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Pictorial Apocalypse: Blake's "Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun"

by TERENCE ALLAN HOAGWOOD

BLAKE'S watercolor, "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun," illustrates an episode from Revelation xii; as usual, however, Blake does not pictorialize that narrative, but instead transforms its symbols and their values. I shall argue that two principles embodied forcefully in this design derive from apocalyptic tradition: aesthetically, pictorial form furnishes a fresh conceptualization of a narrative theme, even altering the values embedded in the narrative. Ontologically, Blake presents an "intellectual vision" (to quote one of his letters to William Hayley);¹ that is, the painting expresses Blake's absolute idealism according to which "Mental Things are alone Real."² These principles make up the theoretical framework within which the minute particulars of Blake's painting unfold their significance; these principles in turn have a place in a coherent tradition of apocalyptic literature and commentary, as I shall show, but Blake modifies in important ways the radical Protestantism that was his heritage.

One pictorial element by which Blake effects a transformation is the stationing of bodies in the design. In the biblical text, the "woman clothed with the sun . . . being with child cried, travailing in birth, . . . and the dragon stood before the woman" (Rev. xii, 1, 2, 4). In Blake's painting, the woman shows no pain, is not crying, and shows a radiant confidence missing from the biblical account (see fig.). Further, the dragon is not "before" the woman, but rather directly *above* her. Her apparent vigor, vertical posture, and her placement below the dragon, rather than beside him, together embody a recurring motif in Blake's portrayals of visionary experience. In his illustrations, a seer with visionary power is commonly portrayed beneath the vision that he sees; thus in "Isaiah Foretelling the Destruction of Jerusalem" (a pencil drawing on wood block), the speaking prophet also gestures upward, where his own conceptualization is displayed in the upper portion of the picture-space. In both

An earlier and shorter form of this essay was presented as a talk at the Western Regional Meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature, at Loma Linda University, Riverside, California, April 14, 1983. This essay and that paper both share concerns with another article, " 'God Blessing the Seventh Day': William Blake's Visions of God and His Biblical Watercolors," *Studia Mystica* VII (1984), 65-77. For their encouragement and responses to the argument in one or another of its forms I am grateful to several persons—Ernest Lee Tuveson, Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., Robert Dunn, Victoria Myers, and Mary Giles.

1. *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 852.
2. *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed. by David V. Erdman (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 565. Subsequent references to Blake's written works are drawn from this edition and identified parenthetically within the text.



William Blake, "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun," National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection.

designs, the seer's vision is portrayed as a horizontal mass above the seer's head.

This positioning of bodies is one of Blake's *pathos formulae* for visionary composition; that is, it represents "a limited range of body configurations and placements of the human form in space which communicates a definable range of mental and emotional states," as Jenijoy La Belle says.³ Specifically, Janet A. Warner calls attention to the recurrent form of hovering figures with outstretched arms: Warner suggests that this positioning of bodies develops "connotations of divinity separated in some way from the whole man or human form"; the divine quality of humanity is thus in danger of estrangement. In the "Great Red Dragon," the "hovering figure is . . . taken to its ultimate Satanic form," says Warner, and its implications are intrapsychic: "these are two aspects of the same psyche."⁴

That language of identification leads, however, to a misrepresentation of Blake's design: to say that "the positions of woman and dragon reflect each other" is to assign them the same ontological status, whereas in this painting, as in his biblical illustrations generally, the hovering figure is rather an imagined concept belonging to the mentality of the seer positioned below. Long ago Joseph A. Wicksteed noticed this important motif in Blake's *Job* illustrations: "we see into the spiritual life of Job. For Blake represents the inner by the higher, 'What is Above,' he says, 'is Within.'"⁵ Wicksteed's instance is the second illustration in the *Job* series, and Kathleen Raine has also called the deity portrayed there, above Job, the "God Within."⁶ In fact, throughout the *Illustrations of the Book of Job* Blake portrays Job's vision of the divine above his head; these images of God are thus exteriorizations of elements within the mentality of Job. Often these visions of deity are represented as a horizontal mass, as the dragon is shown in the watercolor.

