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Blake's Ways with Art Sources II: Some Versions of the Antique

by IRENE H. CHAYES

The recent changes in the critical approach to Blake—inspired, somewhat belatedly, by the linguistic, semiotic, and other word-centered methods already applied to other authors—unfortunately have left a whole area of basic Blake scholarship incomplete. Interest in his designs and their relation to existing visual art, which arose spontaneously in the early 1970s and led to promising beginnings in interdisciplinary inquiry, has faded, although there is much yet to be learned before broader critical and theoretical questions can be most profitably pursued. In the essay that follows, as in its companion and its predecessors, my concern is twofold: first, to identify the likely sources of Blake's knowledge of particular works of art belonging to the tradition he had inherited as an artist maturing in late eighteenth-century England; and secondly, to reconstruct as well as possible his ways of adopting and putting to use in his own work the varied images and motifs he encountered, whether in the sources proposed or through other means that were available to him.

Blake's knowledge and use of material from the art of the past is better documented for the art of the antique—which in his time meant almost exclusively sculpture, and Roman rather than genuinely Greek—than for that of any other period. According to Benjamin Heath Malkin, it was by copying "casts in plaster of the various antiques" that Blake learned to draw when at the age of ten he became a pupil at "Mr. Pars's drawing-school in the Strand." Similar copies have survived from later in his career in the form of pencil drawings and commercial engravings. That he also borrowed from the antique in his own art has been little in dispute among Blake scholars, although most have been content to accept or enlarge upon the limited source identifications made more than a generation ago by Anthony Blunt and Jean Hagstrum.


The means through which Blake would have had knowledge of antique art were plentiful. In the comment quoted above Malkin mentions casts, which could be purchased commercially; replicas of the most-admired works of classical sculpture were available in both public and private English collections. Blake also could have seen some of the same famous statues, either rendered directly or already adapted to new purposes by the artist-engravers of the Renaissance, among the old prints he had begun to collect while he was still a child. Further helpful precedents and even models would have been available in the drawings and designs by his contemporaries Romney, Barry, Fuseli, and Flaxman, all of whom had the advantage of having personally seen and studied the surviving classical monuments in Italy.

At somewhat further remove but no less important as sources were book illustrations, sometimes accompanied by textual description and commentary, of both the famous pieces and those less well known. The Abbé Montfaucon’s encyclopaedic work, L’Antiquité expliquée, et représentée en figures (1719-24; translated into English 1721-22), is today probably the best-known repository of such illustrations, one which has been cited as a source not only for Blake but also for other artists of his time, both English and European. It is not the only such source, however, nor always the best that would have been available. For those trying to reconstruct what Blake would have known of and used from ancient art, books from which Montfaucon took his illustrations or which were more specialized, perhaps classifiable more strictly as art books, may prove to be more enlightening.5

Especially noteworthy from the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth were the antiquarian volumes illustrating Roman monuments in engravings by Pietro Santi Bartoli, a forerunner of Piranesi in this respect. Those to be cited in this study are three: Admiranda Romanorum Antiquitatum, Gli Antichi Sepolcri, and Columna Cochlis M. Aurelio Antonino. Although Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (1764), his best-known work, contains only a few illustrations, his last publication, Monumenti Antichi Inediti (1767), is fully illustrated by engravings with commentary in Italian. By the end of the eighteenth century the great collections in Rome, from which selections already had been published numerous times under various headings, were represented in annotated catalogues by Giovanni Gaetano Bottari (the Capitoline Museum) and Ennio Quirino Visconti (the Pio-Clementine Museum at the Vatican and the Villa Borghese). Visconti’s seven-volume catalogue of the Pio-Clementine Museum (begun by his father and first published 1782-1807; reissued 1818-24) is said to have had “an impact on eighteenth-century archaeological studies second only to that of Winckelmann.”6

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5. For available source books not mentioned either here or in previous studies, see the very full Bibliography in Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900 (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1981) (hereafter abbreviated as H&P), pp. 344-65.
Although only a few of these books were translated, it can be assumed that copies had reached England and in one way or another would have been available to Blake by the 1790s when he began to make serious use of borrowings from existing art. Flaxman mentions or cites “the learned Visconti” in his Lectures on Sculpture and at one point lists for his students “the various collections [i.e., books] of antiquities,” most of which he says “are in the library of our academy.” Montfaucon (also cited passim) is the first author named in Flaxman’s list; Visconti can be recognized in “Museum Pium Clementinum” and “Borghese,” Bottari probably in “Museum Romanum.” Although Flaxman’s lectures at the Royal Academy did not begin until 1810, some of the information and judgments they include undoubtedly were part of his conversations with his friends after his return from Italy in 1794. Among those friends, who were likely to have been Blake’s friends as well, Fuseli not only owned a copy of Winckelmann’s Geschicchte but also translated other works by the same author into English. As has often been noted, a copy of his translation of Winckelmann’s Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks (1765) was in Blake’s library. Whichever of such books Blake was able to consult, or at least browse through, and whatever he did about the texts that were not translated, the illustrations would have spoken for themselves, serving as reminders of the art works he already knew and acquainting him with others he otherwise might never have learned about.

In the following sections I shall be considering Blake’s uses of images, mainly figural, from a necessarily limited selection of antique sculpture, which he could have seen in any of the forms of reproduction listed above. Most of the sources to be cited are identified here for the first time. The particular works that will be discussed in section II next are all free-standing statues belonging to the classical canon and much more admired in Blake’s time than they are today, but still famous and still historically important.

II

In his report of the “casts in plaster of the various antiques” used by the child Blake in drawing school, Malkin cites “the Gladiator, the Hercules, the Venus of Medicis.” Of the four plates Blake engraved for Abraham Rees’s Cyclopædia in 1815-1816 to accompany an essay by Flaxman on sculpture, plate III (Fig. 1) is devoted to the Venus de’ Medici, the Apollo Belvedere, and the Laocoön; “Hercules Farnese” appears on the preceding plate. A few years later (c. 1820) Blake made a separate engraving of the Laocoön, which, because of the

Fig. 1. Blake, engraving, Rees, *Cyclopaedia*, “Sculpture,” pl. III. Dept. of Prints and Drawings, British Museum. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
extensive text inscribed on the same plate, is now one of his best-known graphic works. These statues—or more precisely, the surviving statues associated with these names, together with some others less well known today—were all included in the canon of antique sculpture which had been inherited from Pliny, largely by way of Vasari, and was still authoritative in Blake’s lifetime.

In a noteworthy passage in A Descriptive Catalogue (1809), Blake himself lists three of the same prestigious names—“Hercules Farnese, Venus of Medici, Apollo Belvidere [sic]” (E531)—as examples of “the grand works of ancient art” which, he says, were actually copies “from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs.” Some of these greater works, which he calls “stupendous” and “wonderful” originals, he announces he has seen, “having been taken in vision into the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia.” These passages have been read primarily as an oblique statement of Blake’s personal theory of art. In a contemporary context, however, they reflected an important advance toward modern art history that was already under way before the end of the eighteenth century.

