on ... Silence accompanied, while beast and bird ... to thir nest" etc. *Paradise Lost* iv. Blake's youth "laments through the still evening."

⁴³ Barnes, pp. 432–435.

⁴⁴ This allusion to the decimation of mankind is so unobtrusive that some readers doubt the connection.

⁴⁵ The Couch of Death is a frequent symbol in Blake's drawings: the human body lying lifeless as a copper-gilt effigy, pillowed, supine, the bedclothes like fluted marble—suggesting also the meekness of those who, purged of all aggressive "ambition," are

ready to inherit a new earth. Or, in the case of the “strong wicked man” who dies not in resignation but in terrified convulsions, a loss of all power to terrorize others, a ripeness for eternal fires that will burn away the not human.

⁴⁶Barnes, pp. 387, 398.

⁴⁷See Clark, *British Opinion*, p. 224.

⁴⁸ii:166–69, 76–79: E418/K20.

⁴⁹Clark, chs. iv, viii.

⁵⁰*T.S.B.* conclusion: E438–439/K42.

⁵¹“Dirty Thames” in the first draft of *London* was changed to “charter’d Thames” in the etched version.

⁵²Lowery, pp. 141–155, makes out Blake’s verbal and imaginal debt to Thomson. She observes that “Blake reflected nothing of the philosophy of nature Thomson set forth” and “none of Thomson’s moralizing” yet assumes that Blake accepted Thomson’s views on war and commerce without question.

Recently Robert F. Gleckner, in “Blake’s Seasons,” *Studies in English Literature*, v (1965), 533–551, has shown that in *Poetical Sketches* Blake’s superficial debt to the eighteenth-century poetical milieu (“least of all to Thomson”) is eclipsed by “his characteristic and exciting adaptation, *reversal*, modification, and even perversion of the traditions of poetry *and thought* which he inherited” (my italics).

⁵³And the Queen scorns as “giddiness” the Prince’s wistful preference for natural behavior: “I have been used so much To dignity, that I’m sick on’t.” E417–418/K21–22.

⁵⁴Those who read the play as an expression of jingoism on Blake’s part are equating the author with the most naïve of his characters, the “glittering youth of courts” to use the phrase in *King John*. Yet in *I.M.*, only a year after the printing of *P.S.*, see how deeply Blake mines beneath such naïve characters as Little Scopprell.

The entry under “King Edward the Third” in Damon’s *Dictionary*, has it both ways: a paragraph accepting my reading of Blake’s “moral shrewdness” and “irony throughout the play”—and then a paragraph reverting to the notion (even while taking it as Blake’s response to the 1778 war) that the play expresses “uncritical patriotism”!

⁵⁵Evidently the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was on Edward’s naval defense committee and whom Barnes (p. 119) credits with having caused it to be “the Common Talk in England, that the King of England had a Right to the Crown of France, which he intended to claim and pursue.”

⁵⁶William confused the oak and the creeping root of Ambition. Here is further indication that the Druid oak is already for Blake a symbol of error and evil. Damon’s *Dictionary*, under “Oak,” manages to have it that “the Oak appears first in Blake as the protector of innocence”—but only by ignoring the present passage.

⁵⁷*Parliamentary History*, March 17, 1778. Bishops and other ministers of Heaven figured so prominently in the war talk that they were accused in Commons of being “clothed in blood.”

⁵⁸ii:79–83: E418/K20–21. In the first edition I followed Keynes in the reading “lawful

Queen,” but the original text of *PS.* and recent editions of Keynes read “awful” (i.e. awe-inspiring). There are printer’s errors in *P.S.*, but “awful” suits the context and Blake’s general usage.

⁵⁹See *Rule, Britannia!* (“When Britain first, at Heaven’s command, Arose from out the azure main”) and Mason’s *Caractacus*, Act II.

⁶⁰E431/K34.

⁶¹v:49–54; v:56; i:48.

⁶²iii:137; ii:95.

⁶³For the slow effect of the American Revolution implied in the last plate of *America*—the icing over of fires, the twelve years of weak rule— see the last chapters of Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793*, Vol. II: *New Continents and Changing Values*, London, 1965.

image

not

available

Honour & Genius is all I ask
And I ask the Gods no more.