Another common element among the *Job* designs and the "Great Red Dragon" is the satanic character of the seer's conceptualization. In the sixth illustration in the *Job* series, for example ("And smote Job with sore Boils"), the figure spread above is nominally Satan; in what amounts to a gnostic revision of the Bible, Blake repeats this same vision, with the same posturing, in illustration 11 ("With Dreams upon my bed"), but here he places the God of Job, Elohim, in the role of Satan. In the printed illustration and also in the watercolor version that belongs to the same series as the "Great Red Dragon" ("Job's Evil Dreams"), the satanic tormentor has both the face of Elohim and also the stone tablets of the Moral Law; he is wrapped round by a serpent, exactly as

3. Jenijoy La Belle, "Blake's Visions and Re-visions of Michelangelo," in *Blake in His Time*, ed. Robert N. Essick and Donald Pearce (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), p. 14. The concept of *pathos formulae* is Aby Warburg's, and it has been applied to Blake's art by Bo Lindberg in his *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job* (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi, 1973), p. 115.

4. Janet A. Warner, "Blake's Use of Gesture," in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 187-88.

5. Joseph A. Wicksteed, *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job* (1910; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 51.

6. Kathleen Raine, *The Human Face of God: William Blake and the Book of Job* (n.p.: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 46.

Satan is in the watercolor, "Satan Watching the Endearments of Adam and Eve." In Revelation xii the dragon is named "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan"; Blake's biblical illustrations, thus, link the satanic figures in Job and in Revelation, assigning them to the same placement within his visionary configuration. A symbolic idiom common to both the *Job* designs and the "Great Red Dragon" is not even hinted in the Bible: this is the portrayal of the seer's visionary idea as a horizontal mass above the seer's head.

Another watercolor, "Job Confessing His Presumption to God Who Answers from the Whirlwind," also belongs to the same series of biblical paintings, which was commissioned by Thomas Butts.⁷ In this case a parallel strategy is even more obvious: whereas in the printed version (no. 13 in the *Job* engravings) the Lord is *before* Job, as the dragon is before the woman in Revelation, here in the watercolor Blake moves the Lord immediately above Job's head, spreads him horizontally, and stretches his arms, just as he moves and positions the dragon in the contemporary painting of that biblical episode.

Often Blake humanizes the visionary process conspicuously; the exteriorization of mental forms is presented as a psychological process, so that Blake's transformation of the biblical narratives is at once idealistic and naturalistic. In all of the *Job* illustrations, for example, the face of God is identical with the face of Job;⁸ as the visionary is, so is the vision; "As the Eye—Such the Object" (p. 645). Pictorially, Blake reveals that a perceiver endows the visionary object with its character; the visionary act constitutes the visionary object.

Using the same visual formulation, Blake occasionally achieves a more optimistic implication than what appears in the satanic visions, and he portrays this optimism in two ways. He sometimes shows the visionary refusing a satanic vision: in "Christ Refusing the Banquet Offered by Satan," for example (a watercolor illustration to *Paradise Regained*), it is Christ who is the vertical seer; the horizontal figure above him is Satan, obviously, but Christ's averted gaze and his manual gesture—pushing against the vision—display his rejection of the satanic vision. Job, in contrast, submits: in *Job* 6, for instance, the smitten Job does press outward with his palms, but he is stretched in a horizontal and highly vulnerable position, subject to Satan utterly. Again in *Job* 11 and in the parallel watercolor, "Job's Evil Dreams," Job's palms press ineffectually against the vision that torments him, even while his posture—again horizontal and vulnerable—subjects him helplessly to that evil projection.

In other cases, Blake uses the visionary formulation in designs still more optimistic than "Christ Refusing." On plate 76 of *Jerusalem* (a full-page design without text), a radiant and cruciform Christ is placed above Albion, who

7. See Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, [Vol. 1] *Text* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), p. 411.