On the basis of flaws he observed in their style and workmanship, the German painter, Anton Raphael Mengs, had proposed that such famous and even revered statues as, again, the Apollo Belvedere, Venus de’ Medici, and Farnese Hercules, plus the Niobe Group, were not Greek work, as had been widely believed, but actually Greco-Roman copies of better originals since lost. Mengs’s arguments are said to have had their “most fruitful initial impact” in England, where his writings were published in translation in 1796, and it has been suggested that Blake may have been influenced by his copy theory, either directly or through James Barry.

A practical application of Blake’s own copy theory, along with his idiosyncratic reidentification of the famous family group, appears in the inscription at the bottom of his separate engraving of the Laocoon: “[Jehovah] & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact or History of Ilium” (E273). Even when it was reluctantly accepted that they were copies, the familiar canonical statues continued to be admired for their own sake. Blake himself, in
The passage from *A Descriptive Catalogue* quoted above, calls them “grand,” and his copies, “fine ones,” “justly admired.” It might have been expected that at one time or another he would draw directly on these famous and ambivalently regarded works of sculpture for figures of his own, and to a limited extent he did.

The *Apollo Belvedere*, once one of the two most famous statues in the Western world (the other of course was the *Laocoön*, displayed in the same Vatican courtyard), was not only engraved by Blake for Rees’s *Cyclopaedia*. As a statue, it is parodied in *The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods* (also known as *The Flight of Apollo’s Spirit and Apollo and the Pagan Deities*) among his watercolor illustrations to Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” which exists in two separate sets, now housed at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester (1809), and the Huntington Library and Art Gallery (c. 1815). (See Butlin, I, cat. no. 538, pp. 389-92, and cat. no. 542, pp. 392-94, respectively.) In both versions, although relatively more faithfully in the Huntington, the major parts of the original pose—opposing arm gestures (Blake included the restored right arm), turn of the head, offset relation of the feet—have been preserved. In their overall effect, however, the passively standing figures differ markedly from the statue, in which Apollo has just released an arrow from his bow and has not yet relaxed his shooting stance. In Winckelmann’s famous description, “He has pursued the Python, against which he uses his bow for the first time; with rigorous step he has overtaken the monster and slain it. His lofty look, filled with consciousness of power, seems to rise far above his victory, and to gaze into infinity.”

The supplementary details are modified also. In the Whitworth version (Butlin, II, pl. 663) Apollo is accompanied only by the serpent, originally shown climbing the supporting tree trunk, which has been lengthened and is held stretched out in his hands, with its tail and a large coil of its body flattened under his feet. In the Huntington version (back cover), the draperies and the tree trunk are retained, but the serpent, wound about the trunk, has become a scaly and eering caricature, like the serpent of Eden in Blake’s similar series of illustrations to *Paradise Lost*. Arrows and a bow (long missing from the original) have been added, but the bow is unstrung and the arrows are still in the quiver. In both versions the sculptured god not only is shown to be disarmed and powerless as his spirit departs precipitously. (Cf. Milton’s text: “Apollo from his shrine / Can no more divine, /With hollow shreik the steep of Delphos leaving.”) In both, also, he serpent body and the lifeless statue become reflections of each other, pictorial synonyms, each representing the material remains of what once was the classical deal of the “human form divine.”

17. H&P, no. 8, pp. 148-51 and fig. 77.
19. For the material, or “corporeal,” body visualized as a reptile form, cf., e.g., the serpent crucifixions in one of *Blake’s Last Judgment* drawings (Butlin, II, pl. 871) and, among his illustrations to *Paradise Lost*, *Michael orettells the Crucifixion* (Butlin, II, pl. 659). See also *The Everlasting Gospel* [i], ll. 52-54 (ES24). For examples fotter, and differing, interpretations of the role of Blake’s Apollo, see Stephen C. Behrendt, “Blake’s Illustrations to Milton’s Nativity Ode,” *Philological Quarterly*, 55 (1976), 85-86, and Pamela Dunbar, *William Blake’s Illustrations to Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 103-07.
In Blake’s time the female companion in fame to the \textit{Apollo Belvedere} was the \textit{Venus de' Medici}, admired as the model of ideal feminine beauty and widely copied.\textsuperscript{20} Slightly modified so that the head is inclined toward the right shoulder rather than the left, and retaining the famous double “pudica” gesture, her attitude appears as that of Cambel in the design on plate 81 of Blake’s long poem \textit{Jerusalem} (c. 1804-20) (IB, p. 360). A similar inclination of the head, together with a single shielding gesture, identifies the figure of Venus herself in the separate drawing \textit{The Judgment of Paris} (1811?) (Butlin, II, pl. 964). Less directly but more interestingly, the Medici statue is echoed also in two earlier designs from Blake’s illuminated books.

One is plate 21 of \textit{The Book of Urizen} (1794) (Fig. 2), in which the Oedipal group is a parody of the many scenes in Renaissance prints of Venus and Cupid with Mars or Vulcan. Because she is being embraced by the importunate boy Orc, Enitharmon’s head is lower than the head in the statue and only one hand can be seen; the shielding gesture is absent. Otherwise, with her sharp profile and bent right leg she can be recognized without much difficulty as a version of the famous Venus. Earlier still, and the most surprising, is the standing figure on the title page of \textit{The Book of Thel} (1789) (IB, p. 34), usually accepted as Thel herself. Although her hands are at her sides, one holding a shepherd’s crook, and she is not nude, she has assumed what otherwise is unmistakably the Venus pose. Inappropriate though that pose and its traditional associations may seem for the virgin Thel, a composite figure including an allusion to Venus as such would not be out of place on this particular plate, which introduces the poem. One point of consideration would be the role of Spenser’s Venus in the Garden of Adonis episode in \textit{The Faerie Queene} (III.vi.29 et seq.), which is evoked by parts of Blake’s text as well as by the rest of the title-page design.\textsuperscript{21}

Two other famous statues which Blake engraved for Rees’s \textit{Cyclopaedia} (pls. I, II), \textit{Jupiter Olympias} and the \textit{Farnese Hercules},\textsuperscript{22} are reflected tangentially in his own art. On the last plate of \textit{The Book of Urizen} (IB, p. 210) Urizen, reduced to Lilliputian size and imprisoned in the Net of Religion, is a contrary parody of the frontally enthroned Jupiter, originally a figure of heroic proportions. In the watercolor drawing (no. 537) that ends Blake’s series of illustrations to Edward Young’s \textit{Night Thoughts}, Samson in the act of destroying the temple has bulging muscles which only slightly exaggerate those of the \textit{Farnese Hercules}.\textsuperscript{23} Hercules, however, is standing in repose and has a tightly curled beard; Blake’s straining Samson is clean shaven except for anomalous sideburns.

