

WILLIAM BLAKE'S LAOCOÖN:
THE GENEALOGY OF A FORM

By
Erik McCarthy

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Erik Shane McCarthy

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Chairperson

Committee members

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McCarthy certifies that this is the approved
version of the following dissertation:

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Committee:

Chairperson

Date approved _____

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the relationship between the British artist and poet William Blake and the art of Antiquity, in particular the *Laocoön* sculpture group in the Museo Pio-Clementino in Rome. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Blake never saw the work firsthand, but he knew of it through the writings of such prominent eighteenth-century art theorists as Winckelmann, Lessing and Fuseli, and from plaster casts in the Royal Academy collections. The recurrence of the Laocoöntic gesture in his art and illuminated poetry testifies to its powerful hold on his imagination, and my goal is to ascertain the significance of this gesture in relation to his own theories of art and, more particularly, his prophetic writings.

The first two chapters discuss the sculpture in the broader context of late eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, art historiography, and Anglo-French nationalism. This includes a detailed discussion of the popular debate surrounding the semiotics of graphic and textual representation, a debate that has long been at the center of Blake studies, since his prophetic books consist of both visual and verbal elements. Further attention is given to the prominence of the sculpture in the development of neoclassical taste and the privileging of the Greek ideal in the art academies of England and France. Both countries adopted this ideal as a way to give cultural legitimacy to their respective geopolitical and economic ambitions. Blake's writings on art reveal his keen awareness and interest in these debates, culminating in his remarkable engraving of the *Laocoön* surrounded by a dense, disjointed textual apparatus that addresses all these concerns.

Chapters three and four deal specifically with the recurrence of the Laocoöntic gesture in Blake's graphic work and illuminated poetry. I begin by explaining the rationale behind such formulaic repetitions as the foundation for an elaborate expressive code that

assigns specific meanings to the gesture, and then trace these meanings in several of the illuminated prophecies, starting first with the shorter Lambeth books (*America, Europe, and The Book of Urizen*), and then proceeding to a chapter-length study of the *Four Zoas* manuscript, a work that has received less critical attention than his two other epic-length prophecies, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. My primary point in these readings is that, in the same way the sculpture came to symbolize for Blake ideal beauty degraded by imperialism and war, in the illuminated poetry the same figure represents humanity in both its fallen and redemptive states.

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CHAPTER ONE:

Excavating William Blake's *Laocoön* Plate

(I.)

Eighteenth-Century CONTEXTS

Containing a description of the Laocoön group, as it exists today; a review of Blake's several encounters with the sculpture, by way of academic study and commercial employment; a description of the plate and its place among his later works; remarks on its resemblance to other prints, not by Blake, and to anatomical illustration especially; a detailed examination of the sister-arts tradition in eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse, relative to the Laocoön, and to what extent Blake's plate may be said to contribute to that discourse.

Since its discovery in the early sixteenth century, the *Laocoön* group (**fig. 1-1**) has been the centerpiece of the Vatican Museums' collection of antique sculpture. Today it stands in the *Cortile Ottagono*, somewhat removed from the main tourist thoroughfare leading to Raphael's rooms and the Sistine Chapel. The majority of the museums' visitors know very little about art; they've come to see what others have declared worth seeing and to attest their basic cultural literacy. It is not necessary that they "understand" Michelangelo; it is enough simply to appreciate his work, and to demonstrate that appreciation by making the obligatory pilgrimage to the Vatican to see it, stumbling and elbowing one's way through the crowds, and perhaps on the way out purchasing a coffee mug or mouse pad stamped with the image of *The Creation of Adam*. As I observe all these people posing for snapshots—where the objects or scenery beyond seem to be of less importance than their own fleeting presence there—wearing sneakers and blue jeans and Hard Rock Café tee shirts, they remind me, in an ironic way, of the swank, leisurely aristocrats of Pompeo Batoni's paintings who flocked to Rome two and a half centuries earlier for much the same reason. Ogling the Sistine ceiling through the viewfinder of a camcorder or digital camera while trying to navigate through a room full of people similarly preoccupied, few are cognizant of the indelible imprint of antique design on Michelangelo's draughtsmanship. The *Laocoön* in particular made a positive impression on the young painter when he and the architect Giuliano di Sangallo were dispatched by Pope Julius II to investigate the sculpture and acquire it for the Vatican's fledgling gallery.

Whereas in the eighteenth century the Belvedere Courtyard was a major destination for European gentleman, today relatively few tourists make it to see the *Laocoön*. The shorter itineraries popular with visitors who have just a few days to take in all of Rome bypass the *Cortile Ottagono*. Only a few small groups shuffle through, at regular intervals,

shepherded by bilingual museum guides tiredly brandishing the colors of their respective countries, reciting a script that is basically the same in any language. There are some, however, who decline these packaged tours, choosing instead to peruse the museums' collections at their own pace, guided by their individual interests and tastes; and at some point, most of them will pass through the *Cortile*, discovering a peaceful garden oasis isolated from the tourist congestion encountered elsewhere.

It provides an intimate setting for the contemplation of ancient sculpture. Remodeled in the late eighteenth century under the supervision of Pope Clement XIV, the *Cortile* is an elegant neoclassical enclosure; lacking the Renaissance grandeur and Baroque extravagance that characterizes much of the Vatican complex, it was designed to magnify the beauty of the antiquities housed there. The courtyard is a simple octagon, surrounded by a concatenation of small chambers ("cabinets") that form a vaulted arcade through which visitors may pass to view the statues in their respective niches. Each cabinet also has an aedicular archway facing the interior of the courtyard, allowing one to stand in the center and view each statue by turns. The warm brick façade consists of open pediments, alternating between triangular and segmental styles; decorative pilasters; and attenuated Ionic columns supporting an entablature inset with panels of relief sculpture. Adorning the tympana of the pediments, a series of tragic masks, wide-eyed and grimacing, enhances the air of solemn mystery that no amount of pedestrian traffic can ever dispel completely. The interior of the *Cortile* is decorated with potted shrubs, Roman sarcophagi and other monumental debris, as well as several smaller statues of marble and porphyry, all precisely arranged around a circular basin at the center of the courtyard.

In a city renowned for its spectacular fountains and marvels of ancient plumbing, this modest fount has little to offer the eye accustomed to postcard images of the sprawling

Baroque water parks of Bernini and Nicola Salvi, but there is something oddly magical about it nevertheless. Water trickles into the basin from a median spring hidden beneath layers of moss and tall marsh grass, lush and whispery. The basin itself is scarcely ankle deep, and the bottom gleams with the coinage of different nations. Unlike the Trevi Fountain, which seems to exact tribute from all who stop to marvel at its magnificence, here there is only indifference towards the deposits people leave. I stare into the pool, scanning the bottom for the shiny metallic effigies of American presidents and state buildings, and yet the coins seem to me strangely valueless, transformed by the glamour of sunlight on water into a numismatic fantasy of ancient drachmae and denarii stamped with the visages of once illustrious rulers and the expired symbols of their power. As visitors stand by watching their pocket change settle to the bottom of the pool, whatever futures they might envision for themselves get swallowed up into a distant past none can remember. And the soft pitter of the spring in my ear becomes the laughter of a ghostly naiad deriding the vanity of human wistfulness, our longing for something perdurable in the face of fugitive time, a desire symbolized by the “eternal city” of Rome itself, and in film by the iconic image of Anita Ekberg (“Sylvia”), like a platinum Venus, baring her bosom to the cascades of the Trevi Fountain in Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*.

The less substantial creature I imagine haunting the *Cortile* coaxes the sun down from its heavenly course to replenish its luster in her scintillant pool, here rejuvenated as the once potent god of some archaic solar religion whose rites are long forgotten, its temples neglected or destroyed. Ironically, it is here in the holiest city of Christendom, inside a museum maintained by the Holy See, itself, that the very pagan gods Christianity once sought to banish from Rome take sanctuary from the harshness and tumult of the modern world outside. For the first time since arriving in the city I can no longer hear the drone of mopeds

swarming in the streets, or enormous tour buses panting like overheated animals, or the aggravated honking of belligerent cabbies—the unrelenting chorus of a city driving itself headlong into futurity. Time goes on, and the sun cannot linger past his meridian. After splashing his ruddy face with water, rinsing his locks of urban grime, and flushing acrid petrol fumes from his nostrils, he steals across the courtyard and up the eastern façade, past the ever-vigilant masks with their unanimous expression of horror, and then flings himself back into the deep blue beyond, leaving naught behind but ashen shadows, heavy with stillness, and the little sobbing spring like the despondent lover of some half-remembered legend. It is the somber final scene of an act that will resume again tomorrow, and again the day after that, just as it has pretty much every day for the past two centuries.

The monuments and statues displayed in the *Cortile* enhance the significance of this daily drama; most symbolize, in some way, the suffering and strife of mortal existence and the ultimate desire for triumph over death. There is a statue of *Hermes* with his winged petasus hat, as if still waiting to escort the souls of the ancient departed whose massive sarcophagi, whether intact or in pieces, now serve rather an ornamental than a memorial function. Their elaborate relief carvings often depict mute scenes of carnage and despair: fierce lions subdue horses and antelope, ripping open throats and crushing skulls in their powerful jaws; bare-breasted Amazons wage fearless battle against the Achaeans at the gates of Troy, even as their queen, Penthesilea, expires in the loving embrace of Achilles, slain by him. Other sarcophagi, by contrast, offer cold comfort to the living. One example presents a convivial tableau of immortals at play, with horn-blowing tritons and lissome nereids splashing and cavorting in ocean spume—a marine paradise ironically conceived as the eternal resting place for mortal remains, an afterlife for a corpse that no longer lies within.

Occupying the cabinets enclosing the courtyard are the sculptures of *Apollo*, copied after Leochares, and Canova's *Perseus*, nearly identical in form and expression, though separated by two thousand years. Both heroes have conquered death, Apollo by slaying the chthonic serpent Pytho, Perseus by decapitating the gorgon Medusa, whose baleful head he proudly brandishes like a trophy fish. Close by them is the statue of Hadrian's deified eromenos *Antinous*, one of perhaps thousands of idealized, monumental likenesses ordered by the grief-stricken emperor after the boy's mysterious death by drowning in the Nile. And finally, there is the *Laocoön* group, a father and his two young sons struggling to escape from monstrous serpents sent by the gods to destroy them. Without the protection of Apollo's quiver or Perseus's harpe, they have only their bare hands to fight with. Even for one unacquainted with the story, a fatal outcome seems all but certain. The father is bitten, his death immanent; and yet he suffers in perpetuity, the anguish in his face and the contortion of his abdomen forever arrested in merciless stone, illuminated only by furtive sunbeams glancing from the water of the mossy-voiced spring.

The *Laocoön* is the supreme embodiment of mortal pain, and arguably the most expressive figure remaining from antiquity, a quality that has guaranteed its enduring fame since its fortuitous discovery by a Roman vintner exploring the ruins of an ancient bath complex.¹ Although now generally believed to have been copied after a lost Greek original, the pope's experts recognized immediately the sculpture described by Pliny in the *Naturalis Historiae* as "a work superior to all the pictures and bronzes of the world" (209), and attributed by him to the sculptors Hagesander, Polydoros, and Athanodoros of Rhodes. He also suggests that Lucius Mummius, following the defeat of Corinth and her allies (including Rhodes) in the Achaean War, brought the *Laocoön* back to Rome in the second century BC

¹ The discovery of the *Laocoön* is the subject of a fabulous 1773 painting by the French landscapist Hubert Robert (**fig. 1-2**).

(29). At the time of his writing, over two hundred years later, the group was located in the palace of Vespasian, formerly the site of Nero's *Domus Aurea*; then, shortly after Pliny's death in 79 AD—the same year as Vespasian died—it was removed to the *thermae* of the emperor's heir, Titus, where by some miracle it would remain undisturbed, hidden from Vandals and other barbarian invaders, for the next fourteen-hundred years. Its rediscovery in January 1506 was a sensation, and its introduction into the papal collection shortly thereafter helped to make the Vatican the ultimate destination for artists from across the Continent.

This was especially true in the eighteenth century, when the *Laocoön* became the focus of vigorous aesthetic debate about such matters as the definition of beauty, the origin and function of taste, and the differences between visual and literary media. Standing in the *Cortile* today, the dwelling place of outcast gods and loved ones long dead and no longer mourned for, insulated from crass modernity and the clamorous advance of history, it seems almost preposterous to think that this was once the frontline of a major culture war, a contest of new ideas inspired by extinct civilizations. It was a battle that enlisted artists and writers, scholars and philosophers, radicals and statesmen, and the image of Laocoön's bitter strife became the most poignant and visible symbol of a discourse fraught with adversity. The present study concentrates on the work of William Blake, both as an artist and as a poet, and his contribution to this discourse, which is more substantial than most critics have yet realized. But to tell the story of Blake's *Laocoön*, it will become necessary to tell also what the sculpture meant to his contemporaries, a diverse and distinguished group that includes Winckelmann, Lessing, Goethe, Fuseli, and Napoleon, to name only a few. Ironically, of this group, only Blake was denied the privilege of ever viewing the sculpture firsthand, which fact of itself testifies to its astonishing power as both art object and cultural capital.



It seems rather likely than not that Blake was familiar with the *Laocoön* sculpture from a young age, since we know he copied from the antique as a ten-year-old pupil at Henry Pars's drawing school in the Strand; and according to Malkin, James Blake purchased for his precocious son reduced-scale casts of "the Gladiator, the Hercules, the Venus of Medicis, and various heads, hands, and feet" (qtd. in Bentley *Stranger from Paradise* [SP] 22) from the cast-maker John Flaxman, father of the future sculptor and illustrator whose fame would briefly overshadow Blake's accomplishments. Then in 1779, after a formative seven-year stint apprenticed to James Basire, principal engraver to the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society, Blake—now a young man of twenty-one—was admitted to the prestigious Royal Academy and immediately began a course of drawing in the school's plaster gallery, where again Malkin informs us "he drew with great care, perhaps all, or certainly nearly all the noble antique figures in various views" (50). Unfortunately, only a few examples of these early studies have survived, none of which can be identified as the *Laocoön*, but it seems reasonable to assume that the Academy's plaster replica of the group would not have been overlooked by Blake. Around 1815 he would return to the plaster gallery, albeit with a much different mindset than when he first entered as an enthusiastic probationary student. Now a disaffected and disenfranchised commercial artist desperate for income, he went back to the Academy in order to study and copy the *Laocoön* in preparation for his commission to illustrate Abraham Rees' *Encyclopedia*, and here there exists substantial documentary evidence, in the form of a drawing and eye-witness accounts, not to mention the finished engraving itself, signed by Blake and published in 1816.

Towards the end of his career Blake would return to the *Laocoön* subject twice more, executing a highly original drawing, perhaps best described as a biblical adaptation, or "Free Version" as Butlin calls it, as well as an intaglio plate known to us simply as the *Laocoön*

(though Blake did not provide the title), part of a group of short works that also includes *The Ghost of Abel* and *On Homers Poetry/On Virgil*, collectively identified by William Michael Rossetti as Blake's "Sibylline Leaves." More recent editors have befittingly dubbed them his "Last Testament" (Essick and Viscomi 5.220), though scholarship has confirmed that the *Laocoön* (**fig. 1-3**) is chronologically the last of these works.² Today the plate is viewed as a final coda, a remarkably compact summation of Blake's entire literary and artistic output, representing a classical subject familiar from his formative student years at Pars's drawing school and the Royal Academy, and executed using engraving techniques acquired during his apprenticeship to Basire, with a text comprised largely of aphorisms and epigrams similar in style to his earliest experiments in illuminated printing.

Even though Blake's best-known works in this medium often combine image and text in a single plate, the *Laocoön* stands apart as the only one to be centered around a faithful copy of a piece of antique sculpture, a fact which attests to its hold on his imagination. Another arresting feature of the plate is the atypical density of its textual matter, composed in at least two distinct scripts and three different languages, and the seemingly arbitrary, discontinuous manner of its arrangement on the page. Julia Wright observes, "the design recalls a jigsaw puzzle more than a page from an emblem book, graffiti more than an engraving, and marginal annotations more than aphorisms on art" (5). It resembles no other work by Blake, and he left no instructions on how his wide-ranging statements should be organized, or in what order they should be read. Without an obvious starting point, one could try a conventional approach, beginning with the first line of horizontal text at the top of the page: "Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on but War only"; but then one could just as well start at the bottom, with the caption identifying the three figures as "ה

² For more on the dating of the two extant impressions, see Essick and Viscomi, *The Illuminated Books*, vol. 5, pp. 241-3.

& his two sons Satan & Adam.” Either way, the reader is sure not to get far before having to stop and decide where to begin again; and from there one choice seems as good as another. Eventually, the addled viewer must rotate the page almost a full 360 degrees in order to decipher all of Blake’s inscriptions, rather like the turning of a kaleidoscope, producing an arbitrary sequence or pattern of syntactic elements that is different with every reading. This represents a radical departure from his previous aphoristic and epigraphic writings, such as the early syllogistic tractates *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One* (both c. 1788), or the captions in his emblem book *The Gates of Paradise* (c. 1793), or the “Proverbs” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790), all of which are somewhat more conventional in structure and relatively easy to read.

It has recently been observed by Essick and Viscomi that the perplexing format of the *Laocoön* text bears a strong resemblance to Blake’s contemporaneous Job engravings of 1825-6 (5.242), where one can also witness him arranging textual elements in such a way as discourages a strictly linear reading (**fig. 1-4**). Additionally, they point to the similarity in the bold pseudo-gothic script employed in both projects (238),³ and further support their case with several instances where Blake transferred entire lines of text from the Job plates to the *Laocoön* (242).⁴ Even so, a simple unadorned frame box isolates the Job illustrations from the surrounding text, whereas in the *Laocoön* there is no such compartmentalization. Furthermore, much of the Job text is inscribed within simple outline devices that border each

³ For example, compare the lines “Art is the / Tree / of Life / GOD / is Jesus” (100-4) above the figure at right with the title page of the Job designs.

⁴ The lines “Prayer to God is the Study of Imaginative Art” and “Praise to God is the Exercise of Imaginative Art” appear inscribed on an ornate, fiery altar in early states of the first and last plates in the Job series; but Blake burnished these lines out prior to taking the final impressions, and later transplanted them to the *Laocoön* in shortened form: “Prayer is the Study of Art / Praise is the Practise of Art” (50-1). Further, the words identifying the figure of Laocoön as “The Angel of the Divine Presence” (15), along with their Hebrew translation appear in plate two of the completed Job engravings.

plate: clouds, vines, sea foam, tongues of fire, sacrificial altars, a sheepcote, scrolls and open books. These designs, appropriately if anachronistically done in the manner of medieval manuscript illumination, comprise a kind of loose armature supporting the text, preserving the overall symmetry of the plate with a balance of verbal and lineal-spatial elements and providing the viewer with a sense, if not of sequential coherence, then at least of organization, thereby easing the strain on the eye. The *Laocoön*, by contrast, seems intentionally to provoke the viewer, defying generic conventions and bewildering the restless gaze with a pressing mob of words, crammed in wherever Blake could make room, even to the point of having to reduce the size of his script when necessary, without any regard for harmonious composition or ease of reading. Here word and image occupy the same ludic space, vying for the viewer's attention. The figures seem to struggle as much against the encroaching text as the serpents wound about their limbs. Like a sprawling amoeboid thing out of some 1950s science fiction nightmare, the written word completely engulfs the drawing, yet cannot permeate its stalwart outline; nor, for all their convulsive pushing and stretching, can the drawn figures tear through the condensed, membranous writing.

More than medieval manuscript illumination, Blake's *Laocoön* resembles a kind of diagram, with a solitary image surrounded by a textual key identifying or commenting upon its distinctive parts or features. There were plenty of precedents for this kind of handling in contemporary print culture, where complexity of design often necessitated an extensive textual apparatus, as in J. Cooke's satirical print of 1799 lampooning the French Directory and its aggressive foreign policy (**fig. 1-5**). An outstanding piece of royalist propaganda, it depicts a horde of grotesque, demonic-looking figures spouting venomous Revolutionary rhetoric and taunting Coalition members, including "implacable Albion" and "Autres Souverains et Peuples de la Terre" (Carey 248). The central figure of this apocalyptic scene,

identified by the printmaker as “Roi de Paris,” appears as a portly, hirsute Midas, the hedonistic Phrygian king punished by Apollo for taking the side of Pan in a musical contest. The punishment reserved for the bellicose and belligerent French leadership, according to Cooke, will be to join with their republican predecessors in “l’Egalité Eternelle” in hell, to which end he tattoos every exposed body part of Midas, from the tip of his tongue to the end of his tail, and from the points of his ass’s ears to the soles of his feet, with a record of all the vices of the renegade French Republic, chiefly anarchy, atheism, and terrorism.

Similar in design, but with a much different purpose in view, is Garnet Terry’s engraving *Daniel’s Great Image* (**fig. 1-6**), published in 1793—the same year as the beheading of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and the completion of Blake’s *America a Prophecy*—in an effort to link contemporary historical events with Old Testament prophecy. In the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a colossal idol composed of four metals—gold, silver, brass, and iron—that gets crushed beneath a mountain. Called upon to interpret this vision, the prophet Daniel prophesies the destruction of the four great kingdoms of the world. Terry’s design recreates the figure of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and identifies the four kingdoms as Babylon (gold), Persia (silver), Greece (brass), and Rome (iron); but in the context of late eighteenth-century Britain, with violent insurrection abroad and increasing political agitation and suppression at home, few readers would have missed the historical relevance and political implications of either the apocalyptic subject matter or the words inscribed upon the figure’s body and limbs demarcating the imperial, ecclesiastical, and commercial abuses of their respective kingdoms. Terry’s radical millenarianism would naturally have appealed to Blake, who commenced his four-part cycle of continental prophesies at about the same time, and the prevailing themes of the *Laocoön* plate are

basically the same as in *Daniel's Great Image*.⁵ But Blake's formal art instruction would also have acquainted him with prints produced especially for drawing schools and art academies diagramming the anatomical structures and proportions of antique statues.

In the late eighteenth century, academic curricula stressed the fundamental importance of correct drawing, which required above all a thorough knowledge of human anatomy; and since the Greeks excelled in representing the human form, students were expected to copy after the antique in order to demonstrate their anatomical fluency before moving on to live models. This practice dates back to the Renaissance, when artists like Michelangelo supplemented their study of classical sculpture with routine visits to gallows and morgues; but by the time the Royal Academy opened in 1769, the majority of young artists were acquiring much of their practical knowledge of anatomy from medical book illustrations and grisly plaster *écorché* figures cast from the remains of hanged criminals.⁶ One book especially popular with artists was John Tinney's *Compendious Treatise of Anatomy, Adapted to the Arts of Designing, Painting, and Sculpture* (1743), which was eventually republished in a smaller, more portable edition for their convenience (Kornell 69). Another favorite was John Bell's *Anatomy of the Bones, Muscles, and Joints*, which first appeared in 1793-4, and from 1816 became the chief reference for pupils of the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (53). It makes perfect sense, then, that a number of art instruction

⁵ For more on Terry's republican millenarianism and the possibility of a fleeting encounter with Blake, see Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, pp. 62-8.

⁶ Scottish physician and renowned obstetrician William Hunter was professor of anatomy at the Royal Academy from 1768. In 1772 Johann Zoffany painted Hunter delivering what was to be one of his last lectures before a captivated audience of academicians and a few privileged neophytes. A plaster *écorché* figure and hanging skeleton are visible behind him, but no cadaver. Although Hunter regularly taught courses in anatomy from his Windmill Street School, only a few artists ever participated directly in his dissections.

manuals published during this period would seek to combine scrupulous anatomical study with an appreciation of the antique.

Such books contain macabre images of renowned classical figures flensed and dissected as if they were actual flesh-and-blood specimens. The French surgeon Jean-Galbert Salvage, for example, carefully arranged the corpses of dead soldiers to mimic the pose of the *Borghese Gladiator* (recently brought to Paris with the rest of Napoleon's Italian plunder), and then published his drawings as *Anatomie du gladiateur combattant, applicable aux beaux-arts* (**fig. 1-7**), a book that had the enthusiastic endorsement of such leading French artists as Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Antoine Houdon (Cazort, et al. 220). Unlike the massive encyclopedic projects of Bernard de Montfaucon (*Antiquity Explained*), the comte de Caylus (*Recueil d'antiquités*), or Joseph Spence (*Polymetis*), which present Greco-Roman antiquities primarily as cultural artifacts, significant for their literary and historical associations and visual allure, the more technical designs of Salvage and others instead emphasize anatomical veracity. What mattered to them was whether the sculptor had accurately rendered the structural integrity and correct proportionality of the human form; cultural and aesthetic considerations remained largely peripheral. This approach often necessitated a cumbersome textual apparatus to help orient the viewer and provide detailed information intended to improve the artist's draughtsmanship. The engraver would surround the design with a web-like array of anatomical terminology, alphanumeric markers, and exacting measurements; and if such annotation proved too copious to fit neatly on the page, then he would have to dismember the figure, so to speak, like a cadaver in a dissection theater, and adjust the scale or realign the pieces to make room for the essential technical data. This is the case with Salvage's gladiator, where anatomical exactitude required the head to be presented separate from the rest of the body, with only a faint outline to indicate

that the subject is indeed a statue and not a corpse. The *Laocoön* group received similar treatment in at least two books that would have been readily available to Blake.

With the 1668 publication of Charles Le Brun's *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* artists became keenly interested in the subject of pathognomy,⁷ the study of involuntary movements and gestures to ascertain a person's character or mood; and the *Laocoön* group provided a unique case study of the effect of the most intense passions on the human body. Since the Renaissance, illustrators of anatomical treatises had conventionally represented their skinned subjects as alive, usually rambling amidst salubrious rural scenery, sometimes in the company of other peripatetic cadavers, or else coyly peeling back layers of their own skin and poking inquisitively at the bulging viscera underneath (**fig. 1-8**).⁸ In this uncanny, secular inversion of the medieval *danse macabre*, artists clearly sought to suppress the overwhelming revulsion aroused by the sight and stench of decaying flesh, and perhaps also to purify the conscience after what must have seemed a ghoulish trespass against human dignity, if not an outright source of spiritual corruption. Furthermore, by resurrecting the dissected they could represent the human body in motion, exposing muscles and articulations that would be more difficult to observe in an inert specimen lying on an examination table. In the eighteenth century, anatomists like Jacques Gamelin and William Cowper (the physician) capitalized on the dramatic potential of the living-dead genre with their disturbing images of skeletons and *écorché* figures in contorted postures, enduring extreme and

⁷ Pathognomy, the study of gesture, is distinguishable from physiognomy, or the study of features. Both pseudosciences were popular in the eighteenth century. The most famous work on the subject was John Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789-98), for which Blake produced four engravings.

⁸ These examples come from Speigel and Casseri's *De humani corporis fabrica libri decem*, published in Venice in 1627.

apparently pointless torment for the sake of anatomical inquiry (**figs. 1-9, 1-10**).⁹ The bucolic serenity and stylized grace characteristic of sixteenth-century anatomical design was rejected by both men in favor of more manly imagery of the savage and sublime; rather than rustic cottages and picturesque countryside, they typically placed their agonized subjects in neglected graveyards and barren, impassable landscapes. This sublime aesthetic in anatomical illustration, calculated to excite strong passions as much as to instruct, encouraged artists to seek out antique models of physical strain and suffering: especially popular were the *Farnese Hercules*; the *Borghese Gladiator*; the monumental *Dioscuri*, or “Horse Tamers,” in the Piazza del Quirinale in Rome; and of course the *Laocoön* group, admired by many for its especially poignant combination of beauty and pathos.

Several of these antique figures appear, *aux écorchés*, in Bernardino Genga and Giovanni Lancisi’s *Anatomia per uso et intelligenza de disegno*, published in 1691 for the pensioners of the recently established French Academy in Rome, where Genga had lately been appointed professor of anatomy. Sir Joshua Reynolds, co-founder and first president of the Royal Academy, owned a copy of the *Anatomia*, and an English edition appeared in 1723 with plates “re-engraved” by Michael and Gerard Vandergucht, both of whom had also been employed on Cowper’s *Myotomia reformata* (Cazort, et al. 218-19). Three of the volume’s 39 plates depict a flayed *Laocoön*, from as many different views—front, back, and in profile—without the serpents, and also without either of his sons, as they would presumably occlude the view of his taut musculature (**fig. 1-11**). Besides this work, the sculpture group is also featured in the eleven-volume plate supplement to the *Encyclopédie* (1762-72) illustrating an entry on the art of “design” (**fig. 1-12**), where the purpose was rather to display

⁹ The second edition of Cooper’s *Myotomia Reformata* (with more illustrations than the first) appeared posthumously in 1724, Gamelin’s *Nouveau Recueil d’ostéologie et de myologie* in 1779.

“l’élégance des proportions” than to delineate internal structure (2); hence the relatively flat, two-dimensional outline engraving (signed “Defehrt Fecit”).¹⁰

The article for which the plate was commissioned does urge the disciplined study of anatomy as essential for the improvement of the artist, but for the most part it simply reiterates the hackneyed refrain of neoclassical discourse: that the artist should strive to emulate the Ancients’ perspicuity in selecting and uniting together rarefied forms “impossible de trouver réunies dans un même sujet animé,” thereby avoiding the accidental “défauts de la nature commune” (2). Thus, the *Laocoön* is presented rather as a model of idealized masculine form than as an anatomical lesson, but the illustrator’s approach nevertheless has more in common with the atlases of the anatomists Salvage and Gegna than the albums of connoisseurs like Spence or Montfaucon. In the first place, the three figures in the group are handled separately, with the father appearing above his two boys rather than between them, which negates much of the drama and pathos of the sculpture. Presumably this was done to preserve the clarity and utility of the reticulation of dashed lines and measurements from which they seem struggling to free themselves rather than from the legendary serpents. Having just witnessed how both Gegna and Defehrt adapt the *Laocoön* group to the conventions of anatomical illustration, by removing the figures from their original narrative and cultural context and enmeshing them in a dense weave of empirical data, it seems plausible that Blake may have had this tradition in mind when he designed the *Laocoön* plate late in life.

Indeed, one could even go so far as to suggest that he deliberately parodied these empirical design conventions, opposed as they are to his self-fashioning ideal of the visionary

¹⁰ These designs appear to be based on the earlier designs of Girard Audran for *Les Proportions du Corps Humain Mesurées sur les plus belles Figures de l’Antiquité*, published in Paris in 1683 (**fig. 1-13**).

prophet who “exists and exults in immortal thoughts” and despises “the sordid drudgery of facsimile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances” (Blake *PA* 541). While Blake preserves the integrity of the sculpture by keeping the family group intact, reasserting its status as art object, he swaddles it within band upon band of tightly engraved text that compels the viewer to regard it as something more than artwork; it becomes rather the illustration of general aesthetic values and principles, much the same as it does in the *Anatomia* and *Encyclopédie*. At the same time, however, Blake’s text stands in defiance of the linear precision and hierarchal schema of the anatomical diagram; and its purpose is not to dissect and impose order, but rather to ascertain the work’s cultural and historical significance, and to convey at once a statement of aesthetic doctrine and an indictment of the state of the arts in post-Napoleonic Britain.

So dense is this textual matrix, that were it possible to remove the image, leaving only the text, one could still clearly discern the outline of the sculpture in the negative space left on the page. In no other work by Blake, in fact, does the text appear so completely integral to the design, such that the very act of reading becomes at one and the same time an act of looking. As Essick and Viscomi observe, “the visual shape of these texts, like rays vibrating from the figures, requires a physical engagement with the artifact, comparable to walking around a statue ... forcing the readers to study gestures and a graphic language easily overlooked and to apprehend more than meets the eye of the disengaged or unimaginative observer” (5.231-2). It is as if Blake had reserved for the end of his career the most radical expression yet of his methodological assumptions about the reciprocity of text and design. Such considerations naturally lead to speculation as to whether Blake may have conceived the plate in reaction to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Laocoön* (1766), a seminal treatise addressing the sister-arts tradition in eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse, in which the

author uses the *Laocoön* group to elucidate what he perceived as fundamental differences between verbal and pictorial representation.



A playwright and literary critic of some repute, Lessing objected to the then popular notion that poetry and painting were basically equivalent art forms, achieving the same general ends but by slightly different means. Common to both, many had argued, was the practice of mimesis; and fidelity to nature, whether in drawing or verbal description, was of primary importance and the first test of an artist or poet's merit. Such assumptions originated in the remarks of Greek and Latin writers like Simonides, who famously asserted that "poetry is a speaking picture and painting a mute poem," and Horace, whose "ut pictura poesis" formed the basis of much eighteenth century criticism. Both are cited by the seventeenth-century French painter Charles du Fresnoy in his Latin verse treatise *De arte graphica* (1668), where he goes on to say, "Painting and Poesy are two Sisters, which are so like in all things, that they mutually lend to each other both their Name and Office. One is call'd a dumb Poesy, and the other a speaking Picture" (84). An English edition of *De arte graphica* appeared in 1695, translated into prose by Dryden, who concurs with du Fresnoy that "the Parallel of the Arts holds true" (51). And in 1746—the same year Lessing entered the University of Leipzig—another Frenchman, Charles Batteux of the Collège de France, published his influential aesthetic treatise *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*, in which he argues for the unity of painting and poetry on the grounds that both aspire equally to the faithful imitation of nature, with the poet essentially describing in words what the artist renders in forms and colors. As Blake scholar W. J. T. Mitchell explains, *ut pictura poesis* "became, in eighteenth-century aesthetics, not a casual comparison but a commandment for poets and painters," and furthermore, "if painting and poetry were imitations of the same

thing, they ought to be reducible to their common origin” (16). That common origin—Batteux’s “même principe”—was of course nature, the physical world as perceived through the animal senses; and thus, for the poet no less than for the sculptor or painter, the sense deemed most instrumental to his mimetic task was that of sight.

Writing for *The Spectator* in 1712, Joseph Addison remarks that eyesight is “the most perfect and delightful of all our senses” and “furnishes the imagination with its ideas” (42); hence the “pleasures of the imagination” are primarily visual, stimulated by the degree of similitude, or “near resemblance” (52), between a poem or painting and the object or action being represented. The best kind of poetry, he argues, is that which stocks the reader’s fancy with an abundance of images: “Words, when well chosen, have so great a force in them that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of things themselves” (60). Addison’s contemporary and rival playwright John Dennis likewise ranks poetry alongside “Painting and Musick” as “Arts that make the Senses instrumental to the Pleasure of the Mind” (336),¹¹ adding that “the Eye ... is a Sense that the Poet ought chiefly to entertain, because it contributes more than any other to the exciting of strong Passion” (269). Thus, poetry “must be an Imitation of Nature,” but it must also be “more Passionate and Sensual than Prose,” a criterion it shares equally with painting: “There must be Passion every where ... and the more Passion there is, the better the Poetry and the Painting ... and the Painter, and the Poet, arrive at the Height of their Art, when they describe a great deal of Action, with a great deal of Passion” (215-6). Dennis illustrates this point by comparing the Vatican *Laocoön* with the passage in the *Aeneid* describing the terrible fate of the Trojan priest, which he quotes in full in both Latin and Dryden’s English. Recalling his experience of seeing the

¹¹ *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704). Edward Hooker calls this work “one of the most important and original critical treatises of its day,” and “the first work of English criticism to be published by subscription” (507). The following citations come from his *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*, published in 1701.

sculpture group on his grand tour, he remarks that “it does not appear to be the Work of Art, but the miserable Creature himself, like *Niobe*, benumm’d and petrify’d with Grief and Horror” (220); then credits Virgil for achieving the same “Masterly” qualities of veracity and pathos:

For the Poet setting his Image in so much Motion, and expressing it with so much Action, his inflam’d Imagination set it before his very Eyes, so that he participated of the Danger which he describ’d, was shaken by the Terror, and shiver’d with the Horror. And what is it but the Expression of the Passions he felt, that moves the Reader in such an extraordinary Manner. (222)

This kind of visual-verbal reciprocity in the arts, predicated on the canon of mimetic correctness, informs Addison’s *Dialogues Upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals* (1726), in which the numismatist Philander—a surrogate for the author—proposes a “great affinity between coins and poetry” (27). The Latin poets, he explains, “step in to the assistance of the medallist, when they give us the same thought in words as the masters of the Roman mint have done in figures” (30). Addison’s *Dialogues* later inspired the critical inquiry of the esteemed and erudite Oxford don Joseph Spence,¹² whose *Polymetis* (1747) purports on the title page to discover the “agreement between the works of the Roman poets and the remains of the ancient artists.”

Written as a series of dialogs between the titular antiquarian Polymetis and his two friends Philander (perhaps representing Addison himself) and Mysagetes, Spence ambitiously sought to elucidate iconographic affinities and discrepancies between art and poetry in their

¹² Spence served two consecutive terms as professor of poetry, from 1728-38. At that time he was most famous for his series of critical dialogs on Pope’s *Odyssey*, begun in 1726 and published together in 1728, the same year as his Oxford appointment; but *Polymetis* would become his most enduring work.

treatment of nearly the whole Roman pantheon of mythological and allegorical characters. As Polymetis explains to Philander in the opening colloquy: “When you look on the old pictures or sculptures, you look on the works of men who thought much in the same train with the old poets. There was generally the greatest union in their designs: and where they are engaged on the same subjects, they must be the best explainers of one another” (3). Spence does acknowledge, in a perfunctory manner, the “different natures of statuary and poetry, the latter of which,” he says, “can represent persons in the air as easily, as on the earth; whereas the former is more confined ... tied down to one point of time” (97),¹³ but for the most part he holds fast to the neoclassical doxa of *ut pictura poesis* and devotes himself to establishing visual parallels between the arts, such that the imagery of poetic description serves to explain the relics of antiquity, while those same relics can function equally as illustrations to the poems. Thus, when Spence writes of the “fine groupe” of the *Laocoön*, it is merely to attest that however much one admires “the beauty of the design, and the expression of pain in the father; of dread in one of the sons, and of languishment in the other,” he still “should not know that it was Laocoon, without the help of what Virgil, and one or two more of the Latin writers, have said on the subject” (290). Such knowledge, useful though it may be to the classics scholar or antiquarian, requires no thoroughgoing account of the differences between graphic and poetic representation, differences that Lessing set out to analyze semiotically; that is, at the level of the sign, or signifier, rather than the signified.

That poetry and painting achieve their effects by different means had been recognized since antiquity, when Aristotle observed that the “varieties of mimesis” could be

¹³ For example, he contrasts the Niobid sculpture group in the Uffizi with Ovid’s vivid account of the massacre of Niobe’s children by Apollo and Diana in *Metamorphoses*, observing “a great deal of difference, as well as a great deal of agreement, between his manner of telling the story, and the representation of it in the Medicean figures” (97).

separately defined by their respective “media”: thus, for the musician the media are “harmony and rhythm”; language, or “speech,” concomitant with harmony and rhythm, are the media proper to poetry, while the painter’s are “colours and shapes” (51). Notwithstanding these apparent differences between the sister arts, Aristotle manages to preclude any sibling rivalry by focusing our attention on the mimetic function they all share in common,¹⁴ and which he would have us to appraise according to the same general standards of unity, simplicity, and truth. During the Enlightenment, most writers on aesthetics followed Aristotle’s example, frequently remarking upon the differences between painting and poetry, but not in such a way as would have required them to rethink or adjust the aesthetic criteria of mimesis appropriate to each. Of this tendency we already have the example of Spence’s *Polymetis* above. Dennis asserts that poetry, unlike painting, “comprehends the Force ... of Logic, of Ethicks, [and] of Eloquence” (336), which in his estimation qualifies it as “the noblest of all Arts” (334); and yet he continually emphasizes the pictorial allure of poetry, which is what he says distinguishes it from other kinds of prose writing; but this also aligns poetry more closely with painting, since according to him both must appeal to the sense of sight in order to arouse the passions. Addison likewise contends that the “secondary pleasure of the imagination proceeds from that action of the mind which compares the ideas arising from the original objects with the ideas we receive from the statue, picture, description, or sound that represents them” (59).

But for Addison, a consideration of the differences between visual and verbal representation gives to the sculptor or painter a decisive advantage over the poet, and leads him to pronounce a hierarchy of art forms predicated upon the mimetic efficacy of their respective media. At the top of this hierarchy is sculpture, since it is “the most natural, and

¹⁴ “The poet produces *mimesis*, just like a painter or other visual artist” (84).

shows us something likest the object that is represented”; while poetry takes its place near the bottom, because, as he explains, verbal “description runs yet further from the things it represents than painting, for a picture bears a real resemblance to its original which letters and syllables are wholly void of” (58-9). Here we can observe some of the earliest motions of a nascent semiotic persuasion in eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse, an approach that would, with later writers, place increasing emphasis on disparities in form, rather than unity of purpose or properties shared in common. The arts still may have been regarded as “sisters,” but certainly not as twins, and a kind of sibling rivalry soon arose as different writers sought to judge which art form was the fairest of them all.

For Addison the contest was clearly decided in favor of painting, since the medium of poetry, “letters and syllables,” is more abstract than the lines and colors of painting, which approach closer to the actual appearances of nature. In the same year as Addison’s *Spectator* essays, another Englishman, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, then residing in southern Italy, published his exhaustive directions to the painter Paolo de Matteis, who had been commissioned by him to paint *The Judgment of Hercules*.¹⁵ What distinguishes Shaftesbury’s aesthetic ideas from those of Addison is his insistence that the limitations of painting require the artist to be more selective and discerning than the poet, who can describe many actions in succession. In strict compliance with the “Rule of Consistency” (82), the painter is “debarred the taking advantage from any other Action than what is immediately present, and belonging to that single instant he describes” (80). Shaftesbury considers the painter as much a “historian” as the poet, only “more narrowly confin’d” (132). Whatever action he finally chooses becomes static in the rendering, irretrievably isolated and frozen in

¹⁵ This short treatise originally appeared in French—the only common language for the artist and his patron—in the Amsterdam *Journal des Sçavans*, in 1712. Shaftesbury later translated it himself, but died prior to its first publication in English in 1713. In 1715 it was included in the second edition of his *Characteristicks*.

time; and therefore any attempt to introduce scenes coming before or after would have no other effect than to perplex and frustrate the viewer: “It wou’d certainly prove a more ridiculous Attempt to comprehend two or three distinct Actions or Parts of History in *one* Picture, than to Comprehend ten times the Number in *one* and *the same* Poem.” Nevertheless, for Shaftesbury, no less than for Dennis or Addison, the pleasure of art is chiefly visual, mimetic rather than narrative, and in this respect painting excels even poetry. The “completely imitative and illusive art of painting,” writes Shaftesbury, “surpassing by so many Degrees ... all other human Fiction, or imitative Art, aspires in a directer manner towards Deceit, and a Command over our very Sense” (120). Within a few years of their publication, the heady pronouncements of Addison and Shaftesbury were echoed from across the Channel by Jean-Baptiste Dubos, whose acclaimed *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* appeared in 1719 and ensured his election to the Académie Française the following year.

Like Dennis, Dubos attributes the charm of both painting and poetry to their mutual capacity to generate novel sensations and stir up intense feelings in the viewer or reader, to represent “objets capables d’exciter en nous des passions veritables” (1, 26). More perspicacious is his assertion that the different media of painting and poetry necessitate the formulation of different aesthetic criteria, more rigorous than any presented heretofore, with more clearly demarcated boundaries and rules appropriate to each. The poet, he contends, has the advantage of narrative time, while that of the painter is pictorial space. With time the poet has greater mobility than the painter; the former may describe a whole sequence of related actions and their outcomes, while the latter must of necessity bind himself to a single moment, carefully selected from many possibilities (84). In addition, the poet can, by way of narrative, more readily convey certain attributes of character, “les vertus et les qualitez de

l'âme" (85), as well as countless other subtleties of thought and feeling that elude the artist's pencil.¹⁶ However, even though he has but one moment at his command, one passion to portray, Dubos determines that the painter has yet greater mastery of pictorial space, and can enhance that space with such an abundance of visual detail as would prove insufferably tedious ("un retardement insupportable") and boring to read in a poem (90-1). In addition to the scenic variety afforded by picturesque landscapes, architectural design, and so forth, the painter can better describe the physical appearance of his subjects and, with consummate skill, reveal their inner passions through carefully studied facial expressions, certain stylized postures, and the disposition of their limbs.¹⁷

Notwithstanding these differences, however, Dubos ultimately concurs with Addison and Shaftesbury that painting is by far superior to poetry: "le pouvoir de la peinture est plus grand sur les hommes que celui de la poésie" (1, 392). In the first place, he argues, painting operates more directly through the sense of sight: "la peinture agit sur nous par le sens de la vue" (392); and that, because things visible to the eye, according to him, affect us more immediately and arouse stronger passions than objects perceived through any of the other senses,¹⁸ it cannot be doubted but that painting has the advantage over poetry (393). Here Dubos says scarce anything that has not already been put forth by the British critics

¹⁶ "Un poète peut exprimer plusieurs de nos pensées et plusieurs de nos sentiments qu'un peintre ne sauroit rendre, parce que ni les uns, ni les autres ne sont pas suivis d'aucun mouvement propre et spécialement marqué dans notre attitude, ni précisément caractérisé sur notre visage" (81).

¹⁷ "Rien n'est plus facile au peintre intelligent que de nous faire connoître l'âge, le temperament, le sexe, la profession, et même la patrie de ses personnages, en se servant des habillements, de la couleur des chairs, de celle de la barbe et des cheveux, de leur longueur et de leur épaisseur, comme de leur tournure naturelle, de l'habitude du corps, de la contenance, de la figure de la tête, de la physionomie, du feu, du mouvement et de la couleur des yeux, et de plusieurs autres choses qui rendent le caractère d'un personnage reconnaissable par sentiment" (92).

¹⁸ "La vue a plus d'empire sur l'âme que les autres sens" (393).

introduced above, but he goes a good deal further than any, including Addison, in elaborating a Platonic theory of signs that serves to qualify his aesthetic criteria and justify the preeminence of painting.

Thus, whereas the poet relies on “signes artificiels” to describe his subject, the painter employs “signes naturels” (1, 392), which Dubos believes to have nearly the same effect upon the viewer as would the objects themselves, seen at firsthand. Words, he argues, being representations of mere ideas rather than things, are twice removed from phenomenal experience; they are abstract and conventional, “arbitraires et instituez” (393), rather than perceptible and natural. And because language, which has to be learned, is more cognitive than innate sensory perception, to comprehend the meanings of words requires time: the time it takes to recognize a term and supply an adequate definition, and the additional time needed to understand it in relation to other terms and definitions; and it is this process of continuous deferral, Dubos suggests, that inevitably diminishes the force (“pouvoir”) of poetry. By contrast, the “signes naturels” of painting affect the viewer “plus forte et plus soudaine” than even the most vividly imagined verse description (395). If the poet lets us know of the sun only by the shadows that it casts, as Dubos might say, then the painter directs our gaze upward to encounter its brilliance directly. On canvas he depicts nature as it appears to the naked eye, and there is no delay, no ambiguity in the meaning of his images, or in the impression that they leave in the mind of the viewer; for they “tirent leur force du rapport que la nature elle-même a pris soin de mettre entre les objets extérieurs et nos organes” (393-4). Thus, even though Dubos helped to redefine the sister-arts tradition by introducing Lockean semiotics into eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, in the end poetry fared little better than with Addison or Shaftesbury writing in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition. This prejudice, validated by a more rigorous semiotic analysis, persisted into the middle decades of the

century, culminating, one might say, with the writings of the Prussian-born antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose extraordinary erudition and connoisseurship made him a veritable celebrity in his own time, and who is still widely regarded as the chief proponent of neoclassical taste and, somewhat less judiciously, as the patriarch of modern art history.

In his greatest work, the *History of the Art of Antiquity* (HAA), first published in 1764, Winckelmann writes at length on the *Laocoön* group, and his analysis of the sculpture forms the basis of his objections to poetry which Lessing set out to repudiate two years later. But in order to better comprehend Winckelmann's perspective on the sister-arts tradition, it is first of all necessary to touch briefly upon his elucidation of artistic style in the *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). In describing the evolution of Greek sculpture from the Athenian Golden Age to the beginning of Macedonian hegemony, he distinguishes between what he terms the "high style," represented by Phidias, a favorite of Pericles, and the "beautiful style" of Lysippos, which flowered during the reign of Alexander. Ultimately, both styles are predicated on the belief that art should inspire awe and veneration; and that the artist must therefore represent things not as they appear in the natural world of fallible matter, but rather in their unadulterated form, as they exist in the transcendent world of rarefied ideas. "The mind of a rationally thinking being," writes Winckelmann, "has an innate inclination toward and desire to rise above matter into the mental realm of concepts, and its true satisfaction is the production of new and refined ideas" (199). The high style, he explains, accomplishes this refinement predominantly through visual abstraction. It is characterized by a certain severity and hardness of form, with a preponderance of angular lines and the absence of any individuating physical traits. Such idealized beauty demands of the artist a discriminating "selection of beautiful parts from many individuals and their combination into one" (196); and not only must he reject what Winckelmann calls "individual" beauty, but he must also

sedulously avoid “imitation of the active and suffering states of our minds and our bodies and of passions as well as deeds” (204), for such “expression” in his figures would belie the ideal beauty to which he aspires; any superfluous change in “the features of the face or posture of the body” reflective of individual circumstances rather than inviolable, transcendent forms cannot but compromise the stylistic integrity of the whole. Therefore, “stillness is the state most proper to beauty, as it is to the sea ... the conception of high beauty cannot be produced other than in a tranquil contemplation of the soul withdrawn from all individual appearances.” For Greek sculptors active during the Golden Age, the orthodox method was therefore “to represent the face and attitude of the deities and heroes as freed from emotion and removed from inner agitation, in an equilibrium of feeling and with a peaceful and always equable soul,” and this strict imperative of the high style would prevail up until the early Hellenistic period (235).

What distinguishes the so-called beautiful style, by contrast, is a marked tendency towards naturalism, with a greater sensuality and softness, conveyed through graceful, curvilinear forms, and a heightened sense of pathos in the rendering of gesture and facial expression, contrary to the high style’s “significant and eloquent stillness of the soul” (Winckelmann 235). If artists pursuing the earlier style had sought to “purify [sic.] their images of all personal inclinations,” and conceived “true beauty” in the same way “as a bee gathers from many flowers” (198), as Winckelmann describes, then those later working in the beautiful style savored somewhat more of the sweetness and complexion of the individual plant. These artists seemed not to regard “expression” as being at all disadvantageous to beauty, which is not to suggest, however, that they deviated from the idealism of their forbears; for as Winckelmann notes, “the forms of beauty of the previous style remained the rule in this new style as well” (234). But where he does observe a significant stylistic

innovation is in their much freer representation of movement and passion—the “active and suffering states” repudiated before—as if they had deliberately set out to reinvigorate the static forms inherited from the past, to breathe something of the warmth of life into Galatea’s cold impassive breast: “these artists sought to bring closer to nature those high beauties that in the statues of their great masters were like ideas abstracted from nature and forms modeled on a system” (235), and so “to accompany high beauty with a sensuous charm and to render grandeur more convivial, as it were, through an accommodating loveliness” (236).

“Grace” is the term Winckelmann coins to designate this quickening influence of style: “Grace is formed and resides in gestures and displays itself in the action and movement of the body” (234). At the same time, however, individual expression cannot take the place of divine truth, and the Greeks had to be especially cautious not to represent such an excess of “sensuous charm” as would distract the mind of the spectator from loftier concepts or violate the strict propriety of form. In other words, while making the high style more accessible and pleasing to the eye, they could not afford to neglect their superior duty to the intellect. Thus, an essential quality of grace, according to Winckelmann, is restraint—suffusion rather than effusion: “Variety and greater diversity of expression did no harm to the harmony and grandeur of the beautiful style: the soul manifested itself only as if under a still surface of water and never erupted tempestuously” (236-7). In representing the “merely human passions,” the artist endowed his figures with “the composure of a wise man, who suppresses the surge of emotions and allows only the sparks from the fire to be seen” (205). In the same way as the high style proffers a glimpse of the ideal while remaining bound to

material forms, so the beautiful style insinuates passion while remaining beholden to the ideal. The one strains to see, while the other keeps from being seen.¹⁹

To illustrate this distinction between the high and beautiful modes, throughout the *History* Winckelmann returns time and again to the *Niobe* and *Laocoön* sculpture groups, “two of the most beautiful works of antiquity” (206), both of which portray figures confronting immanent death at the hands of vengeful gods. What distinguishes the *Niobe* (**fig. 1-14**), he writes, is a comparative lack of expression typical of the high style; in her, “feeling is numbed and stifled and the presence of death takes from the mind all capacity to think.” This insensate condition, “which is akin to indifference, changes no aspect of shape and appearance, and the great artist could fashion here, as he did, the very highest beauty.” Hers is the suffering of all mortal bodies rather than of just one individual. In her breathless, sessile form we behold only the idea of death striking down the living; personal tragedy has been largely displaced by “fear of death” which is universal. We get the sense from Winckelmann that we are no longer even witnessing a human drama; the sculpture seems not to elicit the least pity for a woman powerless to prevent the slaughter of her children. She “achieves [her] austere intensity through an almost death-like obliteration of signs of feeling, which elevates [her] expression to the realm of an inhuman beauty” (Potts 82). It would not have been possible for the sculptor to approach any nearer to abstraction while at the same time adhering to the truth of nature. “This beauty,” as Winckelmann explains, “is like an idea conceived without the help of the senses that might be produced in a lofty understanding and a happy imagination if it could soar to seeing nearly as far as divine beauty” (233); and again later,

¹⁹ For a more sustained analysis of Winckelmann’s stylistic dichotomy, see Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, the most insightful analysis yet written on this subject.

Through her the master of *Niobe* ventured into the realm of incorporeal ideas and attained the secret of joining mortal agony with the highest beauty. He became a creator of pure spirits and heavenly souls who excite no carnal desires but effect a vivid contemplation of all beauty: Niobe and her daughters seem not to be formed by passion but only to have absorbed it. (236)

In the figure of *Laocoön*, by contrast, mortal agony is not to be dulled by such abstract contemplation, but rather is sharpened by the immediacy and pathos of his expression, which excites rather than absorbs. Here one beholds not the semblance of a “pure spirit” or “heavenly soul,” but rather a physical body enduring what is undoubtedly excruciating pain.

If the *Niobe* represents for Winckelmann an “abstract disembodied drama in the high mode,” as Potts explains, then the *Laocoön* provides an alternative, “sensuously embodied drama in the beautiful mode” (83). Accordingly, the sculptors elected to portray the doomed Trojan priest unclothed, the better to display the pain manifest in the taut musculature and vigorous movement of his limbs as he struggles to extricate himself and his sons from the serpents’ heavy coils. In him one sees a distinct “image of the most extreme suffering, which acts here on all the muscles, nerves, and veins; the blood boils intensely from the deadly bite of the serpent, and all parts of the body express exertion and pain” (Winckelmann 206). Unlike in his description of the *Niobe*’s transubstantiated beauty, Winckelmann’s rapt gaze lingers at length upon the *Laocoön* figure’s corporeal charms, such that at times he seems to partake somewhat of the pain he finds expressed there. He especially admires the left side of the abdomen, “into which the serpent pours forth its venom with a furious strike,” and where, “because of its proximity to the heart, Laokoon appears to suffer most intensely” (314). Remarkably, the statue seems to have come alive in a kind of sadistic Pygmalion fantasy, animated by Winckelmann’s fervent prose. “The fearful groan he draws in and the breath he

takes empty the abdomen and hollow out the sides, exposing to our view the movement of the entrails, as it were” (313). The staid demeanor and “equilibrium of feeling” (235) characteristic of the high style yields here to a *mélange* of intense emotions denied to the similarly circumstanced *Niobe*: besides the pain brought on by the inguinal snakebite, Winckelmann discerns in the *Laocoön*’s mouth and “wistful eyes” a fatherly “compassion” and “sorrow” for his sons, while in the “dilated and upwardly drawn nostrils” he reads “a stirring of discontent, as at an unworthy and undeserved suffering” (313). Nor does his figure evince anything like the “eloquent stillness” (235) of the high style; so forceful is his desire to preserve his own life, as well as the lives of his offspring, that in Winckelmann’s view it prevents him from attaining the ideal, which effaces all traces of individual identity. This is why the *Niobe* merely *appears*, as in a dispassionate philosophical reverie, whereas the *Laocoön*’s self-preserving instinct exerts itself in every fiber of his body, eliciting sympathy and inciting commensurate passions in the beholder. “No part is at rest,” observes Winckelmann, “his legs want to rise so that he can flee his curse,” and “even the chisel marks help to create the impression of a tightened skin” (314). Nevertheless, it is important to remember here that expression, as defined in the *History*, did not give the Ancients license to transgress the laws of visual propriety already established with the high style, which point Winckelmann presses upon the reader by contrasting the *Laocoön* group with Virgil’s poetic rendition in the *Aeneid*.

Perhaps to some extent because of his own rhapsodic manner of describing the sculpture, throughout the *History* Winckelmann mitigates against its expressive power by concentrating no less intently on its gracefulness, which quality the reader will recall mandates that the artist subdue the passions in order to avoid immoderate appearances inconsistent with the idealized beauty to which Winckelmann thinks all great art should

ultimately aspire. While Hellenistic sculptors advanced their art by endowing high-style forms with material presence, rendering them closer to perceptible nature and more familiar to human experience, they were nevertheless careful to preserve the integrity and sanctity of ideal beauty, never discounting their higher obligation to the intellect. It was therefore imperative to guard against “exaggerated expression” lest it should distort or deform the appearance of the perfectly proportioned body, and thereby excite in the beholder such ignoble passions and desires as would perforce distract from the cerebral contemplation of refined ideas.²⁰ “The artist,” as Winckelmann explains, “because he must select the most beautiful parts of the most beautiful appearances, is limited as to the level of expression of the passions, which must not become detrimental to the appearance” (205). There is, then, a practical limit to the degree of suffering the *Laocoön* can express, and much of its visual appeal he ascribes to the unsurpassed ingenuity of the sculptors, who approached to the very threshold of bathos without stepping over; they contrived to balance the most intense passions with a more dignified yearning after stillness and tranquility, conveyed through the figure’s heroic forbearance and defiance of pain. In him Winckelmann observes “the well-tested spirit of a great man, who struggles against extremity and who seeks to quell and stifle the eruption of feeling” (206); “a being in the greatest pain,” yet who is “fashioned in the likeness of a man seeking to gather the conscious strength of his mind and spirit against it” (313). His robust chest “strains upward with stifled breath and suppressed waves of feeling, so that the pain is contained and locked within.” Even as the serpent’s sting “swells his muscles and

²⁰ Winckelmann faults contemporary European artists for straying too far from the classical ideal, referring specifically to the influential French painter Charles Le Brun’s treatise on the passions, *Conférence sur l’expression générale et particulière* (1698). “In the drawings for this,” he writes, “not only is the most extreme degree of passion imparted to the faces but also in several it is represented to the point of frenzy” (207). The Neoclassic style was conceived in large part as a rejection of the grotesque extravagance and frivolity of the Baroque and Rococo.

tenses his nerves, his fortitude of mind and strength of spirit are manifested in the distended brow.” Indeed, it is in the expression of his face, above all, that the sculptors most eloquently delineated the “battle between pain and resistance ... for just as pain drives the eyebrows upward, so resistance to pain pushes the flesh above the eye down and against the upper eyelid, so that it is almost completely covered by the overlying flesh” (313-4). Winckelmann’s elucidation of the progress of Greek style from the high to the beautiful mode, and his detailed analysis of the *Laocoön* in particular, provides the conceptual foundation for his criticism of Virgil.

Even though he provides no systematic appraisal of poetry, as did Dubos, Winckelmann probably would have concurred with the author of *Réflexions critiques* that the medium of language represents passions more effectively than forms; and since ideal beauty is defined primarily in visual terms, poetry can only suffer by comparison with the plastic arts. At one point in the *History* Winckelmann flatly remarks that the “attributes [of heroes] represented in poetry have a necessary relation to the age and the condition of man but not to his figure” (205). Unfortunately, he fails to elaborate any further here, but what he seems to imply is that while the poet may have certain advantages over the artist when it comes to relating the character and conduct of men, his reliance upon artificial rather than natural signs impedes the mimetic representation of forms, thereby prohibiting him from ever approaching the kind of elevated beauty Winckelmann accords to antique sculpture. The poet therefore has greater freedom to represent the passions, if only because his medium is too abstract and too diffuse to spoil the charm of figural beauty. Because words represent only ideas of things, they affect the reader rather less than if the things themselves had been presented before his very eyes. Thus, Winckelmann contends elsewhere that the allegorical figure of

“fierce Necessity,” as envisaged by Horace,²¹ “would make us avert our faces if represented in a picture, as with the sight of a raging person,” as would also “Milton’s devilry, of which one can convince oneself by imagining the effect on the stage of the British poet’s images” (*An Attempt at an Allegory* 146).²² We should not take this to mean, however, that Winckelmann would have us believe poetry to be in any way superior to plastic representation; since he presumes language to be an impassable barrier separating the poet from the transcendent, eternal beauty that is the ultimate aim of art, the poet must confine himself instead to the relatively menial task of relating the momentary actions and fleeting passions of material existence.

When Virgil describes the death of Laocoön in the second book of the *Aeneid*, he makes no effort to visualize his physical bearing beyond what the narrative requires; he tells only of the doomed priest’s futile struggle to free himself and his sons from the giant serpents unleashed upon him by Minerva, and the excruciating pain inflicted by their venomous sting:

Twice round his waist their winding volumes roll’d;

And twice about his gasping throat they fold. ...

With both his hands he labors at the knots;

²¹ See ode 1.35 (“O Diva, Gratum”), lines 17-20; and 3.24 (“Intactis Opulentior”), lines 5-6.

²² Winckelmann’s *Attempt at an Allegory* was published three years after the *History*, in 1767. In his criticism of Milton he is most likely referring to Satan’s encounter with the grotesque figures of Sin and Death in the second book of *Paradise Lost*, which Samuel Johnson, writing in his life of Milton, calls an improbable and “unskilful allegory” (158), a judgment likewise expressed by Addison in the March 1, 1712 issue of the *Spectator*: “These Passages are astonishing, but not credible; the Reader cannot so far impose upon himself as to see a Possibility in them; they are the Description of Dreams and Shadows, not of Things or Persons.” For Winckelmann, however, what is at stake is not the reader’s credulity, but rather the propriety of the images. Thus, subjects he deems infelicitous for the artist to attempt are nevertheless permissible in poetry, precisely because of the opacity of poetic language. Sin and Death are best left as “Dreams and Shadows,” for they cannot possibly represent the ideal, and therefore to show them plainly delineated in paint or stone would prove too overbearing for the senses.

His holy fillets the blue venom blots;
 His roaring fills the flitting air around.
 Thus, when an ox receives a glancing wound,
 He breaks his bands, the fatal altar flies,
 And with loud bellowings breaks the yielding skies.²³ (286-95)

For Winckelmann, this passage clearly demonstrates the limitations and meanness of poetry. Writing in his 1755 essay *Reflections on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (*RPSG*), wherein he articulates for the first time many of the cardinal precepts that inform the more comprehensive *History*, Winckelmann praises the *Laocoön* sculpture for embodying the aesthetic principle of grace, with its “noble simplicity and sedate grandeur in gesture and expression” (72), while at the same time brusquely criticizing Virgil’s account for being “too violent, too passionate” to convey the “character of sage dignity” that is essential to beauty.²⁴ The poet describes neither gesture nor form; and “sedate” would not be the proper word to characterize Laocoön’s frantic “labors,” nor “dignity” his wild “gasping” and “roaring,” which is grotesquely compared to a beast of burden stamping and frothing at the sacrificial altar. The attenuated “groan,” suggested to Winckelmann by the sculpture, “pierces not heaven, like the Laocoön of Virgil”; and the “tranquility” of the former, necessary “to draw the true character of the soul,” yields to wanton vehemence in the latter. Just as the excesses of poetry resemble a “foaming surface” beyond which one cannot see to

²³ I have chosen to use Dryden’s widely read translation of 1697, which would have been recognized by most English-speaking critics writing in the eighteenth century.

²⁴ The term Winckelmann uses to designate this excess of passion is “parenthyrsos,” apparently derived from the treatise *On Sublimity*, attributed by tradition to Longinus, where it means specifically “immoderate emotion where moderate is in place” (146). Winckelmann writes: “In *Laocoön* sufferings alone had been ‘parenthyrsos’; the artists therefore, in order to reconcile the significative and ennobling qualities of his soul, put him into a posture, allowing for the sufferings that were necessary, the next to a state of tranquillity [sic.]” (*RPSG* 73).

“the bottom of the sea ... peaceful beneath,” so the limpid simplicity and gracefulness of the *Laocoön* figure betrays “a great soul ... sedate beneath the strife of passions.” For Winckelmann, such idealized “soul” expression triumphs over specious matter, transcends “mere nature,” coming, it would seem, straight from the luminous “mind of the artist.” But what of supernal beauty “shines with full lustre” in the marble visage of the sculpture, in Virgil’s imagination gets obscured and degraded by language that is attuned to the “highest pitch of passion,” producing images flagrant and “unnatural,” irreconcilable with the imperative of beauty, and therefore adverse to art.

In spite of the originality of Winckelmann’s work and the unprecedented insight it provides with regard to the evolution and decline of style in Greek art, his approach to the sister-arts tradition was not inconsistent with that of most critics writing in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, many of whom—including Addison, Spence, and Dubos—get referenced routinely throughout the *History*. However, during the years Winckelmann spent in Italy studying sculpture, visiting ruins, and cultivating close friendships with artists and antiquarian collectors, laying much of the foundation for his scholarly work, a fresh theoretical perspective was already making waves, driven by the winds of an emergent Romantic sensibility. Derived more from Longinus than from Aristotle or Plato, these new critical voices subscribed to and elaborated on Dubos’ semiotic approach to aesthetics, but went much further in suggesting not only that a distinction between natural and artificial signs demanded a revision of the aesthetic criteria applicable to painting and poetry, but even more radically, that poetry—not painting—was the superior art form, precisely because it was accepted that language could better represent and express human passions. The value of all art, whether painting or poetry, was no longer a matter of visual allure; of greater concern was its capacity to arouse strong feelings or passions. It is possible, of course, to account for

such a shift in perspective, but to attempt at this point to enumerate and explain all the relevant social and cultural variables would lead us too far astray from the present course; but some of these issues will receive due consideration in later chapters. It suffices here to say that aesthetic values were rapidly changing to reflect the taste of an increasingly positivistic and secular-minded bourgeois polity.

This transformation becomes especially apparent in Lessing's *Laocoön*, written partly as a critique of Winckelmann, but it is also traceable in the work of several British critics writing before him. In the grammarian James Harris's "Discourse on Music, Painting, and Poetry," for example, published as one of the *Three Treatises* in 1744, he adopts Dubos' semiotic terminology to account for the differences between painting and poetry. Thus, while the painter applies the "natural" media of "colour" and "figure" (57-8), the poet relies instead upon the "artificial" medium of "words significant" (75), which are "symbols by compact of all ideas" (70) and therefore must be learned as well as perceived (either as spoken discourse or in print). And like Dubos, Harris even allows that the natural signs of painting, insofar as they operate more immediately upon the eye, make that art form more advantageous to mimetic representation than poetry, because words cannot with equal felicity imitate nature. Thus, "poetic imitation founded in mere natural resemblance is much inferior to that of painting" (73). On the other hand, Harris contends that such "natural resemblance," however pleasing to the eye, does not make painting superior to poetry; rather, he proposes that the poet, because his "materials are words," has a much broader range of ideas than the painter who is limited by his medium to mere forms spatially arranged (70). While the subject matter of painting, according to classical precepts, is restricted to a single moment, or "punctum temporis" (62), in a logical setting, poetry can represent "actions, whose whole is of so lengthened a duration, that no point of time, in any part of that whole, can be given fit for

painting” (83-4). More crucial, however, is Harris’s assertion that the poet has, by virtue of his medium, an exclusive franchise on “all subjects so framed as to lay open the internal constitution of man, and give us insight into characters, manners, passions, and sentiments” (84); and it is for this reason that he privileges poetry over painting. If art must have a purpose, then the best of all purposes surely must be human “improvement” (86); and if the “most affecting” happens also to be the “most improving,” as Harris claims (85-6), then poetry has the advantage of greater “utility” (94).

In 1762 the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Henry Home (Lord Kames) published *Elements of Criticism*, which shares several fundamental premises with Harris’s work but is more lucid in style and rigorous in argumentation, making it one of the seminal aesthetic treatises of the period.²⁵ Like Harris, Home argues strongly for the civic utility of the arts (most forcefully expressed in his dedication to George III), and that this function is more or less viable in proportion to the quality and intensity of the passions they inspire in their intended audience. However, his aesthetic criteria are still essentially visual, as they had been for Dennis and Addison; and mimetic representation, or what he calls “ideal presence,” remains the principal end of painting and poetry alike, since “[objects of sight] are the causes of emotions, by means of their properties and attributes” (82-3). “The force of language,” he writes, “consists in raising complete images”; hence, in any literary description, “objects ought to be painted so accurately as to form in the mind of the reader distinct and lively images” (376), and the writer must be especially vigilant “to avoid as much as possible abstract and general terms,” since “images, which are the life of poetry, cannot be raised in any perfection but by introducing particular objects” (102). In this way, he concludes, “the

²⁵ The *Elements* reached its 11th edition in the year 1840, little more than a decade after Blake’s death.

narrative in an epic poem ought to rival a picture in the liveliness and accuracy of its representation,” notwithstanding significant differences in their respective media (377).

At the same time, however, even though poetry may to some extent “rival” the plastic arts, Home concedes that “painting only and sculpture are in their nature imitative” (228). The painter, by copying the forms and colors of objects in nature, has much less difficulty “in making an impression of ideal presence” than the poet, whose medium of “language copies not from nature” (37; 228). Despite this, however, Home ultimately arrives at the same conclusion as Harris, that because “a picture is confined to a single instant of time, and cannot take in a succession of incidents,” and because “our passions, those especially of the sympathetic kind, require a succession of impressions,” poetry (in particular drama) has a more positive and lasting effect than painting (37).²⁶ By presenting a whole series of word images rather than a snapshot of a single moment, the poet can more readily manipulate the impression his words will make upon the reader, either intensifying that impression through a concatenation of complementary images, or else altering it by introducing more or less disparate ones. In this way, poetic language acquires a “more extensive influence . . . over the heart; an influence which, more than any other means, strengthens the bond of society, and attracts individuals from their private system to perform acts of generosity and benevolence” (38-9); and this social bond, more than anything else, defines the highest purpose of art, thus making literary expression—both theatrical and poetic—inherently superior to the arts of painting and sculpture.

