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*An Act of Theological Revisioning: William Blake's Pictorial Prophecy*¹

by MARJEAN D. PURINTON

As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to the Angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their Proverbs; thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the Proverbs of Hell shew the nature of Internal wisdom better than any description of buildings or garments.

When I came home: on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived by the minds of men, & read by them on earth.

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?
(*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, p. 35)²

THIS MEMORABLE Fancy from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* challenges us to explore new avenues of perception. Blake's verbal prophecy focuses on the limitations posed by sensory perceptions, the possibilities of our being entrapped into accepting as "truths" or "absolutes" those thoughts which are fictions only. How do we know with certainty that the flight of a bird in the air signifies delight? Blake's poetry and iconography undermine our expectations. Both words and pictures confound and contradict comfortable patterns of thought to defy our reduction of a symbol or icon to a single meaning.

Blake's pictorial prophecy similarly challenges us to new ways of seeing. His watercolors harken to a revisioning of the function and purpose of prophecy. Blake achieves this by frustrating and reversing our normal visual expectations. Blake's intention, his attempt to create meaning, however, is not the key to his pictorial prophecy. Meaning lies not in the icons or the watercolors, but in the mental activity, the process of revision, the dialectic between observer and art.³

Sensory perception can be an illusion. The illusion may be a result of conditioning, both on an individual level and conditioning that is culturally induced. For example, a rainbow immediately and automatically signals hope

1. This essay has developed from a paper presented to the Conference on Christianity and Literature at the Southwest Regional Meeting at Texas A & M University in College Station, Texas, on October 20, 1989. I am grateful to Terence Allan Hoagwood for his assistance with this essay.

2. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed., ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 35. Subsequent quotations from Blake's written works are taken from this edition and indicated by page number parenthetically in the text.

3. Leslie Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), claims biblical prophecy as the structural mode upon which Blake's visionary forms are built. Blake's art acts upon the reader and enjoins the reader to act in response to it; see pp. 53-55.

and happiness. Blake, however, is wary of the entrapment created by this kind of visual perception. In "A Vision of the Last Judgment," a commentary about his painting "The Last Judgment," he writes: "I question not my Corporeal or Vegetable Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro it & not with it" (p. 566). Blake's art is about the act of seeing, of looking through and beyond sensory perception. Blake's pictorial prophecy is about the act of theological revisioning.⁴

Blake seeks to undermine the limitation of his medium by inverting and reversing our conditioned expectations. In the disruption of our aesthetic equilibrium, we find that we must look again, to re-vision what we perceive visually. His artistic style, form, and subjects are all laden with multiple contexts, and his art reveals a conceptual, not empirical, reality. From Blake's poetry, we can glean verbal clues about the act of revisioning. In *The Mental Traveller*, the speaker claims:

For the Eye altering alters all
The senses roll themselves in fear
And the flat Earth becomes a Ball. (p. 485)

This verbal image from *The Mental Traveller* reveals the deceptions sensory experience can create. Like the flight of the bird in the Memorable Fancy, the reference to the reshaping the earth in a mental configuration provides verbal clues to expectations about the icons in the pictorial prophecies. Blake seeks to break the cycle of limited vision. He promotes radical opposition to cultural manifestations that limit vision. He achieves this by creating emblems and icons that open infinities of experience. We see with our imagination; we travel mentally beyond the horizons of the eye. We come to behold, as Blake does in "A Vision of the Last Judgment," that mental things are alone real: "Where is the Existence Out of Mind or Thought" (p. 565)?

The pictorial prophecies engage the mind in active interpretation, in visioning and re-visioning. This activity is in itself a reenactment of prophetic vision. This interpretative act never culminates in product. The symbols, icons, and emblems continuously challenge revision and reimagination as an unending process. They beckon us ever forward in search of what we have not yet seen, and they urge us to transform what we have seen.

4. Terence Allan Hoagwood, "Literary Theory and the Christianity of William Blake," *Literature and Belief* 9 (1989): 80-87, argues that Blake constructs an aesthetic theory which involves the visualization of the visionary act, a procedure he associates specifically with biblical themes. In *The Divine Imagination: William Blake's Major Prophetic Visions* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1972), Robert L. Grimes discusses vision as perception, a view of the knowing process, an imaginative way of knowing the world; see pp. 134-61. According to Christopher Heppner, "Blake as Humpty Dumpty: The Verbal Specification of Visual Meaning," *Word and Visual Imagination: Studies in the Interaction of English Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. Karl Josef Höltgen, et al. (Erlangen: University-Bibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1988), Blake did not understand his designs to be univocal containers of explicit meaning, but rather generators of a semantic energy. Meaning is clearly not simply the function of an image, but of a continuing and potentially changing interplay; see p. 234. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Blake's Composite Art," *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), claims that neither abstraction nor representation becomes in itself the locus of meaning; rather, significance is located in the perceptive process by which any symbolic form comes into being. Blake renders the activity of the mind as it alters the objects of perception; see pp. 68-80.

