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Transformations of Michelangelo in William Blake’s The Book of Urizen

by LESLIE W. TANNENBAUM

VASARI, in his Lives of the Painters, states that “Michelangelo was a man of tenacious and profound memory, so that, on seeing the works of others only once, he remembered them perfectly and could avail himself of them in such a manner that scarcely anyone has ever noticed it.” This ability to transform the work of other artists into something almost unrecognizably one’s own was a talent also possessed by one of Michelangelo’s most ardent English admirers, William Blake; and nowhere did Blake apply this talent more assiduously and consistently than he did to the works of the great Florentine. While Michelangelo has always been recognized as the single most influential figure in the development of Blake’s art—particularly because Blake himself continually acknowledged this influence—Blake’s actual copying from the work of his predecessor has been explored only within the past four decades.

Disclosing specific examples of this copying, the work of C. H. Collins Baker, Anthony Blunt, Jean Hagstrum and others has significantly contributed to our understanding of Blake’s pictorial art not only by revealing its traditional roots, but also by directing our attention to the function of copying in Blake’s aesthetic and to the minute particulars of Blake’s pictorial borrowings, the full extent of which these scholars only hint at. A recent discussion of Michelangelo’s influence on Blake sums up what by now has become common knowledge: “In addition to taking on almost whole cloth the basic characteristics of Michelangelo’s style as refracted through the prints and casts he knew, Blake borrowed specific


All of these are concerned primarily with the fact of Blake’s borrowing, as they point out specific instances in one or more designs by Blake. These important contributions have yet to be supplemented with further studies of the scope and the significance of those borrowings. Hagstrum (p. 40) is the only
gestures, configurations and motifs from Michelangelo’s works.”3 That this borrowing was an integral part of Blake’s aesthetic theory has been established by Blunt, who delineates Blake’s concept of copying from other artists. Distinguishing Blake’s idea of copying from Reynolds’ concept of imitation, Blunt notes, “In fact we may say that whereas Reynolds recommends the painter to imitate other artists, what Blake advises is simply that he should copy them. He means this, moreover, in the most literal sense of the word. Copying is for him a process by which the artist learns the language of art, not the source from which he derives ideas.”4 The phrase, “language of art,” is Blake’s, and one might add to Blunt’s statement that this phrase is also meant to be taken quite literally. When, according to Blake, “Every line . . . has Meaning” (“Florentine Ingratitude,” 1. 11), both in Michelangelo and in his own works, Blake’s borrowing suggests that the artist who borrows is dealing not only with the expressive content but also the iconographic meaning of the original. Thus, beyond the actual fact of Blake’s copying from Michelangelo, the details of which have yet to be fully determined, lies the possibility that each figure or motif that Blake borrows carries iconographic significance which contributes toward the meaning of the new context in which that figure or motif reappears.

This literal and specific application of the language of art can be seen in a work that bears perhaps the strongest imprint of Michelangelo upon Blake’s pictorial imagination, The Book of Urizen. One third of Blake’s designs in Urizen contain motifs adopted from Michelangelo’s paintings and sculptures. Furthermore, each borrowed figure contributes to the meaning of that book either directly or through the ironic juxtaposition of that figure’s original context with the new context created by Blake. In The Book of Urizen, his first articulation of a cosmogonic myth, his own vision of the Creation and Fall, Blake found Michelangelo’s eschatological and Neoplatonic themes admirably suited to his purposes. Urizen presents a sustained satire on the Book of Genesis,5 as its essential structure is derived from the first book of the Bible and Milton’s