8. See Wicksteed, *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job*, p. 19: "Where Eliphaz is speaking of his vision of God, the Deity bears the same kind of facial likeness to the speaker as he does elsewhere to Job." Andrew Wright makes a similar point: of the deity depicted above Job's head (as in plate 2 of the engraved designs), Wright says that "it is God created by Job in his own image" (*Blake's Job: A Commentary* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972], p. 9). Kathleen Raine disagrees: she treats God as the maker of man, but then she also locates God "Within" (*The Human Face of God*, pp. 47, 46).

gazes upward into Christ's face and whose posture imitates Christ's. Here man and his vision of God are again identified, but here both visionary and vision are vertical; further, the movement implied is upward, and the vision is brilliant, while in the *Job* illustrations (notably in "Behemoth and Leviathan," in the Butts series of watercolors) the gazes are downward and the vision is dark with destructive power. Clearly the same visionary configuration can embody very different conceptualizations, dark and satanic (like Job's) or brilliant and redemptive (like Albion's in *Jerusalem* 76). In both sorts of cases, however, the visionary stationing is the same, Blake placing the seer's projection in the upper portion of the picture-space; this variety in Blake's usage of the form invites us to contrast the alternative projections of his different human seers.

If we recall even that much about Blake's other designs, we can recognize instantly certain implications of the "Great Red Dragon" watercolor. Like Isaiah (and also like St. John in the watercolor, "Angel of the Revelation"), the "Woman Clothed with the Sun" beholds the dragon as a vision displayed horizontally above the seer. Like the serpent-wrapped tormentor which is Job's projection in "Job's Evil Dreams," the vision is satanic. Like Christ in "Christ Refusing," the woman resists the satanic vision with a posture of opposition, her palms turned outward and her arms spread in an arc exactly opposite to the dragon's. She displays the brilliant light and the upward movement that Blake uses again in plate 76 of *Jerusalem*, where Albion imitates and internalizes the vision of Christ. Here, the light source is the woman, and the dragon she envisions is dark above her; in contrast, the redeeming vision in *Jerusalem* 76 shows light emanating from above, from the object of vision itself. Significantly, the posture of inclusion belongs to the design of the Christian God of forgiveness, while the posture of opposition is dramatized in the design of the dragon accuser. Both, however, display the act of envisioning these idealizations with the same visual formula.

In fact, Blake habitually uses that visionary stationing to contrast these two visions of God. In the "Great Red Dragon," as in the design on plate 6 of *Jerusalem*, a bat-winged state of mind (horizontal) is presented as a contrary to the vertical visionary. In the text of *Jerusalem*, this bat-like vision, the Spectre, speaks of punishment and of "a Law of Sin" (7:50). Los, the vertical visionary, replies: "O that I could abstain from wrath!" (7:59); he repudiates the wrathful vision specifically by invoking the Lamb of God, and by expressing the Christian principle of "mutual forgiveness" (7:59-60, 66). Pictorially and verbally, the doctrines of wrath and forgiveness are thus contrasted, and Christian humanism prevails: "the terrible Spectre fell shuddering before him" (8:21), vengeance falling away before mercy, and Los cries to the fallen Spectre, "arise!" (9:31).

Of course "arise" is an important directional word for the designs: plate 76 of *Jerusalem* uses the movement upward as well as the human embodiment of Christ's position to portray a Christian humanism. On plate 6 of *Jerusalem* and in the "Great Red Dragon," the downward gaze of the bat-winged beast and the upward gaze of the visionary symbolize their perspectives: wrath and destruc-

tion look downward, like Job looking at Behemoth and Leviathan. The Christian prophet, upright, typically looks upward, like John beholding the Angel of the Revelation and like the "Woman Clothed with the Sun."

Describing his own design, the "Last Judgment," Blake articulates verbally this theological contrast: "Thinking as I do that the Creator of this World [Elohim in Genesis and Job] is a very Cruel Being & being a Worshipper of Christ I cannot help saying the Son O how unlike the Father < First God Almighty comes with a Thump on the Head Then Jesus Christ comes with a balm to heal it >" (p. 565). Such contrast engages the mental and perceptual powers of Blake's audience in a mental fight, and the terms of conflict are theological, Blake opposing the cruel God of the Dragon and Serpent against the "mutual forgiveness" embodied in Christ. The 1795 color print, "Elohim Creating Adam," shows the cruel and massively winged God, with the face of Job's evil dream, engaged in the destructive work of making the worm-wrapped matter of man; his contrary, Christ, speaks most eloquently in *Jerusalem*, where he repudiates both materialism and wrath: "I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine" (4:7). This same theological opposition is portrayed in the "Great Red Dragon," where the radiant "Woman Clothed with the Sun" rises on her heart-shaped wings, against the massive and stony form of the dragon in the sky.

