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Blake's Ways with Art Sources: Michelangelo's The Last Judgment

by IRENE H. CHAYES

DESPITE THE proliferation of studies of Blake's art, both books and essays or journal articles, during the past decade and a half, there has been relatively little progress toward an adequate understanding of the aspect of his practice which more than any other places him in the mainstream of European art: his use of the work of other artists for purposes of his own. The promising beginnings made in the essays by Anthony Blunt and C. H. Collins Baker in the late 1930s and early 1940s, succeeded by Blunt's The Art of William Blake (1959) and Jean Hagstrum's William Blake: Poet and Painter (1964), have not been followed up in any systematic way. Blunt and Hagstrum have been accepted as the authorities on Blake's relation to traditional art, and their findings, however tentatively offered, have entered the scholarly canon. The most basic task in any extension of their work, the further identification of specific art sources for specific designs by Blake, remains almost exclusively in the hands of students of Blake whose formal training has been in literature. For some reason, perhaps because they are daunted by Blake's texts, or they are committed to a view of the art of Blake's period which emphasizes its discontinuity with the past, art historians have had little to say.¹

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In the discussions of art sources by literary Blakeists in recent years, the most obvious weakness has been the authors' limited acquaintance with the works that were thoroughly familiar to Blake, even though they reached him at second hand, mainly through engravings after paintings and plaster casts of sculpture. More serious than the inevitable errors of commission and omission, and often fundamental to those errors, has been a persistent literary-mindedness in the very approach to what is essentially a problem in observation, using one's eyes. The appeal of associated meanings, as in the emblem books, or the force of a strongly held thesis about the texts Blake's designs accompany, too often takes precedence over visual evidence; pictorial images may be reduced to verbal formulations better suited to discussions of literature.² On the side of the audience, the situation is complicated by readers, mostly Blakeists themselves, who are both literary- and conceptual-minded, who tend to regard the designs as illustrations subordinate to the texts and to whom any art-historical undertaking concerning Blake is likely to seem irrelevant.

Clearly, what is needed is an expansion of competence all around, and an exchange of methods between literary Blakeists and art historians. If there is another major change of direction in Blake studies, as has been predicted,³ the present difficulties with his art may well be resolved by the end of the next ten- or fifteen-year cycle, or sooner. In the meantime, this essay is offered as an illustration of how, right now, inquiries into his art sources can be reoriented, without loss of relevance to his literary texts, to give proper priority to visual evidence and to make clear precisely what he took over from the work of other artists and how he employed it for his own purposes. Michelangelo's The Last Judgement has been chosen as the demonstration work for several reasons. The recurrence of Michelangelo's name in Blake's marginalia and polemical prose leaves no doubt that he, Blake, was well acquainted with Michelangelo's works and in some ways apparently identified himself with the artist who for him was already the model Romantic genius. Michelangelo, too, is already accepted as a general influence on Blake's art and in certain often-cited instances (to be recalled below) as a source as well. The Last Judgment is the likely choice among Michelangelo's works not only because it is the best known today and is of great intrinsic interest, but also and more importantly because it was widely reproduced in engravings of the kind that would have been available to Blake from his earliest years as a print collector.

In the succeeding sections of this essay, Blake's uses of particular figures from The Last Judgment, most of which are identified as his

² Cf. the more general problems of text and design in the illuminated books, as discussed by Robert N. Essick, "Meditations on a Fiery Pegasus," in Blake in His Time, pp. 1–10.
sources for the first time here, will be considered in detail. As a first step, however, it is necessary to distinguish between two kinds of artists' practice which were Blake's also, but which sometimes are confused: copying and borrowing. Copying is acknowledged and defended by Blake in a frequently quoted but not always understood annotation to Joshua Reynolds' Discourses on Art. In the second Discourse, Reynolds remarks that "those who have spent much of their time in making finished copies" are "incapable" of "producing anything of their own." Blake retorts, "This is most False for no one can ever Design till he has learnt the Language of Art by making many Finishd Copies of Nature & Art & of whatever comes in his way from Earliest Childhood. The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good One Really Does Copy a Great Deal" (E645). On the next page, using an adjective that was standard in such discussions, he adds, "Servile Copying is the Great Merit of Copying." Some writers have understood "copying" in these passages as referring broadly to any use of existing works of art. It is clear from the full wording, however, that for Blake as for other artists of the time, including of course Reynolds, copying had a very specific meaning, involving intentional and sustained effort to reproduce a given image or object as exactly as possible. The value of the exercise lay in the act, not in the product per se.

Blake's suggestive phrase "the language of art" has been taken by some of his commentators as a reference to iconography or, again, to his appropriations from other artists. In the sentence quoted above, however, the context of the phrase requires a more elementary meaning, such as the generalized conventions of representation an industrious student might pick up as a result of copying many different types of art. Examples from Blake might be the straight-nosed "Grecian" profiles, the raised-hand gestures of surprise, wonder, horror and the like, and the undifferentiated masses of long white hair and flowing patriarchal beards, all of which are found in his early drawings and paintings as well as in his better known mature work (see, e.g., Butlin II, pls. 121, 129, 180). None of these motifs can be considered original with Blake, and none can be traced to any one incontrovertible source. As they recur in designs otherwise very different from each other, they do indeed function as the everyday vocabulary of a personal pictorial language.

