

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

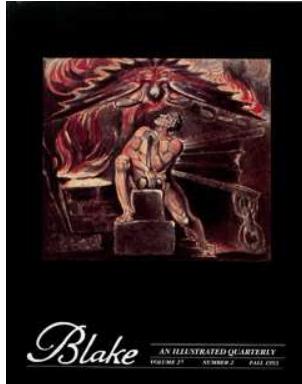
BLAKE

M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

Two Newly Identified Sketches for Thomas Commins's An Elegy: A Postscript

Martin Butlin

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for two weeks. Plate numbers and copy designations for Blake's illuminated books follow Bentley, *Blake Books*.

⁶ A few plates printed in blue appear in *Songs of Innocence* copies R and Y; these were probably printed in the same session as *America* copy M (Visconti, ch. 31). Slight variations in the color of the "same" ink can be explained by differences in the thickness with which it is applied to the copperplate and printed. The reflective surface of the ink (and hence its tone) and the extent to which the paper shows through the ink and affects its color are thereby altered. Greater differences can be caused by the artist thinning the ink or by changing the color mix—a bit more green for one pull, a bit more blue for the next—during the same printing session. These factors, as well as differences in the lighting conditions under which prints are studied and the subjectivity of human color perception, give rise to the different colors (e.g., "blue," "blue-green," "greenish-

blue," etc.) ascribed to impressions printed with the "same" (but perhaps frequently altered) batch of ink.

⁷ The 1799 watermarks in *America* copy M provide only a *terminus a quo* for its printing. The frontispiece was printed in brown, black, and burnt umber, and thus may be the product of a different printing session.

⁸ The four Canberra prints of designs only were formerly in the collection of Kerrison Preston; for monochrome reproductions, see Bindman plates 504a, 516a, 525a, 526a. Plate 1 is reproduced in color in Blake, *Jerusalem*, frontispiece. Plate 47, which includes one line of text below the design, is reproduced in color on the cover of the Colnaghi catalogue.

⁹ Bentley, *Blake Books* 262-63, states that the four raw-sienna impressions trimmed to the designs were "probably" those shown in 1812 and "were probably disposed of abruptly" because of the seizure by the landlord. But the provenance of

these impressions listed by Bentley—Blake, his widow, Frederick Tatham—indicates that they remained in Blake's possession until his death. I can see no reason for selecting these four raw-sienna impressions over at least plates 6, 28, and 51 in blue as those most likely to have been exhibited in 1812. Bentley, *Blake Books* 262-63n1, offers a list of impressions of plates that "might have been" in the 1812 show. Plates 28 and 51 in blue ink are included, but not plate 6.

¹⁰ According to Christie's catalogue of 11 May 1993, "it has now been suggested by Mr. Essick and Professor Visconti that *Los and his spectre* [i.e., *Jerusalem* plate 6] is one of twelve hand-colored plates from *Jerusalem* exhibited by Blake at the Royal Watercolour Society [*etc.*] in London in 1812." Neither Visconti nor I can recall telling Christie's that "twelve" plates were exhibited, although it is possible to arrive at that number through a selection of blue and raw-sienna impressions.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

Two Newly Identified Sketches for Thomas Commins's *An Elegy*: A Postscript

by Martin Butlin

There seems to be a rule in Blake's work that the less important the project and the more removed from his fundamental concerns, the more documentary material or the more preparatory sketches survive. This is the case with the various illustrations to William Hayley's literary projects; it is rapidly becoming the case with Commins's *An Elegy*. No sooner had I passed the final proofs from my article in the summer issue of *Blake*¹ than another sheet of drawings was brought into Christie's bearing no fewer than three further drawings related to the project.²