In 1795 Blake prepared a set of twelve large color prints. Although these prints accompany no text, they recapitulate themes in the Prophetic Books of 1795.⁵ In "Elohim Creating Adam" (II: pl. 388),⁶ Blake humanizes the projection of evil deity. Leslie Tannenbaum has pointed out that Blake stresses the negative aspect of the Creation. Humankind's enslavement in the material world is symbolized by the worm, the emblem of mortality, that entwines Adam.⁷ Janet A. Warner points out that the mirror image in this design shows the human form becoming what it beholds; Elohim created Adam in his own image. The eagle-winged Elohim suggests the creative force behind the act of separation, while the worm-wrapped cruciform Adam retains the image of his potential divinity.⁸ Stewart Crehan has argued that in the creation of Adam we see something quite different from what we expect. Rather than the beginning of joyous life, the Urizenic creation details pain, misery, and suffering. The vision of God is not as a creative force, but as a ruling tyrant.⁹

Let us see, however, what lies behind this interpretative frame of meaning and probe the conceptual possibilities. The figure above in the picture is a mental construction, and the figure below is a figure within a figure—a depiction of a dream, or even an idea state. Blake thus presents a painting of mental structures. He shows that the outer creation is error. He multiplies the point of view so that each eye sees differently. He uses biblical subject matter to present the iconography of seeing. On a conceptual level, Blake is depicting meta-visions—visions about envisioning.

Blake's paintings challenge our preconceived mental constructs, and he suggests an alternative way of envisioning the pictorial with transformations and oppositional lines.¹⁰ "God Writing upon the Tables of the Covenant" (II: pl. 535), one of Blake's ten watercolors of the life of Moses completed in 1805, suggests new ways of seeing art and reading texts. The picture challenges the perceptions derived from the five senses. The small figure bowing in obeisance at the bottom of the picture is constructing a mental structure or vision of this Old Testament incident—God's law and promise being revealed. The vision itself is engulfed in flames—an image from hell, not heaven. The large, gowned figure of the vision lays his hands on the two tablets; this gesture suggests reverence for law and covenant, but it is oppositional to the background of flames. The forefinger of his right hand points upward to the right corner of the tablet. In opposition, his hair blows to the left, and his left hand places all *five* fingers (five senses) on the

5. David Bindman, *Blake as Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), delineates the history of the 12 large color prints of 1795; see p. 98.

6. Blake's graphic works discussed in this essay are reproduced in Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981). See Vol. II, Plate 388 for "Elohim Creating Adam." Subsequent references to Blake's graphic works are taken from this source and indicated by volume and plate number parenthetically in the text.

7. Tannenbaum says that Urizen is the direct embodiment of Elohim; see p. 206. See also Bindman, p. 99.

8. See Janet A. Warner, "Blake's Use of Gesture," *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, pp. 184-94.

9. Stewart Crehan, *Blake in Context* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1984), also points out the social condition implied by the vision; see pp. 275-78.

10. Morris Eaves, *William Blake's Theory of Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), analyzes Blake's application of line to imagination and visions; see pp. 9-44.

left side of the tablet. Normally, we read left to right. Yet the figure implies a new way of reading—right to left. He may also suggest that we have been deluded by our reading such codified laws. His right foot is firmly planted; oppositionally, his left foot is taking a step forward or backward, for weight rests on the ball of the foot. The movement of the left foot similarly suggests advancement in unconventional motions—new ways of seeing and of thinking.

In the lower left of the vision, there is a group of five figures. Four (three clearly visible) play along trumpets and look down. One lone figure, at the top of this cluster, looks towards the right. Usually associated with war and destruction, the images of flames and the Old Testament trumpets are juxtaposed with the law and covenant. The limitations of laws, it seems, merely entrap us and lead us to destruction.

In the upper left of the vision, a cluster of four figures holds the left, lower corner of the tablet. Supine, the central figure supports the weight of the tablet on his/her breast. He/she clasps the corner with his/her left hand and looks back over his/her shoulder to the left. The lower figure in the cluster of four looks down. The uppermost figure looks upward and to the right. If you look closely at all the figures depicted in the watercolor, even figures within clusters, you will see repeated pairings and oppositions as recurring patterns.