These theological implications in Blake's painting express his direct relationship with the larger context of eighteenth-century commentaries on the Book of Revelation, just as his pictorial conceptualization extends a tradition of biblical illustration that I shall describe subsequently. Before turning to these larger contexts, however, I shall dwell a moment on another relevant sketch element in the "Great Red Dragon," because it embodies another of Blake's philosophical themes and it binds his theology to his philosophy of mind. It is no less than amazing that an artist who speaks of a "distinct, sharp . . . bounding line" as enthusiastically as Blake does (*A Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 550) should sketch figures as vague and ambiguous as those in the bottom right of his painting.⁹ Two or perhaps three heads are dimly visible, almost as parts of the stone or cloud beneath the woman. David Bindman has suggested that these figures represent earth "opening up and swallowing the flood" which, according to the scriptural account, "the serpent cast out of his mouth."¹⁰ To interpret the figures in that way, however, would require seeing the dragon's jagged lightning as a flood of water; further, it manifestly does not come from his mouth, the vague figures show fear and deathliness rather than positive helpfulness, and the entire scene obviously does not occur when the scriptural flood takes place, when the woman has been hidden "from the face of the serpent": instead, she stares directly in his face at short range.

9. The most recent exposition of Blake's aesthetic of the "bounding line" is by Morris Eaves, in *William Blake's Theory of Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 9-44. The same issue is central to Anne Kostelanetz Mellor's argument, throughout her *Blake's Human Form Divine* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974).

10. David Bindman, *William Blake: His Art and Times* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 140.

This episode, then, is not that of the flood but rather the apocalyptic moment narrated, for instance, in *The Four Zoas*, where human souls "cry out to be delivered" under the "Dragon form"; "John saw these things Reveald in Heaven / On Patmos Isle & heard the Souls cry out" (p. 385).

The visual ambiguity of these figures, moreover, is precisely Blake's strategy for depicting materialism: he portrays human forms turning into earth or the elements. Thus on plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake's illumination shows human beings turning into earth and water; on plate 3 of *Jerusalem*, a human form falls into the dead trunk of a tree, and another human form becomes the tree itself. The *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* places the relation in a theological framework: "The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses," but then "a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslaved the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood." For Blake, "All deities reside in the human breast" (*Marriage*, plate 11); this theology is a corollary of his principle, "All Things Exist in the Human Imagination" (*Jerusalem* 69:25). The externality of matter and of deity are tyrannical illusions. To succumb to them is to die, to turn to stone, like those figures in the "Great Red Dragon," where Blake depicts what in the *Four Zoas* he had called the "stony form of death O dragon of the Deep" (p. 389). Materialism and the concomitant God of externality form therefore one vision, whose effect on human beings who entertain it is depicted in the watercolor.

That Blake's exegesis takes a pictorial form should not surprise his Christian audience: the Apocalypse had always attracted artists. Albrecht Dürer's set of woodcuts on the Apocalypse (1498) is one influential group of designs, and it is also that artist's first major work. In the first edition of Luther's New Testament (published in Wittenberg by Melchior Lotther in 1522 and conventionally called the "September Bible"), the Book of Revelation is singled out as the only book with large, full-page illustrations, including one of the "Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun," which resembles Dürer's design in many important respects. In the first edition of Luther's complete Bible (published in Wittenberg by Hans Lufft in 1534), the Book of Revelation is illustrated again, with twenty-six pictures rather than the twenty-one of the September Bible. This time, the illustration of the "Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun" loses the resemblance to Dürer's design, in fact reversing the position of the figures. Hans Holbein the Younger executed a set of twenty-one woodcuts illustrating the Book of Revelation (these illustrations appear in the New Testament of 1523, published in Basle by T. Wolff). Holbein's "Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun" clearly belongs to the tradition of Dürer and the September Bible, combining elements from both for a design at once more complex and dynamic.¹¹

11. For these illustrations by Dürer, Holbein, and the anonymous illustrators of the Luther Bibles, see Kenneth A. Strand's two volumes of reproductions, *Woodcuts to the Apocalypse in Dürer's Time* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1968), and *Woodcuts to the Apocalypse from the Early Sixteenth Century* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1969).

