VISIONARY HISTORY PAINTING:
BLAKE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

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BLAKE'S REVOLUTION

While David and Goya were alternately advancing and reprehending the ideologies of Enlightenment, Revolution, and Empire during the course of their artistic careers, the English poet, printmaker, and painter William Blake (1757–1827) was producing a highly imaginative and hermetic art that was no less responsive to the impact of these same historical forces and events in Britain. Unlike his French and Spanish counterparts, however, Blake dwelt for the most part on the margins of artistic activity in his country, effectively cut off from the preeminent fine arts institutions and the most respected avenues of patronage in late Georgian London. If David and Goya took on celebrated and visible roles—sometimes dangerously so—as their nations' premier artists during times of pronounced political and social upheaval, Blake's situation was quite different, as best summed up by his own admission, "I am hid." Blake's proclaimed devotion to creative and spiritual self-definition through mystical revelation, in opposition to any and all authoritarian standards (artistic, religious, or social), makes him exemplary of an alienated, countercultural Romanticism, a notion that certainly seems overburdened with later twentieth-century values and misconceptions but that is nevertheless borne out by the specific conditions of Blake's life and art. Undoubtedly, "Blake" has become a kind of cultural palimpsest for the social and psychological utopias of our own century: how else could he be claimed by some as a visionary, and conveniently heterogeneous, precursor to Karl Marx and Carl Jung? For our purposes, Blake's contribution to the visual arts around 1800 proves most vital to understanding the fate of history painting and the question of national cultural identity in English Romantic art.

To appreciate Blake's predicament as an artist "hidden" from, and yet directly engaged with, the esthetics and politics of his day, our attention will be focused on his self-sponsored, one-man exhibition of 1809, an occasion that marked Blake's most decisive effort to solicit the attention of a public audience. Exhibiting sixteen of his "Poetical and Historical Inventions" at his brother's London residence (also the site of the family hosiery shop, an unusual art venue), Blake promoted his self-appointed calling as the artistic reformer of Britain in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars. In some verses written around the time of the exhibition, he imagined an angelic annunciation instructing him, "Descend thou upon Earth/ Renew the Arts on Britain's Shore./ And France shall fall down & adore,/ With Works of Art their Armies meet,/ And War shall sink beneath thy feet." Blake's pacifist hope for the political efficacy of his art was, paradoxically, cast as a nationalist appeal for patronage and recognition, something made clear in the published "Advertisement" and Descriptive Catalogue for his exhibition. Resentful that his art had been dismissed, if acknowledged at all, as little more than "a Madman's Scrawls" (his words), Blake looked forward to the eventual redemption of his artistic stature: an esoteric engraver who had struggled within an artisan subculture of radicals and mystics was ready to assume his position as an empowered history painter assuaging and redirecting the misguided energies of war-torn empires.

Blake's career began in the 1770's as an engraver of antiquarian and reproductive fine art prints, his lifelong work in commercial engraving serving as an intermittent source of income that did little to save him and his wife, Catherine Boucher, from abject poverty (friends and infrequent patrons would express their surprise at the physical squalor and economic deprivation of the Blakes' living conditions). Blake received brief instruction in life drawing at the recently established Royal Academy of Arts (chartered by King
George III in 1768) and submitted watercolors of historical and biblical subjects to the annual Academy exhibitions. Throughout his career, however, he would remain an adversarial outcast of the Academy, condemning its restrictive, and yet at times overly eclectic, pedagogy and exhibition policy, and especially its hypocritical failure to encourage a genuinely progressive English school of historical art. Blake's faith in the supremacy of history painting and, more generally, in idealist aesthetics was nonetheless dependent on the propounded artistic principles of the Academy. Typically for Blake, indicting or negating a system of thought or an institution of power also entailed incorporating and redefining its values within the imaginative program of his own art and beliefs, whether it be the rational empiricism of Enlightenment philosophy, the self-contradicting authority of constitutional monarchy, or the emergence of industrial capitalism, all of which were to be the subject of scathing commentary in his pictures and writings.

It was during the early 1790's that Blake developed a unique approach to producing his illuminated books of poetry. Experimenting with the technique of relief etching, he printed the handwritten scripts of his poetic sagas graphically embellished with decorative, emblematic, and narrative motifs. The visual imagery, far from simply illustrating or supplementing the poetry, could simultaneously amplify and contradict the content of the verse, the dynamic between word and image often undermining epistemological assumptions about the very processes of reading, seeing, and interpreting. Figurative elements sometimes occupied separate plates or were integrated into the design of the text. The books of poetry were printed in small numbers and hand-colored, often with Catherine Boucher responsible for the tinting. A medieval craft esthetic was thereby conflated with reproductive printing techniques, Blake seeking to reconcile the autographic singularity of his illuminations with their intended multiplication.

