

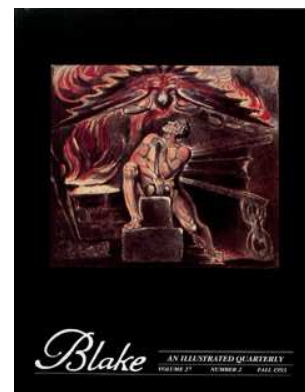
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Paolozzi's Newton

Martin Butlin

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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.

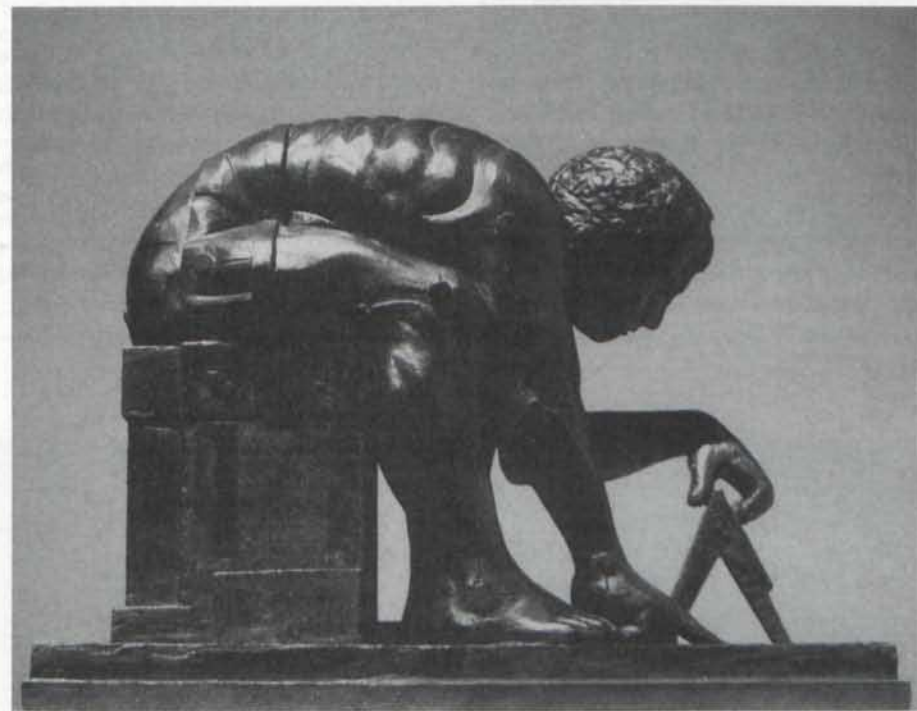
³ Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1981) nos. 156 and 158, repr. pls. 184 and 186.

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

linked by the classically beautiful body of Newton crouched in the position which brings to mind Rodin's *Thinker*." More recently, in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 19 March 1993, the controversy was revived with a letter from Christopher and Muriel Armstrong arguing that "To judge from the photograph . . . , Sir Eduardo's figure does nothing to blunt the power of Blake's satirical conception, of 1795, which should be compared with his picture of the creating 'Ancient of Days' of 1794 . . . Blake detested Newton and all that he conceived him to represent . . ." They go on to say that "The Trustees are, however, in good company . . . since the newly opened Isaac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences in Cambridge has given pride of place in their Library to Sir Eduardo Paolozzi's model of his rejected monument" and they jokingly ask over which "of these illustrious doorways shall we see inscribed Blake's words . . . 'May God Us Keep / From single vision and Newton's sleep?'"

Strangely, Paolozzi had already used Blake's image of Newton in another context, as one of a number of portraits of the eminent British architect Richard Rogers. This was in the context of an exhibition of *Paolozzi Portraits* held at the National Portrait Gallery, London, from May to August 1988. The exhibition was a culmination of several years of portraits by Paolozzi and included portrait busts of Richard Rogers, smiling and unsmiling, but the catalogue also illustrated two other projects based on the Blake print, one for a relief, the other for a three-dimensional sculpture. It was seeing this three-dimensional sculpture, or something like it, that led Colin St. John Wilson to commission the large version for the Library. Paolozzi's own statement in the catalogue said nothing about his indebtedness to Blake but Robin Gibson, in his foreword, wrote of "Paolozzi's preoccupation with Blake's print of Newton, both for its formal and symbolic relevance" (7). Robin Spencer, in his

essay on "Paolozzi as a Portrait Sculptor" compared Blake's image to Rodin's *Thinker* and suggested that Paolozzi had chosen the image more for "Blake's belief in the primacy of Poetic Genius, and the ability of the senses. . . to see through and beyond materialism to an eternal truth . . ." and hence "as an allegory of the modern architect" (18-19). At the time Richard Rogers was Chairman of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, where I then worked, and I mentioned to a friend of the sculptor how surprised I was at this identification of our chairman with Blake's negative image of unenlightened reason. Eighteen months later, as his contribution to a series of "Picture Choices," Paolozzi chose Blake's *Newton*, accepting that "Ironically Newton concentrates on reducing the universe to mathematical dimensions" but going on to say that "While Blake may have been satirising Newton, I see in this work an exciting union of two British geniuses. Together they present to us nature and science, poetry, art, architecture—all welded, interconnected, interdependent. The link is the classically beautiful body of Newton crouched in a position which may bring to mind Rodin's *Thinker* with all that implies . . ." This statement clearly defined and gave authority to the arguments of the friends and defenders of the sculptor. Given the multiplicity of scholarly interpretations of Blake's works and the fact that we here have one artistic genius working on material created by another, perhaps we should not try to impose too strictly a Blakean interpretation on Paolozzi's sculpture.

To the Editors

Since the publication of the Blake Trust/Tate Gallery edition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, my attention has been drawn to a sentence in the introduction that needs to be corrected. I'd be grateful for the chance to set the record straight in the pages of *Blake*.

The sentence appears on page 14. It reads:

Early in his professional career he [Blake] was commissioned to engrave designs for *The Speaker* (c1780), an anthology designed to 'facilitate the improvement of Youth in reading and Writing', and for Mrs Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781).

As it stands this sentence might imply a commission for more than one illustration in each volume. I'd like to make it clear that I know of no evidence that Blake was ever commissioned to engrave plates for the Barbauld book, or that he was ever commissioned to engrave more than one plate for *The Speaker*. (I can only account for this error by assuming that *Hymns in Prose* traveled from my list of books Blake seems to have read to my list of books for which he produced illustrations. Unfortunately I didn't pick this up in the proof-reading state—or notice that the quotation from *The Speaker* was transcribed incorrectly.) The sentence should read as follows:

Early in his professional career he was commissioned to engrave a design for *The Speaker* (c1780), an anthology designed to 'facilitate the Improvement of Youth in Reading and Speaking.'

I'd also like to take this opportunity to apologize to Mark Bracher, whose name was twice mangled in the edition.

I'm grateful to G. E. Bentley, Jr., Robert Essick and David Fuller for pointing out these errors to me.

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