Borrowing is Reynolds' word, associated in the Discourses with his version of "imitation." As term and concept, imitation was of course of


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major importance in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory; its relevance for present purposes is that it provided a loose theoretical framework for borrowing as one practical recommendation among the many made by Reynolds to his students. In Discourse VI, whose subject is "the following of other masters, and the advantage to be drawn from the study of their works," he introduces "another kind of imitation; the borrowing a particular thought, an action, attitude, or figure, and transplanting it into your own work." Blake opposed what he understood Reynolds to mean by imitation, and he annotated Discourse VI heavily, defending the uniqueness of "genius" and reacting sharply to Reynolds' judgments of particular artists. Yet he passed over the passage on borrowing without comment, and for good reason. The practice described by Reynolds was already his own, even to the collecting of engravings, which Reynolds recommends especially to borrowers who wish to avail themselves of the "inventions of antiquity." As will be seen, in his practice Blake often conformed to more specific recommendations by the same Joshua Reynolds he derided and denounced on questions of principle.

The distinction between copying and borrowing is evident from the comments that have been quoted. Blake emphasizes what can be learned from copying and the need for constant application. Reynolds speaks of the artist's "own work" and prescribes how borrowings should be used: the artist should so accommodate his borrowing to his own work "that it makes a part of it, with no seam or joining appearing"; further, "he should enter into a competition with his original, and endeavour to improve what he is appropriating." In the work of Blake and Reynolds themselves (outrageous as the contrast may seem to Blake loyalists), the mechanical exactitude of "servile copying" at its most typical—as in the finished drawings the young Blake made for Basire of the monuments in Westminster Abbey (Butlin II, pls. 1-44)—distinguishes it from the relatively free and inventive uses of borrowing in Reynolds' paintings, which are in accord with his prescriptions in Discourse VI.

In Blake's own work, the ways in which he made use of figures from The Last Judgment, the object of inquiry here, are examples of borrow-

6. Malone, I, 98 and 115. Continuing (p. 116), Reynolds takes care to distinguish borrowing from plagiarism, with which it sometimes still is confused. For more on this point, and on Blake and Michelangelo, see my "Between Reynolds and Blake: Eclecticism and Expression in Fuseli's Shakespeare Frescoes," Bulletin of Research in the Humanities, LXXV (Summer 1982), 140-168.
7. E.g., "How ridiculous it would be to see the Sheep Endeavouring to walk like the Dog[,] or the Ox striving to trot like the Horse just as Ridiculous it is to see One Man Striving to Imitate Another" (E656). From their opposing standpoints, both Reynolds and Blake sometimes confusingly use "copy" as a loose synonym for "imitate." It is clear from the context that for both the disputed object of imitation here is artists' style.
9. Ibid.
ing, in keeping with Reynolds' definition. The problems that are posed by the borrowings in particular instances (as will be seen, the source relationships that emerge are complex) are precisely the kind the distinction between copying and borrowing serves to clarify. Because of the very nature of copies, as faithful reproductions intended for no other immediate purpose, their originals are relatively easy to identify and the identifications are readily accepted. So, with respect to Blake's well-known early copies after Michelangelo, no one doubts that the seven drawings in the British Museum (Butlin I, nos. 167-70; II, pls. 205-11) are of figures from the Sistine Ceiling, almost certainly copied after the engravings by Adamo Ghisi; or that the first state of the engraving later reworked and entitled *Joseph of Arimathea Among the Rocks of Albion* (Bindman, pls. 1, 401; p. 467) reproduces an enigmatic, grieving figure from *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* (Tolnay, figs. 59, 72). (There is a question about Blake's direct source for the figure that became Joseph of Arimathea, but only because of the written inscription on the unique impression of the first state, citing "a drawing by Salviati"; in the engraved inscription added in the second state, the reference is less specific, to "an old Italian Drawing." Since no such drawing has been found, it seems probable that Blake's actual source was the separate print of the figure by Nicolas Beatrizet, identified years ago.)

On the other hand, by *their* nature, borrowings do not reveal their ancestry in any predictable or consistent way, and it is about them that disputes arise and methods are questioned. In some instances, Blake made only slight modifications in his borrowed images, which to that degree are only a step beyond copies. In other instances, his changes were extensive, affecting essential parts of the figures, their orientation on the page or plate, or the point of view from which they are seen. When a borrowed image was put to frequent use, it typically passed through a series of variations and further revisions which grew out of the preceding stages and increasingly weakened the recognizability of the original form; the last in the sequence may seem to be an entirely new image, the product of Blake's unassisted imagination. Because of the variety of alterations and revisions his borrowings could undergo, there is no one method by which they can be analyzed or characterized as a class. Each is best approached as a problem in itself, which may call on all the resources the inquiring scholar or critic can bring to it.