Home delves much deeper than Harris to discover how poetry, and to a lesser extent painting, stimulate passions in people, borrowing much from the earlier work of Dennis. It

²⁶ He suggests that theater, being at once visual and verbal, is therefore superior to both painting and poetry: “Of all the means for making an impression of ideal presence, theatrical representation is the most powerful” (37).

would try the reader's patience to attempt here a comprehensive review of all his arguments on this point; but for the present, what is most important is his division of images into two broad aesthetic categories: the beautiful and the sublime. For Home, objects of beauty awaken human sympathy. "All the various emotions of beauty," he writes, "maintain one common character, that of sweetness and gaiety" (83), which "concur in an eminent degree with mental qualifications to produce social intercourse, mutual good-will, and consequently mutual aid and support, which are the life of society" (89). Sublime impressions, by contrast, appeal more to the individual will and "selfish" passions. They produce in us intense feelings of awe and elevation; and since "nature hath ... distinguished us from other animals ... by a capacious and aspiring mind," it seems only reasonable, then, to admire such things as appear "great and elevated," and those individuals especially who have demonstrated personal greatness by uncommon deeds of heroism; and that people should not only hold such individuals in their highest esteem, but whenever appropriate aspire to emulate their character, and thereby seek to elevate themselves.²⁷ It is the capacity of language to evoke concrete images that engenders these passions, which not even painting and sculpture can accomplish, since "successive images, making thus deeper and deeper impressions, must elevate more than any single image can do" (103). Edmund Burke would probably have supported Home's conclusion that poetry excels painting in the excitation of strong passions

²⁷ This is a potentially radical proposition, and Home is careful to note that the sublime must always be reckoned with the public good. "A selfish motive proceeding from a social principle ... is the most respectable of all selfish motives" (15); however, to act heroically for mere personal gain, "in opposition to a social passion," is detrimental to the whole of society. This view perhaps explains why he writes so circumspectly of individuals whom we may, on the one hand, admire for their strength and courage, while at the same time reviling their selfish "acts of oppression and injustice," which civic duty would prohibit us from ever desiring to repeat. The literary examples of Tamburlaine, Captain Ahab, and Milton's Satan come immediately to mind.

such as the sublime, not because of the concreteness of poetic images, however, but rather because of the abstract, immaterial aspect of linguistic signs.

First published in 1757, five years before Home's *Elements*, Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* is widely viewed today as somewhat of a crossroads in eighteenth century aesthetic discourse, where Enlightenment values intersect in a marked way with a more liberal, Romantic sensibility. Rather than Home, Burke's conception of the sublime is derived from Dennis, the first modern critic to ascribe sublimity to "Enthusiastick Terror" and the "Apprehension of Danger" (361-2).²⁸ The novelty of Burke's theory, however, is his well-known hypothesis that the sublime is not produced by clear impressions, but rather by "obscurity," as when circumstances prohibit the senses from perceiving things clearly. Like Harris, he distinguishes between painting as a strictly imitative art, and poetry which is the proper medium of human passions: "In reality," he observes, "poetry and rhetoric do not succeed in exact description so well as painting does; their business is to affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves" (157). The reason for this is the disparity between natural and artificial signs: "Nothing is an imitation further than as it resembles some other thing; and words undoubtedly have no sort of resemblance to the ideas for which they stand." Burke probably picked up these ideas from reading Dubos, whom he mentions at one point by name,²⁹ but whereas the *Réflexions* argues that abstractness is a deficiency of language, Burke contends not just that language has a greater affect on the passions than painting, but that when it comes to "astonishment," the passion he identifies

²⁸ See *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, chpt. Four.

²⁹ Part Two, Section IV.

with the sublime,³⁰ no other medium will do, since sublimity for him is entirely contingent on ideas indefinite and obscure. “To make any thing very terrible,” he writes, “obscurity seems in general to be necessary” (54), and obscurity was something no painter, so far as he was aware, had yet succeeded in achieving.³¹ Painting for Burke is practically synonymous with clarity, and clarity obviously cannot be sublime: “In reality a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions,” while poetry “with all its obscurity has a more general as well as a more powerful dominion over the passions than the other art” (56-7). To illustrate, Burke quotes from Milton’s description of Death in the second book of *Paradise Lost*, since “no person seems better to have understood the secret ... of setting terrible things ... in their strongest light by the force of a judicious obscurity” (55), inviting a comparison, it would seem, with the rather disappointing designs of John Medina and Francis Hayman, whose *Paradise Lost* illustrations had recently appeared in a 1749 edition of the poem.

By the time Lessing published *Laocoön* in 1766, the sister-arts tradition had already been radically redefined by semiotic approaches to understanding the different ways in which painting and poetry produce meaning, in consequence of which poetry could no longer be judged adequately by the same aesthetic criteria as painting. Thus, while the painter sought to achieve some measure of visual resemblance, appealing to the eye as the primary

³⁰ “Astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (53); hence, “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (36).

³¹ “I do not know of any paintings, bad or good, that produce the same [sublime] effect” (57). “When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of these very fanciful and terrible ideas, they have I think almost always failed; insomuch that I have been at a loss, in all the pictures I have seen of hell, whether the painter did not intend something ludicrous” (58). Upon reading such statements, one cannot but wonder what Burke’s reaction might have been upon seeing Fuseli’s *Nightmare*, which at the time of its exhibition in 1782 (25 years after the *Enquiry*) had the effect of a manifesto declaring the sublime to be an attainable, if not the most desirable, goal of painting.

instrument of universal reason, the poet addressed himself rather to individual human passions; not only could he, by virtue of his linguistic medium, incite these passions more effectively than could the painter, who was bounded by both space and time, as well as considerations of visual propriety, but such a purpose was deemed by these critics to be more pleasurable, as well as more socially profitable, than mimetic representation. Lessing does not appear to have been acquainted with any of the English writers mentioned above, though German translations of their works could have been made available to him through his extensive intellectual network in Berlin,³² nevertheless, there is but little that distinguishes his theory of signs from theirs.³³ What makes his work of special significance, however, is the lucid application of these concepts in his critique of Winckelmann's analysis of the *Laocoön* sculpture.

The fundamental premise of Lessing's thesis is that painting is a *spatial* art form, poetry a *temporal* one: the former employs "figures and colors in space," the latter "articulated sounds in time" (78). Furthermore, supposing "these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified," Lessing proposes that "signs existing in space can express only objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive." Accordingly, objects rendered in space he calls "bodies," while objects that appear consecutively are "actions." This distinction between spatial and temporal signs establishes the limitations of each art

³² He does cite Addison and Spence, both unfavorably.

³³ McCormick has suggested that Lessing probably derived his sign theory from his close friend Moses Mendelssohn's treatise *On the main principles of fine arts and belles-lettres* (1757), wherein Mendelssohn distinguishes between "natural" and "arbitrary" symbols: "They are natural if the association of the symbol with the object designated is derived from the nature of the object itself. Conversely, those symbols which we call arbitrary have in their very nature nothing in common with the object designated" (qtd. in McCormick xix). For his part, Mendelssohn seems to have borrowed his terminology from Dubos.

form: thus, “poetry in its progressive imitations can use only one single property of a body, so that the poet must “choose that one which awakens the most vivid image of the body” (79); on the other hand, while the painter is not required to exercise such “economy in [the] description of physical objects,” he can depict “only a single moment of an action and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible” (78). The advantage of painting, then, is that it allows for the imitation of “material beauty,” since “the beauty of an object arises from the harmonious effect of its various parts, which the eye is able to take in at once glance”; but for the poet, because he can “show the elements of beauty in succession only, he abstains entirely from the depiction of physical beauty as such” (104). However, the seriality of verse description does afford him the advantage of being able to represent actions that, if frozen in time and given material form, would likely offend the sensibilities of the viewer; and this greater flexibility, by mitigating the visual flagrancy of isolated images, allows for the representation of such passionate states as would be altogether prohibited in painting or sculpture.

It should come as no surprise, then, when Lessing reaffirms Winckelmann’s judgment that the *Laocoön* sculptors had wisely exercised restraint in accordance with the mandate of visual propriety, repeating his observation that “the pain in Laocoön’s face is not expressed with the same intensity that its violence would lead us to expect” (8). But here their agreement ends. Where Winckelmann erred, Lessing goes on to say, was in making expression subordinate to idealized beauty, which, by applying the same doctrinal standard to poetry as to the sculpture, cast Virgil’s poetic description in a decidedly unfavorable light. While grace may have been required of the painters and sculptors of ancient Greece, the same did not apply to her dramatists and poets, who did not shy away from expressing violent

passions in their work. If the sculptor strove to appeal to the souls of men, inspiring the mind to the contemplation of transcendent ideas, then the poet sought rather to appeal to their hearts, to awaken sympathy for their fellow man. “High as Homer raises his heroes above human nature,” writes Lessing, “he still has them remain faithful to it in their sensitiveness to pain and injury and in the expression of this feeling by cries, tears, or invectives. In their deeds they are beings of a higher order, in their feelings true men” (9). Not only does Lessing contend that the Ancient poets embraced the passions, rather than suppressing them, but that by doing so they were able to express true “nobility of soul” (11). Thus, whereas Winckelmann correlated nobility with stoical restraint, Lessing suggests that it actually strengthens in proportion to the intensity of the passions:

Stoicism is not dramatic, and our sympathy is in direct proportion to the suffering of the object of our interest. If we see him bearing his misery ... he will, to be sure, excite our admiration; but admiration is only a cold sentiment whose barren wonderment excludes not only every warmer passion but every other clear conception as well.

In this way Lessing manages to nullify the terms of Winckelmann’s analysis of the *Laocoön*, arguing that the sculptors practiced restraint not in the name of rarefied beauty, but rather for no other reason than they could not represent the passions.

Lessing does not dispute that these intense feelings distort the features and proportions of the human figure, but while for the poet “external form ... can at best be one of the least significant means by which he is able to awaken our interest in his characters,” for the sculptor it is the only means (23). All the more reason, then, for him to “set certain restraints upon expression and never present an action at its climax” (19); for not only must he represent bodies in space, but also suspend their action in time, making them more

amenable to the prolonged scrutiny of the viewer; and because his works are meant to be “contemplated repeatedly and at length,” Lessing vehemently discourages the portrayal of full-blown passions as unseemly and insupportable, liable to incite more a sense of loathing than of sympathy. The “prolongation of such phenomena,” he explains, “gives them such an unnatural appearance that they make a weaker impression the more often we look at them, until they finally fill us with disgust or horror” (20). Thus, according to Lessing, the *Laocoön* sculptors, confronted with the limitations of their medium, had no choice but to mitigate the suffering of their subject: “The demands of beauty could not be reconciled with the pain in all its disfiguring violence, so it had to be reduced. The scream had to be softened into a sigh, not because screaming betrays an ignoble soul, but because it distorts the features in a disgusting manner” (17). But fortunately for Virgil, when he came to write of Laocoön’s death, there were no such constraints imposed upon his description.

According to Lessing, this greater expressive freedom is attributable in large measure to the pliability of the poet’s medium. In the first place, because of the abstract nature of language, he can represent the passions without necessarily evoking repulsive ideas. “When Virgil’s Laocoön screams,” Lessing inquires, “does it occur to anyone that a wide-open mouth is necessary in order to scream, and that this wide-open mouth makes the face ugly?” (23). Furthermore, the continuous arrangement of linguistic signs, which must be interpreted consecutively, rather than collectively in a single glance, has an attenuating effect, curtailing the flagrancy of the poet’s images without moderating the intensity of the passions motivating them. Writing of the “ugliness” of Thersites in the *Iliad*, Lessing observes that its effect on the reader is to a great extent alleviated by “the successive enumeration of its elements” (121). Thus, while Thersites would make an inappropriate subject for the sculptor or painter due to his revolting appearance, Homer’s “use of ugliness becomes possible for the very

reason that in his description it is reduced to a less offensive manifestation of physical imperfection and ceases, as it were, to be ugly in its effect.” The same must also be true of Virgil’s Laocoön, only in this instance the ugliness is momentary, occasioned by the fierce but fleeting passions of horror and suffering rather than an inborn physical trait.

Besides the apparent disadvantage of working in a concrete medium, the *Laocoön* sculptors also had to reckon with temporal constraints, precluded as they were from the “use of more than a single moment in ever-changing nature” (19); meanwhile, Lessing tells us there was “nothing to compel the poet to compress his picture into a single moment” (23). Virgil could therefore profit by the operation of narrative time, mollifying Laocoön’s violent expression by presenting it as the climax of a whole series of consecutive actions that concentrate the reader’s attention elsewhere than on his suffering alone. In this way the ancient poets succeeded in representing man as he exists, in historical time, not as some rarefied abstraction; they fabricated a human context for their heroes, a narrative frame of reference, which their fellow sculptors simply could not do. If Virgil’s description, “viewed by itself, should offend the hearer’s imagination, it was either anticipated by what has preceded or is so softened and compensated by what follows that it loses its individual impression and in combination achieves the best effect in the world” (24). The “best effect” whereof Lessing speaks is, of course, sympathy. “Virgil’s Laocoön cries out,” indeed, “but this screaming Laocoön is the same man whom we already know and love as a prudent patriot and loving father.” Without such foreknowledge of Laocoön’s patriotism and paternal affection, and with no other means to convey it than through narrative action, the sculptors would have been foolish to have attempted to render his scream in stone. Incapable of awakening any sympathy in the viewer, they were instead compelled to exercise restraint for the sake of propriety. Thus, whereas Winckelmann had argued that Virgil’s poetry was

deficient in grace, Lessing counters that the sculpture is no less deficient in passion; and without denying the latter's visual allure, or even that such beauty exceeds the capacity of poetic description, he ultimately assigns greater value to expression, believing it to be the exclusive province and principal concern of poetry.



The high profile of the *Laocoön* in eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse has in recent years prompted a few notable scholars to inquire whether Blake was conscious of the controversy surrounding the sculpture and to what extent it may have informed his decision to make the group the graphic centerpiece of what has come to be regarded as his last definitive statement on art and culture. Certainly, the *Laocoön* plate invites literary interpretation, and critics have long been aware of the textual parallels with Blake's prophetic books, mostly having to do with the role of Satan and Adam as personifications of the limits of "Opacity" and "Contraction" impeding the spiritual progress of fallen man; nor is it uncommon for a critic to scavenge the text for material to help elucidate some aspect of Blake's thought expressed elsewhere in his writing. When the plate does get cited, it is therefore usually confined to a footnote. However, such cross-referencing, though valuable in some respects, offers no compelling rationale for the identification of these concepts with one of the most recognizable works of classical antiquity.

An alternative approach to the plate, one that has already yielded more valuable insights, is to read it for what Blake has to say about the practice and purpose of art, as the final summation of aesthetic principles previously advanced in the *Descriptive Catalogue* (DC) of 1809 and notebook drafts of essays written in support of his pictures *A Vision of the Last Judgment* and *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims*. Blake himself, upon giving a copy of the print to the visionary landscapist Samuel Palmer, was said to have remarked to his young

protégé, “you will find my creed there” (Bentley 498).³⁴ Essick and Viscomi have proposed that, taken as a whole, “the axioms and mini-narratives form Blake’s last treatise on art, antiquity, religion, and money” (233); and in more recent years, Morton Paley and Julia Wright have adopted this approach: rather than attempting to use the plate as a key to help unlock the meaning of Blake’s poetry, they read it in the much broader context of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and art historiography, arguing that Blake engages more directly here than in his prophecies with the prevailing cultural currents and aesthetic controversies of his time.

In his chapter-length study of the print, Paley alleges that “there is no evidence that Blake, who did not know German, was conversant with Lessing’s theories” (65); however, the first of two installments of Thomas De Quincey’s translation of *Laocoön* appeared in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1826, the year now generally accepted by scholars as the most plausible date of the plate. Even if one accepts Paley’s rather dubious assertion that De Quincey’s translation—the first in English—probably came too late to have had much influence on Blake, there is an abundance of information suggesting that, while he may not have been able to read Lessing, he was at least familiar, if not fluently “conversant,” with the gist of his critique of Winckelmann and the sister-arts tradition. Besides the handful of articles where Lessing’s ideas receive some notice, printed in popular British periodicals such as *Blackwood’s* and *The Analytical Review*, and which Blake may have come across in casual reading, the most compelling evidence of his knowledge of Lessing is his close friendship and artistic alliance with the German-speaking Fuseli, who had originally sought to earn a

³⁴ This anecdote has only recently come to light. It is reported in the journal of one John Clark Strange, who in the late 1850s set about gathering material in preparation for a biography of Blake, but apparently gave up the project when Gilchrist beat him to the press. Excerpts from this notebook appear as an addendum to Bentley’s biography, published in 2000.

living in London as a poet and translator, before being encouraged by Reynolds to give up that trade in favor of painting.

It was, after all, Fuseli's translation of Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1764), acquired by Blake some time during the 1770s (Hall 67), which first introduced the younger artist to the very ideas Lessing repudiates, namely that Virgil's "too violent, too passionate" account of Laocoön's tragic demise lacks the "character of sage dignity" evident in the sculpture. It was probably Fuseli's early appreciation of Winckelmann that compelled him to decline his friend Johann Caspar Lavater's advice in 1766 to submit a review of Lessing's *Laocoön* to the Swiss journal *Lindauer Nachrichten*, saying "that he did not know the book and would not review it if he did" (Mason 203). It is also possible he felt personally threatened by Lessing's success. A spurious "second edition" of his *Reflections* translation appeared that same year, but seems to have fared no better than the first; while at the same time he was still contemplating the much grander scheme of translating Winckelmann's *History*. It makes perfect sense, then, that he would want to avoid drawing any kind of attention to Lessing's criticism of these works. Once settled in London, he regularly contributed notices and reviews to the publisher Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*,³⁵ and for the June number of its inaugural year (1788) he penned an article betraying an unabashed commitment to the sister-arts tradition denigrated by Lessing: "The excellence of pictures or of language consist in raising clear, complete and circumstantial images and turning readers into spectators. A style in painting is the same as in writing; be it words or colors, they convey sentiments" (204). Five months later, Fuseli was elected an associate of the Royal Academy, a change in circumstances that afforded many new opportunities as an

³⁵ Johnson occasionally employed Blake as an engraver during this period, and in 1793 published his emblem book *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*.

artist, as well as greater financial security, and it may also have encouraged him to break with old intellectual alliances and prejudices and approach Lessing with a more receptive mind.

By the early 1790s he appears to have read, or perhaps reread, Lessing's book, this time approving of his theories. Writing in another article for the *Analytical Review*—a report on Cowper's translations of Homer—Fuseli remarks, “poetic imitation ... is progressive, and less occupied with the *surface* of the object than its *action*; hence all comparisons between the poet's and the painter's manners, ought to be made with an eye to the respective end and limits of either art” (Knowles 1: 89). The following year (1794), in a review of Uvedale Price's *Essay on the Picturesque*, he completely disavows his earlier position on the parity of painting and poetry, this time renouncing the “old maxim that poetry is painting in speech, and painting dumb poetry,” and scornfully adding, “the two sisters ... have been constantly confounded with each other by the herds of mediocrity and thoughtless imitation” (Mason 206). This time Fuseli actually references Lessing in a footnote, crediting him as a “writer of great acuteness,” and one can hear unmistakable echoes of *Laocoön* in his vilification of descriptive poetry “which overwhelms by a rhapsody of successive sounds what can only be represented by figure,” and the “equally absurd attempt” by painters “of combining moments and subdividing expression.” Reviewing his friend and patron William Roscoe's critical biography of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1796, he once more insists that “surface can only be distinctly discriminated by line and colour,” while on the other hand poetry, “in representing its object in motion, to impress us with it's [sic] variety of action and attitudes,” eschews “a minute anatomy of motionless surfaces, to which words, it's vehicle, are totally inadequate” (Knowles 132).

As a full member of the Royal Academy,³⁶ Fuseli was also granted the opportunity to formally present his views on art by way of public lectures, and in the spring of 1801 he delivered his first three (of a total of twelve by the end of his career). In the third lecture, on “Invention,” he begins with a *reductio* of Simonides’ axiom “painting is mute poesy and poetry speaking painting” (2:133), which includes a lengthy paraphrase of Lessing: “*Successive action* communicated by sounds, and *time*, are the medium of poetry; *form* displayed in *space*, and momentaneous energy, are the element of painting” (134). He also concurs with the notion that the medium of “space and form” requires that the artist confine his representations to a single instant, prior to the climax of any action: “those important moments ... which with equal rapidity and pregnancy give us a glimpse of the past and lead our eye to what follows” (135). At this time Blake resided in the seaside town of Felpham in Sussex, and therefore could not have been present at the Academy to hear his friend’s lectures; but Fuseli’s talent, acumen, and forceful persona were esteemed by many in London’s most prominent intellectual circles, and within a matter of weeks all three of his lectures were collected and published by Joseph Johnson. It is reasonable to assume Blake read them at some point; not only was he, as his friend Frederick Tatham averred, “more fond of Fuseli than any other man on Earth” (Bentley 105), but his engraving of a portrait of Michelangelo after a design by Fuseli appeared in the volume, though it was almost certainly executed prior to his leaving London. However, Fuseli was by no means the only Academician to take a position on the sister-arts debate.

Blake probably also acquired Barry’s Academy lectures some time after their publication in 1809, where he would have read “words after all are but words ... They are but

³⁶ Fuseli was appointed in 1790 to replace the late Mr. Meyer, a miniaturist, as Professor of Perspective. His election was famous for prompting the temporary resignation of Joshua Reynolds, who had favored the architect, M. Bonomi. For more on this controversy see Knowles 1: 177-80.

symbols formed for the eye, out of 24 arbitrary scratches, called letters, and certain vibrations of the air ... which by national compacts are made to suggest the idea of existing things” (1: 412); and although language has an advantage over painting “in the facility and extent of what it does communicate in the whole range of characters, manners, passions, sentiments, and intercourse of society,” it is inferior in the representation of forms. As a painter himself, Barry follows Winckelmann in privileging the “completeness and actual existence” of a sculpture or picture over the abstractions of poetic language, which are necessarily limited by circumstances of nationality and education (410); and it is for this reason that he judges the *Laocoön* sculpture to be superior to Virgil’s poetry: “The Laocoon, though in the hands of the judicious and admirable Virgil—yet what has he or could he produce, which may be compared with the stupendous group in the Belvedere?” (411).

Reynolds, too, takes an interest in this issue, though he makes no mention of Lessing or the *Laocoön*; and because Blake’s copy of the 1798 edition of Reynolds’ *Discourses* has been preserved, full of his punctilious annotations, one can be certain that he encountered the following passage from Discourse VIII, which was originally presented in December 1778, less than a year before Blake commenced his instruction at the Academy:

Poetry operates by raising our curiosity, engaging the mind by degrees to take an interest in the event, keeping that event suspended, and surprising at last with an unexpected catastrophe.

The Painter’s art is more confined, and has nothing that corresponds with, or perhaps is equivalent to, this power and advantage of leading the mind on, till attention is totally engaged. What is done by Painting, must be done at one blow; curiosity has received at once all the satisfaction it can ever have. (205)

Moreover, Reynolds believes that the temporal advantage of poetry, “engaging the mind by degrees” rather than “at one blow,” qualifies it as the more expressive art form: “Poetry having a more extensive power than our art [painting], exerts its influence over almost all the passions.” Rather than Lessing, Reynolds’ wording resembles more the arguments of Harris’s *Discourse*, Home’s *Elements* and, as Blake himself points out, Burke’s *Enquiry*.³⁷ Nevertheless, as suggested earlier in this chapter, these points are hardly inconsistent with Lessing’s thesis; and if Blake indeed knew something of the *Laocoön* through Fuseli, then his reading of Barry and Reynolds, not to mention the other critics mentioned above, would at the very least have familiarized him with the terms of the debate, as well as demonstrating the extent of Lessing’s influence. One question therefore remains: if Blake conceived the *Laocoön* plate in part as a tacit response to Lessing, in the words of Wright “annotating an absent debate” (15), then what does it reveal about his attitude towards the sister-arts tradition?

Wright offers a compelling interpretation of the plate as a protest against the customary opposition of painting and poetry as distinct, mutually exclusive media whose respective subject matter is delimited by temporal-spatial decorum, calling it a “work of daredevilry ... Blake’s cocky demonstration that he can exceed the limitations of painting and poetry delineated by Lessing” (15). Above all, he challenges the assumption that the medium of language is abstract and sequential, rather than figural and spatial, by dismantling the conventional linear arrangement of words and confounding habitual ways of reading, thereby accentuating the substantiality and spatial presence of written text. As Wright explains, “the linear, orderly structure of verbal media ... is undone in the engraving, as Blake instead gives

³⁷ On the verso of the title page for *Discourse VIII* Blake has written, “Burke’s *Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful* is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke on this *Treatise* Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions” (Annotations 660).

shape to his pieces of text, by bending them in arcs, horseshoes, trapeziums, and even a question mark ... and by fitting them into the interstices left between his drawing of the statue and the borders of the plate,” while at the same time, “as an entity to be read, [it] shatters sequence as well as completion ... defies the reader to read all of the words and be sure that all are read, to read all of the words and be sure that the grammatical units are all discerned.” Indeed, this argument makes a good deal of sense: everywhere one turns in Blake’s illuminated books the manuscript boasts a certain palpable quality, with practically every word writhing and seething on the page as if still recoiling from the corrosives that etched them, sometimes sprouting into tendrillous vegetable forms, sometimes diminishing into illegibly minute vermiform squiggles; while on the other hand, Blake’s drawing technique engenders unusual hyper-stylized figures, more abstract than natural, at times resembling a kind of graphematic algorithm that one could perchance decipher but for the want of its maker’s key. We must, however, be careful not to pursue this point too far; for in spite of the ingeniousness of Blake’s radical approach to composition and plate design, and his undermining of the categorical generic distinctions that funded the sister-arts tradition, we are still after all looking at images and texts that require very different interpretive strategies of the reader. Blake may have stretched his graphic and linguistic media to their limits—much farther, certainly, than any other artist or writer of his time—yet in order to avail ourselves of the full meaning of his prophecies, we must still *read* as well as *look*; and the act of doing both at once is sufficient to redress the bifurcated aesthetic paradigm of his contemporaries.

W. J. T. Mitchell perhaps explains this best. He agrees with Wright that “Blake would probably not have been impressed by Lessing’s attack on the excesses of *ut pictura poesis*, because it only tried to reaffirm the obvious differences between the sister arts rather

than to discover a new basis for their unification” (34); but whereas for Wright, Blake’s answer was to elide these differences, endowing text with a degree of organic presence and transforming figures into abstract symbols, Mitchell contends that Blake implicitly acknowledges the spatial-temporal limits of his media, but that in combining images with texts in the illuminated books he reveals the two arts to be reciprocal rather than inimical or antithetical. In other words, he does not regard painting and poetry as rivalrous sisters vying for some perceived aesthetic advantage, but rather as two complementary aspects of a unified entity, a “composite art,”³⁸ that promotes what he considers as the most legitimate and consequential mode of imaginative expression humanly possible: prophetic vision.

In the prophetic books Blake’s poetry, though characteristically elliptical and nonlinear, remains principally dramatic nonetheless (20), relating the actions and mental status of his impetuous protagonists as they fall into division and internecine strife, and then gradually progress towards reconciliation and reunification. He describes extraordinary acts, and the intense passions motivating them, but hardly ever does he engage in description to achieve mere pictorial effects, as was commonplace in Augustan and Romantic poetry. As Mitchell observes, “he rarely describes his personae in visual terms” (23), and “his settings never become the subject of the poem, and are never treated as if they were independent of the human theme [he] is dramatizing” (21). Nor did he show much “interest in attempting to construct his [visual] compositions as narrative texts” (25). While Blake’s designs frequently display more passion than either Winckelmann or Lessing would have deemed permissible, they nevertheless provide an abundance of visual detail often lacking in the poetry. In the margins and interstices of the text his mythical, phantasmagoric beings assume a recognizably human form; he delineates their gestures, their posture and facial expression, as

³⁸ Mitchell borrows the term “composite art” from Jean Hagstrum’s 1964 book *William Blake: Poet and Painter*.

well as their positions relative to one another in space, sometimes within naturalistic settings that seem incongruous with the violently fluxile world described in the poetry. These images are therefore more than mere illustrations supporting Blake's diffuse eschatological narratives; they comprise an integral part of the prophetic book, augmenting rather than supplementing the poetry, forming a unified whole greater than the sum of each of its parts. Just as one cannot by looking at the images alone form a sequence reconstructing the events of the poem, or even come close, so does one lose much of the substance of Blake's vision by reading a type-set transcript of the poem without consulting the illuminations.

The illustration of these points will be taken up in subsequent chapters that deal more adroitly with specific images and passages from the illuminated books. For now it is enough simply to recognize the synthetic function of Blake's composite art. In the *Laocoön* plate, he is not so much undermining or deconstructing Lessing's distinction between painting and poetry as he is demonstrating the possibility of transcending their opposition, just as the protagonists of his prophecies seek to overcome the binary divisions of space and time, soul and body, male and female, and thus to restore the fallen world of mortal existence to its original divine unity. But if this is true, then there must be a greater relationship between the text of the plate and the image of Laocoön and his sons than has hitherto been recognized by Blake's critics. Indeed, something would get lost if one were to consider one without the other, or perceive their relationship as adversarial rather than complementary. What then is the nature of this relationship? How should the *Laocoön*, both as an art object and as an expressive figure, influence interpretation of the text enclosing him, and what impact does the text have upon interpretation of the *Laocoön*? The answers to these questions will be addressed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO:

Excavating William Blake's *Laocoön* Plate

(II.)

Critiquing the ANTIQUE

Containing an appraisal of the Laocoön sculpture's cultural value for the warring nations of England and France, and how Blake's commercial employment augmented that capital; an analysis of Blake's Hebraicism and revisionist critique of Hellenic culture in his treatment of the Laocoön subject, and how this informed his views on Anglo-French imperialism and commercial culture, linked by him to the original fall of Jehovah and the creation of Adam and Satan.

Unlike most of his artist friends, Blake lacked the personal connections and financial resources that would have permitted him to travel to the Continent to study the monuments of antiquity and the Renaissance Masters.¹ Denied this important rite of passage and all the opportunities and advantages it could afford, Blake had to rely instead on prints and plaster casts brought back to London by those fortunate enough to have made the Tour. In the late 1760s, James Barry—one of only a few contemporary painters highly respected by Blake—embarked on an ambitious and artistically formative tour of the major cultural centers of Italy under the auspices of Edmund Burke. While in Rome he arranged to have gesso casts made of the *Laocoön* group, along with several other preeminent works of antiquity. They were packed in four large cases and shipped back to London,² arriving in the autumn of 1770, and shortly thereafter installed in the refurbished Royal Academy rooms at Somerset House.

Yet another *Laocoön* cast was acquired by the Academy in 1801 following the death of George Romney, a gifted and widely respected, yet professionally embittered, society painter who throughout his career kept aloof from the Academy and Reynolds' circle. In the early 1790s he wrote a letter to the sculptor John Flaxman in Rome expressing his dissatisfaction with his own draftsmanship and requesting his friend to purchase antique casts

¹ A “good and kind friend” and early patron of Blake, John Hawkins tried and failed to raise a subscription to finance Blake’s Grand Tour in 1784.

² Some of the details of this important transaction are recorded in a series of letters exchanged between Barry and William and Edmund Burke during the period 1769-71. In a letter dated April 8, 1769, Barry proclaims his ambition of “forming myself for a history painter,” and emphasizes, “the prosecution of my plan depends more on the antique than it does on any thing else” (1: 159). Apparently broke and embittered by a fiercely competitive art market in Rome, he proceeds with an urgent request for a stipend to finance the casts: “A general belonging to the empress of Russia [Catherine II], has had several of the great antiques moulded off, to send to Russia. Now, for about eight pounds, I can get fresh good casts of several heads, torsos, feet, &c. that would be of the last importance to me when I get home.” The Russian general was Count Kirill Grigoriewitsch Razumovsky who arrived in Rome the same year as Barry (1766). Razumovsky is the subject of an exceptional portrait by Pompeo Batoni in which the cultured statesman is shown posing with several pieces of antique sculpture, including the *Laocoön* (**fig. 2-1**).

for his studio in Cavendish Square: “two statues of muscular figures would be of more use to me than the Apollo as I find myself very deficient in the knowledge of that kind of muscular character which is ... of so much use in Historical Pictures” (qtd. in Dixon 212). Romney forwarded 100 pounds for Flaxman to purchase and transport back to England dozens of casts, including the *Laocoön*, which he received in two separate shipments between 1792-94. He was delighted with his acquisitions, boasting to William Hayley of having now “one of the finest Museums in London for antique sculpture,” and, more seriously, expressing his desire of one day “forming a domestic academy, and of proving a beneficent foster-father to juvenile artists.” Had he succeeded in forming such a school, independent of the Royal Academy, he might have lived the remainder of his days with some measure of happiness and prosperity. As it was, upon his death in 1801, the very man who had originally acquired the casts for Romney in Rome now was dispatched to purchase them at auction for the Royal Academy collection (Dixon 216) where they served an important dual purpose as instructional models for fledgling students and, more symbolically, as positive confirmation of the Academy’s cultural legitimacy.

In Henry Singleton’s 1795 group portrait of the Royal Academicians—forty in all— assembled in their council chamber (**fig. 2-2**), the *Laocoön* cast has an overbearing presence, elevated above the gathering of artists and blocking their view of the self-portrait of the Academy’s late President, Joshua Reynolds, which hangs on the wall behind it. The *Laocoön* is the most visible, dramatically illuminated set piece in an otherwise pedestrian genre scene. Standing at its base are the painters John Opie, Richard Westall, and Blake’s friend Henry Fuseli, who perhaps admired the sculpture more than any other.³ (James Barry appears seated in the foreground to the left of the Academy’s treasurer, the architect Sir William

³ Fuseli’s views on the *Laocoön* will be taken up in the following chapter.

Chambers, who had recently overseen the extensive renovations to Somerset House). Life-size copies of the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Borghese Gladiator*, the *Capitoline Venus*, and the *Belvedere Torso* appear as well, spread throughout the crowded room, adding additional cultural freight to a painting that was obviously intended as a declaration of the Academy's foundational commitment to reforming British taste and establishing a native arts tradition to rival that of France.

This cultural rivalry, exacerbated by continual warfare between the two countries, began in earnest with the writings of Jean-Baptiste Dubos, who, besides writing extensively on the arts, was a propagandist for the French regime during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14).⁴ In the *Réflexions* he argues that while the English excel in poetry and music, the northern climate is inhospitable to the development of a native visual arts tradition: “Le climat d’Angleterre ... n’a point produit de peintres qui tiennent parmi les peintres célèbres le même rang que les philosophes, les sçavans, les poètes, et les autres anglois illustres tiennent parmi ceux des autres nations qui se sont distinguez dans la même profession qu’eux” (2: 153). Another Frenchman, André Rouquet, says much the same thing in his unflattering report on *The Present State of the Arts in England*, published in 1755 in separate French and English editions, as does Winckelmann in the *History*.⁵ Such remarks, coming from some of the most esteemed intellectuals in Europe, must have been mortifying to British artists, who doubtless felt increasing pressure to provide cultural justification for

⁴ In 1703 he published *Les Intérêts de l’Angleterre mal entendus dans la guerre présente*.

⁵ Winckelmann comments on the “lack of painters among the English” (123), which he too blames on an uncongenial climate. Even poetry suffers by comparison with that of the more temperate regions of Greece and Italy. “In Homer,” he writes, “everything is painted, or conceived and imagined for painting”; while the “descriptions” of England’s most famous epic poet, by contrast, are “like beautifully painted Gorgons, all alike and equally frightful” (122). “The astonishing, sometimes fearful images in which Milton’s greatness resides cannot be the subject of a noble brush and are altogether unsuited to painting.”

their country's military victories over France; for them to concede French superiority in the arts would have meant scarcely less humiliation than defeat on the field of battle. The figure of the *Laocoön* confronting death came to symbolize the nationalist aspirations of both countries, as well as their mutual strife, with British artists struggling to escape the grip of French influence, just as the French were anxious to preserve their dignity in the face of British military and commercial dominance. In the process both sides sought in different ways to claim the sculpture as a token of cultural supremacy.

This desire is manifested in a painting by the Italian landscapist Giovanni Paolo Panini, titled *An Imaginary Gallery of Roman Art* (**fig. 2-3**), commissioned by the Duc de Choiseul in 1756 at the outbreak of the Seven Years' War. De Choiseul was the French ambassador to Rome, and he would later negotiate the Treaty of Paris ending the war with England. The painting depicts a palatial Baroque gallery hung floor to ceiling with Panini's own paintings of postcard views of famous Roman ruins. The artist himself, holding a palette, poses before one of his latest canvases, presumably in the company of the Duc de Choiseul, himself, and possibly Jean-Jacques Bathélemy, who edited and translated classical texts for the comte de Caylus' *Recueil d'antiquités*. A pair of art young art students, presumably of the French Academy in Rome, sit in the foreground contemplating the dizzying array of art treasures around them. The painting functions in much the same way as Singleton's portrait of the Royal Academicians: it is a testament to the cultural viability of the modern nation-state by association with the great civilizations of the past. As Albert Boime remarks, the painting's theatrical "obsessiveness with the totality of antiquity hints at the perceived relationship between the exercise of political power and the trappings of classical antiquity" (153). Three of the five sculptures depicted in Singleton's painting appear also in Panini's: the *Borghese Gladiator*, the *Apollo Belvedere* and, foremost among

them, the *Laocoön* group, placed at the right edge of the canvas, opposite the *Farnese Hercules*.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the culture war between England and France continued in the theater of print, with connoisseurs and scholars from both countries going to great lengths and spending exorbitant sums to produce sumptuous, folio-size encyclopedias and catalogs of private collections. In France, Bernard de Montfaucon published *L'Antiqué expliquée*, translated into English by David Humphreys and published in 1725 as *Antiquity Explained*; while in England, Joseph Spence's *Polymetis* (1747) similarly proposed to extrapolate parallels between classical literature and art. The comte de Caylus, a French aristocrat of ancient lineage who "detested the rococo as a sign of decadence and French weakness," sought almost single handedly to "reinststate antiquity into the royal household" (Boime 110), to which end he published the seven-volume *Recueil d'antiquités* (1752-1767). The project was originally conceived as a catalog of his extensive private collection, a portion of which is depicted in a vignette on the title page of the first volume (**fig. 2-4**).⁶ Before the final volume of the *Recueil* went to press, William Hamilton, a British diplomat residing in Naples, published his four-volume *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities* (1766-7), which he dedicated to George III, with a bilingual text written, ironically enough, by a Frenchman named Pierre-François Hugues, but better known as D'Hancarville.⁷

⁶ Caylus's mania for antiquities is well documented by Boime, who states that his collection "extended to two houses and as many uncrated boxes as his storehouses could hold" (147).

⁷ D'Hancarville is shown seated across from Charles Towneley in a painting by Johann Zoffany (**fig. 2-5**), a German-born Royal Academician who later gained notoriety for depicting the "horrors" of the French Revolution. The painting is as much an inventory as it is a group portrait. Bequeathed to the British Museum in 1809, Towneley's collection was nearly as extensive as that of his French rival Caylus. Standing directly behind D'Hancarville is Hamilton's nephew, Charles Greville.

Although conceived partly as a commercial venture (the catalog was used to promote the sale of his collection in the early 1770s), the engraved dedicatory page (**fig. 2-6**) perfectly illustrates the identification of Greco-Roman culture with British imperial hegemony: the dedication itself is written in Latin, inscribed on a marble stele overgrown with leafy Mediterranean flora; leaning against the stele is a Roman *fasces*, symbolizing the authority of his royal highness, and in the right foreground a Greek vase.

Blake was likely familiar with all these works, and at some point probably saw the engraving of the *Laocoön* group in *L'Antiqué expliquée* (**fig. 2-7**);⁸ but two other French publications merit close attention for their greater relevance to Blake's handling of the *Laocoön* subject. The first is *Les Monumens antiques du Musée Napoléon* (1804), a catalog of the classical sculpture plundered during Bonaparte's Italian campaign and brought back to Paris in 1798. The engravings for the catalog, including a reproduction of the *Laocoön* (**fig. 2-9**), were executed by Tommaso Piroli, an Italian with artistic connections to Blake's circle. Today, he is perhaps most remembered for his collaboration with Flaxman, engraving the latter's drawings illustrating the works of Homer (1793), Dante (1793), and Aeschylus (1795), the publication of which helped to secure Flaxman's Continental reputation as Britain's preeminent neoclassical designer.⁹ Piroli's plates for the *Monumens antiques* are done in the same style as Flaxman's spare outline designs, and are not much different from Blake's own commercial engravings of antique statues, though this certainly was not Blake's

⁸ Mention should also be made of Jan de Bisschop's *Signorum Veterum Icones* (1668-69), which contains several plates illustrating the *Laocoön* (**fig. 2-8**). Reynolds owned a copy, and in his farewell lecture of 1790 the retiring President remarked on the popularity of "Bishop's Ancient Statues," which could be found "in every young Artist's hand" (327).

⁹ Blake engraved 3 additional designs for Longman's 1805 edition of Flaxman's *Iliad* suite, and between 1814-17 provided all 37 plates for the *Hesiod*.

method of choice.¹⁰ As for Blake's thoughts on Napoleon and the pillage of Europe's art masterpieces, that is a subject to which we will return later in this chapter.

Perhaps of more immediate concern than Piroli's *Monumens antiques* is the *Encyclopédie*, an enormous project, undertaken by the leading intellectuals of France, intended in part to demonstrate to the rest of Europe their nation's commitment to advancing the Enlightenment ideals of industry and progress. Among other things, it contains the article on "design," with Defehrt's engraving of the *Laocoön* discussed in the previous chapter (fig. 1-12). Not to be outdone, the British followed with their own *Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* (1802-20), under the general editorship of Abraham Rees. In 1815 Flaxman approached Rees about hiring Blake to design and engrave the illustrations for his entries (printed anonymously) on "basso relievo" (1804) and "sculpture" (1816), and may even have presented him with proof sheets of Blake's *Hesiod* engravings, which had been commissioned by the *Cyclopaedia's* publisher, Longman, the previous year. Flaxman apparently had no trouble persuading Rees, and Blake got the job. To complete the commission he executed several drawings of the *Laocoön* (**fig. 2-10**), copied from the Royal Academy casts,¹¹ an event later remarked upon by Frederick Tatham and Seymour Kirkup, both of whom happened to be engaged in the sculpture gallery at the same

¹⁰ The outline method was preferred by publishers anxious to reduce printing expenses. According to Boime, Flaxman may have found inspiration for his designs in Wilhelm Tischbein's plates for Hamilton's *Collection of Engravings from Ancient Vases* (1791-95), the sequel to his original *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities*, and "the first major archaeological publication to be illustrated almost entirely by simple line engravings" (379). Hamilton urged the more concise linear style to keep the book affordable.

¹¹ Only one of these drawings is accounted for—a pencil drawing located in the Yale Center for British Art; a second drawing done in pen and ink and sold at auction in 1885 has not as yet been traced. At the bottom of the Yale drawing a pencil inscription by Tatham reads in part, "This drawing was made by W Blake in the Royal Academy Somerset House for a small plate he made of the Laocoon" (Butlin *PD* 679).

time as Blake and witnessed something of his peculiar character and working methods (Bentley *SP* 359).

Blake's engraving of the *Laocoön* (**fig. 2-11**) for the *Cyclopaedia* is technically proficient, but certainly not remarkable, and nothing at all like the revolutionary and inspired relief-etching process that most people associate with his name. Indeed, it is unthinkable that he would have regarded the plate as anything more than commercial hackwork done out of financial necessity, for a project that was in most respects completely antithetical to everything he stood for as a poet and artist; and yet, at the same time, the engraving does provide some significant insight into his thoughts about the sculpture and why it reappears in his more serious, personally motivated work. Above all, it suggests that Blake was especially keen to the sculpture's value as cultural capital; with such an abundance of casts, reduced-scale copies, and engravings of the sculpture in circulation, it inevitably became a potent symbol of a state's cultural advancement, at a time when all of Europe was embroiled in violent competition for global domination. In this context, the aesthetic values and principles of neoclassicism served to legitimize imperial power.¹² Thus, it is not only the banality of the print medium and his employer's narrow expectations that would have frustrated Blake, but also the ideological value assigned to the *Laocoön* by the English and French in their bitter contest for cultural hegemony. Throughout the nineteenth century, Blake sought increasingly to dissociate himself from Anglo-French neoclassicism, a position that was difficult to reconcile with his apparent admiration for Greek art.

¹² Neoclassicism was not monolithic, of course; its influence is no less traceable in the socially progressive, liberal ideology of radical politicians and intellectuals outspoken in their criticism of absolute monarchy and imperial conquest. This "republican classicism" was sustained somewhat longer in America than in Europe, where the spectacular failure of the French Revolution and the ensuing Napoleonic wars prompted the majority of radical-minded artists and writers, including Blake, to turn away from classical civilization as a source of inspiration.

Above all, he was opposed to the principle of mimesis, which he understood as imitation without imagination, addressing itself to the physical senses alone, rather than the innate spirit of human beings. Unlike Addison, Blake took no delight in mere imitation; so far as he was concerned, there was not much point in copying after nature, since visual pleasure was not the legitimate purpose of art. He believed not only that art should instruct, but moreover, that it should instruct in matters beyond the reach of ordinary perceptual knowledge; and that by accepting such instruction, all of humanity might one day achieve redemption, released from the trammels of material existence and saved from the great cataclysm of human history. For Blake, this was to be achieved not through mechanical imitation, but rather through spiritual revelation. In spite of his formal academic training, then, he ultimately rejected the mimetic example of Greek art, which was the foundation of the Grand Manner in painting, in favor of the divinely inspired example of the ancient Israelites, the foundation of prophecy. All these issues are of paramount concern in the *Laocoön* plate (fig. 1-3), which may be regarded as Blake's belated response to his previous work for Rees's *Cyclopaedia*.



One of the more surprising and abstruse claims Blake makes about the *Laocoön* group is that it was not an original Greek conception, but rather was “copied from the Cherubim / of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact or History of Ilium” (*Laocoön* 2-3).¹³ An important clue to his thinking here is an unfinished drawing (**fig. 2-12**) dated by Butlin to the period of Blake's series of Dante drawings (1824-27) (*The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* [PD] 681), making it roughly contemporary with

¹³ Line breaks and numbering follow Essick and Viscomi's transcript of the text for the Princeton edition, although I am reluctant to use line numbers since they imply a uniform order in which the text should be read.

the plate. Although the subject of the drawing seems indisputable enough, the inscription in the left margin identifying it as “The Laocoon” was written not by Blake, but by his executor Frederick Tatham, who also supplied the commentary at the bottom of the 1815 drawing. What is most striking about this image, however, is the extent to which it departs from its classical source. The number and arrangement of the figures remains fairly consistent with the sculpture: a father flanked on either side by his two children, with the three of them caught up in the coils of a pair of giant serpents; however, the sum of Blake’s original details and modifications greatly affects how one interprets the group, on both the aesthetic and narrative level.

In the first place, perhaps most obviously, Blake’s figures appear clothed rather than nude. He attires the father in a kind of robe suggestive of sacerdotal vestments (Laocoön is a priest of Neptune in Virgil, and of Apollo in earlier Greek sources), although his musculature still appears well defined through this close-fitting garment, particularly in the left leg and foot. Despite his powerful physique, however, he conveys little of the sculpture’s energy or pathos: his legs are spread but immobile, and both arms extend above his head in a gesture suggestive more of helpless terror than desperate struggle; while his abdomen exhibits nothing of the other’s violent contraction. To account for these differences, one need only observe that Blake chose to omit the snakebite to Laocoön’s left flank, which according to Goethe is the chief source of the sculpture’s expressive power.¹⁴ Instead Blake depicts the serpents wound tightly about his torso and throat, apparently suffocating him to death; their

¹⁴ In his important article on the sculpture, first published in 1798, Goethe writes: We are amazed at the artists’ wisdom when we try to imagine the bite being inflicted somewhere else. ... I repeat, the location of the bite determines the present movement of the body: the evading motion of its lower part, the contraction of the abdominal muscles, the outward thrust of the chest, the lowering of the shoulder and the head. Even the facial expression is determined by this sudden, painful, unexpected stimulus. (18-20)

crested heads rear up behind him in a symmetrical configuration resembling an elaborate Pharaonic headdress.¹⁵

For their part, both children, like the serpents, are far less finished than their father. They appear to be nude, but Blake's rough pencil outlines, along with a few other suspicious markings,¹⁶ suggest he probably intended to clothe them whenever he took a notion to complete the drawing. The left-hand figure—the younger looking boy in the Vatican group—stands with his back to the viewer, gazing up at his father's dolorous face; while on the other side, his more effeminate, forward-facing sibling confronts the viewer directly with an expression of astonishment and despair. Even though both are trapped in the serpents' deadly coils, neither seems so much concerned about his own fate as that of their father: rather than attempting to free themselves, as in the sculpture, they exert the last of their strength to loosen the serpents' tight hold around his waist. Thus, while Tatham was partially correct in identifying the drawing with the *Laocoön* of Greco-Roman antiquity, this does not go far enough to explain the significance or intent of Blake's alterations.

One important clue lies in the revision of Laocoön's hair and facial features, which appear more conventionally Hebraic than Mediterranean, and many commentators have

¹⁵ Compare these details with Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*:
 Twice round his waist their winding volumes Rowl'd,
 And twice about his gasping Throat they fold.
 The Priest thus doubly choak'd, their crests divide,
 And tarring o're his head, in Triumph ride. (2.286-89)

Blake reacquainted himself with Virgil's poetry around 1819-20, when Linnell's family doctor, Robert Thornton, commissioned Blake to produce a series of woodcut illustrations for the third edition of his *Pastorals of Virgil* (1821). In his annotations to Thornton's translation of *The Lord's Prayer* he thanks (in a sarcastic tone) his former patron for revealing that "Caesar [was] Virgil's Only God" (Marginalia 659). In his plate *On Homers Poetry / On Virgil* (c. 1820) he cites (inaccurately) the *Aeneid*, Book VI.

¹⁶ Encircling the neck of the right-hand figure, a v-shaped line would seem to indicate a collar; while the left-hand figure bears faint evidence of sleeves and a hemline about the ankles.

observed his affinity with Blake's depictions of Biblical figures such as Job or Jehovah, both of whom appear with similar flowing hair and beards in his illustrations to the Book of Job, upon which he happened to be engaged at about the same time.¹⁷ It is therefore likely that the drawing does not represent the Virgilian Laocoön at all, but rather “ אָדָם & his two sons Satan & Adam,” based on a lost Judean prototype that supposedly adorned Solomon's Temple. In his unpublished draft “A Vision of the Last Judgment” (1810), Blake describes “The Nature of my Work” as “Visionary or Imaginative ... an Endeavour to Restore <what the Ancients calld> the Golden Age” (545). Certainly, the “Laocoön” drawing may be regarded as a “restoration” of sorts, Blake's aborted attempt to rectify what he perceived as the egregious deviations and distortions perpetrated by later Greek copyists, namely the “three Rhodians” identified by Pliny as Hagesander, Polydorus, and Athanodoros.

This startling yet intriguing notion that the ancient Greeks copied after lost or destroyed Judean artifacts seems to have developed during the formative years between Blake's exodus to Felpham in 1800 and his solo exhibition and publication of the *Descriptive Catalogue* in 1809. We know, for example, that he studied Hebrew, as well as Greek and Latin, with his friend William Hayley, reading the *Iliad* alongside the Bible.¹⁸ Before that, however, he seems to have read Jacob Bryant's *A New System; or, an Analysis of Antient Mythology* (1774). Not only does he mention Bryant by name in the *Descriptive Catalogue*

¹⁷ In 1821 John Linnell commissioned Blake to copy the series of Job drawings he had made for Thomas Butts a decade or so earlier; then, in 1823 Blake accepted another commission from Linnell to engrave another set of plates illustrating the same subject, based upon his earlier designs, which wouldn't be printed until 1826, a year before his death.

¹⁸ In a letter dated 3 February 1802, Hayley wrote that he and Blake had been reading the *Iliad*, comparing the original Greek with Cowper's English translation (Bentley SP 229). A year later (30 January, 1803), in a letter to his brother, Blake bragged of “learning my Hebrew” (Letters 727).

of 1809 (543), but it is even likely that he engraved at least some of the plates for the *New System* while apprenticed to Basire in the 1770s (Bentley *SP* 66).

An antiquarian with a penchant for painstaking etymological research, Bryant stakes many of his claims on the basic assumption that all ancient civilizations, including the Greeks, were originally descended from the postdeluvian ancestors of Noah: “the Deluge was the grand epocha of every antient kingdom ... the first king in every country was Noah ... a great traveller, a mighty conqueror, and sovereign of the whole earth.” The first Mediterranean civilizations, therefore, practiced monotheism the same as the Hebrews; but over time, through their own ignorance and egotism, they neglected, and eventually forgot, the true religion of their ancestors:

Being much addicted to refinement in their worship, [Egypt and Greece] made many subtile distinctions: and supposing that there were certain emanations of divinity, they affected to particularize each by some title; and to worship the Deity by his attributes. This gave rise to a multiplicity of Gods: for the more curious they were in their disquisitions, the greater was the number of these substitutes ... all which in time were esteemed distinct beings, and gave rise to a most inconsistent system of Polytheism.

The Greeks, Bryant continues, “adopted all foreign history; and supposed it to have been of their own country”; “when colonies made anywhere a settlement, they ingrafted their antecedent history upon the subsequent events of the place,” until the two became so imbricate and confused as to render that original history unintelligible. The “elaborate and strange” mythology advanced by the Greek poets obscured the common ancestry and spiritual unity of the ancient world: “We find the whole, like a grotesque picture, blazoned high, and glaring with colours, and filled with groups of fantastic imagery, such as we see upon an

Indian screen; where the eye is painfully amused; but whence little can be obtained, which is satisfactory, and of service.” The aim of Bryant’s treatise, then, is to lift the “veil [of] allegory” and, by tracing the etymological roots of all pagan deities to a single postdeluvian stem, to affirm the historical veracity of the Old Testament; to “deduce from their own histories many truths, with which they were totally unacquainted, and give to them an original, which they certainly did not know,” so that at last “we may descry the original design, and order, of all those objects, which by length of time, and their own remoteness, have been rendered so confused and uncertain.”¹⁹

Even more relevant to Blake’s *Laocoön* is Bryant’s bold contention, in *A dissertation concerning the War of Troy and the Expedition of the Grecians* (1796), that the *Iliad* of Homer was a fabrication based on “some ancient, and foreign history before him, which he modelled to his own mind” (qtd. in Tayler 78). Citing such ancient authorities as the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras, Bryant argues that Homer’s account of the Trojan War even in ancient times was regarded as “fable ... a mere allegory [that] signified a contention between virtue and vice.” This certainly helps to explain Blake’s assertion that the *Laocoön* sculpture was “copied from the Cherubim / of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact or History of Ilium.” In the Preface to *Milton*, he reinforces this position: “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid ... which all Men ought to condemn: are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible” (1); and again, penciled in his late drawing illustrating Canto 4 of Dante’s *Inferno*: “Homer is the Center of All I mean the Poetry of the Heathen Stolen & Perverted from the Bible not by Chance but by design by the Kings of Persia and their Generals The Greek Heroes & lastly by The Romans”

¹⁹ Compare Bryant’s claim that the deities of polytheism were “originally the same: all from one source” to the argument of Blake’s early tractate *All Religions are One* (c. 1788): “an universal Poetic Genius exists ... [and] The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius” (2).

(Inscriptions 668). But Blake was hardly the only artist with a deep interest in the art of ancient civilizations outside of Greece and Rome. James Barry, for example, wrote extensively on the ancient Judeans in his lectures, praising their artwork in terms generally reserved for the Greeks. A lifelong admirer of Barry, whose outspoken criticism of Reynolds and Academy culture corroborated many of his own artistic convictions, Blake more than likely attended his Academy lectures beginning in 1784, and probably read them with eagerness when they finally appeared in print, posthumously, in 1809.²⁰

Nowhere in his writings, however, does Barry go so far as to imply that ancient Judean culture was superior to that of the Greeks, or that the finest examples of Greek sculpture were mere copies after the divinely inspired designs of Solomon's Temple; on the contrary, he reiterates the standard Enlightenment view that Greek culture in the period between Pericles and Alexander surpassed all that had come before and set the standard for all future civilizations to follow. Because democracy flourished there, as he explains in his inaugural lecture, "the arts were happily relieved on being transplanted into the Grecian Republics, where all those baneful obstructions to their growth and perfection had no influence. Here were no degrading and vile distinctions of tyrants and slaves, which are ever infallibly sure to render both abominable and useless" (1: 364). On this point Barry retreads ground that had already been well covered in Winckelmann's *History*; at the same time, however, he disputes the common assumption that Greek art developed independently of other cultures, rejecting "as fabulous, and as a piece of national vanity a great part of the early accounts of the progressional discovery of the art in Greece" (359). He continues:

As the Assyrians, Egyptians, Phenicians, Persians, and the other oriental nations, had cultivated the arts long before the Greeks, we cannot suppose the latter to have been

²⁰ The same year, coincidentally, as the publication of the *Descriptive Catalogue*.

utter strangers to this previous cultivation of their history: the various knowledges they occasionally received and imported, prove the contrary. ... consequently, when the Greeks commenced painters and sculptors, at least all the rudiments of the art, the knowledge of the materials, and the methods of using them in painting, modelling, carving, and foundery, were already discovered and provided to their hands, by their more ancient neighbors. (358-9)

Even though Barry stops short of pronouncing on the derivativeness of Greek design, the idea of a prolonged artistic commerce between the Mediterranean and the Orient left open for Blake the possibility that Greek artists, besides adopting new materials and techniques, were also actively copying whatever they observed of exceptional quality in the course of their expeditions.

Furthermore, whereas Winckelmann contends that “the Jews did not practice the fine arts” (*HAA* 147), Barry points to biblical evidence that suggests otherwise, describing early Judean culture in such terms as Blake would have found especially compelling. To the tyrannical governance and idolatrous practices of the ancient Egyptians and Persians, “a most dreadful exemplary spectacle of degraded ... human reason,” Barry opposes “the glorious mission of Moses, whose truly sublime doctrine, and admirable polity were so happily calculated to exalt human nature to its destined real dignity, by a just emancipation from all other dependence than that on its Divine Creator, and the just and equal laws” (355). Whereas “impious tyrants” like Nebuchadnezzar (an exemplary evildoer for both Barry and Blake) sought to consolidate their power, discipline their subjects, and expand their territorial claims, in part by “the making of ... idols, and placing them in lieu of Almighty God, as divine objects for adoration,” the “grand object” of the Israelites, guided by Moses, was “the removing and fulminating this degrading and mischievous mass of slavish idolatry, which

had been so impiously placed between human nature, and its Almighty Creator, Conservator, and Judge” (356). According to Barry, the manufacture of idols was fundamentally a labor of mimesis; and their makers, acquiescing to the demands of corrupt despots and priests, could not but fail to attain that magnitude of artistic glory reserved for enlightened, democratic civilizations. Without the advantages of liberty, deprived of “every right of equal, common humanity, mental and corporeal,” these artisans labored mechanically, fabricating mere images rather than inspired art. They became proficient at copying “the likeness of any thing celestial, terrestrial, or aquatic,” but lacked the inner-vision Barry believes necessary to attain the truly divine. Their greatest accomplishments therefore amount only to “a continued allegory ... where nothing was shewn for itself, but as the symbol and type of some other thing; a practice that must soon be in opposition, and even in direct contradiction to the very essence and destination of art.”

The artistic achievements of the Israelites, by contrast, were not predicated on mimetic likeness, but rather on divine inspiration; their great works were supposedly derived from visionary rather than perceptual experiences. They turned away from the treacherous appearances of fallible nature, striving instead for a pure, spiritual beauty that lay beyond the reach of vulgar humanity. Barry specifically mentions Hiram’s “brass figures of lions, and the twelve oxen cast in the clayey soil near Jordan” (357); the finely wrought “Cherubims” that adorned the Tabernacle and later Solomon’s Temple; and the twin cherubim of Bezaleel and Aholiah, “spreading their wings over the ark of the covenant.”²¹ Of course, nothing remains of these splendid works (plundered or obliterated by Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth

²¹ For the construction and decoration of the Temple and Solomon’s palace see 1 Kings 5-7; for that of the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant, Exodus 35-39. Of Bezaleel, Moses proclaims the Lord “has filled him with the spirit of God, making him skilful and ingenious, expert in every craft, and a master of design” (35:31-32).

century BC), while by the end of the eighteenth century the pagan idols of Egypt and Persia abounded in British repositories and private collections.²² The irony of Barry's argument is that the virtues of Judean art can only be ascertained indirectly through the biblical record: one can but *imagine* how these objects and structures might have appeared, which is precisely what Blake sought to demonstrate with the "Laocoön" drawing.

Besides the influence of Barry's lectures, Blake's revisionist theories also received affirmation and encouragement through his friend Flaxman, who in 1810 was elected as the Royal Academy's first ever professor of sculpture. Like Winckelmann before him, Flaxman mistakenly attributed the Vatican *Laocoön* to the Rhodian sculptors identified by Pliny,²³ believing it had been pillaged and brought back to Rome by Lucius Mummius during the Achaean War (146 BC), eventually coming to rest in the *thermae* of the emperor Titus towards the end of the first century AD. Nowhere in his published writings, however, does he raise the possibility of a Judean connection; but he does agree with Barry that the origins of Greek sculpture can be traced to Oriental cultures. He recognizes, for example, an unmistakable resemblance between early Mycenaean sculpture and that of Egypt during the New Kingdom, attributable to the well-documented commercial and cultural exchanges between them:

from the Greeks residing with [the Egyptians] to study theology, philosophy, and science,—from the great intercourse, political and commercial, between the two countries from the heroic times,—from the Greeks being long settled in the city of

²² Sir Ralph Abercromby's defeat of Napoleon's forces at Alexandria made possible the seizure of a large quantity of Egyptian artifacts that was eventually installed in the British Museum in 1809, at the same time as the Elgin marbles and the Towneley collection.

²³ Scholarly consensus today is that it is not the original but a later Roman copy.

Naucratis and other parts of Egypt, we may fairly conclude their communication in arts was just as free as in other concerns ... (59)

In his lecture on “Ancient Art” (delivered before the Royal Academy in 1810 but unpublished in Blake’s lifetime) he further remarks on this resemblance, observing that the similarities are such that “we cannot resist the testimony of those writers which inform us [the Greeks] received sculpture from that people” (217). But he also reiterates Barry’s point that the excellence of Greek art beginning in the sixth century BC coincided with a period of military supremacy (87), as demonstrated with their recent victories over the Persians, and with their repudiation of the idolatry and despotic rule that still benighted the civilizations across the sea. “The sculpture of Greece,” he contends, “was equally rude with that of their barbarous neighbours, until they had excelled them in the advancement of knowledge, the improvement of science, and the establishment of political institutions” (217). Thus, while Flaxman accounts for the derivativeness of early Greek sculpture, he makes no allowance for the possibility that post-Periclesian works like the *Laocoön* were copied after Hebrew originals of equal or greater beauty; on the contrary, he believes it was the originality of the Greeks which inspired foreign imitators. “Whatever traces of grandeur or beauty” one observes in Eastern art he pronounces to be nothing more than “pillage and transfer from ancient Greece” (140). However, Flaxman’s harsh judgment of Oriental cultures does not fit well with his commentary elsewhere on Judean art.

In his “Introductory Lecture,” written some time after 1815, he contrasts the “corruptions of systems” that obstructed the development of art in Egypt and Assyria with the divinely inspired culture of Judea, whose artists, once liberated from their pagan oppressors,

created “wonders to enlighten a darkened world” (30).²⁴ While their benighted neighbors persisted in their “violent tendency to idolatry,” Flaxman believes the Israelites were inspired by God himself, who “commanded statues of cherubim to extend their wings over the Ark of the Covenant, and that the veil of the tabernacle should be adorned with cherubim” (54); and it was this “divine command” which produced also the “glories of Solomon’s Temple, and that raised after the captivity, with all their beauty and splendour” (55). Beholden only to God, Judean artists were virtual priests, “handmaids of religion,” and Flaxman ranks Aholiab and Bezaleel among the great artists of antiquity. What is curious, however, is that, like Barry, he conveniently elides the fact that Aholiab and Bezaleel preceded the Golden Age of Athens by perhaps as much as a thousand years, and the possibility that the Greeks had encountered Judean art prior to the sack of Solomon’s Temple in the sixth century. But Blake certainly knew and must have disapproved of the historical and archaeological legerdemain perpetrated by Flaxman and Barry in order to preserve the integrity and genius of Greek art—and by implication British art as well—as evidenced by his identification of the *Laocoön* group as a Rhodian copy of a divinely inspired Judean prototype.

The unfinished “Laocoön” drawing is Blake’s attempt to render that lost prototype, which cannot be said to illustrate the well known episode from the *Aeneid*, but rather one from the Old Testament—quite possibly Numbers 21:6, where it is told how the wandering

²⁴ It is not insignificant that these passages also appear in Flaxman’s article on “Sculpture” for Rees’ *Cyclopaedia*, illustrated by Blake. It seems likely that the entry and the lecture were composed at about the same time, since in the latter Flaxman refers to the defeat of France and the recent restoration of the Vatican sculptures. The relationship between liberty and inspiration is explored further in the *Cyclopaedia* entry, quoted here from Paley’s essay “‘Wonderful Originals’—Blake and Ancient Sculpture”:

And the necessity of such inspired sculptures and other inspired works of art is explained sufficiently in the deliverance of Israel from the idolatry of Egypt. ... The Hebrew being born a slave, continued so under the Egyptian yoke, let his inspiration be what it would, he was compelled to work in making bricks and in iron-furnaces. Such was the deliverance of art and science from destruction, and the earth from returning to its primeval chaos. (183)

Israelites, exhausted and impatient, came to doubt the wisdom and authority of Moses, and how the Lord in his displeasure “sent venomous snakes among them, and they bit the Israelites so that many of them died.” Recognizing their error, the Israelites beseeched Moses for mercy and forgiveness, and God instructed him to cast a serpent in bronze “and erect it as a standard, so that anyone who had been bitten could look at it and recover” (8-9). If the “Laocoön” drawing illustrates God’s punishment of the doubtful Israelites, as it may have been depicted in the First Temple, it would not have been the first time that Blake made the biblical story the subject of his art.

Between the years 1800 and 1803 he executed the watercolor *Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent* as part of the massive series of biblical pictures commissioned by Thomas Butts. In this rather disturbing picture (**fig. 2-13**), Blake presents a group of figures, including several children, perishing in the coils of gigantic venom-spitting snakes. In the foreground stands a bearded man gazing upon the massive *Nehushtan* erected by Moses, while the snake that moments before had threatened such a painful end to his existence now hangs lifelessly from his shoulder, its crested head dragging in the dust behind him. On either side stand his two daughters with their heads penitently lowered, and the three of them together bear a striking resemblance to Blake’s later “Laocoön” drawing, in which the child at the right, contrary to the sculpture, does seem to exhibit several female—or at least ambiguous—sex characteristics. Regardless of whether one accepts this hypothesis, or Blake’s identification of the three figures in the plate as “ג & his two sons Satan & Adam,” the question yet remains, on what basis could Blake claim such a familiar knowledge of works which no one had seen for over two thousand years, and of which the only surviving record was a few brief passages in the Bible? The best answer to this question is to be found

in the *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809, published on the occasion of Blake's ill-fated exhibition in his brother William's London haberdashery.



Part polemic, part manifesto, and part self-promotion, the *Descriptive Catalogue*, along with the unprinted commentary for his picture of *The Last Judgment*, is perhaps the clearest, most succinct statement we have of Blake's later attitudes toward art and his perceptions of himself as an artist. Among the recurrent themes of the catalog is Blake's insistence on distinguishing between imitation, or mimesis, and "inspiration": while the former is accomplished through the deliberate, rational study of the external world of nature, the latter is an interior, imaginative process whereby the poet or artist represents only what appears to him in the form of ecstatic visions beyond his conscious control. Inspiration is "Self Evident Truth" (610), "Innate Ideas ... in Every Man Born with him" (637), as opposed to "Rational Truth" that is the "result of Reasoning" (Marginalia 610). While rational truth is acquired through sensory experience, inspiration is "the gift of God ... and cannot be surpassed; it is perfect and eternal"; "Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists" (VLJ 544). For Blake, then, the true artist is a man of exceptional, even mystical, "Imaginative power" (547), capable of seeing and revealing to ordinary men that which cannot be perceived by the senses alone. Only one gifted with such clairvoyance would be capable of seeing artworks that disappeared from the face of the earth thousands of years ago.

One such prophetic man was Emanuel Swedenborg, whom Blake mentions by name in the catalog entry for his untraced painting "The spiritual Preceptor." He describes Swedenborg's prodigious corpus of theological writings as "visionary," the "foundations for grand things" and "well worthy the attention of Painters and Poets" (546). To this superlative

example, Blake contrasts the “Unworthy” productions of art’s “corporeal demons”—namely Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Correggio—painters of unmerited fame and incorrigible influence who privileged earthly color and fleshly beauty over the firm linearity of eternal forms, and thus “shut the doors of mind and of thought, by placing Learning above Inspiration.”²⁵ In his entry for “The Bard, from Gray,” Blake complains of the mimetic limitations imposed on painting, while the very best poetry “exists and exults in immortal thoughts” (541). The mediocrity of British art he traces to “the sordid drudgery of facsimile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances”; and yet he also believes it can be “elevated into its own proper sphere of invention and visionary conception,” so long as there remain determined and capable artists like himself and a sympathetic and munificent public eager to support them.

Unfortunately for Blake, as for Barry, Romney and Fuseli before him, the problem was cultivating a broad public interest in his grand and eccentric conceptions, especially given the increasingly staid and conservative cultural climate precipitated by the Napoleonic Wars and the draconian administration of Prime Minister Pitt. But Blake was apparently convinced that his previous productions had been spurned and ridiculed on the grounds that he employed a “mode of representing spirits with real bodies” (541) in violation of conventional mimetic propriety; while “modern philosophy” (i.e. empiricism) conceived of spirits as “a cloudy vapour or a nothing,” Blake protests that the Old Testament prophets “describe what they saw in Vision as real and existing men whom they saw with their

²⁵ Blake’s demonology would also have included Reynolds and his “Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves” (Marginalia 636): “Such Artists as Reynolds, are at all times Hired by the Satan’s” (631). In his private writings, Blake often associates Reynolds with the aforementioned Baroque painters (Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Correggio) on stylistic and technical grounds, but Reynolds’ celebrity and acclaim prevented Blake from mentioning him by name in a commercial enterprise intended to appeal to “the Rich and those who have the direction of public Works” (“Advertisement of the Exhibition” 527).

imaginative and immortal organs; the Apostles the same.” For Blake, then, the inspired artist is a prophet of sorts; he can imagine forms “more perfect and more minutely organized than any thing seen by his mortal eye” (541-2), which is precisely what distinguishes him from the scientist or philosopher. “He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see does not imagine at all” (541). Throughout his poetry, Blake opposes “grandeur of Inspiration” to “Rational Demonstration” (*Milton* 41.2-3). In painting the Sistine ceiling, with his face turned towards the heavens, Michelangelo approached closer to “what Eternally Exists” (*VLJ* 544) than did Newton with his compass, bent over the “Vegetable Glass of Nature” (**fig. 2-14**);²⁶ or Reynolds, who dismisses the notion of “inspiration” as “a kind of magick” (152) that has nothing to do with “genius,” which he says can only be acquired through “close observation and experience” (155); or Wordsworth, who in the Preface to his 1815 *Poems* similarly maintains that among the “powers requisite for the production of poetry are ... Observation and Description” (qtd. in *Marginalia* 654).²⁷ For Blake, inspiration requires “Spiritual Perception” rather than “close observation” (*Marginalia* 648). Art transcends “Mortal & Perishing Nature”; it is the vehicle of divine wisdom, while “Newtonian Philosophy ... is Atheism” (649).