The revolving clusters of oppositional figures suggest the effect of a vortex, and their oppositional positions and glances suggest the effect of mirroring. Pairing enhances the expectation of the twofold and complementary tablets (and by extension the complementary laws of the Old and New Testaments). Yet the revolving figures also suggest different perspectives—different ways of viewing the incident. We frequently assume the flat, frontal, one-dimensional view of a picture. We become bound by that view, just as we become bound by one law, one covenant. And then we become slaves to that view, just as the obedient figure having the vision implies. We construct images that depict a mental structure, and then we become slaves to what we have constructed. We become victims of our own “-ologies,” and we depend on our own pictorial depictions of those “-ologies.” The iconography of seeing here encourages us to reevaluate our visions.

The painting projects a revisioning of what the covenant promised in orthodox interpretation. David Bindman, for example, observes that Moses bows in abject submission before Jehovah as he inscribes the unyielding Law of the Commandments.¹¹ The revolving figures, as we have seen, however, suggest different perspectives—different ways of viewing the incident, and our multidimensional view of the painting privileges the flat, frontal, and one-dimensional view that is as entrapping as the one law. Blake tries here to set us free from one view—that is the mental structure we depict and then to which we become enslaved.

With its contextual layers of religion, politics, epistemology, psychology, and

11. Bindman, p. 143.

history, the iconography of seeing encourages us to reevaluate our own visions. In another example of the 1795 large prints, "Satan Exulting over Eve" (II: pl. 389), for example, we see a winged figure with spear and shield appear over the supine figure of Eve, wrapped in a serpent.¹² Flames rage in the background. If we consider the pictorial prophecy as a conceptual design encouraging us to revise traditional biblical iconography, then the painting elicits active, reinterpretative efforts to reevaluate the myth of Eve in our culture. The division of the sexes represents yet another fallen vision, a limited way of seeing sexual and gender interactions. Similarly, in the 1805-1806 print "Job's Evil Dreams" (II: pl. 707), Job envisions above him a Urizenic figure wrapped in a snake and engulfed in lightning bolts. One of his hands points to a tablet of writing behind him. Below Job, we see three serpent-like and chained figures who are groping at his body. The questions we ask of the pictorial prophecy do not demand "what does this picture mean?" Rather, we explore a revision of the myth of Job to which we are traditionally bound. Like Job's dreams, our waking and sleeping visions are preconditioned by codified law (the tablets in the background), by our concepts of God and Satan (the snake around the Urizenic figure), and by our notions of heaven and hell (flames at the bottom versus lightning at the top of the print). The pictorial prophecy may not validate our theology; rather, it disturbs our comfortable interpretations.¹³ The theology lies not in the painting but in the process of seeing and interpreting.

In "A Vision of the Last Judgment," Blake tells us that his work is visionary and that the characters he paints are representations of those visions. Specific characters "are not here meant but the States Signified by those Names the Individuals being representatives or Visions of those States as they were revealed to Mortal Man in the Series of Divine Revelations" (p. 556). The characters or figures in Blake's pictorial prophecy, then, represent multiple contexts of meanings rather than one fixed reference or one specific individual. Several paintings recapitulate the same figures typologically.

We can apply Blake's "States Signified" concept to his 1794-1796 color print "Lucifer and the Pope in Hell" (II: pl. 349). Clad in a gown of scales, Lucifer leads the Pope to the left toward the flames of Hell. His spear (trident, an icon of power and tyranny) points the way. Stripped of ceremonial vestments and wearing only a plain, brownish-red cloth, the Pope looks with dismay toward the right—toward a dark void. The movement to the left and his look to the right are oppositional. The Pope's crown is depicted as a series of three layers which culminate in a conical point (like a dunce cap). The three layers comprise rings of jagged, triangular designs. The scope of his wisdom is as limited as his crown. He can see no farther than the black void from which he comes and to which he

12. Warner sees Satan and Elohim as variations of the hovering pose, a recurring form. The outstretched arms of the bat-winged Satan over the corpse suggest the separation of divine from human. The serpent-wrapped Eve connotes a spiritual death; see pp. 184-85. Irene H. Chayes, "Fallen Earth and Man in Nature: William Blake in Iconographic Tradition," *Studies in Iconography* 10 (1984-1986): 169-96, argues that the reclining or recumbent pose figures typify fallen earth and man in nature; see pp. 169-81.

13. Joseph A. Wicksteed, *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job* (1910; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1971), asserts that it is extremely doubtful how far Blake conceived Job's proverbial "patience" as being a virtue at all; see p. 16.



“Satan Exulting over Eve”



“Job’s Evil Dreams”



“Lucifer and the Pope in Hell”

looks. His hands are inoperative; they are tucked beneath the sleeves of his robe-cloth and are apparently held together. He can *do* nothing. His hands are tied.

Lucifer, whose wild hair creates the effect of a "natural" crown, does not look at the Pope. He looks toward the right shoulder of the viewer. His face and the Pope's face betray similar features. As manifestations of the same evil, patriarchal and deified force, they constitute Blake's "States Signified." Suggestive of war and tyranny, Lucifer's spear is an extension of his arm. He points it to the left, which is oppositional to the Pope's head turned to the right.