Those among early printed editions of the English Bible which include illustrations represent the Book of Revelation disproportionately. One important instance is the 1534 printing of William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament: of the thirty-nine woodcuts included in this volume, twenty-two illustrate the Book of Revelation, and these illustrations are larger than the rest.¹²

This obvious preference among illustrators has an exegetical basis: Martin Luther, among others, notices that the Book of Revelation is a pictorial prophecy: "there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so out and out with visions and figures" as John does in the Apocalypse.¹³ John's prophecy "is purely visionary and consists only of 'pictures,' remaining 'a concealed and dumb prophecy' until the pictures, once interpreted, are made to yield up hidden meaning."¹⁴ Similarly, Henry Hammond writes of the visions in Revelation that they appeared to St. John as "Symbols or visible Hieroglyphs."¹⁵ Aptly, too, Leslie Tannenbaum observes that Samuel Horsley "reiterated the traditional idea that biblical prophecy took the form of 'emblematic pictures' that were presented by the Divine Spirit to the prophet's imagination";¹⁶ what is more, the pertinent emblematic tradition is that described by Sambucus, for instance, in the *Emblemata* of 1566: its aim is "to suggest symbols and set forth something rather obscure which requires clarification and cogitation."¹⁷ It is of this emblematic tradition, associated with biblical prophecy by Samuel Horsley, that Paulo Giovio writes in 1599: "the picture is the body and the text is the soul."¹⁸

Giovio's distinction suggests what Blake's work also makes obvious: the pictorial presentation cannot simply reproduce the concepts of the verbal work, but must transform them: "Between word and image, between what is depicted by language and what is uttered by plastic form, the unity begins to dissolve; a single and identical meaning is not immediately common to them," says Michel Foucault, whose argument may be applied here to Blake's transformations of scriptural themes—"By its own plastic values painting engages in an experiment that will take it farther and farther from language, whatever the superficial identity of the theme."¹⁹ Specifically, Blake's painting, taking

12. A copy of this Bible (Anne Boleyn's copy) is in the British Museum, and others are in the Huntington Library (San Marino, California) and the New York Public Library. On these early printed Bibles, see A. S. Herbert, *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible 1525-1961* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1968).

13. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Revelation of St. John," in *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman and Castle Press, 1932), VI, 488. See Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., "Painted Prophecies: The Tradition of Blake's Illuminated Books," in *Blake in His Time*, ed. Essick and Pearce, p. 113n.

14. Wittreich, "Painted Prophecies," p. 103; Wittreich cites Luther's 1545 Preface to the Apocalypse, which appears in *Works of Martin Luther*, VI, 480.

15. Henry Hammond, *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon All the Books of the New Testament*, 5th ed. (London: Printed by J. Macock and M. Flesher for R. Royston, 1681), p. 844. The first edition of Hammond's *Paraphrase* was published in 1639. For this reference to Hammond I am indebted to Leslie Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), p. 55.

16. Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies*, p. 55.

17. Sambucus is cited in Aquilino Sanchez Perez, *Blake's Graphic Work and the Emblematic Tradition* (Universidad de Murcia: Secretariado de Publicaciones, 1982), p. 25.

18. Cited in Perez, *Blake's Graphic Work and the Emblematic Tradition*, p. 25.

19. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (1965; rpt. New York: Random House, 1973), p. 18.

as its subject the act of vision, directly engages its viewer *in* that act, and Blake allows this property of the visual medium to affect his theme. Presenting a portrayal of visionary imagination as a constitutive act of the beholder, as a human psychological process, Blake simultaneously involves his own audience in exactly that act of visualization. Blake's audience must *see* the portrayal of vision; John's audience can only hear of it after the fact, as John reports, "I John saw these things" (Rev. xxii, 8). Each beholder of Blake's design is immediately involved in the vision; John's reader must rely on the hearsay authority of the visionary, being denied direct access to the vision itself.