At one time it was believed that the \textit{Belvedere Torso}\textsuperscript{24} had belonged to a figure of Hercules also. In the passage from \textit{A Descriptive Catalogue} previously quoted, “the Torso” is cited as “perhaps . . . the only original work remaining”

\textsuperscript{20} H&P, no. 88, pp. 325-28 and fig. 173.
\textsuperscript{22} Repro. Blake in His Time, pls. 108, 109.
\textsuperscript{23} On the \textit{Farnese Hercules}, see H&P, no. 46, pp. 229-32 and fig. 118. Flaxman’s comment on the Jupiter (Lectures on Sculpture, p. 87 and pl. 20) includes the notation that the statue is sixty feet high.
\textsuperscript{24} H&P, no. 80, pp. 311-14 and fig. 165.
Fig. 2. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, Copy B, pl. 21. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. (PML 63139 pl. 21.)
of the supposed Asiatic masterpieces of Blake’s visions (E531). This is another judgment Blake shared with or perhaps adopted from Mengs, who excepted only the Torso and the so-called Borghese Warrior from his category of inferior copies. Blake may have heard about the celebrated fragment from Flaxman in particular, who tried to restore the missing parts by incorporating the Torso in a clay model of his Hercules and Hebe (1792). Blake himself seems to have made a similar effort, incorporating the powerful chest in at least two of his anatomically distorted figures: the inverted male nude on plate 5 of America: A Prophecy (1793; IB, p. 143) and the giant in Antaeus Setting Down Dante and Virgil (front cover). A third might be added: the father in the separate engraving of the Laocoon, which includes other minor modifications of the original group.25

Given the fame and prestige of these works of antique sculpture, any recognizable use of them by subsequent artists was inevitably allusive, whatever the artists’ immediate and conscious intentions may have been. In the Blake designs that have been cited, some of which are parodies, allusion would have been intentional in varying degrees. In particular cases it would have involved conscious copying, not of course from the original but from a reproduction which itself had been made at second or third remove. Despite his later theory of lost archetypal originals and surviving but inferior copies, Blake generally defended the act of copying from existing works of art (which would have included those that, according to his account of art history, were copies themselves) as a practice both necessary and desirable on the part of individual artists.26 It clearly was a practice of his own in the two versions of The Overthrow of Apollo, for which he probably made the basic copy of the Apollo Belvedere from a model, a cast or print or an illustration in a book, placed directly before him. That neither drawing fully duplicates the original pose can be considered functional as well as intentional. The static character of the resulting Blake figures Reinforces the contrast between the abandoned body—including perhaps the “body” of pagan belief henceforth to be displaced by Christianity—and the spirit departing from it, which is in keeping with the general prophecy in Milton’s poem.

Yet, when all three are compared to a modern photograph (see H&P, fig. 77), Blake’s reproduction for Rees’s Cyclopaedia (Fig. 1) turns out to be less accurate than either of the modified Apollos in his Milton drawings. The body is thicker through the middle than in the original sculpture and has been rotated further toward the right; the arms are adjusted to the absence of the bow so that the right hand in particular is reduced to a foppish gesture; the profile head seems to have been taken from a different and smaller statue. The overall effect is perilously close to that of Canova’s Perseus (1804-06), which Kenneth Clark called “a fashion-plate version of the Apollo Belvedere” holding “a caricature of the
Rondanini Medusa.”27 In contrast to both faulty Apollos is Joshua Reynolds’s much earlier version in his portrait of Augustus Keppel (1753-54). The figure there is the Apollo Belvedere in incongruous eighteenth-century dress, yet Reynolds had succeeded in capturing a sense of the constrained movement in the original which later eluded Blake and Canova alike.28

With respect to the Venus de’ Medici the figures that have been cited above from Blake’s illuminated books are better characterized as adaptations than as copies. Urizen 21 well illustrates the difference. The figure of Enitharmon is integrated into the scene in which she appears rather than being offered as an object in itself; even without the signature gesture, her thematic connection with Venus through her relation to the other two figures corroborates the visual evidence of her pose. Moreover, seen as a whole figure, Enitharmon in Urizen 21 is more like the original Venus de’ Medici than is the oddly short-waisted and wide-hipped Venus in Blake’s illustration for Rees’s Cyclopaedia (Fig. 1).

Despite his defense of copying as a regular artist’s practice, Blake’s more typical use of his art borrowings from any period was by adaptation and subsequent variation, which—with him as with the many artists both earlier and later who used much the same method—was most successful when it allowed the original form to be recognized in unexpected surroundings, serving a new and often radically different purpose, yet not violating the original limits of plausibility. In this sense, most of the borrowings from the antique to be discussed in the next three sections are adaptations rather than copies.29 However, the originals in these instances were not statues in the round, as nearly all the famous canonical works of sculpture were, but reliefs, which varied widely in size and kind and in their suitability to reproduction of the kind that multiplied plaster Apollos and Venuses far beyond the sites of the originals. It can be safely assumed that Blake’s acquaintance with the following selections, except possibly some of those discussed in section V, would have been limited to what he could see in prints or drawings and book illustrations, supplemented when necessary by information from Flaxman or Fuseli.

III

The Sculptural Reliefs Blake could have known about ranged in size from wall friezes, public monuments, and sarcophagi to embossed vases (like the famous Portland Vase, which Blake engraved in 1791 for Erasmus Darwin’s The

28. See Ellis K. Waterhouse, Reynolds (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner, 1941), pl. 27. Although the combination is lacking in his two versions of Overthrow and his Rees engraving, Blake apparently sought to embody beauty and power of the kind long admired in the Apollo Belvedere in two very differently posed sun gods, which illustrate Gray’s “The Progress of Poesy” (c. 1797) and Milton’s “L’Allegro” (c. 1816-20). See William Blake’s Water-Colors Illustrating the Poems of Thomas Gray, introd. and comm. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: J. Philip O’Hara, in association with Trianon Press, Paris, 1972), “Hyperion’s march they spy & glittering shafts of war” (for page 86, ms. no. 6); The Sun at His Eastern Gate (Butlin, II, p. 674).
29. A work of antique sculpture not considered here which Blake successfully adapted and varied in a number of designs, including another of his illustrations to Milton’s “Nativity Ode,” was the so-called Sleeping Hermaphrodite; see my “Fallen Earth and Man in Nature,” esp. secs. I and IV.
Blake depicted reliefs in his own designs, as on the symbolic cup held by the Whore of Babylon (Butlin, II, pl. 584) and as part of the interior architecture in *Job and His Daughters* from his *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (engraved version, 1826). The "bright sculptures of Los’s Halls," which preserve the archetypes of human life, “all that can happen to Man in his pilgrimage of seventy years” (*Jerusalem*, 16:61-67, E161), clearly were conceived of as reliefs also. Blake’s summary of Los’s carvings (“every pathetic story possible to happen from Hate or / Wayward Love & every sorrow & distress”) recalls his *Songs*, at least those of Experience, “bright” in their illuminated printing. He may well have come to think of his own graven works, especially those in relief etching, as a form of bas relief, and himself as a sculptor in a more specific sense than was suggested by the conventional engraver’s signaure, in his time still prefixed by “sculpsit.”