Blake's poetic books from this period can best be characterized as spiritual allegories of revolutionary politics. Creating their own mythic personifications of human desires, habits of mind, and world views, designated by primitivizing, onomato poetic names such as Orc, Los, and Urizen, Blake's writings often seem like a strangely invented form of biblical science fiction, though the abiding influence of Miltonic and Ossianic verse is ever at hand. The demiurgic struggles recounted in his poetry appear to transpire in either a cosmic or cellular void, or, geographically speaking, in an English nation poised ominously on the brink of eschatological destruction. In lamenting and exhorting over the cycles of oppression and liberation and of persecution and resistance under which his mythic characters labor, Blake's "Giant forms," as he would call them, perform epic psychodramas of contemporary history, centering on England's failure to embrace the revolutionary fervor of America and France. Blake was in frequent contact with the radical, intellectual circle of the publisher Joseph Johnson, which included the political and feminist republicans Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. These associations, along with his social and professional roots in the urban artisan milieu that was the wellspring of English Jacobinism during the 1790's, affirm Blake's radical political credentials. His poetic books America (1793) and Europe (1794), both subtitled "A Prophecy," chart the travails of political liberty against the despotic, royalist authority of church and state, the contest clothed in seemingly obscure imagery of god-like powers battling over the soul of Albion (Blake's figure for the humanity of England). Blake's writings during the 1790's register with some urgency the emergence and repression of social and political protest among the English Jacobin movements that had found inspiration, and later disillusionment, in the French Revolution and the establishment of the Republic. With England's declaration of war against France in 1793, and with Prime Minister William Pitt's repressive policies against any organized expressions of social dissent, the country became increasingly embroiled in a climate of political paranoia, spurred on by invasion scares, grain shortages, and government censorship. As the decade closed, the rise of Napoleon ensured that the nationalism and militarism required for the defense of England would continue to preempt or suppress any calls for revolutionary reform. Much of Blake's art and poetry addresses the English Revolution that would never come to pass.

BODY POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS MYSTICISM

Blake's hopeful testimony to this nascent English revolutionary impulse is seen in one of his most renowned images, the color print known as Albion Rose (ca. 1794–5). The first sketches for the human figure date back to around 1780, and it is thought that the concept of the picture commemorates Blake's experience of the Gordon Riots of that year—anti-Catholic and anticolonial war protests in London that ignited widespread mob violence; Blake was among the crowd that stormed and burned Newgate Prison, an episode made famous in Dickens's historical novel Barnaby Rudge (1841). The youthful male nude of Albion seen alighting on a sloping summit gives us the essentials of Blake's visual language: the human figure employed as a corporeal sign of spiritual, intellectual, and political positions. The balletic, self-exalting presentation of the body in Albion Rose—derived, while also diverging, from Renaissance proportion diagrams of the Vitruvian Man, as well as from Neoclassical engravings of
sculptural antiquities excavated at Herculaneum—is complemented by the glorious burst of colored light that surrounds the figure. Arms extended and hair aflame, the body of Albion is posed in triumphant frontality. Blake attenuates and simplifies the anatomical structure of the human form, its modeling kept to a minimum with the contour lines strongly demarcating the figure within its prismatic aureole. This linear definition of the refugent body is counterpointed to the mottled darkness of the hillside and the eclipsed black of night seen in the lower portion of the print. Although Blake espoused an unswerving Neoclassical purity of line in artistic execution, the coloristic explosions in his work—often signifying a perceptual and sensual materialism against which Blake declaimed—are vital to his pictorial designs and their dialectical play of esthetic (and implicitly ethical and metaphysical) contraries.

The figure of Albion is not simply a Neoclassical exercise in antique heroic nudity. Albion is nothing less than the body of England, obviously divested of the outward signs of social class and historical identity: refined yet elemental, chaste yet sexualized, and ennobling yet leveling, in a state of what Blake would call “Naked Beauty Displayed.” Like most of Blake’s nudes, Albion seems a knowing contradiction, a disembodied embodiment. He is of the flesh and plainly physical, but he also functions as an ethereal blueprint for some regenerated model of a utopian humanity, Christ-like and Apollonian all at once. In America (1793), Blake envisioned the infectious, liberating impact of the American Revolution on the British people, “Leprosy London’s Spirit” cured and reawakened as “a naked multitude.” Elsewhere in the poem, he writes of a dawning freedom: “The morning comes, the night decays... Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field, / Let him look up into the heavens and laugh in the bright air.” This transition from oppressive darkness to revealed radiance, from imprisoned labor to pantheistic release, in turn recalls Paine’s solar metaphor for political freedom in his The Rights of Man (1791): “But such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks, and all it wants is the liberty of appearing. The sun needs no inscription to distinguish him from darkness.” The self-illuminating figure of Albion, likewise, announces this resplendent visibility of liberty. Using the most canonical feature of Classical humanist art—the idealized nude—Blake fashioned a revolutionary icon, a pictorial entreaty for social and spiritual transformation; as he would implore his readers in the preface to his later poem Milton (1804–08), “Rouze up, O Young Men of the New Age!”