²⁶ Because of their philosophical materialism, Newton, Bacon, and Locke comprise Blake’s infernal triumvirate of “Vegetative & Generative Nature” (*VLJ* 545), or “Satans Kingdom” (*Marginalia* 609), as described in *Jerusalem*:

... Bacon, Newton, Locke,
Deny a Conscience in Man & the Communion of Saints & Angels
Contemning the Divine Vision & Fruition, Worshiping the Deus
Of the Heathen, The God of This World, & the Goddess Nature
Mystery Babylon the Great, The Druid Dragon & hidden Harlot ... (93.21-5)

²⁷ Blake recorded his opinion of Wordsworth in his copy of *Poems*, concluding that Wordsworth represents “the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man ... he is No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration” (*Marginalia* 654).

Blake even takes the highly unorthodox step of attributing the great works of antiquity to divine inspiration, rather than to the selective observation and imitation of nature: “the Venus, the Minerva, the Jupiter, the Apollo ... are all of them representations of spiritual existences of God’s immortal, to the mortal perishing organ of sight; and yet they are embodied and organized in solid marble” (*DC* 541); and in his catalog entry for “The Ancient Britons,” he goes on to include all “the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting, and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian” (544). What these artists had in common, according to Blake, was their recognition of the “eternal principles or characters of human life,” whose “divine names” ultimately transcend the vicissitudes of history and the variable fortunes of their respective civilizations. “The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven,” he continues, “is [sic] no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing as Jacob Bryant, and all antiquaries have proved. ... All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel” (543).²⁸ Thus, Blake would appear to have no problem identifying the “Grecian gods” with the “ancient Cherubim of Phoenicia,”²⁹ save that elsewhere in the *Descriptive Catalogue* he confounds the reader with a completely incongruous assessment of the relationship between Grecian and Judean art.

²⁸ Here Blake applies to art ideas first expressed syllogistically in his earliest experiments in illuminated printing, *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion* (both c. 1788). In the former he observes, “The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call’d the Spirit of Prophecy,” and since “all men are alike (tho’ infinitely various) So all Religions” (1-2). In *There is No Natural Religion* he distinguishes between mimesis and inspiration: “The desires & perceptions of man untaught by any thing but organs of sense, must be limited to objects of sense” (copy [a] 2), while “He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God” (copy [b]). From this Blake deduces, “If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character. the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again” (3).

²⁹ 1 Kings relates how the Phoenicians, under the direction of Hiram of Tyre, contributed materials for the construction of Solomon’s Temple, as well as having a hand in its decoration and ritual objects.

In his catalog entry explaining his “spiritual” portraits of Nelson and Pitt, Blake claims to have witnessed firsthand the lost treasures of ancient Israel. Perhaps recalling the effect produced by his reading of the visionary transports of Swedenborg, Volney, and especially of Milton,³⁰ he recounts being “taken in vision into the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia,” where he was permitted to see “those wonderful originals called in the Sacred Scriptures the Cherubim, which were sculptured and painted on walls of Temples, Towers, Cities, Palaces, and erected in the highly cultivated states of Egypt, Moab, Edom, Aram, among the Rivers of Paradise” (531).³¹ Just as Blake would later pronounce the *Laocoön* group to have been copied after these “stupendous originals,” here he expands the argument to include the *Farnese Hercules*, the *Medici Venus*, the *Apollo Belvedere*, “and all the grand works of ancient art” save for the *Belvedere Torso* (a favorite of Michelangelo and Blake’s artistic allies Barry and Fuseli). Having observed for himself the “superior style” of the ancient Israelites, “terrific and grand in the highest degree,” Blake attests no longer to “believe that the Greek statues ... were the invention of Greek Artists ... but evidently copies, though fine ones, from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs.” It is difficult to reconcile this assessment of the Greeks as inferior copyists with the seemingly unequivocal assertion a few pages later that “The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven is no less sacred than that of the Jews,” and that the Greeks in particular were visionaries who

³⁰ Milton’s *Elegy 5*, “In Adventum Veris,” is particularly relevant:

Apollo himself is approaching ... Already my mind is being borne up into the sheer liquid heights of the sky and, quit of the body, I go through the wandering clouds. I am carried through shadows and grottoes, the secret haunts of the poets; and the innermost shrines of the gods are open to me. My spirit surveys all that is done on Olympus and the unseen infernal world is not impervious to my eyes. What might song is my soul pouring from its full throat? What is to be the offspring of this madness and this sacred ecstasy? (13-22)

³¹ Several of the Temple artifacts described in Exodus 37—the menorah, two altars, the priest’s ephod and breastpiece of judgment—appear in Blake’s tempera *The Angel Gabriel Appearing to Zacharias* (1799-1800), painted for Butts.

succeeded in producing “representations of spiritual existences,” unless one assumes that Blake reserved his highest praise for the sculpture of the Archaic period (1000-500 BC).³²

Further complicating matters is his rather equivocal use of the term “copy,” which can have positive as well as negative connotations in his writings. In the annotations of Reynolds, for example, he observes, “The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good one Really Does Copy a Great Deal” (634); nor does he deny that copying is an essential prerequisite for inspired invention: “for no one can ever Design till he has learn’d the Language of Art by making many Finish’d Copies both of Nature & Art”; “To learn the Language of Art Copy for Ever. Is My Rule” (626). Even though he refutes the *Discourses* on many points, he remarks positively on Reynolds’ claim that “drawing correctly what we see ... give[s] a proportionable power of drawing correctly what we imagine” (Reynolds 86). At the same time, however, he contends that “No Man of Sense can think that an Imitation of the Objects of Nature is The Art of Painting” (PA 566), and “if the Art is no more than this it is no better than any other’s Manual Labour any body may do it & the fool often will do it best as it is a work of no Mind” (567). The “English Artist,” therefore, “is doing an injury & injustice to his Country while he studies & imitates the Effects of Nature” (566); appealing to the senses and vanity of his patrons, he “labors” for profit rather than for the instruction and improvement of “his Country.” Thus, for Blake the “Bad Artist” merely copies nature and art; he relies upon his senses only, and never achieves inspired vision: “He who copies does not Execute he only Imitates what is already Executed Execution is only the result of Invention” (565). The

³² This interpretation is supported by the fact that Blake omits provenancial epithets (i.e. “Farnese,” “Medici,” “Belvedere”) from his list of “spiritual” Greek statues, yet makes sure to include them when describing recognizable works of the Golden Age, for it provided him with a convenient opportunity to identify what he perceived to be the corrupt culture of Papal Rome with the decadence of post-Periclesian Athens.

“Good” artist, by contrast, “invents” in so far as he copies only what is revealed to him through visionary fancy, or imagination, which is direct communion with God, serving all of humanity by conveying the higher truth and wisdom of the spiritual world.

Like Barry and Flaxman, Blake identifies Judean art with original invention, or inspired vision, which is a major theme of the *Laocoön* plate: “Israel deliverd from Egypt / is Art deliverd from / Nature & Imitation” (35-7). Spiritual perception for Blake is synonymous with art, as opposed to “Antichrist Science” (97): “Art is the Tree of Life” and “Science ... the Tree of Death” (100-1). Disdaining transient matter, Judean artists represented only what is “Permanent in The Imagination,” which is “called Sin by the Deist Science” and “Considerd as Nothing by the Natural Man” whose vision is derived from “Generated Organs gone as soon as come” (18-24). “Christianity is Art,” according to Blake, and “The Old & New Testaments are the Great Code of Art” (99-100); “Prayer is the Study of Art / Praise is the Practise of Art” (50-1). “Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists” (96); and no “Man Or Woman” deserves the title of “Christian” who is not first “A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect,” and willing to “leave Fathers & Mothers & Houses & Lands if they stand in the way of Art” (38-40). But if the Judeans and Christians “practiced” art to achieve divine revelation, what then of the Greek sculptors who copied after them? If the *Laocoön* is, as Blake believes, “copied from the Cherubim / of Solomons Temple,” is it a negative example of mimetic imitation, or a positive model of inspired invention?

On the one hand, he states in the *Descriptive Catalogue* that the Greeks rendered “spiritual existences ... embodied and organized in solid marble,” and in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* he identifies the “Ancient Sculptors” with his heroes Raphael and Michelangelo, who, by their extraordinary powers of invention, “cast off” this “World of Generation & death” (552). “Painting and Sculpture as it exists in the remains of antiquity,” he continues,

“is Inspiration, and cannot be surpassed; it is perfect and eternal” (544). When Reynolds remarks in the third *Discourse* that the ancient sculptors, “being indefatigable in the school of nature, have left models of ... perfect form” (107), Blake does not deny that they achieved perfection, but challenges Reynolds’ presumption that they did so by “observing the works of nature ... selecting ... digesting, methodizing, and comparing [their] observations” (105): “All Forms are Perfect,” he replies, “but these are not Abstracted nor Compounded from Nature <but are from Imagination>” (Marginalia 637). In their sculpture, the Greeks repudiated “Accident,” which “ever varies,” and concentrated their imaginative powers on “universal human life” (*DC* 533), rendering eternal “Substance [that] can never suffer change nor decay” (532). Blake offers the *Laocoön* as an exemplary model: since “Art & Science cannot exist but by Naked Beauty displayd” (*Jerusalem* 32.49), “the ancients ... often deviated from the Habits, to preserve the Manners, as in the instance of Laocoon, who, though a priest, is represented naked” (*DC* 548).³³ Such claims about ancient sculpture, and the *Laocoön* in particular, are corroborated, though tenuously, by the text of the plate.

In one of the plate’s lengthier passages, inscribed above the right-hand figure, Blake challenges the atheistic “Spoilers” (i.e. Reynolds) who “Disprove & Contemn Spiritual Perception” (Marginalia 648) and would disavow that the Judeans’ attained “Immediate / Communion with God,” pointing to the absence of any archaeological evidence to suggest otherwise: “Where are his [God’s] Works / That he did in the Wilderness” (*Laocoön* 65-9). But Blake retorts:

³³ Blake believed the Greek sculptors understood that clothing interferes with the representation of “lineaments, or forms and features that are capable of being the receptacles of intellect” (*DC* 544). Throughout his work clothing often symbolizes the perishable tegument of the vegetative body that obscures spiritual form: “The Natural Body is an Obstruction to the Soul or Spiritual Body” (Marginalia 653). In a letter dated August 1799, Blake tells George Cumberland, “I cannot paint Dirty rags & old Shoes where I ought to place Naked Beauty” (703).

Lo what are these
 Whence came they
 These are not the Works
 Of Egypt nor Babylon
 Whose Gods are the Powers
 Of this World. Goddess, Nature.
 Who first spoil & then destroy
 Imaginative Art (70-7)

The plural pronouns “these” and “they” it seems must refer to the figures in the sculpture, suggesting that the Rhodians were indeed inspired and imagined themselves seeing the “stupendous originals” of ancient Judea, just as Blake himself claims to have seen them. At the same time, however, he frequently casts Greek art in a far less favorable light, describing it as being more imitative than inventive. At one point, he flatly contradicts himself and denies that “the Greek statues ... were the invention of Greek artists,” calling them “copies, though fine ones, from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs,” implying that their makers, though admirably skilled, were nevertheless unable to approach anywhere close to “those Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously & professedly Inspired Men” (*Milton* 1).

The reason for this failure, according to Blake, was that the pagan Greeks had no “Communion with God”; they practiced false religion and praised false gods belonging to the world of “Mortal & Perishing Nature” as experienced through the corporeal senses and recorded in history (*Marginalia* 649). Theirs were no different from the gods “Of Egypt nor Babylon / Whose Gods are the Powers / Of this World”; “The Gods of Greece & Egypt were Mathematical / Diagrams” (*Laocoön* 73-5; 59-60). While they may have recognized “the eternal principles or characters of human life,” they perverted their true meaning and

mistakenly “erected them into gods” (*DC* 536), regarding them as distinct entities rather than as the “eternal attributes” of a unified “Divine Body,” which is “God himself” or “ישׁע Jesus,” of whom “we are ... Members” (*Laocoön* 41-3),³⁴ “All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the Divine body of the Saviour” (*VLJ* 545).³⁵ Thus, the Greeks, incapable of attaining spiritual perception, instead limited themselves to “Fable [and] Allegory,” weaving what Bryant described as a painted veil that prohibited them from apprehending what “Eternally Exists” beyond the world of division (544); and since their works did not result from “Visionary Fancy or Imagination,” Blake judges them to be “totally distinct & inferior” to the “Hebrew Bible & the Gospel of Jesus [which] are not Allegory but Eternal Vision.” While the Judeans attended to the “daughters of Inspiration who in the aggregate are calld Jerusalem,” Greek art, by contrast, was “Formd by the daughters of Memory [Mnemosyne]” the “Greek Muses which are not Inspiration as the Bible is” (545), and “therefore not authors of such sublime conceptions [as] Those wonderful originals seen in my visions” (531).³⁶

³⁴ See Romans 12:4-5: “For just as in a single human body there are many limbs and organs, all with different functions, so we who are united with Christ, though many, form one body, and belong to one another as its limbs and organs.” And also Blake’s dedication “To the Jews” in *Jerusalem*, Chapter 2: “Man [Albion] anciently containd in his might limbs all things in Heaven & Earth” (27).

³⁵ For another explanation of Blake’s assessment of Greek sculpture, see John Barrell:

The Greeks ... by erecting the characters into separate gods, dissolved the ground of their unity and ‘separated’ them from man or humanity, who is Jesus the Saviour. The sense of common purpose, and of community, was therefore destroyed: the Greek gods became the representatives of tasks pursued as ends in themselves, and so became not the servants of mankind but ‘the masters’; and instead of being ‘made to sacrifice to Man,’ they ‘compelled’ man to sacrifice to them. (236)

³⁶ Blake’s distinction between the “daughters of Memory” and “daughters of Inspiration” came from Milton, paraphrasing Isaiah 6:1-6, in his essay *The Reason of Church Government* (1642):

A [poetic] work [is] not to be ... obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her Siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with

What Blake is suggesting here is that the Greeks were hindered by perceptual experiences, by things seen and done in the world of “Vegetative & Generative Nature”; relying more on memory than imagination, the “Eternal nature & ... ever Existent Images” of what Blake defines as “Reality [were] forgot & the Vanities of Time & Space only Rememberd & calld Reality” (544-5). “Grecian is Mathematic Form” as opposed to “Gothic ... Living Form”; “Mathematic Form is Eternal in the Reasoning Memory ... Living Form is Eternal Existence” (*On Virgil*). Even though “the Greek Fables originated in Spiritual Mystery & Real Vision,” this ultimate reality was eventually “lost & clouded in Fable & Alegory.” And so, while the *Laocoön* sculptors may have succeeded in rendering perfect form, “Naked Beauty displayed” (*Laocoön* 58), they neglected its eternal spiritual significance, subjecting it rather to the fabulous history of Homer, “applied to Natural Fact, or History of Ilium” (3).



Blake’s increasing skepticism of Greek culture and its valuation within eighteenth century aesthetic discourse was highly unorthodox for an artist of his neoclassical pedigree and whose artist friends included the likes of Barry, Flaxman and Fuseli, all of whom would almost certainly have censured his refusal to distinguish between Greek and Roman culture. Both Barry and Flaxman perpetuated the belief that art was, if not invented by the Greeks, then at least perfected by them; that this perfection could only have been accomplished by a democratic common-wealth that fostered civic virtue and martial discipline; and finally, that these values were patent in the unaffected nobility and vigor of the heroic male nude, codified by Winckelmann the *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). The superiority of Greek civilization, which fell into a precipitous decline after the Peloponnesian War, was often

all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases. (671)

Blake quotes this passage verbatim on the title page of Reynolds’ third *Discourse*, which according to him “Endeavours to prove That there is No such thing as Inspiration” (635).

contrasted by eighteenth-century art historians with the avarice and vanity of the Romans, who commenced their conquest and pillage of Greece in the third century BC. In his twelfth and final Academy lecture, “On the Present State of the Art,” Fuseli writes that “the source of the grand monumental style of Greece was Religion with Liberty,” but that “with the decline of Religion and Liberty ... the Art declined” (Knowles 3: 53). Throughout the Roman empire, “as zeal relented and public grandeur gave way to private splendour, the Arts became the hirelings of Vanity and Wealth” (47), as for example “when Nero transported the Pontic Apollo to the golden house, and furnished the colossal shoulders of the god with his own head” (54). The narrative of Greek cultural ascendancy, followed by a precipitous Roman decline, provided a cautionary tale for contemporary England and France, where “higher Art at present is sunk to such a state of inactivity and languor that it may be doubted whether it will exist much longer” (47). Fuseli derived many of these ideas from his early reading of Winckelmann.

Observing the failure of the arts to flourish during the Roman Republic, Winckelmann argues that because it was “a state founded on warfare, there would have been little occasion to practice art” (*HAA* 286); and whatever evidence of art did exist was by no means the product of a thriving native tradition predicated on the advancement of liberty and knowledge, but rather had been merely copied or plundered from the Etruscans and later the Greeks. In the early third century BC, Marcus Claudius Marcellus, following the defeat of Syracuse, brought the first Greek works back to Rome (287); and after Lucius Mummius’s invasion and destruction of Rome’s principal commercial rival Corinth in 146 BC, “the first works of art from Greece itself reached Rome, and with them Mummius made his triumph both magnificent and memorable” (324). The rapacity of Roman generals escalated throughout the period of the Mithridatic Wars (88-63 BC), when Sulla sacked Athens and

“removed even the columns from the Temple of Jupiter Olympius, and ... had these taken to Rome, along with the library of Apelli[k]on ... [and] a Pallas from Alalkomenai” (328). Based on his scrupulous reading of the historical record and the available archeological evidence, Winckelmann concludes that the Romans esteemed art only in so far as it could glorify their military triumphs and enlarge the wealth and appease the vanity of the senatorial classes. The Grecian ideals of stylistic perfection and civic virtue meant little or nothing to them, a moral deficiency to which Edward Gibbon attributes their reckless, inefficient governance, and the gradual but irreversible relinquishment of authority and territory to barbarian invaders.

Curiously, Winckelmann’s treatise would not appear in an English edition until the middle of the nineteenth century, but a French translation was available within two years of its original publication date, and two more in Italian followed upon the revised edition of 1776, thus making it more accessible to British artists traveling on the Continent. Winckelmann’s indictment of the cultural turpitude of the Romans impressed not just Fuseli, but also Barry and Flaxman, who used the argument to help advance a distinctly British cultural agenda. In his *Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England* (1774), for example, Barry redoubles Winckelmann’s criticism of ancient Rome in order to expose the fallaciousness of the claim that his country’s failure to cultivate artistic genius was in large measure a consequence of its inhospitable northern climate.³⁷ “The monuments of good art in old Rome,” writes Barry, “are well known to have been ... either brought from Greece, or executed at Rome by Greeks”; beginning with “the taking of

³⁷ Barry castigates “Abbé Winckelman” in his 1783 *Account of a Series of Pictures* (a work similar in style and substance to Blake’s *Descriptive Catalogue*), where he complains of Winckelmann’s “injurious opinions” and the “great offence to many of our people ... charging them with the want of capacity and genius to succeed in the superior exertions of the arts of painting” (2: 305).

Syracuse by Marcellus ... through the flourishing time of the Roman commonwealth, and through the whole race of emperors, to the taking of Rome by Alaric the goth ... the Romans themselves in all that time never made any efforts in the arts that did honour to their genius” (2: 181). Unlike the Athenians, who had courageously delivered themselves from tyrannical rule and repelled the Persian armies of Darius and Xerxes, inaugurating a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity in which the arts could thrive, the Romans were a vainglorious “military people,” whose “useless destructive power” necessarily precluded any sustainable cultural advancement:

The deplorable calamities of wars, rapine, and every misery, which for so many centuries deluged Italy during the ambitious contests of rival emperors, elected by the different bands and legions of soldiery; the incursions of the northern barbarians, who destroyed them, and divided the spoil ... left the mind no leisure, but wholly occupied in contriving for the necessary security of mere bodily existence. (1: 371)

In his academy lectures, Flaxman likewise concurs with Winckelmann that the Romans’ “impious pride” and “ignorant vanity,” their “lust of dominion, avarice, and cruelty,” prohibited them from ever achieving excellence in the arts (195-6). “The Roman compositions,” he writes, “owe no inspiration to the Muses, urge no claim to the epic or dramatic. They are the mere paragraphs of military gazettes—vulgar in conception, ferocious in sentiment” (148). Whatever Grecian works came into their possession, through rapine or servile patronage, were applied principally to the embellishment of their military supremacy and to the aggrandizement and luxuriance of power; hence the superfluous proliferation of “equestrian and pedestrian statues, trophies and triumphal arches ... the innumerable sculptures in the imperial palace—in the baths of Dioclesian and Caracalla—the Mausoleum of Augustus, and that of Hadrian—the files of patriots and heroes which lined the Flaminian

way” (228). Flaxman even provides figures, taken mostly from Pliny, estimating the extent of Roman spoilage:

Marcus Scaurus ... decorated his temporary theatre with three thousand statues. Two thousand were taken from the Volscians. Mummius, after the conquest of Achaia, is said to have filled the city [Rome]. Lucullus brought many. Three thousand came from Rhodes—not fewer from Athens or Olympia—more are believed to have come from Delphi. (228)

For his part, Blake would neither have denied nor defended the recidivism of Roman culture; but he did distinguish (and alienate) himself from his artist peers by arguing for the same deficiencies in Greek art, attributed by him to the same general causes.

We have already seen how he believed that the most celebrated Grecian sculptures had been copied “from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs,” just as the Romans had copied or plundered theirs from the Greeks; but he also believed that the qualities of their art so highly esteemed in neoclassical discourse and promulgated in the art Academies of England and France were themselves tributary to a militant nationalism and love of warfare that coursed throughout the Peloponnese. Like the Mosaic law of the Israelites, “the basest & most oppressive of human codes” (*Marginalia* 607), which according to Blake justified “the Wickedness of the Israelites in murdering so many thousands under pretence of a command from God” (604),³⁸ the Greeks had “the Covenant of Priam, the Moral Virtues of the Heathen” (*Jerusalem* 98.46). In the *Descriptive Catalogue* entry for his painting “Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims,” Blake argues that the self-righteous Greeks, like

³⁸ Blake is referring specifically to Joshua’s conquest of Canaan and the destruction of the cities of Jericho and Ai (Joshua 6-8), “the Unnatural design of wicked men” (*Marginalia* 604). After razing the latter city, Joshua ascended Mount Ebal and “engraved on blocks of stone a copy of the law of Moses” (Joshua 8:32).

the Jews before them, “neglected to subdue the gods of Priam,”³⁹ “masters of man,” no less “destructive to humanity” than the wrathful Jehovah of Mosaic law (536).

Most of Blake’s intellectual peers attributed the flowering of Greek civilization to the relative peace and stability that followed immediately upon the final defeat of the Persians in 479 BC, but even Winckelmann concedes that the two wars fought between Athens, Sparta, and their respective allies (460-404 BC) contributed in no small way to the advancement of art. “This war,” he writes, “is possibly the only one in the history of the world in which art ... not only suffered no decline but even achieved more than ever before” (305); because the two city-states were competing for regional hegemony and “seeking out and deploying every conceivable means to secure a decisive advantage for one side over the other, every talent manifested itself and all human senses and hands were engaged.” Flaxman also realized that peace and security could not, of themselves, have sustained the “power and beauty” of the heroic male nude; that when the Greeks were not off fighting wars, then they were at least preparing themselves to do so through athletic competition, the “Pentathlon, or five Olympic games, of wrestling, boxing, throwing the quoit, running, and riding one or more horses at full speed” (178). This correlation between patriotic athleticism and military heroism is evident in Flaxman’s account of the typical Olympic victory celebration: “a conqueror in one of the games was honoured as if he returned from the conquest of foreign enemies—crowned with olive—drawn to the city in a chariot by four horses—and a breach was made in the wall for his entrance.” Even so, Flaxman makes sure to frequently remind his reader that it was

³⁹ Principally Apollo, protector of Troy and the first god to act in the *Iliad*, when with his silver bow he strikes down scores of Achaeans to avenge the abduction of Chryseis from the city of Thebe, an ally of Priam (1.451-5). The “archer god” appears in Blake’s watercolor illustration to Milton’s “Nativity Ode” (from the Butts set of c. 1815) as the *Apollo Belvedere* sculpture (**Fig. 2-15**). In Milton’s poem, the birth of Christ signals the end of pagan religion: “The Oracles are dummm, ... Apollo from his shrine / Can no more divine” (173-7); for Blake, the moment implies also the denigration of the art of antiquity and its warrior aesthetic.

the Greek's cultivation of liberty and knowledge that elevated their culture above that of the Romans.

But Flaxman's view was not that of Blake, whose trenchant remarks on Greek culture are no less startling now than they were then. In his single-plate etching *On Homer's Poetry/On Virgil (H/V)* (c. 1820), he condemns Greece and Rome equally as "destroyers of art": "so far from being parents of Arts & Sciences ... Rome & Greece swept Art into their maw & destroyd it" (270). He goes on to say, "a Warlike State never can produce Art," citing the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, where the ghost of Anchises advises his son, Aeneas, to make the arts (specifically sculpture, oratory, and astrology) ancillary to martial heroism and empire: "... your arts are to be these: / To pacify, to impose the rule of law, / To spare the conquered, battle down the proud" (6.1145-54).⁴⁰ And writing of Homer, Blake proclaims the "perfect Unity" and "Moral Goodness" of the *Iliad* to be contrary to poetic genius, since true poets should concern themselves with eternal forms and "Characters" only, and sedulously avoid such "secondary considerations" as "goodness and badness," which "has nothing to do with Character" (269-70).

By character Blake means those "eternal principles ... of human life" (*DC* 536), which reveal themselves only to the visionary and cannot be apprehended by mere "Copiers of Nature" (*PA* 574-5) who imitate only the "Effects of Nature" rather than eternal existence (578). Unity and Morality, he argues, are the province of reason rather than imagination; hence they "belong to Philosophy & not to Poetry, to Exception & not to Rule, to Accident & not to Substance" (*H/V* 270). For Blake, the epics of Homer and Virgil cannot therefore be reckoned as visionary because they are circumscribed by the variable contingencies of human

⁴⁰ Blake's paraphrase reads: "Let others study Art: Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War & Dominion" (270).

action, or history, and the vicissitudes of perceptual experience.⁴¹ To valorize the unity and moral goodness of the *Iliad* as Aristotle does, is to “eat [sic.] of the tree of good & evil.” “Conscience,” writes Blake, “is the voice of God,” which has nothing at all to do with “judgment of right & wrong” (Marginalia 603): conscience forgives, righteousness destroys. Thus, all violent conflicts and continual strife in the world originate in, and are perpetuated by, moral judgment. In *Jerusalem*, Chapter 3 (dedicated “To the Deists”) Blake explains that “Greek Philosophy ... teaches that Man is Righteous in his Vegetated Spectre: an Opinion of fatal & accursed consequence to Man, as the Ancients saw plainly by Revelation to the intire abrogation of Experimental Theory” (52). “Moral virtues,” he wrote in his copy of Berkeley’s *Siris*, “is the baseness of Plato & the Greeks & all warriors The Moral Virtues are continual Accusers of Sin & promote Eternal Wars & Domineering over others” (664), rather than Christian humility and forgiveness of sin; hence “The Greek & Roman Classics is the Antichrist” (656): “Whatever Book is for Vengeance for Sin & whatever Book is Against the Forgiveness of Sins is not of the Father but of Satan the Accuser & Father of Hell” (Inscriptions 669).

Thus, from Blake’s perspective, the heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are satanic “Murderers & Revengers as the Jews were” (Marginalia 604), devoted to their martial gods and motivated by retributive justice: Achilles slays Hector to avenge the death of Patroclus;

⁴¹ This theory receives a more thorough elucidation in the *Descriptive Catalogue* essay on his painting of the Canterbury pilgrims. As Chaucer apparently embodied for him the very opposite of Homer and Virgil, one section in particular merits full quotation here:

The characters of Chaucer’s Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same ... nothing new occurs in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change nor decay. ... some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter. (532-3)

while Odysseus, assisted by Athena, ruthlessly slaughters Penelope's suitors and nurses. Blake therefore concludes his essay on Homer with a strident declamation against the bard and his literary progeny: "The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars" (*On Homers Poetry* 270).⁴² Homer was a war poet, a "slave of the sword" (Preface, *Milton* 1); and so he appears, crowned with laurel, in Blake's picture illustrating Canto 4 of Dante's *Inferno* (**fig. 2-16**), his vestment dyed red with barbarian blood, brandishing his sword at the threshold of the material universe, "Center of All," like Satan himself at the nucleus of hell; he is the grand representative of "the Poetry of the Heathen Stolen & Perverted from the Bible" (Inscriptions 688).⁴³

In the *Laocoön* plate, when Blake identifies the sculpture as a mechanical copy rather than divine vision, he impugns the transference of eternal forms, or "characters," to human history. The Rhodian sculptors not only copied the "Cherubim of Solomons Temple," but also perversely "applied [them] to Natural Fact, or History of Ilium" (2-3), a reference to the second book of the *Aeneid*, where Laocoön, a priest of Neptune, having hurled a spear at the wooden horse concealing the Achaeans, is punished by the Achaean's divine protectoress Minerva when she dispatches two giant sea serpents to devour him and his sons. The Trojans foolishly dismissed Laocoön's apprehensions and misinterpreted the retribution against him, which wisdom, reckoned properly, might have preserved their city from calamity. Thus, for the triumphant Greeks and their Rhodian allies the sculpture not only glorified their heroic

⁴² Blake is responding to the philosophes Rousseau and Voltaire who "charge the poor Monks & Religious with being the causes of war ... But the Religion of Jesus, Forgiveness of Sin, can never be the cause of a War ... All the Destruction therefore, in Christian Europe has arisen from Deism, which is Natural Religion" ("To the Deists," *Jerusalem* 52).

⁴³ Ironically, Blake levels the same charge against Dante, who "for Tyrannical Purposes has made This World the Foundation of All & the Goddess Nature & not the Holy Ghost."

past, but also corroborated their sense of self-righteousness in the conquest of Troy. The death of Laocoön confirmed their divine mandate. For Blake, however, the sculpture signifies nothing more than “Art Degraded Imagination Denied” in a brutal, spiritually vacuous age when “War Governed the Nations” (4). In such warrior “States,” he continues, art stagnates, the imagination atrophies; there “all Visionary Men / are accounted / Mad Men / such are / Greece & Rome / Such is / Empire” (86-94).⁴⁴

Over and over in the plate, Blake insists that “Empire [is] against Art,” and once more refers the reader to Anchises’ prescient speech from the Underworld in the *Aeneid* (80-1). He likewise recalls his previous argument in *On Homer’s Poetry/On Virgil* that morality is “the Root of Good & Evil” and “The Accusation of Sin” the wellspring of human suffering and carnage (48-9), adding sarcastically “If Morality was Christianity Socrates was the Saviour (1).⁴⁵ And around Laocoön’s extended right arm he declares yet again, “The Gods of Priam are the Cherubim of Moses & Solomon: The Hosts of Heaven” (11-2), whose deification and worship was inimical to art. No less than the Egyptians and Babylonians before them, “Whose Gods are the Powers / Of this World. Goddess, Nature,” the Greeks and Romans “first spoil & then destroy / Imaginative art / For their Glory is / War and Dominion” (73-9). In his selection of the *Laocoön* group as the figural armature for his declamatory aphorisms, Blake found a most appropriate icon of empire and war: first, as a production of the Greeks commemorating their victory over the Trojans; and then later as the

⁴⁴ In his then unpublished “Public Address,” composed sporadically in his notebook between the years 1809-10 in reaction to the heated controversy surrounding the publication of his Chaucer picture, Blake answers to accusations of his being mad with his characteristic vitriol: “It is very true what you have said for these thirty two Years I am Mad or Else you are so both of us cannot be in our right senses” (573).

⁴⁵ Originally Blake’s response to Byron’s comparing Christ to Socrates: “What made Socrates the greatest of men? His moral truths—his ethics. What proved Jesus Christ to be the son of God, hardly less than his miracles did? His moral precepts.” (Marginalia 657).

spoil of Rome, eventually decorating the thermae of the emperor Titus, the very man who commanded the *XV Apollinaris* against Jerusalem and looted the Second Temple in 70 AD. The Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum bears a series of relief sculptures documenting these events, wherein some of the Hebrew works so enthusiastically celebrated by Blake as divinely inspired art appear as the trophies of a sanguinary, intemperate, artistically barren civilization.

If the *Laocoön* group symbolized militant nationalism and imperial conquest in ancient times, this fact was no less true in Blake's own time, due in large measure to the Napoleonic Wars and a British determination to challenge French hegemony in the arts. The Revolution crippled French art in the 1790s. The French Royal Academy was dissolved, and many prominent artists were evicted from their studios in the Louvre; and with the confiscation of money and private property to fund the wars that ensued, there was neither the will nor the resources to encourage monumental public artworks; the grand manner of the ancien régime suddenly seemed spurious and incompatible with secular, middle class interests. British artists seized the moment for cultural advantage and political leverage, and they were quick to remark this change, as evidenced by Fuseli's lecture "On the Present State of the Art":

If the revolution of a neighboring nation emancipated the people from the yoke of superstition, it has perhaps precipitated them to irreligion. He who has no visible object of worship is indifferent about modes, and rites, and places; and unless some great civil provisional establishment replaces the means furnished by the former system, the Arts of France, should they disdain to become the minions and handmaids of fashion, may soon find that the only public occupation left for them

will be a representation of themselves, deploring their new-acquired advantages.

(Knowles 3: 51)

Fuseli's claim that "irreligion" is detrimental to art recalls Dennis's treatise on *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*, where to produce "great and strong Enthusiasms"—"the chief Thing in great Poetry"—he urges poets to pursue "a Religious subject" (1: 216-18). So it was with the Greeks: "the Subjects of the Ancients, were Sacred in their greater Poetry" (216). And Fuseli is no less clear that "the source of the grand monumental style of Greece was Religion with Liberty." Even though Blake would surely have disputed the artistic propriety of Greek religion, he would just as likely have corroborated Fuseli's assessment of French art and, moreover, shared his friend's concern that in England, too, secular materialism would produce a cultural sewer that would swallow up great art and condemn artists like himself to penurious mediocrity.

Whenever the French did show signs of interest in art, their policies and tastes resembled more the Romans than the Greeks. As early as 1794, the Abbé Grégoire, former president of the French National Convention and member of the *Commision Temporaire des Arts*, declared, "if our victorious armies penetrate into Italy the removal of the Apollo Belvedere and of the Farnese Hercules would be the most brilliant conquest" (qtd. in Gould 41).⁴⁶ Grégoire's provocative statement would indeed prove prophetic, for in the spring of 1796 the *Directoire* ordered Napoleon to march on Italy and dispatched a commission of art specialists to follow close behind and supervise the spoliation of the conquered cities. In an armistice agreement signed that summer in Bologna and formalized in February of the following year with the Treaty of Tolentino, Pope Pius VI ceded to France some 100

⁴⁶ Many of the following details of Napoleon's conquest and plundering of Italy were gleaned from Cecil Gould's 1965 book *Trophy of Conquest*.

artworks from the papal collections, including the *Laocoön*; but in the event, Napoleon's Roman haul did not arrive in Paris until late July 1798, where they were immediately displayed—many of them still packed in their crates—in what must have been a remarkable ceremony before the people, comparable in many ways to Titus's Hebrew plunder.⁴⁷ Cecil Gould writes of the occasion, “The parade of 1798 through the streets of Paris ... was as close to a literal and deliberate imitation of a Roman triumph as the revolutionaries ever achieved” (66). A splendidly wrought Sèvres urn painted by Béranger commemorates with patriotic zeal the conquest of Italy, some fifteen years after the fact, depicting the triumphal entry of the Vatican sculptures into Paris (**fig. 2-17**). The *Laocoön* is preceded through the streets by the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Eros* of Lysippos, all drawn by a team of cavalry horses and escorted by French officers.⁴⁸

The *Laocoön* soon joined the rest of Napoleon's plunder in the Louvre museum, which had been opened to the public in 1793; and in 1803, under the directorship of Dominique-Vivant Denon, was renamed the *Musée Napoléon*. Most of the sculpture was eventually installed in the former apartments of Anne of Austria (1601-66), wife of Louis XIII, which had been remodeled for the purpose in 1799-1800. The *Laocoön* occupied a niche at the south end of the gallery. Plainly visible to visitors from the adjoining rooms, it became the unofficial centerpiece of the museum's antique collections, as witnessed by several contemporary paintings and drawings by Hubert Robert (**figs. 2-18 and 19**) and Benjamin Zix (**fig. 2-20**), as well as a commemorative medal sculpted by Bertrand Andrieu

⁴⁷ Napoleon actually missed the event, having left for Egypt the previous May to battle the Mamluks.

⁴⁸ The reader may note that the sculpture's right arm is removed. This was not the result of damage sustained in transportation, as contemporary drawings prove, but rather as a precautionary measure. In a 1960 restoration effort the extended arm was replaced with another that bends towards Laocoön's right ear, which change, along with several other conspicuous pairings, I think substantially diminishes the pathos of the whole.

(**fig. 2-21**). Though reputed to have had a negligible appreciation for art, Napoleon himself appears in Zix's drawing admiring the sculpture, accompanied by his second wife, Marie Louise, whom he married in the Louvre chapel in April 1810 (the date of the drawing). More incredibly, in a tapestry commemorating the event of Napoleon's coronation in December 1804, designed by the Italian Gioacchino Serangeli, the new emperor appears in full regalia smugly surveying the commanders of his army and naval forces in the Louvre gallery. The *Laocoön* group appears in the center background, just above his head, an apt symbol of France's military and cultural conquests, crowning the head of the man who accomplished them (**fig. 2-22**). During the short-lived Peace of Amiens in 1802, numerous British artists, writers, and politicians streamed into Paris, eager to witness for themselves what was at that time the greatest public collection of art ever assembled. Blake was not among them.

But his friends Flaxman and Henry Fuseli were among those compelled to make the journey (Fuseli even sketched the *Laocoön* during his visit to the gallery), and their remarks on then Consul Bonaparte and *his* museum could not have been much different in substance from Blake's own opinions and concerns. In the introduction to his lectures, Flaxman laments the "injustice" and "barbarous rapacity" of the French (21) and praises the magnanimity of the British government in backing the Pontiff's envoy, the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova, who negotiated the restitution of the papal collection in 1815.⁴⁹ Nor was the historical parallel between imperial France and Rome lost on Fuseli, who observes that "To plunder the earth was a Roman principle, and it is not perhaps matter of lamentation that Modern Rome, by a retaliation of her own principle, is made to pay the debt contracted with mankind" (Knowles 3: 51). Fuseli must have been impressed by the spectacle of so many masterpieces assembled in one place, he reviled such "an ostentatious display of ancient and

⁴⁹ See also Flaxman's address to the Royal Academy "On the Death of Signor Canova" (pp. 306-7).

modern treasures of genius, accumulated by the hand of conquest or of rapine.” Not only did Fuseli object to Napoleon’s pillage of Europe, but he also believed it further demonstrated the failure of France to comprehend the civic function of art. While the French had succeeded (temporarily at least) in freeing themselves from the yoke of tyranny, there were no viable institutions remaining to maintain social order and instill the values of his civic humanist philosophy, in which the liberal arts, by presenting the public with illustrations of moral virtue, would have encouraged citizens to place the best interest of the state before their own private ambitions. What the people of France most require, he argues, is a “great establishment ... that will employ the living artists, raise among them a spirit of emulation dignified by the objects of their occupation, and inspire the public with that spirit.” Civic virtue cannot but sink into diffidence, he warns, whenever “encouragement is turned into a job, and dispatch and quantity have supplanted excellence and quality” (50). Wherever art is suffered to become a superfluous commodity or the handmaiden of power, “the gorgeous accumulation of technic monuments is no more than a dead capital” (52), and the *Laocoön* had become for Fuseli and many others one of the most visible symbols of that “dead capital.”

In the notebook entries later collated and published as the “Public Address” (*PA*), Blake expresses with confidence the fundamental civic humanist creed that “it is the Arts that Encourage Empires” (577), which point he stresses again in the preface to *Jerusalem*, Chapter 1, dedicated “To the Public”: “Nations are Destroy’d, or Flourish, in proportion as Their Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy’d or Flourish!” (3). “If [artists] are not Wise the Freest Government is compelld to be a Tyranny” (*PA* 569), as evidenced by “Buonaparte,” who according to Blake has failed to see “That it is not Arts that follow & attend upon Empire but Empire that attends upon & follows The Arts” (577). But Napoleon was by no

means the only one, nor France the only nation, as suggested by his address to the British public in *Jerusalem*. In his annotations to Reynolds' *Discourses* (published in 1798), he additionally observes, "The Arts & Sciences are the Destruction of Tyrannies or Bad Governments," but "Remove them or Degrade them & the Empire is No More—Empire follows Art & Not Vice Versa as *Englishmen suppose* [my emphasis]" (636).

It is doubtful that Blake or anyone in his immediate circle had any knowledge of Prime Minister Liverpool's correspondence with Lord Castlereagh in Paris concerning the restitution of the Vatican sculptures. In one letter Liverpool expresses the Prince Regent's urgent desire "of getting some of them for a museum or a gallery here [London]," since "we have a better title to them than the French, if legitimate war gives a title to such objects" (qtd. in Gould 121). William Hamilton would ultimately discourage this plan, but there was no doubt a general consensus amongst "men of taste and virtù" that Paris be prevented from becoming the "future centre of the arts." The same argument appears in Martin Shee's *Elements of Art* (1809), a book that Blake may well have read or heard discussed. In it Shee expresses regret that England had not marched on Paris and raided the Louvre, "to dislodge its most illustrious inhabitants, and as prisoners of war conduct them to assist in adorning the triumph, and advancing the arts" (qtd. in Essick and Viscomi IV, 275). However, even though England joined with her European allies in demanding the restitution of stolen artworks, the British had previously demonstrated a penchant for spoliage: first in 1801, when General John Hely-Hutchinson soundly defeated the French garrison at Cairo and seized much of Napoleon's Egyptian plunder, including most famously the *Rosetta Stone*; and again, around the same time, when Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin, persuaded the Ottoman occupiers of Greece to let him take back to London a substantial portion of Phidias's

Parthenon frieze.⁵⁰ It is worthy of note that William Hamilton, who helped Canova to secure the return of Napoleon's plunder, had played no less instrumental a role in acquiring these precious archaeological objects for England, where they are still to be found today, and are still objects of contention.

Besides this disturbing hypocrisy in British policy towards imperial plunder, Blake was equally concerned that British commerce and incessant warfare had vitiated public taste and undermined the mission of the Royal Academy to promote civic virtue. Not only was England involved in a seemingly endless "Crusade against France," but also in Blake's lifetime there were countless other wars of conquest and oppression—against America, Ireland, the Dutch, and India. These campaigns were expensive, and the tax burden on the nation enormous, leaving little state money to finance the kind of public arts projects that artists like Barry, Fuseli, and Blake wholeheartedly believed would serve the public good and "Resist the Contemptible Counter Arts established by such contemptible Politicians as Louis XIV" (*PA* 580). When state commissions were granted, they were to commemorate statesmen and heroes of the Napoleonic Wars. For example, Flaxman won the commission to design the Horatio Nelson memorial in St. Paul's Cathedral, which Blake had hoped to see decorated with "Monuments to the dead Painted by Historical & Poetical Artists" in the manner of Michelangelo (570).⁵¹

⁵⁰ Byron was famously critical of the British seizure, as recorded in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) Canto II, stanzas 11-15.

⁵¹ "The Painters of England are unemployd in Public Works. While the Sculptors have continual & superabundant employment ... Yet [painting] is more adapted to solemn ornament ... as it is capable of being Placed in any heighth & would make a Noble finish <Placed> above the Great Public Monuments in Westminster St Pauls & other Cathedrals" (*PA* 570).

It is not difficult to imagine how the public would have received such paintings had Blake executed them. His “spiritual forms” of Nelson, Prime Minister Pitt, and Napoleon (lost), commenced in 1805 and exhibited in 1809 as “Frescoes,”⁵² represent an infernal triumvirate of warriors who, though fighting on opposite sides, were all enlisted in Satan’s army. Hero of the naval Battle of Trafalgar (1805), Nelson is portrayed by Blake riding the giant sea snake Leviathan (**fig. 2-23**), “War by Sea enormous” (*Jerusalem* 91.39), in whose coils are wound the nations of the earth (an African slave appears in chains beneath his feet); while Pitt (**fig. 2-24**) controls the dragon Behemoth, “War / By Land astounding” (91.39-40); “directing the storms of war: He is ordering the Reaper to reap the Vine of the Earth, and the Plowman to plow up the Cities and Towers” (*DC* 530). Blake cast aside the familiar allegorical trappings of the state monuments in favor of apocalyptic symbolism “containing mythological and recondite meaning, where more is meant than meets the eye” (531), which choice probably saved him from a good deal of trouble, as no one who saw the paintings understood them. Henry Crabb Robinson, who perpetuated the myth of Blake’s madness, found the pair too erudite for description, as did the author reviewing the exhibition for *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* (the only known review): “the pictures ... [of Nelson and Pitt] are too sublime for our comprehension” (Bentley *SP* 340, 346). It is hard to miss the irony of Blake finding inspiration in a war he believed was detrimental to the arts, depriving painters of resources, curtailing their expressive freedom, and acting upon Satanic moral virtues.

In his satiric reversal of the *Lord’s Prayer*—“which they say Raises the Devil”—written in his copy of Richard Thornton’s 1827 translation of the same, Blake ironically jests, “Real God is the Goddess Nature & that God Creates nothing but what can be Touchd &

⁵² The Napoleon painting was not included in the exhibition. It has been suggested that it was painted at a later date, but it makes sense, as Butlin argues, that it would have been excluded from the exhibition “because of the political danger of including a ‘Spiritual’ portrayal of the French Emperor against whom Britain was at war” (474).

Weighed & Taxed & Measured all else is Heresy & Rebellion against Caesar Virgils Only God” (Marginalia 670). In the *Laocoön* plate, he again writes, almost obsessively, on the insidious reciprocity of money and war. “Heroism [is] a Miser” (33), hording resources to placate the vanity of a few while perpetuating poverty among the many; “Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War Only” (52). “Money / Is Useless” (84-5), he continues, and a “Curse” (111); it is “The Great Satan” (47). “True Christian Charity” can never be “dependent on Money ... that is on Caesar or Empire or Natural Religion” (45-6); nor can art, since “Christianity is Art / & not Money” (109-10). “The Whole Business of Man,” according to Blake, should be “The Arts & All Things Common” (105-6) rather than conquest and commerce; money should be the least of his concerns. “I wish to do nothing for profit,” he told Crabb Robinson, “I wish to live for art” (Bentley *Blake Records* 312). “Art can only be produced in Perfection where the Man is either in Affluence or is Above the Care of it” (Blake *VLJ* 551). Unfortunately, this ideal was impossible for Blake, whose financial burdens were a source of bitterness and complaint throughout his career.

In the “Public Address” fragments, Blake remarks glumly that, “the Painters of England are unemployd in Public Works” (581). This dearth of opportunity sooner or later would compel most artists in the direction of private enterprise: painting society portraits, print trading, or, as was the case with Blake, illustrating luxuriant editions of classic British authors that only a few people could afford to buy. The ideals of civic virtue had, in the course of the eighteenth century, given way to liberal individualism, and in the process art had been reduced to a mere commodity, a private luxury, subject to the capricious taste of “Connoisseurs & Amateurs” (577). As Fuseli explains:

the ambition, activity, and spirit of public life is shrunk to the minute detail of domestic arrangements—everything that surrounds us tends to show us in private, is

become snug, less, narrow, pretty, insignificant ... from such a selfish trifling to expect a system of Art built on grandeur ... would only be less presumptuous than insane.” (Knowles 3: 48)

This cultural degeneracy, he goes on to say, parallels what transpired in Greece between the Golden Age of Pericles and the period of Roman occupation:

As long as their march was marked with such dignity, whilst their union excited admiration, commanded attachment, and led the public, they grew, they rose; but when individually to please, the artist attempted to monopolize the interest due to Art, to abstract by novelty and to flatter the multitude, ruin followed. To prosper, the Art not only must feel itself free, it ought to reign: if it be domineered over, if it follow the dictate of Fashion or a Patron’s whims, then is its dissolution at hand. (44-5)

No different was Blake’s appraisal of the status of art in eighteenth-century London. “Commerce,” he writes, “is so far from being beneficial to Arts or to Empire that it is destructive of both” (*PA* 574); “empires flourish till they become commercial” (563). No longer a liberal art, painting had been degraded to a mechanical trade, “no better than any other[’]s Manual Labor” (567), where greater value was placed on technical efficiency and superfluous detail than on visionary conception or masterful execution, “Clear colours unmuddied by oil, and firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by shadows” (*DC* 540). As Andy Warhol demonstrated so effectively (and profitably) in the twentieth century, popular art is by nature hostile to original genius, and Blake was quick to perceive this as he observed London teeming with “Ignorant Journeymen Suited to the Purposes of Commerce ... for Commerce Cannot endure Individual Merit its insatiable Maw must be fed by What all can do Equally well” (*PA* 573). “He is Counted the Greatest Genius,” he writes mockingly, “who

can sell a Good for Nothing Commodity for a Great Price.” The *Public Address* is filled with the mostly forgotten names of “Monopolizing Traders,” “Idle Sycophants,” and “Imbecillitys Journeymen” (565-68). While Barry starved and Fuseli’s *Milton Gallery* quickly passed into oblivion, “Joshua [Reynolds] & his Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves” at the Royal Academy profited immensely by “Portrait Painting applauded & rewarded by the Rich & Great” (Marginalia 636). The success of these artists became so frustrating to Blake that at one point he fancied himself the Robespierre of the London art world: “If all the Princes in Euorope were to Patronize such Blockheads I William Blake a Mental Prince should decollate & Hang their Souls as Guilty of Mental High Treason” (PA 569).

Of what value, then, were the once esteemed works of antiquity, the foundation of the grand manner of historical painting? When Henry Singleton’s group portrait of the Royal Academicians resurfaced in 1802—the same year as the Treaty of Amiens—as a large print engraved by Charles Bestland, it was intended in part to signal to the French, as well as to reassure the English crossing the Channel to admire Napoleon’s war booty, that even though Paris had become, almost overnight, the art capital of Europe, Britain had a more legitimate claim to the works of antiquity, having instituted a Royal Academy for the purpose of indemnifying the liberal arts and promoting civic virtue. More important than the individual Academicians represented, then, was the ostentatious display of classical sculpture surrounding them, including of course the *Laocoön*. But this was nevertheless a commercial print, and the irony would not have been lost on Blake, who by this time recognized that the works of antiquity had already been depleted of much of their visionary meaning and become instead the trophies of conquests, both imperial and commercial, just as the Royal Academy had lost sight of its original mission and its artists become “Monopolizing Trader[s]” and

“Imbecilitys Journeymen” indentured to wealthy patrons, rather than promoters of divinely inspired art and civic virtue.



For Blake’s contemporaries, no less than for the ancient Greeks and Romans before them, the *Laocoön* sculpture became a potent symbol of conquest and cultural puissance; while the spiritual significance of its form, as the visionary embodiment of one of the “eternal principles or characters of human life” (*DC* 536), was obscured by the crass contingencies of European culture and history. The plate makes clear that for Blake the struggling figure of Laocoön, “ΟΦΙΟΥΧΟΣ” (17),⁵³ embodies the original, pre-Druidic fall from divine unity into the divided world of “Space & Time,” where humanity is continually subjected to the tyranny of the corporeal senses and moral law, “propagating / Generation & Death” (9-10). Accordingly, his Laocoön represents Yah “הי,” or Jehovah, “The Angel of the Divine Presence / 15 ;2) ”הוהי דארמ”⁵⁴ whose egotism and ambition led to the creation of Adam, “The Natural Man / & not the Soul / or Imagination” (28-30), from earthy matter (“Adamah”)

⁵³ ΟΦΙΟΥΧΟΣ. Greek for “Ophiucus,” the serpent-holder.

⁵⁴ “That Angel of the Divine Presence mentiond in Exodus XIVc 19v & in other Places this Angel is frequently calld by the Name of Jehovah Elohim” (*VLJ* 549). Blake addresses this tyrant figure in the fragmented manuscript of “The Everlasting Gospel”:

Thou Angel of the Presence Divine
That didst create this Body of Mine
Wherefore has[t] thou writ these Laws
And Created Hells dark jaws

...

Tho thou was so pure & bright
That Heaven was Impure in thy Sight
Tho thy Oath turnd Heaven Pale
Tho thy Covenant built Hells Jail
Tho thou didst all to Chaos roll
With the Serpent for its soul (29-40)

(55);⁵⁵ and “The Great Satan or Reason,” whose “Wife [is] The Goddess Nature” Lilith, or “לילית” in Hebrew (32-3). In *Jerusalem*, while Albion slept, “Satan & Adam & the whole World was Created by the Elohim” (“To the Jews” 27). In *Milton* and *The Four Zoas*, Adam and Satan symbolize the paired limits of “Opacity” and “Contraction” respectively (FZ 56.19-21). Opacity suggests the impotence of the sense organs to perceive the eternal world beyond material existence; while contraction describes the oppressive effect of the reasoning mind as it circumscribes the world with mechanical laws predicated on the “Cloven Fiction” of binary divisions (“The Keys,” *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* 13).

The principal architect of this dichotomous universe is the “Avenger” Satan, Jehovah’s agent of “Moral Virtues,” which are “continual Accusers of Sin & promote Eternal Wars & Dominency over others” rather than “the Religion of Jesus, Forgiveness of Sin” (Marginalia 653; *Jerusalem*, “To the Deists” 52).⁵⁶ “Every Religion that Preaches Vengeance for Sin is the Religion of the Enemy & Avenger; and not of the Forgiver of Sin, and their God is Satan.” According to Blake, “Conscience” is innate, “Self Evident Truth” (Marginalia 610); it is “the voice of God” as opposed to “Our judgment of right & wrong,” which is the voice of “Reason” or Satan (603),⁵⁷ who sometimes appears to Blake as an Apollonian archer-god:

⁵⁵ See also Blake’s marvelous color print *Elohim Creating Adam* (**fig. 2-25**), a grim interpretation of Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling fresco. Rather than a serpent, Adam is portrayed wound in the coils of a gigantic earthworm, symbol not of moral but natural law (the serpent of moral virtues torments Eve (Sin) in the companion print *Satan Exulting over Eve*, a mirror image of the former).

⁵⁶ “Moral Virtues all begin / In the Accusations of Sin” (“The Everlasting Gospel” [b] 34-5).

⁵⁷ These lines are quoted from Blake’s annotations to Bishop Landaff’s *Apology for the Bible* (1797), in response to the following passage:

What is conscience? ... an internal monitor implanted in us by the *Supreme Being*, and dictating ... what is *right or wrong*? *Or is it merely* our own judgment of the

When Satan first the black bow bent
 And the Moral Law from the Gospel rent
 He forgd the Law into a Sword
 And spilld the blood of mercys Lord (*Jerusalem*, “To the Deists” [“I saw a Monk of
 Charlemaine”] 52.17-20)

To espouse moral virtue is to practice atheism, to embrace “Allegories & dissimulations” and deny “Visionary Fancy or Imagination” and “all Intellectual Gifts ... of the Holy Ghost,” whereupon “only Contention remains to Man” (*VLJ* 553; 544): “you cannot have Moral Virtue without the Slavery of that half of the Human Race who hate <what you call> Moral Virtue” (554). As Blake writes in the plate, “the Root of Good & Evil / [is] in The Accusation of Sin” (48-9). By “eating the Tree of Knowledge for Satans Gratification” (*VLJ* 555), humanity suffers the deep sleep of reason, “the Sleep which the Soul may fall into in its deadly dreams of Good & Evil when it leaves Paradise [with] <following> the Serpent” and confounds itself in “Satans Labyrinth,” “puzzling themselves” about “what is Good & Evil or ... Right or Wrong” (552-3). This moral entanglement, “The Combats of Good & Evil” (533), is symbolized in the plate by the two winding serpents, clearly identified by Blake as “Good” (31) and “Evil” (5): “Serpent Reasonings us entice Of Good & Evil: Virtue & Vice” (“Keys” 7-8).

Although responsible for imposing his individual will upon Eternity, thereby creating the divided, vegetative universe, Blake’s Jehovah/Laocoön does not appear here as the tyrannical law-giver of the Israelites, author of “the basest & most oppressive of human codes

moral rectitude or turpitude of our own actions? I *take the word* (with Mr. Locke) in the latter, *as in the only intelligible sense*. (2)

By casting his lot with Locke, Blake identifies Watson as an exponent of “Antichrist Science,” hence an ally of Satan: “I believe that the Bishop laught at the Bible in his slieve & so did Locke” (Marginalia 603).

... i.e. State Religion which is the Source of all Cruelty” (Marginalia 607); rather, he represents the awakening of “conscience,” a fallen god struggling to rouse himself from reasoning unconsciousness, “the Sleep of Ulro” (*Jerusalem* 4.1), and to extricate himself from the bonds of natural and moral law of which he, himself, is the creator: he “repented that he had made Adam / ... & it grieved him at his heart” (*Laocoön* 54-6). Truth alone is eternal; “Error is Created” (*VLJ* 555), and as Blake reminds us in the plate, “What can be Created / Can be Destroyed” (25-6); it is yet possible, through “Spiritual War” (34) and “Mental Fight” (*Milton*, Preface [“And did those feet in ancient time”] 1.13), to shatter the “Vegetable Glass of Nature” and restore “the Permanent Realities of Every Thing” in the “World of Eternity,” “throwing off the Temporal that the Eternal might be Established” (*VLJ* 545). “Whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual” (551). This apocalyptic realization comes when spiritual vision supersedes corporeal perception, and this requires a vigorous imaginative leap. With his right leg drawn up and right arm extended towards heaven, Blake’s Jehovah/Laocoön appears to be making such a leap, but has not yet left the earth, nor escaped the trammels of poisonous moral virtue; his energetic figure represents “Mental Fight,” the precipitous moment between the lassitude of spiritual slumber and the apocalyptic ecstasy of visionary awakening. In the chapters that follow the reader will see how Blake returns to this figure time and again, both in his artwork and in the illuminated prophecies, and almost always with the same meanings.

CHAPTER THREE:

Deciphering William Blake's Figural Code:

A DICTIONARY for "The Language of Art"

With an examination of Blake's theory of imagination, particularly in connection with his defense of linear form; an explanation of his ideas of universal character and expression, and how these inform his portrayal of Chaucer's pilgrims; an application of these theories to the Laocoön as an exemplum of the "beautiful man"; an analysis of the emergence of the Laocoöntic figure as a pathos formula in connection with Burke's theory of the sublime, with a close analysis of this figure's appearance and significance in Blake's graphic work and early prophetic books.

One of the enduring issues of Blake criticism is the seeming paradox of representing spiritual existence in bodily form. Alluding to Blake's famous statement in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (*MHH*) lambasting Milton as a member "of the Devils party without knowing it" (6), Anne Mellor accuses Blake of belonging to "the human body's party without knowing it" (164). The charge is understandable. After all, if the body of "Natural Man" is the antithesis of "the Soul / or Imagination" (*Laocoön* 28-30), then how can there possibly be at the same time a "Divine Body" or "Eternal Body ... [that] is the Imagination" (41-2)? As Mellor herself explains:

If form, especially the human form, is a sign of man's fall from eternity into the limited, closed world of Urizenic Experience; and if, on the other hand, an austere neoclassical style based on tectonic compositions, abstract linear rhythms, clear outlines, and heroic Michelangelesque nudes ... is the most authentic articulation of antique, divine images; then Blake is at the same time rejecting and affirming form, and especially the human form. (163-4)

If the artist's imagination is capable of apprehending eternal forms, as Blake claims, then why in the illuminated prophecies do those forms manifest such an irrepressible physicality, ranging from the grotesquely violent to the erotic? How does one distinguish imaginary bodies from those perceived by the corporeal senses? And furthermore, what are the differences between physical perception and the imagination, especially if the latter is based on the memory of prior sense experiences? How does Blake reconcile his belief that "no one can ever Design till he has learnd the Language of Art by making many Finishd Copies both of Nature & Art & of whatever comes in his way from Earliest Childhood" (Annotations 628), with his staunch position that "Imagination has nothing to do with Memory" (655); that "Knowledge of Ideal Beauty. is not to be Acquired ... [but] is Born with us ... not

Abstracted nor Compounded from Nature” (637); and that “the Divine Vision [is] not of The World nor of Man ... as. he is a Natural Man but only as he is a Spiritual Man” (655)? To begin with, let the reader consider what Blake actually means by the concept of “imagination.”

In opposition to Lockean psychology, based entirely on sense perception reinforced by mental association, Blake believes the mind can function quite independently of the senses; that it is not necessarily confined to perceptual experience, but can still apprehend eternal truths beyond the “mundane shell” of material existence, though he believes very few people are actually able to do so. He calls this inborn faculty “Con-Science <or Innate Science>” (Annotations 637), spoken directly by “the voice of God” to whoever is willing to listen (603). This is the essential difference between Lockean “memory,” which postulates “that Man Learns all that he Knows” (645), and “inspiration” which is divine revelation; between mere vision, a physical nerve stimulus, and “Visionary Fancy” (*VLJ* 544), which is a spiritual faculty: the one perceives only the “Outward Creation” (455), “the world of Generation or Vegetation” that is “Finite & ... Temporal,” while the other perceives the eternal world beyond space and time (545). For Blake imagination is truth unadulterated by memory: the “world of Imagination is the World of Eternity.” His drawings (and I use the term loosely as he does)¹ and poetry are therefore a “Representation of what Eternally Exists. Really & Unchangeably” (544); and whatever he perceives with his “Imaginative Eye” is not, “as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing,” but rather eternal forms and characters, “organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce,” just as the Hebrew “Prophets describe what they saw in Vision as real and existing men whom they saw with their imaginative and immortal organs” (*DC* 532).

¹ “Painting is Drawing on Canvas & Engraving is drawing on Copper & Nothing Else” (*PA* 563).

Not only does Blake repudiate the skepticism of philosophical materialism, but also church doctrine which “suppose[s] that before [*Adam*] <the Creation> All was Solitude & Chaos,” a “pernicious Idea that ... takes away all sublimity from the Bible & Limits All Existence to Creation & to Chaos To the Time & Space fixed by the Corporeal Vegetative Eye” (*VLJ* 552). As Janet Warner and others have observed (10), such statements by Blake betray the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy on his aesthetic values, which have much in common with certain aspects of mainstream neoclassicism.

Ironically, Blake is critical of Plato for denigrating the arts. In the *Republic* Plato disparages painting as the production of chimerical “appearances” that are “two generations away from the throne of truth” and therefore useless to the citizens of a rational polity (348); likewise poetry, which not only deals with illusory presences (355), but also has the “terrifying capacity” to excite in the listener turbulent and “irrational” passions, “the petulant and varied side of our characters,” which undermine the “intelligent and calm side” of staid reason and manly restraint (358-9). And since reason is, according to Plato, “the best part of the mind which accepts measurements and calculations,” painting and poetry must appeal only to “a low-grade part of the mind,” proliferating tenuous images and exorbitant feelings that would threaten the stability of his ideal state (355), for which reason he advises the banishment of all painters and poets. Blake of course believes exactly the opposite, contending that Plato expounded a “Pernicious Falshood” when he “made Socrates say that Poets & Prophets do not know or Understand what they write or utter” (*VLJ* 544). In the first place, he argues that artists—at least those gifted with spiritual perception—produce divine originals rather than mere copies twice removed from eternal existence. Secondly, he believes painting and poetry to be advantageous rather than detrimental to human civilization: “The Foundation of Empire is Art & Science Remove them or Degrade them & the Empire is

No More—Empire follows Art & Not Vice Versa” (Annotations 625-6). “Genius and Inspiration,” he writes in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, “are the great Origin and Bond of Society” (518). It would be wrong to assume, however, that because Blake disputed Plato on several major points, that he did not agree with him on others.

When Joshua Reynolds attempts in the *Discourses* to debunk the idea of divine inspiration, “to Disprove & Contemn Spiritual Perception” (Annotations 648), Blake cites Plato in defense of his most hallowed aesthetic ideals. It is “absurd,” writes Reynolds, “to conclude, that because painters sometimes represent poets writing from the dictates of a little winged boy or genius, that this same genius did really inform him in a whisper what he was to write; and that he is himself but a mere machine, unconscious of the operations of his own mind” (177-8). Blake must have read this statement and others like it as a personal affront against everything he stood for as an artist and poet,² as part of a broader campaign under the aegis of the Royal Academy to tar and feather him and his artistic allies as “Weak headed Fanatics,” “Vague Enthusiasts or Madmen” (Annotations 647; 636). Writing in his own defense, he reminds himself that both Plato and Milton “affirmd their belief in Vision & Revelation ... They believd that God did Visit Man Really & Truly & not as Reynolds pretends.” Thus, despite his numerous disagreements with Plato, one positive thing Blake took from reading him was corroboration of his belief in a transcendent reality, and that “There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature” (*VLJ* 545).

² See Blake’s invocation in *Milton* (2.1-10):
 Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poets Song
 ... Come into my hand
 By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm
 From out the Portals of my Brain, where by your ministry
 The Eternal Great Humanity Divine. planted his Paradise,
 And in it caus’d the Spectres of the Dead to take sweet forms
 In likeness of himself.

These “ever Existent Images” (544), perceptible only to the prophet’s “imaginative eye,” are not amenable to the vicissitudes of space and time: “In Eternity one Thing never Changes into another Thing Each Identity is Eternal” (546). Like Winckelmann, he conceives these eternal identities as hard linear forms, unsullied by the incidental effects of light and shadow, which accounts for his insistence that line always take precedence over color: “Colouring does not depend on where the Colours are put ... all depends on Form or Outline ... where that is wrong, the Colouring never can be right” (*DC* 520-1). Blake does not despise color save when the painter has contaminated it with the variable effects of light and shadow, but color must always adhere to distinct, unequivocal forms. “The great and golden rule of art,” he later writes, “is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling” (540).³ Line is the basic unit of meaning in Blake’s language of art:

He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see does not imagine at all. The painter of this work [*Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims*] asserts that all his imaginations appear to him infinitely more perfect and more minutely organized than any thing seen by his mortal eye. (532)

³ The same rule applies also to poetry: “Ideas cannot be Given but in their minutely Appropriate Words nor Can a Design be made without its minutely Appropriate Execution” (*PA* 565). See also Blake’s preamble “To the Public” in *Jerusalem* (3):

When this Verse was first dictated to me I consider’d a Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton and Shakespeare ... But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place ... all are necessary to each other.

This preoccupation with “Minute Neatness of Execution” and “Precision of Ideas” and the revulsion roused by “Broken Colours & Broken Lines & Broken Masses” account for Blake’s lifelong aversion to painting in oils and the more modern intaglio processes of aquatint and mezzotint (Annotations 636; 641).

Oil is the medium of “blundering ignorance”; it is “a fetter to genius, and a dungeon to art” (DC 522), an intractable substance unfit for the kind of precise line-drawing favored by Blake. “Oil will not drink or absorb Colour enough to stand the test of very little Time and of the Air; it grows yellow, and at length brown” (518). It is a fallible substance, suitable perhaps for representing the fluxile world of unstable matter, but unbefitting the eternal forms of Blake’s imagination. This is why he deemed relief-etching the most appropriate medium of prophetic vision, and why when he did paint he chose rather to work in the more primitive media of tempera and watercolor, “the Ancient Method of Fresco Painting” (DC 520), than in oil. By calling his paintings “frescoes,” Blake was not only affiliating himself with his Renaissance heroes Michelangelo, Raphael, and Giulio Romano, but also distinguishing himself from his competitors at the Royal Academy, where his paintings were precluded from exhibition on account of his unorthodox materials and working methods.⁴ Undoubtedly, Blake’s vilification of Reynolds, “President of Fools,” and his “Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves” (Annotations 636) were motivated in part by an exalted sense of personal injustice, but he also believed that these artists, by their refusal to conform to his principal of linear design, were not only degrading art, but even worse vitiating public taste with “Laboured ... Journey-work” (635), visually appealing but lacking in substance, and, “obedient to Noble-

⁴ In the advertisement for his 1809 exhibition Blake explains the necessity of an independent solo exhibition: “The execution of my Designs, being all in Water-colours, (that is in Fresco) are regularly refused to be exhibited by the *Royal Academy*, and the *British Institution* has, this year, followed its example, and has effectually excluded me by this Resolution” (518).

mens Opinions” (632), gratifying the vanity and material aspirations of private patrons rather than presenting before the public and men of all classes the truth of divine wisdom as revealed to the genuinely inspired artist. In this hostility towards degenerate “False Art” (570) and its deleterious effect on humanity, Blake at times sounds very much like Plato.⁵

He singles out for invective and ridicule the painters Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Thomas Stothard; as well as the engravers Robert Strange, William Woollett, Francesco Bartolozzi, and especially Louis Schiavonetti, or “Assassinetti” (Satiric Verses and Epigrams [SVE] 495), who all but robbed Blake’s commission to engrave his own designs illustrating Robert Blair’s *Grave* (1808).⁶ What all these artists have in common, according to Blake, is the total subversion of linear form through the indiscriminate deployment of naturalistic light and color, emulating the “Venetian and Flemish Demons” (*DC* 537), whose “practice is broken lines, broken masses, and broken colors” (529), while neglecting the true sublime of

⁵ Compare for example Socrates’ claim, that the poet represents “whatever appeals to a large, if ignorant, audience” (354), to Blake’s that “Such Prints as Woollett & Strange produced will do for those who choose to purchase the Lifes labour of Ignorance & Imbecility” (*PA* 563).

⁶ Stothard was elected to the Royal Academy in 1794 and became its librarian in 1812. Primarily a commercial painter and decorative designer, among Blake scholars he is remembered for his popularly received painting of the *Canterbury Pilgrims*, later engraved by Schiavonetti and James Heath, which overshadowed Blake’s version exhibited in 1809. Blake always claimed the idea was stolen from him. Strange was famous for his engravings after old masters, particularly van Dyck, a Flemish painter serving in the court of Charles I, whom Blake credits with making oil the standard medium of painting in England (*DC* 522). Both Strange and Woollett engraved after Benjamin West, for which Strange was knighted in 1787 and Woollett appointed historical engraver to the king in 1775. Bartolozzi was a founding member of the Royal Academy, and for a long time was the only engraver among its ranks. He was known primarily for his “Modern Chalcographic” manner of mezzotint engraving, despised by Blake (*PA* 566). Much of this biographical information was taken from Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (xxiii-xxix).

