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R E V I E W

Nancy L. Pressly, *Revealed Religion: Benjamin West's Commissions for Windsor Castle and Fonthill Abbey*

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retained the idea of authorial responsibility. Hilton, I would guess partly because of the strain on credibility exacted by punning, would make his pretext the word of the Muse speaking through Blake's unconscious. Evidently this escape from censorship is liberating for Hilton, and he feels free to goose-chase chains of association through Blake's texts in a wonderfully uninhibited fashion. But he is encouraged as well into theoretical hypocrisies with respect to the "other tradition" of commentary. "Rather than add to the infinitely proliferating possibilities of symbolic commentary, we might strive instead to study how Blake's polysemous words and contexts support each other" (p. 11). Obviously Hilton earns the right to his own emphasis, but where does our knowledge of context come from if not from the proliferating commentaries? And what makes Hilton think his is not one of them?

In other words, the idea that word leads to word in Blake's texts without any mediation by "symbolic" commentary seems to me untenable. The mediation, finally, has to be the myth Blake produced, and since Hilton seems delighted by polysemy in words I can't for the life of me figure out why he is disturbed by "proliferation" in commentary. Moreover, this error (as I see it) terribly and unnecessarily limits what he could have done with his talents as a reader. "These constructions," he writes (p. 4) "do not disclose anything about the narrative, but they do create aspects of the background and frame. . . ." But after all, since so many of Blake's primary mythological names are themselves puns, it is no very great leap to the notion that the myth itself may be only an "extension"—as it were shorthand—for the linguistic activity studied here. Of course it is one thing to ignore the leap for reasons of economy or space, but Hilton's attempt to make a theoretical virtue out of ignoring it seems to me a grievous self-imposition. To pursue words as if they told us nothing about Blake's narrative is to be only half-Blaked.

To carry on as if this were not the case, and if his own commentaries weren't led at every point by a specialist's awareness of symbolic commentary, commits Hilton to a mode of disclosure which, since it traces term-associations at the expense of narrative-associations, fails to discover a *critical narrative* worthy of his discoveries. For example, the chapter on "Stars and Other Bright Words" moves from the extraordinary reading of "The Tyger" with which it begins to an elaborate discussion of the conceptual associations between stars and reason, taking us from the *Night Thoughts* illustrations through *The Book of Urizen* to *Milton* and beyond. I learned something for which I am grateful every step of the way, but in the absence of any critical narrative except association I found the process of argument tedious and arbitrary. In this book it is as if the usual relationship between argument and footnote had been

reversed, and the reader left to make what he will of the notes. Given the talents of the reader, I found myself wishing for more. There is no desirable conflict between fiction-readers and word-readers of Blake, or at least none that couldn't be made into a Blakean war in heaven. Lacking this, however, it is not so terrible to find oneself where "Contrarieties are equally True," and we should be grateful to Nelson Hilton for giving us Beulah.

**Nancy L. Pressly. *Revealed Religion: Benjamin West's Commissions for Windsor Castle and Fonthill Abbey*. San Antonio: San Antonio Museum of Art, 1983.**

**Reviewed by Allen Staley**

From September to November 1983 the San Antonio Museum of Art presented a small but distinguished exhibition of sketches by Benjamin West for three ambitious cycles of paintings and stained glass windows depicting biblical subjects. The organizer of the exhibition and author of its extremely informative catalogue was Nancy Pressly, the museum's chief curator, who previously had organized the exhibition of *The Fuseli Circle in Rome* at the Yale Center for British Art in 1979.

The three series for which the exhibited sketches were preparatory studies were intended for the Royal Chapel in Windsor Castle, St. George's Chapel also at Windsor Castle, and Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire. The two Windsor undertakings occupied West on and off for over two decades. The Fonthill commissions came only in 1796, when William Beckford started to build the Abbey, and West's work for Beckford all seems to have been done by 1801. West did complete eighteen very large pictures for the Royal Chapel, all of which he exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1781 and 1801, but they were never installed in the Castle. For St. George's Chapel he painted an altarpiece and made designs for five windows, of which four were installed. These were on a vast scale (the triptychal east window depicting the *Resurrection* measured some thirty-six feet high by twenty-eight across) and, as they were in the fully late-Baroque style that West used consistently for the biblical subjects he painted in the 1780s and 1790s, they conflicted dramatically with the Perpendicular Gothic style of their architectural setting. They were removed and destroyed in mid-nineteenth-century restorations of the Chapel. For Fonthill Abbey, West's chief religious subjects were intended for a Revelation Chamber planned

to house his patron's tomb. The Chamber was never built, and the compositions intended for it never proceeded beyond painted sketches, but four of those sketches were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1798. Three of the four, plus a drawing of *The Angel in the Sun* and two paintings of *St. Michael* and *St. Thomas à Becket* undertaken for windows in the Abbey, were shown at San Antonio, providing the visual climax of the exhibition, as well as a focused look at a hitherto all but unknown aspect of West's multi-faceted *oeuvre*.

Pressly's catalogue comprises not only lucid historical accounts of the three projects, but also important analyses of their positions in the art of the period. She is particularly interesting in her discussion of the Apocalyptic subjects for Beckford, which she relates to the millenarian ideas current in England following the French Revolution, specifically to the exhortations of Richard Brothers, the self-proclaimed prophet of a revolutionary millenium.

When one looks at a painting like *The Beast Rising from the Sea* [collection of Thomas and Margaret McCormick; no. 40], it is difficult, in the light of the millenarian spirit of the times, not to see some radical political commentary underlying its religious imagery. The prominent lion head of the beast could easily be interpreted as an only slightly veiled reference to England whose emblem was the lion, particularly when one remembers that Brothers explicitly identifies the Beast with the British Monarchy. (p. 64)

When one looks at West's *Beast Rising from the Sea*, it is also difficult not to see some foretaste of the multi-headed monsters in William Blake's *Great Red Dragon and the Beast from the Sea* (National Gallery of Art, Washington; Butlin no. 521), particularly when we read in Joseph Farington's diary that Blake's friend Ozias Humphry called West's sketch the "finest conception ever come from mind of man." Due to the rarity of illustrations of Revelation in post-Medieval art, West's paintings exhibited in the 1790s must have provided useful guide posts for Blake when he turned to Apocalyptic subjects in the next decade, and every one of West's subjects did find an echo in a drawing done by the younger artist a few years later. On the other hand, we should note that on 19 February 1796, well before West had begun to work for Beckford, Farington recorded a conversation in which West, Humphry, and Richard Cosway "spoke warmly in favour of the designs of Blake the Engraver, as works of extraordinary genius and imagination." At that date, West may well have been at work on the version of his *Death on the Pale Horse*, composed for the Royal Chapel at Windsor, which he exhibited the following May (Detroit Institute of Arts). By 1796 he probably had seen some of Blake's large color prints of 1795, and Blake is said to have given him a copy of *America, A Prophecy* of 1793. Although West first composed *Death on the Pale Horse* between 1779 and 1783 and exhibited a version of it in 1784 (Royal Academy

of Arts, London), it is possible that his awareness of Blake prompted him in 1796 to return to what had been an isolated venture into a visionary mode, and, at the least, we must acknowledge that he was not unaware of Blake when he began to paint his Apocalyptic sketches for Beckford in the following year. Despite vast differences in temperament and in their positions in English artistic life, there was some common ground between the two artists at a time when it could have been of use to them.