Much more common, however, in Blake’s art of the 1790’s was the imagery of subjugation and enslavement. In the solemn and tormented frontispiece to his poem Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), Blake delineates the constricted body language of mental and physical bondage. The female protagonist of the poem, Oothoon, is seen manacled to her slave-master/rapist, while her jealous and inhibited lover cowers and withdraws into himself on the cavernous ledge above the enchained figures. The poem, broadly speaking, intertwines abolitionist and quasi-feminist arguments against sexual and economic exploitation, denouncing the trade in flesh that commodifies both “the swarthy children of the sun” and “the virgin joys of life.” The social and moral perversion of freedom is translated, visually, by Blake into the physical constraints of his bound figures—these miniaturized variations on Michelangelesque nudes that typified his figurative style. The agonized subjection of the figures is conveyed not only through their poses and gestures—opposing, for example, the taut frenzy of the male with the bowed resignation of the female—but also through their formal definition, with the lineaments of their anatomies harshly and schematically rendered, their massive bodies contained and reduced to compact diagrams of human despair. In keeping with Blake’s aversion to the conventions of pictorial illusionism, the bleak landscape setting in this design is expressively metaphorical, rather than objectively descriptive. The grotto entrance
frames a disconsolate vista of sea, clouds, and darkened sun, the realm of nature treated as flat patterns of unnaturalistic color shades, resisting any logical sense of graduated spatial recession. This mental landscape inverts into a skull-like, anthropomorphic profile that only reinforces the malevolent plight of the incapacitated titans. Concurrent with these mythic abstractions of oppression were Blake’s more documentary, engraved illustrations of the inhumane actuality of contemporary slavery that he prepared for Captain John Stedman’s book entitled Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America (1796). Based on Stedman’s eyewitness drawings that recorded the varieties of torture and punishment meted out to rebellious slaves by their colonial masters, Blake’s engravings, like the one depicting a black man bound and hung by his torso to a gallows, are unflinching in their portrayal of the repressive violence connected with the traffic in slavery. The slaves are often shown, as in this plate, with expressions of stoic restraint, their quiet fortitude meant to elicit civilized compassion for their unendurable physical suffering, while also making them seem all the more impervious—almost inhumanly so—to the brutal circumstances of their punishment. Suspended hopelessly between the grim skeletal remains of past victims and the distant slave ship visible in the harbor, the tortured slave is made to objectify the perpetuation of death that was necessarily synonymous with the perpetuation of slavery itself.

Blake’s preoccupation with the conflicting powers of revolution and oppression was inseparable from his Christian religious mysticism. He embraced, assimilated, and critiqued eighteenth-century mystical systems with habitual regularity, ranging from the apocalyptic hermeneutics of the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg to the Neoplatonic scholarship of the English mystic Thomas Taylor. Using self-induced trances as a source of artistic inspiration, experimenting occasionally with an antinomian lifestyle as a way of recapturing prelapsarian bliss (William and Catherine had been espied nude, emulating Adam and Eve, in their cottage garden), and frequently entertaining visitations from the spirit world (often from his deceased brother and fellow artist Robert or from more celebrated guests like Dante and Milton), Blake had constant recourse to the otherworldly in his struggles against the prevailing structures of society and art. These nonconformist religious and mystical tendencies in his work and temperament make him all the more fascinating and compelling to some, and all the more irrelevant and trying to others.

With his art consistently cast in terms of “visions” and “prophecies,” Blake was participating in a widespread millenarian anxiety that swept through significant segments of English society during the closing decades of the eighteenth century. As the historian E. P. Thompson observed in analyzing the concomitant rise of religious enthusiasm and political radicalism that marked the English reaction to the French Revolution, “Chiliasm touched Blake with its breath; it walked abroad ... among the Jacobins and Dissenters of artisan London.” With the century perilously waning and with revolutionary events on the Continent inciting political and social discord within England, contemporary history appeared to promise the impending fulfillment of biblical, apocalyptic scenarios, especially in the collective imagination of the ever growing, religious nonconformist sects and their self-styled prophets. One such prophet, Richard Brothers, the “Prince of the Hebrews” who foretold the imminent collapse of all monarchies, along with the destruction of London, “the modern Babylon”, was even arrested for seditious treason in 1795 and confined to a lunatic asylum where he drew up published plans for London’s promised resurrection as the New Jerusalem, the influence of which may be detected on Blake’s own later poetic epic Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Great Albion (1804-20). The proliferation of these chilastic
97 WILLIAM BLAKE  The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan, in whose wreathings are infolded the Nations of the Earth 1809. 30 x 24 (76.2 x 62.5)
predictions of historical destruction and spiritual renewal during this period was deeply symptomatic of both social disenchantment and political disenfranchisement, to which the increasingly obscurantist and prophetic quality of Blake’s imagery bears striking witness. Those modern scholars most attuned to the social formation and historical specificity of Blake’s work, particularly Jacob Bronowski and David Erdman, have noted that by 1800 Blake’s imaginative religiosity brought with it a certain degree of political quietism that was in part necessitated by the conservative nationalism dominating social and political discourse in England.