Arising from the visual medium, this fact of audience engagement returns us to the theme of conceptualization. Blake insists repeatedly on the conversion of tangible to intellectual terms. Thus he says, in his preface to his illuminated prophecy, *Milton*, "I will not cease from Mental Fight," emphasizing what he says again in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: "the Writings of the Prophets illustrate . . . conceptions of the Visionary Fancy by their various sublime & Divine Images as seen in the Worlds of Vision" (p. 555). Explicitly here, Blake identifies the act of conceptualization as the subject of the prophetic work; his visual art, interpreting the scriptural passage even while illustrating it, serves at once as an instance of that intellectual act and also as a commentary on it.

That dual function of prophecy, as vision and as commentary, was also traditional. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, had observed that each biblical prophecy comprises vision and concept, picture and interpretation.²⁰ Prior to Newton's commentary, Joseph Mede had popularized an understanding of the prophecy's structure as partly pictorial and partly verbal: some visions there were "painted in certain shapes," and some were written in language; vision and exposition are "joyned together."²¹ This structural concept is obviously germane to the composite art of Blake's illuminated poems, which culminate in the greatest of his works, *Jerusalem*, a poem which is itself a visionary interpretation of the Apocalypse. In the "Great Red Dragon" as well, a dual intent is important: like his other biblical paintings, this one is partly a portrayal of scriptural imagery (an illustration strictly) and partly a vision at once conceptual and new.²²

According to Thomas Goodwin (1639), the Book of Revelation is itself both a picture and a concept: the prophecy embodies a "Portrait of the Holy Ghost's

20. Isaac Newton, *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Printed by J. Darby and T. Browne, 1733), p. 129. The copy cited is in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and it is bound with Newton's *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (London: Printed for J. Tonson and for J. Osborn and T. Longman, 1728).

21. The quoted phrases appear in the unpaginated translator's preface to Joseph Mede, *The Key of the Revelation*, trans. Richard More, 2d ed. (London: Printed by Phil. Stephens, 1650).

22. Blake's tendency to transform texts that he illustrates has long been recognized; Wicksteed, for example, says the following: "The texts are to be interpreted by the designs, and not vice versa . . ." (*Blake's Vision of the Book of Job*, p. 45). Since Wicksteed, Blake studies have profited from this approach: Wittreich's important chapter on Blake's Milton illustrations takes as one thesis the claim that "this perception points to the interpretive function of Blake's illustrations, enabling us to establish a canon of Blake's criticism, one that includes not only his written commentaries but his illustrations . . ." (*Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1975], p. 76).

Mind.”²³ Robert Lowth writes that biblical prophecy employs chiefly visual imagery, but it is “imagery . . . transferred from certain and definite objects to express indefinite and general ideas.”²⁴ Similarly, William Jones points out that the Bible applies “all visible objects to a figurative use.”²⁵ Committing his own visionary art to these ideational ends, Blake also exalts the ontological value of such mental forms: the “Permanent Realities of Every Thing” exist in “This World < of Imagination >.” To illustrate the given prophecy would be the work of memory; Blake’s work, he says, is the work of inspiration (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, pp. 555, 554).

That conceptual basis of his art helps to define for Blake a place within his eighteenth-century context. Specifically, the traditional opposition of idealistic (and Augustinian) interpretations against earthly (and chiliastic) interpretations reappears in the eighteenth century with a special focus on the American and French revolutions. Blake uses his philosophical idealism to unify these contrary visions of the biblical prophecy. Joseph Priestley, for example, writes that the American and French revolutions were “distinctly and repeatedly foretold in [biblical] prophecies.”²⁶ James Bicheno argues that the French Revolution “is undoubtedly the theme of prophecy.”²⁷ The sermons of John Willison (d. 1750) were published long after his death, with the title, *A Prophecy of the French Revolution* (1793). According to these chiliastic interpretations, the seven-headed beast is a type of the political tyrant, and the Whore of Babylon is his ecclesiastical counterpart. Thus was Antichrist among the seventeenth-century Puritans,²⁸ and thus implied Dürer, much earlier, when he portrayed bishops, not devils, overcome by heavenly angels in the War in Heaven. Blake implies this same identification when he writes that “The Beast & the Whore rule without controls” (p. 611). Consistently with his stated doctrine on the Book of Revelation—that “Mental Things are alone Real” (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, p. 565)—Blake goes on to intellectualize the beast and the dragon, and in fact all prophetic symbolism. He finds authority in (for example) John Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, where Wesley explicates the dragon as an idea (hatred of faith).²⁹ Blake also found support for his idealist reading in Swedenborg, who states in one of his commentaries on the Apocalypse that “every truly spiritual meaning is abstracted from the idea of persons, places, and times.”³⁰ Blake opposes the interpretations of Isaac Newton, who argues that the dragon is specifically