The fiery lake of hell on the left side of the canvas engulfs six figures. The three in the center are most clearly depicted. Only their heads and upper chests appear above the water in which they are suspended. They wear single-layered crowns. Each crown is shaped in the ring of jagged, triangular designs reflected in the Pope's crown and Lucifer's hair. The similarity of their headpieces suggests that these figures are lesser manifestations of "States Signified" represented in Lucifer and the Pope. Furthermore, the figures' facial features are the same as the Pope's and Lucifer's faces—terrified and despairing. Their beards of varying lengths may imply that they are older, decaying or usurped versions of the "States Signified" by Lucifer and the Pope. They depict the fate of evil, patriarchal, institutional representatives.

The figure on the far left of these three huddled heads looks toward Lucifer. He raises his right arm and hand above the water toward Lucifer. A snake entwines his arm. His countenance reflects wonder and awe. This figure signifies the plight of most humankind. Even as we are sinking in the snake pit of hell, how easily we are deluded by the power of Urizenic forces! To the right, the other two figures look toward the right shoulder of the viewer—as does Lucifer.

Of the other three figures, only portions of their heads are visible. The head on the far left of the picture is submerged in the lake. Only the eyes, hollow and unfixed, and the forehead remain above the water. Perhaps a skull lies next to him on the most extreme left side of the picture. To the right of the huddled three figures, a head appears to be partially shielded by the arm. One eye peeps out, vacant and unfocused. Behind him, a beardless head looks upward and towards Lucifer. Eyes, nose, and mouth dominate; all are open and empty. This figure especially suggests the result of knowledge empirically obtained by sensory perception—blank and useless. The other figures look up and out in opposition to their obvious descent into the lake of hell.

The flames of fire behind the lake of hell resemble the jagged, triangular designs in all the crowns and Lucifer's hair. Behind the flames, dark smoke rises in contrast to the sinking figures in the lake. A final opposition—the Pope's right foot clearly points to the left as his head looks to the right. These graphic oppositions signify the theological oppositions that exist between traditional conceptions of the Pope, God's representative on earth, and Lucifer. This is not, however, an orthodox treatment of that seeming opposition. Blake's watercolor asks us to see beyond that simplistic duality. If the Pope is God's emissary, his similarity to Lucifer and his destiny (the lake of hell) suggest that God too is a "State Signified" by evil, torture, tyranny, and horror. This design is not simply

an anti-Catholic statement. It calls into question a much broader orthodox view of religion and the anthropomorphic depiction of God. The Pope is like the King, who is like Lucifer, who is like God.

Using biblical subject matter to present the iconography of seeing, Blake depicts meta-visions, theological visions about the act of envisioning. In "Lucifer and the Pope in Hell," Blake challenges our view of religion and God by recasting theological authority figures as one type. Blake humanizes the projection of an evil deity in "Elohim Creating Adam." "God Writing upon the Tables of the Covenant" suggests new ways of seeing art and reading texts by disorienting orthodox imagery. "Satan Exulting over Eve" and "Job's Evil Dreams" reflect traditional biblical iconography but pose alternative interpretations of the Devil/Eve temptation myth and the narrative of Job's suffering.

All these Blakean watercolors challenge our preconceived mental constructs and suggest an alternative way of seeing or envisioning prophecy. They demand a revisionary and interpretative action which posits meaning in the process rather than the artwork itself. Terence Allan Hoagwood has pointed out that Blake's iconography may open, multiply, aggravate, and shift its implications, exploding norms into dynamic variability.¹⁴ This use of iconography is liberating as well as exciting. In Blake's later epics, characters resist the liberation the revisioning process of the pictorial prophecy impels. In *The Four Zoas*, characters are "locked in" by their own senses. Imagination is buried in dark oblivion until it is finally released and "the Expanding Eyes of Man behold the depth of wondrous worlds" (p. 406). For the inhabitants of Urizen's cities in *The Book of Urizen*, "the Senses inward rush'd shrinking,/Beneath the dark net of infection" and shrunken eyes are bound "by narrowing perceptions" (p. 82). Blake's pictorial prophecy enables us to break away from the chains of "inward shrunken senses" and to see the wondrous world through the eyes of imagination.

14. I am indebted to the considerable scholarship Terence Allan Hoagwood has contributed to Blake's pictorial prophecy. See "'God Blessing the Seventh Day': William Blake's Visions of God and His Biblical Watercolors," *Studia Mystica* 7.2 (Summer 1984): 65-77, and "Pictorial Apocalypse: Blake's 'Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun,'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 21.1 (March 1985): 11-21.