

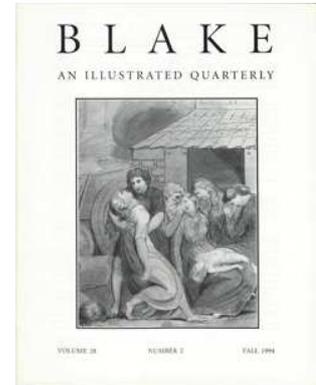
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D I S C U S S I O N

Which Newton for the British Library?

David Simpson

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Association of America, 1985, 213, refers to it as "the best introduction to all the *Songs* . . ." and then mentions half a dozen critics who had sought to discredit the Bard.

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D I S C U S S I O N

Which Newton for the British Library?

BY DAVID SIMPSON

I was very interested to read, in a recent issue of *Blake*, Martin Butlin's account of the recent controversy over Sir Eduardo Paolozzi's sculptural adaptation of Blake's *Newton* projected for the British Library. Butlin ends by advising us against imposing "too strictly a Blakean interpretation on Paolozzi's sculpture."¹ I have often wondered whether there is any "strict" Blakean interpretation of *Newton*, especially of the famous print on which the controversial sculpture is based.² Colin St. John Wilson, as reported by Butlin, notes the ambivalence of the portrait of Sir Isaac, at once narrowly obsessed with a geometrical problem and beautifully delineated in its naked energy, like a coiled spring, or a revolution waiting to happen. Other commentators, among them Robert Essick, have noted similar ambiguities in the print.³ And we should not forget that Edmund Burke himself made much of the connection between the geometrical spirit and the French Revolution, with its "geometrical and arithmetical constitution" threatening to "uncover our nakedness" and banish the "Christian religion" in favor of some "degrading superstition."⁴ By 1795, the year of Blake's print, many in Britain had come to share Burke's contempt for France. And if Blake himself might also have come to endorse some of the regnant emotionalist distrust of scientific and mathematical method as applied to political and social reorganization, we may yet see in the taut body and tight curls of the *Newton* figure the signature of an alternative reading.

So far, I have said nothing new. But my question is this: is the figure in the print Sir Isaac, or only Sir Isaac? It certainly bears a facial resemblance to the famous images of the aquiline, slightly petulant and even neurotic genius known as Isaac Newton, so that it seems hard to imagine that that this is not the distinguished Fellow of Trinity and

¹ Martin Butlin, "Paolozzi's *Newton*," *Blake* 27 (1993): 45.

² The standard listing of the sources for and discussions of the print is ed. Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1981) 1: 166-67. Butlin notes both negative and positive components of Blake's attitude to *Newton*, along with graphic precursors in Michelangelo and elsewhere.

³ Robert N. Essick, "Blake's *Newton*," *Blake Studies* 3 (1971): 149-62. The major account of Blake's relation to *Newton* is, of course, Donald D. Ault's *Visionary Physics: Blake's Response to Newton* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1974), which has a very full sense of the complexities of the relationship.

⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976) 144, 187-88.

Lucasian Professor depicted here in naked glory.⁵ But the Newton more familiar to Blake's generation was another, the Rev. John Newton, adventurer, author and divine. John Newton had an extraordinary life, and he wrote about it at some length and on various occasions. An enthusiastic disciple of Whitefield and friend of Wesley, John Newton became rector of Olney, where he knew and worked with William Cowper, with whom he coauthored the *Olney Hymns* (1779). In 1780 he moved to the benefice of St. Mary Woolnoth with St. Mary Woolchurch, Lombard St., London. Here, in Blake's London, he preached to large congregations and published against the slave trade in support of Wilberforce. In his last years he went blind, and he died in London in 1807.

Blake's figure bears no resemblance to the fleshy, rather commonplace portrait of the Rev. John prefaced to *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* in 12 volumes (London, 1821). But it is Newton's early life that may be relevant to that figure. In the 1740s he had served on a slave ship and found himself stranded on an island off the coast of Africa. His *Authentic Narrative*, first published in 1764 and something of a classic in evangelical circles, offers the following:

Though destitute of food and clothing, depressed to a degree beyond common wretchedness, I could sometimes collect my mind to mathematical studies. I had bought *Barrow's Euclid* at Portsmouth; it was the only volume I brought on shore; it was always with me, and I used to take it to remote corners of the island by the sea side, and draw my *diagrams* with a long stick upon the sand. Thus I often beguiled my sorrows, and almost forgot my feeling;—and thus, without any other assistance, I made myself, in a good measure, master of the first six books of *Euclid*.⁶

This was a famous anecdote: Wordsworth transcribes it faithfully in *The Prelude* (1805, 6: 160ff; 1850, 6: 142ff.). And it describes something very close, of course, to the posture of Blake's Newton, bending over the sand or sea floor with his scroll and compasses. For John Newton, this was a stage upon life's way, a habit to be discontinued after his conversion, when he "laid aside the *mathematics*. I found they not only cost me much time, but engrossed my thoughts too far: my head was literally full of *schemes*. I was weary of cold contemplative truth, which can neither warm nor amend the heart, but rather tends to aggrandize *self*" (1: lxxxviii). Essick has noted an iconographic connection in

⁵ See Martin K. Nurmi, "Blake's 'Ancient of Days' and Motte's Frontispiece to Newton's *Principia*", in ed. Vivian da Sola Pinto, *The Divine Vision: Studies in the Poetry and Art of William Blake* (London: 1957) 205-16.

⁶ *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1: xlvi.

Dürer between geometry and melancholy;⁷ John Newton found it out for himself on a tropical beach and wrote it into the narrative of his Christian awakening.

And is it part of Blake's print? More would have to be done to convert this possibility from hunch or hypothesis to firm persuasion. But it does explain the posture and one of the possible locations for Blake's figure. Blake liked complex allusions, and this one adds another temporal dimension to the moment of *Newton*. John Newton gave up geometry in order to find God; Isaac Newton perhaps represents a God found by way of mathematics.⁸ If Sir Isaac himself was a manifold figure, conjuring up energy and repression, orthodoxy and revolution—and we might recall that Sir Isaac was a theological oddball as well—then the copresence of another Newton, John Newton, imaged in the most famous event of his life, pictures another and companionate history in the pulse of this particular graphic artery, a history of error preliminary to truth, or mathematical truth preliminary to spiritual truth. If Blake is joining faith with rational science in an image of *two* Newtons, and playfully implying the precursive presence of Sir Isaac in the Reverend John, then the synthetic energy of Paolozzi's sculpture is greater than we have yet realized, and its potential to represent the bringing together of the sciences and humanities, as intended by Michael Saunders Watson (as reported by Martin Butlin), is all the greater. As for revolution . . . of that we had best be silent.

⁷ Essick 156-57.

⁸ In *There is No Natural Religion* there is a miniature prototype of the 'Newton' print (noted by Butlin, *Paintings and Drawings*, p. 167), accompanied by the legend "He who sees the infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only". What is not unambiguously clear here is whether the geometer sees one or the other, or both.