“Florentine and Roman” linearity (537).⁷ Their masters are the Venetians: Titian and Tintoretto, Veronese and the “petty Prince” Correggio, who “infuses a love of soft and even tints without boundaries, and of endless reflected lights, that confuse one another, and hinder all correct drawing” (538); and the Flemish painters van Dyck, Rembrandt and Rubens, the “most outrageous demon” of all, whose “Shadows are of a Filthy Brown somewhat of the Colour of Excrement ... filld with tints & messes of yellow & red His lights are all the Colours of the Rainbow laid on Indiscriminately & broken one into another” (Annotations 644).⁸ The importation of “Venetian & Flemish Ooze” (SVE 505), and “that infernal machine, called Chiaro Oscuro” (DC 537), or as Blake calls it elsewhere the “Book of Moonlight” (SVE 506), has fomented British artists’ “Contempt & Neglect of Form” (Annotations 640) and infects their compositions with “Smears & Dawbs” (PA 570), “Blots & Blurs,” and “Natures Shadows ... Ever varying” (564-5). By these their line is made

⁷ Blake makes the same claim against eighteenth century British poetry. By way of analogy, Milton and Shakespeare are to Michelangelo and Raphael what Dryden and Pope are to Correggio and Rubens. What he despises in Augustan poetry is its superfluous wit and contrivance; its tuneful prettiness, “the Metaphysical Jargon of Rhyming” (PA 565) and “Monotonous Sing Song Sing Song” of the heroic couplet (570), and moral pettiness, which he deems obstructions to sublime vision. Furthermore, like the above-named engravers whose fame rested on copying after old masters, Blake dismisses Pope and Dryden as copyists and imitators (564). Most readers are familiar with Pope’s translations of Homer and Dryden’s *Aeneid*. Both men did a hatchet job on Shakespeare in an effort to regulate his meter and impose Aristotelian principals of dramatic structure; and in collaboration with Nat Lee, Dryden also penned a libretto, *The State of Innocence, and the Fall of Man*, which attempted the same with Milton. Blake makes reference to this last work in the *Public Address*: “Now let Drydens Fall & Miltons Paradise be read & I will assert that every Body of Understanding must cry out Shame on such Niggling & Poco Pen as Dryden has degraded Milton with But at the same time I will allow that Stupidity will Prefer Dryden because it is in Rhyme ... from Beginning to end Such are Bartollozzi Woolett & Strange” (570).

⁸ As a demonstration of Rubens’ popularity and influence in the Academy, Blake recalls an early encounter with the enameler and metalsmith George Moser:

I was looking over the Prints from Rafael & Michael Angelo. In the Library of the Royal Academy Moser came to me & said You should not Study these old Hard Stiff & Dry Unfinishd Works of Art, Stay a little & I will shew you what you should Study. He then went & took down Le Bruns & Rubens’s Galleries Hoq I did secretly Rage. (Annotations 628)

feeble and uncertain; like a lame animal it “Doubts & Hesitates in the Midst of its Course,” and therefore is inadequate to convey the radiant, boldly pronounced forms of inspired vision; for as Blake reminds us, “Original Invention” cannot “Exist without Execution Organized & minutely delineated & Articulated” (565). Even as they basked in the glow of their celebrity and reaped the lucre of commercial success, these artists impressed Blake the same as men crippled by disease: “The Lifes Labour of Mental Weakness scarcely equals one Hour of the Labour of Ordinary Capacity like the full Gallop of the Gouty Man to the ordinary walk of youth & health” (562).⁹ In his view they are no less Satan’s minions than Bacon, Newton or Locke.

Like his radical millenarian compatriots who prophesied an immanent apocalypse that would purge England’s corrupt political and ecclesiastical institutions, Blake believed a similar fate lay in store for the Royal Academy and the mercantile arts culture propagated by its affiliates,¹⁰ and that he was, like the prophet Jeremiah, an unacknowledged messenger of impending doom. Motivated by “Love to My Art & Zeal for my Country” (*PA* 563), his radical politics is bound up with his aesthetic ideals; deliverance from tyranny cannot take place wherever art and poetry remain in a degraded, servile state.¹¹ “The Last Judgment,” he

⁹ Blake often resorts to metaphors of disease and derangement in describing offensive artwork; for example: “When I see a Rubens Rembrant Correggio / I think of the Crippled Harry & Slobbering Joe” (*SVE* 506).

¹⁰ Like the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Sciences, and Manufactures, which had unconscionably mistreated Barry after commissioning him to paint the monumental murals decorating its assembly hall: “The Society ... Sufferd Barry to Give them, his Labour for Nothing A Society Composed of the Flower of the English Nobility & Gentry ... Suffering an Artist to Starve while he Supported Really what They under pretence of Encouraging were Endeavouring to Depress” (*Annotations* 626).

¹¹ For Blake, political revolution alone, unguided by the arts, is destined to fail, since “You cannot have Liberty in this World without Moral Virtue & you cannot have Moral Virtue without the Slavery of that half of the Human Race who hate <what you call> Moral Virtue” (*VLJ* 554). The artist, however, is the messenger of Christian forgiveness and the

writes, “is an Overwhelming of Bad Art & Science” (*VLJ* 555). Thus, he perceived himself as a savior, a “Mental Prince” (*PA* 569),¹² whose divine mission and “Public Duty” (560) it was to combat the “Contemptible Counter Arts,” to “obstinately adhere to the true Style of Art ... [the Art of Invention not of Imitation],” and “To recover Art ... to the Florentine Original” of linear idealism (569). For Blake, the artist’s imagination guides the viewer to salvation along a path clearly demarcated by firm, determinate lines.

As the basic unit of meaning in Blake’s pictorial symbolism, line is essential to the development of what he calls “character.” “Where there are no lineaments there can be no character” (*DC* 531). By character Blake means the “eternal principles” or “attributes” of humanity that transcend history (time) and geography (space), all of which are united in eternity in the divine body of Jesus. While Plato and Winckelmann concentrate mostly on form, regarding character and expression as deviations from the ideal, Blake believes in the eternal existence of “characters which compose all ages and nations ... different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again ... nothing new occurs in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change nor decay” (523). Of course, only those blessed with superior imaginative faculties are capable of discerning these “characters of human life [which] appear to poets in all ages” (527). In the past they were represented by the “ancient Cherubim of Phoenicia,” those “wonderful originals” Blake claims to have witnessed in visions (522), and then later as

voice of universal fraternity. “Cunning & Morality are not Poetry but Philosophy ... Poetry is to excuse Vice & shew its reason & necessary purgation” (*Annotations* 623). Revolution is rational, predicated on individual rights; true liberty is visionary and spiritual, and has nothing to do with the conditions of material existence.

¹² The archangel Michael, God’s champion, is identified as a “prince” in the prophet Daniel’s vision (*Dan.* 10:13, 21). In the Revelation of John it is Michael who leads the charge against Satan and his accomplices (12:7-9).

the gods of Greco-Roman civilization. No less than the sculptor or painter, he believes poets, too, can accomplish this rarefied discrimination of character, rendering no less precisely in the medium of language what the artist renders in the medium of line.¹³ And while Blake regularly credits Michelangelo and Raphael for their visual acuity and linear precision, when he comes to elaborate on his theory of character, he turns to a literary source: Chaucer.



In the 1809 exhibition Blake included his fresco painting of *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury* (**fig. 3-1**), in which he emulates the broad, frieze-like compositions of such Italian masters as Romano and Annibale Carracci. Previously, he had planned to execute a commercial print of the scene, to be published by Robert Cromek; but in the aftermath of Cromek's decision in late 1805 to fire him as the engraver for Blair's *Grave*, Blake apparently backed out of the project. Within a matter of weeks Cromek passed the commission to Stothard, whose nearly identical picture of the Canterbury pilgrims was very well received upon its exhibition in 1806, and eventually published as a highly profitable print.¹⁴ Thus, Blake's decision to go ahead with the painting and engraving was partly motivated by intense personal animosity. In the 1809 *Catalogue* he claims to have proceeded out of "self-defence" against a "class of artists whose whole art and science is fabricated for the purpose of destroying art," and who had publicly disparaged his work as the incomprehensible product of "eccentricity and madness" (528-9). He makes very clear that Stothard is at the center of this cabal, and his prose is peppered with satirical

¹³ Blake's belief in the definitude at least of inspired, prophetic language is revealed in his criticism of Lockean semiotics: "Lockes Opinions of Words & their Fallaciousness are Artful Opinions & Fallacious also" (Annotations 648).

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the complex circumstances behind Blake's break with Cromek and the debacle over the Chaucer commission see Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, pp. 291-304.

denunciations of Stothard's handling of the subject, at one point calling his painting a "burlesque set of scare-crows, not worth any man's respect or care," "dumb dollies" haphazardly "thrown together" and marred with the oily "spots of brown and yellow" symptomatic of a blighted, degenerate imagination (530-1).

Shrewd as these remarks may seem, Blake was no mere opportunist seeking to edge out his competition for commercial advantage. His genuine and enthusiastic admiration for the *Canterbury Tales* is apparent in the *Descriptive Catalogue* entry—the longest, taking up 28 of the catalog's 66 pages; and his assessment of Chaucer's characterization of individual pilgrims constitutes the most sustained piece of literary criticism he ever published. Not only did he complete the painting in an effort to redeem his artistic reputation and jumpstart a stalled career, but also to preserve Chaucer's reputation as Britain's first great national poet of the prophetic tradition, as a model of inspired genius for all future generations to follow. He praises Chaucer as "the great poetical observer of men, who in every age is born to record and eternize its acts" (*DC* 525). His picture therefore depicts the entire cast of pilgrims from the General Prologue as they depart from the Tabard Inn on their journey to Canterbury (Chaucer himself appears in the rear of the procession, situated between the Clerk and Reeve). The choice of subject is significant, for it reveals Blake's concern not so much with the events of the individual tales as with the people telling them (just as the General Prologue, itself, is more descriptive than narrative), for together the pilgrims comprise a "Complete Index of Human Characters as they appear Age after Age" (*PA* 560). Chaucer's greatness, therefore, does not reside in his narrative versatility, or in his facility with language and verse forms, but rather in his visionary conception of such "eternal principles or characters of human life [as] appear to poets in all ages" (*DC* 527). Thus, Blake claims not only to *illustrate* Chaucer by faithfully copying "every particular of Dress or

Costume” “according to authentic monuments,”¹⁵ and rendering the “Scene or Landscape with its Villages Cottages Churches & the Inn in Southwark” “as it may be supposed to have appeared in Chaucer’s time” (*Blake’s Chaucer* [CP] 557; DC 523-24), but also to see with his “Imaginative Eye” the same eternal characters that inspired Chaucer, and to delineate their forms no less clearly on canvas than they are described in verse.

As representatives of eternal existence, Chaucer’s pilgrims transcend all material and historical contingencies; they are “the characters which compose all ages and nations ... different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same ... repeated again and again, in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men” (DC 523).¹⁶ Although decked in medieval trappings and situated in a specific place and time, they retain their eternal semblances just the same; for while “Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change nor decay.” They are, Blake continues, “the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life beyond which Nature never steps,” and though their “names or titles are altered by time ... the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered,” each one “perfect in his kind ... the image of a class, and not of an imperfect individual” (DC 527). Likewise, their journey to the shrine of Saint Thomas at Canterbury is more than a holy pilgrimage of more or less devout

¹⁵ Blake is probably referring to work done during his apprenticeship with James Basire in the 1770s, copying and engraving the monuments of Westminster Abbey and other London churches. It was Basire who trained Blake in the old fashioned techniques of line engraving, which later prejudiced him against the more fashionable and lucrative methods of aquatint and mezzotint.

¹⁶ S. Foster Damon has suggested that Blake derived many of his ideas about Chaucer from a most unlikely source, Dryden, who had praised the medieval poet as the “father of English poetry” in the preface to his *Fables* (1700), a collection mostly of his translations of Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio, and portions of the *Canterbury Tales*. Dryden goes on to praise Chaucer’s keen observation of “the various manners and humours (as we now call them) of the whole English nation, in his age”; and of the pilgrims he remarks that “their general characters are still remaining in mankind ... though they are called by other names than those of Monks, and Friars, and Canons, and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns; for mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though everything is altered” (Damon 78-9).

individuals; it is the journey of all men, in all times: the “Journey of Life” (*CP* 558). “Every age is a Canterbury Pilgrimage,” writes Blake, “we all pass on, each sustaining one or other of these characters” (*DC* 526). And to delineate all these characters as faithfully as Chaucer has done requires the artist to adhere to the “golden rule” of firm, determinate outline. “As Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant,” so must the painter minutely “attend to the Hands & Feet to the Lineaments of the Countenances they are all descriptive of Character & not a line is drawn without intention & that most discriminate & particular” (*VLJ* 550). Like the General Prologue, then, Blake’s picture aims to present a “Complete Index of Human Characters” that could, theoretically at least, function somewhat independently of Chaucer’s text, so long as “the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought.”

To demonstrate Blake’s perspicacity, it is necessary at this point to make a closer examination of the “physiognomies and lineaments” of certain of his “characters,” both as they appear in the engraving and as he describes them in the *Catalogue*.¹⁷ The character of the Knight (**fig. 3-2**), for example, is a “true hero, a good, great, and wise man ... that species of character which in every age stands as the guardian of man against the oppressor” (*DC* 524). Chaucer’s women can be “divided into two classes” (528), typified by the Prioress (Madame Eglentyne), riding near the front of the train, and the Wife of Bath positioned in the rear. The character of the Prioress is one of unassuming gracefulness and Christian goodness; “so charitable and so pitous,” according to Chaucer, “She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bleede” (1: 143-6). With her “al was conscience

¹⁷ The fact that Blake describes them at all seems to betray a lack of faith in his viewers’ capacity to achieve the kind of fulgorous contemplation he deems necessary to fully understand and appreciate his picture. Ultimately, to take in all of Blake’s meaning, one must also be familiar with Chaucer’s text. This is also the basic premise of the illuminated prophecies, where text and image form a complementary unity (see the discussion of the sister-arts controversy in chapter one).

and *tendre herte*" (150), and upon her arm she wears a "brooch of gold," decorated with a cross and inscribed with the motto "*Amor vincit omnia*" (160-2). Her conscience (a term Blake preferred to "virtue") is reflected in her unassuming demeanor and superlative beauty, "the beauty of our ancestors, till after Elizabeth's time, when voluptuousness and folly began to be accounted beautiful" (Blake *DC* 524); and in the engraving Blake is careful to observe all the minute details of Chaucer's description (**fig. 3-2**): her "nose tretys" and "mouth ful smal, and thereto soft and reed"; and her "fair forheed; / ... almost a spanne brood" (152-5).

The character of the Wife of Bath, by contrast, is "a scourge and a blight" (Blake *DC* 528). Although widely regarded by contemporary readers as one of Chaucer's more sympathetic and entertaining characters, for Blake she is but a vile incarnation of licentiousness, guilefulness, and gross materialism, analogous in his imagination to the *Whore of Babylon* (**fig. 3-6**), who in the Bible appears "clothed in purple and scarlet, and decked out with gold and precious stones and pearls," sitting astride a "scarlet beast" and holding forth "a gold cup full of obscenities and the foulness of her fornication" (Rev. 17:3-4). Blake's Wife of Bath is not, of course, mounted upon some apocalyptic monster, but the pommel of her riding crop is carved in the figure of a dragon's head; and while it seems reasonable to assume that her cup is not brimming with seminal spirits, nowhere in the General Prologue is there any mention of her taking her "mornings draught of comfort" with the Cook (*CP* 558), further demonstrating the necessity of additional symbols to substantiate Blake's interpretation of her character; likewise the cross she wears, nestled blasphemously in the cleavage of her ponderous, outworn bosom.¹⁸ Chaucer does, however, describe her "hosen ... of fyn scarlet reed" (I: 456); and her extravagant wimple, "As brood as is a bokeler

¹⁸ Another visual parallel between the Wife of Bath and the Whore of Babylon is the heart-shaped locket each wears around her neck.

or a targe” (471), becomes in Blake’s picture a kind of mock-halo of stiff brocade and lace. But the main reasons for Blake’s harsh view of her character are to be found in the prologue of her tale.

Unlike the Prioress, who stands for Christian charity and compassion, the Wife of Bath is an unscrupulous and selfish creature of appetite. Calculating human relationships in terms of gains and losses, she reduces marriage and sexual intimacy to a vulgar commerce of goods and services. As she explains to her fellow travelers, once her five successive husbands “had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor; / Me neded nat do lenger diligence / To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence” (III: 204-6).¹⁹ She uses love to assert her will and dominate over the male sex. *Femina vincit omnia* is her motto: “An housbonde I wol have ... Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral ... I have the power duryng al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he” (154-9). For her, love is synonymous with conquest, and marriage a kind of domestic warfare that demands no less cunning and fierce resolve in the wife than in a soldier on the field of battle:

For certes, I am all Venerien
 In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.
 Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
 And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse. (609-12)

The gratification of her sexual urges and accumulation of property and wealth are her principal motives in pursuing men and marriage; and this self-centered, worldly attitude is totally incompatible with Blake’s idea of Christian humility and compassion. At one point she argues, tendentiously, that Christ “Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle / Al that he

¹⁹ The Riverside edition of Chaucer divides the *Canterbury Tales* into ten “fragments” with separately numbered lines; these are indicated by roman numerals within citations.

hadde, and gyve it to the poore, / And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore.” He was, she continues, addressing himself only “to hem that wolde lyve parfitly; / And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I” (107-12). Blake could not have agreed more with this last statement, as evidenced by her hideous visage in the engraving (**fig. 3-2**), with its low, receding forehead, drooping eyes, large nose, mottled complexion, and wide jack-o-lantern (“gat-tothed”) mouth twisted into a lewd and loutish grin.

Complementing the opposing pair of the Prioress and Wife of Bath are the characters of the Pardoner and Parson. The Pardoner appears on the right side of the composition, a few paces behind the Prioress, the Parson on the left side, just ahead of the Wife of Bath. Riding between the two men is the portly Host, Harry Bailly, turned in his saddle with arms outstretched, as if beckoning the viewer to distinguish between the two men, and to choose which is more deserving of emulation or condemnation. The Pardoner is the most luxuriantly attired male in the group (**fig. 3-2**), “al of the newe jet” (I: 682), with a tunic of fine fabric, richly dyed and embroidered on the back with a red cross; gloves embellished with delicately stitched devices; and genteel shoes curling to a sharp, devil’s-tail point. In his right hand he brandishes a “croys of latoun ful of stones” (699); and by his side hangs an ornate bag full of indulgences (pardons), “comen from Rome al hoot” (687); “Bulles of popes and of cardynales, / Of patriarkes and bishopes” (VI: 342-3); and small glass reliquaries containing nothing but dirty old rags and animal bones (348).

As Blake reads Chaucer, the Pardoner is the embodiment of spiritual hypocrisy, a conniver and enemy of Christ—the Anti-christ, “sent in every age for a rod and scourge, and for a blight, for a trial of men, to divide the classes of men” (*DC* 526). It is he “who always commands and domineers over the high and low vulgar”; and this he accomplishes by appealing to the vanity of the powerful and exploiting the ignorance of “lewed peple”

(Chaucer VI: 437): “And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes, / He made the person and the peple his apes” (I: 705-6). Armed with a papal mandate, he travels from parish to parish, selling indulgences and exacting tribute for his counterfeit relics. Rather than spreading the gospel of Christian forgiveness of sin, he preaches “of no thyng but for coveityse” (VI: 424), preying upon the guilty conscience in order to sustain his extravagant lifestyle; “For myn entente,” he confesses, “is nat but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correccioun of synne” (403-4). Hardly less worse is his abuse of the power of the holy office to destroy his personal enemies, weaving defamatory remarks into the tissue of his sermons, delivered from the unassailable position of the pulpit: “Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe / Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe” (421-2). Under the pretence of Christian virtue, he sows discord to reap the profits of sin, while at the same time reveling in his own lubricity and avarice (427-31). This flagrant hypocrisy is symbolized by the “vernycle”²⁰ sewn onto the top of his cap (I: 685). Christ’s visage is plainly visible in Blake’s engraving opposite the profile of the Pardoner, whose head is turned backward to face the Host, in a manner perhaps intended to resemble the two-faced Roman god Janus, thereby evoking the Pardoner’s duplicity in spiritual and ecclesiastical matters.

The hood of his holy office he keeps “trussed up in his walet” (I: 681) so as not to conceal his beautiful “heer as yelow as wex” from the ladies in his company (675). Accordingly, Blake has portrayed his Pardoner “dischevelee” (683), his locks spread across his shoulders like the tendrilous fingers of some vile demon reaching down as if to tear away the broidered cross from his back. He also represents him clean-shaven, as Chaucer describes in the General Prologue (689), thus revealing a fair complexion and receding chin that, together with his sharply angled nose (like that of Blak’s Newton), surely indicates “a ful

²⁰ The vernycle, or Veronica, was a reproduction of St. Veronica’s veil, said to bear the actual imprint of Christ’s face (*Volto Santo*).

vicious man” (VI: 459), as it does elsewhere in Blake’s art.²¹ The Pardoner’s high, flattened forehead perhaps indicates an above-average intelligence, but in his person utterly vitiated by concupiscence and material ambition. Chaucer describes his eyes as being alert “as an hare” (I: 684), but Blake has set them close together, right on the bridge of his nose, possibly to suggest his narrow, self-centered view of the world. Overall, the Pardoner’s appearance is exceedingly effeminate; and even though he does not ride sidesaddle, as do the Prioress and Wife of Bath, it would be easy to mistake him at a glance for a woman. He is the only male rider wearing an earring, a detail unique to Blake’s design; but Chaucer does describe his appearance as sexually ambiguous: “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” (691). In Blake’s poetry, hermaphroditism is generally a mark of spiritual degeneracy, indicating a state of internal strife and division. In the *Four Zoas (FZ)*, for example, Satan manifests as “a Shadowy hermaphrodite, black and opaque” (101^b.34); and in *Milton*, divided from his Emanation Ololon in Eternity, Blake’s eponymous hero identifies himself as Satan,²² the spiritual embodiment of sexual conflict, described as “A mounful form double; hermaphroditic: male & female / In one wonderful body” (14.37-8). Like Chaucer’s viraginous Wife of Bath, who bears at once “the prente of seinte Venus seel” and “Martes [Mars’] mark upon my face” (Chaucer III: 604; 619), the Pardoner’s sexual indeterminacy

²¹ For example, see John Linnell’s copy of Blake’s drawing (now lost) of “The Man who Built the Pyramids” (**fig. 3-7**) one of a large number of so called “visionary heads” Blake produced in the early 1820s for his friend John Varley’s *Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy*, of which only the first of a projected four volumes ever went to press (1828). The Egyptian pyramids appear frequently in Blake’s poetry and art as symbols of material oppression and false religion. Exploring the “interiors of Albions / Bosom ... Caves of solitude & dark despair,” Los observes “souls ... bak’d / In bricks to build the pyramids of Heber & Terah” (*Jerusalem* 45.3-12). Thus, Blake’s visualization of the builder must be regarded as the physiognomy of evil.

²² “I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One! / He is my Spectre!” (14.30-1).

betrays his satanic egoism; and both characters are regarded by Blake as “Hermaphroditic worshippers of a God of cruelty & law” (*Jerusalem* 90.55).

While the Pardoner hypocritically refuses to abide by the moral lesson of his own tale (*Radix malorum est cupiditas*),²³ Chaucer’s Parson not only preaches the everlasting gospel, but also lives by its word: “Cristes loore and his apostles twelve / He taughte; but first he folwed it hymselfe” (I: 527-8); for “Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive, / By his clenness, how that his sheep sholde lyve” (505-6). Unlike the Pardoner, who boasts of his papal investiture and expects nothing less deferential treatment and veneration, the Parson “waited after no pompe and reverence” (525); nor does he exhibit any interest in material gain: “He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie” (514), whose only wealth is a lifetime’s accumulation of “hooly thoght and werk” (479). “He sette nat his benefice to hyre / And leet his sheep encombred in the myre” (507-8); rather, “To drawen folk to hevne by fairnesse, / By good ensample, this was his bisynesse” (519-20). And while the Pardoner preys mercilessly upon the guilty conscience without the least regard for redemption, the Parson displays true Christian compassion and courtesy: “He was to synful mennat despitous, / Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne, / But in his techyng discreet and benygne” (516-7).

What Blake must have found especially appealing in the character of the Parson is his stern refusal to entertain his fellow pilgrims with a tale, offering instead to give a sober and lengthy sermon on repentance and the proper path to salvation. Citing Paul’s admonition to Timothy that he should “have nothing to do with superstitious myths, mere old wives’ tales” (1 Tim. 4:7), he informs Harry Bailly that he will have nothing to do with “tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.” “Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,” he explains, “Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?” (Chaucer X, 34-6). Moreover, he dissociates himself

²³ “The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Tim. 6:10).

from canonical church doctrine, “for I am nat textueel” (57), and claims to speak rather from divine inspiration, that is prophetically:

And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende
 To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,
 Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage
 That highte Jerusalem celestial. (48-51)

This passage is analogous to Blake’s statement at the beginning of *Jerusalem* announcing the theme of his great prophecy to be transcribed word for word from the lips of Christ: “I see the Saviour over me / Spreading his beams of love, & dictating the words of this mild song” (4.5). The Parson is therefore the character of the visionary poet-artist, “a real Messenger of Heaven, sent in every age for its light and its warmth” (Blake *DC* 527). He is what Blake himself most aspired to become—to deliver the message of eternal truth to his countrymen, who seemed to him not to care about either their own salvation or that of their nation, and who neglected to honor his productions with their patronage. The extent to which Blake identifies himself with the Parson is apparent in his admonition to the “rich and powerful” of England to seek out such visionary men “and obey their counsel,” for “then shall the golden age return.” “But alas!” he laments, “you will not easily distinguish him from the Friar or the Pardoner [i.e. the gang of Reynolds] ... and their counsel you will continue to follow.”

Chaucer does not provide many details regarding the Parson’s physical aspect or demeanor, but in Blake’s engraving his appearance is in every way the obverse of the Pardoner, from the pale color of his steed, to his plain black robes and matching cap on his venerable head (**fig. 3-2**). His hands are bare, strong and coarsened by years of “hooly thoght and werk,” as opposed to the Pardoner’s, who “wol nat do no labour with myne handes” (Chaucer VI: 444). His long white beard further testifies to his wisdom and experience, yet it

does not conceal from the viewer his austere yet gentle profile. He has full lips, firm but not sensual; a well-proportioned nose; and a high forehead, complemented by a prominent brow signifying his spiritual sagacity and highly developed imaginative faculties.

If Chaucer's pilgrims are to be reckoned as eternal characters, as Blake has suggested, "the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life beyond which Nature never steps" (*DC* 523-4), then to make sense of his painting one must approach it as a kind of physiognomic atlas of the human face and head, and, by examining each pilgrim in turn, attempt to elucidate essential links between morphology and character. Blake was not, of course, the first person to posit the existence of such links; indeed, as Anne Mellor has shown, most of his ideas about physiognomy and phrenology came from his close study of the writings of Lavater and Spurzheim. That Blake was an enthusiastic admirer of Lavater's theories is demonstrated by his sympathetic annotations to the *Aphorisms on Man*, translated by Lavater's old schoolmate Fuseli and published by Joseph Johnson in 1788. Lavater's seminal *Essays on Physiognomy*, translated by Henry Hunter, appeared in three volumes (issued in five parts) between 1789 and 1798; and once again, Fuseli was involved in almost every phase of the project, from supervising and proofreading the translation, to designing and overseeing the engraving of illustrative plates. It was probably Fuseli who called upon his friend Blake to execute four plates for the first volume, thus proving that Blake was at least familiar with the work, if not already an avid reader, from the very beginning of his artistic and literary career.

Lavater defines physiognomy as "the talent of discovering the interior of Man by his exterior"; it is "the Science of discovering the relation ... between the visible surface and the invisible spirit which it covers—between the animated, perceptible matter, and the imperceptible principle which impresses this character of life upon it—between the apparent

effect, and the concealed cause which produces it” (1: 20). In short, he believes that it is possible for one to ascertain the mental faculties and moral character of any individual (including animals)²⁴ by scrutinizing the morphology and proportions of the physical body, particularly the face and forehead. Moreover, as a devout Christian minister, he believed that one’s mental and moral makeup was innate, appointed by god, and therefore confirmation of divine providence:

Almighty God! how innumerable are the human beings whom thou hast created; and what an astonishing variety in their figures! They all bear the impress of thy marvellous Wisdom; and the meanest, the most deformed, the most wretched among them, is still the object of thy Love, and the workmanship of thy Goodness.”²⁵ (2: 43)

Blake did not, of course, share Lavater’s faith in the benignity and “marvellous wisdom” of providential design; but as Mellor points out, Lavater’s physiognomy is a “branch of philosophical idealism” (“Physiognomy, Phrenology, and Blake’s Visionary Heads” 56) “powerfully opposed [to] the implicit materialism and determinism of Locke’s mechanist

²⁴ Lavater devotes several essays to the physiognomy of animals, ranging from insects, to horses and monkeys (2: 96-144). Writing of the horses of his Canterbury pilgrims, Blake claims not only to have “varied the heads and forms of his personages into all Nature’s varieties,” but also “the Horses ... to accord to their Riders” (*DC* 524).

²⁵ The illustration accompanying this passage presents a freakish panoply of human figures (**fig. 3-8**): those “born straight and regularly conformed,” who “enjoy the precious gifts of health and reason” (43), as well as those “infirm and impotent in body, and weak in understanding” (44). As a representation of the “astonishing variety” of humanity, it resembles Blake’s procession of Canterbury pilgrims, who likewise represent “all Nature’s varieties,” the “lineaments of universal human life beyond which Nature never steps” (*DC* 524); and it is plausible that Blake had this image or others like it in mind when he conceived his Chaucer painting.

psychology, which held that man's intellectual and moral ideas were wholly derived from physical sensations" (53).²⁶

Thus, while he may not subscribe to Lavater's theological premises, Blake apparently accepts the general idea of a correspondence between one's spiritual condition and physical form; as he writes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93), "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (4). In addition, he would have approved Lavater's contention that the "true physiognomist" must possess not only "a quick, penetrating, and just eye," but also "maturity of judgment" and "a strong and lively imagination" that functions independent of the senses (1: 119-21). He must be able not only to apply himself to the minute observation and classification of physical traits, and assign some spiritual significance to each, but also to "recall them easily and whenever he will ... to act upon them with as little difficulty as if the objects were present; and as if it depended only upon himself to transpose them at pleasure" (121). Indeed, according to Lavater, the most exemplary physiognomists historically have been artists, and many of his illustrative examples are taken from celebrated paintings and sculptures, both ancient and modern. One of his longer essays is devoted entirely to the works of Raphael, "the greatest Painter that ever existed" (2: 324), whose artistic genius amounts to a form of divine grace. "He is," the author muses, "with regard to painters, what the apostles were compared with the rest of mankind" (356). Lavater's essay examines upwards of fifty separate figures from Raphael's pictures, in which he claims to find "subjects of the most interesting, and the most instructive for the science of Physiognomies" (324).

²⁶ Of course, Locke would retort that Lavater's hypotheses are based entirely on associations acquired through a lifetime of sense experience, and reveal more the prejudices of the individual man than the supreme will of god.

Lavater's identification of Raphael as an "apostolical man" (356) would certainly have appealed to Blake, who believed legitimate artists, including Raphael, to be specially gifted, visionary men capable of distilling eternal truths from the delusive forms of fallen nature. His fanciful portrait of "The Man who Taught [him] Painting in his Dreams" is, itself, a physiognomic exercise (**fig. 3-9**), and Mellor has done an earnest and convincing job of deciphering the bizarrely prominent ridges and furrows of the man's skull in relation to Spurzheim's phrenological graphs as well as Lavater's hypotheses. The picture belongs to a fantastic series of so called "visionary heads" executed by Blake between 1819 and 1825. That these drawings were based on real "visions" is corroborated by the accounts of various friends and acquaintances at the time. One such friend was John Varley, who not only encouraged Blake to put down his visions on paper, but intended also to use them as illustrations for his *Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy*, in which he postulates a correlation between human morphology and the alignment of heavenly bodies.²⁷ This project, one of Blake's last, thus demonstrates his continued engagement with physiognomic theory into the twilight of his career.

At some point, a thorough and complete exposition of the design of Blake's Canterbury pilgrims should be attempted, but for the present a simple demonstration of Lavater's influence will suffice. That many of the details of Blake's figures described above have their basis in Lavater's theories can be demonstrated by concentrating on the heads of the spiritually opposed Parson and Pardoner (**fig. 3-4**), arguably the two most important characters in the composition, who appear as if hanging in a balance formed by the Host's outstretched arms. Lavater's *Essays* treat each feature of the face individually, with separate

²⁷ Of the four projected volumes of Varley's work, only the first was published, in 1828. Blake's famous *Ghost of a Flea* appears in this volume, engraved by Linnell.

sections devoted to the eyes, nose, ears, mouth, and chin, all of which contain information that would help to elucidate the character of both men;²⁸ but the profile view affords the best opportunity to examine the forehead, which is the most comprehensive and revealing of all facial features. It is the “gate of the soul,” writes Lavater. “Of all the parts of the face it is the most important and the most characteristic”; its angles and contours “mark the *disposition* and the *measure* of our *faculties*, our way of thinking and feeling” (3: 273).

Looking first at the forehead of the Pardoner, Blake’s Anti-christ, one first notes its exceptional verticality, wherefore it falls under the classification of “perpendicular foreheads” (2: 236). Foreheads of this type, according to Lavater, indicate a character “incapable of forming a single reasonable idea”; “complete perpendicularity,” he later observes, signifies a “total want of understanding” (3: 276). Such a forehead belongs to those who “do all according to weight and measure; they reduce all to rule and compass,” while “every thing belonging to the province of imagination is foreign to them” (2: 237). The best example of this tendency in the *Essays* is the profile image of Judas Iscariot (**fig. 3-10**), copied after Holbein, which arouses in Lavater a natural and irrepressible antipathy, “a primitive feeling ... warn[ing] us at once to expect from it neither generosity, nor tenderness, nor elevation of mind” (1: 186). As the man responsible for betraying Christ, and whose loyalty could be had for a price, Judas shares many ignoble qualities with the avaricious Pardoner, and it is plausible that Blake recalled this massive Frankensteinian forehead when he set about drawing that of his own mock-apostle.

Of additional significance is the Pardoner’s lack of a detectable brow ridge, since Lavater discovers “great elevation of mind and goodness of heart in those whose eyebrow is

²⁸ For example, chins that “project beyond the under lip,” like that of the Parson, suggest to Lavater the “idea of a mind active and acute”; while the Pardoner’s “retreating” chin excites “suspicion of some weak side” (3: 393).

very apparent” (3: 277). “When the bone of the eye is prominent,” he continues, “you have the sign of a singular aptitude for mental labour, of an extraordinary sagacity for great enterprises.” While its absence from the Pardoner’s profile thus indicates mental infirmity, insolence, and callousness, its conspicuousness in the profile of the Parson, by contrast, reflects imagination, humility, and Christian compassion. As for the rest of the Parson’s forehead, it slopes gently backward, which Lavater claims is a further sign of “imagination, spirit, [and] delicacy” (276); and the even convergence of these two arcs—the slope of the forehead and brow ridge—conform to Lavater’s ideal profile: “Always consider as the sign of a clear and solid understanding every forehead which presents, in profile, two proportionate arches, of which the lower advances” (277). One can see a resemblance between the Parson’s profile and that appearing in the last volume of the *Essays* (**fig. 3-11**), which suggests to Lavater a mind “capable of extracting the quintessence of things, without employing violent efforts,” and is therefore “best disposed for the arts” (3: 309). When Blake rendered his own likeness in the character of Chaucer’s Plowman (**fig. 3-4**), “a trewe swynkere ... Lyvyng in pees and parfit charitee” (Chaucer I: 531-2), one could anticipate that he would endow himself with the same forehead as his “brother” and spiritual ally, the Pardoner.

The purpose of Blake’s Chaucer painting was, first, to publicly demonstrate his primitive linear aesthetic and trump what he perceived to be the shoddy productions of his market-savvy competitors; and second, to represent not just the Canterbury pilgrims, but the entire range of characters that compose humanity in every age. The latter he accomplishes by concentrating on the symbolism of medieval dress and equipage and rendering the countenance of each pilgrim with painstaking physiognomic detail. Their figures are, for the most part, expressionless and inert as they embark on their journey. They have about them an

air of solemnity. Their faces convey neither excitement nor agitation, and their gestures are small and trivial: the Cook swigs from a pint of ale as the Miller plays his bagpipes; while towards the front of the procession several riders quietly motion towards the Host or turn in their saddles to hear his proposal. For a work of such magnitude and personal importance for Blake, and one that must surely be counted among his masterpieces, this paucity of action and feeling is peculiar, to say the least. The Canterbury pilgrims seem far removed from the dramatic, agonized figure of the *Laocoön*, which raises a crucial question. If these figures are, as Blake avers, archetypal characters, if “every one is an Antique Statue, the image of a class, and not of an imperfect individual” (*DC* 527), and if all classes are here represented, then to what class belongs the *Laocoön*? Where does *this* antique statue fit in the procession of “universal human life”?



To begin to answer this question one must turn to the fifth picture described in Blake’s *Catalogue*. Titled *The Ancient Britons*, the painting unfortunately has been lost, but the artist’s own account of it contains information that sheds much additional light on the Canterbury pilgrims. As Blake describes it, the picture consists of three principal figures, the only survivors of “the last Battle of King Arthur”; together they represent the “three general classes of men,” which are the “Strong man,” the “Beautiful man,” and the “Ugly man” (533). Nowhere in the text does he identify these three survivors by name; nor does he ever disclose his historical sources. He is not so much interested in portraying individual identities or conveying historical facts as in representing *eternal archetypes* and *universal history*. Unlike the “reasoning historian ... who does not see spiritual agency,” Blake endeavors to present “the historical fact in its poetical vigour; so as it always happens, and not in that dull way that some Historians pretend” (534). While “Hume, Gibbon and Voltaire” concern

themselves with deducing “causes and consequences,” “probabilities and possibilities,” the true visionary apprehends “the history of all times and places ... what we should say was impossible if we did not see it always before our faces.” Just as Blake discovers in Chaucer’s pilgrims “the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life,” so too in the individual acts of Arthur does he perceive the universal history of all humanity.

According to Blake, Britain was the original site of Eden and of the Creation and Fall into druidical civilization: “Adam was a Druid, and Noah” (*DC* 533). The pre-druidical Britons were blissful, “civilized men, learned, studious ... naked, simple, plain, in their acts and manners; wiser than after-ages.” “All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel” (532). Collectively, they embodied the unified psyche of the “giant Albion ... Patriarch of the Atlantic”; but at some point Albion became “self-divided” and Eden collapsed into space and time, “the world of vegetation and generation” (533); the peaceful and enlightened Brittonic civilization fragmented, and so too did its universal religion, inaugurating a period of oppression and internecine strife, a “Druidical Age, which began to turn allegoric and mental signification into corporeal command, whereby human sacrifice would have depopulated the earth.” The subject of “how [Albion] became divided” is not addressed in Blake’s catalog entry, but he does refer the reader to his “voluminous” forthcoming prophecy *Jerusalem*, which “contains the ancient history of Britain, and the world of Satan and Adam” (533-4). Infusing history with imagination and “poetic vigour,” King Arthur becomes in Blake’s painting the avatar of Albion: “The Stories of Arthur are the acts of Albion, applied to a Prince of the fifth century, who conquered Europe, and held the Empire of the world in the dark age, which the Romans never again recovered” (534). Blake does not, unfortunately, elaborate on this theme. What he does make clear, however, is that Arthur’s death (or sleep) precipitated the “dark age” of

druidism; that he was “self-divided, and his real humanity slain on the stems of generation”; that one day the “three general classes of men” will rejoin in his form, and he “shall awake from sleep, and resume his dominion over earth and ocean”; and that when this finally occurs, the “ancient glory” of Eden will shine on Blake’s native shores, and England once more become “the source of learning and inspiration” (533).

Strength, beauty and ugliness represent intellectual divisions generated by Albion’s fall and “remain for ever unsubdued, age after age” (*DC* 533). At one extreme is the ugly man, who “represents the human reason,” or the “incapability of intellect” to transcend material experience; he “acts from love of carnage, and delight in the savage barbarities of war” (533, 535). At the opposite extreme is the strong man, who “represents the human sublime,” “a receptacle of Wisdom, a sublime energizer,” who “acts from conscious superiority, and marches on in fearless dependance on the divine decrees, raging with the inspirations of a prophetic mind.” Blake imagines the ugly man as grotesque in appearance and violent in temperament:

Approaching to the beast in features and form, his forehead small, without frontals; his jaws large; his nose high on the ridge, and narrow; his chest and the stamina of his make, comparatively little, and his joints and his extremities large; his eyes with scarce any whites, narrow and cunning, and every thing tending toward what is truly Ugly.

Perhaps the most familiar example of this class in Blake’s art is the large color print of *Nebuchadnezzar* (**fig. 3-12**), who conquered Judea and sacked the First Temple in the sixth century BC. Blake’s strong man, by contrast, is the vigorous embodiment of imagination emboldened by divine wisdom. His limbs are muscular, but not “too large and unwieldy for his brain and bosom,” for strength, Blake explains, “consists in accumulation of power to the

principal seat, and from thence a regular gradation and subordination; strength is compactness, not extent nor bulk.”

The ancient sculptors, he continues, depicted not unique personages, but rather entire classes of men. The strong man, for example, materialized in the robust figure of Hercules, while bestial ugliness was embodied in the Dancing Faun (534).²⁹ Since Chaucer accomplishes the same thing with his medieval pilgrims, presenting each character as “the image of a class, and not of an imperfect individual,” Blake contends that every one has its correlative in antiquity: “every one is an Antique Statue.” Thus, the convivial character of the Franklin, in whose house year round “It snowed ... mete and drynke” (Chaucer I: 345), is identical to the god Bacchus, “the genius of eating and drinking” (Blake *DC* 527); and in the character of the Host, Harry Bailly, a “large man ... with eyen stepe” (Chaucer 753), Blake recognizes the sage toper Silenus.

He does not say which of the pilgrims he identifies with the Dancing Faun; but looking back at the engraving, no character appears more “ugly” than the Summoner (**fig. 3-4**), the “freend and compeer” of the Pardoner (670) and likewise “a Devil of the first magnitude” in Blake’s view (526). Certainly, Chaucer’s description emphasizes the Summoner’s physical repulsiveness. He has “eyen narwe” and “scalled browes blake,” while the complexion of his flabby “cherubynnes face” is marred by “whelkes white” and “knobbes sittynge on his cheeks” (624-33). This pestiferous skin condition may be an indication of venereal disease, for the reader learns that he was “lecherous as a sparwe” (626) and a pedophile: “In daunger hadde he at his owene gise / The yonge girles of the diocise” (664). So hideous is he that “Of his visage children were aferd” (628). Spiritually, he is no less corrupt than the Pardoner; for he, too, is a deceiver (659), though his lies proceed rather from

²⁹ Blake is probably referring to the *Farnese Hercules*, currently in Naples, and the *Dancing Faun* in the Tribuna of the Uffizi.

ignorance than blatant hypocrisy. His knowledge of scripture is confined to only a “fewer termes ... / That he had lerned out of som decree” (639-40). With breath rank of “garleek, oynons, and eek leeks,” he is the medieval equivalent of the childhood bogeyman, mad with wine “reed as blood” (634-35). Blake’s drawing is for the most part faithful to Chaucer’s description, but reflects also his own definition of ugliness, especially in the small forehead, heavy jaw, and narrow eyes. The Summoner also wears a wild “gerland” (666) of leaves (perhaps oak), which Blake typically associates with druidic ritual; but it is also, of course, associated with classical images of lecherous fauns capering about, brandishing their swollen genitals or fondling someone else’s, such as he would have known from perusing Hamilton’s renowned collection of vases.

The strong man—the Hercules of the Ancients—appears not once but twice in the file of pilgrims (**fig. 3-4**). As Blake explains, “Chaucer has divided the ancient character of Hercules between his Miller and his Plowman” (*DC* 527). “The Plowman,” he continues, “is Hercules in his supreme eternal state.” He is also Blake himself, “raging with the inspirations of a prophetic mind,” the tireless engraver cutting furrows across acres of copper plate and planting the seeds of divine wisdom. Like his brother the Parson, he is impoverished and “thin with excessive labor,” but not without strength, for strength is as much a state of mind as it is a bodily condition. The Miller, by contrast, is the “spectrous shadow” of the Plowman and represents sheer physical power, “brutal strength and courage” without mental stamina (note his compressed forehead). In the Prologue Chaucer describes him as a “stout carl” who batters down doors with his head (I: 545-51), and who takes advantage of his superior strength to “stelen corn” and extort “tollen thries” (562). He is a “terrible fellow,” writes Blake, “such as exists in all times and places ... to astonish every neighborhood ... to get rich and powerful to curb the pride of Man” (527). While not quite sinking to the level of

ugliness, the Miller's features nevertheless betray a brutish nature: "His berd as any sowe or fox was reed" (552) and his nostrils "blake ... and wyde" (557), and his mouth "as greet was as a greet forneys" (559). Most prominent in Blake's engraving is the wart on the end of his nose, whereon "stood a toft of herys, / Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys" (555-6).

But neither the ugly man nor the strong man corresponds to the *Laocoön* figure. Certainly, he is not ugly, at least not in Blake's sense of the word; and although muscular and energetic, he bears no resemblance to the Plowman marching fearlessly, confident in his prophetic powers, or to the anvil-headed Miller who enjoys smashing things and bullying his neighbors. Hercules' first act while yet an infant was to strangle the two serpents dispatched by Hera to kill him; but Laocoön will not survive his encounter with those sent by Athena. His is the image of grim mortality, not glorious heroism; he is bitten, and he recoils in pain, conscious of his fate, yet struggling against it to the last, if for nothing else than the preservation of his two sons. Strength does not characterize his figure so much as pathos. For Winckelmann, it is passion that imparts beauty to the sculpture, and so it is for Blake, too. Laocoön therefore belongs to the third of his "three general classes of men": the "beautiful." The beautiful man, he maintains, "represents the human pathetic, which was in the wars of Eden divided into male and female" (*DC* 533). Whatever actions he performs he does out of "duty and anxious solicitude for the fates of those for whom he combats" (*DC* 535). If the ugly man follows the dictates of reason, the beautiful man responds only to feeling.

In the Chaucer engraving, the beautiful class is represented by the Squire (**fig. 3-4**), who "blends literature and the arts with his warlike studies" (*DC* 524). He can sing and dance, and "weel purtreye and write" (Chaucer I: 96); and though "wonderly delyvere, and of greet strengthe" (84), and a veteran of the Hundred-Years War, he remains uncommonly sensitive in affairs of the heart: "So hooted he loveded that by nyghtertale / He sleep namoore

than dooth a nyghtyngale” (98). So moved is the Franklin upon hearing the Squire’s tale of exotic romance, that he afterwards avers none among their party can speak more “feelyngly” (V, 675-8). This combination of martial valor, artistic accomplishment, and intense passion exemplifies the “human pathetic” that defines Blake’s beautiful man. Blake does not, however, identify the Squire with the *Laocoön* sculpture, but rather with “the [Belvedere] Apollo” (527), which Winckelmann judges to be the most beautiful of all Greek sculptures,³⁰ and there is, indeed, an unmistakable resemblance between the visage of Blake’s Squire and the god of music, poetry, and love, who can string a bow as effectively as he can tune a lyre (**fig. 3-5**). One must remember, however, that Blake’s Canterbury pilgrims are mere physiognomic studies of universal characters; they neither express nor act upon their passions. The Squire’s beauty is conveyed primarily through the lineaments of his face, undistorted by powerful emotions. The *Laocoön*, however, is not the embodiment of universal character, but rather the embodiment of a universal passion proper to his class. In other words, he is beautiful by virtue of his expressiveness. His visage may be handsome and his physique ideally proportioned, but these things do not define his figure so much as the expression of suffering upon his face, or the powerful articulation of his body and limbs. Blake appreciated this aspect of the sculpture more than Winckelmann, who had sought rhetorically to moderate its expressiveness. Indeed, Blake was one of a group of Romantic painters so deeply impressed by the sculpture that its form appears over and over again in their works, usually for the purpose of conveying to the viewer the most extreme passions and achieving extraordinary sublime effects.



³⁰ “The statue of Apollo is the highest ideal of art among all the works of antiquity that have escaped its destruction. The artist has formed this work completely according to the ideal, and he has taken from the material world only as much as was necessary to carry out his intention and make it visible” (*HAA* 333).

Blake's insistence on linear clarity therefore applies not only to the delineation of form, but also to the delineation of passion; and this, above all, is what distinguishes his aesthetic philosophy from that of Winckelmann, who had argued that expression detracts from form by privileging the individual over the ideal, the accidental over the eternal. For Blake, "Passion & Expression is Beauty Itself" (Annotations 642), and to assert that ideal forms exist independent of the passions, as Winckelmann does, indicates to him a mind that operates by ratiocination and moral judgment rather than by imagination. "The Treasures of Heaven," Blake writes in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, "are not Negations of Passion but Realities of Intellect from which All the Passions Emanate <Uncurbed> in their Eternal Glory" (554). The visionary artist or poet must therefore avoid abstract, generalized forms. "General knowledge is remote knowledge it is in Particulars that Wisdom consists ... General Masses are as Much Art as a Pasteboard Man is Human" (550). Not only, therefore, should he distinguish between individual "Characters in all their branches," but also between their Manners & Intentions," or passions.³¹ "On this discrimination," he continues, "All Art is founded ... & not a line is drawn without intention & that most discriminate & particular <as Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant so Painting admits not ... an Insignificant Blur or Mark>."³² This notion that the passions are eternal and expressed the same in all men according to their character was by no means peculiar to Blake, but something that was doubtless encouraged through his reading of Lavater and contemporary aesthetic theory.

In the *Elements of Criticism* (1761), for example, Henry Home devotes an entire chapter to the "external signs of emotions and passions." As a member of the Scottish

³¹ Blake had originally written the word "Expression," but crossed it out and replaced it with "Manners and Intentions."

³² Blake applies this principle to coloring as well: "Violent Passions Emit the Real Good & Perfect Tones" (Annotations 649).

judiciary who was well read in classical rhetoric, he is careful to distinguish between “unpremeditated,” “natural” signs, on the one hand; and on the other, “arbitrary” signs that are studied and artificial, and therefore fallible (187). To the latter group belong linguistic signs, which vary from culture to culture, and even among individuals who share the same language. Moreover, because thought precedes speech, and because words are often chosen for their effect rather than meaning alone, language can mask as well as it can reveal one’s inner thoughts and feelings. And because language is subject to this kind of deliberate manipulation, Home concludes that “involuntary” expression communicated through the body has certain advantages. “Each class of emotions and passions,” he observes, is “invariably attended with an external appearance peculiar to itself. These external appearances or signs may not improperly be considered as a natural language, expressing to all beholders emotions and passions as they arise in the heart” (186). Furthermore, these *natural* signs are legible to all of humanity, regardless of one’s education, and transcend socio-cultural boundaries, comprising a kind of “universal language which no distance of place, no difference of tribe, no diversity of tongue, can darken or render doubtful” (189).

In the *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater gives a name to the analysis of this language—“pathognomy,” which he defines as “the interpretation of the passions, or the science which treats of the signs of the passions ... traced in the motion of the moveable parts” of the body, from the subtlest of facial expressions to the most extravagant gesticulation of the limbs (1: 23). In other words, pathognomy treats the subject not as a general type, but as he appears at a particular moment in time. It is an extension of physiognomy: while the one seeks to determine innate characteristics indelibly imprinted upon the body, the other concentrates more on individual manners and behavior that, while certainly susceptible to the influence of character, are induced by fleeting external stimuli.

As Lavater explains, physiognomy “considers the man such as he is in general; [pathognomy] what he is at the present moment.” Moreover, he implies that the two disciplines are complementary, and that a thorough physiognomist will have to examine his subject in “a state of rest” as well as “in action.” “The friend of truth,” he writes, “considers these two sciences as inseparable” (24).

Of course, artists had long been aware of this. Writing over a century before Lavater, the French painter Nicolas Poussin remarked that “just as the twenty-four letters of the alphabet are used to form our words and to express our thoughts, so the forms of the human body are used to express the various passions of the soul and to make visible what is in the mind” (Blunt 1: 222). Since the painter or sculptor was limited by his medium to the representation of a single moment in time, as Lessing observed, and relied upon the viewer not only to recognize the scene portrayed, but also to identify the actors and their relation to one another and understand the thoughts and feelings motivating them, without the advantage of narrative explanation, he therefore had to carefully consider his subject and provide sufficient visual detail to achieve the desired result. The idea was to produce an image that, while perhaps illustrating an historical or literary episode, could nevertheless convey meaning independent of any textual reference. Paraphrasing Lessing, Fuseli challenges those critics who would argue “that the Laocoon owes the impression he makes on us to his name alone, and that if tradition had not told a story and Pliny fixed it to that work, the artist’s conception of a father with his sons, surprised and entangled by two serpents ... was inadmissible and transgressed the laws of invention” (Knowles 2: 142). The literate viewer may recognize the subject as coming from the *Aeneid*, but such knowledge according to Fuseli is neither necessary, nor perhaps even preferable, since the sculpture would “rouse our sympathy more forcibly, and press the subject closer to our breast, were it considered only as the

representation of an incident common to humanity.” In other words, if the *Laocoön* incites feelings of pity and terror in the beholder, it is not because it prompts recollection of Virgil’s poetic description, but rather because the sculptors grasped the advantages of their visual medium and availed themselves of the “universal language” of expression and gesture.

In his fifth Academy lecture Fuseli defines expression as “the vivid image of the passion that affects the mind” transferred to external “features, attitudes, and gestures” (Knowles 2: 255). These external signs comprise a visual “language” that renders the passions legible to the viewer. After identifying the four primary passions of “calm emotion, joy, grief simple, or with pain, and terror,” he explains that they may either “hint their action only,” in a subtle expression or movement, or more violently “extend their sway over the whole frame,” depending on the type and degree of passion, its source, and the character of the subject portrayed (258). Expression is essential to the artist, since “the distinct representation of continued action” is beyond the limits of his pictorial medium (134). The artist delineates forms and arranges them in space, but he cannot tell us what his human actors think or feel, nor what they have done or are about to do; the success of a picture or statue therefore depends upon his selection of the moment that best reveals these things to the viewer, “those important moments ... which exhibit the united exertion of form and character in a single object or in participation with collateral beings ... and which with equal rapidity and pregnancy give us a glimpse of the past and lead our eye to what follows” (135). Thus, when Fuseli speaks of “invention,” he means the artist’s capacity to make this selection and convey feeling and action through the expressiveness of his figures, and to do so in a natural, unaffected manner befitting his subject.

He offers the example of Raphael, who he says “possessed in the most enviable degree” a keen understanding of the passions and their various “emanations,” or physical

signs, ranging “from the utmost conflict of passions, to the enchanting round of gentler emotion, and the nearly silent hints of mind and character” (154). “The power of Raphael’s invention exerts itself chiefly in subjects where the drama ... elevates, invigorates, [and] impresses the pregnant moment of a real fact with character and pathos” (173). His masterpiece in this regard, according to Fuseli, is his fresco in the Apostolic Palace depicting the miracle of the Borgo fire, when according to Church legend Pope Leo IV extinguished the blaze with a timely benediction (**fig. 3-13**). What accounts for the novelty of Raphael’s composition, however, is his relegation of the performance of the miracle to the background in order to heighten the drama of the scene and impress the viewer with “the effusion of the various passions roused by the sudden terrors of nocturnal conflagration ... the perturbation, necessity, hope, fear, danger, the pangs and efforts of affection grappling with the enraged elements of wind and fire, displayed on the foreground, furnish the pathetic motives that press on our hearts” (154-5); and these motives he eloquently and movingly conveys by means of studied facial expressions and gestures.

In the late eighteenth century, most academically trained artists sought to infuse their designs with a great deal of dramatic pathos, especially when ambition compelled them to take on historical or literary subject matter. It was also widely accepted that the Ancients, and later the Renaissance masters, had already succeeded in codifying the passions in all their varieties and degrees; so that now all the artist had to do was learn to copy their figures and adapt them to his own compositions according to the expressive demands of his subject, relying on the viewer to recognize them and “achieve an intuitive muscular empathy with the body” (Heppner 4). Writing in the early twentieth century, German art historian Aby Warburg coined the term “pathos formula” to describe these conventional postures and

gestures, and it has since been adopted by a number of Blake scholars. In his study of the *Illustrations for the Book of Job*, for example, Bo Lindberg explains Warburg's concept thus:

Attitudes or gestures embodying a special meaning in one work of art tend to carry this same meaning in other works by the same artist or by another. That is: they have a conventional meaning. Artists use *pathos-formulae* as writers use words; and like the meaning of a word, the meaning of a pathos-formula can be modified or altered by context. The study of these formulae is the lexicography of art. (115)

Fuseli echoes Lindberg's linguistic analogy when he compares the "judicious adoption of figures in art" to Horace's advice to poets "that the adoption of an old word, rendered novel by a skilful construction with others, will entitle the poet to the praise of original diction" (Knowles 2: 180-1).³³ It is not plagiarism, then, when one artist borrows from another, so long as the adopted figure fits naturally within its new pictorial context:

Far from impairing the originality of invention, the unpremeditated discovery of an appropriate attitude or figure in the works of antiquity, or of the great old masters after the revival, and its adoption ... will add lustre to a performance of commensurate or superior power, by a kind coalition with the rest, immediately furnished by nature and the subject. (181)³⁴

³³ The key words in this passage are "judicious" and "novel," as opposed to thoughtless, unfeeling copy work. The line Fuseli attempts to draw between genuine pathos, or "embodied sentiment" (Knowles 2: 161), and unnatural "expression dictated by the theater" (124) is somewhat difficult to define in practical terms. Christopher Heppner treats this issue at some length in his excellent book *Reading Blake's Designs*.

³⁴ Compare this passage with Reynolds' advice in Discourse VI (1774):
He, who borrows an idea from an antient, or even from a modern artist not his contemporary, and so accommodates it to his own work, that it makes a part of it, with no seam or joining appearing, can hardly be charged with plagiarism; poets practise this kind of borrowing, without reserve. But an artist should not be contented with this only; he should enter into a competition with his original, and endeavour to improve what he is appropriating to his own work. Such imitation is so

To illustrate, Fuseli refers the reader to Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, a painting in which he claims to observe "every attitude that varies the human body ... every passion that sways the human heart" (85). Convinced like many others that Michelangelo developed his art by studying and emulating the Ancients, Fuseli writes that he "scattered the Torso of Apollonius in every view, in every direction, in groups and single figures, over the composition of the Last Judgment" (182).³⁵ And for his part, many of Fuseli's own dynamic figures can be traced back to antiquity through the intermediary of Michelangelo, whose frescoes he studied intently during his Grand Tour.³⁶

As one might expect, the same lineage of forms and gestures is traceable in the work of Blake, whose name even during his lifetime was practically synonymous with that of Michelangelo,³⁷ and he praises the Florentine's genius with the same boundless enthusiasm as Fuseli, often mentioning him in the same breath as the ancient sculptors (*VLJ* 552). In a notebook preserved in the Houghton Library at Harvard there is a two-sided drawing by Blake, dated by Butlin to the period of his *Night Thoughts* illustrations (1793-94), which depicts a death-bed scene surrounded by approximately two dozen smaller and apparently

far from having any thing in it of the servility of plagiarism, that it is a perpetual exercise of the mind, a continual invention. (167)

³⁵ For example, compare the *Torso* with Michelangelo's Saint Bartholomew (**fig. 3-14 and 3-15**).

³⁶ Allan Cunningham paints a romantic picture of Fuseli lying upon the floor of the Sistine Chapel "day after day, and week after succeeding week, with upturned and wondering eyes, musing on the splendid ceiling" (280). And Knowles provides an equally delightful anecdote recounting how after viewing some of Fuseli's early compositions a fellow artist exclaimed, "Michael Angelo has come again!" (1: 49).

³⁷ In 1824 Charles Heathcote Tatham, writing to Linnell, referred to him as "Michael Angelo Blake" (Bentley *SP* 401). A few weeks later, the painter Samuel Palmer, visiting Blake while he was engaged upon his Dante illustrations, compared the artist lying on his sickbed to "a dying Michael Angelo" (406).

unrelated figures in various stylized poses reminiscent of Michelangelo's designs (**fig. 3-16**). Christopher Heppner locates analogues for some of these figures in Michelangelo's drawing *A Dream of Human Life* (**fig. 3-17**), a subject that would have appealed to Blake not only because of its message of spiritual regeneration through divine inspiration, but also because the artist elected not to represent the seven deadly sins as traditional allegorical personifications, but rather as impassioned human figures, or what Fuseli writing of the drawing describes as "phantoms of the passions" (Knowles 2: 197). Written beside many of Blake's cartoon-like figures are words specifying the passion supposed to be expressed by each: "despair," "rage," "misery," and so forth. There has been some doubt as to whether Blake actually authored these inscriptions, but there is nevertheless general agreement that they are accurate matches and corroborate the meaning of figures that appear elsewhere in his work. Scholars writing on Blake's use of pathos formulae often cite these notebook pages as a kind of preliminary dictionary of his "language of art," an index of expressive gestures assimilated and adapted from the great artists of antiquity and the Renaissance.³⁸

Like Fuseli, who distinguishes between the artificiality of uninspired *imitation* and the naturalness of "unpremeditated" *invention*, Blake has no problem with artists borrowing from their predecessors, so long as their compositions demonstrate a certain imaginative vigor. While anyone may acquire knowledge of the language of art by copying after the Ancients and Renaissance masters, only the visionary artist can "speak" this language with any authority, not because he copies well whatever works come before his rational eye, but because he has inherited their creators' divine gift of imagination. If the genius of

³⁸ The pages resemble somewhat two earlier sheets of figures copied from D'Hancarville's celebrated engravings of Hamilton's collection of antique vases. Blake seem to have selected these designs for the number of figures as well as their variety of expression. The image of Silenus in one of the sheets (Butlin, Cat. 174) is almost identical to the figure of "dissipation" in the notebook drawings.

Michelangelo and Raphael revealed to them the forms and expressions of eternity, as Blake averred, then the artist is not so much copying after them as he is copying from the same divinely inspired vision. As Blake explained to Crabb Robinson in 1825, “Art is inspiration[.] When Michael Angelo or Raphael or Mr Flaxman does any of his fine things he does them in the spirit” (Bentley *SP* 413). Undoubtedly, Blake learned the language of art from the Ancients and Michelangelo, but it was neither his nor theirs to claim any more than the air they breathed as they labored over their works. The language of art was also the language of eternity or “spirit,” spoken truly by those few artists he judged capable of perceiving beyond the limits of time and space; spoken falsely by those who could not, and who betrayed their ignorance by permitting color and shadow to supersede linear clarity and by following the impulses of temporary fashion and private taste rather than the dictates of universal and everlasting truth.

Blake’s borrowings from Michelangelo have not, as of yet, been very well documented, although the subject has been addressed by a number of prominent scholars, including Anthony Blunt, who remarks that “the motives from [Michelangelo’s] work recurring in Blake’s designs are legion” (35); Jenijoy La Belle, who has demonstrated Blake’s familiarity with Michelangelo through the reproductive engravings of the sixteenth-century Italian artist Adamo Ghisi; Anne Mellor, who writes that “the Sistine Chapel frescoes alone provided Blake with an enormous vocabulary of human gestures and movements” (129); Janet Warner, who has published extensively on Blake’s use of pathos formulae; and most recently, Christopher Heppner. But even less consideration has been given to his borrowings from antiquity, and so far there has been no substantial scholarship articulating the special significance of the *Laocoön* for Blake, despite the recurrence of the sculpture’s unmistakable gesture in his artwork and illuminated poetry. Warner has done a necessary and

useful service to Blake scholarship in schematizing a number of regularly appearing gestures and explaining their significance; but even though some of these figural motifs, such as the leap, correlate to certain aspects of the *Laocoön*, nowhere does she specifically identify the sculpture either as a source or as a discrete gesture. In the following sections, the reader will perceive a shift in emphasis from discussion of the *Laocoön* as an art object of aesthetic and cultural significance for Blake, to its value as a source of expressive meaning within the context of his poetry and designs.



It is first of all necessary to point out that Blake was not the only British artist to assimilate the *Laocoön* into his personal repertoire of pathos formulae. Indeed, many of the painters with whom he most closely aligned himself had made a habit of using the figure to express terror and pain, passions identified more with Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime than with austere neoclassical taste. Nevertheless, Winckelmann's emphasis on the hero's gracefulness, his tranquility and noble restraint in the face of immanent destruction, continued to influence perceptions well into the nineteenth century. Recounting his encounter with the sculpture in the spring of 1817, Byron remarks on its "torture dignifying pain— / A father's love and mortal's agony / With an immortal's patience blending" (*Child Harold's Pilgrimage* IV.1433-35). While this response would seem to have much to do with Byron's own cultivated self-image as an accursed outcast, "Proud though in desolation" (III.107), not even Shelley could see past the tepid platitudes of Winckelmann. The poet who wrote with impassioned morbidity of the "tempestuous loveliness of terror" in his ekphrastic lines "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci" (*Poetical Works* 33), merely reiterates the standard neoclassical emphasis on the *Laocoön*'s "intense physical suffering" mitigated by "a nobleness in the expression and a majesty that defies torture" (*Shelley's Prose* 344).

However, with a faction of outsider artists that included Barry, Fuseli and Blake, neoclassical restraint began to fracture and crumble under the intense political and cultural pressure that came to bear on the London art market in the last quarter of the eighteenth century; and as Martin Myrone has effectively demonstrated, the *Laocoön*—a wise man mocked in his final hour by the very people he hoped to rescue from destruction—became a powerful symbol of the disaffected and disenfranchised artist whose ideal of masculine heroism clashed with an ingrained Academic conservatism, reinforced by royal patronage and bourgeois tastes predicated on private luxury rather than on public virtue.

In this fraught context the figure of the *Laocoön* frequently appears as the embodiment the Burkean *sublime*, which ultimately turns on the biological instinct of “self-preservation,” as opposed to the *beautiful*, which quickens the social instincts of love and fraternity (35). Throughout the *Enquiry*, Burke associates the beautiful with sensual pleasure and gratification; but the passions aroused by beauty are not so great as those arising from sensations of “pain and danger,” situations that imperil the happiness or well-being of the individual: “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (36). This terror is produced by the experience of perceptual extremes: intense light and impenetrable darkness, vastness in size and vacuity in space, deafening noise and oppressive silence, sensory privation and excruciating pain. The pleasures of beauty, by contrast, are produced by diminutiveness, delicacy and docility.

What distinguishes the sublime, therefore, is ultimately the forcefulness of its impressions. It overwhelms the senses and thwarts rational comprehension, threatening the security and even the very identity of the perceiving subject. Beauty by contrast inflicts no

pain, elicits no uncertainty, and is therefore incapable of challenging the authority of a privileged, implicitly male beholder. As Burke explains, “pleasure follows the will; and therefore we are generally affected with it by many things of a force greatly inferior to our own. But pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly” (60). What makes the sublime a “cause of delight,” then, is the physical and mental exertion necessary to reassert the individual will and restore the mind and senses to their proper balance. “Labour,” as Burke observes, “is the surmounting of difficulties,” and is as much a mental as it is a physical exercise, involving the “contracting power of the muscles” as well as the “finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination, and perhaps the other mental powers act” (122). The pleasures afforded by beauty, on the other hand, require no such physical or mental strain, and are characterized instead by sensory repletion, complacency, and a state of tranquility that borders on lassitude. “When we have before us such objects as excite love,” Burke explains, “the head reclines something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual . . . the mouth is a little open, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh: the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly to the sides” (135).

The transformation of the *Laocoön* in late eighteenth century art from a graceful, visually alluring exemplum of idealized masculine restraint into a spectacle of sublime distress and passion exceeding propriety becomes apparent in the Academy lectures of Fuseli, who ironically, prior to his career as a painter, had been a dedicated disciple and translator of Winckelmann. In chapter one, the reader became acquainted with how the German critic approached the figure as a phlebotomized abstraction, as a representation only of the idea or, as Reynolds would say, “general expression” of pain, at once detached from and superior to the actual suffering endured by flesh-and-blood human beings. The academic purveyors of

neoclassical taste therefore urged artists to emulate antique standards of beauty and to sublimate such passions as were more likely to elicit from the spectator powerful feelings of sympathy than rational detachment, and violate the integrity of general nature and the idealized human form. But Fuseli's appreciation of the *Laocoön* was fundamentally different from theirs.

Like the majority of academically trained painters, he treated the human body as a cipher, a vessel of abstraction, copied after antique models and deployed in his work formulaically as a vehicle for certain universal or "general" truths. At the same time, however, he was fiercely opposed to the "pedantic stiffness" of the "frigid ... marble style" and distanced himself from those he identified as "tame transcribers of the dead letter ... importers of nothing but forms and attitudes of stone" (Knowles 2: 387-8); and throughout his career he continued steadfast in his disapproval of the arguments advanced by Winckelmann and Reynolds that the representation of human passions was incommensurate with aesthetic propriety and therefore breached the limits of legitimate artistic endeavor, convinced as they were that such subject matter privileged the individual over the universal, violent emotion over staid reason, and could only be displayed through contorted bodies and agitated features that grotesquely, even perversely, deviated from the eternal forms that transcend the vicissitudes of temporal human experience.

At times, Winckelmann, Reynolds, and to a lesser extent Lessing, could be rather equivocal in their estimation of the *Laocoön*, acknowledging its compelling representation of human suffering while at the same time mitigating its emotional force by reducing it to an alluring conflux of elegantly wrought lines while consciously avoiding any narrative referentiality that would be likely to disturb that experience of visual pleasure. That Fuseli rejected such Platonic abstraction becomes apparent in the introduction to his collected

lectures (1820) where he castigates Winckelmann as “better fitted to comment a classic than to give lessons on art and style,” and vents his opposition to the “frigid reveries and Platonic dreams on beauty” that “lose what alone can make beauty interesting, expression and mind” (Knowles 2: 13-4). Like Burke, Fuseli contends that passion rather than abstraction is the basis of aesthetic pleasure, and that those passions arising from the instinct of self-preservation are most productive of the sublime. He therefore regards the *Laocoön* not as the idealized embodiment of “noble simplicity and sedate grandeur” identified by Winckelmann (*RPSG* 72), but rather as an individual caught in the throes of death, suffering the extremes of pain and fear, and whose writhing limbs and fixed expression of terror are better suited than any other work of antiquity to communicate the sublime. For Winckelmann, according to the beautiful style, of which he believed the *Laocoön* to be the most eminent example, “the soul manifested itself only as if under a still surface of water and never erupted tempestuously. In the representation of suffering, the greatest pain remained locked away” (*HAA* 237). Fuseli’s description at the conclusion of his inaugural lecture, written as if he had just put down reading Winckelmann, concentrates instead on the expression of unfettered passion and is replete with sublime imagery:

for us to apply the compass to the face of the Laocoon, is to measure the wave fluctuating in the storm: this tempestuous front, this contracted nose, the immersion of these eyes, and above all, that long-drawn mouth, are separate and united, seats of convulsion, features of nature struggling within the jaws of death. (Knowles 2: 72)

Fuseli had, of course, seen the *Laocoön* during his Grand Tour in the 1770s; and during the short-lived Treaty of Amiens in 1802, he was among the British artists and connoisseurs who flocked across the Channel to see Napoleon’s art plunder on display at the Louvre. While visiting the museum in the company of Joseph Farrington, he executed an

intriguing sketch of a fashionably dressed woman standing before the sculpture (**fig. 3-18**), a kind of extemporaneous study in contrasts between the sublime and beautiful. Noticeably absent from this drawing are Laocoön's sons, and what remains of the two serpents is but a single coil wrapped around his left forearm. His right leg and upper-right forearm are not so well defined as the rest of the body; missing as well are his right hand and, most disconcertingly, his head. Clearly, what mattered most to Fuseli was the expansiveness and expressiveness of the gesture rather than the identity of the figure or the circumstances behind his suffering. His *Laocoön* appears as a totally abstract form, bereft of narrative reference and reduced to an impersonal expression of "enormous passion" (Knowles, 2: 259).³⁹ One might even say that we no longer see the image of a man "struggling within the jaws of death," but rather an iconic sculpture threatened with effacement by the artist's incomplete representation. With this image, then, Fuseli presents an idealized expression of the sublime, a formula he would employ regularly, almost obsessively, in his formal treatment of literary and historical subject matter.