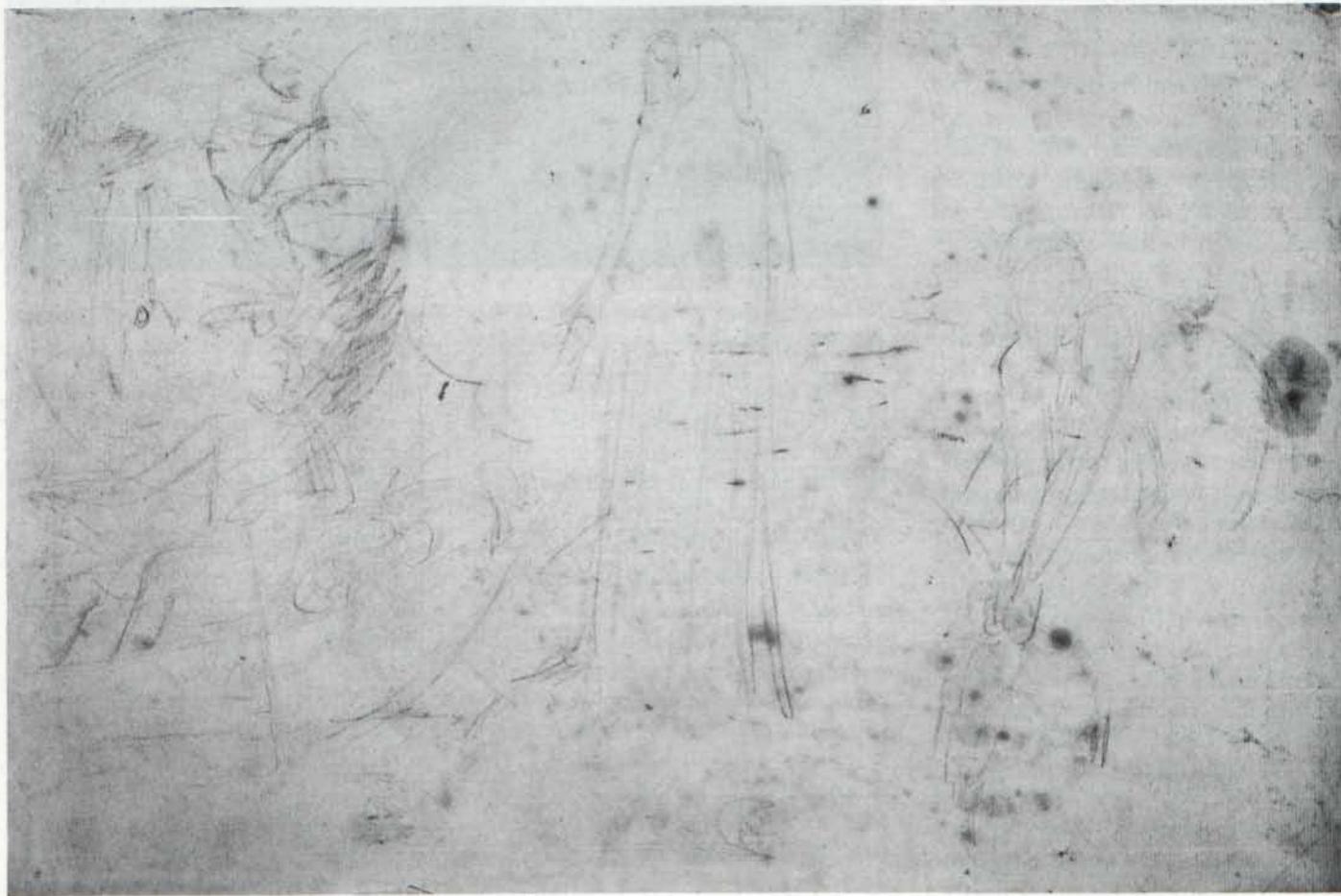
1. Alternative design for Commins's *An Elegy*, c. 1786. Pen and wash over pencil, framing line diameter approx. 30.0 cm. Sold at Christie's 17 November 1992.

On the recto, circumscribed in a drawn circle, is a variation of the drawing of an old man getting out of a boat, though in reverse. Unlike the vertical oval composition from the Cunliffe collection now in the U.S., the two angels welcoming him are airborne and hover, set against a cloud, over a bare promontory; there are no trees behind. This drawing is in pen and wash. On the reverse, in pencil, there are a number of drawings including one of the young man approaching the shore in his boat, this time in the same direction as that on the drawing from the Cunliffe collection. The figures in the center of the compositions seem to be part of the same composition and show two figures standing on the shore, seen against a cloud as is the case of the angels on the recto. To the right and apparently slightly larger in scale and therefore not part of the same compo-

sition are two sketches for what seems to be the same figure, stooping over with arms held down close together; this figure, perhaps a reminiscence of the two figures pulling in nets in Raphael's tapestry cartoon of *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes*, could represent a figure leaning down to secure the boat in the main drawing but alternatively could be a sketch of a completely different idea such as the figure of Simeon in *Joseph Ordering Simeon to be Bound*, of which there is both a water color sketch and a final version exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1785.³ Finally, and what clinches the connection of the drawings in the U.S. with the engraving for Commins's *An Elegy*, there is a drawing on the left hand side of the paper, to be seen upside down, of an upright oval composition corresponding closely to that final engraving; this drawing is much

more summarily executed than the other drawings on the sheet.

The order in which the drawings on the two sheets were made is not altogether clear. However, it is the circular, more heavily drawn version of the old man getting out of the boat that seems to be the later of the two versions of that composition. The clouds behind the airborne angels in this circular drawing recur behind the similar figures welcoming the young man rowing his boat towards the shore on the verso of the newly discovered sheet, but whether this comes before or after the version of that composition from the Cunliffe collection in which there are no angels but in which there are trees behind is uncertain, though it does seem to lead on more logically to the final engraving where again there are no angels, rather the young man's wife and child. It is likely that this last,



2. Sketches for Commins's *An Elegy* and other drawings, c. 1786 (verso of illus. 1). Pencil, 30.7 by 46.0 cm. Sold at Christie's 17 November 1992.

engraved version of the composition was the last to be developed, the rough preparatory drawing for it having been squeezed into a corner of the verso of the new sheet, overlapping the larger sketch of the young man in the boat.