The borrowings from *The Last Judgment* that are to be considered are primarily from three different groups of figures, two on the side of the Elect, one on the side of the Damned; the relevant designs by Blake belong mainly to the period of the mid-1790s. The illustrations of
Michelangelo are not from modern photographs made on site in the Sistine Chapel, excellent as those now available are, but from engravings such as Blake could have known or even owned, some perhaps dating back to the sixteenth century.12 Equally as well as photographs, the engravings chosen reproduce separate parts of *The Last Judgment* (although there were early engravings after the whole composition), which would have made it possible for Blake to study both individual figures and small groups in close detail. Unlike photographs, however, they translate Michelangelo’s painted forms into the linear effects familiar to Blake as an engraver himself, which would have influenced his mental images of the figures represented. The early engravers also occasionally revised details of the originals (see section II) in ways which Blake was not in a position to recognize; hence accurate modern photographs would be *inaccurate* illustrations of the *Last Judgment* scenes known to him.

II

On the side of the Elect in *The Last Judgment*, near the bottom, is a group representing four stages in the resurrection of the body (Fig. 1), which Michelangelo is considered to have painted after the vision of Ezekiel (37:1–12). A skeleton in a shroud is sitting up, as though roused by the trumpet calls of the angels (Tolnay, fig. 12) who are situated somewhat above and to the right of the group concerned, directly below the figure of Christ. Leaning against the skeleton is a fully fleshed but still sleeping human body, which seems to be stretched out on top of another skeleton; of that, the buried skeleton, which may represent the original “dry bones” awaiting resurrection, only the skull is visible, near the sleeper’s right shoulder: cf. Ezekiel 37:8–9, “And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. . . . Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” The fourth stage, a human body which has received “breath,” emerges from behind the listening skeleton of the second stage and begins to rise with uplifted arms.

Although as Michelangelo painted it the fleshed figure is unquestionably asleep, with closed eyes (Tolnay, fig. 37), the engraving reproduced here as Fig. 1 shows the eyes open, perhaps to emphasize that although the body is in an intermediate state it is destined for resurrection. The “dry bones” state is similarly emphasized, or overemphasized, by the introduction of a second skull, near the supine figure’s left knee. There is also a revision in the figure of the demon at the lower right of Fig. 5:

12. Engravings after *The Last Judgment* by known engravers are reproduced by Tolnay, figs. 258, 260b, 261, 262. See also Leo Steinberg, “Michelangelo’s ‘Last Judgment’ As Merciful Heresy,” *Art in America*, L.XIII (Nov.-Dec. 1975), pp. 49-63. The anonymous engravings used as illustrations in the present essay are from the oldest collections in the British Museum print room and hence may be considered representative of those in circulation in England at the time Blake began collecting.
Fig. 1. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail). Anonymous engraving. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 2. Blake, *America: A Prophecy* (copy A), pl. 6 (detail). The Pierpont Morgan Library.
the grotesquely enlarged anus of the original (Tolnay, fig. 11) has been replaced by a long tail which encircles the demon’s right buttock. Such gratuitous revision or correction during engraving was not unusual. The Michelangelo scholar Leo Steinberg has called attention to the sometimes major ways—alterations of gesture or attitude, or the transposition of figures from the side of the Elect to the side of the Damned—in which *The Last Judgment* was distorted by engravers of the time in their efforts to make Michelangelo’s eschatology more conventional and his theology more orthodox.13

Whether or not Blake was aware of its place in the overall composition of *The Last Judgment*, the skeleton group (which can be understood as a single figure in successive stages of resurrection) was the probable source of his so-called Renovated Man, in two of his illuminated books of the mid-1790s—*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 21, and *America: A Prophecy*, plate 6—and again among his illustrations to Robert Blair’s *The Grave* (published 1808, with etchings by Louis Schiavonetti after Blake’s drawings). In both early versions, the stages of resurrection are reduced to two, represented by an awakening man and one skull. The skull in *Marriage* 21 (*IB*, p. 118) is barely noticeable, lodged under the man’s knee on the right side of the picture. (Cf. the position of the second skull in Fig. 1.) By transferring it to the left in *America* 6 (Fig. 2), Blake turned the skull and along with it the grave mound on which the man is seated into the semblance of a long-buried body, from which its resurrected form is looking upward and outward toward the right, like Michelangelo’s roused skeleton; vines now are growing out of the mound. In the verse text on the same plate (but not in *Marriage* 21), two lines paraphrase Ezekiel 37:8-9, which Michelangelo’s reviving skeletons would as reasonably have brought to Blake’s mind as they later did to the minds of Michelangelo scholars:

“The bones of death, the cov’ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry’d / Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! awakening!” (*America* 6:3-4; E53).

According to Blake’s later doctrine, the human body in its resurrected state is spiritual and androgynous. In both *Marriage* 21 and *America* 6, the conspicuously displayed genitals of the awakening man suggest that his resurrected state is material, sexual, and specifically male. When, however, he reappears in the third version of the scene (*The Grave*, pl. 11),14 which is more elaborate as well as more conventional than the first two, his pose has been altered so that the state to which he has awakened is unclear. Since his genitals are concealed, he may be either material and sexual as before, or spiritual but less than androgynous; or perhaps he is merely desexed for the sake of the contemporary audience.


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The skull has disappeared, and the stage of death is represented by a tomb and a bent old man, both from another design in *America*, plate 12 (IB, p. 150; cf. also *The Gates of Paradise*, plate 15; IB, p. 276).