Directly opposite the *Laocoön* stands the figure of a voluptuous, extravagantly coiffed woman typical of Fuseli's many erotic drawings of courtesans and sexually precocious debutantes, and who may have been among the fashionable "women of Paris" he and Farrington observed patrolling the Louvre galleries. Like the sculpture, she too becomes something of an abstraction on paper, inert and mysterious, more statuesque even than the statue she looks upon. If the *Laocoön* represents the exertions of sublime self-preservation, she embodies instead everything that Burke deems beautiful. Her blithe posture, Empire cleavage, and fastidious hairdo may well captivate the viewer, as they certainly seem to have

³⁹ In Lecture V, Fuseli defines "expression" in painting as "the vivid image of the passion that affects the mind" (Knowles 2: 255). He goes on to say that "every being seized by an enormous passion . . . loses the character of its own individual expression, and is absorbed by the power of the feature that attracts it" (259).

captivated the artist, but they are hardly overwhelming to the senses. There is nothing in her appearance to indicate the disturbance of enormous passions. Her face is expressionless, complacent, and her body unmoved by the terrible image of mortal strife before her, supported by the iron railing that forms the boundary between her own secure world of sensual repletion and the threat of physical annihilation that lies just beyond.

This juxtaposition of feminine charm and masculine exertion in the face of death is a recurrent motif in Fuseli's art, and in many instances his vigorous male heroes bear the unmistakable expressive stamp of the *Laocoön*. In his 1781 drawing *Othar Rescuing Siritha from the Giant*,⁴⁰ for example, he presents his muscular hero ascending a broad flight of stairs, carrying the pale heroine in a helpless swoon under his left arm as he turns to slay a pursuing giant with his upraised sword (**fig. 3-19**).⁴¹ Similar in approach and subject matter is his painting *Percival Delivering Belisane from the Enchantments of Urma*, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1783, where one can observe the Laocoönal gesture of yet another of the artist's virile male heroes as he prepares to strike down an evil wizard, notwithstanding the helpless damsel clinging to his robes, and whose maidenly beauty is none the worse for the terrors she supposedly has suffered (**fig. 3-21**).

⁴⁰ The source for this subject has been identified as the *Historiae Danicae*, by the medieval historian Saxo Grammaticus.

⁴¹ The dramatic contrast and diagonal composition of this drawing seems to have influenced James Northcote's *Triumph of Liberty* (**fig. 3-20**), painted to commemorate the siege of the Bastille. The painting is now lost, but survives as an engraving by Gillray with a dedication to the nation of France. The painting shows one of the *vainqueurs* supporting the Bastille's most famous inmate, identified by the journalist Jean-Louis Carra as the Comte de Lorges, elderly and feeble after 32 years of imprisonment, as he is led out of the darkness of a dungeon strewn with corpses and menacing implements of torture, and into the light of freedom. According to David Bindman, the engraving was one of a pair by Gillray, the other featuring the celebrated British prison reform activist John Howard, entitled *The Triumph of Benevolence* (92).

In addition to such masculine heroics, Fuseli also employed the figure frequently to signify mortal agony and supernatural terror, as in his large *Milton Gallery* painting of Adam's ghastly vision of the "Lazar-house" in *Paradise Lost* XI (a subject treated also by Blake), where the "Dæmoniac Phrenzie" (XI: 485) of the central figure resembles the *Laocoön*, however drawn in the artist's typical exaggerated manner (**fig. 3-22**).⁴² Desirous of a quick and merciful end to his suffering, he springs away from the soothing embrace of the Belisane-like woman collapsed at his side (perhaps his wife) and instead directs his gaze towards the bat-winged figure of "triumphant Death" (491) looming above, extending his right arm imploringly despite the strenuous effort of a second male figure (perhaps his son) to restrain him. A similar group of figures appears in Fuseli's drawing of Hamlet confronting his father's ghost on the ramparts of Elsinore, executed some time in the early 1780s (**fig. 3-24**), where the Laocoönal figure of the distressed prince, eager to pursue the ghost and learn its motives, struggles violently against the grasp of Marcellus and Horatio as they voice legitimate concern for their friend's sanity and safety. Further examples of this figure in Fuseli's art include an illustration of Dante's *Inferno* depicting the blasphemous thief Vanni Fucci of Pistoia being strangled by serpents (**fig. 3-25**); a painting of Prometheus enchained among the desolate crags of the Caucasus Mountains, about to be eviscerated by the giant vulture dispatched by Zeus as punishment for stealing fire from the gods and conferring it on mortals (**fig. 3-26**); and a fantastic wash drawing (**fig. 3-27**) of a lone cavalier in a tempestuous landscape being ambushed by an enormous fanged serpent similar to the

⁴² See also his earlier drawing *The Escapee* (**fig. 3-23**), a scene that he supposedly witnessed firsthand in a hospital in Rome in the 1770s. Similar in both theme and composition to the Lazar-house, the picture shows a dying man refusing the last sacrament and fleeing in a panic from a roomful of clergymen, whose ministrations have become in his distempered imagination the very torments of hell itself.

“aboma” (boa constrictor) described by Stedman and illustrated by Blake in the *Narrative of the Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796).

Laocoönal figures appear regularly in the works of other late eighteenth-century artists seeking to produce sublime effects. To this group belongs Benjamin West’s 1788 painting of King Lear on the heath “Contending with the fretful elements” (III.i.4), his sole contribution to Boydell’s *Shakespeare Gallery*. The picture’s tonal extremes and heightened pitch of expression signals an emphatic break with the neoclassical detachment and restraint that typifies his earlier work (**fig. 3-28**). The scene he chose abounds with sublime imagery, as described by the character of Kent:

Things that love night

Love not such nights as these. The wrathful skies

Gallow the very wanderers of the dark

And make them keep their caves. Since I was man,

Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,

Such groans of roaring wind and rain I never

Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry

Th’ affliction nor the fear. (ii.42-9)

West places Lear before the hovel, with his right arm extended towards the tempestuous heavens above, as if to “outstorm / The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain” (i.10-11), invoking the “oak-cleaving thunderbolts” and “all-shaking thunder” to “strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world” (ii.5-7). At his left arm is Kent, desperately urging the maddened king to take shelter from the storm that “tears his white hair, / Which the impetuous blasts with eyeless rage / Catch in their fury and make nothing of” (i.7-8). Given the sublimity of

Shakespeare's themes in *Lear*, it is hardly surprising that Boydell turned to Barry and Fuseli to provide the only two other paintings in the *Gallery* illustrating the play.

Shortly after completing his painting for Boydell, West resumed work on his royal commission for a grand cycle of paintings entitled the *Progress of Revealed Religion*, eventually unveiling *The Brazen Serpent* in 1790 (**fig. 3-29**). In this piece West pays homage to the *Laocoön* by adapting the sculpture to an Old Testament subject, just as Michelangelo had done in the spandrels of the Sistine ceiling. In the center of the composition stands the heroic figure Moses directing the Israelites to look upon the brazen serpent, or *Nehushtan*, in order to be relieved of the poisonous snakes god inflicted upon them as punishment for questioning the sagacity of their spiritual leader. Occupying the left foreground of the painting, a father and his two sons succumb to the serpents' deadly attack, while their wife and mother, attired in scarlet, looks on in utter horror. Even though the father has fallen on his back, his agonized gesture, the placement of his two sons, and the marmoreal glow of their bare skin leave little doubt as to their classical source, and it seems probable that West influenced Blake's conception of the father-daughter group in his treatment of the same subject (**fig. 2-13**), though his family apparently survives the ordeal.

Another prominent artist for whom the *Laocoön* became a compelling model of sublime expression was James Northcote, who acquired a reputation in the 1780s for his dramatic large-scale paintings of shipwrecks and natural disasters, and for a pair of *Shakespeare Gallery* paintings illustrating the horrific murder of young Edward and Richard in the Tower of London (*Richard III* IV.3). His *Death of Wat Tyler* (**fig. 3-30**) was one of the highlights of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1787 and may have directly inspired the composition of the aforementioned drawing by Fuseli of a dismounted rider assailed by a serpent. As Myrone points out, Northcote, a republican sympathizer, clearly identifies

sublimity with the manly virtue of the leader of the Peasants' Revolt at the moment he is betrayed and struck down by the treacherous Mayor of London; while on the other hand, effeminate beauty characterizes the figure of Richard II as a corrupt, ineffectual monarch. John Flaxman also employed Laocoönal figures to represent the male body in distress. In his series of Aeschylus designs, for example, Prometheus displays the by now familiar gesture of extended arms, abdominal contraction and powerfully thrusting legs, as Hephaestus, assisted by Bia and Cratos, carry out the sentence handed down by Zeus (**fig. 3-31**). Flaxman's illustration of *Ulysses Terrified by the Ghosts* (**fig. 3-32**), engraved by Piroli, is reminiscent of Fuseli's paintings of Hamlet and Macbeth; and he too depicts Dante's snake-bound Vanni Fucci in hell suffering from an endless cycle of asphyxiation and immolation (**fig. 3-33**).

Nevertheless, the images of Benjamin West, Flaxman and Northcote, while to a certain degree sublime, approach nowhere near to the anatomical excesses and exaggerated expression identified with the Michelangesque manner of Fuseli. For the ill-tempered and socially marginalized painter James Barry, however, a volatile combination of radical political attitudes and an acute sense of personal injustice fuelled the same kind of expressive extremism, described by Myrone as "a severe kind of reforming classicism, which retained expressive and imaginative properties even as it adhered to the 'Greek' ideal" (86). Like Fuseli, Barry, too, recognized the potential of the *Laocoön* figure for achieving sublime effects. The tragic story of Milo of Crotona was a perfect choice of subject in this regard.

According to legend, the downfall of the celebrated Olympic wrestler came about when he set out to demonstrate his strength by uprooting and snapping asunder a large tree. He failed to accomplish this feat when his arm became pinched between the two halves of the split trunk. Unable to free himself, he was eventually attacked and devoured by wild

animals.⁴³ Recent commentators have traced the source of Barry's treatment of this subject (**fig. 3-34**) to Pierre Puget's seventeenth-century sculpture, originally installed at Versailles (Myrone et al. 57), and indeed Barry remarks briefly on this "fine sculpture" in his Academy lectures (1: 508), but ultimately his design has much more in common with the *Laocoön* in his positioning of Milo's limbs and facial expression, thereby exacerbating the violence and terror of the scene well beyond what Puget had envisioned.

Another artist with a penchant for the sublime was Maria Cosway, a pupil of John Zoffany and friend of Jacques-Louis David, and one of only a few women artists admitted to the Royal Academy in the eighteenth century. Towards the end of her life she reminisced that as a teenager in Italy, "Fusely, with his extraordinary Visions, struck my fancy" (qtd. in Myrone et al. 62). Executed at the height of her career in the 1780s, her drawing of a scene of Christian martyrdom (the subject of the picture is a matter of speculation) certainly betrays the influence of Fuseli's agonized subjects (**fig. 3-35**). The dolorous facial expression of her captive, his struggling legs and extended arms straining against the snake-like ropes that bind him, as well as the violent abdominal torsion caused by his tormentor's foot digging into his side, are features that can be traced to the *Laocoön* through such images as the *Vision of the Lazar-house* and *The Escapee*.



As the reader will soon see, Blake's adaptations of the *Laocoön* figure can be a great deal more complicated, but there are instances where he exploits its associations with

⁴³ One way to interpret the moral of this story is that Milo's downfall was brought about by prideful over-confidence in his own strength; however, Barry may have found more in the story with which he could identify, particularly as an artist who had learned early in his career that he would suffer greatly—and suffer alone—for his unyielding commitment to the robust style of Michelangelo as the salvation for British art. Myrone makes this very point in his analysis of the artist's *Philoctetes*: "Barry's display of wounded vulnerability ... may be interpreted as representing a strategy for a reformed masculinity that accrued value according to the degree of its social exclusion" (91).

physical suffering and mortal terror in the same manner as the aforementioned artists. As with Fuseli, Dante's *Inferno* provided Blake with an abundance of terrifying images that would become the focus of his artistic energies from 1824 until his death in 1827.⁴⁴ He devotes a total of eight pictures to the subject of the serpent-harassed thieves of the eighth circle. Two of these depict the church robber Vanni Fucci, neither of which figure, however, bears much resemblance to the *Laocoön*, as was the case in the drawings of Flaxman and Fuseli. But Blake's half-finished drawing of Plutus, the avaricious demon guarding the fourth circle of hell, presents a grotesque but still recognizable likeness of the sculpture (**fig. 3-36**), illustrating the passage in Canto VII that describes Virgil imprecating the demon, whereupon he instantly collapses to the ground writhing in pain. Another example of Blake's use of the figure in the context of the sublime is his illustration to Shakespeare's *Richard III* (Act V, Scene ii), one of six pictures commissioned between the years 1806-09 for a privately owned copy of the *Second Folio*.

Even though the number of Blake's Shakespearean subjects is relatively small compared to his more ambitious sequences illustrating Gray, Young, Milton, and Dante, four of the six watercolors are devoted to supernatural subject matter, including three ghost scenes (from *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Richard III*). His depiction of Hamlet confronting his father's ghost is obviously indebted to the sublimity of Fuseli; but it is his depiction of Richard III that most resembles the *Laocoön* in gesture and expression (**fig. 3-37**). In this picture the mentally disturbed king stands alone with upraised sword in his candlelit bedchamber, swiping in vain at the ghosts of all whose lives had been brutally sacrificed to his ambition. He recoils from the spectral hand of his former wife, Anne of Neville, who

⁴⁴ John Linnell commissioned the series. Before his death, Blake completed 102 watercolors and drawings, of which 72 (and all seven completed engravings) are based on the *Inferno*.

joins in the chorus of “despair and die” that foreshadows his defeat at Bosworth Field. The remaining ghosts point accusing fingers, groan dolorously, or present their stanchless murder wounds, thereby heightening the terror of the scene far beyond what eighteenth century theatergoers could have expected to see performed on the London stage.

A subtler example of Blake’s use of a Laocoöntic figure in the context of the sublime is his watercolor of *Samson Breaking his Bonds* (**fig. 3-38**), one of the numerous Bible illustrations he completed for Thomas Butts beginning in 1799 and continuing through 1805. In the Book of Judges it is told how Samson deceived Delilah into believing he could be bound with “new ropes that have never been used” (16:11); but when the Philistines arrive at Delilah’s tent the next morning to apprehend him, he breaks the ropes and drives away his would-be captors. This is the subject of Blake’s painting, a moment of heroic triumph rather than terror, or so it would appear; for physical strength alone is not enough to liberate Samson from the seductive charms of Delilah, towards whom he directs his infatuated gaze, and his hubris steadily weakens his resistance to her persistent questioning until he eventually divulges the secret of his strength, whereupon he is shorn of his locks and taken prisoner (the subject of another watercolor by Blake). For now, however, he remains ignorant of the threat Delilah poses to his manhood; but the viewer is, of course, fully aware of this danger, and admiration of his physical prowess is necessarily tempered by apprehensiveness concerning his ultimate fate. In this way, the sublime threat of annihilation, or emasculation, is channeled not through obscure vistas populated with agonized subjects or with macabre, spectral forms, but rather, ironically, through Delilah’s irrepressible sexuality; and in this uneasy juxtaposition of sublime masculinity and female beauty, Blake’s drawing has much in common with the whimsical sketch Fuseli made at about the same time of a Parisian lady contemplating the *Laocoön*.

However, whereas Fuseli or Barry often identified themselves in the male heroes of their morbid and oftentimes misogynistic fantasies, Blake did not identify with their pursuit of the sublime as an aesthetic end; rather, he typically implements sublime imagery to signify a wretched, attenuated state of being, a condition of mental division and spiritual abasement contrary to the “human form divine” of eternal existence. As Vincent De Luca suggests, while “Blake’s imagination is repeatedly drawn to the Burkean sublime ... he appears skeptical that it can serve as a mode of genuine elevation and access to a liberating power” (21). Thus, while many artists and writers seemed to embrace Burke’s theory, Blake could not bring himself to accept its essentially Lockean formulation of aesthetic pleasure. “Burke’s Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful,” Blake wrote in his copy of Reynolds’ *Discourses*, “is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke on this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions ... They mock Inspiration & Vision” (650). What Blake singles out for reproach in all these writers is their unqualified insistence upon the primacy of perceptual experience over the imagination.⁴⁵ Moreover, Burke’s postulation of self-preservation and physical gratification as the two “passions” essential for the acquisition and cultivation of “taste” would have been repugnant to him, as doubtless was the Baconian epistemology implicit in the categorical and hierarchal organization of the entire contents of the *Enquiry*.

At the same time, however, there is scarce anything in Blake’s hand, whether visual or verbal, that does not provoke astonishment or elicit sympathy from his audience, which makes it necessary to explain how it is that a man so vehemently opposed to the *Enquiry* in

⁴⁵ For Burke, the imagination does little more than record and arrange whatever is perceived through the sense organs: “incapable of producing any thing absolutely new [,] it can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses” (16-17); whereas for Blake, the imagination is less mechanical, untrammelled by mimetic protocols, and more reliant on inspiration than mere sensory perception.

theory should yet be desirous of achieving the very effects it describes, by the same means, and in many instances to a greater degree than the best literary examples Burke himself could afford. What seems to have appealed most to Blake was the proliferation of binary concepts in Burke's attempt to identify and articulate the core mental operations involved in the "delicate and aerial faculty" of taste, or aesthetic judgment (Burke 11). The repeated opposition of such terms as sublimity and beauty, self-preservation and society, and delight and pleasure, establishes a coherent framework for Burke to neatly categorize and partition a rather broad range of sense impressions and emotional conditions. For Blake, then, the bifurcated rationale and spurious terminology of the *Enquiry* proved eminently useful nonetheless in representing the catastrophic world of the prophetic books, a world once whole but now divided, the bitterly contested domain of once blissful beings turned suddenly hostile and vengeful towards one another; having forsaken their former seat in eternity, their selfish appetites and fallible senses keep them from achieving the divine vision and reconciliation necessary to restore them there.

Thus, when Blake cites the *Laocoön* as a vehicle for sublime passions, he does not intend for the viewer to exalt the protagonist in the same way Fuseli does with Othar, or Barry with Milo; nor does he limit his use of the Laocoöntic figure to the sublime. Christopher Heppner has wisely cautioned against reductive interpretations of gesture in Blake:

A specific body does not carry with it a constant or univocal meaning, but rather a range of possible meanings, one or more of which is activated by the syntax of the design as a whole, or by an associated text. Gestures are always meaningful, but not always univocal, and their potential meanings must be narrowed and focused by the total context. (70)

If the *Laocoön* provided Blake with a dependable and visually appealing formula, it was nonetheless susceptible to the influence of external graphic and textual variables capable of producing an alternate meaning. The reader will recall, for instance, that in his Chaucer print he “divided the ancient character of Hercules between [the] Miller and ... Plowman” (*DC* 527). Thus, the “strong man,” embodied in the *Farnese Hercules*, exists as two opposing forms: the one, “a receptacle of Wisdom” and “sublime energizer” (535), the other his “spectrous shadow,” a “terrible fellow” who uses “brutal strength and courage” for material gain (527). Why therefore cannot the same be true of Blake’s “beautiful man”?

The beautiful man, as the reader will recall, “represents the human pathetic” (*DC* 533). Whereas the strong man (in his positive incarnation) embodies divine conscience and imagination, the beautiful man embodies the passions, which may either elevate or debase the individual, depending on the nature of the passion and its source. The “spectrous shadow” of the beautiful man, therefore, is one whose passions are motivated by self-interest; and since self-preservation is, according to Burke, the impetus for terror, Blake would see no reason why such passions should elicit anything but revulsion and indignation. Certainly, this was Blake’s intent with his depictions of the avaricious demon Plutus, the murderous tyrant Richard III, and the voluptuary Samson. At the same time, however, passion—more specifically Christian love—is what ennoble the beautiful man, compelling him to act without any regard for material reward, or even for his own well being; he is motivated only by a sense of “duty and anxious solicitude for the fates of those for whom he combats” (*DC* 535). In Blake’s graphic art this heroic figure often appears as a youthful male nude, with the extended arm, up drawn leg, and muscular exertion characteristic of the Laocoöntic form, but lacking the anguished expression of despair in the face.

Nowhere can one perceive this more clearly than in his portrayal of “Job’s sons and daughters destroyed” (**fig. 3-39**)—plate four of his *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826)—which in the Bible is recounted to Job by the lone survivor of the tragedy: “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking in their eldest brother’s house, when suddenly a whirlwind swept across from the desert and struck the four corners of the house, which fell on the young people” (1:19).⁴⁶ Blake’s design is rich in sublime imagery. Dispatched by the Lord to test Job’s faith, Satan sits perched atop the lintel of a collapsing temple-like structure, much like the bat-winged figure of Death hovering over Fuseli’s *Lazar-house*, conjuring up wind and lightning to rain down on Job’s helpless offspring as they struggle to escape from flames, thick smoke and toppling columns. The central figure ascending a flight of steps not only resembles the *Laocoön* in gesture, but also in action, as he takes an infant onto his left shoulder and reaches down with his right hand to pull up a young woman—perhaps his wife or sister—from the burning debris. Blake’s composition resembles that of Fuseli’s *Othar*, compressed into a narrow vertical format; but whereas Fuseli emphasizes the terror of the scene by turning Othar’s attention away from the beautiful Siritha in order to confront the giant just emerging from the shadows below, Blake’s hero, by contrast, is the embodiment of pity and love. Perhaps realizing the futility of resisting divine fiat, he does not turn to challenge Satan, but instead concentrates on rescuing the victims of his fury, even if that means sacrificing his own life in the process.

One may contrast this heroic figure with Satan’s appearance in plate 17 of the series, where he is cast out of heaven, his body engulfed in flames and blasted by lightning,

⁴⁶ The engravings reproduced here were commissioned by John Linnell, for whom Blake also made a duplicate set of watercolors based on his earlier designs for Butts (c. 1818).

howling in pain as he plummets headlong into the gaping furnace of hell below (**fig. 3-40**).⁴⁷ Even though both his arms are folded behind his head, his resemblance to the *Laocoön* is unmistakable, with the smaller figures of Sin and Death falling alongside him being analogous to the boys in the sculpture.⁴⁸ Here again the Laocoöntic form serves as a vehicle for sublime terror, reinforcing the contrast between satanic (Burkean) egoism and “Self Righteousness” (*VLJ* 554), on the one hand, and Christian compassion on the other. “Forgiveness of Sin is only at the Judgment Seat of Jesus the Saviour where the Accuser is cast out. Not because he Sins but because he torments the Just & makes them do what he condemns as Sin & what he knows is opposite to their own Identity” (555). This contrast becomes even more explicit in Blake’s painting of the Last Judgment for Cromek’s deluxe edition of Blair’s *The Grave* (**figs. 3-41**), a picture that until its fortuitous rediscovery in 2001 was known only through the engraving by Schiavonetti, whom the publisher hired abruptly in 1805 to replace the recalcitrant Blake. In his unpublished account of his later painting *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, which he originally intended to exhibit in 1810, Blake stresses the high importance of this subject which for him signals the “Overwhelming of Bad Art & Science” (555) by “Eternal Vision or Imagination of All that Exists” (544): “whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual”

⁴⁷ This image of Satan can be traced to *The Rout of the Rebel Angels* in Blake’s *Paradise Lost* illustrations of 1807-08, particularly the large set acquired by Butts. Ironically, the Book of Job offers no account of Satan’s fall, though according to Butlin many Biblical commentators regarded the story as foreshadowing the Last Judgment (415). In the text of the plate Blake quotes a verse from Revelation: “The Accuser of our Brethren is Cast down / which accused them before our god day & night” (12:10).

⁴⁸ Paley and others have suggested that these figures are “Job and his wife in their former state of error” (Paley *Traveller in the Evening* 251). As far as I know, no other identification has been made; but since all are agreed that Blake’s design offers “a preview of the Last Judgement” (250), it seems reasonable to conclude that these two figures are the same as appear with Satan in his *Last Judgment* painting: “Satan is seen falling headlong ... into the Abyss Sin is also represented ... [and] Death” (*VLJ* 546).

(551). The monumental painting described here, sad to say, disappeared shortly after Blake's death, but three other fully painted versions have been identified, along with a significant number of related drawings and tracings. The watercolor commissioned for *The Grave* is the smallest of the finished pieces, being also the earliest, having far fewer figures, but with more space for them to maneuver in. The larger, more ambitious and densely populated designs of Blake's later years sprang from this seed, first planted in the barren plot of a failed commercial venture.

To consider for any length of time the enormous and bewildering array of nude figures expanding and contracting, leaping and plunging through spaces celestial and infernal, it seems these compact scenes must contain all the figure types ever conceived by Blake, in effect presenting a kind of glossary of forms correlative to "the Manners & Intentions the [Expression] Characters in all their branches" (VLJ 550), and which together comprise his entire "language of art." It should come as no surprise, then, to discover in these pictures the Laocoöntic figure in both its positive and negative aspects. In the Blair illustration, the "beautiful man" appears amongst the blessed on the left side of the composition, ascending the "Mount of God" (VLJ 552), with his right arm extended toward the throne of the Savior as he turns and reaches back with his left to give assistance to a solicitous mother and infant waiting below (**fig. 3-42**). Directly opposite this figure, on the right side of the composition, the tormented body of Satan plunges earthward on a collision course with the seven-headed beast and the whore Babylon in the lower right corner, cowering amidst "Her Kings & Councillors & Warriors ... Lamenting & looking upon her in astonishment & Terror" (548).⁴⁹ Satan's appearance here (**fig. 3-42**) is nearly identical to that in the Job engraving,

⁴⁹ My identification of this figure as Satan is based on Blake's description in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: "Satan is seen falling headlong wound round by the tail of the serpent

only this time he is caught in the coils of a giant serpent that symbolizes moral virtue—“The Combats of Good & Evil” (553)—just as it does in the *Laocoön* plate, thus reminding the viewer of Satan’s role as accuser of sin, as opposed to Christ’s boundless munificence and tender compassion.

Before proceeding further with an examination of the iconography of the illuminated books, there is yet another example that merits special attention for the way it presents the beautiful man and his “spectrous shadow” not as two distinct beings in conflict or contraposition, but rather as two stages, or “states,” of a single individual in the process of completing the arduous mental journey that leads from sinful ignorance and fear towards the attainment of divine wisdom: “Man Passes on but States remain for Ever he passes thro them like a traveller” (VLJ 546). This mental traveler is the character of Christian from Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, a work for which the aging Blake produced 29 watercolors at the same time as he was laboring over his illustrations for Dante, the Job engravings, and the *Laocoön* plate. One of these designs (eighth in the series) depicts Christian following the bad advice of Worldly Wiseman, ascending the hill (Mt. Sinai) atop which he has been told lies the village of Morality, where he is to seek the counsel of Legality (**fig. 3-43**). The way up is terrifying, however, with steep precipices and looming overhangs, not to mention the sporadic eruptions of fire that “made *Christian* afraid that he should be burned: here therefore he swet, and did quake for fear” (20). Christian ultimately turns back down the mountain, abandoning the course of Morality and encountering along the way the figure of Evangelist, who exhorts him to have faith that “all manner of sin and blasphemies shall be forgiven unto men” (22). Blake would have regarded this episode as a pivotal moment in Christian’s spiritual journey, where he must confront and reject moral virtue as the instrument

whose bulk naild to the Cross round which he wreathes is falling into the Abyss” (546). In all of Blake’s treatments of this subject, Satan is the lone figure fitting this description.

of Satan and the catalyst of human division and oppression. He would also have recognized the appropriateness here of Bunyan's sublime imagery and in his drawing depicts a terrorized Christian as a Laocoöntic figure caught in a violent, blighted landscape scarred by lightning, charred by flames forked like a serpent's tongue, and choked by thick coils of smoke; "literally engulfed," as Gerda Norvig observes, "in the emblems of the wrath of God, the stormy moral weather of the Old Testament mentality" (152). At this stage of his journey, still unconscious of his spiritual identity, his understanding is limited to what he perceives with his physical senses; he has yet to attain the divine wisdom that will release him from the bonds of material existence.

All that changes when he later ascends the Hill of Difficulty, at the summit of which he passes through the gates of Palace Beautiful, emerging afterward spiritually rejuvenated and armed to do battle with the sublime forces of the demon Apollyon. On his way up the hill, however, Christian loses the redemptive Roll, "his Pass into the Coelestial City" (43), given to him earlier by three angels—the "shining ones"—and which replaces the "burden" of sin with which he started his pilgrimage. Without this documentation of his heavenly inheritance and spiritual identity, he is dissuaded from proceeding further by the characters of Timorous and Mistrust, who point out to him the dangers that lie ahead. He therefore retraces his path back down the hill in search of his Roll, eventually recovering it in the Arbor of Grace, where he had stopped earlier to rest on his upward journey. Blake captures the moment of this rediscovery in illustration 17 of the series (**fig. 3-44**), an image that Norvig points out is "the positive contrary" to that of Christian clambering among the volcanic crags of Sinai (177). In both plates he appears "within an enclosed space of intense atmospheric charge where he both has a revelation and appeals to the viewer in a frontal pose

of considerable strain and stretch” (175).⁵⁰ But whereas in the earlier design Christian’s Laocoöntic gesture conveys Burkean terror, exacerbated by his own sinful conscience, here it reveals him to be in a beatific state of grace and vigor, ready now to proceed intrepidly past the fierce lions guarding the way to Palace Beautiful. As Norvig describes, “His imagination, stored in his ‘human form divine,’ can stretch so as to ground the transpersonal rainbow world and let it incarnate in the manifest forms of his personal reality” (Norvig 177-8). Thus liberated from his self-limiting consciousness, he is now capable of divine vision, and his beautiful form is compounded by the “human sublime” of the “strong man” who “marches on in fearless dependance on the divine decrees” (*DC* 535). This depiction of Christian’s spiritual self-assertion bears a marked resemblance to Blake’s drawing of Isaiah “raging with the inspirations of a prophetic mind” (**fig. 3-45**),⁵¹ but where instead of the lush and tranquil oasis on the Hill of Difficulty he presents a fiery scene of the conquest of Jerusalem (“Ariel”) by the Assyrian forces of Sennacharib as foretold by the prophet (29:1-6).



Blake, of course, identified strongly with the biblical prophets, convinced from his childhood that he, too, had been uniquely and providentially blessed with a capacity for divine vision, and nearly all his mature writings can be described as visionary or prophetic in character. Typically, they usher the reader into an abysmal, primordial dream-world bitterly divided between supernal, anthropomorphic beings consumed with jealousy and rage, and bent on destroying one another and whatever stands in the way of their selfish desires. At some point, realizing the futility of their mutual strife, they are reconciled and reunited in

⁵⁰ Norvig notes the resemblance between these figures, but does not trace them to the *Laocoön*.

⁵¹ The Laocoöntic gesture of Blake’s Isaiah also closely resembles that of Benjamin West, painted for his cycle *The Progress of Revealed Religion*.

Eternity, and the fallen world of space and time restored to its original Edenic state. As Blake continued to revise and refine this vision over the years, expanding and elaborating on recurrent themes and characters, it acquired an increasing Christian emphasis, culminating in the last and most comprehensive of his prophetic books, *Jerusalem*. Most all of these works are “illuminated” with starkly linear images that focus on the human form as significative of mental and spiritual states which in the text get conveyed primarily through the actions and discourse of Blake’s characters.

W. J. T. Mitchell accurately sums up Blake’s “pictorial style ... as a kind of systole and diastole of expanding and contracting forms ... defined on the one hand by the numerous crouching figures in opaque, contracted spaces, and on the other by the ubiquitous leaping, flying figures in fiery, expansive spaces” (53). Blake’s “ugly man,” it will be remembered, “represents the human reason” (533), or “incapability of intellect” (535), and to this non-visionary class belong all his figures of contraction. He may appear a “beast in features and form,” like Nebuchadnezzar (**fig. 3-12**); or, if not crawling about on all fours, bending his gaze earthward to contemplate the material world of space and time, as does *Newton* (**fig. 2-14**), or the crouching figure of Urizen poised to partition the universe with the split tongue of his compass in the iconic frontispiece to *Europe* (**fig. 3-46**). Blake’s Laocoöntic figures, by contrast, are obviously more “systolic,” although Mitchell redoubles Heppner’s statements cautioning against making generalizing interpretations based on the mere repetition of forms, since “Blake always has a ‘contrary vision’ in mind, in which any given symbolic organization can reverse its meaning” (56). In the illuminated prophecies, not only does the Laocoöntic form symbolize the contrary states of selfless Christian heroism and satanic egotism, as the reader saw in the illustrative projects examined above, but it becomes as well a significant pictorial motif, with most examples clustered near the beginning or end of the

book. Oftentimes, one of these figures will appear within the first few pages to represent intellectual and spiritual beauty perverted by selfish passions and mental strife, while towards the end is where one usually can find it deployed as the ultimate expression of redemptive Christian love and divine conscience. Such is the case in *Europe* and in the more comprehensive and graphically ambitious *Four Zoas* manuscript and *Jerusalem*, as the reader will come to see.

However, both forms can sometimes appear on the same page, as in plate seven of *America*—the first of Blake’s so called “Continental Prophecies” (**fig. 3-47**).⁵² The book recounts the events of the American Revolutionary War as a cosmic conflict between the Promethean Orc, “Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of Gods Law” (7.6), and the Guardian Prince of Albion, “A dragon form clashing his scales” (3.15), who stands for reason and virtue (as opposed to conscience) and enforces the oppressive imperial policies of the British monarch, George III. In plate seven, “Albions wrathful Prince” (14) appears above the text (**fig. 3-48**), standing upon a forked length of cloud and carrying upon his “awful shoulders” (3.17) the rope-bound figure of one of the “Brothers & sons of America” (9), whom he appears ready to pitch into the “Atlantic waves between the gloomy nations, / Swelling, belching from its deeps red clouds & raging Fires!” (4.2-3). Two more angels fly up on either side of the page bearing metonymic devices of British tyranny—a scale of justice and flaming sword⁵³—they seem desperate to attract Albion’s attention towards the

⁵² Although first published in 1793, the color copy reproduced here was printed in 1821 for John Linnell and is now preserved in the Fitzwilliam Museum. All text citations are based on Erdman’s edition of the *Complete Poetry and Prose*, where plate seven has been designated plate five (Erdman does not include the frontispiece or title page in his numbering of the plates).

⁵³ In the *Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake gives “Sword & Balances” to “Og King of Bashan” (546). In *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem* he identifies Og as a member of “Satans Synagogue,” a reptilian enforcer of “Moral & Self-righteous Law” (*Jerusalem* 27.22-4).

resurrected figure on the following page, rising up from the turf of his grave to contemplate the heavens clearing above, just as America seeks to deliver itself from the decayed institutions of Britain, one day to awaken to a “fresher morning” when “Empire is no more” (6.13-15):

The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up;

The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry'd.

Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! Awakening!

Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds & bars are burst. (2-5)⁵⁴

The Laocoöntic figure of Albion engaging in wanton cruelty and murder expresses the terror of absolute power that Burke identifies as a source of the sublime: “the ideas of pain, and above all of death, are so very affecting, that whilst we remain in the presence of whatever is supposed to have the power of inflicting either, it is impossible to be perfectly free from terror” (59). Burke follows his predecessor Dennis in arguing that god, as the ultimate power in the universe, is in the highest degree sublime, since “no conviction of the justice with which it is exercised, nor the mercy with which it is tempered, can wholly remove the terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand”; while in the realm of mortal affairs, “the power which arises from institution in kings and commanders has the same connection with terror” (62-3). This last statement would have seemed especially ironic in the year 1793. Much had changed in the 35 years since the original publication of the *Enquiry*, and Burke was now defending an enervated feudal establishment from the terror wrought by “new fanatics of popular arbitrary power” (*Reflections on the Revolution in*

⁵⁴ Blake here alludes to the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of reanimated skeletons, prophesying Israel’s deliverance from Babylonian captivity: “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ... I am going to put breath into you, and you will live. I shall fasten sinews on you, clothe you with flesh, cover you with skin, and give you breath, and you will live. ... there was a rattling sound and the bones all fitted themselves together” (37:4-7).

France 111), while Prime Minister Pitt introduced heavy-handed legislative measures intended to squelch revolutionary fervor, including in 1792 a proclamation against seditious writings that may have compelled Blake to cancel certain plates from *America* that mention King George by name.

At the bottom of plate seven Orc appears in a form like to that of Satan in the *Job* series and *Last Judgment* pictures examined above (**fig. 3-48**). Albion vilifies him as “Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, hater of Dignities” (7.5), while at different times describing him as “serpent form’d” (3), an “Eternal Viper” with “ever-hissing jaws / And parched lips drop[ping] ... fresh gore” (9.15; 23-4). But ironically, what Albion decries as blasphemy is the revolutionary principle expounded by Orc, that “every thing that lives is holy, life delights in life; / Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defil’d” (8.13-4). Orc represents “prolific” energy, which is vital—“the only life” (*MHH* 4), while the “devourer” Albion represents the necrophilous, “passive” principle “that obeys Reason” (3). These two contrary states—ecstatic expansion and abstract contraction—co-exist in mutual strife, each acquiring force by pushing against the other, without which neither could have any meaning whatsoever. Thus, Reason, “the bound or outward circumference of Energy” (4), designates as “Evil” whatever is adverse to abstraction, codification, and regulation, and arms itself to eradicate precisely that which it requires to sustain itself. It is the suppression of freedom and accusation of sin that enkindles the fires of revolution, and so Blake depicts Orc “Writhing in pangs of abhorred birth,” encircled by the serpent of moral virtue, the coils of which spiral downward through time and space like an auger; and the tighter it contracts, the faster will it turn, until finally the point of its tail shall bore straight through the “Stone of night” (5.1) and release the “fiery joy that Urizen perverted to ten commands,” signaling that at last “times are ended” and a new “morning gins to break” (8.2-3).

Orc is the spectrous embodiment of Blake's raging "strong man," appearing as such on plate twelve, terrorizing the impressed armies of Albion (**fig. 3-49**): "Intense! naked! A Human fire fierce glowing, as the wedge / Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were fire" (4.8-9); but in plate seven Blake portrays him as a Promethean hero, suffering "unutterable torment" as he struggles against the contracting serpent of moral virtue, the "enormous circles" of the "harlot womb" from which he springs in "terrible birth" (9.18-19): "The hairy shoulders rend the links, free are the wrists of fire; / Round the terrific loins he siez'd the panting struggling womb" (2.2-3). His Laocoöntic gesture is unquestionably sublime, similar to that of Satan with whom he has much in common. Both display extraordinary egotism, and both wreak extraordinary destruction—Satan by way of accusation, and Orc, whom Blake at one point identifies with Mars (5.2-4), by way of reactionary violence; for as Blake later acknowledged, "while we are in the world of Mortality ... You cannot have Liberty ... without <what you call> Moral Virtue & you cannot have Moral Virtue without the Slavery of that half of the Human Race who hate <what you call> Moral Virtue" (*VLJ* 554). At the same time, however, whereas Satan's primary objective, according to Blake, is to sow moral discord between men, and thus to perpetuate tyranny and oppression, Orc announces that he will "stamp to dust" the "stony law" from which Satan derives his power

... and scatter religion abroad

To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves;

But they shall rot on desert sands, & consume in bottomless deeps;

To make the desarts blossom, & the deeps shrink to their fountains,

And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof. (8.5-9)

And while Albion assumes the “dragon form” of Blake’s “ugly man,” who “acts from love of carnage, and delight in the savage barbarities of war, rushing with sportive precipitation into the very teeth of the affrighted enemy” (*DC* 535), Orc wages war for the sake of liberty and social justice:

Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:

Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;

Let the chained soul shut up in darkness and in sighing,

Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years;

Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open.

And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge. (6.6-11)

In this speech he resembles the “beautiful man,” who “acts from duty, and anxious solicitude for the fates of those for whom he combats,” but he does not understand that a “Spiritual War” is not decided by “Moral Precepts”; rather, victory can ultimately be attained only through “Forgiveness of Sins” (Annotations 608). “Error or Creation will be Burned Up,” Blake later wrote, “the Moment Men cease to behold it,” only “then & not till then Truth or Eternity will appear” (*VLJ* 555). Such is the apocalyptic task, not of warriors and philosophers, but of artists and prophets: “The Last Judgment is an Overwhelming of Bad Art & Science” (*VLJ* 555). Thus, while Orc’s motives might well be just, they are undermined by his violent measures; and this would seem to account for the ambiguity in his physical appearance, at once terrifying and beautiful.

In spite of Orc’s oracular pronouncements, he is clearly neither an artist nor a prophet; that role belongs to his father, Los, for whom Blake reserves the epithet “Eternal Prophet,” and who plays no small part in the creation of the material world of time and space. This is the subject of *The Book of Urizen* (1795), the longest and most pictorial of the

Lambeth books, consisting of a short “Preludium,” followed by nine “Chapters” averaging around ten verses in length, with ten additional full-page illustrations that contain no text. In brief, the narrative recounts Urizen’s estrangement from the “Eternals” in his desire to create a finite world subject to his laws. In the process of doing so, he gradually assumes a mortal form over a period of seven ages, aided by Los, whose pity for him results in his division from “the first female” Enitharmon (18.10). She soon gives birth to the rebellious “man child” Orc (19.40), and her affection for the boy rouses the jealousy of Los, who promptly has him bound atop a mountain. Orc’s cries reawaken Urizen, who spends the remainder of the book surveying his new world (Egypt) and its mortal inhabitants, “in reptile forms shrinking ... bound down / To earth by their narrowing perceptions” (25.37-47), and supervising the emergence of human civilization and organized religion. Not much hope gets expressed in this account of the creation and fall—really a *falling into creation*—which critics have often compared to the book of Genesis, and both the poetry and designs overwhelm the reader with unrelenting images of sublime terror and physical suffering.

The figure appearing on plate twelve (**fig. 3-50**),⁵⁵ the tailpiece of Chapter III, represents Urizen retreating from the wrath of the Eternals into the “dark desarts” of his new kingdom, “A wide world of solid obstruction” (4.23; 5.14):

He dug mountains & hills in vast strength,
 He piled them in incessant labour,
 In howlings & pangs & fierce madness
 ...
 And a roof, vast petrific around,
 On all sides He fram’d: like a womb. (5.22-9)

⁵⁵ The images reproduced here come from the final 1818 printing (G) housed in the Library of Congress.

In Blake's tailpiece design the reader sees the embryo of Urizen struggling, "labouring," within a dense tissue of contracting matter, from which he will soon emerge no longer possessed of his youthful eternal form, but as a newborn "death-image" (15.2), "hoary, and age-broke, and aged, / In despair and the shadows of death" (5.26-7). Here again Blake employs the Laocoöntic figure to represent the beautiful man wracked by "tormenting passions" (3.19), his gesture expressing the "fierce anguish" (5.19) of one confronted with immanent physical annihilation, rather than the boundless, redemptive joy of a body and soul united through magnanimous acts of divine conscience.

Blake's depictions of Los are scarce any less sublime. When he first discovers Urizen "rent from Eternity" (6.8), he is "smitten with astonishment" (4a.1), "affrighted / At the formless unmeasurable death" (7.8-9). With hammer and tongs he helps to complete Urizen's hideous transformation, then afterwards contemplates the horror of what he has done: "In terrors Los shrunk from his task: His great hammer fell from his hand" (13.20-1). Thus separated from Eternity, "Cut off from life & light frozen / Into horrible forms of deformity" (42-3), Los can see naught save "what his little orbs / Of sight by degrees unfold" (31-2); and though acutely conscious of his degraded state, he cannot gaze on Eternity without experiencing feelings of terror: "he look'd back with anxious desire / But the space undivided by existence / Struck horror into his soul" (45-7). These lines are the most likely source for the remarkable and moving image of Los on page 18 of the 1818 edition (**fig. 3-51**), which shows the prophet with his hammer striding through the foundry of space and time, his taut, muscular limbs engulfed in the raging fires of material creation. The great purgative conflagration of the Last Judgment, when time and space shall be blasted away from the face of Eternity, as yet remains untenable; though presumably, when the end finally does arrive, it will come blazing up from one of the embers of this nascent moment, until then

kept alive in the body of Orc, who “with fierce flames / Issu’d from Enitharmon” (19.45-6). But in this utterly hopeless and sublime image, Los’s face is marked by anguish and despair, like that of the sculpture he so much resembles in gesture and physique, “his eternal life / Like a dream ... obliterated,” mentally as well as physically confined in a deep crater of mephitic, fire-formed matter (13.33-4).

A more ambiguous example of Blake’s Laocoöntic figures appears on plate seven (**fig. 3-52**). Alluding directly to the sculpture, he presents a group of three figures, tormented by serpents, plunging upside down “In cataracts of fire blood & gall / In whirlwinds of sulphurous smoke” (4.46-7). One may presume that these “enormous forms of energy” represent three of the “seven deadly sins of the soul” (48-9) against which, having just issued the mandate of “One King, one God, one Law” (40), Urizen has pitted himself in “fightings and conflicts dire” (27). The group closely mirrors that of the aforementioned Job illustration of Satan, Sin and Death being cast out of heaven (**fig. 3-40**),⁵⁶ with the significant difference that here Blake’s figures are rather victims of accusation than being themselves accusers. The sublimity of Blake’s imagery is irrefutable, with its emphasis on disfiguring torment and destructive elemental forces; and yet, the conspicuous cruciform gesture of the central figure adds a layer of meaning that substantially alters the overall complexion of the design.

This figure’s Christ-like appearance suggests a parallel between Laocoön and his sons and conventional Calvary scenes depicting Jesus crucified between two thieves as recounted in the Gospels. The reader will recall how for Blake the figure of *Laocoön* can represent either the Burkean sublime or the “human pathetic.” In the former sense, he embodies satanic reasoning, a despotic patriarch who, having unleashed the serpents of moral virtue upon the world, must now confront the terror of his own mortality; while in the

⁵⁶ The right-hand figure is almost identical with that of Satan in his Job and Last Judgment designs.

beautiful mode, by contrast, he is motivated to act by nothing more than parental love for his offspring, with little concern for his own survival. Jesus naturally epitomizes Blake's ideal of the beautiful man, guiding humanity out of "Satans Labyrinth" (*VLJ* 552) through "Forgiveness of Sins" (555). Thus Jesus addresses himself to Mary Magdalene in *The Everlasting Gospel (EG)*: "Let me see / The Seven Devils that torment thee / Hide not from my Sight thy Sin / That forgiveness thou maist win" (149-52). In the prophetic books, Urizen is the original lawgiver, cruel and inexorable, recording "secrets of dark contemplation" (4.26) in his "Book of brass" (44). He writes off as "sins" the passions "which the bosoms of all inhabit" (29), though Blake later makes clear that "Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have <curbed &> governd their Passions or have No Passions but because they have Cultivated their Understandings" (*VLJ* 553-4). Logically, Urizen would have to be the enemy of Jesus, since "he who does Forgive Sin is Crucified as an Abettor of Criminals. & he who performs Works of Mercy in Any shape whatever is punishd & if possible destroyd not thro Envy or Hatred or Malice but thro Self Righteousness that thinks it does God service which God is Satan" (554). Thus, like Orc in the *America* plate examined earlier, the Christ-like figure in plate seven is bound in the constricting coils of moral virtue, with the serpent's head looping back to form a pestiferous halo; while his inverse position signifies the perversion of the Everlasting Gospel under Urizen's "Net of Religion" (25.22): "The Modern Church Crucifies Christ with the Head Downards" (*VLJ* 554).⁵⁷ At the same time, however, the sublimity of the composition is ameliorated somewhat by the beautiful, Christ-like gesture foreshadowing the Last Judgment, when Jesus will "subdue / The Serpent Bulk of Natures

⁵⁷ In the *Everlasting Gospel* Blake singles out "the Church of Rome[:] The Vision of Christ that thou dost see / Is my Visions Greatest Enemy ... Thine loves the same world that mine hates / Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates" (259-67).

dross” and “nail [sic] it to the Cross” (*EG* 254-6).⁵⁸ If the reader accepts this interpretation of the image, then it would mark the first time that Blake hints towards a Christian resolution to the cycle of oppression and revolution that is the primary theme of the Lambeth books; and what is more important, it anticipates the more prominent role given to Jesus in the mature prophecies, developing in part out of his important commission, beginning in late 1794, to illustrate Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* for the publisher Richard Edwards, a subject that will be taken up in the following chapter.

Before proceeding onward to an analysis of these longer works, however, it is necessary to direct the reader’s attention to the second of Blake’s Continental Prophecies, *Europe* (1795), not only because it offers one of the most compelling examples of the beautiful man in Blake’s entire graphic oeuvre, but also because it reveals for the first time a deliberate scheme to deploy Laocoöntic figures near the beginning and end of the book as a way to call special attention to the distinction he makes between the beautiful man and his Spectrous other. The latter appears on the second page of the Preludium to *Europe* (**fig. 3-53**),⁵⁹ wherein the same nameless female who prophesied revolution in *America* reappears—this time addressing herself to Enitharmon—to forecast the war between England and France, which does not commence until the conclusion of the book.

Though “unwilling,” she describes a sublime, war-torn landscape overrun with “howling terrors” and “all devouring fiery kings. / Devouring & devoured roaming on dark and desolate mountains / In forests of eternal death, shrieking in hollow trees” (2.1-6). A

⁵⁸ As foretold by the Archangel Michael in *Paradise Lost* XII, lines 415-19, a subject illustrated by Blake on three separate occasions between the years 1807 and 1822. See also *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: “Satan is seen falling headlong wound round by the tail of the serpent whose bulk naild to the Cross round which he wreathes is falling into the Abyss” (546).

⁵⁹ The figures reproduced here come from copy K (1821), originally printed for John Linnell, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum.

band of clouds separates these ominous verses from a dark, indefinite expanse covering the entire bottom half of the page. Occupying this cavernous space is a group of three tussling, baldheaded men that obviously represent the warring kings of the text, their bodies intertwined in a grotesque, almost ludicrous knot of painfully straining limbs like figures crammed into a temple frieze. The central figure has a clear advantage over the others, keeping one in a tight headlock as he reaches back with his left hand to strangle the other whose arms are pinned beneath his outstretched leg. It is a terrible scene, reminiscent of Blake's "memorable" vision of the "seven houses" of sin in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where he observes

baboons, & all of that species chaind by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another ... the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devourd, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was a helpless trunk. this after grinning & kissing it with seeming fondness they devourd too. (20)

The hairless, reptilian-looking men in *Europe* know only the pleasure of conquest, the "love of carnage" that defines the ugly man (*DC* 535), or else the terror of death that comes with defeat. In this image, then, Blake has, in a manner of speaking, melted down the *Laocoön* in the fires of war, disfiguring the heroic beauty of the original and eradicating any trace expression of compassion or remorse. Serpents are no longer even necessary, as here the father's powerful arms do all the fatal work, just as, in the *Laocoön* plate, the Angel of the Divine Presence, by codifying moral virtue, is ultimately responsible for the suffering endured by his sons Satan and Adam.

In stark contrast to this terrifying image, in the final plate of *Europe* Blake restores the original beauty and pathos of the Laocoöntic form in a climactic, apocalyptic scene (**fig.**

3-54). Striding through the smoke and flames of the war raging between “Albion’s Guardian” and “terrible Orc” in the “vineyards of red France” (14.37-15.2), a nude male figure bears upon his shoulder the unconscious (perhaps dead?) body of a woman as he reaches back with his left hand to assist a frightened child who is about to be consumed. Nowhere in the text does Blake identify these figures. Earlier he had described the dismal “youth of England” whose “parents brought them forth” to the druidical “Serpent temple ... shadowing the Island white” (12.5-11), where Albion’s Angel “preaches canting” (7) from atop the sacrificial “Stone of Night” (10.26). In the final plate, however, a Greek temple (the Greeks, according to Blake, also practiced a form of druidism), or some other edifice of classical design,⁶⁰ lies in complete ruin, presumably razed by Orc; and the encroaching flames, which have already engulfed the last word of the text, “FINIS,” threaten next to consume an oak tree branch that hangs precariously over the scene—the oak being regularly employed by Blake as a symbol of druidical religion (10.7). Nor does the powerful, heroic physique of the father bear any resemblance to the despondent victims of plague and cruel despotism that abound in the manuscript. “Over the doors Thou shalt not; & over the chimneys Fear is written: / With bands of iron round their necks fasten’d into the walls / The citizens: in leaden gyves the inhabitants of suburbs / Walk heavy: soft and bent are the bones of villagers” (12.28-31). Such is Blake’s description of the outworn citizens of “London city” (9), appearing much the same as they do in his poem “London” (from *Songs of Experience*); but the father in *Europe* has no “bands of iron” around his neck, nor “leaden gyves” about his ankles; he is strong of body and mind, and by his face he knows no fear, but only pity for those he loves.

⁶⁰ The columnated façade of St. Paul’s comes to mind, as it was, during Blake’s lifetime, becoming over-crowded with monuments to England’s fallen military heroes.

And so Blake saw fit to place an image of the beautiful man at the conclusion of a poem that offers the reader little hope or consolation, ending as it does on a numberless, discordant note, with a relentless onslaught of apocalyptic horrors: “On golden chariots raging, with red wheels dropping with blood; / The Lions lash their wrathful tails! / The Tigers couch upon the prey & suck the ruddy tide” (15.5-7) ... and so on, until the very last line of the poem where Los urges “his sons to the strife of blood” (11). And yet, even as the tender shoots and leafy tendrils that sprout from the furrowed letter of Blake’s fiery vision, heralding an end to the wintry season described in the first line of the Prophecy, so springs the beautiful “human form divine” from the fires of Armageddon that burn away the vegetable world and rouse Enitharmon “in anguish and dismay” (15.8) from her eighteen-hundred years long dream of human history (9.1-2). It is not clear, at least not to this reader, whether or not this springtide man will perish, like Job’s sons, in spite of his noble effort, his family the hapless casualties of a world bitterly divided by the forked tongue of Urizen’s compass; or if, indeed, he has not already experienced a “Last Judgment,” and now embarks for Eternity guided by divine conscience rather than sense perception. It may be that Blake intended both meanings at once. At any rate, his heroic presence at the end of the book casts a positive light over the dismal whole, affirming that selfless Christian love alone can open the gates to Eternity, which cannot be forced by strength of arms or edge of sword; and that the true purpose of art, that is of “visionary” art, is to teach this love by encouraging the renunciation of the satanic faculties of reason and moral judgment. This would become the central theme of all of Blake’s mature prophecies, in which, as the reader is about to see, Laocoöntic figures once again form a crucial graphic paradigm.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The SPIRITUAL BODY Revealed:

The Laocoöntic Figure in the *Four Zoas* Manuscript

Containing a description of the manuscript and the history of its composition; with further remarks on Blake's drawings and their relationship to his Night Thoughts designs; followed by interpretation of several Laocoöntic figures, assessing their importance to the meaning of the poem.

Northrop Frye once memorably referred to *The Four Zoas* as “the greatest abortive masterpiece in English literature” (269). Indeed, the manuscript is a veritable crash site, the point of collision between seemingly incommensurate strains of Blake’s thought during a particularly formative period in his career, with a debris field that spans some 140 pages. The challenge for the modern reader is not to attempt a reconstruction of the author’s final intentions, imagining a text that apparently never existed, so much as to understand the process of its creation, to piece together the development of Blake’s mythopoetic scheme over a period of years by patiently sifting through layer upon layer of handwritten text and hastily executed sketches, together with a large number of illustrations originally produced for a poem he did not write. The competing demands of these textual, graphic, and intertextual aspects of the manuscript defy any critic who would set out to make a comprehensive analysis of the entire work. Those who have tried, while often providing many useful insights into the poem, nevertheless have yielded only partial readings that neglect one or more of these elements. In this chapter, by contrast, attention will be given to a relatively small number of pages, singled out for their examples of Laocoöntic figures; and while such a narrow emphasis necessarily precludes the kind of broad interpretations pursued by most critics, at the same time it permits a greater depth of analysis by taking into account the full range of meanings contained in the manuscript.

As narrative poetry, *The Four Zoas* is much too fragmentary, its progress too halting, its message too discursive and desultory, to be taken as anything more than an abandoned experiment, a kind of Frankensteinian monstrosity, misshapen and unwieldy, let loose by its negligent creator to be chased through the halls of academe by a small mob of torch-bearing scholars hopeful of casting some new light on its meaning. The manuscript is an extraordinarily complex document, and to navigate through all its winding passages of

interpolations and revisions with their dense traffic of figures requires an equally extraordinary amount of patience and diligence in the reader, and perhaps also a willingness to accept that, owing to the unfinished state of the work, certain aspects of it probably will forever elude analysis. Still, there have always been enterprising scholars eager to take on the challenges of the manuscript, and who, like Theseus in the Labyrinth, have laid down important clues for others to follow by tracing out some integral pattern of meaning, a system of structural and symbolic coherence.

Northrop Frye and David Erdman probably are the most widely known and generally respected of Blake scholars, and despite the age of their major monographs—*Fearful Symmetry* was first published in 1947, *Prophet Against Empire* in 1954—their sophisticated and immensely learned interpretations of *The Four Zoas* have greatly influenced almost all subsequent criticism of the poem right up to the present day, which feat, rather extraordinary in the field of literary studies, is a testament not only to the enthusiasm and pioneering intellect of these critics, but perhaps also to the intractability of the poem, itself. Their readings, elaborated so eloquently and with such careful attention to some of the most minute details of Blake’s eccentric and protean vision, bring comfort to so many readers precisely because they are able to make sense of so much apparent chaos; because they calm the waters of what Swinburne once described in his rhapsodic essay on Blake as a tumultuous “sea of words,”¹ extrapolating from the poet’s turbid and disjointed ideas a relatively coherent and pellucid narrative that comports with the expectations of readers of more traditional verse.

¹ The entire passage reads: “If any one would realize to himself for ever a material notion of chaos, let him take a blind header into the midst of the whirling foam and rolling weed of this sea of words” (187). It should be noted, however, that Swinburne, like Gilchrist, makes no mention of *The Four Zoas* in his survey of Blake, though both men almost certainly were aware of its existence, then in the possession of John Linnell, where it remained hidden away until Yeats and Ellis published their feckless transcription in 1893. Writing in the mid-1860s, members and close associates of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in particular

Northrop Frye approaches *The Four Zoas*, as he does all of Blake's prophetic writings, as "a single drama"—familiar to everyone by now and simple in its basic outline—of spiritual corruption and redemption, identifying as "Blake's real theme, the fall of Albion and his recovery of Jerusalem in the apocalypse" (270). Meanwhile, David Erdman places a greater emphasis on the poet's lived experience and somewhat detached engagement with a world wracked by endless warfare and economic strife; pointing out numerous instances in *The Four Zoas* where Blake's mythography intersects with British history and culture, Erdman reads the entire poem as a kind of oblique commentary on the condition of England during a particularly intense period of economic crisis and political turmoil, attempting "to fuse living and ancient history into a single prophetic epic" (296). No one can dispute that Frye and Erdman provide compelling and at times ingenious interpretations based on a circumspect reading of the poetry and versatile scholarship, and there is much that can still be gained from reading them. Nevertheless, after reading *The Four Zoas* closely and examining all the manuscript pages, it is evident that such readings as would treat the poem as a coherent, continuous narrative predicated on mythic time, as in Frye, or on living history as in Erdman, must of necessity elide certain textual lacunae and ambiguities, or even dismiss outright those more vexatious elements of the manuscript that would threaten to unravel the fabric of inferences from which these readings have been cut.

In his magnificent edition of *The Four Zoas*,² G. E. Bentley divulges many of these snags, though at times his tone can seem rather shrill, as when he derides all previous

Swinburne and the Rossetti brothers, revived much interest in Blake, whose reputation and works lamentably had suffered from many years of neglect, and in whose aesthetic principles and working methods they found much to admire and emulate.

² G. E. Bentley's massive facsimile and transcript of *The Four Zoas*, published in 1963 by the Clarendon Press, is a masterpiece of textual scholarship, and many of the

criticism of the poem as “consistently characterized by ignorance and perversity” (167). In particular, he faults Frye and Erdman, among others, for taking the material at face value, for overlooking the multilayered composition and convoluted revisions of the manuscript, which he believes has resulted in a proliferation of improper assumptions and misjudgments that simplify and distort the meaning of the work. Bentley does acknowledge later that his “predecessors were misled by an inadequate text of the poem,”³ which makes some of his harsh pronouncements seem not a little unfair; yet he is right to conclude that “the extreme complexity of the manuscript problems makes any analysis of the poem extremely dangerous” (170). This is not to suggest that Frye and Erdman are bad readers of *The Four Zoas*, or that Bentley is somehow a better scholar for having consulted Blake’s manuscript, but rather to demonstrate the extraordinary difficulty in handling a work that was evidently abandoned when it became too disordered and unwieldy even for the poet himself to have found it practicable to give it the same finish as his other illuminated books. A description of the manuscript and the history of its composition will shed some light on these problems, and also suggest how it should be situated in relation to Blake’s other prophetic writings.



The story of *The Four Zoas* begins with the paper upon which it is written, paper that first came to Blake through another aborted project. In late 1794 the publisher Richard Edwards commissioned Blake to design and engrave a series of illustrations for an elegant edition of Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, which both men hoped would achieve the same notoriety as Boydell’s *Poetical Works of John Milton*, the first volume of which had appeared

observations presented in my analysis of the manuscript owe their existence to this important edition.

³ Frye’s source was Geoffrey Keynes’ three-volume *The Writings of William Blake* (1925); Erdman used *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake* (1926), edited by D. J. Sloss and J. P. R. Wallis.

the previous year.⁴ In the end Blake produced an astonishing 537 drawings, only 43 of which however were ever engraved, the rest winding up in the possession of the publisher. The 43 engravings, done “in a perfectly new style of decoration, surrounding the text which they are designed to elucidate” (Edwards, qtd. in Keynes 201), were published with the first four Nights in 1797. After the appearance of this first volume, however, Edwards gave up publishing; no further volumes were issued, and Blake’s immense labor brought him neither renown as an illustrator nor financial stability. In a letter to George Cumberland dated 26 August 1799 a dejected Blake wrote, “I live by Miracle . . . For as to Engraving in which art I cannot reproach myself with any neglect yet I am laid by in a corner as if I did not Exist & Since my Youngs Night Thoughts have been publishd Even Johnson & Fuseli have discarded my Graver” (704). To fulfill this disastrous commission Edwards had provided Blake with about 900 spacious leaves of paper, watermarked “1794 JWHATMAN,” on which all the *Night Thoughts* drawings and test proofs of the engravings were to be made. Upon Edwards’ abrupt and disappointing withdrawal from the *Night Thoughts* venture, Blake allocated many of the left over leaves to other projects. The J Whatman watermark thus appears in several copies of the Lambeth prophecies,⁵ and some time in late 1797 Blake made a fair copy of a longer poem entitled *Vala* on this same paper.

This fair copy, transcribed from a lost rough draft, was written out in Blake’s flourishing copperplate hand, which suggests that he regarded at least the poetry as complete at an early date. Of this transcription only two and a half Nights remain in the present

⁴ In the “Advertisement” for the first and only volume of this edition of *Night Thoughts*, Edwards writes, “no apology can be necessary . . . for giving to the great work of Young some of those advantages of dress and ornament which have lately distinguished the immortal productions of Shakspeare and of Milton” (iii).

⁵ The exact locations of these leaves is specified by Keynes and Wolf in *William Blake’s Illuminated Books*.

manuscript, but it seems probable that all nine were carefully copied out and bound together, as there are evident stitching-marks unique to the extant pages. In addition, the title page is dated 1797, which Blake probably would not have done unless he were satisfied that the work was finished. All that remained for him to do was to illuminate the fair copy and transfer the pages to copperplate for engraving. But this of course never happened. By this time Blake's income had been reduced to a pittance. After the *Night Thoughts* fiasco, which had consumed him for over two years,⁶ he had neither the time nor the resources to devote to his own work, and he would publish nothing of his own again until 1804. As Bentley puts it, "Blake was in no position to embark on huge projects that might ensure him fame in heaven but would not bring him bread on earth" (FZ 160). Encouraged by friends such as Fuseli and Joseph Johnson, and compelled by dire necessity, Blake laid aside *Vala* and resumed with much reluctance the "meer drudgery" of commercial printmaking (qtd. in Bentley *SP* 207).⁷

Between late 1797 and the summer of 1800, beset by anxieties financial and professional, Blake was looking for a hand to pull him up out of the "Deep pit of Melancholy" in which he now found himself (Letters 706).⁸ While he continued accepting modest commissions for book illustrations, including several from his still dependable employer Joseph Johnson, and even a large advertisement for Moore & Co's carpets, Blake would return whenever possible to the fair copy of *Vala*, inserting and deleting passages, and in some places entire pages, corrupting whatever was left of the original narrative with the addition of new characters and interpolated episodes. At some point Blake re-numbered the

⁶ During this period Charles Heathcote Tatham observed, "Mrs. Blake has been heard to say that she never saw him except when in conversation or reading; with his hands idle" (qtd. in Bentley *SP* 165).

⁷ Letter of 10 January 1802.

⁸ Letter to George Cumberland, 2 July 1800.

first two Nights. Bentley advances the hypothesis that prior to revision part of the present Night I served as a “Preludium,” like those that precede several of the Lambeth prophecies; and that after this section was expanded by several pages it was deemed necessary to designate it as “Night the First,” while the original first two Nights henceforth became Nights II and III.⁹ By 1802, now working out of his picturesque cottage at Felpham, Blake evidently concluded that the fair copy had become too muddled and unwieldy to work with, and so set out to re-transcribe the second half of Night III and all the subsequent Nights, this time in his far less neat normal hand.¹⁰ Most of these pages were copied on to *Night Thoughts* proof sheets, a few of which had rough sketches on them before the proofs were pulled (Bentley *Vala* 161).¹¹ A new set of stitching-marks once again indicates that Blake bound these new leaves together, but separate from the first two and a half Nights in the copperplate hand.

Most scholars concur that during Blake’s residence at Felpham, a relatively blissful and productive period, he experienced an intense spiritual epiphany—perhaps under the auspices of his munificent patrons Thomas Butts and William Hayley—that would have an

⁹ It should be noted, however, that Blake never bothered to re-number the second Night.

¹⁰ We can be almost certain of this date because on page 48 of the *Four Zoas* manuscript—the verso of the *Night Thoughts* engraving “The author supporting a female figure, and presenting her to the sun”—can be seen a faint impression of William Hayley’s ballad “The Elephant,” which was printed by Joseph Seagrave of Chichester in late May 1802, and then immediately relayed to Blake to print the corresponding plate on his press at Felpham. The *Night Thoughts* proof was used as a backing sheet when the still damp ballad was passed through the press, hence the barely visible mirror-printing. It seems rather unlikely that Blake would have thus abused his new transcription of *Vala*, and we may therefore conclude with confidence that pages 43-140 were produced after this date (Bentley *Vala* 162).

¹¹ See my discussion of page 114 below.

immediate and profound impact on his later poetry.¹² According to Bentley, he became “overwhelmed with a renewed vision, a renovated Christianity, and a new purpose in his work” (FZ 163). The shock of this sudden spiritual rejuvenation would have much influence on Blake’s creative endeavors, and even his conception of himself as an artist, and the *Vala* manuscript provides a unique and invaluable record of this seismic upheaval, where new passages collide jarringly with old ones, the original foundation now slipping and sagging, ready to collapse under the strain of so much added verbiage. Indeed, by the time Blake handed over the manuscript to his friend John Linnell late in life, the title of the poem had been changed to *The Four Zoas*,¹³ the “Ancient Man” had been given the name “Albion,” and the whole had increased in length by some 2000 lines. The last three nights are the longest, and there can be little doubt that Blake, inspired by an abundance of new ideas and shifting concerns, labored over his poem in hopes of somehow reconciling his abstruse gnostic cosmology—the seeds of which had been sprouted in the early 1790s and were by this time fully grown up into a dense, wild blowing wood of gigantic Zoas, Spectres and Emanations—with his burgeoning millenarian beliefs.

In the same way that Blake had split the first Night into two, when Night VIII proved to be exceedingly long he partitioned it and called the first half “Night the Seventh,” hence the second Night VII in the present manuscript (Night VII^b). Bentley has suggested that

¹² At this time Blake was inundated with commissions to produce pictures and illustrations on religious subject matter, most notably the large number of Biblical scenes painted for Butts. He was also steeped in the writings of Milton and Cowper (Hayley wrote major biographies of both men) and took lessons from Hayley in Greek and Hebrew. Boasting to his brother James on 30 January 1803, he wrote, “the Testament is my chief master” (727). Blake also sat through ponderous recitations of Klopstock’s Christian epic *The Messiah*, and seems to have “decided that Klopstock had defied England to produce the successor to Milton, and that it was up to him to meet the challenge” (Frye 329).

¹³ This was evidently a late change, since the heading of each Night retains the original title of *Vala*.

Night VII^a was eventually to be integrated into one or more of the preceding Nights, “to force the first seven Nights into six by judicious rewriting and deleting” (163). One distinguishing feature of Night VII^b is Luvah’s assimilation into Jesus Christ: “They vote the death of Luvah & they naild him to the tree / They piercd him with a spear & laid him in a sepulcher” (92.13-14).¹⁴ The other Christian references in the first three Nights, including several awkwardly contrived appearances by Christ attired in Luvah’s “robes of blood,”¹⁵ are all demonstrably late additions to the manuscript. Curiously, no such additions are to be found in the middle Nights, which means that Blake may have been too preoccupied with revising the later Nights, or perhaps abandoned the entire project at this point. In any case, as Bentley observes, “the middle Nights were never brought into conformity with the Christianity of the Nights at either end of *Vala*” (165). Nights VIII and IX, meanwhile, were also being reconceived, and the “titanic war among the Zoas” they might once have described (163), and towards which Night VII^b would seem to lead the reader,¹⁶ gradually gave way to the “gently beaming fire” of Jesus Christ (Blake *FZ* 104.4). The Lamb of God finally triumphs over tyranny and falsehood, restoring harmony to a universe brought to ruin by eons of Zoal strife, and finally redeems the fallen Albion in magnificent apocalyptic scenes reminiscent of the Revelation of John.

¹⁴ All passages from *The Four Zoas* are cited by manuscript page, followed by line numbers, using David Erdman’s edition of the text.

¹⁵ See pages 13, 27, 32, 33, and 55.

¹⁶ Night VII^b concludes thus: “. . . the War song sounded loud & strong / Thro all the heavens Urizens Web vibrated torment on torment” (98). The leaves of Nights VII^b, VIII, and IX bear no stitching-marks, which means that at some point, probably before 1804, Blake discarded Nights VIII and IX of the second fair copy. Bentley speculates further that “Blake’s rapidly changing ideas may have forced him to transcribe Nights VIII and IX yet once or twice again” (163).

Yet it is this complex imbrication of gnostic ontology and Christian eschatology that has compromised the structural integrity of the whole poem, not to mention the numerous other infelicities of plot and style that have resulted from layer upon layer of revisions, so that what remains today is not so much a coherent narrative of epic proportions, as Blake no doubt originally intended, but rather a palimpsestic record of the poet's evolving ideas over a period of about ten years. And since the rediscovery of the *Four Zoas* manuscript in the early 1890s, there has been much consternation and regret that "he never got around to reconciling the cross-purposes in his poem or smoothing over the awkward transitions from an early draft to a late one . . . [and] because of his inconsistent patchwork revision . . . never wove it into a genuine whole" (Bentley 165). At the same time, however, critics acknowledge the unique opportunity it provides of viewing up close Blake's working methods and intellectual tendencies during a particularly volatile and fertile period in his artistic development, giving rather extraordinary insight into the transition from the early illuminated books to the much longer and more mature prophecies.