In my previous article, I suggested that the sheet of drawings in the U.S. had been bought at the Cunliffe sale in

1895 by the New York dealer Frederick Keppel. This would suggest that it was not the drawing held, back in London, by Messrs. Robson in 1913. Now we have a new candidate for this last, the drawing recently sold at Christie's.

¹ Martin Butlin, "Two Newly Identified Sketches for Thomas Commins's *An Elegy*

and Furthered Rediscovered Drawings of the 1780s," *Blake* 26 (1992): 21-24, the recto and the verso of the drawing in the U.S. repr. pls. 2 and 3, Blake's final engraving of 1786 repr. pl. 1.

² Sold at Christie's, London, 17 November 1992.

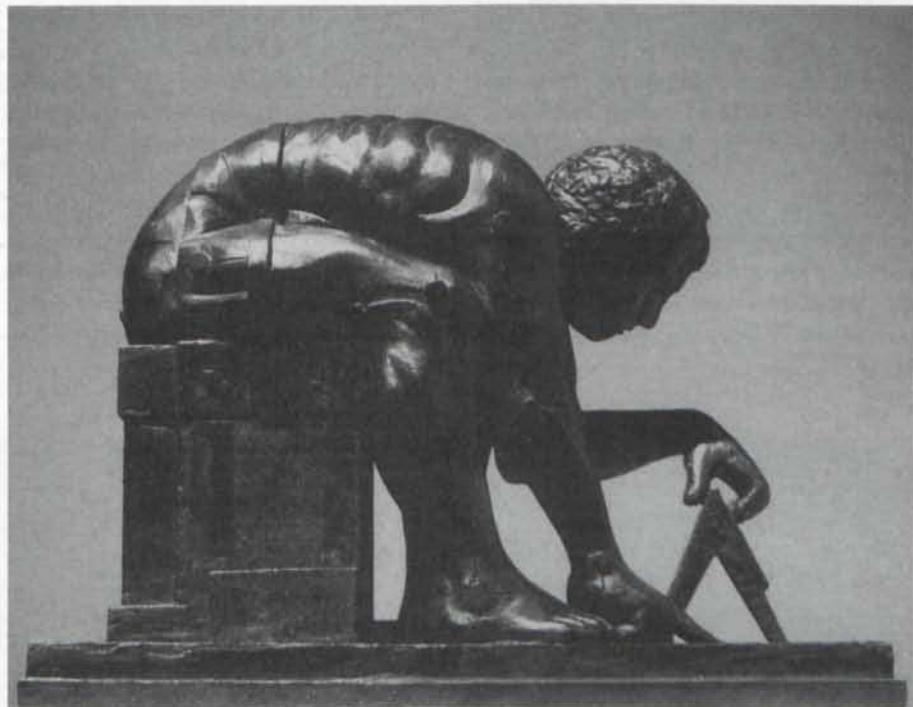
³ Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1981) nos. 156 and 158, repr. pls. 184 and 186.

Paolozzi's Newton

by Martin Butlin

The recent controversy over Paolozzi's projected sculpture for the new British Library has highlighted the attitude, typical in its attempt to tame the revolutionary, of the British to William Blake; a classic example is the singing of Blake's "Jerusalem" (in reality the conclusion of the Preface to *Milton*), as set to music by Sir Hubert Parry, at rallies of the Women's Institute or the Conservative Party. The project is for a massive bronze sculpture, some 12 feet high and set on a podium similar in height, based on Blake's color print *Newton*. After an alarm caused by the cancellation of government funding for this and other works of art commissioned by the Library, the casting of the final bronze is, at the time of writing, due to commence at any time.

The controversy began with two letters in *The Times* on 10 August 1992, from Richard Willmott of Brighton College and Brian Alderson. Astonished at "the cultural gaffe" that had led to the commission, Willmott pointed to Blake's attack on Newton "for a mechanistic and materialistic view of the universe which gave no room to the imagination." Alderson started by referring to the lack of original Blakes in the British Library (the illuminated books are staying in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum). He too suggested that the British Library had failed to understand the artist's meaning. On 13



Sir Eduardo Paolozzi (born 1924), *Sir Isaac Newton*, bronze, approx. 366 cm. Photo courtesy of the British Library Board, London.

August there were two replies. The first, from the architect of the British Library and a member of the committee that had commissioned the work, Colin St. John Wilson, described Blake's image of Newton as "an ambivalent combination of Michelangelesque splendour and disdain for scientific obsession with the measurable" and pointed out that "This equivocal attitude to the values of science is shared by many eminent scientists as well as laymen." The Chairman of the British Library Board, Michael Saunders Watson, suggested that "Where Blake's figure is impotent and exposed to the elements, Paolozzi's is immensely strong and

powerful" and went on to claim that "It is entirely appropriate that Britain's biggest civil building project of this century should be dominated by such an important work which so aptly symbolises the bringing together for the first time of the British Library's incomparable collections in the humanities and sciences." The following day the sculptor himself wrote, stating that when the architect had commissioned his sculpture "He was sure that I saw the work as an exciting union of two British geniuses. While acknowledging that Blake may have been indulging in satire, the image represents to me a fusion of nature, science, poetry, art and architecture