In the first two versions of Blake’s Renovated Man, the relation of the seated figure and the grave mound with the skull to the three main members of Michelangelo’s resurrecting group (listening skeleton, newly fleshed body, and still unfleshed skull) is evident enough. A print like that in Fig. 1 would have provided the imagery, including the added, righthand skull and open, upward-gazing eyes, and perhaps even recalled the passage from Ezekiel which is echoed in the text of *America* 6. Yet for the attitude of the Renovated Man, who seems to be both listening and watching, Blake could have found a further suggestion in another work by Michelangelo, the famous drawing known as the *Sogno*, or *A Dream of Human Life*, which had often been copied and would have been available in the engraving by Beatrizet (Fig. 3). One of the adaptations of the *Sogno* by Fuseli, for which Beatrizet’s engraving surely was used, was early enough for Blake to have seen it and learned something about its model by the time he began work on *Marriage*. In Michelangelo’s drawing, which belonged to the same period as *The Last Judgment* and is related to it through the figures in the background, personifications of the cardinal sins, the nude man leaning on the globe is looking up toward the angel with the trumpet, who is summoning him to rise from his worldly life. Not only is the man’s attitude like those of both the alert skeleton in Fig. 1 and Blake’s Renovated Man (Fig. 2). The angel descending headfirst also has a Blakean counterpart in the trumpeter—wingless and full-sized, but in that respect like the trumpeting angels in *The Last Judgment*—who appears in one of the watercolor illustrations to Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (ca. 1795–97) (Fig. 4). With minor alterations, the same design was repeated on the title page of *The Grave*.17 Blake’s trumpeter, however, is summoning not another nude man but a skeleton, which lies outstretched under a shroud and has raised its head in a beginning response. Just as, according to my argument, Blake substituted his Renovated Man for Michelangelo’s listening skeleton, so (I would further argue) in his illustrations to Young and Blair he substituted a skeleton for the awakening man in Michelangelo’s *Sogno*. If he was familiar with engravings after both Michelangelo scenes, as he very likely was, he could hardly have missed their common imagery. Even though as many as five or six years may have separated his initial design of the Reno-

16. See Tolnay, pp. 181–82. In their own designs, both Fuseli and Blake used similar tiny background figures to indicate fantasy, vision, troubling thoughts, and the like. With Michelangelo’s crouching figure at the lower right of Fig. 3, cf. esp. the captive inside the globe in *Europe: A Prophecy*, pl. 3 (IB, p. 161).
17. *The Grave*, facs. For related figures, skeletons and/or trumpeters, see Butlin II, pls. 430, 431, 849, 851, 853A; IB, pp. 337, 392, 394.
Fig. 3. N. Beatrizet, engraving after Michelangelo, *A Dream of Human Life*. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
THE COMPLAINT.
NIGHT the SECOND.

"When the Cock crew, he wept"—Smote by that Eye, which looks on me, on All: That Pow'r, who
This Midnight Contain'd with Clarion thrill, Emblem of that which shall awake the dead,
Rouse Souls from Slumber, into Thoughts of Heaven.
Shall I too weep? Where then is Fortitude? And Fortitude abandon'd, where is Man?
I know the terms on which He sees the Light; He that is born, is filled; Life is War;
Eternal War with Woe: who bears it well,

Fig. 4. Blake, Illustrations to Edward Young, Night Thoughts, no. 38. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
vated Man in *Marriage* 21 and his own trumpeter scene in *Night Thoughts*, given his powerful sense of symmetry the first substitution would have made the later, reciprocal one probable, if not inevitable.

III

Another detail from *The Last Judgment* which was represented in a separate print Blake could have known is the tanged group of figures on the side of the Damned (Fig. 5), whose angels, demons, and condemned sinners—or rather, if we accept Leo Steinberg's view, personifications of sin—are barely distinguishable from each other. Between the two prominent climbing nudes the angels are trying to thrust down, two other figures are tumbling headfirst, with their hands clasped on or against their heads. The one at the left, with purse and keys, the symbols of Avarice, is seen frontally; the other, who has been turned face down, is clothed, with a head-dress, and if the garments were painted by Michelangelo himself may be a woman. The ways in which Blake "transplanted" these two figures into his own work well illustrate his type of borrowing, conforming to Reynolds' brief definition (see section I above) but exceeding the practical possibilities Reynolds had been able to foresee.

With small modifications and variations, mainly in the heads, hands, and feet, Blake repeated and sometimes multiplied, in individuals and in groups, the basic combination of headlong fall, contorted attitudes, and complementary frontal and dorsal views from the original pair, all the while preserving a recognizable relation to his source. The list of designs in which such figures occur includes *America: A Prophecy*, plate 5 (Fig. 8), and *The Book of Urizen*, plate 6 (IB, p. 188), along with separate pictures and illustrations to others' texts: *Night Thoughts*, nos. 173, 174, 184, 305, 336; *The Brazen Serpent; The Fall of Man: The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan; The Grave*, plate 8; *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, plate 16; 19 *Paradise Lost*, no. 7 (Fig. 7). Only a few can be discussed here. Plate 8 of *The Grave* is entitled *The Day of Judgment* and apparently was Blake's first attempt to work out his own pictorial conception of the Last Judgment. 20 In place of a clear, overall structure, the emphasis is on separate groups of figures, such as he could have seen in engravings after Michelangelo like those reproduced