Flanked by the concise compression of the Lambeth prophecies on one side and the sprawling epics *Milton* and *Jerusalem* on the other, *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* stands as the record of transition and experiment in symbolism, characterization, theme, and especially in narrative method. Incomplete from the perspective of the illuminated work, unwieldy from the perspective of editorial containment, it offers a nearly complete view of poetic process and the turmoil of composition and revision. (Pierce xix)

The same might also be said of Blake's intriguing and at times baffling illustrations for the poem, most of which were never finished (including the *Night Thoughts* proofs), and which, with a few notable exceptions, have been largely neglected and dismissed by scholars, both

literary critics and art historians, an oversight which it is in part the purpose of the present study to redress.



At the time Erdman and Frye published their pioneering studies of Blake, the greatest impediment to scholars working on *The Four Zoas* was the absence of a reliable facsimile of the complete manuscript; and for those who did have the privilege of viewing the original leaves in the British Museum, the first priority was to sort out the considerable textual problems complicating the poem, already an onerous task without having also to deal with the illustrations that present numerous and daunting difficulties in their own right. But with the publication in 1963 of Bentley's facsimile and transcript of the manuscript, many scholars for the first time could see all 70 leaves, plus several fragments of early drafts, in the state that Blake himself probably last saw them when late in life he entrusted them to his friend and patron John Linnell. Nevertheless critics have continued largely indifferent to Blake's designs. Even Bentley himself treats them with a certain amount of reticence and skepticism; and while some of his observations are indeed useful, his general conclusion that Blake's illustrations, whatever their artistic merits, "cannot be regarded as integral parts of the poems themselves" (180), seems to sum up the attitude of the majority of his successors.¹⁷ Anne Mellor devoted a chapter to *The Four Zoas* illustrations in her important book *Blake's Human Form Divine* (1974), and John Grant's essay "Visions in *Vala*: A Consideration of Some Pictures in the Manuscript" appeared in *Blake's Sublime Allegory* (1973), followed

¹⁷ Of the half-dozen or so book-length studies of *The Four Zoas* published in the last 30 years, none that I have read attempts in a systematic way to interpret the poem in the light of Blake's designs. See *Blake's Four Zoas: The Design of a Dream* by Brian Wilkie and Mary Lynn Johnson (1978); Donald Ault's *Narrative Unbound: Revisioning William Blake's The Four Zoas* (1987); Andrew Lincoln's *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas* (1995); and *Flexible Design: Revisionary Poetics in Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas* by John B. Pierce (1998).

fifteen years later by Cettina Magno and David Erdman's lengthy plate-by-plate commentary on the illustrations, together with a reduced facsimile of the manuscript. But the fact remains that most Blake scholars writing on *The Four Zoas* usually refer to individual illustrations merely as points of interest, or treat them in a cursory manner as ineffectual doodles, hardly worthy of sustained critical attention. There is much work that remains to be done if scholars hope ever to comprehend their significance, not only in relation to the text of the poem, but also, and just as important, in relation to Blake's other illuminated prophecies.

The reasons for this neglect are manifold and have much to do with the disciplinary limitations of literary studies. In the first place, at least 49 of the manuscript pages—over a third—contain images that originally had nothing at all to do with *The Four Zoas*. Most of these are test proofs of Blake's engravings for Edwards' thwarted edition of *Night Thoughts*, the first and only volume of which was issued in 1797, while two more leaves (pages 87-90) were acquired by cutting up his earlier historical print *Edward & Elinor* (1793).¹⁸ Besides these engraved images, most critics readily acknowledge that even some of the drawings appear adventitious and have no direct correlation to *The Four Zoas*. In the same way that he bisected the *Edward & Elinor* print, Blake cut up and then wrote over an apparently unfinished physiognomic study of a somber bearded man (pages 19 and 22 in the

¹⁸ On the verso of the engraving Blake has written part of Night VII^a, and neither page contains any additional drawings. What is more curious is that we know that, when these lines were composed, he still had in his possession a number of the *Night Thoughts* test proofs. It is not yet clear why Blake would destroy a finished print which, after all, had a greater market value than the individual proof sheets. It's possible that this impression had been damaged, perhaps by being folded in half, and that the ever resourceful Blake was only salvaging paper that could be trimmed down to a size consistent with the JWHATMAN leaves.

manuscript), which may have suffered damage before it was completed.¹⁹ It is not enough, however, to assume that because such a large number of images have their origins in other projects that they are somehow impertinent, or perhaps even detrimental, to the analysis of *The Four Zoas* and its “legitimate” illustrations; rather, readers are obliged to conjecture what may have been their role in the turbulent development of the prophecy, to what extent they may have influenced or guided the poet both in the composition of the poetry and in the execution of original designs.

Putting aside these concerns for the moment, it should not be overlooked that the drawings Blake obviously meant to illustrate the poem are themselves problematic for a number of reasons, making it difficult in many instances to ascertain their meaning with any assurance. One cannot always be certain, for example, that a drawing is germane to the text with which it appears; the proximity of word and image should never be assumed to guarantee representational correspondence or narrative synchrony. In some cases Blake’s drawings appear only to refer to incidents related elsewhere in the manuscript; and because of his extensive and prolonged revision of the poem, and his practice of extirpating substantial passages, and perhaps entire pages, more than one drawing probably refers to a text that no longer exists. Even worse, a large number of the erotic drawings, assuming these were the work of Blake and not acts of vandalism, have themselves been partially erased, either by the artist himself, or perhaps, as Magno and Erdman suggest, by his patron John Linnell when he acquired the manuscript from Blake, acting on the behalf of Victorian propriety and decorum (14). In most instances only the most sexually explicit details have been obliterated, but one cannot always be certain that other significant details have not also been scrubbed out, either

¹⁹ A substantial portion of the upper left quarter of the sheet is missing, which suggests that Blake’s work on the drawing may have been interrupted by some accident; and rather than discarding the entire sheet, he perhaps thought to save the paper for later use.

by accident or by the negligence of the censor, in the process of sanitizing the manuscript of prurient matter. Another problem confronting scholars is that some of the pictures are too crudely and tenuously drawn to be of much interpretive value; drawn in apparent haste, though not necessarily without conviction, they are either too rough or too faint, or else render too few details to be reliably identified with anything in the text. Bentley for one despairs that these “rough sketches are of such a general and imprecise character that little is gained from associating them with *Vala*” (FZ 180); and yet the number of such sketches is much lower than Bentley implies.

Despite the considerable obstacles presented by the whole of Blake’s illustrations, there can be no doubt that they can still assist substantially in making sense of the *Four Zoas* and its role in the transition from the short Lambeth books of the 1790s to the dense, epic-length prophecies of his late career. While Blake’s mythology evolved in the course of time, accumulating many new characters and refashioning some old ones, and broadening its scope and assimilating Christian beliefs, what remained consistent to the very end was his use of the symbolic gesture, or *pathos formulae*, as a means of corporealizing spiritual and intellectual states. By associating the various stages of corruption and regeneration afflicting his characters with certain prescribed articulations of the human body, Blake recognized early on that in the marginal spaces of the printed page he could magnify and intensify concepts that would otherwise have been diminished or extenuated in the diachronic progress of an unilluminated narrative. The rhetorical function of the design is therefore no less essential to the text than the referential function of the text to the design. This intermediality of course presupposes some degree of familiarity with Blake’s figural code, as revealed in the preceding chapter. In *The Four Zoas* manuscript one can observe a more mature Blake weaving the various threads of his mythology into a richer cloth, however frayed the end

result, realizing the full potential of the Laocoöntic gesture, expanding its significance and centralizing its role, in effect making it the lodestone of his entire illustrative program.



Because this analysis accepts the *Night Thoughts* proof engravings as an integral part of the manuscript, and because so little has been written on the topic of intertextuality in *The Four Zoas*, it seems appropriate to start by examining the relationship between Young and Blake's poems, as well as the relationship between the designs Blake created for both. Many scholars have remarked in an offhand way that Blake was surely thinking of *Night Thoughts* when he decided early on to call his poem "a Dream of Nine Nights," thus retaining at least the structure of Young's poem;²⁰ but far fewer have essayed a comparison of specific lines and passages vis a vis the engravings. Robert Essick and Jenijoy LaBelle remind readers that Blake, like most contemporary *belles-lettrests*, had probably encountered Young's work in his youth, well before he started writing and printing his illuminated prophecies, and that this must have "had an important effect on Blake's development as a poet" (iv). Compounding this influence, then, was Blake's scrupulous and tireless reading of *Night Thoughts* in order to produce the 537 watercolors for Edwards, while at the same time embarking on what would soon become his most ambitious prophecy to date. This rigorous confluence of ideas at a pivotal moment in Blake's maturation as an artist and writer has prompted Essick and LaBelle to conclude that "it was a sense of symbolic continuity, rather than simply a paper shortage, motivating Blake when he wrote parts of *Vala* on proof sheets of his *Night Thoughts* engravings." But even "if necessity perchance dictated the use of proof sheets," Magno and Erdman add, "it was more than mere ingenuity that made a virtue of their

²⁰ Years later when Blake changed the title from *Vala* to *The Four Zoas*, he would cross out this sub-title—dated 1797—perhaps indicating his frustration with the structural limitations of the much revised poem.

adaptability to Blake's poem—one of the manifest purposes of which was to rehearse and reinterpret the themes and visions of Edward Young" (15). Such a conclusion can be attested by empirical observation of the manuscript, without even having to read a single line of poetry.

In the first place, looking at page 43 (Night III), the first *Night Thoughts* proof in the manuscript, one notices that Blake chose to write first on the design side, filling the blank text box originally intended for Young's verses before turning the leaf over and continuing on the back side. Magno and Erdman point out that, "if Blake had incorporated these proofs merely . . . for the saving of paper, wouldn't his impulse have been to use the completely clear versos first?" (14). Furthermore, with the obvious exception of pages 114 and 140, both of which are devoid of any writing or drawing, Blake always privileged the recto design over the blank verso, suggesting that he must have perceived some affinity or continuity between the old *Night Thoughts* illustrations and his evolving prophecy.

Besides these highly finished engravings, of which many will at first glance appear indistinguishable from their final published states, Bentley claims that Blake had still in his possession a number of test impressions—perhaps as many as 300—taken in the earliest stages of the engraving process in order to survey his progress and, if necessary, make adjustments to his designs before running the final proof (161).²¹ According to Bentley, many of these proofs are sketchy and "show little more than a rough outline," and if his estimate of their number is accurate, then it is curious that not a single one appears in *The Four Zoas* manuscript. From this it seems reasonable to conclude that Blake selected only the most finished proofs for his manuscript pages, and that he must have valued them as

²¹ Besides the *Night Thoughts* proofs used in the manuscript, only 24 others are known to exist, though Bentley thinks it highly probable that there were once many more (161).

much for their designs as for their writing space. At one point in the manuscript (page 137) he even extends the design into the blank space occupied by the text of his poem, restoring body parts that had originally been cut away to make room for Young's poetry, and thus blurring to an even greater degree the boundary between text and design, as well as that between *The Four Zoas* and *Night Thoughts*.²²

The engraving on page 137 (**fig. 4-1**) originally appeared in *Night Thoughts* illustrating a passage in the fourth Night that may well have struck Blake as being especially prescient. In these lines Young identifies the imagination with sensibility, with "turbulent" and "warm" passion rather than "calm" reason (628; 639). He disparages the "cold-hearted, frozen Formalists" who, "abhorring Violence," would regard the passions as a menace to divine wisdom, as marauding "Pagans of the Soul," and who would make the mistake of believing "Reason alone baptiz'd—alone ordain'd / To touch Things sacred" (638; 626; 629-31). Meanwhile, Young agonizes that he is not passionate enough to be a poet, that his own erroneous "Guilt" and old age have stymied his imaginative "Pow'rs" (632); and he pleads with his muse "to look / Compassion to the Coldness of my Breast; / And Pardon to the Winter in my Strain!" (635-7).

Blake's engraving illustrates Young's biblical metaphor comparing the fiery, visionary poet to Jacob wrestling with an angel in order to receive God's blessing (Genesis 32:24-28), as opposed to the rational "Quietists" who "*wrestle* not with Heaven" (623; 627). Blake would have agreed with Young that "Passion is Reason, Transport Temper" (640); and the text of *The Four Zoas* replacing Young's lines recounts with "Mirth & Joy" a great spiritual thaw and "Golden feast" after millennia of Urizenic winter (*FZ* 137.7-8). The poet

²² For a good introduction to Young see Stephen Cornford's introduction to his edition of *Night Thoughts* (Cambridge UP, 1989). All passages from the poem are cited from this edition.

tells how, like Young's Jacob, the "Eternal Man" Albion, having just endured a terrific internal struggle, casts off his "wintry mantle" and attains divine wisdom, finally "redeem'd from Errors power" and awakened from "dreams of soft deluding slumber" (137.5; 120.51; 39.16). His "Eternal Mind bounded" is now freed and "Limit . . . put to Eternal Death" (54.1; 56.23-4), while the Spectre Los, Blake's powerful avatar of imagination, roused by "winged Exultation" (137.15), at last "rose in all his regenerate power" to become once again Urthona in Eternity (34).

Nowhere else in the manuscript does Blake so radically alter a *Night Thoughts* design within the text box framing his verses, which only compounds the significance of the page; but there are numerous instances where he seems to have purposefully paired certain *Night Thoughts* proofs with a *Four Zoas* drawing, either to accentuate shared compositional features, underscore thematic affinities, or in a few instances to produce ironic juxtapositions, all of which motives suggest that he perceived a kinship between the two sets of illustrations. One of the most obvious examples of this can be seen in Night V, in which Blake recycles his memorable account in *America* of the birth of Orc and his bondage at the hands of his jealous father Los. The pencil and chalk drawing on page 62 (**fig. 4-2**) depicts a remorseful Los and Enitharmon, now experiencing "all the sorrow Parents feel" (62.10), as they approach their wailing son, who lies outstretched upon the "iron mountains" of Entuthon Benithon (17), bound down by the "chain of Jealousy" (27). Like Blake's simpering and kittenish tiger of *The Songs of Experience*, this rendering of Orc conveys nothing of the "Demons rage" (61.2), nor his terrifying aspect: "His nostrils breathe a fiery flame. his locks are like the forests / Of wild beasts" (24-25); "His bosom is like starry heaven" (27), and "His loins . . . a furnace fierce / As the strong Bull (62.1-2); and "His knees are rocks of adamant & rubie & emerald" (5). All such impressive imagery has been left out of Blake's illustration, in which the

intense pathos of this scene of domestic tragedy takes precedence over the sublime “terror in the nether deep” (8).

The passage to which the drawing best corresponds actually appears on the facing page where Los and Enitharmon, unable to halt their son’s “swift vegetation” (24) or “uproot the infernal chain” (32), overcome by “Despair & Terror & Woe & Rage . . . bend howling over / The terrible boy till fainting by his side the Parents fell” (63.4-6). The *Night Thoughts* engraving on this page portrays not a scene of familial strife and despair, but rather one of domestic bliss and comfort (**fig. 4-3**). A man and woman gaze joyfully upon their infant son. The mother cradles the smiling baby in her lap as the father draws back the coverlet and with the length of his hand measures the boy, as if wondering at his smallness and vulnerability. In its original context, the illustration does not refer to a specific passage of *Night Thoughts*; rather, it is a kind of symbolic meditation on Young’s theme of fleeting time: the father’s outstretched hand signifies life’s “Span too short” (Young II.115), and the infant reminds the reader how time accelerates with age, how “Years to Moments shrink, / Ages to Years” with the accumulation of life experience (136-7).

The irony, of course, is that Blake’s scene of infant joy and parental tenderness is spanned by the ceiling of a tomb, just as the infant is overshadowed by the span of the father’s hand; and though the parents are for the moment distracted from any reflection on their own mortality, this telescopic composition gives an air of menace to the father’s affectionate gesture, as though he were contemplating the ease with which he could destroy his offspring. In the context of Blake’s illustration of Los and Enitharmon grieving over Orc, the engraving functions in two significant ways: on the one hand, its portrayal of familial intimacy and tenderness in a comfortable domestic setting contrasts with the textual scene of cruelty and anguish in the inhospitable wilderness of Entuthon Benithon; on the other hand,

the irony in the father's spanning gesture, reminiscent of the compass-wielding figures of "The Ancient of Days" and "Newton" (Essick and LaBelle ix), perfectly complements the impetuous paternal violence of Los.

Another suggestive feature of the manuscript is that Blake chose to write out the conclusion of the *Four Zoas* on the verso of his frontispiece design for the first Night of Young's poem (page 140), the only proof in the manuscript included with its original text.²³ It depicts another family group busily preoccupied and seemingly mindless of their own mortality, only here the father has been replaced by the gigantic sprawling figure of Death. It is not clear what connection this picture has with the action of the final Night, although Magno and Erdman propose that the artistically employed children represent the "building of the city of art," Golgonooza (102). What is most curious, however, is that Blake appears to have sought to join two poems by employing the first page of Young's *Night Thoughts* as the last page of his prophecy, perhaps implying that *The Four Zoas* should be read as a kind of "prequel" to the earlier work (101), conveying in a sublime drama of mythological powers acting on a cosmic stage many of the same concerns addressed by Young in a more evangelical, pedantic tone that is at the same time more personal and immediate.

The differences between the two poems could not be more apparent. Blake adopts the persona of a prophet, whose divine vision extends far beyond the limits of animal sensation, and who sets out for the sake of a hopelessly benighted humanity to record the grandiose, momentous events unfolding in Eternity. By contrast *Night Thoughts* is a meandering blank-verse monologue in which Young's morbid but morally self-assured persona expostulates interminably with his worldlier companion Lorenzo on the themes of personal loss, mutability, and Christian salvation; and the chief amusement of which is the

²³ *NIGHT the FIRST: ON LIFE, DEATH AND IMMORTALITY.*

ingenuity and baroque complexity of the author's metaphors. Yet one cannot deny that there also exist some remarkable similarities and affinities between the works.

Young's penchant for sublime and lugubrious imagery, his habit of drawing on the natural world and cosmic phenomena to convey moral and spiritual truths, and above all his faith in the imagination as the gateway to "Truths Divine" (IX.2412) would all have been congenial to Blake's sensibility; and it seems likely that Blake not only admired Young's work, but that he would seek to emulate in his own writing whichever aspects of it most appealed to him. Certain passages in *The Four Zoas*, for instance, bear a striking resemblance to lines written by his predecessor. Thus, in Young's first Night we read:

God's Image, disinherited of Day,
Here, plunged in Mines, forgets a Sun was made;
There, Beings deathless as their haughty Lord,
 Are hammer'd to the galling Oar for life;
 And plough the Winter's wave, and reap Despair:
Some, for hard Masters broken under Arms,
 In battle lopt away, with half their limbs
 Beg bitter bread thro' realms their Valour sav'd. (244-51)

Compare to these appalling images of enslavement and famine Urizen's own "slaves in myriads in ship loads burden the hoarse sounding deep" (95.29); and the "laborious workmanship" of children "kept ignorant . . . that they might spend the days of wisdom / In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread" (92.29-31).

In addition, there are several places in the manuscript where Blake seems to have deliberately placed a *Night Thoughts* illustration to coincide with specific passages of his own poem, a practice perhaps best demonstrated by his use of the illustration for Young's lines:

Death! Great Proprietor of all! 'Tis thine
 To tread out Empire, and to quench the Stars;
 The Sun himself by thy permission shines,
 And, one day, thou shalt pluck him from his sphere. (I.204-7)

Blake's engraving (**fig. 4-4**), one of the more successful in the series, offers a literal representation of the passage, depicting Death, the "insatiate archer" (211), standing powerfully astride the corpses of a deposed king and queen, his bare feet crushing their outstretched throats. In his upraised left hand he brandishes a bolt with which he prepares to pierce the sun being forced down by his right hand. This image appears twice in *The Four Zoas* manuscript. In Night IX it is page 133, where Blake describes how a regenerated Urizen, now "cooperating in the bliss of Man" (126.16), at last "rose & in his hand the Flail / Sounds on the Floor heard terrible . . . And all Nations were threshed out & the stars threshd from their husks" (133.34-35; 134.1). This apocalyptic vision of Urizen flailing stars is an ironic reprise of a passage in Night VII, where, having proclaimed himself "a God & not a Man" (95.23), he commands the priests and priestesses of his false religion "to give light to the Abyss / To light the War" (96.15-16), for which purpose "they took the Sun that glowd oer Los / And with immense machines down rolling. the terrific orb / Compell'd (9-11). The *Night Thoughts* engraving appears again, in an earlier state,²⁴ on page 81, where Los grieves the loss of Enitharmon, who "lay on his knees . . . stretchd the image of death upon his witherd valleys" (10, 13), her once "beaming summer loveliness" now all "decay[ed] like roses in the spring" (25, 28). Unlike page 133, the funereal imagery of these passages seems jarringly inconsistent with the *Night Thoughts* engraving. In Night IX, however, at the

²⁴ The queen's hair is less defined and Death's arm has less shading. Bentley provides a complete list of proof engravings in the manuscript and catalogs any significant deviations from their final published state.

“sound of Loud Trumpet thundering,” a rejuvenated Los rises up and with “his right hand branching out in fibrous Strength / Siezd the Sun” back from Urizen, wrenching it loose from the clouds of Mystery, “cracking the heavens across from immense to immense” (117.7-9). This cataclysmic gesture signals the first act of a much-anticipated apocalypse, when “the thrones of Kings are shaken” and “the poor smite their oppressors” (18-19). Here the imagery of the poem is a much better match for the engraving, and it therefore seems quite probable that Blake intended the engraving of page 81, where Los succumbs to the “cold disease” of sorrow “like a cold night that nips the root & shatters off the leaves” (81.21, 19), to foreshadow Los’s eventual regeneration and starring role in the apocalyptic harvest of Night IX.

The purpose of this section has been to demonstrate how Blake’s consolidation of the *Night Thoughts* proof sheets into his manuscript was much more than a mere matter of expedience or necessity, and also to elucidate some of the ways these images, and even the verses to which they were originally assigned, intersect with and transform the text and iconography of *The Four Zoas*. This kind of intertextual scholarship is unfortunately still too rare in Blake studies, and much important work yet remains to be done on the *Night Thoughts* illustrations as a whole, as well as the poet Blake’s interaction with Young’s work. Such a detailed study lies well beyond the scope of the current project, but its basic lessons are essential to the following analysis, since several of the Laocoöntic figures in the manuscript were originally designed as illustrations to Young’s poem.

The expressive value of the figure is no different in the *Four Zoas* than in the earlier prophetic books and artwork presented in chapter three. Once again it represents the “beautiful man,” who was “in the wars of Eden divided into male and female” (Blake *DC* 533). This fall into division, with the Zoas violently separating from their female

Emanations, is the grand subject of the *Four Zoas*, as explained clearly by Urizen in Night IX:

... Gods combine against Man Setting their Dominion above
 The Human form Divine. Thrown down from their high Station
 In the Eternal heavens of Human Imagination: buried beneath
 In dark Oblivion with incessant pangs ages on ages (126.9-12)

Several times in the manuscript Blake employs Laocoöntic figures to represent the Zoas in this sublime state of dismal contraction, as prisoners of their own tormented bodies. Urizen goes on to say, however, that they might “resume the image of the human,” if “in stern repentance” they “renew their brightness & their disorganizd functions ... Cooperating in the bliss of Man obeying his Will / Servants to the infinite & Eternal of the Human form” (13-17). This great renewal finally occurs in Night IX, appropriately subtitled “The Last Judgment” (117), where the figure appears yet again, this time signifying the beautiful man in his regenerate state: the “Human form Divine.” In the sections that follow, individual examples of both types of Laocoöntic figures will be treated in greater detail.



Perhaps the most striking example of the sublime type is found on page 44 of Night III (**fig. 4-5**), and bears a striking resemblance to Blake’s later watercolor of Plutus for the Dante series (**fig. 3-16**). The text written above clearly identifies the figure as Tharmas, and in the vertical reach of his right arm, the curling locks and dense growth of beard. In the anguished, contracted brow, flared nostrils, and exasperated sigh, one instantly recognizes many of the original features of the sculpture. While the drawing is incomplete, it would appear that Tharmas was meant to appear in a position of semi-recumbence, an observation

supported by the *Night Thoughts* proof on the facing page (45), which depicts Jesus healing (resurrecting?) an afflicted man.

The subject matter of this engraving (**fig. 4-6**) would seem to have little to do with the text, which recounts Tharmas's belligerent rage against the "showery form of Enion" (45.18) resulting in her watery dissolution, "like a rainy cloud," at the conclusion of the Night (45.30-46.1-3); but at the same time, as Magno and Erdman observe in their commentary on the plate, the Christian imagery perhaps serves a greater purpose here than mere irony. "By holding forth the silent promise of Christ's hand" (Magno and Erdman 51), Blake offers us at least a glimmer of hope for a redemptive conclusion to the poem at a point when his characters would seem to have no such hope themselves. And yet Enion and Tharmas both voice confused feelings of repentance and remorse for what each has, in the course of the preceding Nights, inflicted upon the other.²⁵ As Enion sinks beneath the "cold waves of despair" en route to the "world of deep darkness" called Entuthon Benithon (45.14-15), she can be heard pleading for Tharmas to repeal his "righteous doom" and absolve her of the horrific cruelties perpetrated against him:

. . . consume me not away
 In thy great wrath. tho I have sinned. tho I have rebelld
 Make me not like the things forgotten as they had not been
 Make not the thing that loveth thee. a tear wiped away (23-6)

²⁵ It is worthy of notice that in the first Night, following Tharmas's Spectrification, Enion suddenly bewails what she herself calls "Cruelty above atonement" (7.4): "viewing her woven shadow [she] / Sat in a dread intoxication of Repentance & Contrition" (5.28). Erdman's edition includes the bulk of her two remorseful monologues (5.46-55; 6.44-53; 7.1-7), but in the manuscript Blake crossed out all these passages, perhaps feeling that, in light of his own rethinking of the poem, it would be too early in the development of his characters for such an "intoxication" to take place.

For his part, Tharmas seems torn between “rage & mercy” (29), at one point hurling Enion into Entuthon Benithon with the warning, “come not too near my strong fury,” while at the same time—a mere five lines earlier—chastising himself as a “fool fool to lose my sweetest bliss” (1-6). Such contrite expressions, impulsive though they are, nevertheless make both characters more worthy of the reader’s compassion, and more deserving, too, of the Christian redemption foreshadowed by Blake’s engraving, though each has much yet to endure and much to learn of the nature of divine love.

If the page 45 engraving can therefore be said to represent the promise, however remote, of an eventual return to universal fellowship and cosmic wholeness, and if the nude figure rejuvenated by Christ’s touch can be said in some sense to foreshadow the “humanizing” Tharmas of Night IX (132.36), reunited at last with Enion and singing in joyous celebration of love and liberty,²⁶ then the drawing on page 44—the mirror image of the engraving—certainly must represent Tharmas and Enion as they actually appear to the reader in Night III, with the text not only recounting the terrible consequences of their continuing strife, but also functioning compositionally as a kind of partition, a veritable curtain of words that denies any possibility of “humanizing” contact between them. By the time the reader encounters this arresting image in the manuscript, it will have been easy to forget the poem’s opening scene where Blake describes Enion “From her bosom weaving soft in sinewy threads / A tabernacle” in order to conceal Jerusalem from Tharmas (5.6-7). Motivated by sexual jealousy and “Hatred instead of Love” (4.18), she keeps “Embalmd in [her] bosom . . . a death never to be revivd” (22.24-6) her rival Emanations who, as Tharmas confesses under physical duress, had “become harlots” in his eyes and aroused in him

²⁶ Tharmas’s magnificent song of liberty takes up the bulk of the text on page 134, with lines 28-23 coming almost verbatim from *America* where they were first spoken by Orc (6.6-11).

irrepressible feelings of sexual guilt: “I am already distracted at their deeds & if I look / Upon them more Despair will bring self murder on my soul” (4.36-8). In the page 44 drawing, this same funereal “tabernacle,” wherein the figure of Jerusalem, or possibly Enitharmon, is still faintly discernible, serves also as a kind of chastity belt that prohibits the kind of ecstatic physical rejoining and rejoicing that in Blake’s view would be necessary to transcend the limitations of isolated selfhood and heal the sexual, emotional and mental divisions from which all conflicts in the poem arise. Enion’s belt therefore functions in a way similar to the “tightening girdle” that torments Los in Night V, and in its elaborate Gothic design, not to mention the sharp-edged tiara adorning her head,²⁷ one recognizes a symbol of the sexual repression, “reversing all the order of delight,” imposed by Urizen’s false religion in Night VII (96.2).

To judge from Blake’s drawing, however, no such protection is necessary, not just because the text of the poem presents a formidable barrier in its own right, but because Tharmas himself appears to be in no condition to make any kind of advance towards Enion: so involved is he in his own suffering and emotional bewilderment, that sexual union with her, or anyone else for that matter, would seem to be farthest from his mind. The pain he experiences here is intense and conveyed in language that is exceedingly sublime. Emerging from the “horrible din” and “wracking elements” of Ahania’s destruction at the hands of Urizen (44.9, 12), first as a “shadow of smoke,” then gradually “struggling to take the

²⁷ Blake’s lines are too straight, the angles too precise, to be taken as representing anything other than some kind of ornamental headdress. At the time of writing, I cannot recall any passage in the poem that describes Enion as wearing a crown, but it would not be inconsistent with her tyrannical role up to this point. The closest visual analog I can find in the manuscript is Christ’s shimmering, pointed halo on page 55, a *Night Thoughts* engraving illustrating Young’s account of God’s “omnipotence ... lost in love” and embodied in Jesus, the “great PHILANTHROPIST” (Young 4.601-2). But Enion’s crown appears to be formed of earthly matter and clearly symbolizes power rather than love, which could be Blake’s point, since it is Christ who appears (*sans* halo) on the facing page as mankind’s magnanimous benefactor.

features ... the limbs of Man” (18-19), Blake describes how Tharmas “reard up his hands & stood on the affrighted Ocean,” cursing the moment of his rebirth as a “despairing struggling stamping” human being. He must now, as Hamlet would say, contend with “the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” (III.i.63-4), and in his own account of this sudden and violent embodiment, entailing as it does the degradation of his eternal form, one encounters a remarkable concatenation of painful sensations and lugubrious images:

. . . Fury in my limbs. Destruction in my bones & marrow
 My skull riven into filaments. My eyes into sea jellies
 Floating upon the tide wander bubbling & bubbling
 Uttering my lamentations & begetting little monsters
 Who sit mocking upon the little pebbles of the tide
 In all my rivers & on dried shells that the fish
 Have quite forsaken. . . . (44.23-45.1)

Had Burke encountered this passage, one cannot but wonder what his reaction might have been; whether he would have possessed boldness enough to recommend their obfuscatory syntax, their irregular and spasmodic meter and grotesquely nightmarish associations, as at least equal to, if not exceeding, certain well-known passages from *Paradise Lost* cited in his treatise as being exemplary of the sublime in poetry.

Blake’s drawing of Tharmas and Enion should not, therefore, be regarded as a mere illustration supplementing the text, but also as an allegory of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and orthodox standards of taste. The Laocoönal form of Tharmas, to a good many of Blake’s contemporaries would have been closely identified with the “sublime.” The severe muscular contraction (here visible mostly in the face) and carefully rendered expression of terror—both signs of a struggle against forces beyond human reckoning—are fundamentally

Burkean. On the other hand, Enion's more static, voluptuous figure (Blake seems to have been more mindful of delineating her bosom than of completing her arms and legs), together with her miniature adornments, is clearly representative of the "beautiful." By associating Burke's aesthetic formulations with the antagonistic division of Tharmas and Enion, he was asserting his opposition to and challenging the legitimacy of the perceptual and, in the context of post-revolutionary cultural malaise, politically fraught binary logic that governed the criteria and parameters for aesthetic judgment in his time.

Tharmas's dim recognition in Night III of his recklessness and complicity in his own suffering unfortunately is not enough to put an end to it. Still unable to bring himself to forgive Enion, despite her tearful pleas, he proceeds to exile her to Entuthon Benithon, "A world of deep darkness where all things in horrors are rooted" (45.14), plunging her violently beneath the "cold billows" (12) of the "affrighted Ocean" (44.21), until she is utterly "vanishd from the watry eyes of Tharmas" (46.3). Motivated in part by the desire to make her suffer as he has suffered, he besets her body with "frozen arrows" to "tear thy tender flesh" and wintry winds that "rend [sic] thee into Shivers as thou hast rended me" (45.5, 8); but he seems also to desire the eradication of her memory from his mind, believing that by banishing her from his sight to "distant darkness" there would no longer be any cause for rage, nor for that matter anything to remind him of the "sweetest bliss" once shared between them but long since lost (1-3).²⁸ This scene is the subject of the dramatic drawing on page 46 (**fig. 4-7**).

²⁸ In Night IV, however, even with Enion gone, his suffering persists, until finally he resolves to commit suicide, only to discover, much to his horror, that death proves no less elusive:

Like a famishd Eagle Eyeless raging in the vast expanse
 Incessant tears are now my food. Incessant rage & tears
 Deathless for ever now I wander seeking oblivion
 In torrents of despair in vain. For if I plunge beneath

Here the reader encounters the powerful figure of Tharmas, with “Fury in [his] limbs” (44.23), “riding on storms” whence his “voice of Thunder rolld” (45.27). To his right stands the cowering figure of Enion, overwhelmed by the “cold waves of despair” (15) directed by the outstretched arm of Tharmas, and “Driven . . . like a cloud into the deep” (21). He glares down at her with a fierce, determined expression as he reaches back with his left arm to draw forth yet another destructive wave; while “weaker & weaker” (23) she looks back at him, her hands folded about her face in a gesture of futile pleading, as if preparing to deliver the following lines: “consume me not away / In thy great wrath . . . make not the thing that loveth thee. A tear wiped away” (23-6).²⁹

Stifling I live. If dashd in pieces from a rocky height

I reunite in endless torment. . . . (47.10-15)

²⁹ On the facing page (the first page of Night IV) is Blake’s *Night Thoughts* plate illustrating Young’s failed attempt—recounted in the poem—to recuperate the health of his teenaged step-daughter Narcissa by removing with her to the sunnier, more congenial climate of southern France:

I flew, I snatcht her from the rigid North,
Her native Bed, on which bleak *Boreas* blew,
And bore her nearer to the Sun; the Sun
(As if the Sun cou’d envy) checkt his Beam,
Deny’d his wonted Succour, nor with more
Regret, beheld her drooping, than the Bells
Of Lilies; Fairest Lilies! Not so fair. (III.117-23)

Blake’s design (**fig. 4-8**) shows the poet and the consumptive Narcissa gazing up hopelessly at the equestrian sun god Phoebus Apollo (evoked by Young earlier in the *Night*) en route across the heavens. However, for its placement in the *Four Zoas* manuscript, opposite his drawing of Enion appealing to Tharmas, Blake probably had more in mind the small image to the left of the text box depicting the water-nymph Clytie (not mentioned in Young’s lines), whose unrequited love for Apollo transformed her into a sunflower, reaching out her arms in vain to embrace the impassive sun god (**fig. 4-9**). Enion suffers a similar plight to conclude Night III; and later on, Tharmas, whom Blake usually associates with the element of water, is identified with the blazing sun. Night IV begins with a brooding Tharmas contemplating his fate and how best to escape from it. Described by the poet as “Red as the Sun in the hot morning of the bloody day” (47.5), he envies the “strength & brightness” of Los and Enitharmon and longs once more for the companionship of Enion, without whose love he would rather that he were dead, if only he could die.

Upon a closer examination, one of the first things one should notice about the drawing is the difference between the two characters; that Tharmas has been carefully worked and reworked in pencil, endowing him with a substantiality and gravity that is lacking in Enion's phantasmal form. While Blake this time chose to clothe Enion in a diaphanous gown that covers the greater part of her body, it would seem he devoted far more time and energy to the modeling of the naked figure of Tharmas, with increased attention to the musculature of the right leg and foot, the torso, and upraised left arm. One could supply a number of sufficient reasons for Blake's decision to change Enion's appearance from the towering, erotic anti-Liberty of the page 44 drawing to the cowering woman seen here, more reminiscent of the persecuted heroines of Gothic and sentimental romance; but perhaps the most satisfactory explanation for this reversal is that Blake wanted to emphasize how Enion's sexual jealousy and sadism in the first *Night* have contributed in equal measure to her miseries here in the third; and because the poetry at this point has more to do with the wrath of Tharmas, and Enion's unavailing cries for clemency and love, the page 44 drawing stands as an indispensable reminder of the latter's complicity in the unfolding catastrophe.

For much the same reason Tharmas is no longer represented on page 46 as a tormented man, but rather as a merciless tyrant bent on destruction. Another interesting feature of this drawing however—one that is easy to miss without closer scrutiny—is the presence of a second, earlier version of Tharmas that is much different from the present one. What remains of this original figure are the right and left arms, roughly outlined in pencil, as well as the head and face, partially erased by Blake and mostly obscured by the overdrawing of the later Tharmas. Still visible, however, is the original right eye, which overlaps the lateral edge of the new left brow; while adjacent to the redrawn left eye are his original nostrils, below which one can just make out his former mouth and the remnants of a beard.

The torso and legs of the final version appear not to be much changed from the original design. What emerges from these discarded details is yet another example of the Laocoöntic figure. Tharmas's right arm reaches up to grasp the crest of an enormous serpentine wave, while with the left he braces himself against what might be a rock or chunk of ice, or possibly even another approaching wave. No longer directed against Enion, his gaze meets that of the viewer with an expression of intense pathos that has more in common with his appearance on page 44 than with the glowering expression Blake eventually would replace it with.

Perhaps because Blake had already depicted Tharmas as a Laocoöntic figure on page 44, he decided at some point to alter the composition substantially and give to Tharmas the fierce demeanor more typical of his despotic characters. By doing so, he purposely reverses the circumstances of the previous drawing, this time portraying Enion as hostage to Tharmas's intractable rage. But regardless of these dramatic changes to his figure, striking and suggestive as they are, what remains constant from page 44 to the present drawing is the opposition between the sublime and beautiful, manifest in the bodies of Tharmas and Enion respectively. Once again one observes Enion's lack of muscular definition; her legs are positioned close together and her arms folded in front of her bosom in a stylized gesture of persecuted virtue that contrasts with her more immodest bearing on page 44. No longer the dazzling icon of a sadistic eroticism, here she is little more than a slender flame, pale and sputtering, about to be snuffed out by the eruptive power of Tharmas. It is this linear delicacy as well as her relative diminutiveness that aligns her with Burkean beauty. Repeatedly in the text she is described as small and insubstantial, reduced to scarcely more than a "little shadow" (45.18), "Substanceless" (46.2), "melting" (1), "fading" (45.28); a "little showery form" (45.18), a "tear" (26), a "shower of falling tears" (46.1), and she is twice compared to a "rainy cloud" (21, 32). By contrast, Blake augments Tharmas's "lovely summer beauty" (7)

with the sublime stock of storms and violent paroxysms. He bellows and he bursts, and then bursts and bellows some more (9); while “riding on storms his voice of Thunder rolld” (27). In his obdurate grief and indignation he becomes, at the dismal climax of Night III, the embodiment of apocalyptic energy, voracious beyond reckoning, “Consuming all to the end consuming” (46.5).

This is the Tharmas Blake evidently sought to portray in the page 46 drawing. His imposing stature and immoderate physical power menace and terrify Enion. At one point even she herself addresses him as her “loved Terror” (45.19). Thus, whereas in the page 44 drawing Tharmas appears as a solitary man wracked by pain and asserting his will in the face of insufferable circumstances, in the latter drawing Blake presents that same masculine energy perverted by vanity and resentfulness and directed towards the subjugation and annihilation of his perceived enemies. His terrifying appearance here is akin to that of Los on page 57, though in the latter image, it will be remembered, it is not a female but rather another male figure—Orc—who bears the brunt of this animosity. In their juxtaposition of sublime and beautiful—masculine and feminine—forms, both the page 44 and 46 drawings have much in common with Henry Fuseli’s sketch of a woman standing before the *Laocoön* group (**fig. 3-18**).



The *Night Thoughts* plate on page 49 (**fig. 4-10**) enhances the suffering Los experiences in Night IV when Enitharmon is violently rent from his side, while at the same time foreshadowing the domestic tragedy of Night V involving both characters, reunited once again as husband and wife, together with their newborn son Orc. Like the engraving on page 63 (**fig. 4-3**), Blake depicts a family group comprised of a married couple and their young child; and once more, Blake focuses on family relationships in order to explore themes of

mortality and tyranny. Even though there is no massive tomblike structure enclosing this family group like that on page 63, the snake bit father in this image is apparently dying, if not already dead, while his wife, apparently oblivious to his suffering, or perhaps indifferent, is preoccupied with restraining their child from chasing a bird that flies towards the right of the picture, effectively reversing the parental roles portrayed on pages 62 and 63, where it is the father who assumes the role of Urizenic despot. The bird is of course a conventional symbol of liberty and imagination, and so the mother's determination to hold back her child from the pursuit of these ends is analogous to the binding of Orc in Night V.³⁰ It therefore seems Blake was being deliberate when he settled on this proof sheet for page 49, providing an image that unequivocally belies Tharmas's words in the text appearing above, where in return for Los's cooperation in binding Urizen, he promises him "rest when this thy labour is done,"³¹ and a much desired reunion with Enitharmon in a pleasant, undisturbed "bower in the midst of all my dashing waves" (17-19). But what Blake shows in the illustration certainly is no happy "resting place" (20), nor a representation of conjugal bliss; instead we see the dominant figure of an expiring man constricted in the coils of an enormous serpent, which is meant to prepare the reader for Blake's reprise in Night V of the acrimony and strife between Los and Enitharmon, seen first in Night I, but further complicated here by the birth of their "terrible Child" (58.17).

As soon as Orc is born into the Zoas' chaotic world, a horde of "Enormous Demons" rises up from the abyss; and like the magi circled round Christ's manger, they approach the

³⁰ This scene recalls a popular stanza from Blake's working notebook:

He who binds to himself a joy
 Doth the winged life destroy
 But he who kisses the joy as it flies
 Lives in Eternity's sun rise

³¹ An ironic reversal of Blake's epigraph on page 2: "Rest *before* Labour" (my italics).

newborn and immediately identify him as the Spectrous form of Luvah, “Crying Luvah King of Love thou art the King of rage & death” (58.22).³² Their short chorus concludes on page 59 with yet another narrative of the division of Los and Enitharmon, one which has more in common with Blake’s treatment of the couple in Night I as mutually scornful antagonists, than it does with the same pair as they appear in Night IV, where Enitharmon’s mournful passivity contrasts with her partner’s reckless abandon. The demons’ version also has several points in common with the *Night Thoughts* design at the bottom of the page. In the first place, their recollection of how Los “laid his gloomy head / Down on the Rock of Eternity” (59.15) is corroborated in the image by the placement of the male figure against a rocky escarpment, which Essick and LaBelle correctly interpret as indicating his “bondage to the world of reason and natural perceptions” (vii).³³ This bondage is of course symbolized by the serpent winding its way around the man’s torso, a motif seen many times before in Blake’s earlier illuminated work, and repeated over and over again in both *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*. Moreover, as is often the case with Blake, this condition of moral degradation and mortification can be attributed to sexual conflict in one form or another. Thus, the Demons go on to say Los’s “dark wife” (Enitharmon) took pleasure in all his suffering, “Within his ribs producing serpents whose souls are flames of fire” (FZ 59.15-16). What is more telling than all this heady symbolism, however, is the very disposition of the figure, itself.

³² As is often the case with Blake, the syntax of the lines leaves room for doubt; but in Night IV Tharmas did tell his son that Luvah lay “hidden in the Elemental forms of Life & Death” (51.13).

³³ In the Edwards *Night Thoughts*, this plate accompanies lines Blake himself could well have written:

Beware what earth calls happiness; beware
 All joys, but joys that never can expire:
 Who builds on less than an immortal base,
 Fond as he seems, condemns his joys to death. (1.340-43)

As in the *Laocoön*, a powerful masculine physique strains against the heavy involutions of an enormous serpent, with the same familiar abdominal torsion, bent knee, extended arms, declination of the head, and suffering writ in the face. None of these features, however, is consistent with any Ancient standard of form and beauty; and strict classicists like Lessing or Winckelmann would have flatly rejected any such comparison of Blake with the venerable Ancients, and certainly would have deemed this example of his proclivity for Gothic mannerisms and Michelangesque extravagance repulsive in the extreme. Indeed, what Blake has given us here is a gothicized rendition of the sculpture. Throughout his career Blake became increasingly adept at jostling neoclassical prescriptions of beauty with Gothic grotesquery in order to achieve certain ironic effects; and in this particular instance the wracked figure of Los appears in juxtapositional relation to the more proportionate and temperate Laocoönal figures that appear later in the manuscript, and which, as the reader is about to see, signify the ultimate reconciliation and rejuvenation at the conclusion of the narrative.



The figure that appears on page 109 (Night VIII) presents a curious anomaly in that it is the only female example of its kind (**fig. 4-11**). In its original context—as the last text illustration in the Edwards edition of *Night Thoughts*—the engraving illustrates Young’s admonition to Lorenzo to heed his “conscience,” which he says can disclose all the wonders of eternity: “who triumphs there, / Bathing for ever in the Font of Bliss, / For ever basking in the Deity” (817). Most men, he continues, though possessed of conscience, will suppress its voice, “Smother’d with Errors” until they lie on their deathbeds (831); “*Truth* is deposited with Man’s *Last Hour*” (825), too late to repent for a life of sinful indulgence: “Men may live Fools, but Fools they cannot die” (842). Young therefore personifies Truth as a vengeful

fury, “eldest Daughter of the Deity” (827), who “from her Cavern in the Soul’s Abyss, / Like Him they fable under *Ætna* whelm’d, / ... bursts in Thunder, and in Flame” at the stroke of the “Heaven-commission’d Hour” (832-5). And thus Blake has drawn her, springing up from a gulf of fire, surrounded by thick black smoke and lightning, her flaming locks tousled by infernal winds.

While Blake wrote disapprovingly of such abstract personifications, Young’s definition of conscience as innate spiritual wisdom would have appealed to him, as well the idea that the revelation of eternal truth brings about a last judgment that opens a way to heaven for those who heed the prophet’s vision, while accusers and oppressors are left to perish with the rest of material existence. As Young writes, the voice of conscience “Loudly convinces, and severely pains ... The keen vibration of bright truth—is hell: / Just definition! though by schools untaught” (838-9). Thus, while Blake remains faithful to his textual source by representing Truth as a powerful female entity, her imposing form and the “selflessly wrathful expression on her face” (Magno and Erdman 86) derive more from his definition of the “strong man” as a “receptacle of Wisdom, a sublime energizer,” whose “limbs do not spindle out into length, without strength,” and who “marches on in fearless dependance on the divine decrees, raging with the inspirations of a prophetic mind” (*DC* 535). In this she resembles Blake’s depictions of Christian in the arbor and Isaiah prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem, discussed in the previous chapter (**figs. 3-44 and 45**). Moreover, one may compare her facial expression and raised hands gesturing emphatically towards heaven with another *Night Thoughts* engraving (**fig. 4-12**) that shows the prophet Daniel directing King Belshazzar (Nebuchadnezzar’s son and heir) to read the writing on the wall that portends his death and the division of his empire (Daniel 5:24-31), to which story Young alludes in *Night II* as a reminder to Lorenzo of his own mortality:

Know; like the *Median*, Fate is in thy Walls:

Donst ask, *how? whence? Belshazzar-like*, amazed?

Man's Make incloses the sure seeds of Death;

Life feeds the Murderer: Ingrate! he thrives

On her own Meal; and then his Nurse Devours. (415-9)

The strength and energy of Blake's female prophet can be contrasted with the sensual form of the Whore of Babylon in his *Last Judgment* pictures. A similar contrast is evoked in the *Four Zoas* manuscript, where the engraving appears opposite another female figure lying prostrate on a couch in an attitude of abject despair (**fig. 4-13**).

Here the reader encounters a female version of the figure of Tharmas on page 44, a Laocoöntic form representing the Spectrous incarnation of the self-involved "beautiful man" who cannot see anything beyond her own immediate suffering. This figure can be none other than Ahania, whose violent separation from Urizen Blake described in Night III (pages 43 and 44), now lying in the "Caverns of the Grave & places of Human Seed" (44.3) where Urizen left her and where can still be heard her "universal groan of death louder / Than all the wracking elements" (11-12). So long as "her Eyes are Toward Urizen," she remains incapable of attaining "Divine vision" (108.7), instead dwelling at length on the loathsome, putrescent forms of the vegetable world:

O how the horrors of Eternal Death take hold on Man

His fain groans shake the caves & issue thro the desolate rocks

And the Strong Eagle now with num[m]ing cold blighted of feathers

Once like the pride of the sun now flagging in cold night

Hovers with blasted wings aloft watching with Eager Eye

Till Man shall leave a corruptible body he famishd hears him groan

...

Beside him lies the Lion dead & in his belly worms

Feast on his death till universal death devours all

And the pale horse seeks for the pool to lie him down & die

But finds the pools filled with serpents devouring one another

He droops his head & trembling stands & his bright eyes decay (108.35-109.11)

Ahania's morbid lament is heard by Enion, whose visionary response immediately following suggests that Blake likely identified her with the prophetic female in the engraving on the facing page.

Just as Young admonishes Lorenzo to "trust, for once, a Prophet, and a Priest" and heed the voice of conscience (841), so Enion exhorts Ahania to "fear not" (Blake *FZ* 109.14), for "the time approaches fast ... When the man gently fades away in his immortality / When the mortal disappears in improved knowledge ... invisible to those who still remain" (29-34). She no longer fears death, but looks forward to the end of her material existence. "Altho I consume in these raging waters" of Tharmas, she explains, "hope drowns all my torment / For I am now surrounded by a shadowy vortex drawing / The Spectre quite away from Enion that I die a death of bitter hope" (24-7). And whereas Ahania perceives only corruptible nature, "Man ... leaning his faded head / Upon the Oozy rock inwrapped with the weeds of death / His eyes sink hollow in his head his flesh coverd with slime / And shurnk up to the bones" (108.29-32), Enion sees the Eternal Man, like to "the seed ... Eagerly watching for its flower & fruit," "Collecting up the scatterd portions of his immortal body / Into the Elemental forms of every thing that grows" (110.7-8). Death for her is but a passage into Eternity, and this faith renders all its terrors meaningless:

In pain [the Eternal Man] sighs in pain he labours in his universe

Screaming in birds over the deep & howling in the Wolf
 Over the slain & moaning in the cattle & in the winds
 And weeping over Orc & Urizen in clouds & flaming fires
 And in the cries of birth & in the groans of death his voice
 Is heard throughout the Universe wherever a grass grows
 Or a leaf buds The Eternal Man is seen is heard is felt
 And all his Sorrows till he reassumes his ancient bliss (21-8)

Thus she prophesies the resurrection of Jesus and the Last Judgment of Night IX: “The Lamb of God has rent the Veil of Mystery soon to return / In Clouds & Fires around the rock & the Mysterious tree” (1-2).

Enion’s vigorous action in the engraving on page 109 attests to her new visionary consciousness—“I awoke to sleep no more” (109.21)—transformed from her earlier appearances as a jealous lover (page 44) and later as a wispy Gothic heroine (page 46). Furthermore, her exceptional physical and mental exertion contrasts with the erotic lassitude more typical of Blake’s female figures and which is consistent with the misogynistic rhetoric of the Biblical prophets who inspired him. While the fallen Zoas generally follow in the wayward steps of Nebuchadnezzar, the deranged conqueror and builder of the Book of Daniel, their female Emanations often exhibit traits of the Apocalyptic Whore of Babylon, herself the subject of a series of elaborately wrought drawings and watercolors, including the several versions of the *The Last Judgment* that Blake produced during the period coinciding with the late additions and revisions of the *Four Zoas* manuscript. Who better to illustrate this tendency than Luvah’s Emanation, Vala, who appears in Night VIII “Clothed ... with Scarlet robes & Gems / And on her forehead ... her name written in blood Mystery” (105.14-15), the very same “Harlot of the Kings of Earth” that the prophet John saw “Reveald in

Heaven / On Patmos Isle” (111.4-5). Her rebirth in Night VII marks a critical stage in the poem, when the war between the Zoas expands to encompass the world of mortal men. Henceforth she appears as the seductive embodiment of carnal appetite, “Lovely of Delusive Beauty” (105.11), sister to the voluptuous, breast-baring Babylon of the *Last Judgment* series, and so it makes sense that Blake would make her the subject of one the most striking and provocative examples of erotic drawing in the manuscript.

The design appears on page 86 and at one point probably served as the frontispiece to Night VIII (**fig. 4-14**), apparently before Blake decided to extend Night VII by several pages, and then later to write an entirely new version of the same Night (beginning on page 91), without however leaving any clear indication as to how the two versions should fit together. The earliest version of Night VII ended on page 85;³⁴ and since the drawing on the verso occupies the center of the page, an area Blake normally reserved for text, it seems reasonable to conclude that the drawing predates his later additions to Night VII. In their commentary, Magno and Erdman have identified the female figure as Enitharmon, who, after “Conferring times on times” with the Spectre of Urthona (85.4), gives birth to Vala, as foretold by Urizen at the beginning of Night III: “Vala shall become a Worm in Enitharmons Womb / Laying her seed upon the fibres soon to issue forth” (37.8-9), and again by Urthona in Night VII: “I will bring down soft Vala / To the embraces of this terror [Orc]” (84.33). As soon as Vala is born, “a wonder horrible” (85.7), Enitharmon generates the spectrous men whose lust for Vala impels them to war:

... a Cloud she grew & grew

Till many of the dead burst forth from the bottoms of their tombs

In male forms without female counterparts or Emanations

³⁴ Twice on this page Blake wrote “End of the Seventh Night,” and both times he changed his mind and continued on. These erasures appear behind lines 26-27 and 37-39.

Cruel and ravening with Enmity & Hatred & War

In dreams of Ulro dark delusive drawn by the lovely shadow (17-21)

In the drawing, then, Magno and Erdman see Enitharmon, “ready to offer female counterparts that will transform these male forms from spectres of the the dead to spectres of the living” (72),³⁵ an interpretation reinforced in their view by the figure’s action of massaging her breasts, which several critics have suggested derives from conventional representations of maternal virtue. Martin Butlin, for example, sees “a representation of Charity, apparently unrelated to the text;” while Jean Hagstrum recognizes the influence of the Renaissance tradition of lactating Madonnas (73). In addition, kneeling on either side of her are two cancelled figures that likely represent Urthona and the curly-haired Orc, since the last line of Night VII originally read: “The Spectre terrified gave her Charge over the howling Orc” (22). Nevertheless, at some point in his revisions Blake hastily scribbled them out in chalk, probably before he reached any decision about overhauling Night VII. By deleting these figures, however, he also substantially changed the meaning of the gesture, and arguably the very identity of the figure itself.

Despite Blake’s dramatic alterations, Magno and Erdman persist in identifying her as Enitharmon, though they do acknowledge, offhandedly, “there is a sense ... in which Enitharmon’s story and Vala’s are both conveyed in this picture” (73). But if the figure indeed represents Vala, then her gesture is rather one of sexual arousal than of “mothers tenderness” (Blake *FZ* 115.30), and is consistent with the numerous other Romanoesque

³⁵ The following passage seems appropriate here, though it is not cited by Magno and Erdman:

Lovely delight of Men Enitharmon shady refuge from furious war
 Thy bosom translucent is a soft repose for the weeping souls
 Of those piteous victims of battle there they sleep in happy obscurity
 They feed upon our life ... (90.5-8)

erotic drawings that appear in the manuscript. On page 99—the first page of Night VIII, originally page 87 before the insertion of Night VII^b—Vala charms the spectrous men into joining Urizen’s armed legions: “tempted by the Shadowy females sweet / Delusive cruelty they descend away from the Daughters of Beulah / And Enter Urizens temple” (20-22). The ring of inchoate forms that appears faintly about the knees of the female figure on page 86 may therefore represent these “Cruel and ravening” spectres in Vala’s thrall, fatally drawn like so many moths into the white flame of her flesh; and thus, this drawing may best be regarded as the frontispiece to Night VIII, from which it was disjoined by Blake’s later additions and the insertion of Night VII^b into the manuscript.

Another possibility is that the drawing represents Vala in her mortal form, named Rahab (105.27), generated by the Synagogue of Satan later in Night VIII to oppose the newly vegetated spectres woven by Enitharmon at the Looms of Cathedron (103.34-5):

The Synagogue Created her from Fruit of Urizens tree

By devilish arts abominable unlawful unutterable

Perpetually vegetating in detestable births

Of Female forms beautiful ... (20-23)

This passage is likewise consistent with Blake’s design, where Vala now appears as “Babylon the Great the Mother of Harlots” (106.6), lewdly baring her breasts to her sadistic daughters, referred to collectively as Tirzah, but in “their various divisions ... calld / The Daughters of Amalek Canaan & Moab” (105.27-8), their embryonic forms “Perpetually vegetating,” squirming into “detestable” life before her. Rahab and Tirzah would make a fitting subject for the frontispiece to Night VIII, since together they carry out the resolution of the Synagogue condemning Jesus to die, an event that marks the beginning of the Last Judgment prophesied by Enion on page 110. As the ultimate incarnation of Blake’s beautiful man, the

expressive form of Jesus appears in the manuscript as a positive alternative to the beautiful but perversely sensual bodies of the Emanations, on the one hand, and the tormented, hypermasculine bodies of the Zoas on the other.



It makes sense that Rahab should participate in the crucifixion of Jesus, since he is the mortal incarnation of Luvah from whom she (as Vala) originally separated to lie with the Eternal Man “Amongst the Flowers of Beulah” (83.7).³⁶ In Night VIII, “Perplexd & terrifid,” Urizen recognizes Jesus as the “new Luvah” (101.2-3), and no longer as Orc, or Luvah in the “State calld Satan” (115.26-7). As in the earlier Lambeth books, the “terrible Child” Orc here emerges as the sublime embodiment of violent insurrection against Urizen’s natural religion (58.17). But following the bitter disappointment of the French Revolution and subsequent war between England and France, Blake was more than ever convinced that “war is energy Enslavd,” the “confused perturbation” of “honest minds” (120.43-4), and must needs feed on that which it would destroy.³⁷ This would explain why Orc becomes a form of the ugly man, monstrous and scaly, the “King of rage & death” (58.22); whereas the “Lamb of God clothed in Luvahs robes” (101.1) appears before Urizen as the rejuvenated “King of Love” (58.22), whose face and figure are proportional to the “tender mercy & loving kindness” of his character (58.22), making his the ideal form of the beautiful man.

³⁶ This is one of the “Secrets of Eternity” recounted by Enitharmon in Night VII (85.7-32). Sexual lust (Vala) divided from spiritual love (Luvah) is the origin of all conflict in the poem. The union of Vala and the Eternal Man results in the birth of Urizen.

³⁷ Thus Orc sustains himself by eating the fruit of the Tree of Mystery:
 ... the fruit of the mysterious tree
 Kneaded in Uveths kneading trough ... Orc devourd ...
 In raging hunger Still the pestilential food in gems & gold
 Exuded round his awful limbs Stretching to serpent length
 His human bulk ... (101.16-20)

Christ's role in the *Four Zoas* is perfectly clear: "to awake up into Eden / The fallen Man" (104.36-7), to restore his divine imagination and bring unity and peace to its warring elements embodied in the individual Zoas. To accomplish this he must "Give his vegetated body / To be cut off & separated that the Spiritual body may be Reveald" (37-8). By thus sacrificing his mortal self, he reveals the truth of Eternity beyond the roaring world of space and time, and reveals the catastrophic futility of selfish reason, jealousy, and lust. Thus the Sons of Eden sing:

Glory Glory Glory to the holy Lamb of God
 Who now beginneth to put off the dark Satanic body
 Now we behold redemption Now we know that life Eternal
 Depends alone upon the Universal hand & not in us
 Is aught but death In individual weakness sorrow & pain (104.6-10)

It is Los who makes this "redemption" possible when he embraces the Spectre of Urthona in Night VII, "first as a brother / Then as another Self; astonishd humanizing & in tears / In Self abasement Giving up his Domineering lust" (85.29-31). "Thou art but a form & organ of life," the Spectre reminds him, "& of thyself / Art nothing" (86.2-3); but "Self annihilation," he continues, shall open the way back to "Life Eternal" (85.34-5), and with "irresistible conviction" (86.5) he promises

If we unite in one[,] another better world will be
 Opend within your heart & loins & wondrous brain
 Threefold as it was in Eternity & this the fourth Universe
 Will be Renewd by the three & consummated in Mental fires (85.43-6)

Los instantly perceives the truth of these words: "I already feel a World within / Opening its gates & in all the real substances / Of which these in the outward World are shadows which

pass away” (86.7-9); and he in turn promises henceforth to “quell my fury & teach / Peace to the Soul of dark revenge & repentance to Cruelty” (11-12). It is repentance that permits Los finally to perceive “the Lamb of God ... descending to redeem” (87.43-4), a vision he shares with Enitharmon, the two of them inspiring to redeem their past errors by endowing the ceaselessly warring spectres with “Bodies of Vegetation” (100.4) so that they may die in order to be reborn, “a New Spiritual birth Regenerated from Death” (122.20).

Together they labor, “Wondring with love & Awe” (99.18), in the city of Golgonooza, Los at his anvils and furnaces, Enitharmon at the Looms of Cathedron; and together they create “a Universal female form ... From those who were dead in Ulro from the Spectres of the dead” (103.38-9). Enitharmon names her Jerusalem (104.1) and in her beholds the Lamb of God, “The divine Vision seen within the inmost deep recess / Of fair Jerusalem’s bosom in a gently beaming fire” (104.3-4). The Synagogue of course attempts to halt and reverse this process of embodiment, erecting industrial “Mills of resistless wheels to unwind the soft threads & reveal / Naked of their clothing the poor spectres before the accusing heavens” (113.17-8). Meanwhile, Rahab “smites with her knife of flint ... thinking to destroy the Lamb blessed for Ever” (33-4), and finally crucifies him on the tree of Mystery (106.2). But by thus destroying the Savior’s mortal, “vegetated body,” his “Spiritual body” is revealed, and so commences the apocalyptic process of redemption and judgment that rouses the Eternal Man, Albion, from his imaginative stupor in Night IX.

Christ’s spiritual body is depicted on page 114 (**fig. 4-15**), the first in a series of three consecutive images of the Savior out of a total of eleven dispersed throughout the manuscript. All of these designs, including eight engravings (pages 45, 55, 59,89, 111, 114, 115, and 129) and three pencil sketches (pages 16, 58, and 116), can be traced with confidence to the *Night Thoughts* commission, with the greatest number concentrated in Night VIII. The page 114

engraving—the only *Night Thoughts* plate in the manuscript without any text—originally served as the frontispiece to Night IV of Young’s poem, entitled “The Christian Triumph,” illustrating Christ’s resurrection: “he burst the Bars of Death” (273) and “Man’s Mortality ... transferr’d to Death; and Heaven’s Duration / Unalienably seal’d to this frail Frame” (296-7). Bentley has observed that the drawings of Christ in the manuscript are all three early preparatory studies for this engraving (Vala 183), where he is shown either standing or walking with outspread arms (**fig. 4-16**), but without the animated lightness of movement that characterizes his appearance in the final engraving.

Indeed, there are several aspects of the engraving that make it unique among Blake’s representations of Christ. In the first place, and perhaps most obvious, is his nudity, the well-proportioned Apollonian physique, and the exceedingly soft, pathetic features of his face, like those of the Squire in the Chaucer engraving (**fig. 3-4**). This unmistakably classical form reflects Blake’s linear aesthetic and his insistence that the “Human form divine” appears naked in Eternity (*EG* 172), “a body that is spiritual without being vaporously unsubstantial and that is physical without being gross or earthbound” (Hagstrum 144). Most important, however, is Christ’s expansive, salvational gesture, akin to that of the loving father *Laocoön* struggling against death in order to preserve the lives of his sons.

Springing up from the floor of his tomb, where a pair of angels kneels down still contemplating his empty shroud, Jesus extends his arms and pries apart a thick wall of clouds to disclose the breezy, unadulterated radiance of Eternity beyond. This is his gift to humanity, the ultimate expression of divine love, which may be contrasted with the terrifying image of Orc in *America* plate twelve (**fig.3-49**), with fierce, glaring eyes, smoldering locks, and muscles taut with rage, as he extends his arms across the breadth of the page, arching his palms sorcererwise to conjure up the fires of war. But with Christ’s death and resurrection

“Death Eternal is put off Eternally” (104.12), which makes possible the redemption of Albion in the concluding Night: “Behold Jerusalem in whose bosom the Lamb of God / Is seen tho slain before her Gates he self renewd remains / Eternal & I thro him awake to life from deaths dark vale” (122.1-3). At this point, a repentant, battle-fatigued Urizen is compelled to acknowledge his errors, and the remainder of the poem is concerned with the cessation of strife between the Zoas and their respective Emanations, followed thereupon by the reestablishment of spiritual harmony and imaginative plenitude.



Thus far the reader has witnessed how Blake uses the Laocoöntic form in the *Four Zoas* to represent the beautiful man in the contrary states of abject terror and dire suffering, as represented by the figures of Tharmas and Los discussed above, and selfless, heroic compassion, embodied in the figure of Jesus on page 114. In this final section, the reader will see how Blake employs the Laocoöntic figure in both these senses at the beginning and end of the manuscript as a way to encapsulate the general theme and direction of the narrative: the mental progress of Albion from a debased state of intellectual contraction reinforced by reason, towards a regenerate state of visionary expansion facilitated by divine conscience; his “fall into Division & his Resurrection to Unity / His fall into Generation of Decay & Death & his Regeneration / by the Resurrection from the dead” (4.4-5).

The former state is represented in the frontispiece to Night I (**fig. 4-17**), where Blake presents a nude male figure struggling vigorously to free himself from heavy chains attached at his wrists, as if heeding the horn-blowing angel’s call to judgment on the recto side of the leaf (the title page of the poem). In this he resembles somewhat the figure of the enchained poet in the *Night Thoughts* proof on page 123 of the manuscript (**fig. 4-18**), where Albion springs up from the “Rock of Ages” in order “To meet the Lord coming to Judgment,” but is

immediately “repell’d,” one presumes because he has not yet attained the fully regenerated visionary faculty necessary to “Enter the Consummation” (123.40-124.5).³⁸ However, the frontispiece figure is much more expressive, the strain of his muscles fully displayed, rather than being concealed beneath a loose-fitting, full-length garment. That he suffers greatly is evident in the violent contortion of his body and agitated limbs. He reaches up with his left arm, and perhaps has managed to break loose one of the chains, while drawing up his left leg and leaping into the air, wrenching his abdomen and throwing back his head, in an attempt to do the same to the chain still binding his right arm.

While this sublime masculine form could represent any one of the male characters in the *Four Zoas*, depending on when in the progress of the manuscript Blake drew it, it is perhaps most useful to identify him as Albion. Throughout much of the poem, however, he appears as a cadaverous sleeper. Addressing Los in Night IV, Tharmas proclaims: “The Eternal Man is seald never to be deliverd / I roll my floods over his body my billows & waves pass over him / The Sea encompasses him & monsters of the deep are his companions / Dreamer of furious oceans cold sleeper of weeds & shells” (41.15-8). At the same time, however, the poem is a dream vision, and all the characters and events it describes, the reader must remember, are different aspects of the “Eternal Mind bounded” (54.1). In Night IX, when Albion awakes from his deathlike sleep and “lifts the blue lamps of his Eyes ... Bowing

³⁸ In the source poem, Young doubts his own poetic ability to discourse on the theme of immortality, comparing himself unfavorably to Alexander Pope, and his poem to the *Essay on Man*:

O had *He* prest his Theme, pursued the track,
Which opens out of Darkness into Day!
O had he mounted on his wing of Fire,
Soar’d, where I sink, and sung *Immortal* man!
How had it blest mankind? and rescued me? (I.455-9)

The illustration represents Young straining to bring his voice in tune with the sublimity of his theme: “Oft burst my Song beyond the bounds of Life; / What, *now*, but Immortality can please?” (453-4).

his head over the consuming Universe” (119.30-1), he recognizes the Zoas, Spectres, and Emanations as manifestations of his own fragmented psyche: “O weakness & O weariness O war within my members / My sons exiled from my breast pass to & fro before me ... all exiled from the face of light & shine of morning” (119.32-120.2). The tormented figure in Blake’s frontispiece drawing embodies this internal strife, an appropriate image to place at the threshold of the poem. Once Albion awakens, however, he looks forward to the time when “the Man of future times [shall] become as in days of old,” before his fall into division (5). “Tho I arise look out / And scorn the war within my members,” he continues, “Yet will I look again unto the morning” (8-10).

This long-awaited “fresher morning” (138.20) is described in the final 30 lines of the poem, and beneath the concluding words “End of the Dream” on page 139 Blake has drawn another Laocoöntic figure (**fig. 4-19**), similar to that of Jesus on page 114. Its sketchiness makes any identification tenuous at best; and since it is viewed from the back, not even its sex can be determined. Grant asserts that it is female and depicts Enitharmon “launching from the earth to meet Urthona among the stars” (201), while Magno and Erdman seize on the figure’s sexual indeterminacy to suggest that it represents “the unity of Enitharmon and Urthona” (101) as described in the text on this page: “Urthona is arisen in his strength no longer now / Divided from Enitharmon no longer the Spectre Los” (139.4-5). Both interpretations have their strengths, but Grant’s is not directly supported by the text, while Magno and Erdman seem to ignore the lines immediately following Urthona’s reunion with Enitharmon in which he “rises from the ruinous walls / In all his ancient strength to form the golden armour of science” (7-8). Another possibility, no less valid than theirs, is that the figure depicts Albion as the “Regenerate Man” (126.3) when “sweet Science [conscience]

reigns,” no longer suffering from the torments of Urizen’s “dark Religions” and “war of swords” (139.9-10).

This interpretation gains support from a revised passage on page 138 that almost certainly postdates the conclusion on page 139, and which may even have been written to complement the tailpiece design. As Albion “walks forth from midst of the fires the evil is all consumd,” his “Expanding Eyes ... behold the depths of wondrous worlds,” and “Each morning like a New born Man issues with songs & Joy / Calling the Plowman to his Labour & the Shepherd to his rest / He walks upon the Eternal Mountains raising his heavenly voice” (138.22-30). These lines seem perfectly to describe the figure on page 139, which may now be regarded as the “Spiritual body” of Albion liberated from the chains of reason, leaping joyously from the fallen world of space and time into the visionary realm of Eternity. The epigraph of the poem, “Rest before Labour,” scrawled beneath the benighted frontispiece figure, finally comes to fruition in this culminating image of solar consummation and eternal awakening.