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3. Mellor, p. 130.
5. This point is fully developed in my essay, “Blake’s Art of Crypsis: The Book of Urizen and Genesis,” Blake Studies, V, No. 1 (Fall 1972), 141-64.
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version of Genesis in *Paradise Lost*. Within this structure, Blake creates a complex fabric of allusions to other myths of origins. All of these creation myths are invoked ironically to satirize the orthodox theology and philosophy which, for Blake, create and maintain man's fallen condition. Blake depicts the God of Genesis as a self-divided tyrant whose jealousy and commitment to abstract laws perpetuate sin, suffering, division and chaos—all of which this Creator has been attempting to eliminate. Seeking "for a joy without pain, / For a solid without fluctuation" (4:10-11), Urizen withdraws from eternal life only to create Generation and death. In the illustrations to *Urizen*, Blake's tormented forms, many of which are borrowed from Michelangelo, suggest that the material world itself is a prison and a greater hell than any imagined future punishment. This point is reiterated in the text and designs by the eschatological imagery, drawn from Revelation and Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, which is juxtaposed against the images and myths of origins to represent the Creation as an inverted apocalypse, an anti-creation. By thus playing upon the resonance between the original and newly created contexts of the forms he borrows from Michelangelo, Blake opposes mere imitation with what he considers to be true invention: the imaginative transformation of previous forms to provide structure and meaning to a new creation.

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Most of Blake's borrowings from Michelangelo are taken from *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel. Their recognition in *The Book of Urizen* is initially obscured for several reasons: (1) Blake, in copying some of Michelangelo's forms directly onto his plates, caused them to become reversed mirror images of their originals when they were printed; (2) other figures from Michelangelo have been rotated or inverted; and (3) some forms have been modified by Blake. However, once one recognizes these borrowings, one becomes aware that, as Yeats put it, "whatever Blake borrowed... he turned to his own purposes." Blake not only captured in his own works what Isaac D'Israeli recognized as the "terribil via" of Michelangelo's apocalyptic forms, but also made each figure, in its transformation, reinforce the message of his text. For instance, the athletic figure on plate 14 of *Urizen* (fig. 1), besides suggesting an inversion of Michelangelo's God creating order out of chaos on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, is actually taken from one of Michelangelo's devils dragging a soul down to hell in *The Last

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Judgment (fig. 2). Borrowing the torso and the legs for his design, Blake has rotated Michelangelo’s figure ninety degrees. This visual quotation, along with the text, militates against any admiration that the viewer might feel for the figure in Blake’s design, which is, among other things, a literal illustration of Urizen’s description of his struggles:

And self balanc’d stretch’d o’er the void
I alone, even I! the winds merciless
Bound. . . . (4:18–20)

Although Urizen, from his own point of view appears to be a hero, the Eternals identify him as a demon (3:3) and his supposedly heroic battle with chaos is undercut by the fact that he himself had created that “soul-shudd’ring vacuum” (3:5) by withdrawing from Eternity.

That Urizen is dragging himself and others down to hell is further emphasized by another instance of Blake’s borrowing from Michelangelo. The huddled, howling figure of Los on plate 7 (fig. 3), who is reacting to Urizen’s separation both from Eternity and from Los, is derived from a soul in torment aboard Charon’s boat in Michelangelo’s painting (fig. 4), indicating that the world emerging from Urizen’s labors is actually hell. Both plates 7 and 14 employ Michelangelo’s forms to satirize the orthodox vision of creation, as depicted in Genesis and Paradise Lost, by identifying the Creator of the material world with Satan.

This satiric inversion is an extension of the satiric strategy in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, where Blake’s Devils (the proponents of Energy) claim that Milton’s Messiah (the proponent of Reason) “fell. & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss” (MHH 5). Urizen, Blake’s satiric version of Milton’s Messiah, falls from Eternity because he attempts to abstract the contraries of life into principles of Good and Evil, thereby negating the passions by calling them evil and usurping his place by asserting dominance over them. Unlike Blake’s ironic Devils, whose vital energy appears demonic only to the orthodox, Urizen is the true Satan, the Accuser of sins, the angry God of this world who creates and perpetuates man’s fallen condition.