Two individual figures long accepted as borrowings by Blake by way of book illustrations were originally from antique bas reliefs: one or another of the four Greek wind gods represented on the Tower of the Winds, Athens, probably through an engraving in Stuart and Revett’s *The Antiquities of Athens* (1762); and Jupiter Pluvius, from the Marcus Aurelius column in Rome, which appears in *The Fertilization of Egypt*, engraved by Blake after a design by Fuseli for, again, Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* (1791). A relief not previously mentioned which would have been as easily accessible to Blake as the wind gods or Jupiter Pluvius was the so-called *Borghese Dancers*, also called the *Nuptial Chorus* or *Dancing Hours* (Fig. 3), which was well known in eighteenth-century England. The original was a neo-Attic frieze from the collection of antiquities at the Villa Borghese in Rome which was purchased in 1807 by Napoleon Bonaparte and later installed in the Louvre. The frieze, admired by Poussin among others, had been frequently copied; engravings were included in François Perrier’s *Icones et Segmenta* and Bartoli’s *Admiranda*. Probably using the engraving by Bartoli, Flaxman adapted and enlarged the whole group as *The Dancing Hours*, a relief he designed for Josiah Wedgwood in 1778; Fuseli made a pencil and chalk drawing of the central figure which has been dated between 1790 and 1800. In
Fig. 4. Blake, illustrations to Young’s *Night Thoughts*, no. 339. Pen and watercolor. Dept. of Prints and Drawings, British Museum. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
the frieze as a whole, this particular Dancer unites the two pairs of her fellow performers by looking toward the right, the direction in which one pair is moving, while her feet are taking her with the other pair toward the left.

Most likely it was from Fuseli’s drawing that Blake took the suggestion for his own Night Thoughts drawing no. 339 (Fig. 4), illustrating the line he himself marked, “A Christian dwells, like Uriel, in the Sun.” (See Night VII, p. 67, l. 1355.) Although Blake’s figure seems to be male and the orientation is shifted from right to left, the details of reverted head, extended arms, and legs striding amid flowing draperies identify its probable origin. While Young’s literary metaphor obviously was intended to be positive, Blake’s illustration is unavoidably ambiguous when it is compared to designs like the famous Ancient of Days, the frontispiece to Europe: A Prophecy (1794; IB, p. 156), which at the time of the Night Thoughts project (c. 1795-97) would have been of recent composition, and Milton, plate 47(IB, p. 263). The enclosed figures in both have the power to reach down from the solar sphere (the Demiurge in the Europe frontispiece) or to step out from it (Los in Milton 47). In contrast, the Christian in NT 339 may appear to be actually trapped inside his sun, unable to move in the direction of either his gaze or his interrupted step. In this respect, his condition could be compared to that of Urizen inside his protective but imprisoning “dark globe,” which in context is a primeval form of both the terrestrial globe and the self-isolating human mind within its bony skull. (See The Book of Urizen, 5:28-37; E73.) Blake’s readers, too, may be reminded of the satiric epigram “To God,” written in his Notebook: “If you have formd a Circle to go into/Go into it yourself & see how you would do” (E516).

On the other hand, the attraction Blake found in the line of verse he marked for illustration may have been the technical challenge of a literal visualization, how to place a human figure inside a circle (in none of the designs cited is there a sphere in the strict sense of the word) with the greatest economy of means. The Christian’s stride is somewhat broader than that of the antique Dancer and his arms are raised slightly higher; the figure is so well accommodated to the surrounding circle that the line forming the circumference could be drawn by connecting the five points indicated by both feet, both hands, and the head. Conversely, the same five points in themselves could have given rise to the idea of a circle which when completed would enclose the figure and thereby serve as a useful two-dimensional image of Young’s habitable sun of faith. Because of the close relationship between form and meaning, the abstract and the concrete, while the original dancing attitude remains recognizable and is not negated by its new function, NT 339 is the most successful of all the adaptations under consideration here.

The Borghese Dancers was represented on a frieze in relatively low relief. Another kind of sculptural relief, carved on the walls of antique sarcophagi, once had almost as great an influence on European art as the famous statues, providing

35. See also the combination of human postures and geometric figures, including the circle, in the diagrams of Vitruvius, as discussed and illustrated by Flaxman (Lectures on Sculpture, p. 56 and pl. 26).
Fig. 5. Blake, *America: A Prophecy*; Copy E, pl. 9. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
figural poses, incidental motifs, and even whole scenes to painters from the early Renaissance onward. One obvious reason for the appeal of sarcophagus reliefs was that the size and the rectangular shape of the side walls permitted condensed narrative scenes from classical mythology and, later, Christian "histories" which were mines of iconographic detail. The names under which most of the pagan sarcophagi were classified by nineteenth-century scholars indicate their literary and mythological character: Troy, Odysseus, Orestes, Oedipus; Actaeon, Adonis, Meleager, Marsyas; Orpheus, Prometheus, Proserpine, Endymion. For his students’ “contemplation and imitation in basso-relievo,” Flaxman recommended “above all, the ancient Sarcophagi, which present a magnificent collection of compositions from the great poets of antiquity . . . the systems of ancient philosophy, mysteries, initiations, and mythology.” Moreover, “the study of these will give the young artist the true principles of composition, with effect, and without confusion, to produce the chief interest of his subject by grand lines of figures, without the intrusion of useless, impertinent, or trivial objects.”

Some of the best-known sarcophagi from Renaissance collections or the great Roman museums were illustrated in the catalogues and encyclopaedic volumes that would have been available to Blake. The “grand lines of figures” singled out for admiring mention by Flaxman may have had some remote, contributory influence (among the other influences that have been suggested) on the processional arrangements of the participants in two of Blake’s separate works: Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the Nine and Twenty Pilgrims on Their Journey to Canterbury (c. 1808–10), in both painted and engraved versions, and his watercolor painting The Characters in Spenser’s Faerie Queene (c. 1825). On the evidence of designs from the same early period as those discussed in the preceding sections, however, in the illustrations of sarcophagi he was able to see Blake was less interested in the episodes depicted on the sarcophagus walls than in separate figures or motifs. My first example is an image which is the smallest and least conspicuous of the many in a crowded and intricate composition and reappears in several of Blake’s designs with little or no modification.