Fig. 5. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail). Anonymous engraving. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
here. In the group of the Damned and their escorting demons at the right (Fig. 6), as many as seven distinct figures are shown in generally alternating frontal and dorsal views as they fall; all but one are inverted, and all but another either have arms bound behind them or hold clasped hands on or against their heads. The shadowy one in the center, partially enveloped in flames, is virtually a copy (in the precise sense of the term) of the face-down member of the original pair. Similar variations and near-duplications occur in other designs which incorporate several falling bodies in the same scene. In the Milton illustration, *Rout of the Rebel Angels* (Fig. 7), the only complete figures are the three in the foreground, who are seen in dorsal, frontal, and profile views, respectively; their gestures recur among the others, who are seen as hardly more than heads and clasped hands.

Blake's earliest adaptation of the tumbling pair, and the one that most altered the original attitudes, appears below the text on plate 5 of *America* (Fig. 8). The figure at the left clasps his head, but he is dropping into the flames in a horizontal position and it is not an illusion that the upper and lower halves of his body are ill-matched. The foreshortened legs, drawn up and slightly bowed, with curling toes, are actually from a figure not among the Damned but one of their tormenters: specifically, the demon gliding downward at the lower righthand corner of Fig. 5. (In the old and fragile print reproduced here, it seems to be the frayed edge of the paper that cuts off the upper part of the demon's body. Even in the original, however [Tolnay, fig. 11], the upper part is obscured.) Moreover, the demon's legs are shown not from the rear, as they appear in Fig. 5, but from the front, as they would appear if the demon were a mounted work of sculpture which could be rotated in place or around which the viewer could walk. (Cf. Reynolds' advice in *Discourse* XII: "It appears to me to be an excellent practice thus to suppose the figures which you wish to adopt in the works of those great Painters to be statues; and to give . . . another view, taking care to preserve all the spirit and grace you find in the original.") Correspondingly, the head and arms are shown approximately as they would appear if the face-down figure from the complementary pair in Fig. 5 were to be reoriented from the vertical to the horizontal.

The lefthand figure at the bottom of *America* 5 thus is a composite, made up of two different halves which are joined by addition. The other figure as a whole is a recognizable variant of the frontal member of the complementary pair, but his contortion is extreme. The strange outward arching of the chest, while the head and face are lost in shadow below, may be from a remembered and imperfect impression of the Belvedere Torso, which in his polemical *Descriptive Catalogue* many years later Blake was willing to accept as "the only original work remaining" by

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21. Malone, i, 259. Reynolds' examples, from Raphael and Masaccio, are of frontal and profile figures.
Fig. 7. Blake, *Rout of the Rebel Angels*. Illustrations to *Paradise Lost* (Thomas set), no. 7. The Huntington Library and Art Gallery.
Fig. 8. Blake, America: A Prophecy (copy E), pl. 5. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress.
Greek artists (E531). Since the famous antique fragment is in fact headless, there is a certain plausibility in David Erdman’s perception of Blake’s falling figure as the “possibly decapitated body” of “the King” after trial by what Erdman calls a “revolutionary tribunal” (IB, p. 143) — i.e., the figures at the top of the plate. However, it is more likely that the eclipse of the figure’s head was the accidental effect of Blake’s interest in the torso, not a wordless addition to the narrative of America nor an attempt to copy the Belvedere Torso as such. Essentially the same inverted and contorted pose recurs in a number of other designs, often simplified and schematized but consistently preserving the asymmetrical leg position, the arms bound behind, and the head painfully thrown back on a straining neck so that little or nothing of the face can be seen. To give examples would be virtually to repeat the list from the beginning of this section, together with Blake’s own Judgment drawings. An example from outside the sequence is the trumpeter in Fig. 4: although his arms are not bound and he is not actually falling, as he descends he too assumes the pseudo-headless pose.

The other figures on America 5 are also related to The Last Judgment but in differing ways, as though Blake sometimes depended on his memory and sometimes consulted his print collection directly as he prepared the design for etching.22 (The second version of the Renovated Man, with its own relation to The Last Judgment, follows on America 6. A number of other designs in America can be traced to specific sources, including others by Michelangelo.) In the scene above the text, the three principal figures recall Michelangelo’s muscular and wingless angels who in the lunettes at the top of The Last Judgment are sporting through the air with the symbols of the Passion (Tolnay, figs. 6, 7); those in Fig. 9 here are carrying the Column of the Flagellation, the Ladder, and the Sponge. Blake’s two outer figures, wingless also and effortlessly flying, also carry symbolic objects, a pair of scales and a flaming sword, which are much over-sized but evidently weightless. (Blake may have recognized that behind Michelangelo’s lunette designs was the traditional pictorial conceit of putti or amorini playing with giant-sized weapons or pieces of armor.) The attitude of the angel with the scales is a reversal, from left to right, of the otherwise nearly identical attitude of Michelangelo’s angel with the Sponge. In the middle, the figure standing on the cloud has a more distant counterpart in one of Michelangelo’s angels with the Column (second from the left, foreground).23 However, the captive bundled on his shoulders is from

22. In “The Eidetic and the Borrowed Image: An Interpretation of Blake’s Theory and Practice” (1964; rpt. in Visionary Hand, pp. 253–302), Joseph Burke argues for the “unconscious influence of [Blake’s] visual experience on invention” (p. 274), although his own specific examples do not support his position. Most of the “inventions” discussed here, especially in sections III and IV, imply more or less conscious decision intentionally acted upon; the chief variable is immediacy, the degree of distance of the original image from Blake’s outward or inward eye.