23. Thomas Goodwin, *An Exposition upon the Revelation* (1639), in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (London: Printed by J. Darby and S. Roycroft, 1681–1704), II, 29.

24. Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory (1787; rpt. New York: Garland, 1971), II, 68.

25. Jones is cited in Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake’s Early Prophecies*, p. 59.

26. Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France*, &c., 3d ed. (Birmingham: Printed by Thomas Pearson and sold by J. Johnson, London, 1791), p. 150.

27. J. Bicheno, *The Signs of the Times* (Providence, R.I.: Carter and Wilkinson, 1794), p. i.

28. See Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 78–88.

29. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (New York: Lane & Tippet, 1847), p. 694.

30. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Apocalypse Explained*, trans. L. H. Tafel and John Whitehead (New York: The American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society, 1911–12), par. 597.

a "type of the numerous armies of *Arabians* invading the *Romans*." Whereas Newton identifies the four beasts of the Apocalypse as geographical regions in Mesopotamia,³¹ Blake locates them "in every Man" (*The Four Zoas*, p. 300).

Typically, in the eighteenth century, it is the conservative and the orthodox who argue for utterly de-temporalized interpretations; Charles Walmesley's Catholic commentary on the Apocalypse is thus devoted to "the great and awful Truths . . . of Religion," and not to radical politics.³² But Blake's idealism (like that of John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist) allows him to locate the "Prophetical scene or Stage" in the Imagination, not in terrestrial matter and affairs.³³ At the same time, Blake's radicalism endows his vision with particular purpose; ideational realities are susceptible of many manifestations, and the beast is thus the ally of the bishop; Blake's apocalyptic "Song of Liberty" ends with the cry that "Empire is no more" (p. 45).

Thus Blake's radical idealism marries the heaven of spiritual vision with the hell of earthly wars and revolution. Accordingly, the "Great Red Dragon" embodies two of the themes of Blake's life-work and of his century: first, "Human thought is crushed [or threatened] beneath the iron hand of Power" (*Milton*, 25:5), and this is the political dimension of the watercolor; second, redemption (both political and spiritual renewal) is to be achieved by visionary means: "All of us on earth are united in thought" (p. 600); it is "Thought [that] chang'd the infinite to a serpent" (*Europe*, 10:16), and which changed a mental power of the universal Man to a "stony form of death [a] dragon of the Deeps." And thus we can recover infinity: "Man is All Imagination God is Man & exists in us & we in him" (p. 664). The "Great Red Dragon" in the watercolor is a vision, then, like the materialistic Elohim who created Adam; it is the action of the "Woman Clothed with the Sun" first to perceive this vision, and then to oppose and to overcome it. This rendition of the Apocalypse of John is therefore no rendition at all, but a new work that challenges the old, embracing its imagery to transform it. The Christian prophecy provides for Blake's work what he ascribed to apocalyptic art: not a master text suitable for imitation, but rather an imagistic and symbolic language, suitable for the sublimer task, the "Visions of Regeneration" (*Jerusalem*, 24:45).

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31. Newton, *Observations upon the Prophecies*, pp. 304, 276.

32. Sig. Pastorini [Charles Walmesley], *The General History of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (London: J. P. Coghlan, 1798), p. v. The phrase that I have quoted appears in the anonymous editor's preface.

33. Cited by Basil Willey, in *The Seventeenth-Century Background: Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion* (1934; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953), p. 153. Smith's statement has been applied to Blake by Morton D. Paley in *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 236.