This principle of satiric inversion is more apparent in the other figures in The Book of Urizen taken from The Last Judgment, where Blake actually inverts the meaning of Michelangelo’s figures. The illustrations on plates 6, 9, 12, 15 and 24 each contain figures that ironically invert the meaning of their counterparts in Michelangelo’s painting. The picture of Urizen on plate 9 (fig. 5) and that of Grodna on plate 24 (fig. 6) are derived, with their forms reversed, from the knee-raising figure on the bottom left side of Michelangelo’s figure of the resurrected dead (fig. 7), illustrating Revelation 20.12–13. Plate 9 (fig. 5) is a blatant inversion of the resurrection of the dead because in this plate Urizen, rather than rising from the dead, has actually created death by burying himself as he flees the wrath of the Eternals:
Sund’ring, dark’ning, thund’ring!
Rent away with a terrible crash
Eternity roll’d wide apart
Wide asunder rolling
Mountainous all around
Departing; departing; departing:
Leaving ruinous fragments of life
Hanging frowning cliffs & all between
An ocean of voidness unfathomable.
To the desarts and rocks He ran raging
To hide, but He could not: combining
He dug mountains & hills in vast strength,
He piled them in incessant labour. . . . (5:3-11, 20-22)

Urizen thus forms a grave for himself, which becomes the created universe, “the dark globe of Urizen.” This process is a parody of Revelation:

And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains;

And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb .... (Revelation 6.14-16)

Like the fear of “the wrath of the Lamb,” Urizen’s fear of the “horrors” of eternal energy is self-created, leading him to choose self-entombment rather than eternal life. The ironic quotation from Michelangelo on plate 9 reiterates the point that the fallen universe is created by a willful denial of the possibility of eternal life.

The figure of Grodna on plate 24 (fig. 6) also represents a false resurrection, as the depiction of his birth and the birth of the other sons of Urizen on this plate and in the text of the poem (20:26-29) ironically allude to the resurrection in the Bible and in Michelangelo’s work. The four sons of Urizen represent the four elements, the basic constituents of the world of matter. The two grosser elements are represented as the resurrected dead, and the two lighter elements are taken from Michelangelo’s angels. While Utha’s head emerging from the water is also a direct copy of one of the resurrected dead on the bottom left of the Sistine Chapel painting (fig. 8), Fuzon’s form is taken from one of the angels above Christ in the same work (fig. 9). Thiriel is also one of Michelangelo’s angels, but his form is taken from Michelangelo’s The Conversion of St. Paul (fig. 10), where the angels bear the same expression of wonderment at a divine event as those in The Last Judgment. In the text of Urizen, the cries of the chained Orc awaken the dead, whose emergence marks the establishment—rather than the destruction—of the world of Generation. Fuzon and Thiriel are angels partaking of Urizen’s false heaven, while the figures of Utha and Grodna represent a false res-
Fig. 4. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail). Sistine Chapel. (Alinari / Editorial Photocolor Archives)
Fig. 5. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 9. Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection.
Fig. 7. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail). Sistine Chapel. (Alinari / Editorial Photo-color Archives)
Fig. 8. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail). Sistine Chapel. (Alinari / Editorial Photocolor Archives)
urrection. Instead of heralding a new heaven and a new earth, Orc trumpets the awakening of Urizen's children to a world of perpetual judgment and death.

Blake's vision of the Creation as a denial of eternal life can also be seen in plates 6 (fig. 12) and 15 (fig. 13). Each plate contains a figure from Michelangelo that represents salvation and each plate inverts the meaning of the original. On the extreme left-hand side of The Last Judgment there is an angel leaning down from a cloud to raise one of the elect into heaven with his right hand (fig. 11). On plate 6 (fig. 12) of Urizen the figure of the saved man is shown on the right, but totally inverted to represent one of the fallen. Michelangelo's angel appears, with his form reversed, as the central figure on plate 15 (fig. 13). Instead of raising man into heaven, Blake's figure is spreading the Tent of Science, separating the fallen world from Eternity. This reversal of the Apocalypse is also indicated in this design (in copy G) by the rolling folds of drapery that surround the Eternals, one of whom is actually taken from The Last Judgment (fig. 14), alluding to heaven rolling up like a scroll (Revelation 6.14). Finally, the apocalyptic imagery of this plate is reinforced in copy G by the form of an eagle, the emblem of St. John, in the upper left-hand corner.