23. The lefthand angel, seen from the rear, has been identified in one of Blake’s figures in his Dante illustration, The Punishment of the Thieves; see C. H. Collins Baker, “The Sources of Blake’s Pictorial
Fig. 9. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail). Anonymous engraving. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
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another part of *The Last Judgment*; see the demon-and-sinner group below and to the left of our falling Damned (Tolnay, figs. 11, 288).

For the sword and scales Blake’s angels are carrying, there is a possible Biblical source. In Revelation 6, the second of the Four Horsemen receives a “great sword” and the third has “a pair of balances in his hand” (vv. 4-5). When in *The Resurrection of the Dead*, his rejected design for the title page of *The Grave* (Butlin II, pl. 719), Blake incorporated both a sword and a pair of scales, or balances, like that in *America 5*, similarly weighted toward the right, he very well may have been thinking of the passage on the Horsemen and adapted the apocalyptic symbols to his own purposes. It happens, however, that in art a sword and scales were the particular symbolic attributes of the Archangel Michael,24 who in another chapter of the Book of Revelation (12:7-9, “And there was war in heaven”) defeats and casts out of Heaven the rebel angels and their leader, Satan or (as in Isaiah 14) Lucifer. Although Michael does not appear in his namesake’s *Last Judgment*, he was a standard presence in more conventional versions, in which the fall of the Damned thus was tacitly assimilated to the expulsion of the rebels. Even without Michael, an early drawing by Michelangelo for his own *Last Judgment* does in fact depict a group of rebel angels.25 Blake therefore was closer to Michelangelo than he may have realized, and closer to traditional iconography, in using his variations of the attitudes of the falling Damned for the defeated host in his *Rout of the Rebel Angels* (Fig. 7), which illustrates Milton’s account of the War in Heaven (*Paradise Lost*, VI, 835-66).

In *America 5*, too, imagery from *The Last Judgment* in both the upper and lower scenes is associated with defeat and expulsion. Held by the angel at the upper left, the balances of judgment dip in the direction in which the two bottom figures are falling, while the righthand angel flies upward with the sword of victory. In the light of the theme of rebellion and counter-rebellion in the poem as a whole, and the curious cosmological myth to which the short text on plate 5 alludes in an aside,26 the three victors and three vanquished are archetypal antagonists, comprising Michael and the loyal angels versus Lucifer and the rebels and through them the Sun versus Mars, Albions Angel versus Orc, England versus America, and any others that may fit the analogy. Below the text, the inverted figure is repeating the fall of Lucifer from Heaven to Hell, or laying down the path it will follow, and the serpent image


26. “Then Mars thou wast our center, & the planets three flew round / Thy crimson disk; so e’er the Sun was rent from thy red sphere” (5:4-5; E53).
behind him is a quasi-abstract emblem of his fate. The circle formed by the serpent's body beginning at the head is obviously from the Ourobouros, the traditional symbol of Eternity, but the head and tail do not meet to close the circle. Instead, the tail is lengthened and diverted to form a series of regularly graduated coils which spiral downward into the flames. In a somewhat later version of the same archetypal fall, *Urizen 6* (*IB*, p. 188), the main outcast of the three shown has fallen headfirst into the serpent coils and is bound from chest to feet in a similar graduated spiral. There, however, the serpent too is inverted and the incomplete Ourobouros circle is toward the bottom of the plate. Less regular coils entwine the two flanking figures, whose complementary attitudes, face up and face down, with hands on heads, make them model Blakean adaptations of the original tumbling pair.  

IV

The third group of figures from *The Last Judgment* is again on the side of the Elect, among those who already have been resurrected and are shown in varying stages of ascent. This particular group is another pair of figures, reducible further to one member of the pair, who is kneeling on a cloud as he reaches down to help a slower neighbor (Fig. 10). As has rightly been observed,  

27. The irregular serpent coils (see also the falling Satan in Fig. 6), a motif often used by Blake, probably were adopted from the figure usually called Minos, in the extreme lower righthand corner of *The Last Judgment* (Tolnay, fig. 35). The distorted faces and perhaps bodies in the flames in *Urizen* 6 may have been suggested by Michelangelo's image of his own flayed skin (Tolnay, pp. 45-46 and fig. 55; see Michell, *Composite Art*, p. 148). In view of Blake's *Joseph of Arimathea* and its relation to Michelangelo's *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*, it also is of more than passing interest that, except for the serpent coils, the pose of the central inverted figure in *Urizen* 6 is the same as that in traditional early representations of the crucified Peter (see Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Last Paintings*, pp. 46-47 and figs. 68-71, 73-74), from which Michelangelo markedly departed.


