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Review


Reviewed by Mei-Ying Sung

This extensive exhibition in the British Museum added an important dimension to the consideration of apocalypse and millennium at the end of the twentieth century, and brought a badly needed sense of a thousand years of historical difference in celebrating the new era. With a couple of hundred separate items ranging as far back as the Anglo-Saxon Tiberius Psalter from Winchester Cathedral right up to modern films such as Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal (1957) and Derek Jarman's The Last of England (1987), "The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come" portrayed the full range of millenarian responses. These include not only the woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer, but also extensive examples of the sixteenth-century artists Hans Burgkmair and Georg Lemberger, both of whom worked in the visual tradition of Dürer. Of particular interest is the series of engravings by the French goldsmith and tapestry designer Jean Duvet (c. 1485-1561), whose works are intensively crowded with objects and figures.

The richly researched catalogue includes significant contributions by scholars such as Frank Kermode and Norman Cohn, but it is David Bindman's chapter "The English Apocalyptic," annotating the large area of exhibition space given over to one of the most distinctive of the European representations of religious endgame, which will be of most immediate interest to students of Blake. English interpretations of apocalypse were heavily politicized in the aftermath of the Reformation and the English Civil War. No doubt the French Revolution has also been seen as the imminent apocalypse of the whole history and cast its enormous influence on Britain through the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century.

The watercolor of The Last Judgment from Petworth House formed a key component of the Blakes in the exhibition, but other works brought together for comparison included The Angel of Revelation (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun (New York, Brooklyn Museum of Art; Washington DC, National Gallery of Art) and The Number of the Beast Is 666 (Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library), as well as paintings and drawings from Tate Britain, the Fitzwilliam Museum, and the British Museum’s own collection, including seven plates from its copy of Jerusalem plus an eighth, plate 51, from the Fitzwilliam. The wide historical reach of the exhibition meant that there was also opportunity to compare these works with reproductive engravings derived from Michelangelo’s fresco of the Last Judgment by Bonasone, Rota, and Wierix. However, Blake's own versions and interpretations of the apocalyptic theme would have taken elements from his contemporaries. In this respect, the exhibition proved the enduring influence of John Hamilton Mortimer’s Death on a Pale Horse (1775) and Benjamin West’s painting of the same subject (Royal Academy of Arts). Bindman’s essay in the catalogue brings out rather well the political controversy which surrounded the royal commission of West’s painting. Blake’s Bible illustrations (c. 1799-1810) for Thomas Butts must have been influenced by West’s five paintings of Revelation subjects exhibited at the Royal Academy in the years 1796 to 1798. Although West, as president of the Academy, always claimed his loyalty to King George III, the king appeared hostile to him and claimed in 1794 that the Academy was “under the Stigma of having many Democrats in it.” This element of political controversy surrounding depictions of apocalyptic subjects reached back many years.

Following sixteenth-century religious polemics, the seventeenth-century imagery converted the dialectic contrast of good versus evil between Catholics and Lutherans to political polemics and offensive propaganda. The antithesis of salvation and damnation, of Christ and Antichrist, is associated not only with the religious last judgment but also with political trials in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The origins of these controversies in English political cul-

tured are shown in an engraved diagram by Joseph Mede, a
ten century Anglican and royalist, whose *The Key of Revelation* (1650) viewed the apocalyptic end of history
as being when “the Kingdoms of the World are become our
Lords and His Christies,” that is, the redemption of mankind.
showing how intricate this iconography could be, on the
other hand, an anti-Catholic satire published by William
Peake in 1643 could have been interpreted at the time as an
attack on the Anglican Church and court, where the Roman
Pope is represented as the Whore of Babylon seated on the
seven-headed Beast. In this way, the fusion of religious and
political meanings could have completely opposite interpre-
tations. In much the same way, both the opposing pro- and
anti-Cromwell parties at the end of the Civil War took the
apocalyptic view by representing Cromwell as the Antichrist
devil in the woodcut *The True Emblem of Antichrist* and as
Christ the savior in the engraving *The Embleme of Englands
Distractions*.

The exhibition also showed three exceedingly rare
relief woodcut prints of “Poor Adam” never published be-
fore. The prints were made by the York-based prophet Adam
Toppin, who was active in the 1760s. These works are known
only from two collections, in the Huntington Library, San
Marino, California, and the Yale Center for British Art, New
Haven. The prints combine images and texts, which are ei-
ther cut on one woodblock or put together with letterpress.
Toppin’s work derived its apocalyptic imagery from a work
by George Tillinghast, a Fifth Monarchy man who at first
welcomed Cromwell as a prophet but later viewed him as
Antichrist. Such prints, combining image and text, provide
an important context for understanding Blake’s illuminated
books in both their technique and content. Their rarity per-
haps indicates the possibility of a wider circulation among
less educated people. Blake might not have seen Poor Adam’s
works, but this does not eliminate the possibility that simi-
lar prints were around in his lifetime.