Plate 12 of Urizen (fig. 15) contains another satiric inversion of a figure that represents salvation in Michelangelo's painting. The picture of Urizen rising through water is an adaptation of Michelangelo's figure of one of the elect ascending to heaven, depicted in The Last Judgment just below the figure being raised by the angel (fig. 11). Blake makes the transfixed and ecstatic expression of this figure appear ludicrous in his adaptation by changing the position of the arms to that of the strokes of a swimmer: "I labour upwards into futurity" is Blake's inscription to this plate as it is reprinted in A Small Book of Designs (p. 662). The "heaven" that Urizen is ascending to in such ecstasy is the world of matter, the "wide world of solid obstruction."

These deliberate transpositions of figures from Michelangelo's The Last Judgment contribute to one of the important organizational patterns in the entire Book of Urizen, the Last Judgment motif. The primacy of this motif is established in the very beginning of Urizen by the design on plate 1, the title page (fig. 16), where the keynote is sounded by the representation of Urizen seated with the book of brass beneath his feet and transcribing from it into the books on either side of him. This book of brass also appears in the illustration to plate 5, where Uri-

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Fig. 13. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 15. Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection.
Fig. 15. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 12. Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection.
zen is opening it to proclaim his “Laws of peace, of love, of unity” (4:34). Besides containing oppressive laws of uniformity, Urizen’s brazen book is also a record of those who have obeyed and those who have transgressed those laws. As the inscription to the reproduction of plate 5 in A Small Book of Designs (p. 662) indicates, the brazen book—“The Book of my Remembrance”—is the “book of remembrance,” mentioned in Malachi, which contains the names of the saved and the damned:

Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name.

And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.

Then shall ye return, and discuss between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not. (Malachi 3.16-18)

In plate 1 (fig. 16), Urizen, who is transcribing from this book, is actually sitting in judgment, recording the names of the saved and the damned in the Book of Life and the Book of Death on either side of him. This symbolic significance is emphasized by Blake’s inscription to the title page of Urizen reproduced in A Small Book of Designs, “Which is the way / Right or Left” (p. 662), alluding to Urizen’s divisions of Good and Evil, the righteous and the wicked, Heaven and Hell, Salvation and Damnation.

This last judgment motif serves to underscore Blake’s identification of Urizen with the Elohim of the Bible, who represents God in his aspect of justice, as contrasted with Jehovah, the aspect of Mercy. Sometimes the word should have been translated simply “judges,” as in Psalm lxxxii:1; also in Exodus xxi:6 and xxii:26; and according to some commentators, including Moses Maimonides, in Genesis iii:5 (“ye shall be as gods [judges], knowing good and evil”). Blake would have embraced this reading, as it would clarify the nature of the primal sin: that of dividing all human realities into good and evil, thus setting oneself up as judge—an error corrected by the “judge not” of Jesus (Matt vii:1).1

The absurdity of Urizen’s concept of judgment is indicated by the fact that he is transcribing into both books simultaneously, using his foot as

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10. The motif of the three books appears later in “The Last Judgment” illustration to Blair’s Grave (1806) and in all of Blake’s versions of A Vision of the Last Judgment. In his letter to Ozias Humphrey (p. 542) and in his Notebook description of the painting (p. 551) Blake specifically identifies the three books as the books of Life, Death and Judgment. Although this three-book motif does not seem to be part of traditional Christian iconography, at least in the most famous renditions of The Last Judgment, its source is Revelation. The Book of Judgment is the book with the seven seals in Chapters 5-8. The Book of Life is mentioned in 20.12 and 20.15. Although the Book of Death is not named, it is implied by the statement that more than one book is opened on the judgment seat. Michelangelo’s The Last Judgment uses these two books, but omits the Book of Judgment.