Fig. 10. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail). Anonymous engraving. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
Fig. 11. Blake, *The Book of Urizen* (copy G), pl. 15. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress.
copy undertaken as a study exercise. And such a copy, in a medium he never was to master, might be expected to be unlike his more familiar work. In itself, the Huntington painting is an example of at least the *kind* of “finished copy” Blake was defending in his annotation to Reynolds quoted in section I. If it is authentic, it is a better example of his practice in the sense of the annotation than either his drawings after Ghisi’s Sistine engravings or the first state of *Joseph of Arimathea*. Moreover, if it is authentic, the Huntington painting and *Urizen* 15 together illustrate the difference between Blake’s copying and his borrowing in relation to what conceivably could have been the same engraving, used as a source on occasions some eighteen years apart.

Whatever the true status of the Huntington copy of the neighboring figure, Michelangelo’s kneeling Helper can be identified in the active Eternal of *Urizen* 15 mainly by the beardless face seen in foreshortened view and the downreaching arm, which are reinforced by the supporting cloud and the folds of cloth swirling cloaklike around all the figures in the design—a development of the lighter drapery the Helper probably acquired when the nudes in *The Last Judgment* were overpainted on Vatican orders. Blake’s major alteration in the figure, aside from allowing nothing of the body to be seen below the shoulders, was to reverse the positions of the right and left arms. Such reversals, which occur also in variations of images of his own invention, sometimes are explained as the automatic effect of printing, as though in this instance he had first drawn the detail of head, arms, and shoulders in the original orientation, as in Fig. 10 here, which he surely would have found in any engraving he consulted. However, like the early engravers themselves, working directly from Michelangelo’s frescoes, Blake was capable of judging and choosing in advance the orientation he wanted in the final impressions of his relief etchings. In this respect it is significant that when the Helper’s pose recurs, in watercolor drawings as well as on plates requiring printing, the extended arm is usually the left but sometimes the right.

Some Blake commentators consider his reversals between left and right, and the apparent opposition that results, as intentionally symbolic, although the symbolism that can be constructed is not consistent throughout his work. In *Urizen* 15, there is a change in the significance of the downreaching gesture which depends as much on a new vertical relation between upper and lower as on the horizontal right-left reversal. The globe partially visible at the bottom of the plate is an image of the material universe, brought into existence as an improvisation by Urizen in an earlier episode (5:28–37; E73), and the Eternal’s purpose in covering it is to deny access to Eternity to Urizen, Los, and their descendants. (See 19:2–9, 37–48; E78, 79.) Separation and downward exclusion, sinis-
ter in a double sense, thus replace the community in ascent expressed by the original gesture, which is made with the right arm. In other uses of the same borrowed figure, whether the operative arm is the right or the left also depends on the implied relation of upper to lower, which tends to be ambiguous or uncertain and may be hostile. In Fig. 12, for example, the gesture of the bearded man on the upper sphere is presumably friendly in intent, serving the “sweet interchange of rays” between planets described in the Night Thoughts passage (Night IX, p. 37; Ill. 728–31) which the drawing illustrates; but as Blake ironically visualizes it, the transaction is precarious for both giver and receiver. In another illustration, to Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” the personification of Ambition is crouching on a hillside, holding out a laurel branch to the boy who is climbing up the slope toward her. Gray’s text explicitly warns of malicious deception from above: “Ambition this shall tempt to rise, / Then whirl the wretch from high.”

It is among Blake’s watercolor drawings for Young’s Night Thoughts and the poetry of Gray that most of his adaptations of the helping pose occur. For them, he probably did not consult his Last Judgment source itself (which I am assuming was an engraving like that from which the detail in Fig. 10 is taken) but worked from Urizen 15, producing increasingly distant variations in which the original pose is not easily recognized. NT 455 (Fig. 12) is typical, with its crouching and exaggeratedly contracted figure, rotated statuelike to give “another view” (in this instance, shifted to a profile from a frontal view), and predictably the left not right arm thrust down toward the level below him (see also NT 42, 73, 135, 141, 166, 252, 336, 493). Change in situation or setting, mirrorlike reversal, inversion of value, shift in perspective or reorientation in space: no one method of adaptation or variation employed by Blake was without precedent in the art tradition he inherited. The painters of Michelangelo’s own time and later had made similar use of separate figures from The Last Judgment, often in incongruous situations, and Joshua Reynolds had formularized their practice in yet another of his recommendations to his students. Blake was unconventional, and probably could be called excessive, in the number and variety of changes he could bring to bear upon one particular borrowing, even concentrating them in one particular figure, as in NT 455.

The illustrations to Young and Gray were all executed within the same period of two or three years, beginning in 1795. Somewhat before then, however, Blake had also executed a much better known design, one

32. See Steinberg, “Merciful Heresy,” p. 60 and Figs. 16, 17. In his valedictory, Discourse XV (1790), Reynolds recommends two exercises to “the young artist when he first attempts invention”: first, “to select every figure, if possible, from the inventions of Michael Angelo”; then, “to change the purpose of the figures without changing the attitude” (Malone, I, 341–42). The transitional step between copying and borrowing advocated by Reynolds here would be well illustrated by the second state of Joseph of Arimathea.
Fig. 12. Blake, Illustrations to Edward Young, *Night Thoughts*, no. 455. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
usually discussed from the standpoint of its symbolism, in which the lone figure is visibly related to both the active Eternal of Urizen 15 and the Elect Helper from Michelangelo’s Last Judgment. The same design was indeed cited as a “specimen” of Blake’s Michelangelesque style by Blake’s contemporary J. T. Smith, who evidently also contributed its popular title, The Ancient of Days. 