BLAKE’S PUBLIC ART

As noted earlier, Blake’s 1809 exhibition was to have signalled his galvanizing re-emergence from the obscurity of his early career. Although Blake’s “Advertisement” and Descriptive Catalogue for the exhibition often evince a dutiful patriotism in his solicitous claims for public attention, Blake does not shy away from his more typically invective commentary on the suffering of art in “a corrupt state of Society.” He referred to the works he exhibited as “Experiment Pictures,” primarily because they were executed in tempera on canvas, a new medium for Blake that he also described as “fresco painting” and that he saw as a pointed challenge to what in his estimation was the commercial and esthetic vanity of oil painting (unfortunately, the surviving tempera pictures from the exhibition have themselves badly deteriorated). These experiment pictures were meant to serve as mere models for gargantuan frescos that Blake hoped would be commissioned by the government for the adornment of national monuments. Representative of these delusively ambitious frescos was the first picture listed in the catalog: The spiritual form of Nelson guiding Leviathan, in whose wrathings are infolded the Nations of the Earth. Admiral Lord Nelson, the British naval commander who died at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, was certainly a topical and popular hero in the public consciousness during the Napoleonic Wars, and contemporary artists were quick to capitalize on the nationalist cultural craze for commemorative military monuments, most of which were endlessly planned and debated by governmental committees and in the art press, but were rarely ever built. Even before the death of Nelson, John Flaxman had proposed plans for an allegorical naval monument with an imposing statue of Britannia to be set within a sepulchral precinct on Greenwich Hill, dedicated to public commemoration in honor of England’s naval triumphs against the French. The designs for this antique-inspired, megalomaniacal project—characteristic of Flaxman’s severe and reductive graphic style that would prove so influential among European artists—were engraved by Blake in 1799. Flaxman’s scheme reflected the Neoclassical obsession with designing vast, memorializing public spaces where spectacles of national power could be celebrated in a modernized Greco-Roman ambience. Blake’s own dream, ten years later, of having his modestly scaled pictures monumentalized and venerated as a public art of national import conformed to the prevalent cultural politics that called for the artistic aggrandizement of British contemporary history. Blake was hardly insensitive, however, to the compromising logic that would render the purposefulness of art entirely subservient to nationalist and imperialist causes; as he wrote in 1810, “Let us teach Buonaparte, & whomsoever it may concern, That it is not the Arts that follow and attend upon Empire, but Empire that attends upon & follows the Arts.” In another draft of this statement, Blake would substitute “Englishmen” for “Buonaparte.”

Blake’s divided attitude toward the strained allegiance between art and empire is apparent in his allegorical interpretation of Nelson. As befits his “spiritual form,” he is clothed only in a loincloth and a halo, the mortal hero now
deified within a mandala-like pattern of highly abstracted rays of light. The naval warrior's aloof and calm expression, and the almost automatistic ease with which he lassoes the interminable sea monster that encircles him, makes him seem divinely oblivious to the futile struggle of the women and men trapped within the serpentine coils (one figure with sword in hand, just beneath Nelson's left arm, is already caught in the dragon's maw). As a terrifying image of dominion and conquest, the picture is especially attentive to these dread casualties ("the Nations of the Earth") that have fallen under Nelson's imperial sway. At the base of the composition, the figure of an expired slave is prominently shown, liberated from the stranglehold of the sea serpent, but only to be left as a lifeless castaway on the narrow shore of freedom. The leviathan referred to in the picture's title alludes both to the biblical leviathan, a monstrous opponent to divine will, as well as to Thomas Hobbes's famous political trope for the corrupting power of the ship of state. As Nelson's beastly agent of war, the leviathan has, at very best, ambivalent connotations for the maritime supremacy of Britain. Blake's Nelson harks back to his revolutionary prototype, the nude Albion; but in this later picture, the physical freedom of the human form is not so certain, the body of Nelson appearing much less taut and energetic, having now become more encumbered and restricted by its supernatural task. One must wonder whether Nelson guides the leviathan, or whether the sea creature guides, and perhaps even enslaves, the transcendent hero.

The artistic traits of Blake's picture—its claustrophobic anti-illusionism, its denatured and contorted treatment of the human body, and its overall fascination with heroic supernaturalism and ritualized violence—connects his work with the more innovative currents in recent English historical and poetical paintings. Blake saw his art as belonging to an abortive tradition of progressive history painting that, in his opinion, had already fallen victim to the purely commercial vicissitudes afflicting art patronage in England.

BLAKE AND CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH ART OF THE SUBLIME

Foremost among Blake's contemporary artistic heroes was the Irish-born painter James Barry (1741–1806). Barry had received early encouragement and support from such prominent and influential men as the Conservative statesman and esthician Edmund Burke and the founding President and leading portraitist of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Although Barry rose quickly through the ranks of the Academy to become its Professor of Painting in 1782, he carried on a rancorous crusade against the Royal Academy's, and by extension English society's and the state's, failure to promote "public taste" for history painting; in his view, private interest and social and political factionalism had destroyed the civic ideal of a truly public art representative of egalitarian values (he had even turned down an invitation to become America's national history painter). His hectoring criticism of the Royal Academy led to his expulsion in 1799. Although he found other institutional sponsorship that allowed him to pursue his ambitious painting cycles of historical and allegorical subjects, Barry's career ended in poverty and disillusionment, making him the unquestioned martyr to the lost cause of history painting in England—so much so that Blake planned to write "Barry, an Epic Poem."