IV

From time to time Blake commentators have wondered about the recurring small corpse, apparently a child’s, which is seen, for example, under bending stalks of wheat at the bottom of plate 9 in America: A Prophecy (Fig. 5). With virtually no variation except in orientation and relative size, the same image is seen in other designs of the same period: There Is No Natural Religion (b) (c. 1788), plate 4; The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (c. 1790–93), plate 14; “Holy

36. See Carl Robert, Die antiken Sarkophag-Reliefs (Berlin; Grote, .1890-1919), Vol. III.
37. Lectures on Sculpture, pp. 287–88. Flaxman copied sarcophagus reliefs when he was in Rome and made use of sarcophagus themes in his own designs; see Whinney, “Flaxman and the Eighteenth Century,” p. 276 and pls. 55a, 55f.
Thursday” (Songs of Experience, 1794); The Book of Urizen (1794), plate 28; Europe: A Prophecy (1794), plate 6;39 also NT 13 and 19. Recently it has been suggested that the doll-like figure in “Holy Thursday,” in particular, represents one of the “dropped” children of eighteenth-century England, abandoned by parents too poor to care for them; The Foundlings, a design by Hogarth (1739), illustrates just such a situation.40 But Hogarth’s dropped infant seems to be alive, with waving arms and kicking legs. Blake’s rigidly horizontal figure is more like the small, supine corpse included in the relief on one of the Prometheus sarcophagi (c. 3rd century, A.D.), once in the Villa Doria-Pamphili and Albani collections before going to the Capitoline Museum, where it is now on display. Engravings of this relief, as a whole or in selected parts, had been published in Bartoli’s Admiranda Romanorum Antiquitatum, Bottari’s Musei Capitolini, and other works which borrowed from one or the other. Moreover, the Prometheus sarcophagus is mentioned (as “an antient sarcophagus,” along with a citation to Bartoli’s Admiranda), by Erasmus Darwin in the edition of The Botanic Garden for which Blake engraved the Portland Vase and The Fertilization of Egypt.41

Blake’s rigid small figure is more compact than that in the relief on the Prometheus sarcophagus and especially than that in the second of Bartoli’s two engravings (Fig. 6); in the latter the legs are slightly apart and the one visible arm lies beside rather than against the body. Lines of age, too, are indicated on the face, and in the full scene the corpse is not necessarily a child’s. (The lid bearing the effigy of a dead child, which covers the Prometheus sarcophagus today but does not appear in Bartoli’s engravings, came from another sarcophagus.42) Nevertheless, in Fig. 6 there is a distinct size difference between the gods, who are the major figures in the composition, and all the others, including the corpse; to transform the latter into the body of a dead child would have been a plausible step in any borrowing. In Blake’s illuminated works of the mid-1790s, moreover, the term and image of a child or children is likely to refer to confused, victimized, or erring persons generally, regardless of age. See, e.g., his emblem series The Gates of Paradise (IB, p. 268), subtitled For the Sexes in the reissue of c. 1818; in the original edition (1793) it was designated For Children.

Blake might have been expected to be independently interested in the thematic groups that make up the Prometheus relief as a whole,43 which in Bartoli’s engravings is inscribed with a title, “Vita et Mors Hominis ex Fabulis et Mystica Antiquorum Philosophia”; the individual mythological figures are numbered and identified by name. In plate 66, the first engraving (from the central and left-

39. IB, pp. 30, 111, 75, 210, 164.
42. Panofsky, op. cit., p. 30.
43. For a detailed description, see H. S. Jones, Catalogue of the Sculptures of the Museo Capitolino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), pp. 142-43. Bartoli’s engravings reverse the left-to-right order of the figures in each half of the relief, regroup some figures, and modify some of the poses.
Fig. 6. Prometheus Sarcophagus (detail); Bartoli, *Admiranda Romanorum Antiquitatum*, pl. 67. Library of Congress.
hand groups in the relief), Prometheus is using a tool to shape a small human figure; a similar creation, finished but still inanimate, stands on a pedestal nearby. Both, representing potential life, thus are replacements for the person who has just died. In the middle, at the bottom, Cupid and the butterfly-winged Psyche are embracing: a familiar pair in antique art, personifying Love and the human soul. A butterfly in itself was an even more ancient symbol of the soul, and both Psyche and butterfly imagery help to unite and balance the two halves of the scene. In Bartoli’s plate 66 (omitted here), Minerva is about to animate the clay figure Prometheus is making by placing a butterfly on the head. In plate 67 (Fig. 6), from the right-hand half of the relief, another butterfly hovers over the supine corpse, symbolizing the departing soul; above and to the left, another figure of Psyche, as the “purged” soul, is being led away by Mercury “in felice regione.”

Like many of his contemporaries, Blake was attracted by the myth of Cupid and Psyche and its iconography; not merely the final winged state of the butterfly but its full life cycle was one of his biological metaphors for the life of man in nature. In the present context, butterfly imagery is an important link between the Capitoline Prometheus relief and Blake’s recurring small corpse, which in America suggests both premature death in nature, along with the wheat struck down before harvest, and a new life protected as in a nest by the same fallen wheat.

Sarcophagus reliefs varied widely in depth, some being hardly more than outlines incised in the marble while others (in comparison, the Prometheus sarcophagus just discussed is of moderate depth) were cut so deeply that the figures were almost separated from the ground. Yet designs carved on the outer walls were not the only sarcophagus sculpture. Individually, or sometimes as couples or family groups, figures representing the deceased were conventionally mounted on the heavy stone lids. Since such figures were not subject to the external limitations of the reliefs, which had to fit the given rectangular space, they often had the appearance of statues in the round, especially in book illustrations that omitted the sarcophagi proper. In an important respect these representations differed from the mediaeval tomb effigies of which Blake had made drawings when he was an apprentice working in Westminster Abbey. Like the small corpse on the Prometheus sarcophagus, the Abbey effigies lie supine with closed eyes and stiffly composed limbs. In contrast, the Roman deceased, and even more the Etruscan, were typically portrayed much as in life, reclining but alert and disconcertingly able to meet the beholder’s gaze with wide-open eyes.

It is not the mediaeval but the antique Etruscan and Roman pose, with its accompanying gaze, that is reflected in one of Blake’s drawings to his early poem Tiriel (c. 1788-89). In Har and Heva Bathing: Mnetha Looking On, the figure

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44. See my “The Presence of Cupid and Psyche,” esp. secs. II and III.
45. See, e.g., Butlin, II, pls. 4, 19, 22.
46. See Panofsky, Tomb Sculpture, p. 29 and figs. 84-86.
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of Mnetha reclining on a river bank is abnormally elongated, with curiously boneless legs; what can be seen of the bank beneath her, which is barely out of the water, resembles the slab of stone that formed the sarcophagus lid. There are, of course, many reclining or recumbent figures in antique and Renaissance art as there are in Blake’s own art; but it is in sarcophagus figures or those derived from sarcophagus figures (for example, Botticelli’s Venus and Mars) that the lower half of the body, almost always covered by drapery, acquires an appearance of inert, architectural weight as it merges into the supporting stone slab.