Fig. 16. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. I. Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection.
a pointer. From Blake's point of view, Urizen's judgmental vision creates self-division.

Besides the satiric use of the Last Judgment motif in the title page and in the designs derived from Michelangelo, there are other ironic allusions to Revelation, both visual and verbal, in The Book of Urizen. The "globe of life blood" (15:13) depicted on plate 17 echoes the image of the moon turned into blood in Revelation 6.12. Rather than heralding a true Apocalypse, the appearance of the globe marks the creation of a new error, a further split between the fallen world and Eternity. The binding of Urizen, depicted in the designs of plates 11 and 22 and described in the text (Chapter IV[a] and IV[b]), alludes to the binding of the Dragon, Satan, in Revelation 20.1–3. Urizen is also identified as the Dragon on plate 20, where the cries of the infant Orc, who is a parallel of the child born to the woman clothed with the sun (Revelation 12), awakens the dead and stirs the sleeping Urizen. Described as a beast "craving with hunger / Stung with the odours of Nature" (20:30–31), Urizen explores his dens. Like the woman clothed with the sun, Enitharmon is protected from the threat of this ravenous creature, as she is "encircled . . . / With fires of Prophecy" (20:42–43) while the Dragon-like Urizen makes war "with the remnant of her seed" (Revelation 12.17). In essence, Blake is here reversing the message of Revelation to warn the fallen about Urizen, the angry God of this world: "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time" (Revelation 12.12). The ironic use of apocalyptic imagery throughout The Book of Urizen clearly identifies Urizen as the true Satan, the Accuser of sins.

Through his ironic invocation of apocalyptic themes and images from Michelangelo and the Bible in The Book of Urizen, Blake asserts that Urizen's promise of "futurity," of future reward for the obedient and damnation for the recalcitrant, is a sham that actually causes man's fallen state. The promise of a new heaven and earth is supposed to ameliorate the death and suffering that exists in the fallen world:

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. (Revelation 21.4)

But it is this concept of a future static order in which pain is legislated out of existence that creates and perpetuates the fallen world. By dreaming of a future utopian existence, man becomes trapped in time. Urizen's vision of a "joy without pain" actually produces the world as we know it with a vengeance. As a result of his labors there are more tears, more pain, and added to death is the threat of eternal torment for those who do not accede to the concept of a passive Good. For Blake, the Last Judgment in the orthodox sense took place at the Creation, and the
“saved”—the followers of Urizen’s religion—are already condemned to hell, which is the fallen world itself.

II

Besides borrowing from Michelangelo’s paintings to elucidate his own vision of the Creation and Fall, Blake also borrows from Michelangelo’s sculptures to the same purpose. One of Urizen’s daughters, in the foreground of plate 25 (fig. 17), is derived from the statue of Aurora in the Medici Chapel (fig. 18). Here Blake seems to be adopting Michelangelo’s meaning directly, as the Florentine’s work expresses a profound sense of despair. Blake certainly was familiar with Vasari’s interpretation of Michelangelo’s work, which sees its expression as a reaction to death:

But what shall I say of the Aurora?—a nude female form, well calculated to awake deep melancholy in the soul, and to make the Art of Sculpture cast down her chisel. Her attitude shows her to have hastily risen from her bed, while she is still heavy with sleep; but in thus awakening, she had found the eyes of the great prince closed in death; wherefore she turns in bitter sorrow, bewailing, as an evidence of the great suffering she endures, her own unchangeable beauty.12

Blake may also have known the Neoplatonic interpretation of Condivi, which was made familiar to English readers in the works of Jonathan Richardson.13 Condivi proclaimed that Michelangelo’s theme in the Medici Chapel was the destructive effects of time, an interpretation that is supported by the sculptor’s own autograph stanzas.14 Within this Neoplatonic context, Aurora’s expression is one of disgust for the material world—an interpretation obviously relevant to Blake’s view of the fallen world in Urizen. Like Urizen’s sons, who are shown on plate 24 (fig. 6), the daughters on plate 25 (fig. 17)—“born from green herbs & cattle / From monsters, & worms of the pit” (23:20–21)—are equally pained to awaken to a world of death, decay and fallen vision. They appear to be strangled by their own serpentine bodies, a detail which echoes the band around the torso of Michelangelo’s Aurora.