In his effort to promote a distinctly national school of history painting, Barry, along with other artists of the period, often turned to Shakespearean and Miltonic themes for inspiration. His King Lear Weeping Over the Body of Cordelia (1786–7) depicts a Shakespearean scene that was significantly censored and rewritten for late eighteenth-century stagings of the play: the grim pathos of Lear cradling the body of his only faithful daughter, with the corpses of the other conspiratorial daughters close at hand, was deemed too transgressive for Georgian theatre audiences. For Barry, the deranged fury of an aged king cursing over his internecine family implied political questions about the stability of monarchical power and its potentially irrational conflict of private and public passions. Lear and his male entourage of mourners dominate the foreground stage of Barry's picture, the monumental figures divulging a profound range of emotional reactions to the spectacle of their despairing king. Lear himself, with his windswept mane of white hair and prophet-like grandiloquence (critics of the day complained of his Semitic mien), would provide a figurative and psychological model for many of Blake's looming patriarchs and domineering gods, as well as for later artistic renditions of the Gaelic bard Ossian and his mythic heroes that were so popular among painters from David's atelier. The landscape background of Barry's composition, offering visual escape from the massive array of dramatis personae, is most notable for its inclusion of primitive Druid trilithon temples, evoking the ancient history and religious civilization of Britain. Barry's Lear was part of a commercial enterprise known as "the Shakespeare Gallery," a project underwritten by the London publisher and alderman John Boydell who had commissioned most of Britain's leading artists to paint Shakespearean episodes for public exhibition, the pictures later to be engraved in large stocks for public sale. Since history painting was not receiving direct encouragement through royal patronage, these speculative financial ventures submitted the future of British narrative art to the uncertain and variable forces of the marketplace.

Barry was also an accomplished printmaker whose
99 William Blake. Albion Rose. ca. 1794-5. 107 x 71 (27.1 x 20.1)
100 Henry Fuseli. Thor Battering the Midguard Serpent 1790. 51 1/4 x 36 1/4 (131 x 92)
illustrations of Miltonic subjects demonstrated, often better than in his paintings, a heroic figure style that had earned Blake's admiration. Barry's etching *Satan and His Legions Hurling Defiance Toward Heaven* (ca. 1792) was most emphatically a visual essay in the sublime. Edmund Burke had formulated the esthetics of the sublime in a treatise from his student days, *A Philosophical Inquiry into ... the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756). Here the sublime was defined as a pleasure of terror, esthetically mediated of course, in which the imagination revels in thoughts of fear, privation, and subjection, all the while identifying with obverse conditions—states of sensory and psychological overstimulation and illusions of omnipotent power. For Burke, Milton's *Paradise Lost* was the creative work that exemplified the sublime, particularly the passage in which the fallen Satan rises out of the fiery lake of Chaos to curse the heavens—the precise episode illustrated in Barry's etching. In fact, Barry's composition responds to Burke's stipulation in the *Inquiry* that only poetic, not pictorial, images could most compellingly inspire these sublime affections. Barry's Satan is seen rousing his warriors and directing their rebellious attention upward to the celestial realm, the eerie light from the infernal depths below creating rich patterns of chiaroscuro that accentuate the vigorous modeling of the figures. The visuality of the sublime is conceived by Barry as a masculine realm of physical strength in which the swelling and extended bodies of the fallen angels, congested along the precipice of a flaming abyss, strain to break through the very boundaries of the image. The insurgent theme of the Miltonic illustration operates on many levels: the pictorial assault on the poetic sublime, the radical Barry challenging the conservative Burke (and the entire artistic and social establishment for that matter), and the suppressed energies of political revolt finding an irresistible embodiment in the dark heroism of Satan. Burke himself had originally associated this scene from Milton with, in his words, "the ruin of monarchs, and the revolutions of kingdoms."

Along with Barry, it was the Swiss-born painter Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) with whom Blake most closely identified as a fellow, underappreciated artist whose excessive imagination seemed to contest, while also appealing to, the mercantile art culture of late eighteenth-century London. Fuseli's intellectual background was remarkable: he emerged from the literary and philosophical circles of the Sturm und Drang (storm and stress) movement in Zurich and Berlin; by 1770, he had translated Winckelmann's art historical writings on Greek art into English, consulted with and written a critical commentary on Rousseau and his moral philosophy, and finally turned to painting as a professional pursuit on the encouraging advice of Reynolds. After an eight-year Roman sojourn, Fuseli settled in England in 1780 where he established his dual career as a painter of occult, mythological, and poetical subjects and also as a prolific literary reviewer. Among his closest colleagues could be counted the influential theorist of physiognomic science J. C. Lavater, the Liverpool art collector, banker, and abolitionist William Roscoe, and the revolutionary feminist and political activist Mary Wollstonecraft (she had reportedly become infatuated with Fuseli and wanted him to join her on a tour of Republican France in 1792).