One specific example of sarcophagus statuary that Blake could have seen in the available secondary sources was of an overlapping pair of figures, known as the Emperor Alexander Severus and his mother. Their sarcophagus was among the subjects of Bartoli’s engravings in Gli Antichi Sepolcri; it was reproduced (apparently from Bartoli) by Montfaucon (Fig. 7) and is included in Bottari’s Musei Capitolini.48 There may be an imperfect memory of the reclining and fixedly staring imperial couple, or at least of the type to which they belong, in Blake’s separate drawing Oberon and Titania on a Lily (c. 1790-93; Butlin, II, pl. 294). Mnetha in the Tiriel drawing similarly is related to the type of female figure represented by the Emperor’s mother.49

Less obvious than the gaze and pose but more directly relevant to Blake in the same engraving is the narrow, decorative frieze along what must be the edge of the sarcophagus lid, made up of three hunting scenes. In the identical first and third scenes a stag is being chased by dogs. The stag that has been noted among the interlinear or marginal motifs in three different designs by Blake, one of the minutest of his “minute particulars,” is similarly arrested in a leaping attitude, with front legs raised, although no pursuers are shown.50 There appears to be no thematic reason why a stag as such should be needed in any of those designs; it is merely one among the animal and plant motifs of heterogeneous origin that Blake used as incidental decoration in his illuminated books. Tiny though its details are, the sarcophagus frieze may have caught his eye because it is engraved in simple outline, in contrast to the heavily crosshatched figures immediately above.

Many years later a less awkward version of Mnetha’s pose returned at the bottom of Jerusalem 93 (IB, p. 372), where a nude woman is reclining amid flames. More clearly than Mnetha, she is resting on what appears to be a stone slab, probably intended to represent the cover of a tomb; together with the figure, however, it more plausibly suggests the lid of an effigy-bearing sarcophagus as in Fig. 7. In relation to Blake’s text on the same plate (E253-54), which concludes “the Graves thunder under their feet,” the surrounding flames probably are those

48. Bartoli, Antichi Sepolcri, II, pl. 81; Montfaucon, Antiquity Explained, V, 66-67 and pl. XXIII, no. 1; Bottari, Musei Capitolini, IV, pl. 1.
49. See also The Song of Los, p. 5 (IB, p. 178). For a pose like Mnetha’s, although different in detail, see Bartoli, Antichi Sepolcri, II, pl. 91 (“Una Sepolcrale Etrusca”). According to Butlin (I, cat. no. 198 #2, p. 79) the intersecting profiles of Har and Heva in Blake’s drawing were derived from James Barry’s painting Jupiter and Juno on Mt. Ida. Cf. also the face-to-face Etruscan relief reproduced by Panofsky, Tomb Sculpture, fig. 78.
50. See IB, pp. 123 (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 26), 155 (America, pl. 16), 381 (The Ghost of Abel). Erdman (IB, p. 155) sees a fourth stag in the background of The Archangel Raphael with Adam and Eve (or Raphael Warns Adam and Eve; Butlin, II, pl. 650).
Fig. 7. Sarcophagus of Emperor Alexander Severus and his mother (detail); Montfaucon, *Antiquity Explained*, Vol. V, pl. XXIII. Library of Congress.
of the Last Judgment, and in the context of the poem the woman is a composite of Jerusalem and Vala, awaiting resurrection from her half-tomb and half-grave in nature. By the juxtaposition of the designs, she also represents a promise of similar resurrection to the fallen Albion, who at the top of the next plate (IB, p. 373) is still lying on his wave-washed rock.

There is a third related design, among Blake’s watercolor illustrations to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (1824-27), which echoes both the burning tomb and the calmly reclining attitude of Jerusalem-Vala in *Jerusalem* 93. The figure of Capaneus in *Capaneus the Blasphemer* has been compared to the statue in the Vatican collection personifying the river Nile. Although the positions of the legs of the two figures are similar, there is nothing in Blake’s drawing to correspond to the most memorable aspect of *The Nile*: the many putti, the Nile’s “children,” who are placed on and about the bearded figure, signifying the height (sixteen cubits) the river could reach during its beneficial annual flooding. Further, Capaneus is surrounded by flames, in contrast to the stylized waves and Egyptian river scenes on the base of the *Nile* statue. In view of Capaneus’ fiery punishment, it seems likely that Blake was thinking of a model no more distant than his own design for *Jerusalem* 93.

**V**

**Engraved Gems**, whether intaglios or cameos (i.e., with designs incised or raised; only the latter, of course, are true reliefs), had been prized collectors’ items in antiquity and again in the Renaissance. In the eighteenth century, under the influence of the Neoclassical movement, there was a revival of interest on the part of both collectors and artists and a larger public, which knew of famous individual gems from book illustrations, adaptations of the designs, or the paste reproductions by James Tassie. The older Blake was reflecting the popular interest in his own way when among the inscriptions on his separate engraving of the *Laocoon* he reidentified the gems: “What we call Antique Gems are the Gems of Aaron’s Breast Plate” (E274). Blake himself, according to the testimony of Samuel Palmer, admired “some of the inventions preserved in the Antique Gems” equally with “Michael Angelo, the Last Supper of Da Vinci, the Torso Belvedere.”

In the book illustrations accessible to Blake the method of reproduction was likely to be line engraving, which even when it was relatively faithful to the original works inevitably minimized their differences and disparities in size and kind or state of preservation. The levelling effect of such illustrations was greatest on engraved gems, the smallest works of antique sculpture, whose flaws

52. See H&P, no. 65, pp. 272-73 and fig. 142; also E. Q. Visconti, *Il Museo Pio-Clementino*, 1 (Milan, 1818), 222-31 and pl. XXXVII.
and occasional crudities (as revealed in modern photographs) were removed at
the same time that their size was magnified. On a page of miscellaneous images,
such as Montfaucon assembled to illustrate common themes or the iconography
of particular mythological personages, a gem design, whether incised or raised,
might appear to be little different from a free-standing statue or a detail from a
sarcophagus frieze. When among his annotations of the late 1790s to Reynolds’s
Discourses Blake wrote, “The Greek Gems are in the Same Style as the Greek
Statues” (Discourse IV, p. 94; E651), he was repeating what was very close to
a critical commonplace of the time; some designs were considered to be copies
of famous statues or were attributed to the same sculptors.