Similar to Aurora in style and mood is Michelangelo’s Apollo (fig. 19), whose languid form appears as Los on plate 21 of The Book of Urizen (fig. 20). The surprisingly lethargic nature of the statue has prompted a modern scholar to claim that it, like the Aurora and the other Allegories of the Medici Chapel, “is conceived not as an animated body, but as the incarnation of a psychic state. . . . The gestures seem to be unconscious reflexes, like those of a dreamer trying to drive away a nightmare.”15 Blake expresses a similar interpretation, as he adds to

Fig. 17. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 25. Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection.
Fig. 18. Michelangelo, *Aurora*, from the Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici. Florence, S. Lorenzo. (Alinari / Editorial Photocolor Archives)
Fig. 19. Michelangelo, *Apollo*. Florence, Bargello. (Alinari / Editorial Photocolor Archives)
Michelangelo's form—which he has reversed—the weight of a full beard and a chain around the chest. Blake's association of Los with Apollo has been frequently noted by scholars, and within The Book of Urizen Blake's visual allusion to Michelangelo's Apollo corresponds to Los's initially Apollonian function of creating harmony out of Urizen's chaos, as well as to his pursuit of the Daphne-like Enitharmon, whose bending form on plate 19 echoes the vegetative forms that appear throughout the book. However, in plate 21 (fig. 20), Los's hammer and the chain identify him more with the jealous Hephaestus than with the creative power of Apollo, reinforcing the narrative progression of the poem. Los, who initially embodies the power of imaginative vision, succumbs to Urizen's power by pitying him and, in his despair, ceasing all creative activity. As Los's pity produces self-division, he gives birth to the vegetative world, symbolized by the Daphne-like Enitharmon, whom he—unlike Apollo—successfully pursues and rapes, begetting Orc. Having thus fallen into Generation, Los succumbs totally to the power of jealousy, which is Urizen's ruling principle. This jealousy causes him to bind Orc, after which Los ceases to be a potent force in the poem. Los's transformation from a creative Apollo to an Hephaestus, who can produce only the mind-forged chains of jealousy, underscores the failure of imaginative vision in the fallen world, the sacrifice of Art to Nature. In essence, Blake's design on plate 21 extends the meaning of Michelangelo's lethargic Apollo by depicting him as the fallen sun that is debilitated by a failure of inner power or prophetic vision, a point reinforced in the design by the setting sun.

III

Blake's protest against the failure of vision, that is both the cause and result of the Fall, is incorporated into the very method of Blake's art in The Book of Urizen, as his borrowings from Michelangelo's paintings and sculptures carry an ideological significance which Blake later made explicit in his Descriptive Catalogue:

To recover Art has been the business of my life to the Florentine Original & if possible to go beyond that Original (this) I thought the only pursuit worthy of [an Englishman] (a Man). To imitate I abhore I obstinately adhere to the true Style of Art such as Michael Angelo Rafael Jul Rom Alb Durer left it [the Art of Invention not of Imitation. Imagination is My World this world of Dross is beneath my Notice & Beneath the Notice of the Public] (Public Address, p. 569)

Just as man has fallen from an original state of wholeness, so has art fallen from a divine original which the Florentine painters were closer

to. (Michelangelo had shared a similar belief about the relation of the art of his own time to the art of the ancients.) For Blake, to go beyond the Florentine original meant to go back to the original source of inspiration—the imagination itself—and the way back was through copying the forms and manner that Michelangelo in turn had copied from the divine source; but such copying in itself was not enough. If it were, then—as Blake sees Reynolds to be saying—"there is No such thing as Inspiration & . . . any Man of a plain Understanding may by Thieving from Others. become a Mich Angelo" (Annotations to Reynolds, p. 635). Since the source itself is the imagination, the truly inspired artist must exercise his own Genius, modifying those forms to meet the needs of his imaginative vision. By thus transforming inherited art forms, the true artist does not imitate nature or the works of others; rather, he copies the imagination.