By identifying the subject of both the frontispiece and tailpiece designs as Albion, first in his divided, fallen state, and then as a regenerate divine form, “Redeemd from Errors power” through “Brotherhood and Universal Love” (120.51; 133.13), the significance of these drawings increases substantially. They confirm Albion’s central role in the poem, even though he remains largely absent from the principal action of the narrative until Night IX, reminding the reader that everything described in the poem takes place in the imagination of Albion. The two drawings also reconfirm the special significance of the Laocoöntic figure as an expressive form readily adaptable to Blake’s visionary aesthetic. Its utility was the broad range of passions it could convey, ranging from sublime terror, at one extreme, to ecstatic love at the other. It could represent the best and worst in human behavior, just as the

sculpture represented for Blake the best and worst in Greek civilization, and the best and worst in late eighteenth-century European arts culture.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1-1 *Laocoön* group

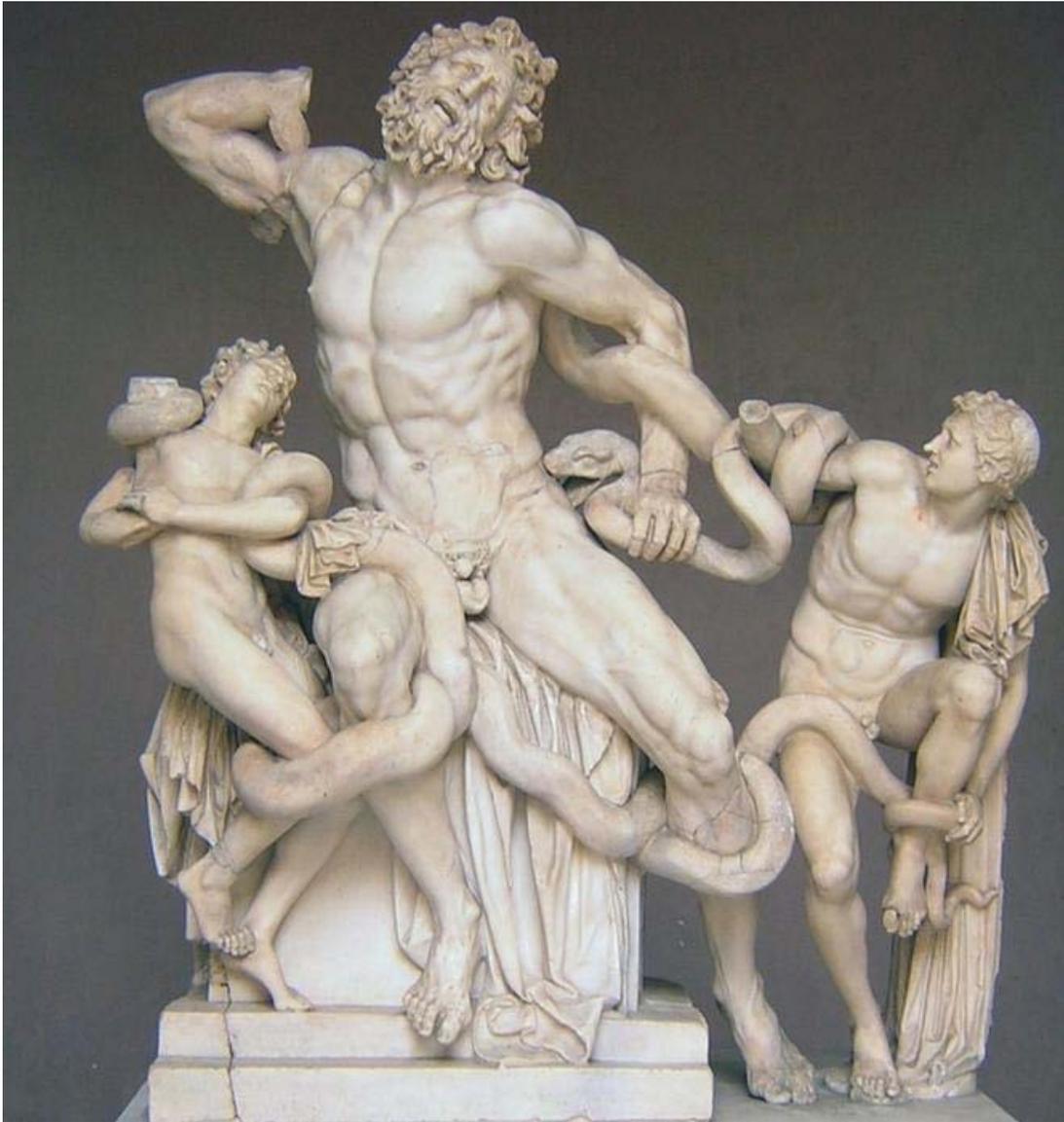


Fig. 1-2 *La découverte du Laocoön*



Fig. 1-3 *Laocoön Stereotype*

Fig. 1-4 “Satan Before the Throne of God”

(plate 2 from *ILLUSTRATIONS of The BOOK of JOB*)



London Published as the Act directs March 8. 1725 by Will. Blake N^o 3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

Fig. 1-5 *Representant d'une grande nation*

Fig. 1-6 *Daniel's Great Image*

PROPHETIC VISION DANIEL'S GREAT IMAGE.

Is this the Man that made the earth to tremble? Dan. 2. 31.

Gold
Dan. 2. 31. 32. 33.
BABYLON
Empire.

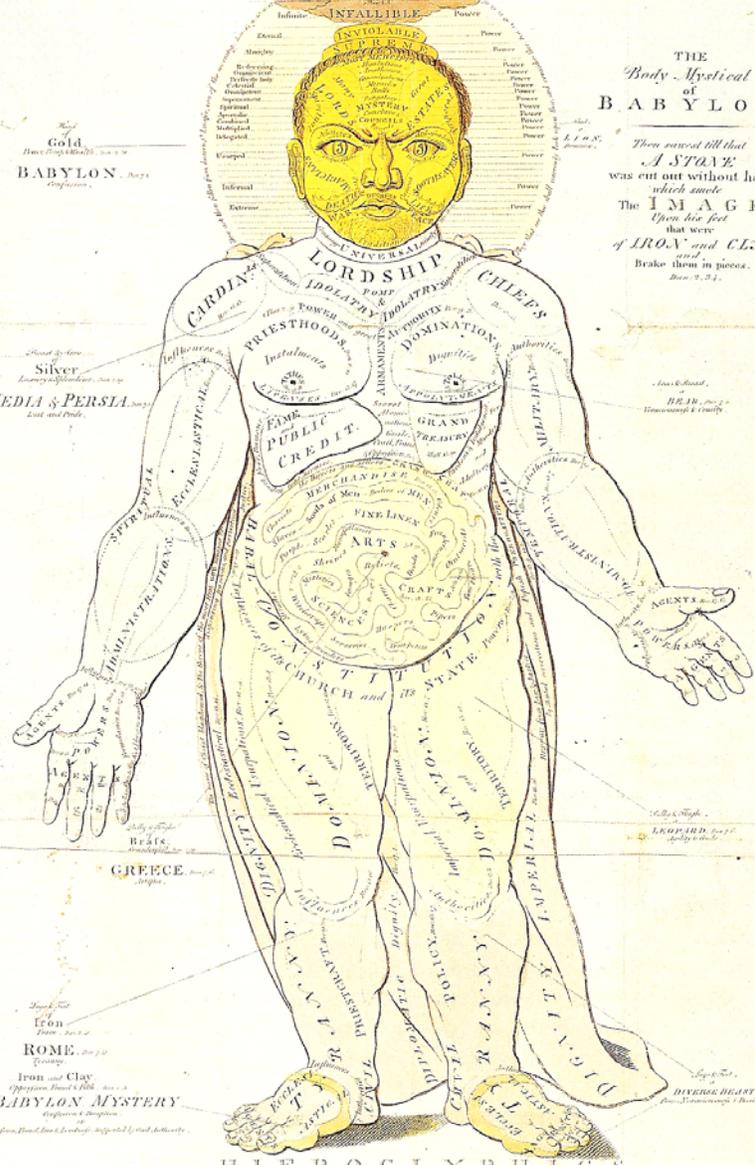
Silver
Isaiah 40. 12.
MEDIA & PERSIA
East and West.

BRASS
Isaiah 40. 12.
GREECE
Isaiah 40. 12.

Iron
Isaiah 40. 12.
ROME
Isaiah 40. 12.
Iron and Clay
Isaiah 40. 12.
BABYLON MYSTERY
Isaiah 40. 12.

THE
Body Mystical
of
BABYLON.

Then sawest thou that
A STUPE
was cut out without hands,
which smote
THE IMAGE
Upon his feet
that were
of IRON and CLAY.
and
Break shown in pieces.
Dan. 2. 34.



HIEROGLYPHICS.
Engraved according to Act of Parliament, Dec. 1. 1802, and Printed by W. Bury, 17, Pall-mall East, London.

1-7 *Anatomie du gladiateur combattant, applicable aux beaux-arts*

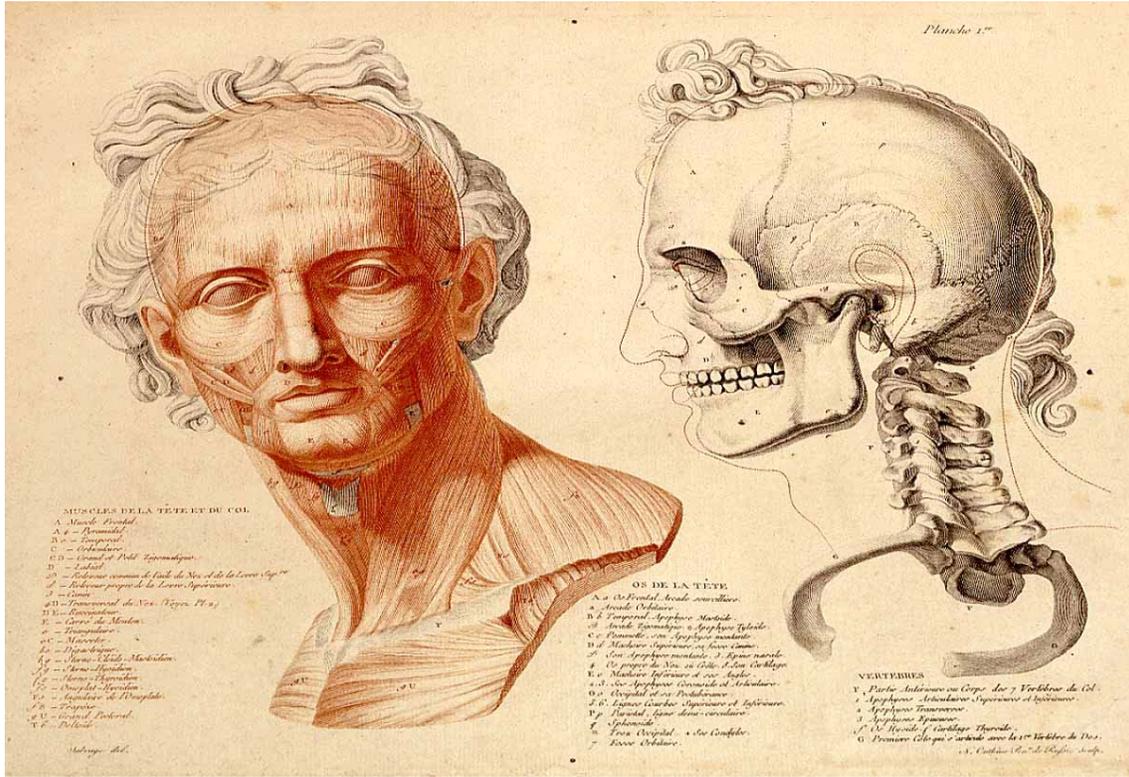


Fig. 1-8 *De humani corporis fabrica libri decem*

Left: Table XI (Book IV)

Right: Table XVI (Book IV)

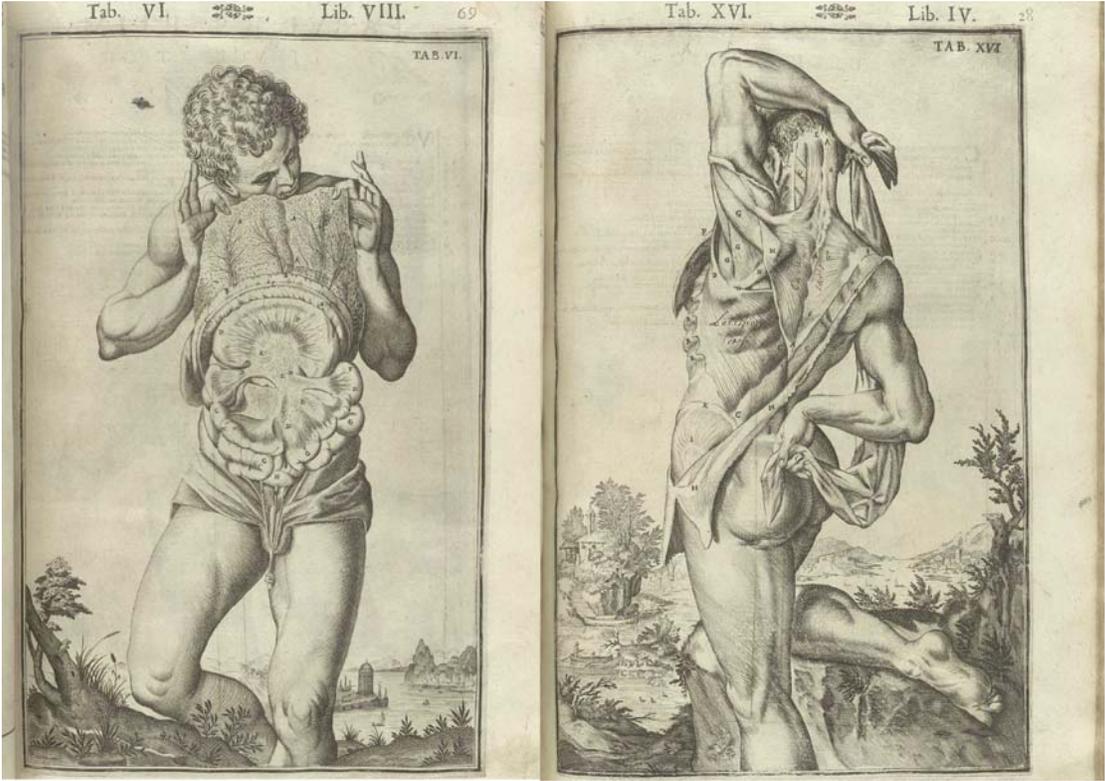


Fig. 1-9 *Nouveau recueil d'ostéologie et de myologie dessiné après nature ... pour l'utilité des sciences et des arts*

Unnumbered plate

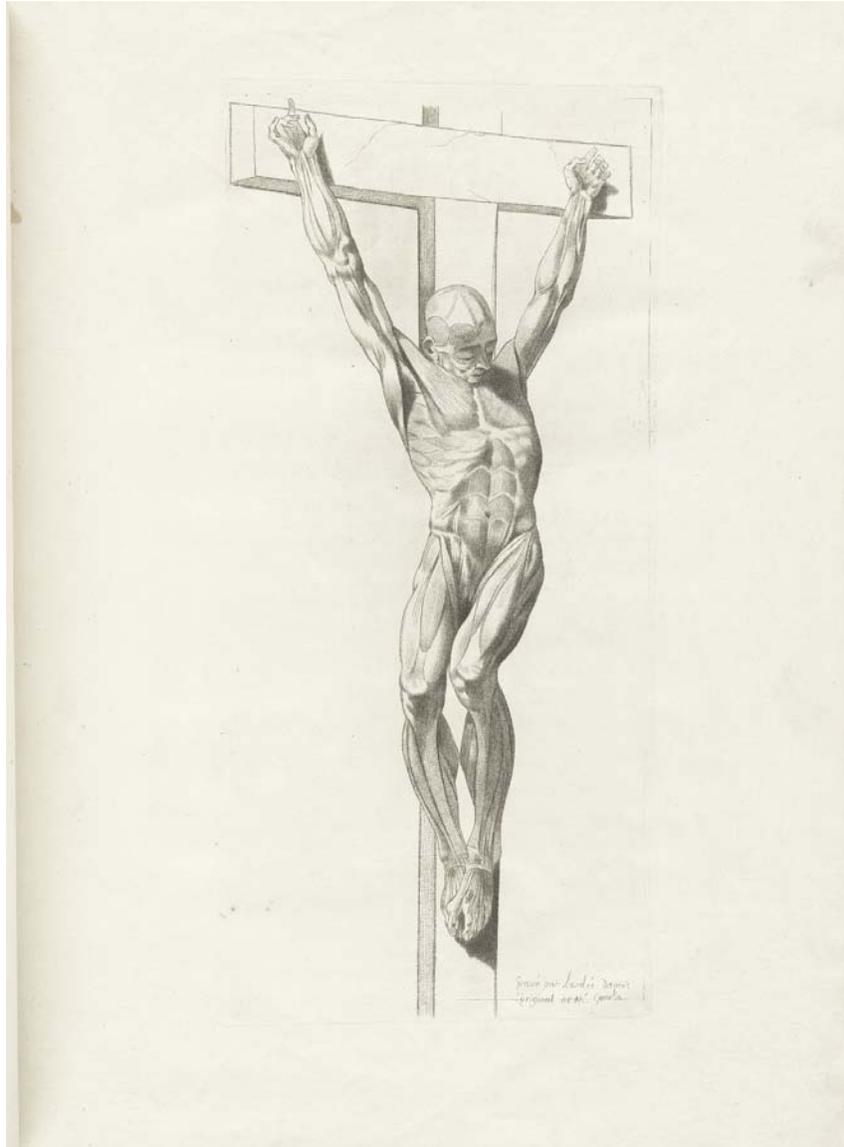


Fig. 1-10 *Myotomia reformatata: or an Anatomical Treatise on the Muscles of the Body*

Top: Chapter vignette

Bottom: Table XII (“chiefly design’d for the Use of Painters and Statuaries”)



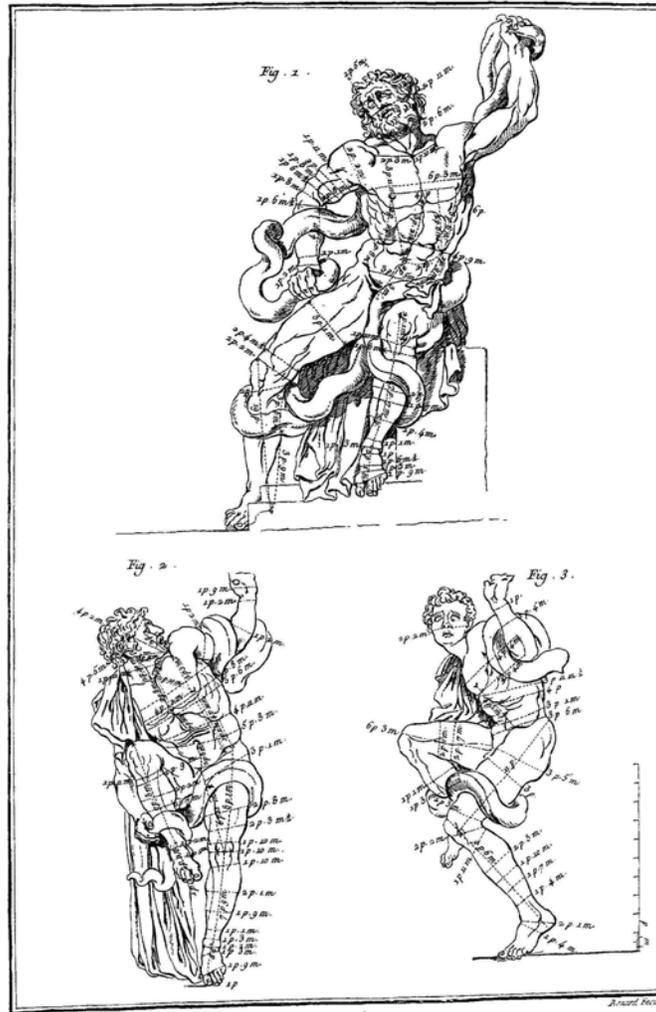
Fig. 1-11 *Anatomia per uso et intelligenza de disegno*

Left: Plate XXVII (“Statua di Laocoonte ... veduta in faccia”)
Center: Plate XXIII (“Laocoonte ... seconda veduta di profilo”)
Right: Plate XXIX (“Laocoonte ... terza veduta dalla schiena”)



Fig. 1-12 *Encyclopédie*

Pl. XXXVII.



Dessin,
Proportions de la Statue de Laocöon.

Renard fecit

Fig 1-13 *Les Proportions du Corps Humain Mesurées sur les plus belles Figures de l'Antiquité*

Fig. 1-14 *Niobe*



Fig. 2-1 *Count Kirill Grigorievitch Razumovsky*



Fig. 2-2 *The Royal Academicians in General Assembly*



Fig. 2-3 *An Imaginary Gallery of Roman Art*



Fig. 2-4 *Recueil d'antiquités*

Title page vignette



Fig. 2-5 *Charles Towneley in His Gallery*

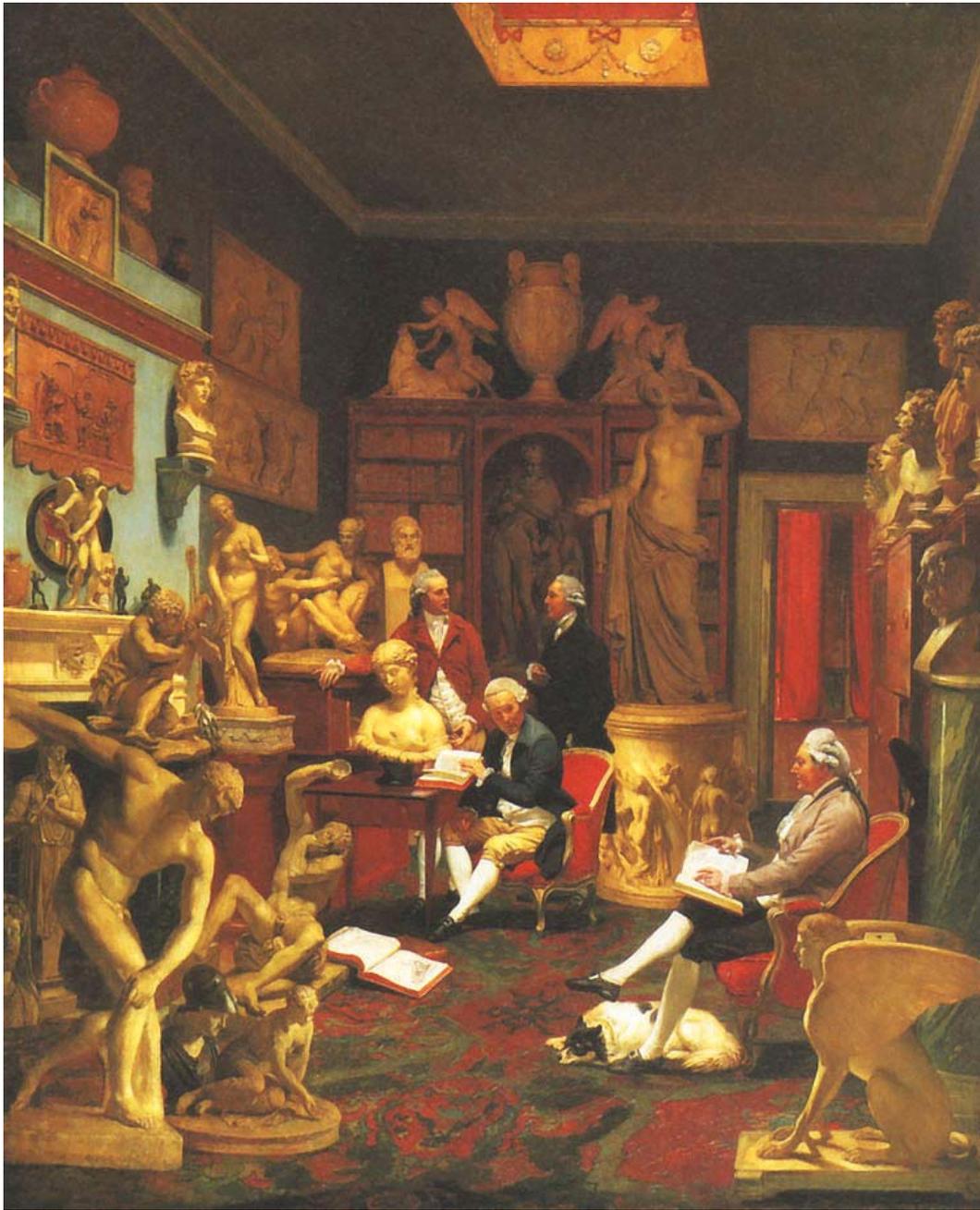


Fig. 2-6 *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities*

Dedicatory page

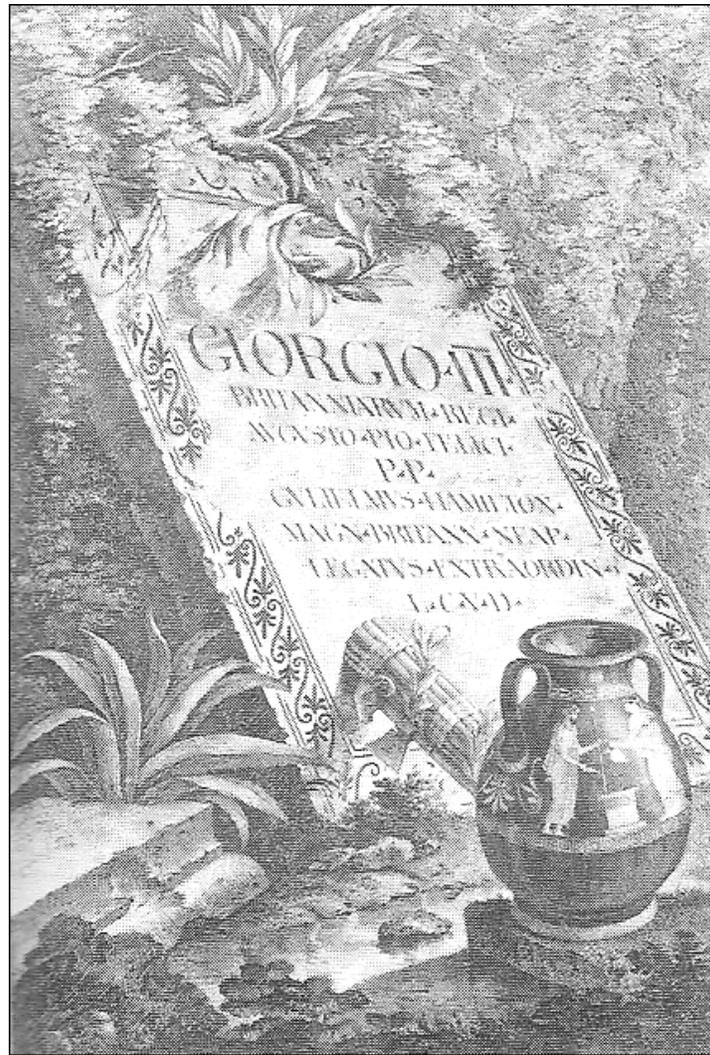


Fig. 2-7 *L'Antiqué expliquée*

Plate LXXXVII



Fig 2-8 *Signorum Veterum Icones*

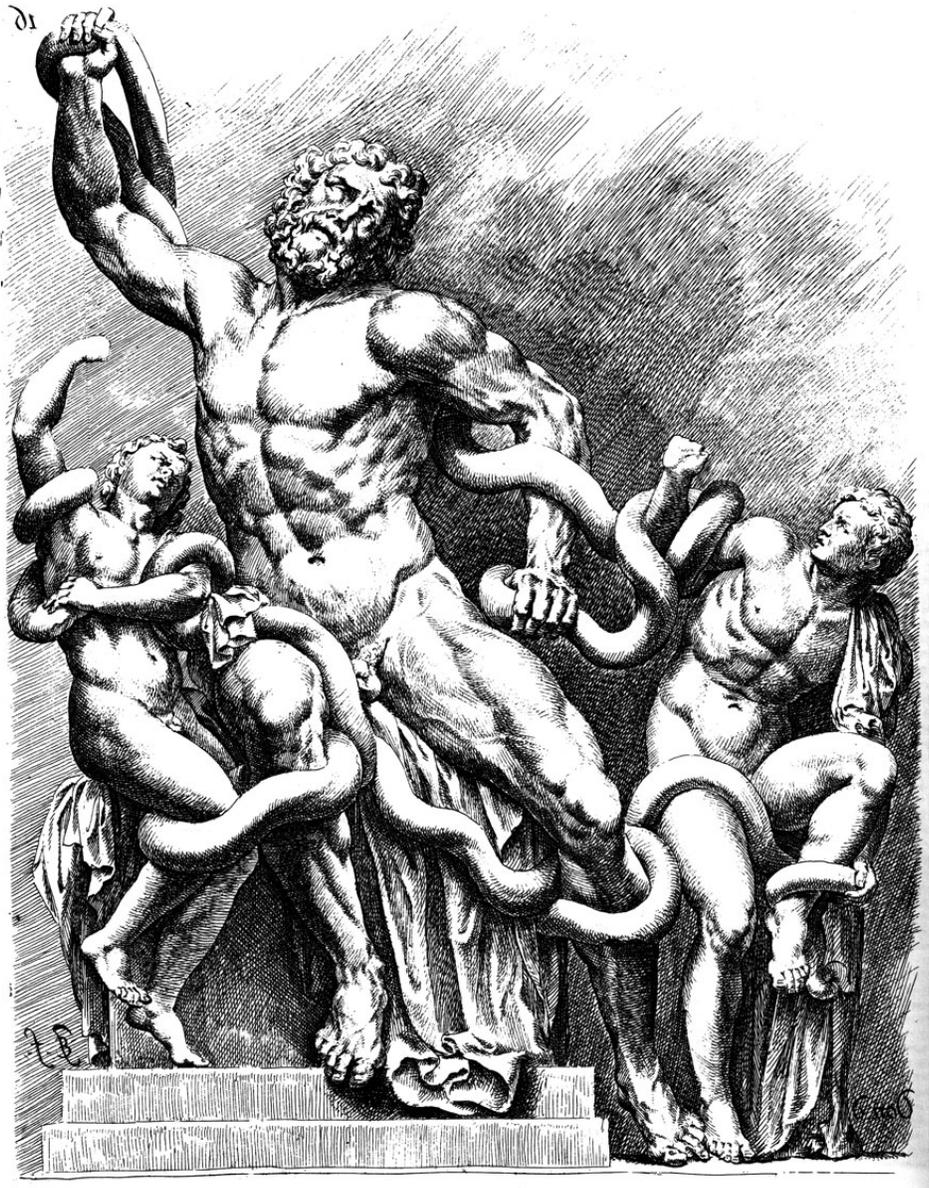


Fig 2-9 *Les Monumens antiques du Musée Napoléon*

Plate LXII

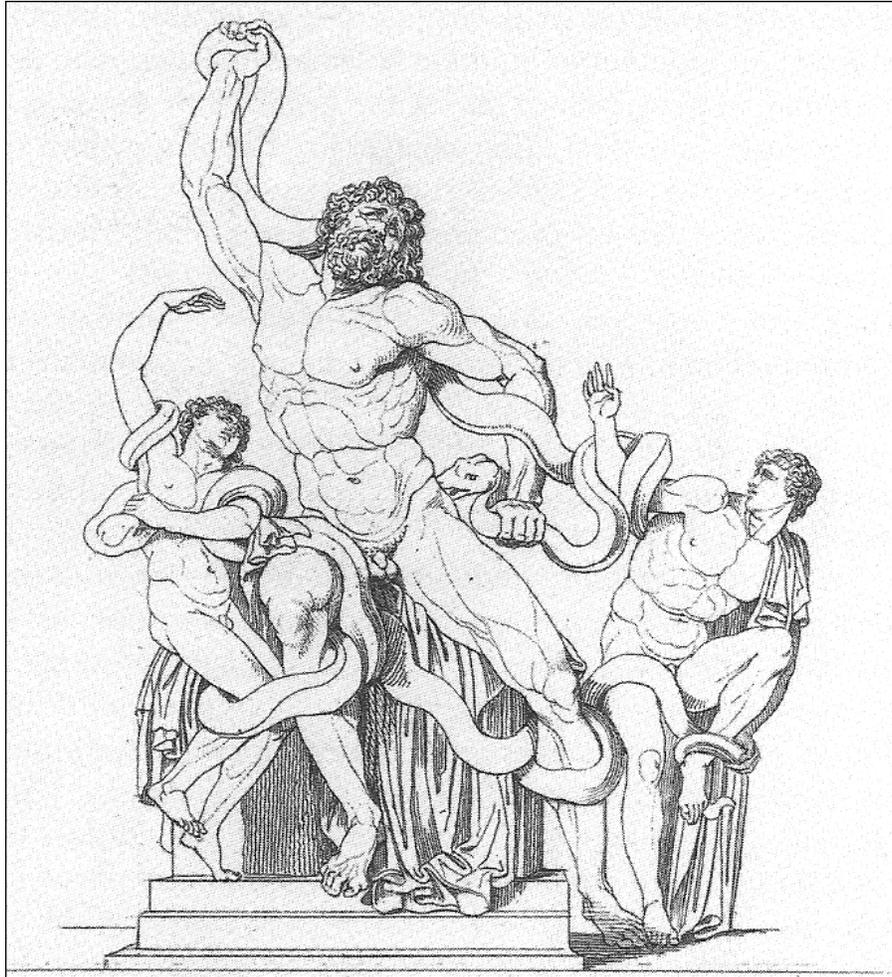


Fig 2-10 “Laocoön” (drawing)

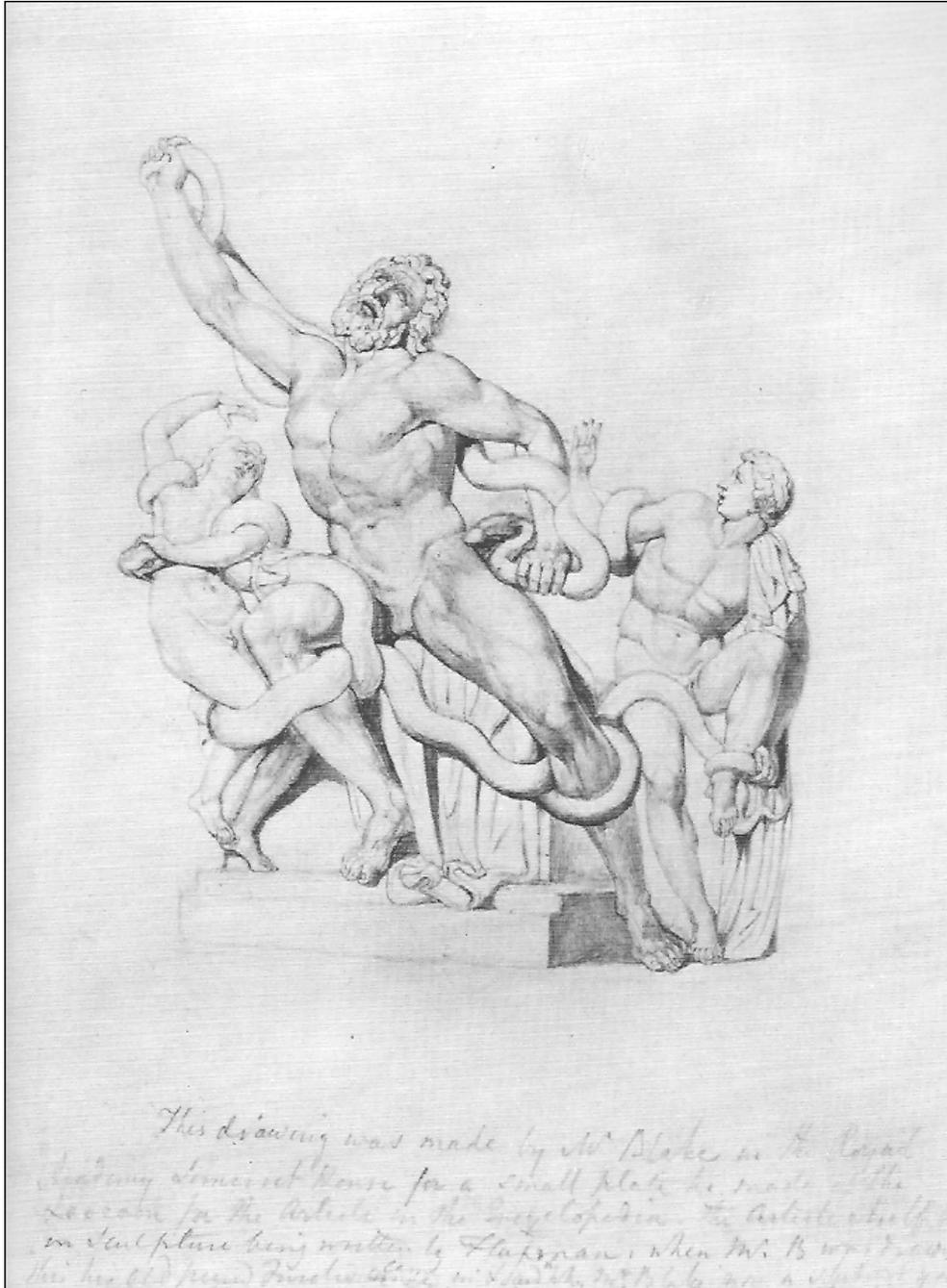


Fig. 2-11 *Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*

“Laocoön” (engraving)

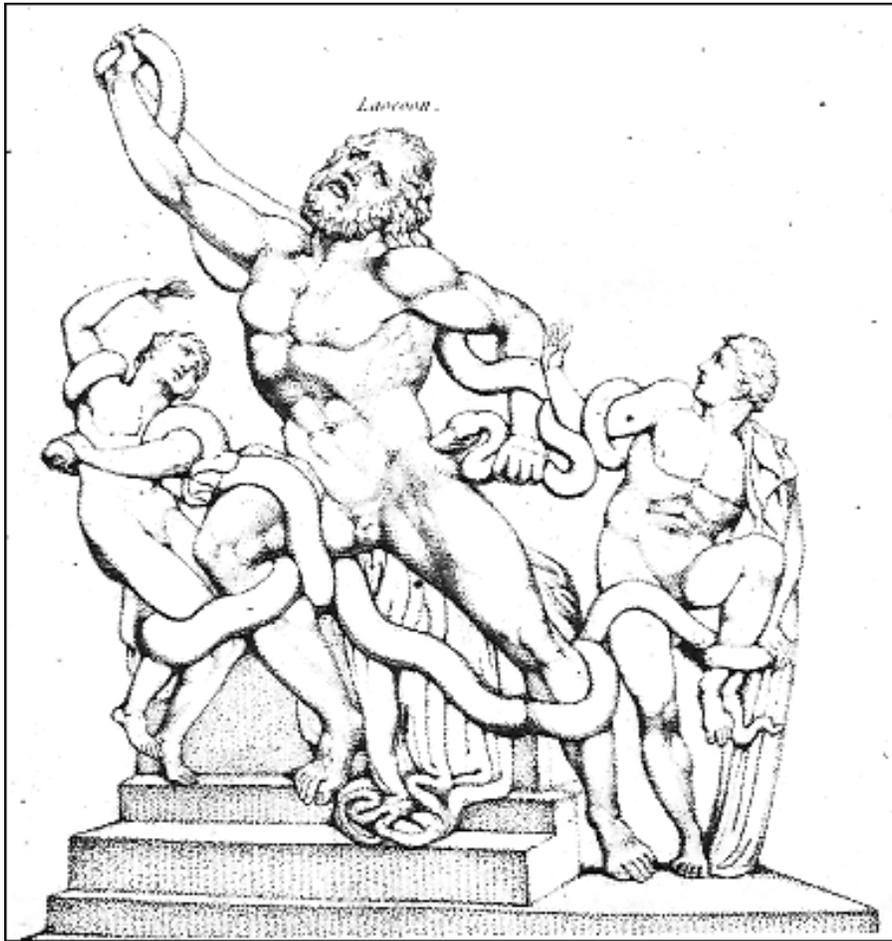


Fig 2-12 “The Laocoön” (drawing)



Fig 2-13 *Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent*

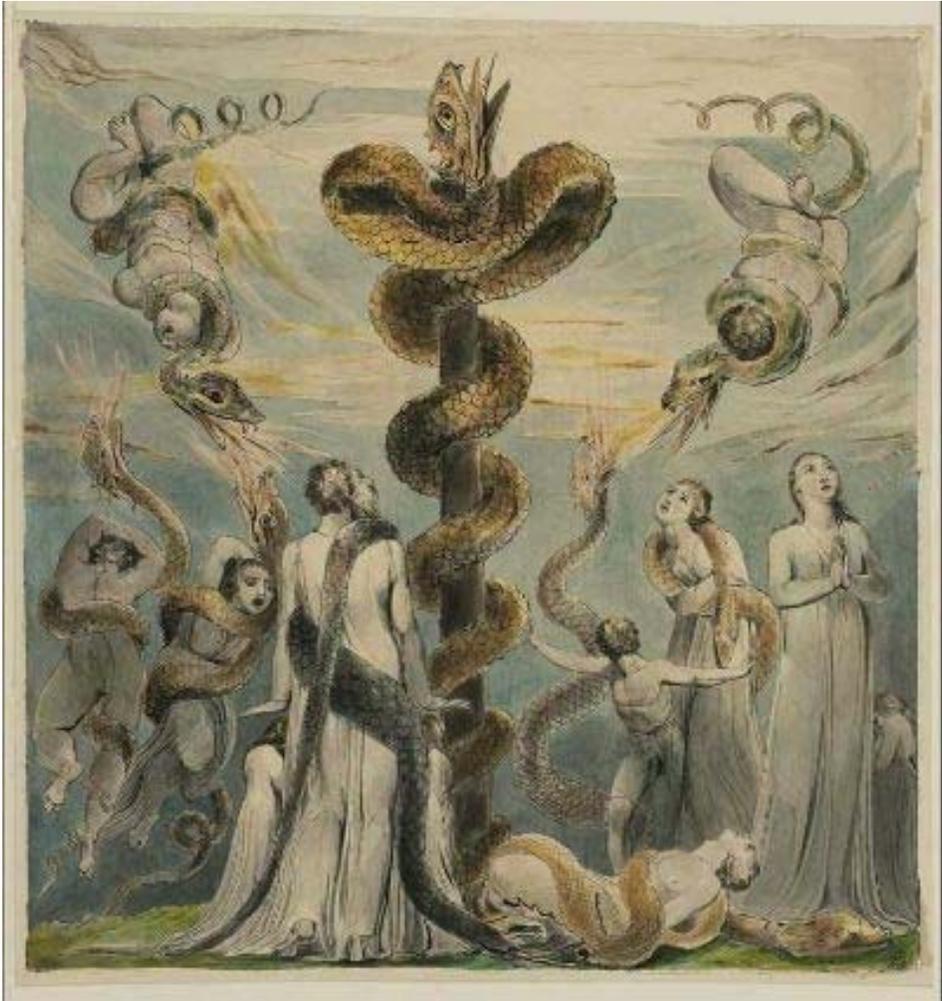


Fig 2-14 *Newton*

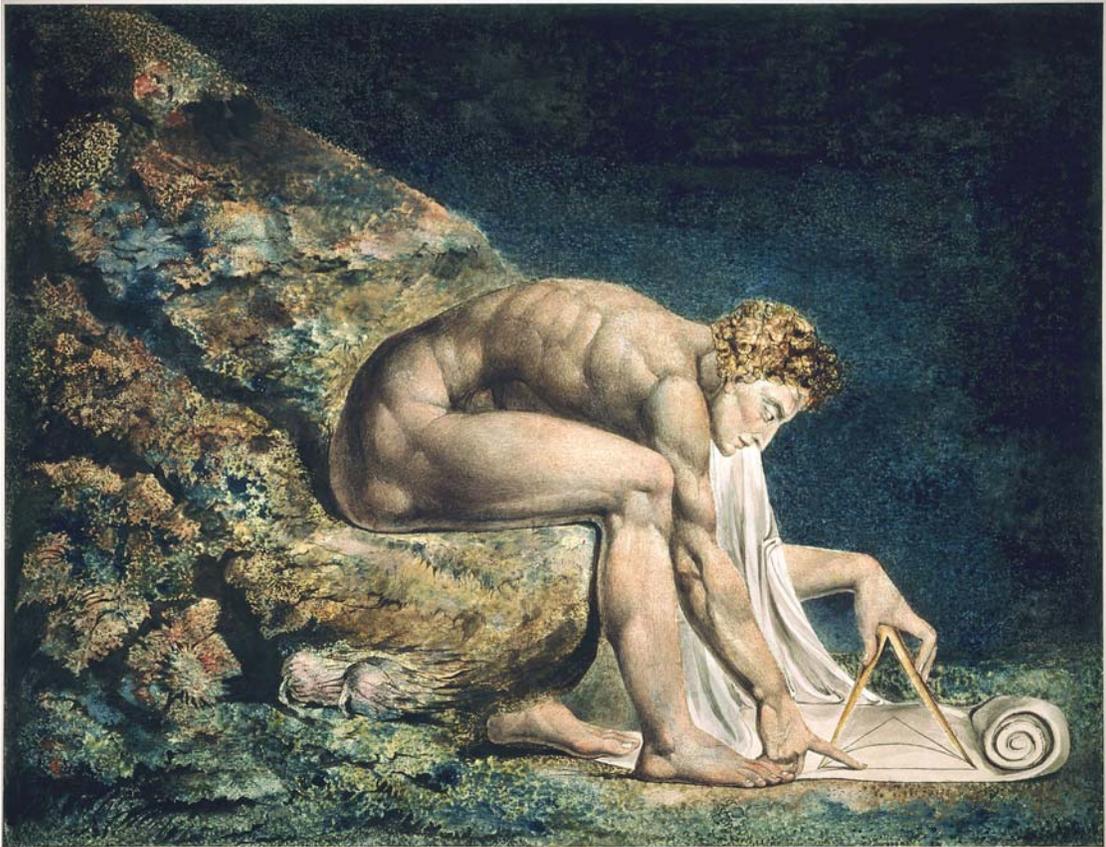


Fig 2-15 *The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods*

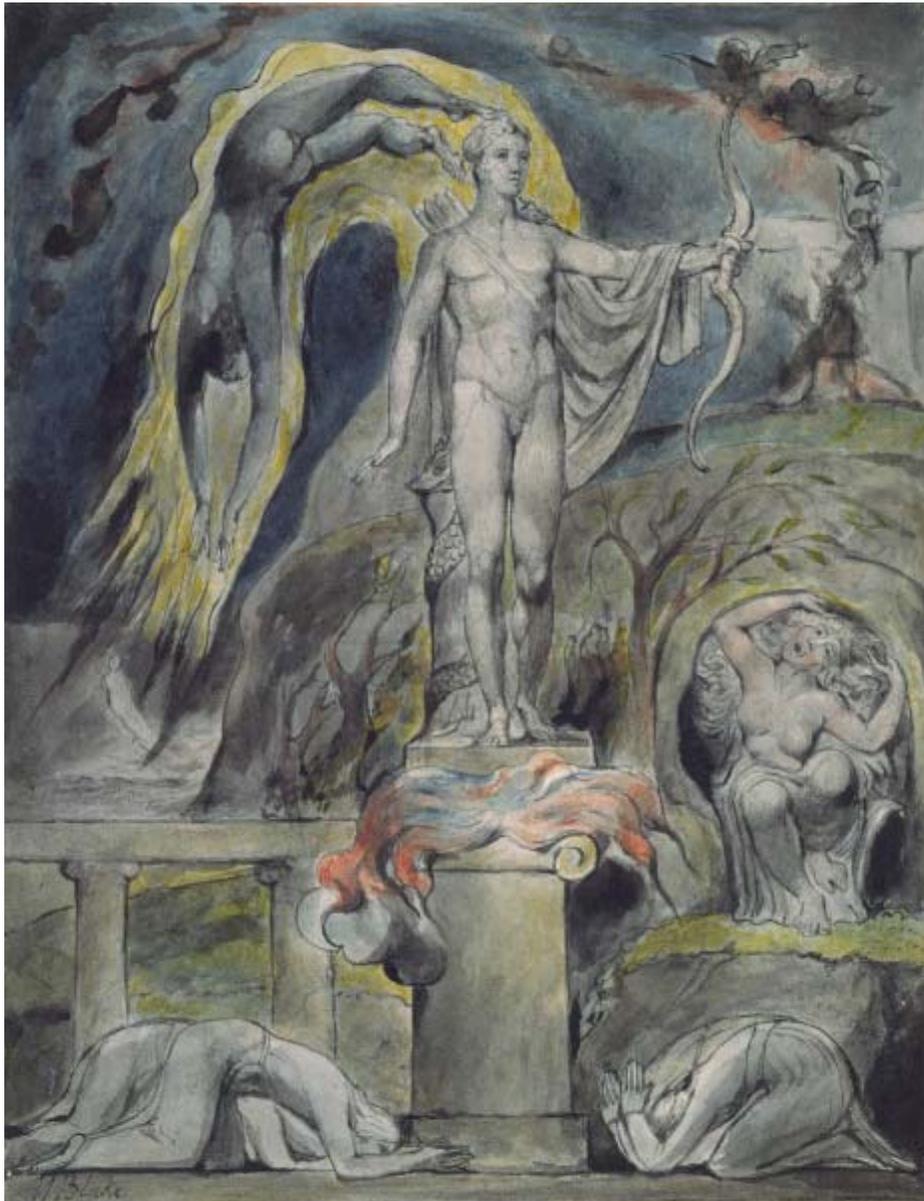


Fig 2-16 “Homer Bearing the Sword and his Companions”



Fig 2-17 *L'Arrivée au Louvre des oeuvres d'art acquises à l'issue de la campagne d'Italie*

Top: Vase
Bottom: Detail



Fig 2-18 *La Salle du Laocoön*



Fig 2-19 *La Salle des Saisons*



Fig 2-20 *L'Empereur Napoléon et l'imépatrice Marie-Louise visitant la salle du Laocoön la nuit*



Fig 2-21 *Salle du Laocoön*

Top: Front
Bottom: Back



Fig 2-22 *Napoléon reçoit au Louvre les députés de l'armée après son couronnement*



Fig 2-23 *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan*



Fig 2-24 *The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth*



Fig 2-25 *Elohim Creating Adam*



Fig 3-1 *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury*

Fig. 3-2 *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims* (details)

Top row (left to right): The Knight, Prioress, and the Wife of Bath

Bottom row (left to right): The Parson and the Pardoner

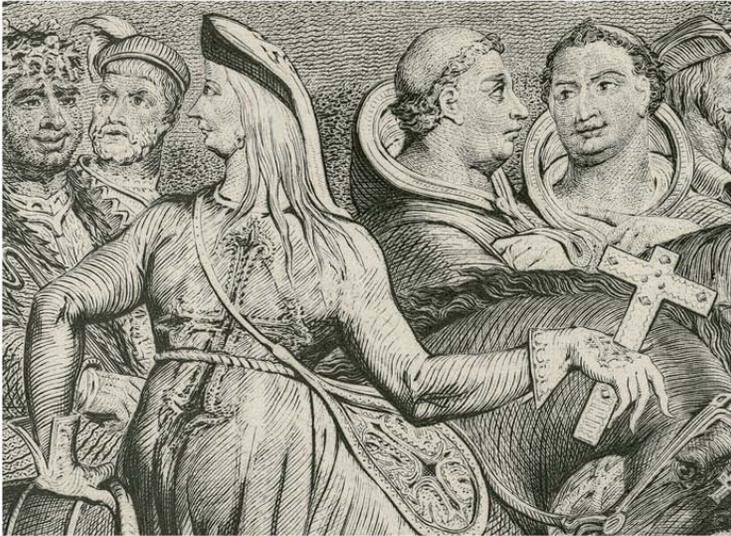


Fig. 3-3 *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims* (details)

Left: Right profile of the Parson
Right: Left profile of the Pardoner



Fig. 3-4 *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims* (details)

Top row (left to right): The Squire and the Summoner

Bottom row (left to right): The Miller and the Plowman



Fig. 3-5 *Apollo Belvedere*



Fig. 3-6 *The Whore of Babylon*



Fig. 3-7 *The Man who Built the Pyramids*

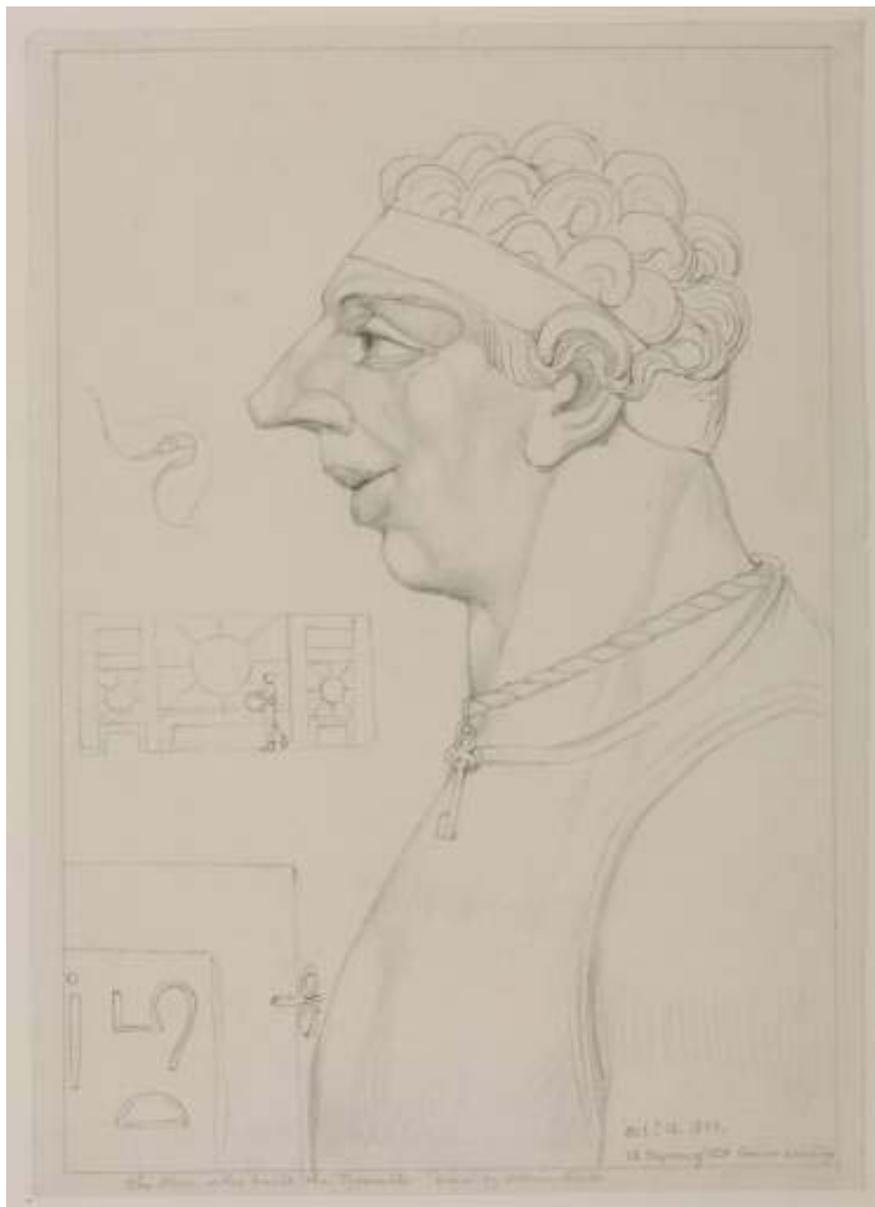


Fig. 3-8 *Essays on Physiognomy*, vol. 2

Unnumbered plate



Fig. 3-9 *The Man who Taught Blake Painting in his Dreams*



Fig. 3-10 *Essays on Physiognomy*, vol. 1

Unnumbered plate



Fig. 3-11 *Essays on Physiognomy*, vol. 3 (part 2)

Unnumbered plate



Fig. 3-12 *Nebuchadnezzar*



Fig. 3-13 *The Borgo Fire*

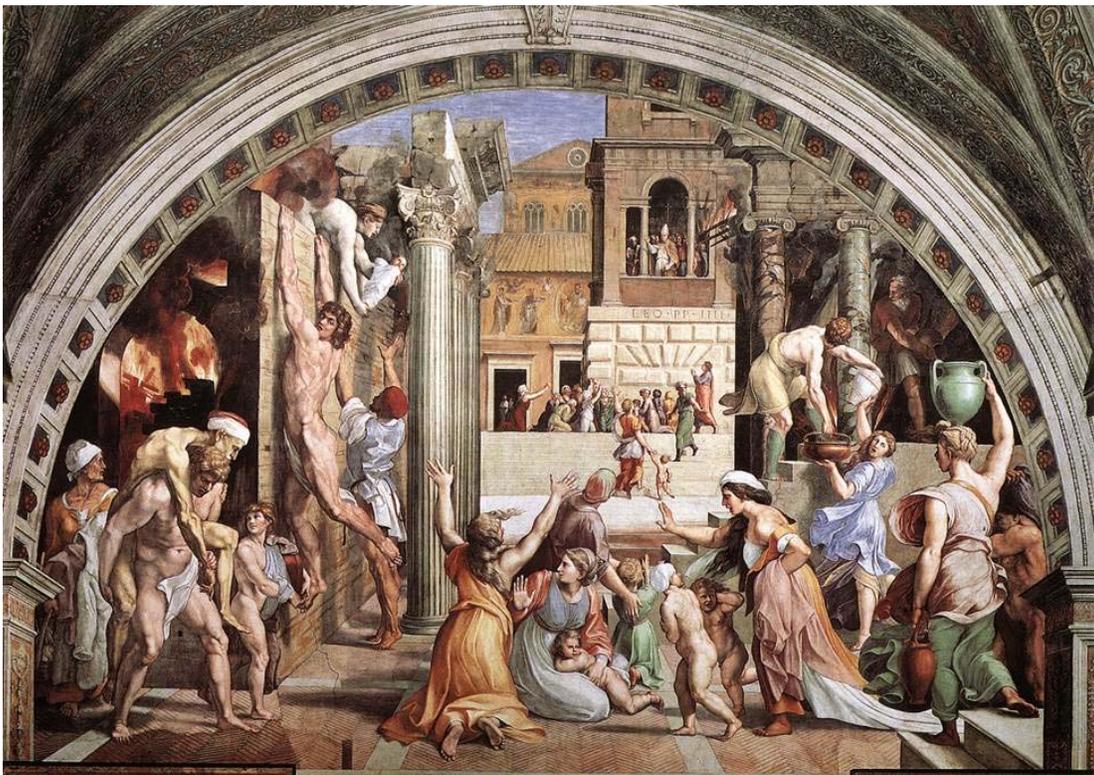


Fig. 3-14 *Belvedere Torso*



Fig. 3-15 *The Last Judgment* (detail)

Saint Bartholomew

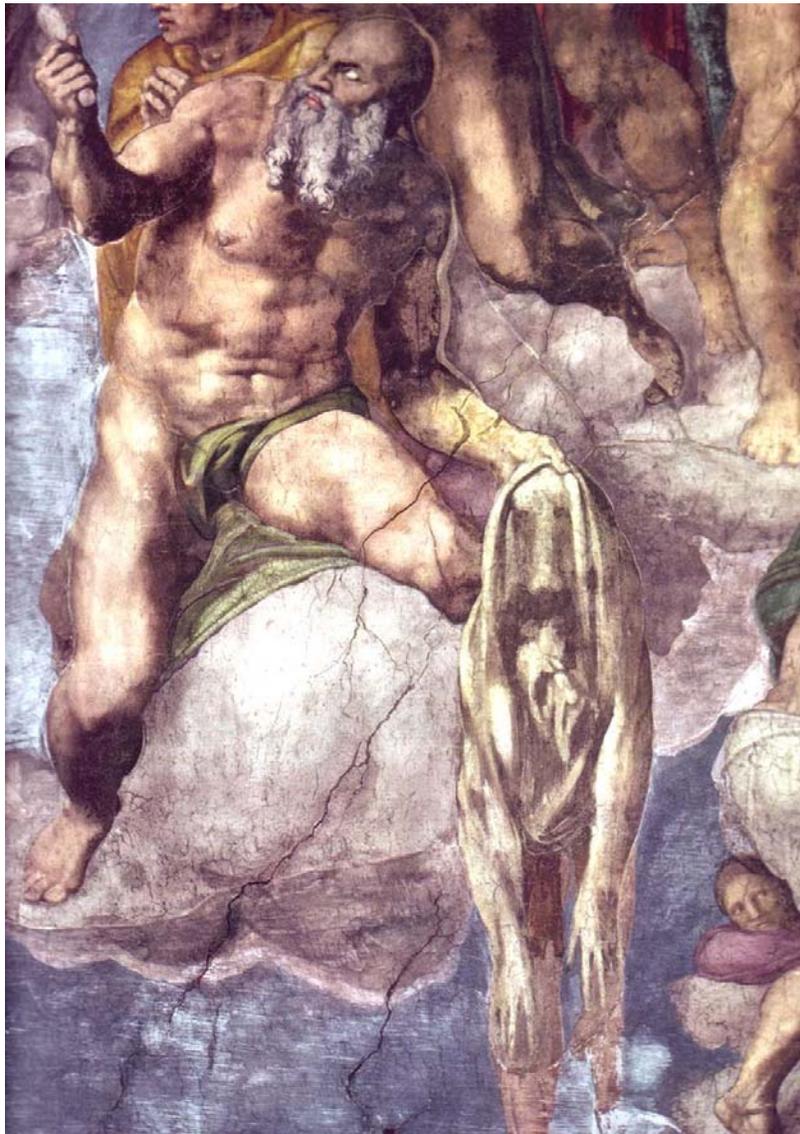


Fig. 3-16 “Various Personifications”

Fig. 3-17 *A Dream of Human Life*



Fig. 3-18 *A woman standing before the Laocoön*

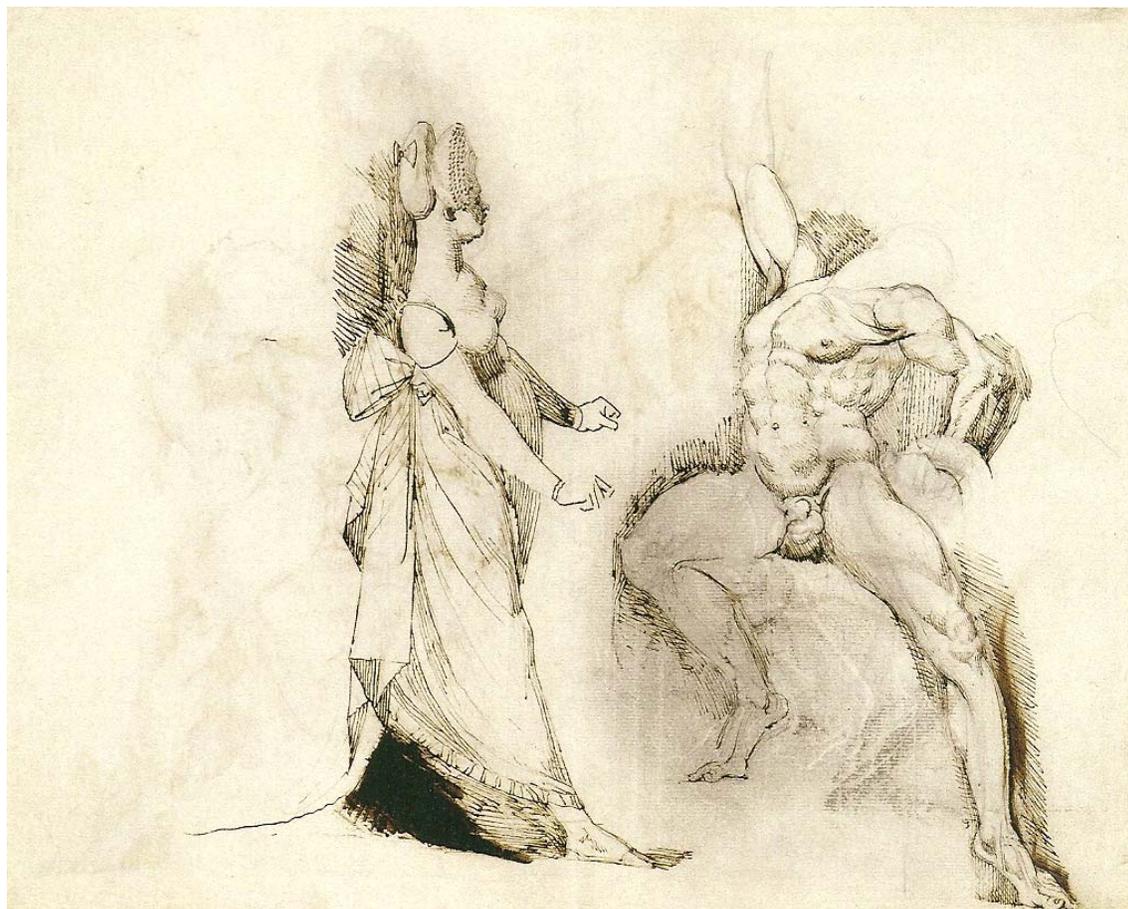


Fig. 3-19 *Othar Rescuing Siritha from the Giant*



Fig. 3-20 *The Triumph of Liberty*



Fig. 3-21 *Percival Delivering Belisane from the Enchantments of Urma*



Fig. 3-22 *The Vision of the Lazar House*



Fig. 3-23 *The Escapee*



Fig. 3-24 *Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and the Ghost*

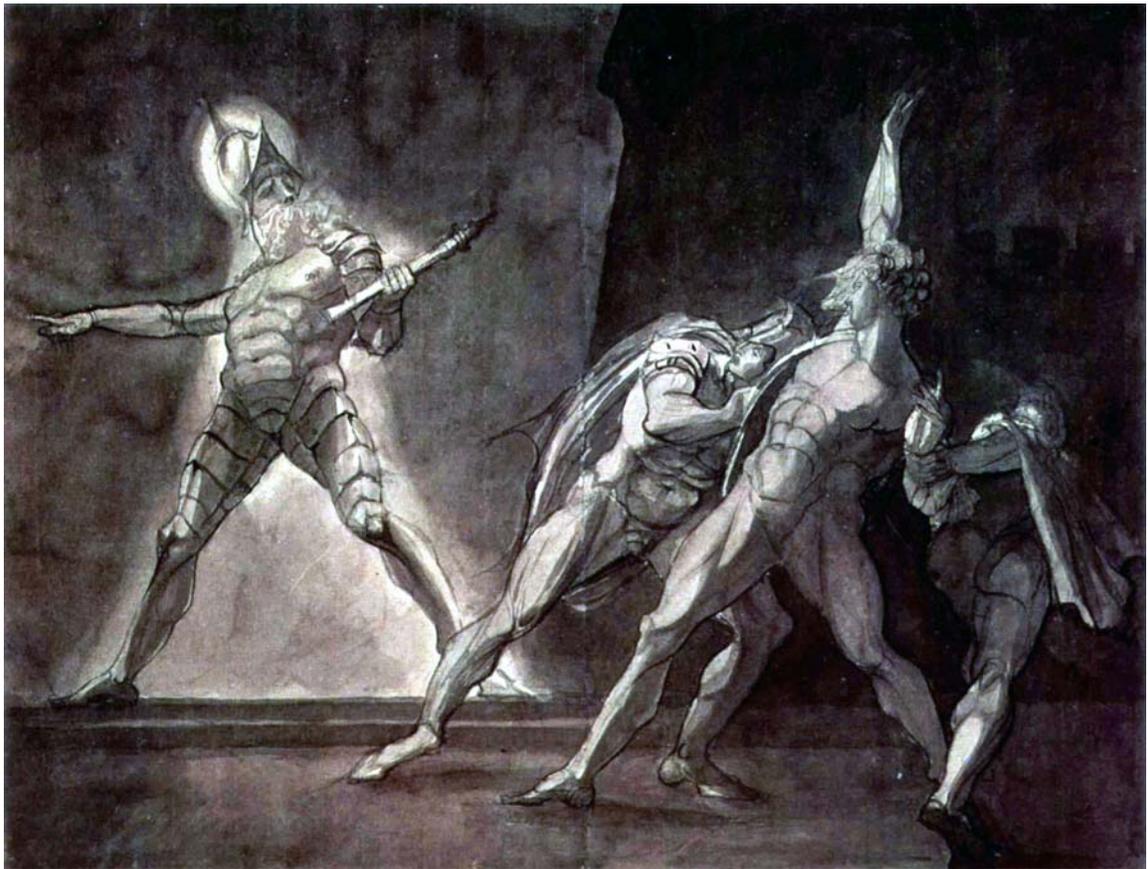


Fig. 3-25 *The Thieves' Punishment*

Fig. 3-26 *Heracles Saves Prometheus from the Eagle*



Fig. 3-27 *Cavalier Dismounted by a Giant Serpent*



Fig. 3-28 *King Lear*



Fig. 3-29 *The Brazen Serpent*



Fig. 3-30 *The Death of Wat Tyler*



THE DEATH OF WAT TYLER.

Fig. 3-31 *Prometheus Bound*



Fig. 3-32 *Ulysses Terrified by the Ghosts*

Ulysses Terrified by the Sirens.



Ulysses is bound to the mast of his ship, and the Sirens are reaching out to him. The crew of the ship is visible in the background, some looking towards the Sirens and others looking away.