Engraved gems were illustrated in the standard catalogues and collections:
Montfaucon, Visconti, Winckelmann’s Monumenti and (as occasional vignettes)
his Geschichte. There were also catalogues devoted to gems alone, such as those
by Bartoli and Micheangelo Causeo de La Chausse (1704); by Winckelmann,
of the collection of the Baron Stosch (1760); and by Raspé (two volumes, with
annotations in French and English), of specimens from “the most celebrated
cabinets in Europe” which had been reproduced by Tassie (1791). The themes
from classical mythology represented on engraved gems are similar to those in
sarcophagus reliefs, but by necessity the images tend to be symbolic or allusive
rather than parts of visual narrative. I have suggested elsewhere that certain of
Blake’s pictorial motifs were derived from gem designs representing Cupid and
Psyche, especially those in which Psyche, the soul, is being symbolically
tortured by love in the person of Cupid.54 The type of enigmatic imagery found
in some of the more complex gem designs is paralleled in two of Blake’s own
designs: the neonatal group in the blossom at the head of “Infant Joy” (IB, p. 66),
which includes a figure fully in keeping with the traditional iconography of the
butterfly-winged Psyche, and again in NT 272, where a somewhat sinister fairy
is holding a butterfly larva in her hands.55

To represent this, the last category of antique sculpture under consideration
here, I have selected two specific engraved gem designs which Blake adapted,
or tried to adapt, in more than an incidental way. Prometheus Creating Man,
a design on a gray jasper (Fig. 8), was illustrated first in Bartoli and La Chausse
and repeated by Montfaucon; there are brief entries without illustration in
Winckelmann’s Stosch catalogue and in Raspé’s own catalogue.56 As on the
Prometheus sarcophagus, the subject is the creation of man by Prometheus, but
with the difference that here the work in progress is a human skeleton, whose
bones the sculptor-demiurge is shaping with hammer and chisel. As Montfaucon
reminds, via his English translator, this “doth not seem to agree with the fabulous
Story.” A similar conception, although with differently posed figures, governs

Winckelmann, Description des pierres gravées du feu Baron de Stosch (Florence, 1760; facs. rpt. Baden-Baden
Ancient and Modern Engraved Gems (London, 1791), I, 409-10, pls. XLII-XLIII.
7; Winckelmann, Description des pierres gravées, p. 314, no. 7; Raspé, I, 503, no. 8558.
plate 8 and (in some copies) plate 11 of The Book of Urizen (IB, pp. 190 and 193). Both depict Urizen during the first two of his so-called “Seven Ages of Woe,” the successive stages by which the organs of his human body are formed. In the first of the two designs, a skeleton who is Urizen is bowed in a fetal position, in token of the formation of his bones (skull, spine, and ribs), soon to be recounted as the first Age in Chapter IV [b] (10:31-41; E75). On plate 11, especially in copy B (Fig. 9), a layer of flesh has begun to cover the bones, in keeping with the text above the design (see E75-76), but Urizen is still more skeleton than fully fashioned man. Beside him, in a similar crouching pose, is Los, holding the hammer that is one of his attributes. It is true that in Blake’s text the organs of Urizen’s body are generated spontaneously, and Los’s activity as a creator is limited to forging the binding “links” of time (“hours, days & years”) which in the design (same copies) are represented as fetters about Urizen’s feet. Yet the notion that the human body is formed from the skeleton outward, as though by covering an armature, is shared by both Urizen designs and their relevant texts with the engraved gem, which in the mid-1790s would have been available to Blake at least through Montfaucon.

The most striking use of a gem design by Blake occurs in Antaeus Setting Down Dante and Virgil (front cover), one of the illustrations to The Divine Comedy, which he undertook near the end of his life (1824-27; Butlin, I, cat. no. 812, pp. 554ff.). The figure of the giant Antaeus has been called “one of Blake’s best nudes,” which shows the “influence of Michelangelo upon him.” Another writer, remarking that the curious sidewise posture is “both against nature and without any iconographical precedent,” sought to explain it by the simile of a leaning tower in Dante’s text.57 Yet there was an iconographic precedent in the figure supposedly of Tydeus, father of Diomede, engraved on a carnelian (Fig. 10), which Blake could have seen in any of several different places. The design was reproduced in both the Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums and the Monumenti Antichi Inediti of Winckelmann, to whom it depicted the hero in the act of pulling a javelin from his leg. Winckelmann believed, apparently correctly, that the gem was Etruscan. Flaxman made a drawing of the design during his Italian period and later reproduced it in his Lectures. There were also illustrations in Raspe and in Visconti’s Museo Pio-Clementino, from which Fig. 10 here is taken.58 Visconti in his catalogue note proposes that Tydeus is scraping

57. Roe, Blake’s Illustrations to the Divine Comedy, p. 124; Burke, “The Eidetic and Borrowed Image,” p. 280; cf. Inferno, XXXI, 136-45. In contrast to the strange attitude of Blake’s figure, Antaeus in Flaxman’s version of the same scene is more believably crouching, as though at the end of his leaning movement; see Compositions from the Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, of Dante Alighieri, by John Flaxman, R. A., Sculptor, Engraved by Tommaso Piroli (London, 1807), pl. 33 (Inferno).
Fig. 9. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*; Copy B, pl. 11. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. (PML 63139 pl. 11)
his body with a strigil as part of a purification rite and (anticipating later scholarship) cites Pliny on an Apoxyomenos by the Greek sculptor Polycleitus in which a similar action is being performed.\textsuperscript{59}

Blake could have seen Tydeus’ pose in any or all of these places, and more than once during his career. (Despite the late date of publication of Lectures on Sculpture, he may well have seen Flaxman’s drawing much earlier.) Winckelmann, and after him Raspe, had commented on the prominence (unfortunately diminished in our Fig. 10) of the bones and muscles in the gem design, which Raspe called “an engraving in the old style.”\textsuperscript{60} The musculature and the surface network of veins are delineated with similar care in Blake’s watercolor, so that with respect to detail the figure of Antaeus appears to be a near copy incorporated in what is otherwise an adaptation, with a change in situation and the addition of a dramatic infernal setting. Nevertheless, neither the pictorial source nor Dante’s literary simile for the giant’s bending down from his great height can alone account for Blake’s rendering of Antaeus’ attitude as a whole, which is indeed “against nature.” In contrast to the flowing, unified movement that is suspended in Tydeus’ pose, which itself accommodates the oval shape of the carnelian, the separate parts of Antaeus’ body are poorly related to each other and to the action he is ostensibly engaged in. The swelling chest, which as I have suggested may be a late and misplaced visual tribute to the Belvedere Torso, is combined with a twisted midriff that is the result of Blake’s having tried to rotate the lower half of Tydeus’ body upward. The left hand and both feet are copied almost exactly from the gem design, but they are merely resting on or against the ledges of the cliff rather than providing believable support for the heavy, leaning body. Even though Antaeus’ right hand is placed behind the figures of Dante and Virgil, as though he has just released them, by his gaze and his outward-thrusting right knee he appears to be situated in a plane far in front of them, anchored nowhere and almost tumbling out of the picture.