At once admired and scorned for his cynical libertinism—he was renowned for his colorful blaspheming and overbearing manner—Fuseli enjoyed testing the limits of artistic decorum. His pictures consistently fix upon the human figure in extremis, as seen in the second version of his most celebrated and scandalous painting, *The Nightmare* (1790), a work that visualized the disturbing torments of a sleeping woman. Drawing from traditional folklore about demonic visitations and the supernatural carnality of dreaming, as well as from eighteenth-century medical theories on the psychophysiology of human sleep, Fuseli depicted the nocturnal intrusion of a grimacing incubus and his electrified, spectral nightmare into a woman's bedchamber. The dreaming woman is shown supine and vulnerable, surmounted by the peculiarly fetal-looking fiend that is meant to serve as a vengeful personification of her desires; the psychical disables the somatic, resulting in the occult rape fantasy of the female protagonist. It is of course more accurate to say that the fantasy is Fuseli's, the dreaming delirium of this implied sexual violation posited as internal to the feminine so as to mask the demonic projection of masculine desire: that is, under Fuseli's stage direction, the dreaming woman victimizes herself. As though part of a Sadean reenactment of a spooky Nativity scene, the virginal victim gives birth to the gnomic offspring of her libidinal impulses, the visual displacement of suggestive sexual imagery discernible in the vaginal parting of the curtains and in the phallic end of the bolster that supports the dreamer's body (the upper torso revealingly thrown back in poised abandon). Although the first version of *The Nightmare* (1781) may have employed this imagery of supernatural persecution in veiled allusion to the diminished status of Britannia after the war with the American colonies and in the wake of the civil disorder of the Gordon Riots, Fuseli maintained a lifelong obsession with the feminine realm of dreams, and with what he referred to as (paraphrasing Shakespeare) "the undistinguished space of women's will." His famous aphoristic remark about having to endure "the epoch of viragos" betrays obvious misgivings about the progressive advocacy for women's rights in the Wollstonecraft circle. In his later private, graphic erotica from about 1810, however, Fuseli was prone to inverting the terms of sexual domination, the scenario in these drawings often involving a
restrained Promethean male being sexually suffocated by a muscular grouping of ornately coiffed courtesans. The feminine is seemingly liberated from the oppressive breeding of dreams, but only to minister to the masochistic fantasies of the artist.

Fuseli’s credo that “the forms of virtue are erect, the forms of pleasure undulate,” can properly be taken as the guiding principle behind his more heroic species of history paintings. Blake’s image of Nelson subduing a serpentine monster is in many ways a hieratic reworking of the conquering male nude that dominated Fuseli’s forceful Diploma painting for the Royal Academy, *Thor Battering the Midguard Serpent* (1790). Along with subjects from Milton and Shakespeare, Fuseli favored epic myths from Nordic legend and the *Nibelungenlied*—this new emphasis on the Northern European mythic
canon in accordance with current speculations on the cultural geography of nations espoused by the German philosopher of history J. G. Herder (who had praised Fuseli in 1774 as “a genius like a mountain torrent”). Inspired by the strained and expressive exaggeration of human anatomies in late Michelangelo and in Giulio Romano, Fuseli’s figure of Thor is most assuredly a concerted study in “erect virtue.” With the masculine body shown flexed and towering (Fuseli was fond of low vantage points and drastic foreshortening), Thor remains highly sexualized in his supreme moment of physical exertion. His genitals at the center of the picture are barely kept from view by the shadow of his projecting leg; but this pronounced swathe of shadow also connects his sex to the bloody head of the sea serpent that he has just snared from out of the misty waters. The subsidiary figures of the massive,
aged boatman, shrinking away in fear, and the ancient god Wotan observing the struggle from on high—perched like a more feeble version of the incubus in the upper corner of the picture—only serve to swell the superhuman scale and fearless heroism of Thor. As a youthful deity with power over the elements of nature and the cultivation of land, Thor held more plebeian and popular associations than most of the more noble and venerable gods from the Eddic pantheon. In characterizing the revolutionary tremblings of Europe in late 1789, Fuseli almost seemed to be anticipating the visual impact of his figure of Thor, as when he wrote of “an age pregnant with the most gigantic efforts of character . . . whilst an unexampled vigour seems to vibrate from pole to pole through the human mind, and to challenge the general sympathy.”