—*An Island in the Moon*

5. English Genius and the Main Chance

IN MARCH 1782 a vote to discontinue the American War upset the cabinet of Lord North, and vital changes were expected by the patriots. Bills for political and economic reforms swept through Parliament in May and June with little opposition. Blake recapitulated the situation twelve years later in *Europe* by saying the air was “filld with immortal demons of futurity” who came in a cloud from America and bore “hard upon the council house, down rushing on the heads of Albions Angels.” Twice King George actually drafted a message of abdication. Twice in two years Opposition ministries were forced upon him. “One hour” the King’s Friends, “smitten Angels,” lay “buried beneath the ruins of that hall” (E.9). But then they rallied under angelic young William Pitt; a cold and leprous tyranny (Urizen) was able to damp down the fires of revolt, “Hiding the Demon red with clouds & cold mists from the earth” and permitting “Angels & weak men” to govern once more “o’er the strong” (A.16). There was peace, and the treaties of 1783 were made, not of gingerbread this time, but of good wheaten bread. But it remained a question whether the people were any nearer to a fair slice of it.

Trade recovered rapidly from the first shock of peace and by the middle of 1784 had attained the vigor of “returning prosperity.” Free America and Britain’s distant possessions “flocked in quest of British wares” and afforded “a very large vent for the productions and acquisitions of British industry and skill.” Of course as the flow of money increased, the uncertainty of its flow and the injustices in its distribution became increasingly apparent. Some who ventured their capital found they had “glutted the market and lost their former profits, and from the misjudging eagerness of avarice completely defeated their own purposes and become bankrupts.” Yet “skilful and able traders continued to realize fortunes,” and for a time the ambition of kings and ministers was obscured by the multitudinous ambition of every citizen with a project or a little stock in trade to seek his fortune as one of the “skilful and able.”¹

In the autumn of 1784, having come into a small inheritance on the death of his father in July,² Blake took a step upward from the economic status of journeyman engraver by entering into partnership with James Parker, a somewhat older Basire apprentice, and venturing upon the manufacture and sale of engraved prints. Fortunes were being made on single issues—for printseller if not for artist or engraver. An engraving of Fuseli's *Night Mare* in 1783 brought the publisher £500. A mediocre engraver, Boydell, having gone shares with the engravers Ryland and Woollett on the latter's engraving of West's *Death of General Wolfe*, was able to finance a print-selling business that was expanding into a firm employing seven journeymen. The decently erotic and discreetly naked Floras and Venuses designed by Stothard and engraved by Blake, for Parker & Blake and later for himself, may not have missed the turn of fortune's wheel by very much.³

When James Parker and William and Catherine Blake opened their new print shop in comfortable quarters at 27 Broad Street, next door to the family hosiery shop, James a specialist in mezzotint, William in line engraving, and Catherine a grocer's daughter who had become Blake's wife in 1782 and was learning to color the prints and operate an engraver's press, doubtless they hoped to have fortune if not fame within their grasp.⁴ We are able to gather the spirit of Blake's robust self-confidence at the time from the rollicking *Island in the Moon*, written during the first months of Parker & Blake and expressive both of a desire to make hundreds of thousands of pounds and of an intention to find time for writing and painting as well as engraving, the three being mentioned in that order.⁵ After a year or so the firm was dissolved, having secured for its members neither wealth nor leisure; and in later years Blake and his wife would look back on the venture as a false step in the dark, Blake declaring that "exactly" at this time the light he had enjoyed in youth had been "closed from me as by a door and window-shutters" and that he had become "a slave bound in a mill among beasts and devils" with "my feet and my wife's feet" in fetters.⁶ It is not clear whether the beasts and devils were fellow engravers and shopkeepers dehumanized in the mill of competition or potential customers insensitive to the values of Blake's art. Recalling the torment of this period he would write:

"We remember when a Print shop was a rare bird in London & I myself remember when I thought my pursuits of Art a kind of Criminal Dissipation & neglect of the main chance which I hid my

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they might be easily outdone. Chatterton never writ those poems” (vii). He will outdo Shakespeare and Milton by dismissing them as wild and unfeeling, Chatterton by finding out that he never wrote. His companion expresses the ambition of the painter, though it was William and not Robert who sent four water colors to the Academy for the next May exhibition, his last for many years: “If I dont knock them all up next year in the Exhibition Ill be hangd said Suction, hang Philosophy I would not give a farthing for it do all by your feelings and never think at all about it. Im hangd if I dont get up tomorrow by four oclock & work Sir Joshua—²⁰ Suction has evidently been stirred by Reynolds’ admonition to ambitious students to “go to work, willing or unwilling, morning, noon and night.”