Most simply, thus, this drawing well illustrates the value of knowing Blake’s probable sources when specific images are under consideration. To those unaware of the Tydeus design, the representation of Antaeus may seem challenging in its mysteriousness, and Blake may be given undeserved credit for anatomical effects that were already in his model. When his model is identified, however, it becomes painfully evident that the figure of Antaeus is defective in relation to the original, as copy and adaptation alike, and also as the major image in this particular illustration of Dante’s text. The defects become obvious when the drawing is compared to Urizen 21 (Fig. 2), in which a scene supplementing the narrative of Los and Enitharmon in the poem is built around the slightly modified pose of the Venus de’ Medici, and to NT339 (Fig. 3), in which the original gesture

\textsuperscript{59} Visconti, ibid. The apoxyomenoi were athletes shown scraping oil and sand from their bodies after exercise; see Margarete Bieber, The Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 11-12 and figs. 74-75, 77.

\textsuperscript{60} Winckelmann, Description des pierres gravées, p. 349; Raspé, I, 530.
of the Borghese Dancer, already functional, virtually gives rise to the sun circle that illustrates Young’s metaphor. In contrast, Tydeus’ leaning attitude and his gesture with the strigil lose both their original form and their practical function without being plausibly transferred to the very different action Antaeus is supposed to be performing.

While the design on the Tydeus gem answers the immediate questions of puzzled viewers about Antaeus’ awkward posture in the Dante drawing, the failure of the adaptation raises broader questions which have to do with Blake’s artistic practice, especially in the last years of his life. From one standpoint, there are the obvious considerations of his age and his long isolation (had he forgotten what he once learned by working with life models as well as with casts?) and the always delicate question of his actual competence as an artist, which literature-oriented Blakeists tend to ignore or evade. From another standpoint, the defects in his figure of Antaeus as an adaptation of the Tydeus gem design may be evidence of a fundamental and unresolved stylistic conflict in Blake’s own art, one that became more pronounced in his later career, between the classical, which had been the chief heritage of his time and place, an influence he could not have escaped, and what in theoretical terms he came to call the “Gothic,” i.e., in simplest terms, the mediaeval, although his knowledge of the art of the Middle Ages proper necessarily would have been limited to English ecclesiastical sculpture and probably a few examples of illuminated texts.

The conflict, I am arguing and want to emphasize, was stylistic and not primarily some other kind. It is one of the assumptions of this study and those preceding it that Blake’s verbal polemics and his overt expressions of opinion are no less phenomena than his verse and his pictures, sometimes reflecting the same attitudes and influences in preliminary or supplemental form. Although they often are useful as corroboration or as a source of clues, they are by no means absolute, nor—although such is the ultimate implication of otherwise enlightening constructions of “Gothic” as a Blakean aesthetic principle—would they ever have been so potent that they could control his practice, turning it in one direction rather than another or censoring his spontaneous choices. It is true that in the inscriptions on his engraving of the Laocoon and in On Homer’s Poetry and On Virgil (c. 1821) (IB, p. 380; E269-70), both dating from late in his career, he at least rhetorically rejected “the classics” in literature and exalted the form of “Gothic” over “Grecian” in passages that are repeatedly quoted by his critics. “The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars” (E270), “The Gods of Greece & Egypt were Mathematical Diagrams See Plato’s Works” (E274), “Grecian is Mathematic Form / Gothic is Living Form” (E270). Nevertheless, the stylistic conflict I have in mind had manifested itself much earlier in his career, even earlier than A Descriptive Catalogue, in which (as has been seen) he could admit to an admiration for the famous works


62. With respect to “mathematic form,” Keynes (William Blake’s Laocoon, p. 24) suggests that Blake was thinking of the classical conception of beauty, which was based on “a mathematical system of proportion.” See also Flaxman (Lectures on Sculpture, pp. 56-57) on proportion in the theories of Vitruvius and da Vinci.

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of classical sculpture which he was obliged, by the version of art history he proclaimed in the same text, to designate as mere copies of lost “Asiatic” originals.

In his illuminated books and literary illustrations during the approximately twenty years beginning in the mid-1790s, Blake favored nude figures in attitudes borrowed or imitated from the antique or the Renaissance which originally were naturalistic in the classical sense—as in the examples of sculpture that have been cited above. At the same time, what “Gothic” style apparently meant to him in practice, perhaps before he would have used the adjective, can be seen in his religious pictures, biblical and otherwise, dating back to the late 1790s and early 1800s. In their own fashion, they are very nearly “mathematical diagrams” themselves, with their rigid, quasi-geometrical balance in composition, often made up of symmetrical contrasts and inversions between right and left, upper and lower, and a curious rigidity also in the human figures, even when they are supposedly in motion. After about 1820, in his literary illustrations to Paradise Regained and The Pilgrim’s Progress as well as to The Divine Comedy, rigidity became the prevailing characteristic. The human figures were increasingly stiff and blocklike, typically gowned rather than nude and static rather than active. Certain other figures, such as Dante’s demons or angels and Milton’s Satan, continued to be nude, often with heavy though superficial modelling of their musculature, and they might be represented in violent movement. Even then, however, the final effect was likely to be static, so that the supposedly moving figures, whatever their state of dress or the characters they portray, appear to be frozen in strangely contorted attitudes and gestures, sometimes in midair. (See, e.g., Butlin, II, pls. 684, 690, 693, 1098, 1108, 1109.) It is indeed possible that, rather than controlling Blake’s style and choice of models or subject matter from above, on the level of aesthetic theory, the anti-classicism expressed in his Laocoon inscriptions and the diatribe against Homer and Virgil was his attempt to rationalize a persistent tendency in his personal style which was increasingly pressing for dominance.63

From the stylistic standpoint, then, even though through the original of the borrowed pose the figure of Antaeus was an indirect heir of classical sculpture, it may well have been the growing “Gothic” and expressionistic character of Blake’s late style that prevented him from making the kind of adaptation of the pose of Tydeus which once would have been within his competence. On the evidence of this and other examples of his late work it is not unjustified to wonder how he might have developed under different circumstances and with a longer working life: whether he eventually would have been able to convert an uncorrected weakness in execution and an inclination toward the schematic into a consciously chosen and sustained style of his own, one which today might be

63. On the stylistic conflict in Blake’s practice I am in disagreement with Anne K. Mellor, who has argued (Blake’s Human Form Divine [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1974], p. 269) that in his late art Blake achieved a “subtle, individual, and wholly successful synthesis” which she calls “Gothic neoclassicism.” Mellor’s more specific comments, however, reveal that what she has in mind is the nature of Blake’s sources or models (“classically posed and constructed figures” combined with “Gothic motifs and icons”) rather than the actual quality of the results.
seen to align him less with the Neoclassical and Romantic art of his contemporaries than with the modernism whose several strains would begin to emerge toward the end of the nineteenth century.