But Fuseli was generally reluctant to grant any direct social or moral function to modern English art, his own or anyone else’s. In his role as Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy (a position he assumed in 1801), he asserted, with fierce candor, that the very existence of academies and public exhibitions “were and are symptoms of Art in distress and . . . the decay of Taste.” His epic male figures exploding out of shadowy voids were insistent reminders of the absence of heroic grandeur in contemporary society and culture: futile challenges to what Fuseli derided as “that Micromania which infects the public taste” (by which he meant the diffuse esthetic interests of private patronage and commercial collecting habits that militated against the creation of “great works”). The Romantic poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge came closest to recognizing the contradictory sexual politics and cultural pessimism of Fuseli’s own great works when he judged them finally to be an art of “vigorously impotence.”

PROPHETCY AND PREHISTORY

Blake’s more utopian effort to redeem contemporary society through his eternalizing icons of modern history like *Spiritual Form of Nelson* ironically brought his art in close alliance with that most transient and unevolved type of visual culture, political caricature. Although Blake once chastised a prospective patron’s artistic taste by remarking “I can perceive that your Eye is perverted by Caricature prints,” the overwrought conjunction of modern history and cosmic allegory in many of his own pictures from the 1809 exhibition was not dissimilar to the teeming fantastical imagery produced during this period by the brilliant caricaturist James Gillray (1757–1815). Gillray received instruction in drawing at the Royal Academy and was well versed in both Old Master and contemporary art. By the 1790’s he had become a prolific caricaturist for the Tory (conservative, royalist) Party, even though the vehemently anti-Jacobin themes of his prints did not reflect his own political beliefs. While Blake’s 1809 exhibition was dismissed by a reviewer from the liberal journal *The Examiner* as the work of “an unfortunate lunatic,” it was Gillray who actually spent his final years debilitated by insanity. In his crowded and complex etching *Phaeton Alarm’d!* (1808), Gillray casts the Tory spokesman and propagandist George Canning as the new Phaeton, the “Sun of Anti-Jacobinism,” coursing through the heavens above the war-torn earth (aflame and surmounted by a tiny Napoleon), his path beset by astrological personifications of his political opponents. The mythical, God-like defender of the Tory government is challenged by the monstrous clutter of Whig parliamentarians whose cartoonish portraits remain distinctly legible, even through their exceedingly grotesque armature. Blake’s Nelson could easily claim Gillray’s Canning as a fellow luminary from the nationalist firmament (the recently deceased Pitt, who is portrayed as the Tory father figure of Apollo in the lower left shadow of the Gillray print, was also given his “Spiritual Form” by Blake in a companion picture to the Nelson painting for the 1809 exhibit). Gillray’s parodic and allusive appropriation of myth and allegory was an obvious strike against the pretense and hyperbole of history painting.

In mythologizing the daily politics of England, Gillray’s prints often explicitly lampooned the imagery of high art at the Royal Academy, showing that the moral and esthetic exclusivity of history painting could be brought unceremoniously to the print culture of the streets. His *Phaeton Alarm’d!* knowingly refashioned the apocalyptic uproar of Benjamin West’s *The Destruction of the Old Beast and False Prophet*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1804. West’s painting belonged to an official commission for a series of religious history paintings that were to decorate the royal chapel at Windsor Castle. The ambitious project went awry when West, an American expatriate who succeeded Reynolds as President of the Royal Academy, fell out of royal favor, presumably because George III suspected him, and politicized factions within the Academy, of “democratick” sympathies. Many of the works from this planned cycle illustrated passages from the Book of Revelation, a point of contention with the King who criticized West’s propensity for what he called “Bedlamite scenes from Revelations” (itself a revealing comment in the light of George III’s own bouts of madness). West’s apocalyptic spectacles nevertheless proved extremely popular with exhibition audiences in both London and Paris. In the religious painting cribbed by Gillray, West practised his own more typical style of academic eclecticism, the triumphant stampede of equestrian Christian warriors treated in gleaming, Neoclassical profile, while the vanquished armies of the false prophets and the lionheaded demonic adversaries.
105 JAMES GILLRAY Phaeton Alarm'd! 1808. 13 x 14\(\frac{1}{4}\) (33 x 36.8)

106 BENJAMIN WEST The Destruction of the Old Beast and False Prophet 1804. 39 x 56\(\frac{1}{2}\) (99 x 143.5)

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107 William Blake. The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed With the Sun: "The Devil is Come Down" ca. 1805. 16 1/4 x 13 1/2 in. (41.8 x 34.7 cm)
of God, seen retreating into tenebrous chasms and windswept clouds, are indebted to Rubens and the trappings of Baroque allegory. The appeal of West's pictures of this kind lay not in their learned artistic accomplishment, but rather in their contemporary historical and millennial overtones: with the resumption of the Napoleonic Wars after the Treaty of Amiens and with the recent turning of the century, such apocalyptic paintings were redolent of widespread fears for the future survival of England and the fate of Europe.