“—Before ten years are at an end said Quid [Blake’s thoughts now jumping to the challenge of his rivals in engraving, ‘lumps of Cunning & Ignorance’ such as Woollett and Strange, who ‘etch’d very bad’ but won fame and fortune] how I will work these poor milk sop devils, an ignorant pack of wretches.

“So they went to bed.”

Poetry to outdo Homer and Shakespeare, painting to knock them all up at the Academy, and cunning to escape being bound in a mill among ignorant devils. Behind Blake’s confidence lies the vision of a man who has his own mill and who begins to see a way to replace the division of labor with the harmony of One Man, to renew and join together the arts of poetry and painting without going outside his own shop and his own head. Blake might scoff at the experiments of anatomy and chemistry, but he would not hesitate to apply “Mr. Birch’s Electrical Magic” to his wife’s “rheumatism.”²¹ Our Cynic shares the enthusiasm of his age for projects and inventions. “Honour & Genius is all I ask,” professes Quid, but the junior partner of Parker & Blake has noticed George Cumberland’s announcement in October of a New Method of Printing which will eliminate the setting of type.²² To a somewhat inattentive auditor, apparently Miss Gittipin,^{22a} Quid explains that he will “have all the writing Engraved instead of Printed & at every other leaf a high finishd print.” He will be able to “Print off two thousand” copies of his own work, and in “three Volumes folio” (note that hyperbole has crept in) he will “sell them a hundred pounds a piece.” The dream of grossing two hundred thousand pounds is fantastic, but his giddy auditor exclaims innocently: “whoever will not have them will be ignorant fools & will

sing. However sweet, 'tis Envy that inspires my Song. Prickt by the fame of others how I mourn, and my complaints are Sweeter than their Joys....”²⁴

In 1784 the kind of envy that breeds satire is that of the artist and artisan who is anticipating the taste of success and is especially perceptive of the element of opportunism in himself and in all his associates.

The surgeon (at first given the name of the famous Jack [John] Hunter but then metamorphosed into “Jack Tearguts”) is indifferent to the crying of charity patients “that have it done for nothing.” The surgeon’s apprentice, Quid’s intimate Sipsop, called a Pythagorean because he has the squeamishness of a vegetarian, is more conscientious but admits that mutual envy prevents one professional from trusting another: “Ah,” says he to the poet and the painter, “you think we are rascals & we think you are rascals.”²⁵ Aradobo, “Dean of Morocco” (bookworm, perhaps, rather than bookseller, considering his youth), seems indifferent to the aesthetic and cultural components of artistic genius; even of “the God of Physic, Painting Perspective Geometry ... Mythology Astrology Osteology ...” he must ask “if he understood Engraving.”²⁶ The Enlightened philosopher continues “to go to church” to hold down “a place of profit” (iv). And

Theres Doctor Clash
And Signior Falalaso
O they sweep in the cash
Into their purse hole
Fa me la sol La me fa Sol.²⁷

Wretched musicians sweep in the cash while Youth and Genius starve. And consider Chatterton. Not only did he eat very little and so die, despite his genius: now his reputation is being slain at the hands of the smug Antiquary, Etruscan Column, who calls Chatterton’s poetry “wretched paltry flimsy Stuff” while he expects his own dull volume to bring him “eternal fame” (i), and by the bookseller’s pragmatic obituary: “Chatterton was clever at Fissic Fology, Pistinology ... Hogamy, Hatomy, & hall that but in the first place he eat very little wickly that is he slept very little which he brought into a consumsion, & what was that that he took Fissic or somethink & so died” (v). Chatterton may have been as great as Phebus, Giotto as great as

Pindar, but in the end their reputations are cut up or ignored by some “nasty ignorant puppy” like Plutarch or Aradobo (vi).