Art, for Blake, is not competitive and progressive, but interpretive and cumulative:

Milton, Shakespeare, Michael Angelo, Rafael, the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting, and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian, are the extent of the human mind. The human mind cannot go beyond the gift of God, the Holy Ghost. To suppose that Art can go beyond the finest specimens of Art that are now in the world, is not knowing what Art is; it is being blind to the gifts of the spirit. (Descriptive Catalogue, p. 535)

To assume that one can go beyond (that is, improve upon) the great works of art is to assume that the ultimate goal is the perfection of the art object and therefore miss the point of all art. For Blake, art is "a vehicle for vision rather than an object of perception," and all great art is of equal value insofar that it releases vision for the perceiver. Here Blake's model is what he considered the greatest work of imaginative vision and the "Great Code of Art" (The Laocoon, p. 270), the Bible. The Book of Revelation draws images from Isaiah, Daniel and the other prophets; but one cannot say that St. John improves upon the other prophets any more than one can say that Daniel improves upon Isaiah. Each prophet is concerned with one essential issue, the separation of the human from the divine, in response to which he communicates the divine vision that will heal that breach. Seeing history as a series of spiritual crises, man's continual loss of the divine vision, each prophet necessarily looks backwards as he attempts to keep alive the vision revealed by his predecessors that has either gone unheeded or, if heeded, has become encrusted with orthodoxy. The prophet thus borrows from his predecessors in order to liberate and interpret their vision for his own

making all prophecy form one great vision, which for Blake is "the extent of the human mind," or the imagination.

Thus Blake's theory and practice of copying from Michelangelo is an integral part of his concept of the nature and purpose of prophetic art. As a prophetic call to fallen man, *The Book of Urizen* employs images from Michelangelo both to articulate man's fall and to point the way back to wholeness. While the literal message of the designs along with the text reveal "dark visions of torment" (2:7), the imaginative process through which Blake transforms Michelangelo's paintings and sculptures dramatizes the means through which the divine vision can be regained by fallen man. The visionary content of Michelangelo's forms had become, for Blake, obscured by the systematizations of Sir Joshua Reynolds and his ilk; but in *Urizen* Blake liberated those forms for himself and his contemporaries by an act of imaginative transformation that invested those forms with his own prophetic fury. The extent to which the dark message overshadows the illuminating process of vision in *The Book of Urizen* suggests that Blake failed to achieve a satisfying articulation of the divine vision in that work. The full depiction of the actual process of imaginative transformation became his concern and ultimate achievement, as he moved toward the creation of a form that would liberate man by "Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems" (*Jerusalem* 11:5).

In his search for a liberating form, Blake was to seize upon Michelangelo's own words as a manifesto of prophetic art:

Heaven-born, the Soul a heaven-ward course must hold;  
Beyond the visible world She soars to seek  
(For what delights the sense is false and weak.)  
Ideal Form, the universal mould.

Serving as a paradigm and providing material for this enterprise, Michelangelo was a seminal and pervasive influence upon Blake. When the full extent of this influence has been discovered, we shall discover in that Ideal Form not only the lineaments of Blake and Michelangelo but our own as well.

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*Columbus*

19. This concept of the interpretive and creative nature of prophetic art, as it is embodied in the poetry of Milton and Blake, is articulated in Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., *Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton* (Madison, Wis.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1975), esp. pp. 171-88.

20. Blake quotes these lines from Michelangelo's sonnet, translated by Wordsworth (*Poems*, 1815, 11, 179), in his "Autograph in the Album of William Upcott" (p. 675). He also cites those lines in his "Annotations to Wordsworth's Poems" (p. 655). In both citations Blake invokes Michelangelo's lines to assert the supremacy of Art and Imagination over Nature or Chance.