Despite the dichotomy between the artistic careers of West (the professionally prominent academicist) and Blake (the insular engraver and poet), their art shared in the nationalist, religious fervor of these early years of the nineteenth century. While West was exhibiting his epic machines of biblical destruction, Blake was also illustrating the Book of Revelation for a group of scriptural paintings that had been commissioned by his only steady patron, Thomas Butts (a government munitions clerk whose politics and occupation were strikingly antithetical to those of Blake). Eschewing the yards of canvas and cast of thousands required by West, Blake's apocalyptic designs have a figurative conciseness, gestural eloquence, and compositional equipoise that allowed him to translate the religious mystery and copious allegory of the Book of Revelation into terse visual epigrams. These qualities are most evident in his stunning watercolor *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun: "The Devil is Come Down"* (ca. 1805), a work that could also be described as an eschatological refrain of Fuseli's *Nightmare.*

Roughly contemporary with Blake's spiritualization of Nelson for the 1809 exhibition was West's own project for a monumental painting of *The Apotheosis of Nelson* (1807), a design replete with architectural and sculptural surrounds that were to have made the entire ensemble into a secular altarpiece commemorating British maritime power and the religion of nationhood. Although West was most renowned for his grand-manner history paintings of contemporary events, especially death scenes of prominent military and political figures, here he invents a composite allegory in which Nelson's draped corpse is being conveyed heavenward by gigantic and mournful figures of Neptune, Britannia, and Victory. Ponderous, erudite, and reverential, the painting may be seen as the more official version of the visionary national artform that Blake was trying to expand upon with the 1809 exhibition.

Blake sought to legitimize the conception of his own works by comparing them not to the acclaimed, patriotic art of West but to, as he wrote in his *Descriptive Catalogue,* "compositions of a mythological cast, similar to those Apotheoses of Persian, Hindoo, and Egyptian Antiquity." Inspired by late-eighteenth-century mythographic and antiquarian speculations on the origins of art and religion, Blake asserted that through his own mental travels ("taken in vision") he had seen the lost sacred art of the Jews that had adorned the palaces, temples, and city walls of the ancient world, and that these originary instances of public monumental sculpture and painting formed the basis for all subsequent artistic traditions, whether Greco-Roman or "Asiatic." The auratic and archaizing character of *Spiritual Form of Nelson* was indebted to eighteenth-century engravings of Indian antiquities, as seen, for example, in the illustrations of relief sculptures from the Shiva Temple at Elephanta that appeared in Baron d'Hancarville's comparative study of ancient art and myth, *Researches on the Origin, Spirit, and Progress of the Arts of Greece; . . . on the Antique Monuments of India, Persia, the Rest of Asia, and Egypt* (1785), a study which purported to reveal the primacy of sexual and occult symbolism to the cultural and mythic forms of earliest civilizations worldwide. Blake's catalog commentary also spoke of reviving mythological and recondite meaning in modern art and posited a syncretic theory of artistic tradition encompassing "the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo, and Egyptian." In preparing his later engraving (ca. 1820) of the *Laocoön,* Blake summarily rewrote the history of art by reattributing the Hellenistic sculpture—a
paradigmatic artwork that had been central to the German Enlightenment esthetic debates of Winckelmann and Lessing—as a copy of a lost original from the Temple of Solomon. With its array of inscribed mottos lamenting the corruption of art by war and money, this reproductive print of a fundamental piece of ancient statuary is transformed into a didactic proclamation about the divine origins and modern plight of art. Although Blake saw the panoply of ancient world art as unified by “a spiritual agency,” it was one that remained tied to a Judeo-Christian origin. The antiquarian fantasy of incorporating all of world culture within a renewed English art of national grandeur cannot be divorced from the imperialist fantasy that is the subject of Blake’s picture—the transfigured Nelson (culled from both Shiva and Laocoon, construed as both protective demi-god of Albion and militaristic Antichrist) enfolding the nations of the earth within its primordial serpent.

Mythic accounts of national origins and exotic dreams of colonial encounters were much in evidence at Blake’s 1809 exhibition. Paintings (now lost) of “savage girls” aboard a missionary vessel and of the Sanskrit scholar Charles Wilkins among Indian Brahmans could be seen along with The Ancient Britons, a picture whose catalog entry included Blake’s account of Druidic and Arthurian legend given as proof that Albion and the English nation had originally descended from the lost continent of Atlantis and from the lost tribe of Israel. The national identity of Blake’s England could only be redeemed by virtue of its visionary prehistory and its colonizing future—the more conjectural, global, and syncretic, the better. Thus, while scorning the veristic and documentary demands of contemporary history painting, Blake would argue that “the history of all times and places is nothing else but improbabilities and impossibilities.” Prefiguring the dilemma surrounding later manifestations of primitivism and mysticism in nineteenth-century art, Blake’s work was at once critical of and constituted by its own historical experience, announcing itself as both powerless and transcendent, victimized and prophetic.

Writing a few months before his death, Blake acknowledged his own inability, or rather unwillingness, to participate fully in the creation of a nationalist culture. He commented yet again on the longstanding opposition of “Englishmen” to his standard of “Republican Art,” an opposition that was not in the least overcome by the nationalist strains of his 1809 exhibition. Intent on dissociating himself from any illusion of social and cultural unanimity within England and from the generic defining of its national identity, Blake looked back over his lifetime and concluded: “since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another, Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree.”