“English genius forever here I go,” is Quid’s cry, but the opportunism of the purse hole and the contrast between aims and results—in the arts, and in chemistry, surgery, politics, and marriage—elicit sardonic mirth throughout *An Island in the Moon*.²⁸ And beneath the appearance of social intercourse, everyone’s face is a mask unto his *lack* of heart. Mrs. Gimblet “seemd to listen with great attention while the Antiquarian seemd to be talking of virtuous cats,²⁹ but it was not so”; and each Philosopher was “endeavouring to conceal his laughter, (not at them but) at his own imaginations” (i). The contrast between appearance and reality in the realm of communication lies at the center of Blake’s satiric method, but it relates to more than method. It touches the contradiction between individual enterprise and social vacuum, and we come to suspect the common humanity of the Islanders. As one says to another, “they hate people who are of higher abilities than their nasty filthy Selves” (xi) and at times they appear to be a collection of animals and insects.

“I think your face ... is like that noble beast the Tyger,” says Quid to the woman whom he has already induced, in the antic manner of Hamlet with Polonius, to agree that his own is “Very like a Goats face.”³⁰ As a satirist Quid can enjoy the contrast between his own ironic alertness and his auditor’s innocence or ignorance. A later Blake will address his *Jerusalem* to the public as “Sheep” and “Goats.” But this view reveals such gaps between mind and mind as may be too wide for wit to leap. Can a tiger understand a goat? Or in any meaningful way can a goat envy a monkey (a Jacko)?³¹ One cannot communicate with an insect, and the stupidest Islander, Little Scopprell, provokes Quid himself to incoherence: “What you skipping flea how dare ye? I’ll dash you through your chair says the Cynic. This Quid (cries out Miss Gittipin) allways spoils good company in this manner & its a shame” (ix).

These lines are crossed out. The mirror was being held too close for good mockery; besides, as Blake once said of “Caricature Prints, which ought not to abound so much,” “Fun I love but too much Fun is ... loathsom.”³² But the breakdown of communication and the substitution of violence for intellectual persuasion is the limit which Blake’s fun constantly explores—to the ruin of good company. In chapter i Etruscan Column, worsted in argument, prepares to give “a

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“Thus these happy Islanders spent their time but felicity does not last long, for being met at the house of Inflammable Gass the windfinder, the following affairs happend.

“Come Flammable said Gibble Gabble & lets enjoy ourselves, bring the Puppets.

“Hay Hay, said he, you sho, why ya ya, how can you be so foolish. —Ha Ha Ha she calls the experiments puppets. Then he went up stairs & loaded the maid, with glasses, & brass tubes, & magic pictures.”(x)

Calling the experiments puppets would remind Londoners of Samuel Foote’s satiric use of puppets, real and imaginary. The whole scene would remind them of Foote’s microscopic slide lecture satirizing Sir William Browne, President of the College of Surgeons, as Dr. Hellebore.³⁶ The “magic pictures” were in truth more for amusement than for experiment. Blake’s broad caricature of the absent-minded preacher-chemist may be inspired by contempt for science, as Damon suggests, but the nature of that contempt is complex. Blake is dealing in contrasts when he shuffles together two different kinds of apparatus in the action that follows, a table microscope with “sliders” of insects to amuse, and a delicate blown-glass air-pump for experiments with that dangerous plague-bearing element, Phlogiston. It may have been the sight under Katterfelto’s shilling-a-look Solar Microscope of “those insects which were the cause of the Influenza last Spring”³⁷ that inspired Blake’s later vision of the *Ghost of a Flea*; but the microscope even in such hands as Priestley’s was put to little scientific use; the serious business, in Priestley’s, was the “pumping at the air-pump.” “Here ladies & gentlemen said he Ill shew you a louse or a flea or a butterfly or a cock chafer the blade bone of a tittle back no no heres a bottle of wind....”

Behind the puppet-show stands danger. In the climax Blake leaves realism (“Smack went the glass”) for symbolism and the prophetic note:

“Inflammable Gass turnd short round & threw down the table & Glasses & Pictures, & broke the bottles of wind.... He saw the Pestilence fly out of the bottle & cried out ... come out come out we are putrified, we are corrupted, our lungs are destroyd with the Flogiston this will spread a plague all thro’ the Island he was down stairs the very first on the back of him came all the others in a heap.

“So they need not bidding go.”

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