Smith’s observation was better grounded than he himself may have realized, for Blake’s famous Demiurge (Fig. 13) is linked directly to Michelangelo’s Helper by three key details: the powerfully downthrust arm (in the finished form of the design, once again the left); the right leg bent at the knee (omitted in Urizen 15), which now is supplemented by an invented left leg; and the downturned face with its expression (not usual in Blake) of concentration in repose. There are two additions: the long hair and beard streaming in the wind (perhaps suggested by the portrayals of King Lear by James Barry and John Hamilton Mortimer), and the hand holding the compasses. As the traditional implement of Creation in illustrations of the Book of Genesis, compasses had a long history in religious art, which was the subject of Anthony Blunt’s first published article on Blake. The particular image in The Ancient of Days, however, calls for a particular source, which most probably was the famous printer’s device of Christopher Plantin of Antwerp: a disembodied hand with a pair of compasses, emerging from a cloud to draw a circle on a tablet below; inscribed on a cartouche is Plantin’s motto, “Labore et Constantia.”

Equipped with the compasses and reaching down from the heavens in parallel with the Eternal of Urizen 15, the Demiurge is engaged in an action which, in the light of the passage from Paradise Lost universally associated with The Ancient of Days, will have a restrictive and exclusionary effect on the new world he is about to bring into existence somewhere below and outside the picture. ‘One foot he center’d, and the other turn’d / Round through the vast profunditie obscure, / And said, thus farr extend, thus farr thy bounds, / This be thy just Circum-
Fig. 13. Blake, *Europe: A Prophecy* (copy E), frontispiece. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress.
ference, O World” (*Paradise Lost*, VII, 228–31). Like Milton’s Logos with his “golden compasses” (ibid., I. 225)—and the compasses in Blake’s design are golden also, spread open like extensions of the hand—the Demiurge may be drawing a circumscribing circle in the void. Or he may be preparing to use the compasses as his counterpart Urizen is seen to be doing in the first chapter of *The Book of Urizen*: “‘Times on times he divided, & measur’d / Space by space in his ninefold darkness’” (3:8–9; E70). In the latter case, the new and circumscribed world outside the picture would be represented not as a linear circle but as a solid with a measurable surface: that is, as a sphere or globe, like the one at the bottom of *Urizen* 15.

*The Ancient of Days* was first issued as the frontispiece to *Europe: A Prophecy*, which bears on its title page the same date, 1794, as *The Book of Urizen* and hence may have been composed at about the same time. *Urizen* has no frontispiece, and the compass allusions (one a pun) at the beginning of both verse texts³⁷ suggest that at some time prior to etching Blake may have been undecided as to which book should receive the design. Whether it or *Urizen* 15 was the earlier in actual execution, *The Ancient of Days* did not give rise to a similar series of variations and readaptations. It is only in two quite different versions of the down-reaching pose later in Blake’s career that the Demiurge can be recognized again, and once more separation and exclusion from above are either depicted or implied. In the upper half of *Rout of the Rebel Angels* (Fig. 7), the warrior Christ expelling the defeated angels assumes the same basic pose as the Demiurge, poised within a hollowed-out opening in the heavens. Appropriately, since this is the Miltonic Christ who elsewhere draws the bounding circle of the universe, his left arm holding the bow is thrust down like his predecessor’s compass arm, and the bow-string pulled taut forms a triangular shape like the compasses themselves. Later still, in *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825), Blake brought together *The Ancient of Days* and *Urizen* 15, with a faint visual echo of Michelangelo’s original figure as well. At the top of plate 15 (“‘Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee’”) (Bindman, pl. 640) Job’s bearded God is leaning over a cloud which allows nothing of his body to be seen below the arms. With the familiar left-handed gesture, he is pointing down toward a transparent sphere, an adaptation of the cosmic globe in *Urizen* 15, which at last is shown in full but now encloses only the monsters Leviathan and Behemoth in their primeval world. Job, his wife, and his friends are on the level immediately above, looking down; but the framing cloud that surrounds the globe and over which the Demiurge is leaning is unbroken, enclosing all of them as well.

About Blake and Michelangelo, and about Blake’s ways with art ³⁷. “‘Times on times he divided,’” etc. (*Urizen* 3:8–9; E70); “‘And who shall bind the infinite with an eternal band? / To compass it with swaddling bands?’” (*Europe* 2:13–14; E61).
sources, more remains to be said, elsewhere. What has been said in the preceding pages I hope has demonstrated to those who may be skeptical that the study of Blake's art sources involves much more than the categorization of his designs and their imagery according to the names of earlier artists and the titles of their works. Whether his borrowings served meanings which were essential to his mythopoeic and "prophetic" concerns, or whether they were chosen for the pragmatic purposes of the moment, the series of changes through which they passed—revisions, adaptations, variations, or ultimately complete transformations—constitute an invaluable record of his imagination at work. To attempt to reconstruct the history of such changes for even a limited number of borrowings, as for the three groups of figures that have been considered here, is to enter along with Blake into the creative process itself.

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