Fig. 3-33 *The Fiery Serpents*

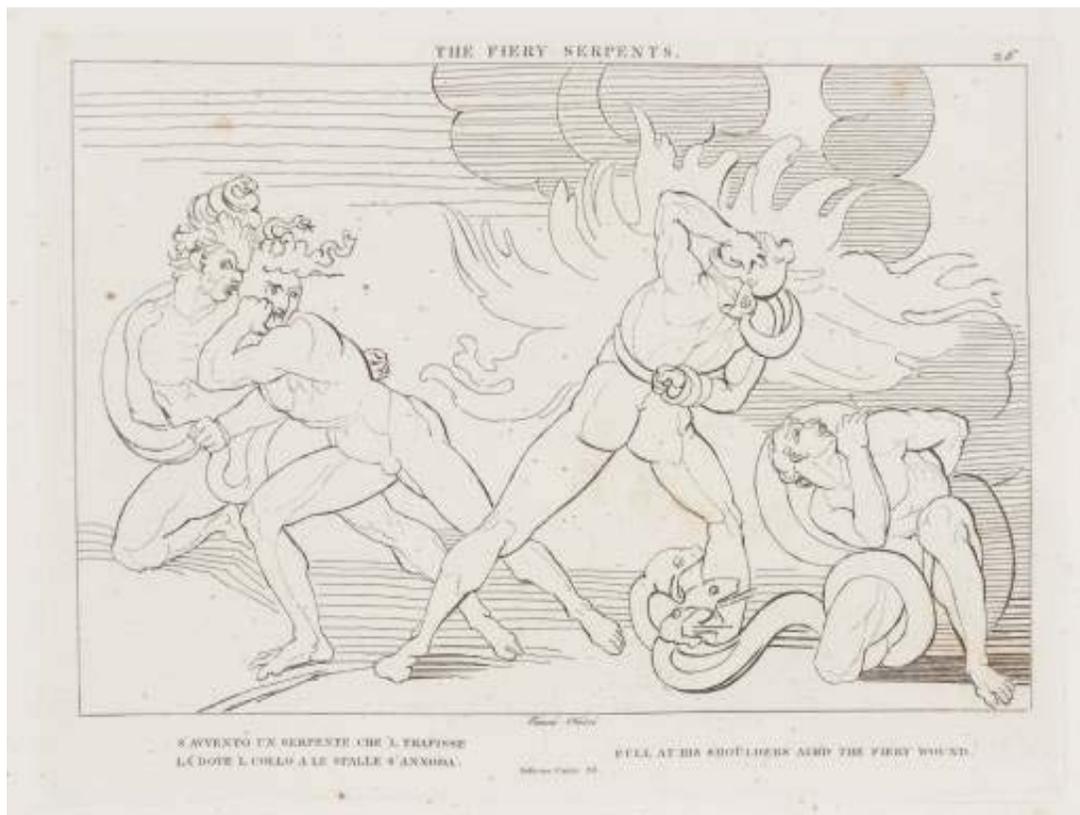


Fig. 3-34 *Milo of Crotona*



Fig. 3-35 *Unidentified scene*



Fig. 3-36 "*Plutus*"



Fig. 3-37 *Richard III and the Ghosts*

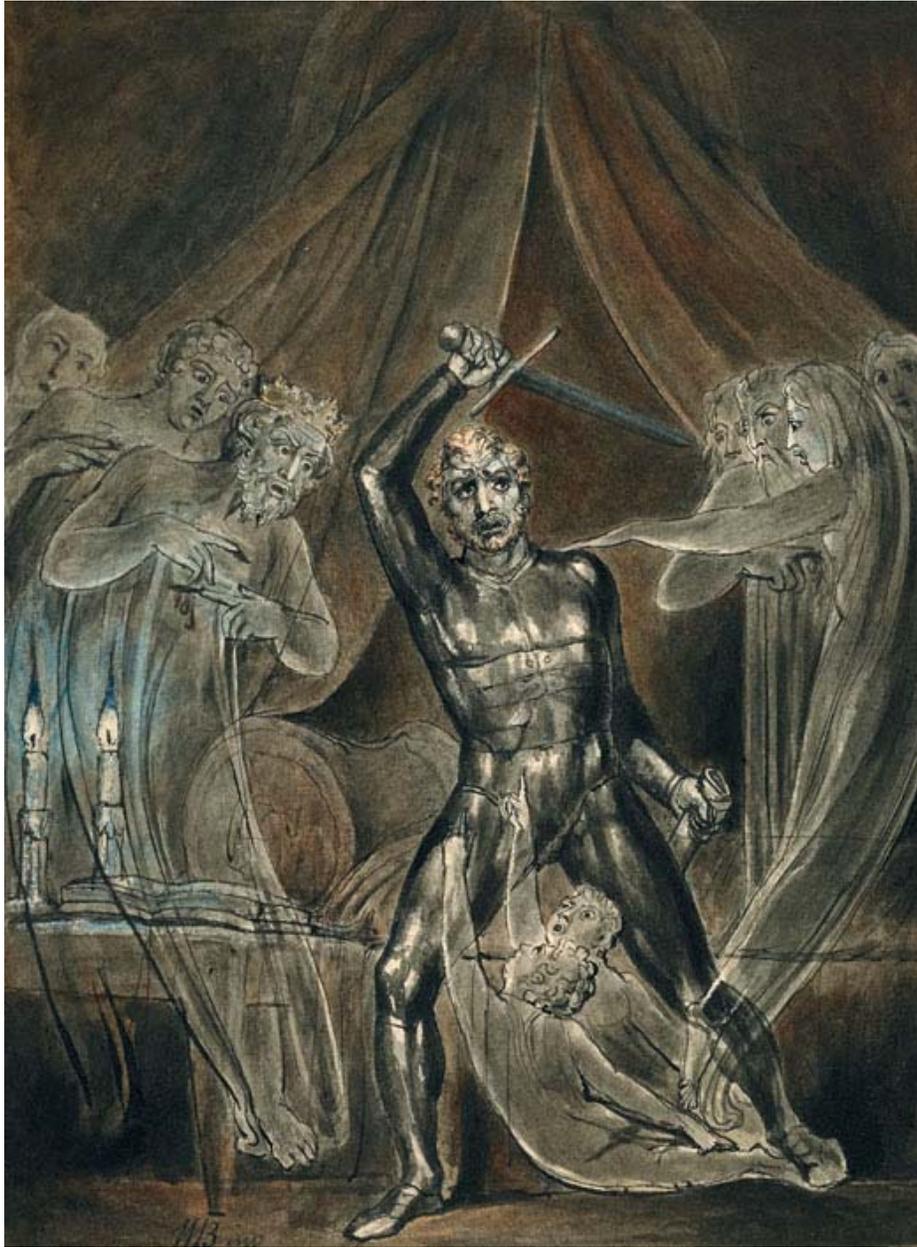


Fig. 3-38 *Samson Breaking his Bonds*



Fig. 3-39 *ILLUSTRATIONS of The BOOK of JOB*

Plate 4 (detail)

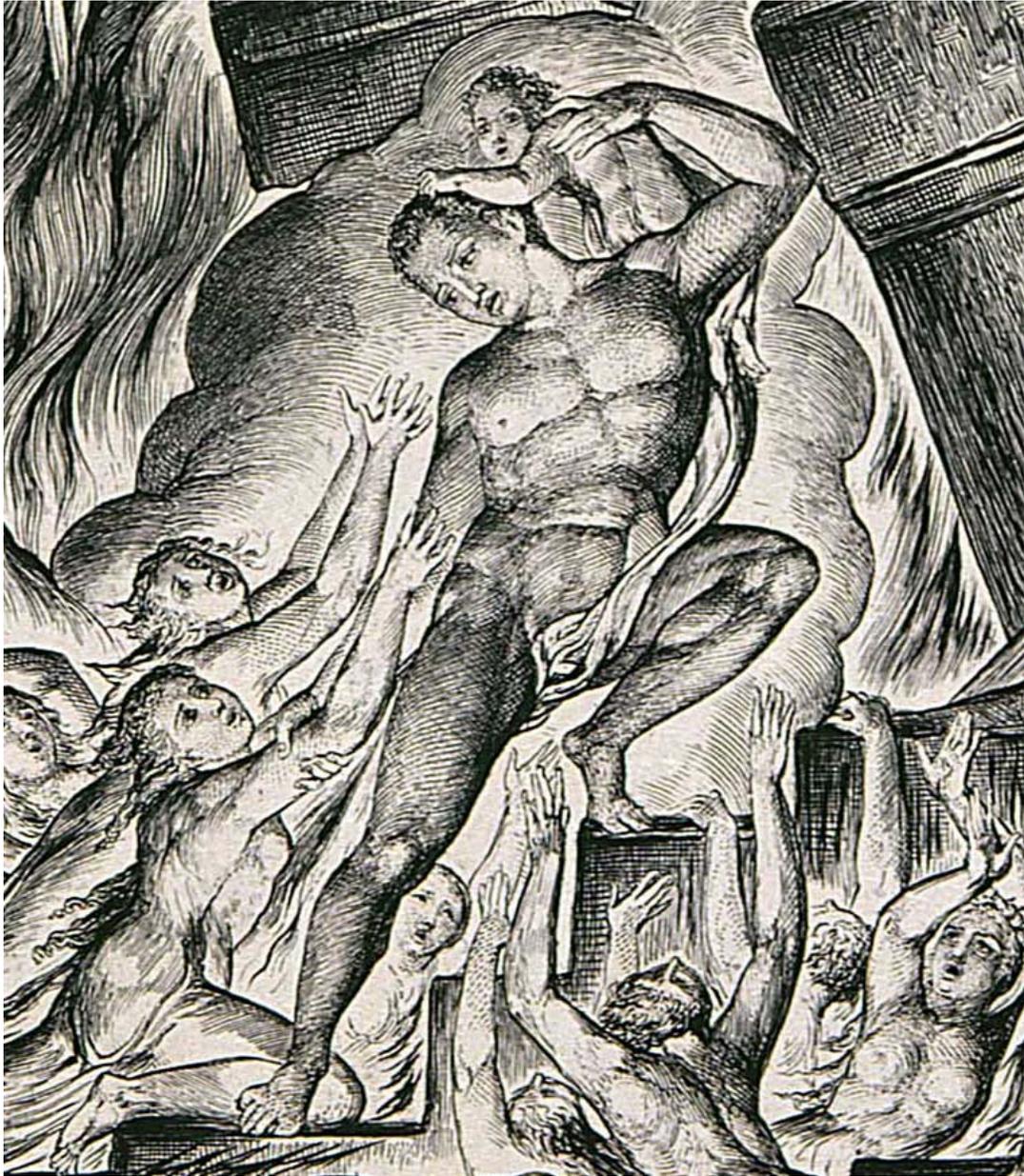


Fig. 3-40 *ILLUSTRATIONS of The BOOK of JOB*

Plate 17 (detail)

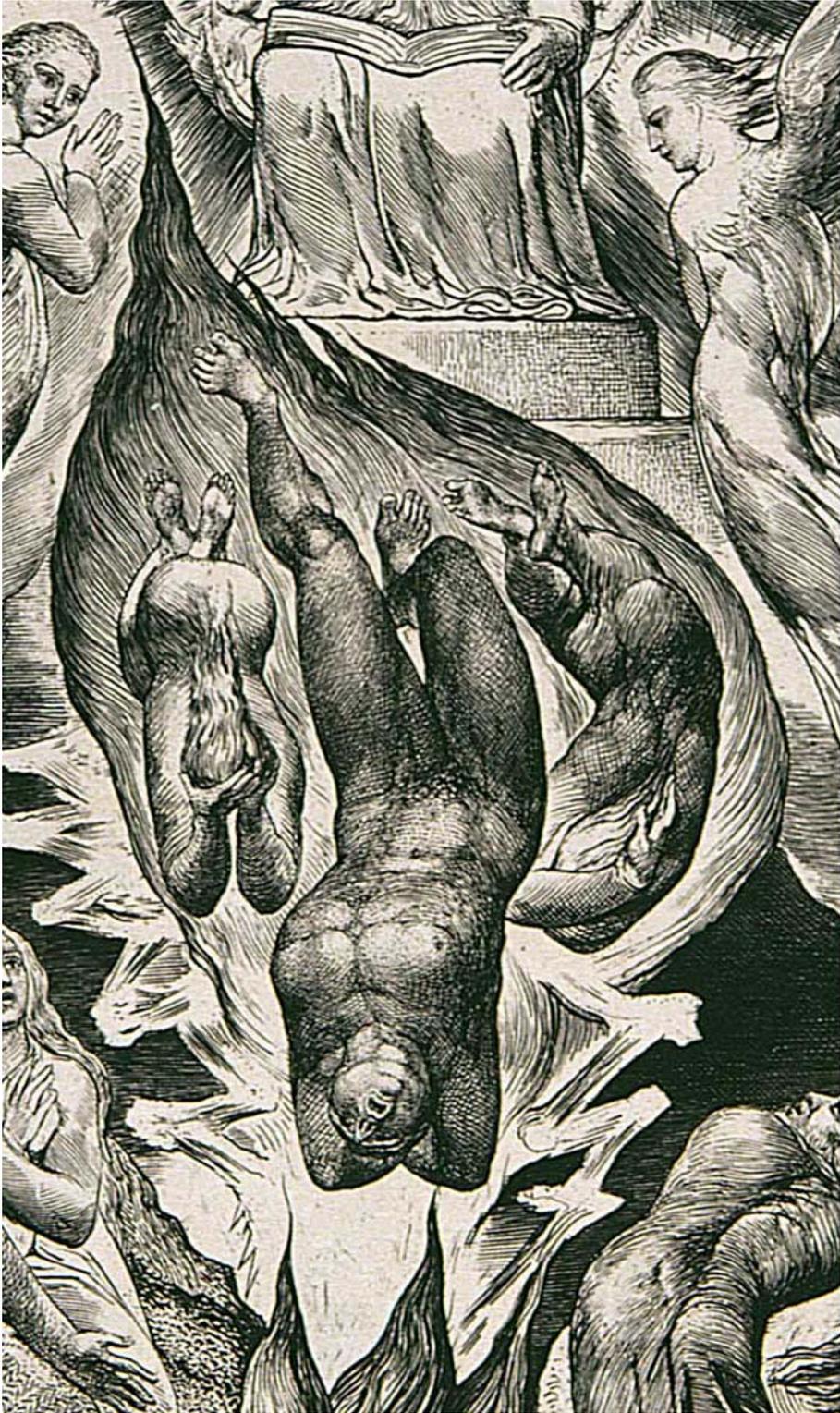
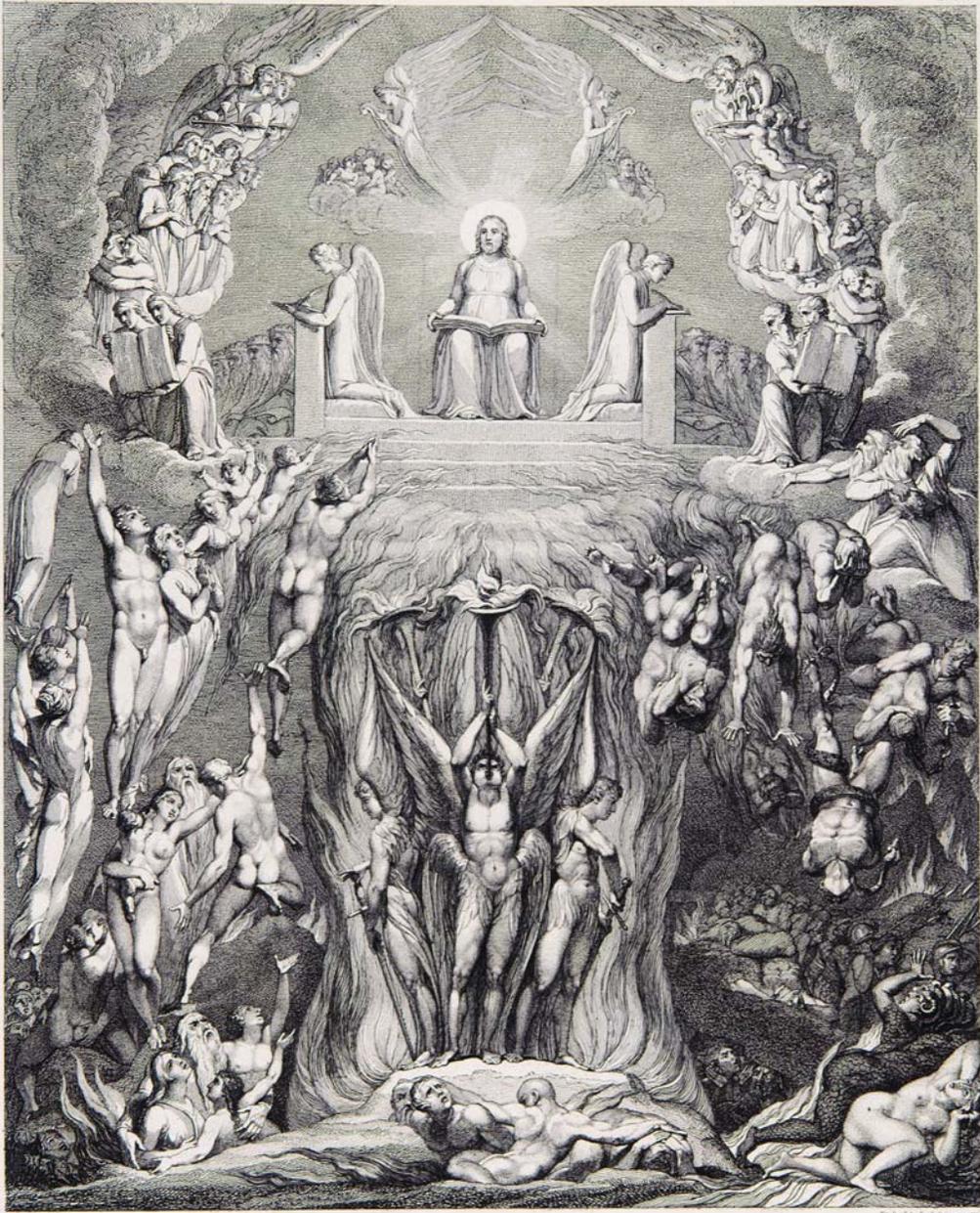


Fig. 3-41 *The Last Judgment*



P. 28

Painted by M. Delisle

Engraved by L. Schwaninger

The Day of Judgment

London, Published by W. Ash, in Pall Mall, & Dawson Street.

Fig. 3-42 *The Last Judgment* (details)

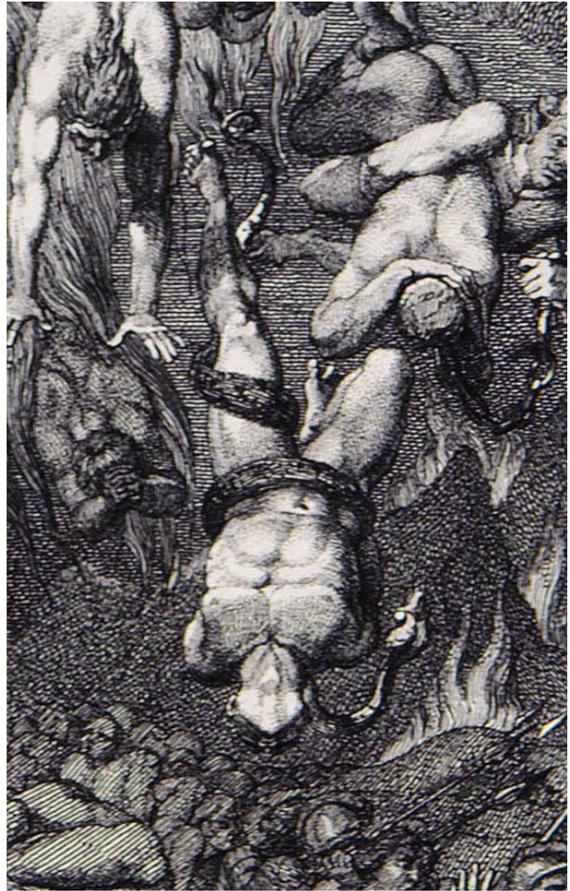


Fig. 3-43 *Christian Fears the Fire from the Mountain*

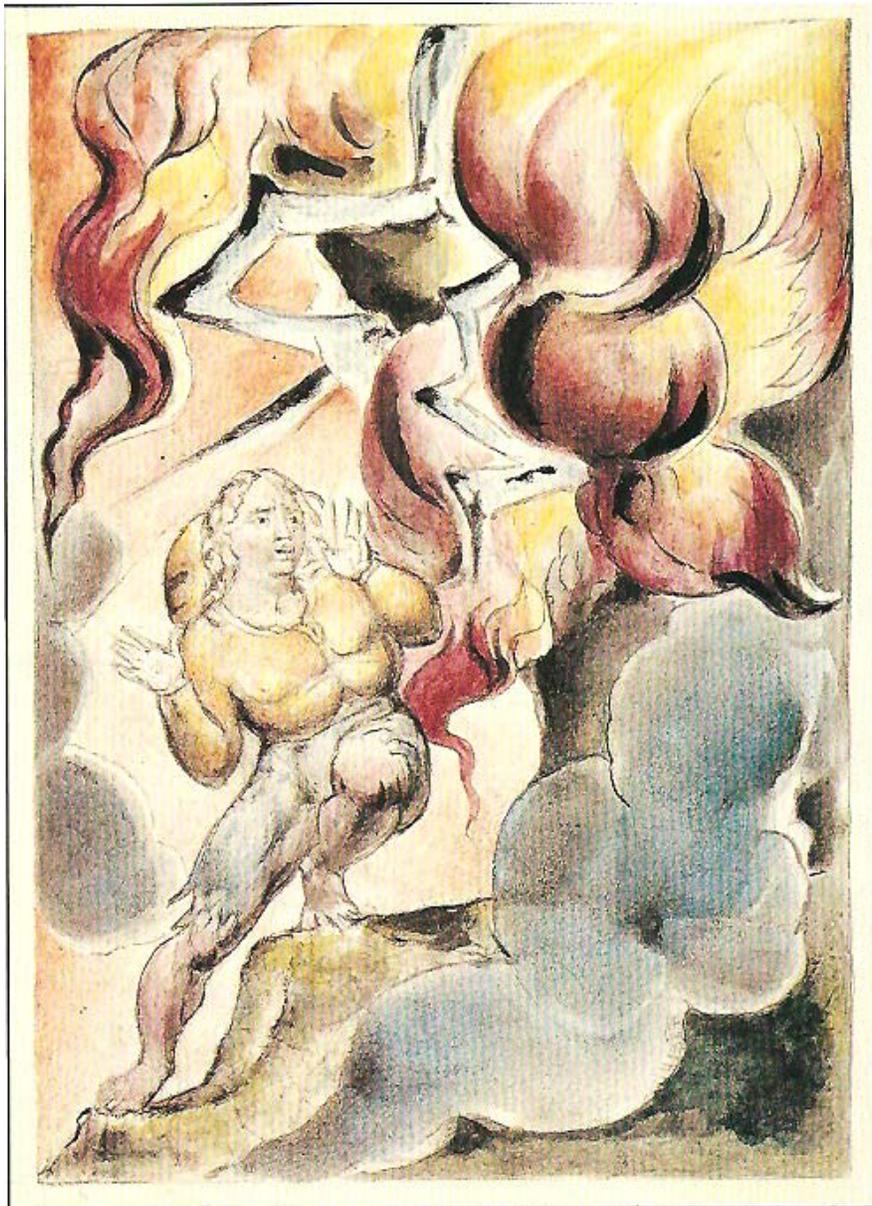


Fig. 3-44 *Christian in the Arbor*

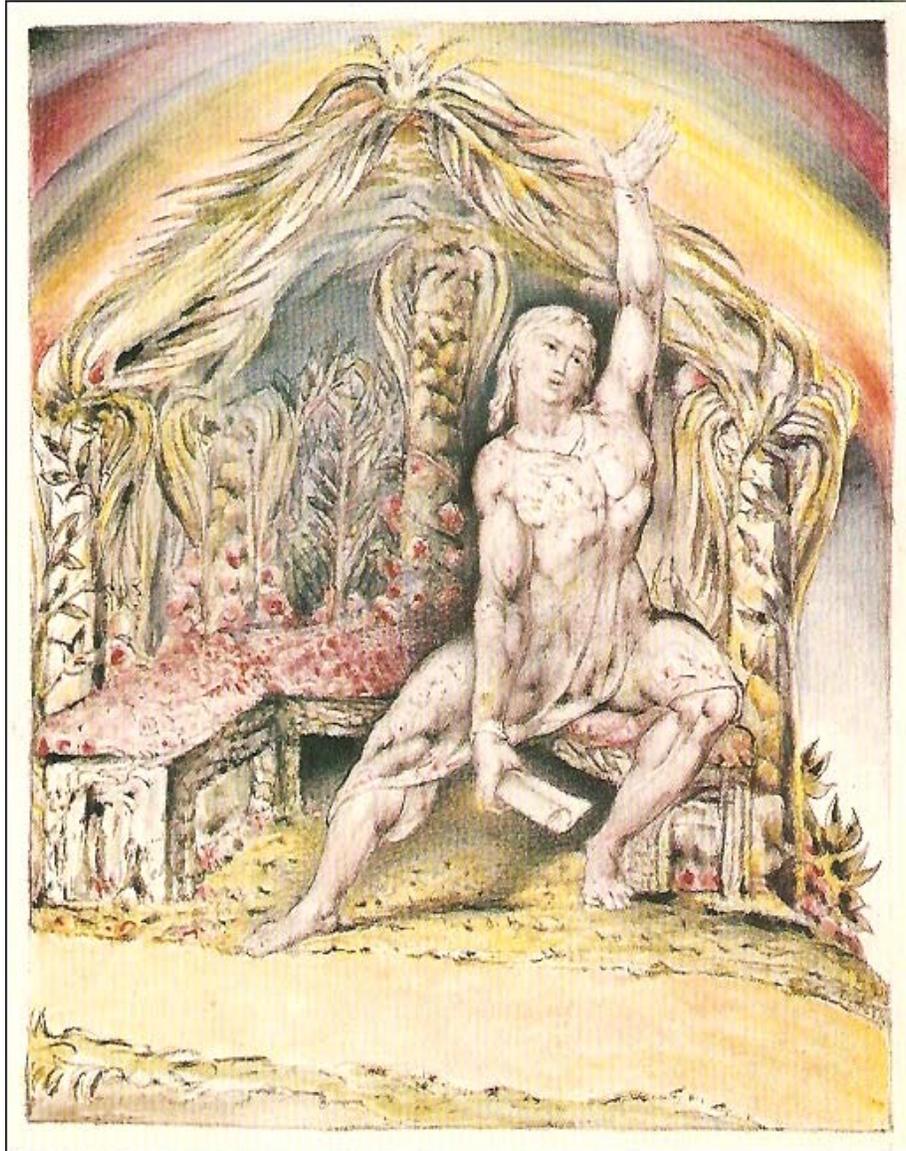


Fig. 3-45 *The Prophet Isaiah Foretelling the Destruction of Jerusalem*



Fig. 3-46 *Europe: A Prophecy*

Frontispiece



Fig. 3-47 *America: A Prophecy*

Plate 7



Fig. 3-48 *America: A Prophecy*

Plate 7 (details)

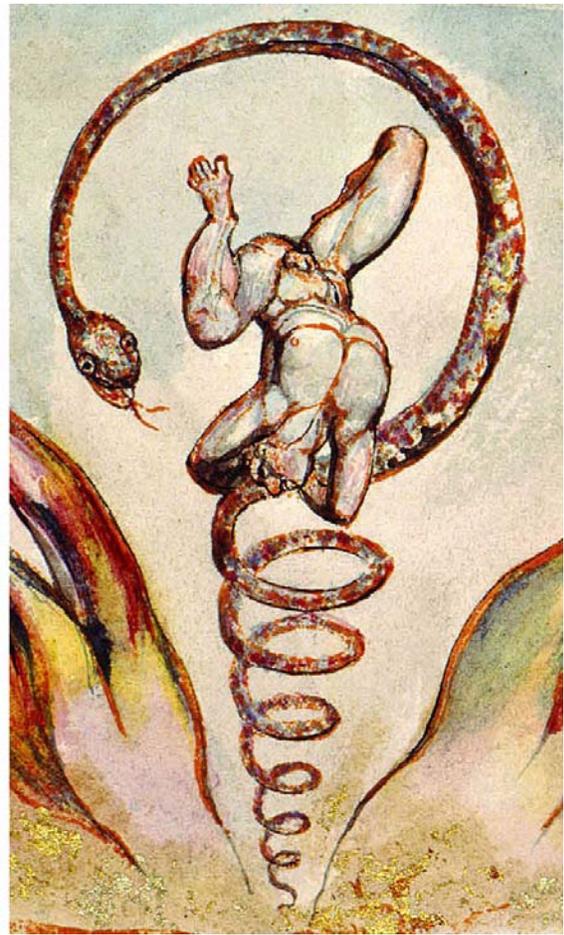
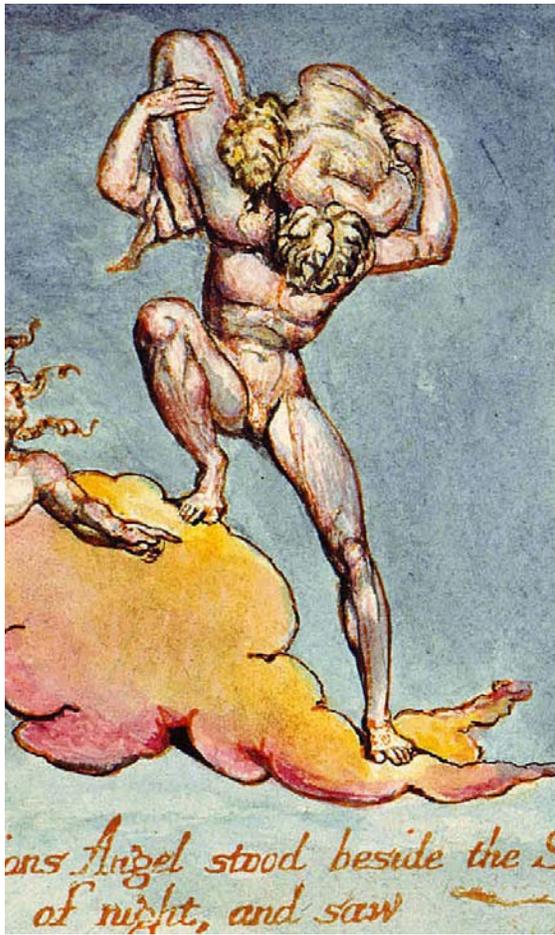


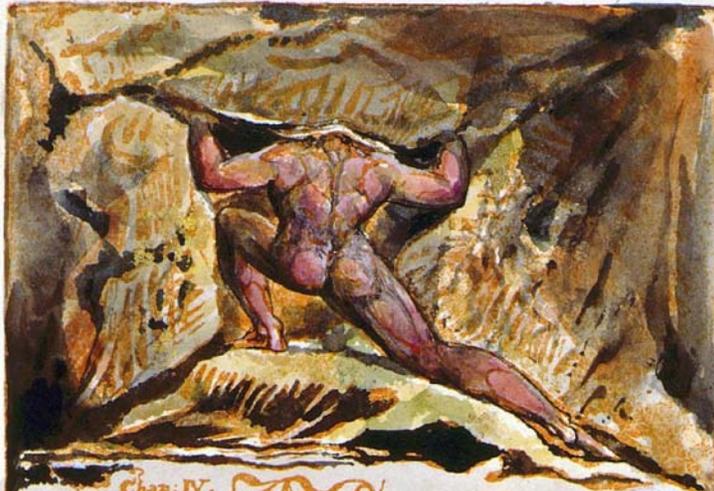
Fig. 3-49 *America: A Prophecy*

Plate 12



Fig. 3-50 *The Book of Urizen*

Plate 12



Chap: IV.

1. Ages on ages roll'd over him: Settled, a lake, bright, & shining clear:
 In stony sleep ages roll'd over him: White as the snow on the mountains cold.
 Like a deck waste stretching changable
 By earthquakes ruin, belching sullen
 2. In ages roll'd ages in ghastly
 Sick torment; around him in whirlwinds
 Of darkness the eternal Prophet howl'd
 Beating still on his rivets of iron
 Pouring sodor of iron; dividing
 The horrible night into watches.
 3. And Urixen (so his eternal name)
 His prolific delight obscur'd more & more
 In dark secrecy hiding in surging
 Sulphureous fluid his phantasies
 The Eternal Prophet heard the dark
 bellows.
 And turn'd restle's the tongs; and the
 hammer
 Incal'sant beat; forging chains new & new
 Mumb'ring with links, hours days & years
 3. The eternal mind bound'd began to roll
 Eddies of wrath coastle's round & round
 And the sulphureous foam surging thick
 4. Forgetfulness, darkness, swiftness
 In chains of the mind locked up.
 Like fetters of ice shrinking together
 Disorganiz'd, rent from Eternity.
 Los beat on his fetters of iron;
 And heated his furnaces & pour'd
 Iron sodor and sodor of brals
 5. Restle's turn'd the immortal in chains
 Heaving dolorous, anguish'd, unbearable
 Till a roof shaggy wild inclos'd
 In an orb, his fountain of thought.
 6. In a horrible dreadful slumber;
 Like the linked infernal chain:
 A mist, spine writh'd in torment
 Upon the winds; shooting pain'd
 Ribs, like a bending cavern
 And bones of solidness, froze
 Over all his nerves of joy.
 And a first Age pass'd o'er,
 And a state of dismal woe.

Fig. 3-51 *The Book of Urizen*

Plate 18



Fig. 3-52 *The Book of Urizen*

Plate 7



Fig. 3-53 *Europe: A Prophecy*

Plate 5

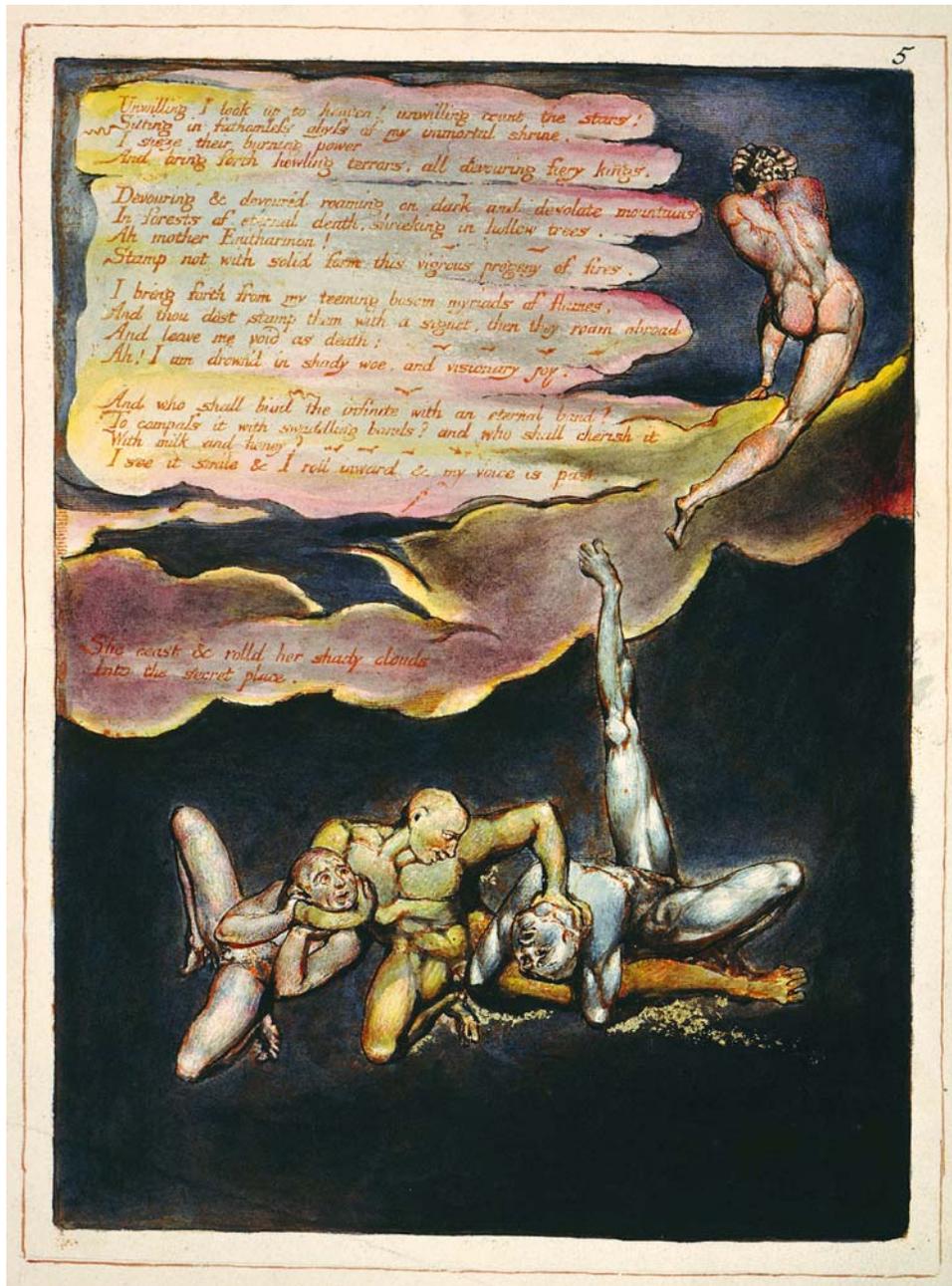


Fig. 3-54 *Europe: A Prophecy*

Plate 18



Fig. 4-1 *The Four Zoas*

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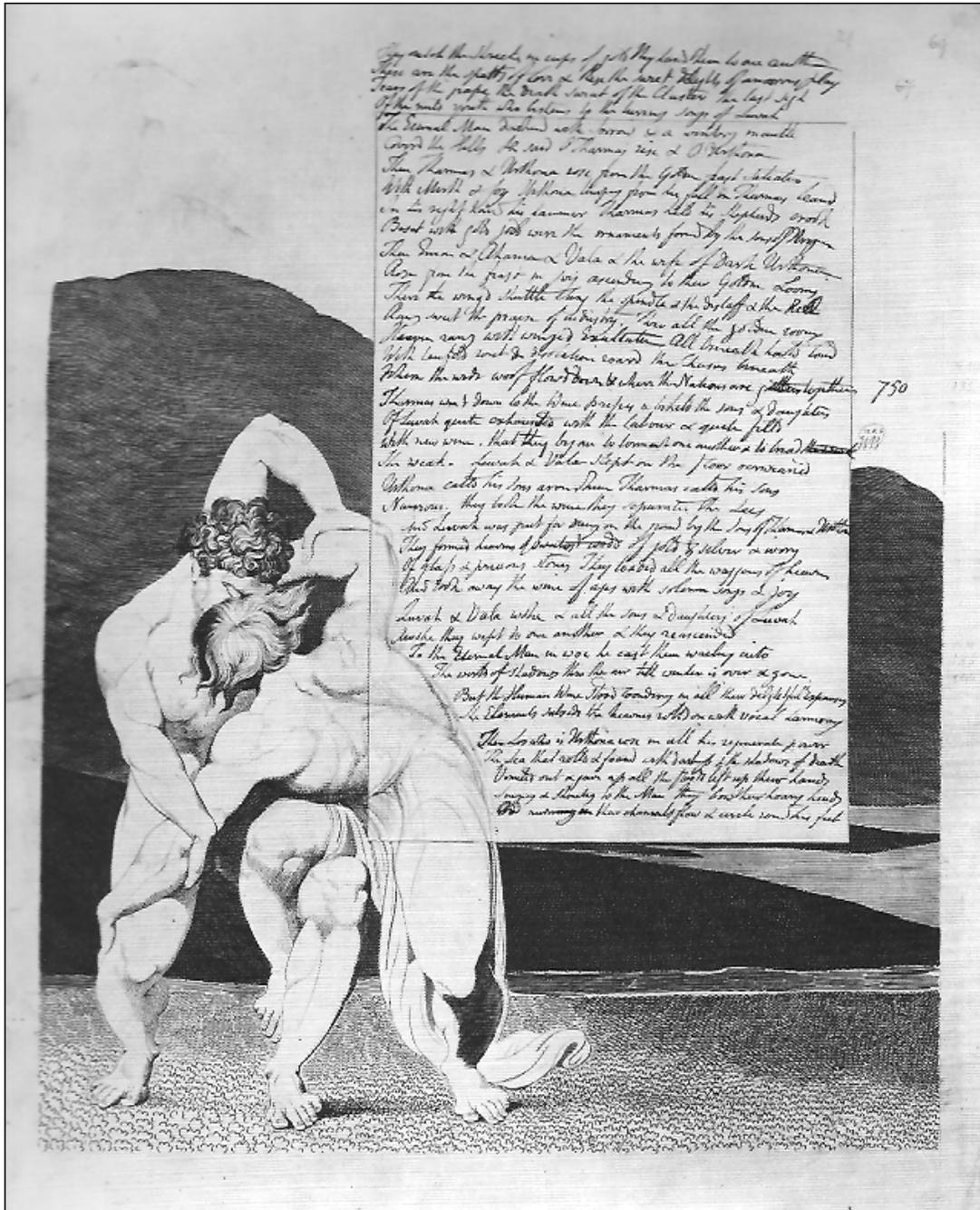


Fig. 4-2 *The Four Zoas*

Page 62

His loins invore with silver fire, or like a furnace fire
 As the Iron Bull on summer days when bees may send the heat
 Where the torrid loam after the dews of after the water spring
 The numerous flocks cover the mountain & thin along the valley
 The knees are rocks of adamant & nitre & emeralds
 Sprinkled with strength & splendour, & repose in golden armour
 Armed with fear & shield they drink & rejoice over the plain
 Such is the scene such his terror on the rocks deep

But when returned to Jotunvaga & Jotunvaga
 With all the sorrow & grief, they wept toward one another
 And each repented that he had chain'd Ore upon the mountain
 And Jotunvaga's tears provok'd parental Ore returned
 He loosed his head of that infernal chain, they rose
 At midnight hastening to their much belov'd cave
 Nine days they travell'd thro' the gloom of Jotunvaga
 Ore taking Jotunvaga by the hand led her along
 The normal scales & up to the iron mountain, up where Ore
 Flourish'd in the furious wind he thought to give to Jotunvaga
 Her son a length of joy & to compensate for her years
 Worn of his own death & to much pity him pained

But when they came to the dark rock & to the spectral cave
 To the young wench and strucken root into the rock of strong
 Fibres had from the chain of jealousy misused themselves
 In a swift vegetation round the rock & round the cave
 And over the immortal limbs of the loveliest young boy
 To whom they bore now to be chain'd. In vain with bitter tears
 To melt the chain of jealousy, with Jotunvaga's death
 Nor the consumption of his roots ever melt the chain
 Nor wrest the infernal fibres from their rocky bed
 Nor all Jotunvaga's strength nor all the power of Surtur's Bull
 Tho' they each morning drag the sun out of the deep
 Could uproot the infernal chain, for it had taken root



Fig. 4-3 *The Four Zoas*

Page 63

Into the iron sock or prison chain beneath the earth
 Even to the center twirling round the center of the globe
 Of Ore entering with fibres, became one with him a living chain
 Sustained by the Demons life, Dejection or Terror or Hope or Rage
 Support the Parents in cold clouds as they bend hither & over
 The leonid boy till joining by his side the Parents fell
 Not long they lay Urthonas gave forth words of the past
 Rubbing their temples he roused them all their lamentation
 I write not dear but all their after life was lamentation
 When satisfied with grief they returned back to holy ground
 In the morning on the road of Drunken felt the narrow gate
 Of few bright stars swept open & again close with a deadly pain
 Within her heart Valambrian to reanimate in burning rays
 And when the gate was open he beheld that dreary Deep
 When bright Urania wept. He also saw the infernal ways
 Of the chain of Jealousy & felt the rendings of pain & death
 One
 Reading the lessons like a mighty wind pent on the earth
 Who went apart as furthest north is from the furthest south
 No joy he had where he lay to hear the hoarsest voice
 The rocks black the eternal bars lagged to a few were left
 Outbreathed upon the stars of ice the ruins of his throne
 No joy he had where he lay to hear the hoarsest voice
 The loss of Nozger that up in the deep stars of Urthonas
 His hand shall slay the key submit to his dark mansion
 The hour is this: Once on the heights I breathe my throne sublimed
 The mountains of Nozger one of silver above the land of iron dwell
 And on their tops the Virgins sang are rocks of Babylon
 My fragments, once the hand of Urania now breed the scaly tortoise
 The houses of my harpers are become a haunter of graves
 The gardens of wisdom are become a field of hoard grass
 And on the trees I drop my leaves & water them in vain



Fig. 4-4 *The Four Zoas*

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Fig. 4-5 *The Four Zoas*

Page 44

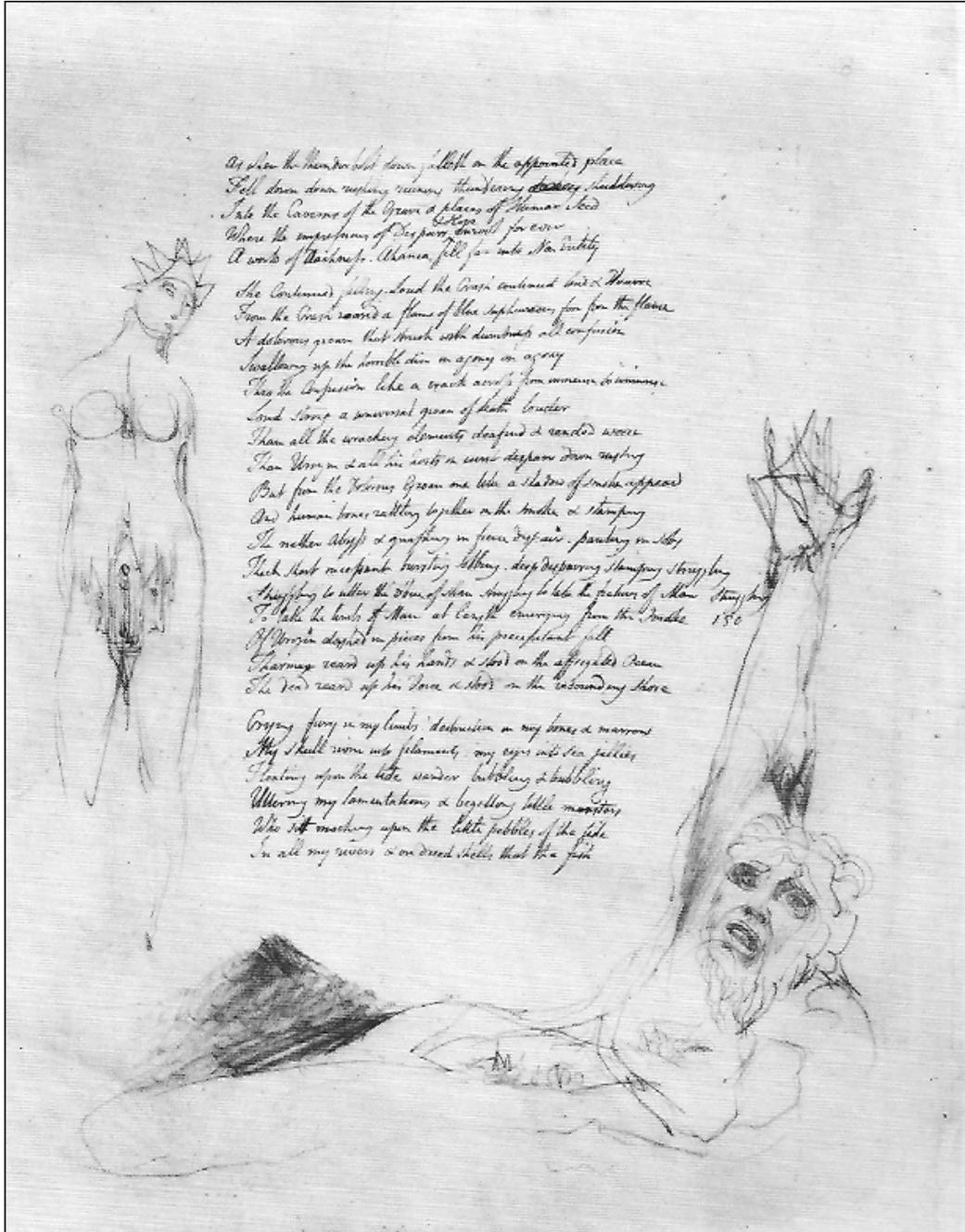


Fig. 4-6 *The Four Zoas*

Page 45

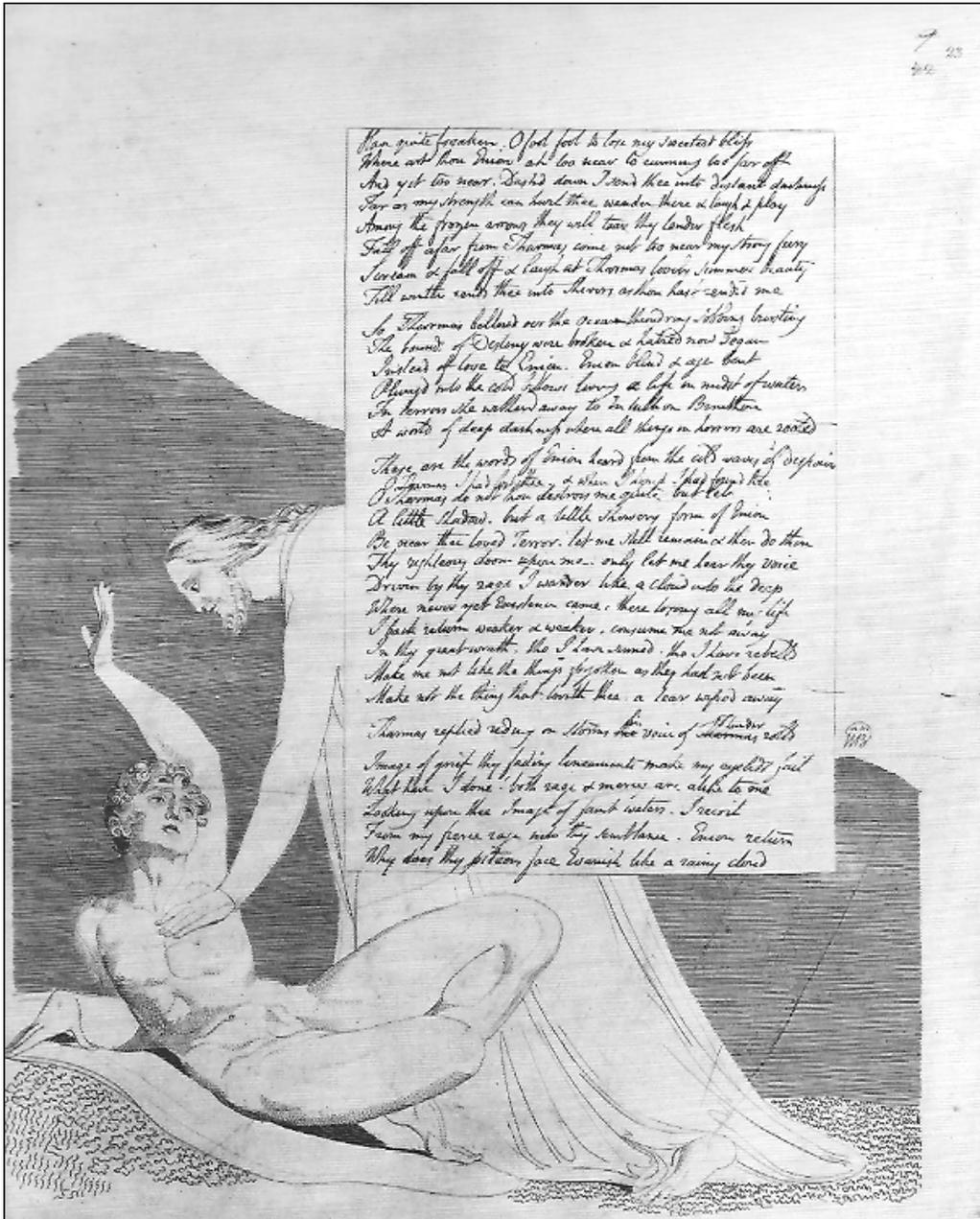


Fig. 4-7 *The Four Zoas*

Page 46

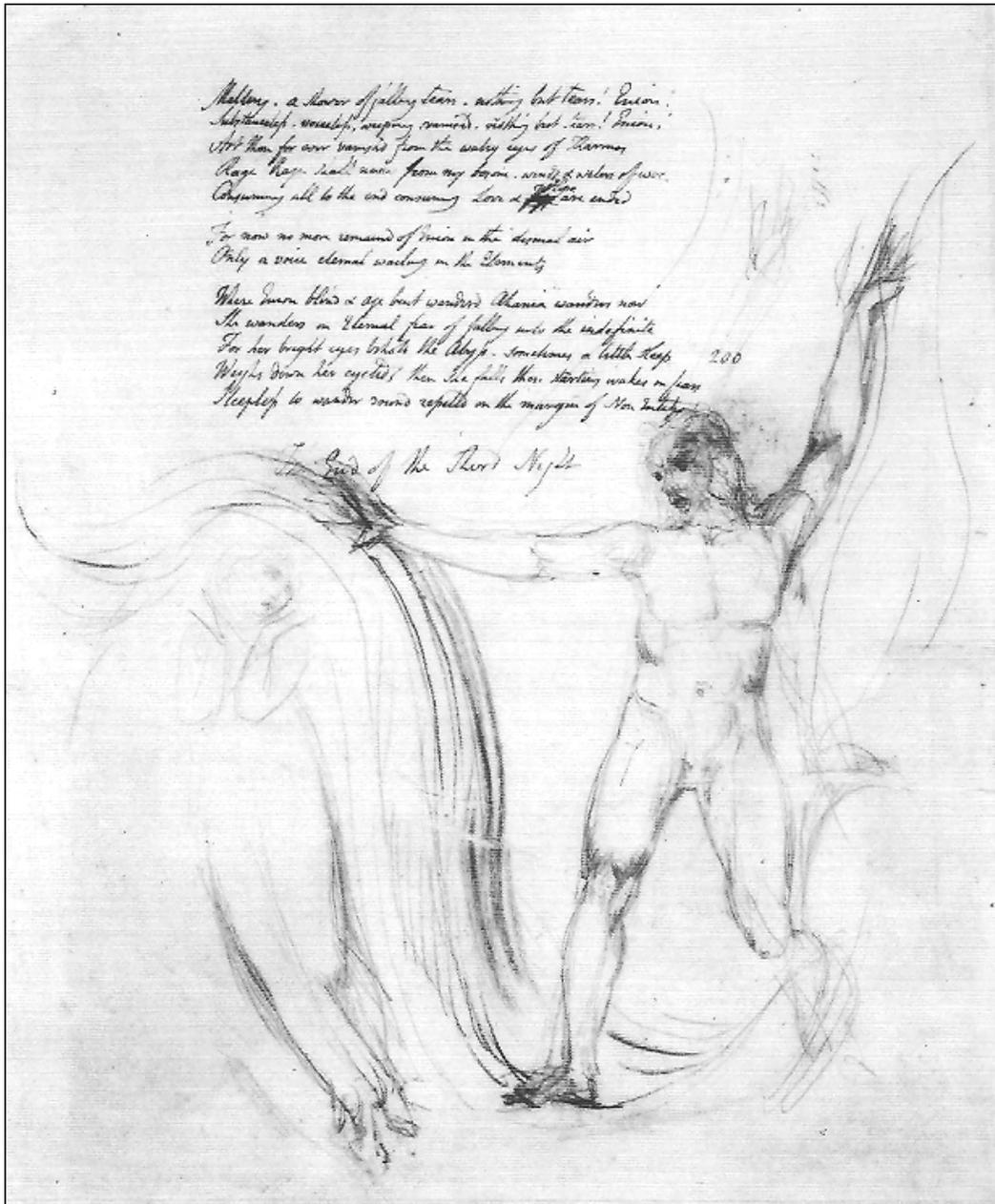


Fig. 4-8 *The Four Zoas*

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Fig. 4-9 *The Four Zoas*

Page 47 (detail)

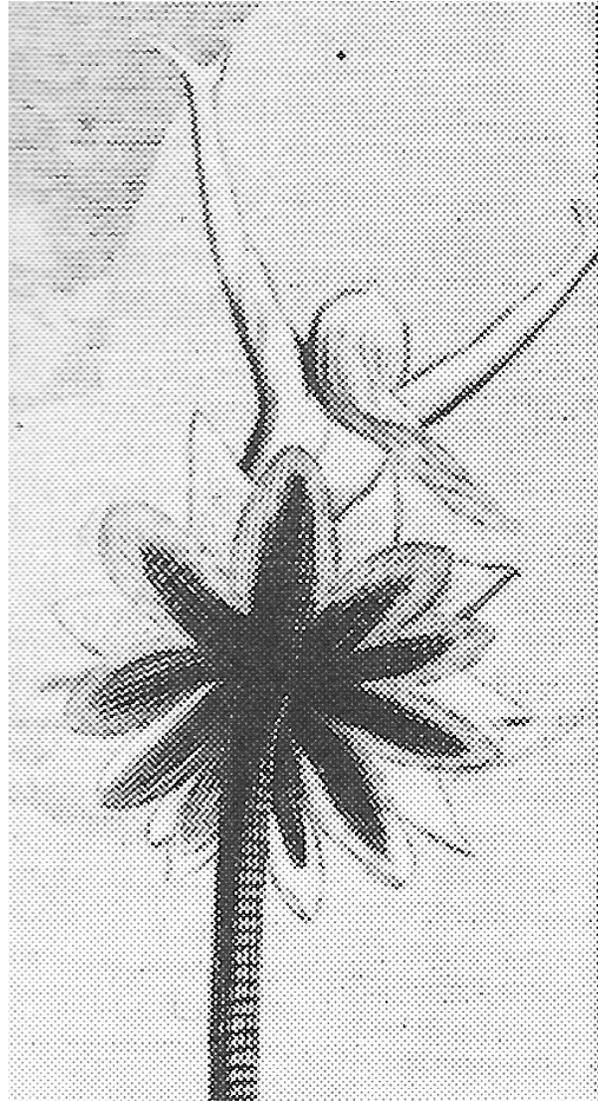


Fig. 4-10 *The Four Zoas*

Page 49

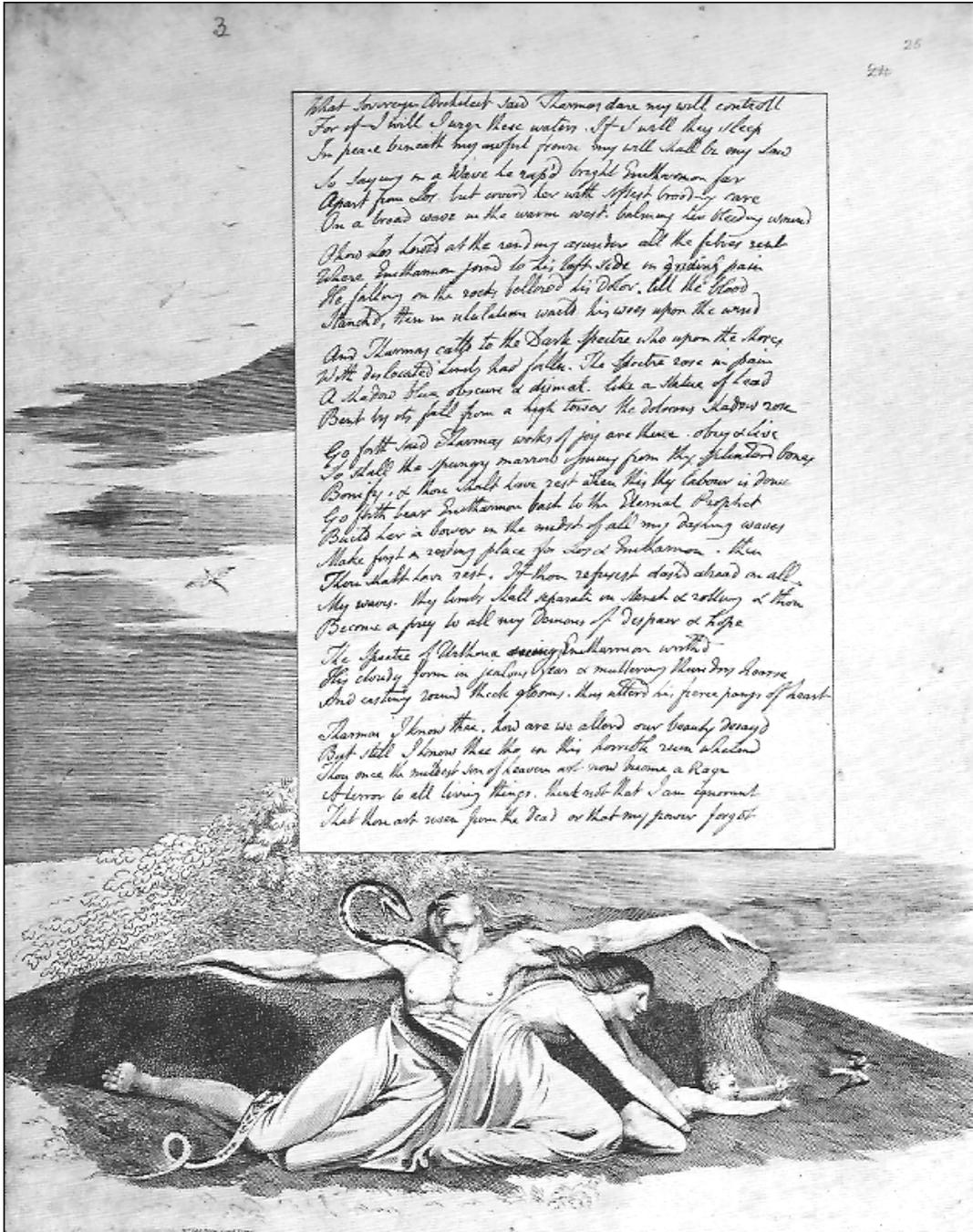


Fig. 4-11 *The Four Zoas*

Page 109

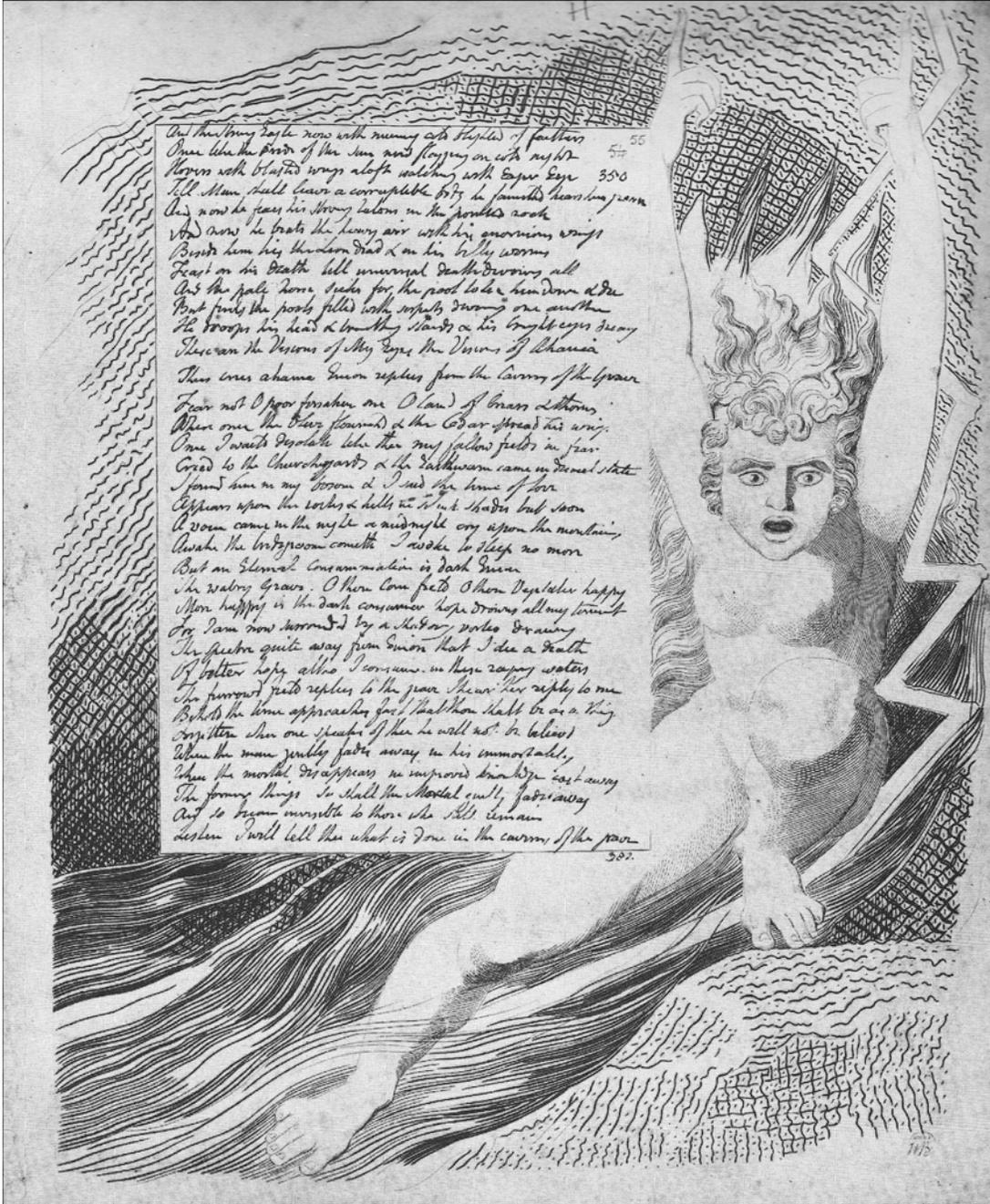
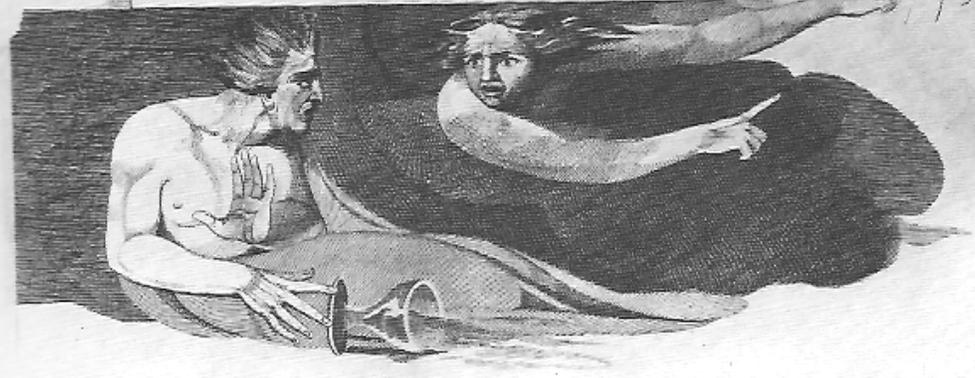


Fig. 4-12 *The Four Zoas*

Page 51

But my heart burn in despair as I never more
 shall see her smile than I shall, yet protect her son
 Of men & her spirit, to bind the golden ring young
 That he should rise again from death in all his former power
 And him, take Methusalem for thy sweet reward which I
 In vain am driven in false hope, hope sister of Despair
 screaming the terror rose & draw his white rocks before
 Upon the high hill underneath the feet of sin a world
 Deep dreadful rose & Methusalem lay at his feet
 The glorious Adam's joy, great hope appear'd around his head
 Thomas before his head & has the voice of Thomas said
 Now all comes into the power of Thomas, Thomas is fallen
 And several hidden in the elemental form of life & death
 Methusalem is thy son Peter, thou art Methusalem, or Thomas
 By God. The Thomas Man is dead again to be delivered
 Shall my floods over his body, my waters & waves pass over him
 The sea encompasses him, a number of the deep are his companions
 Dreamer of furrows, oceans, with depths of weep & woe
 Thy Thomas you shall never renew my conviction, proud against the
 Yet the Pope God over all, a portion of my life
 That in eternal rest, in comfort wait'd with this flood
 At noon & laid her head upon my wearied bosom at night
 He is divided, He is divided, even like Sarah & Hagar
 Why did your ambition beg, that Virgin Power of night
 And the Voluntary power of man kill Thomas, was divided
 And I shall come down here, but an eternal death
 Before my eyes & an eternal weep, woe to strive
 Against the transitions form, that drew among my blood weep
 By this to be I God give rather words, I'm a man
 To know sweet peace, & to do with simple companions
 Lying beneath a lent & weary sleep, soft & soft pictures
 Take than the hammer of Methusalem, rebuke these pictures
 Do not then refuse mind, I the words that speak for thy heart

MENE
 TEK
 111



Small text at the bottom left of the page, likely a reference to the engraving.

Fig. 4-13 *The Four Zoas*

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Fig. 4-14 *The Four Zoas*

Page 86

By me or their unshakable response I be no more
 For then not but a form or vision of self or of myself
 But nothing being created so truly by Mary or her divine
 By power, unbound, fierce, lovely, by word, as thus my eyes
 With visible creation, I feel I am not one of them
 Who else conceived can still possess the person uncreated
 By heavenly power, even I already feel a world within
 Opening its gates to me at all the real substance.



Of which there in the outward World are shadows such as they
 Come then into my Person of a by shadowy form, one with the
 My body, substance, I will quell my fire & trust
 Place to the soul of dark, strange or repentance to smelt
 To the body of embracing substance of the spirit
 Clouds would have gathered in history or love matter

Fig. 4-15 *The Four Zoas*

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Fig. 4-16 *The Four Zoas*

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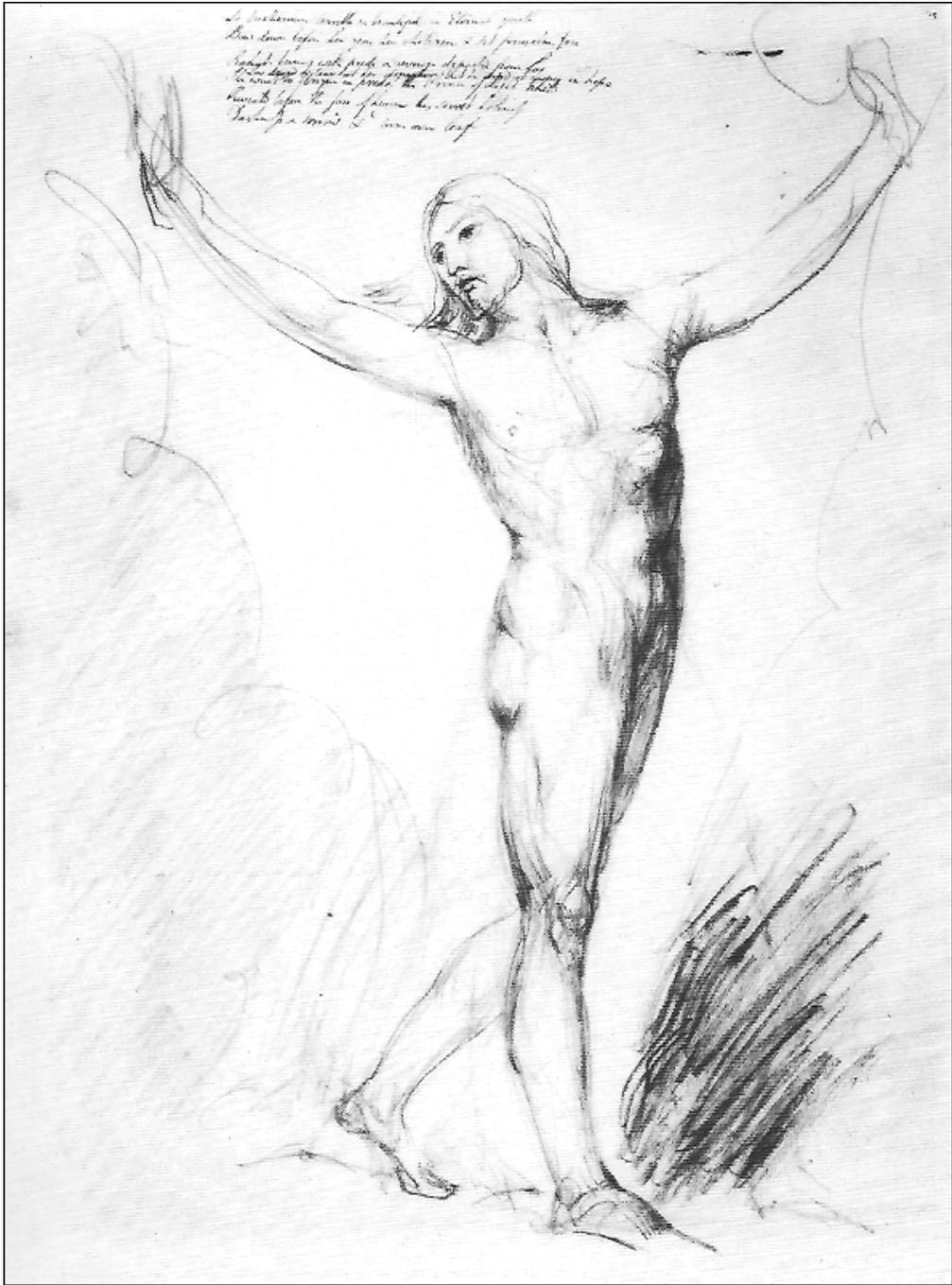


Fig. 4-17 *The Four Zoas*

Page 2



Fig. 4-18 *The Four Zoas*

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Fig. 4-19 *The Four Zoas*

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In the arms of the young boy & the peerless
 Play in his sunny hours, giving the seeds of life to grow
 In the joy, sweet love, faith in heart, stand springs of life
 With him in arms of his strength no longer now
 Swayed from his knees as long as the speaker do
 There is the spirit of Peppercorn, the delicate phantom
 Departs & Mr. Thomas rises from the second world
 In all his ancient strength to join the golden armor of heaven
 The intellectual war, the war of words, departed now
 In dark, religious on departs & had a name reigns .821

40 leaves

Mr. The Dream



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