Popular print culture is equally important in Blake’s time.
For example, Thomas Rowlandson’s satires use apocalyptic
imagery to support the Whig party in an etching showing
Charles James Fox as St. George fighting against the Dragon
of Revelation in *The Champion of the People* (1784), while
in the *Downfall[] of Monopoly* in 1800 (14 August 1800),
Rowlandson refers to West’s *Death on a Pale Horse*. The most
popular religious image from the end of the eighteenth cen-
tury through the nineteenth, however, is that of the Tree of
Life derived from the Book of Revelation. The exhibition
shows several of these motifs in hieroglyphic form in which
the viewer is required to decipher the meanings of quite
elaborate combinations of text and image. For example, the
anonymous prints published by the print sellers Bowles and
Carver in the 1780s, and J. Catnach in 1830s, remained very
similar in many respects in both their composition and de-
tail, depicting a large Tree of Life—bearing “twelve manner
of fruits” described in Revelation 22:2—upon which Jesus
is crucified. In the foreground, separated with a barrier from
the redeemed Jerusalem, is this present Evil World with the
gate of hell at the right. The two preachers in the print are
identified as the most famous Methodists, Wesley and
Whitefield. This was in keeping with the association between
Methodism and millenarianism occasionally made at the
time. Nevertheless, the Tree of Life (also from Genesis, where
it is contrasted with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and
Evil) shown with the crucified Jesus is not mentioned in the
Book of Revelation but was obviously well known to con-
temporary viewers. Facing such imagery, students of Blake
will easily recall the full-page illustration of Albion worship-
ning the crucified Jesus on an oak tree in *Jerusalem* 76, which
is also shown in the exhibition. Showing how complex this
imagery could become, J. Bakewell’s hand-colored engraving
*Hieroglyphics of the Natural Man* (1780s) depicts a bar-
ren tree with the fruits of Deism, Anger, Envy, etc., inter-
twined by a serpent and watered by Death and Devil. Its
companion, *Hieroglyphics of a Christian*, by contrast shows
a leafy tree bearing the fruits of Joy, Truth, and Peace, guarded
by angels. These simple contrasts of good and evil could
have inspired Blake’s thoughts leading to the more intricate
philosophy of right, wrong, and paradox in *The Marriage of
Heaven and Hell*. Indeed, the basic elements of composition
from the Tree of Life visual tradition continued well into
the nineteenth century, as shown in the colored lithograph
*The Broad and Narrow Way* (1883).

The exhibition also highlighted the engravings of Garnet
Terry, which have been the subject of an article, “Is There an
Antinomian in the House? William Blake and the After-Life
of a Heresy” by Jon Mee (Historicizing Blake, ed. S. Clark
and D. Worrall, Macmillan, 1994). In Mee’s opinion, Terry
shares many similarities with Blake both as radical engraver
and antinomian Christian in representing millenarian ideas.
The exhibition showed one of the most important of Terry’s
prints, *An Hieroglyphical Print of Daniel’s Great Image, or
Mystical Man* (1793). It illustrates the Old Testament prophet
Daniel’s vision of the figure in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream with
a head of gold and feet of iron and clay, standing for Babylon
and the kingdom of the world, which in the prophecy will
be smashed and replaced by the eternal kingdom. The de-
scription accompanying the image reads “Daniel’s Great Image
of the Mystical Body of Babylon shewing the approaching
Destruction of Antichrist, the Beast, the Whore, and the
False Prophecies of Daniel, and confirmed by the Signs of
Times.” In his tract, Terry states that the great image of
Babylon was the antetype of London in the 1790s and that
its destruction prophesied the downfall of its rulers. This
notion is also shared by the radical antinomian preacher
William Huntington, who had Terry as his bookseller in the
1780s. The other print, *An Hieroglyphical Print of the Church
of God in Her Five-Fold State* (1791), engraved by Terry after
a design by William Huntington and a painting by E.F.
Burney, was perhaps an aid to Huntington’s preaching. The
square-shaped Holy Jerusalem floating above the clouds in the print reminds us of the four-dimensional city of Golgonooza, Los's city of "Art and Manufacture" (E 120) in Blake's Milton, a Poem (1804). The captions below Terry's print actually refer to a similar idea; scenes around the Holy City show "Artists, Mechanicks, and Manufacturers, Engaged in their Respective Pursuits for promoting the various Branches of Natural Religion." The spiritual ideals of millenarianism and the rejection of the materialism of Natural Religion are clearly common to Huntington, Terry, and Blake.

Garnet Terry is also a useful point of comparison with James Gillray (1756-1815), who is more widely known to present day audiences, Garnet being involved more with radical religious and social ideas, while Gillray's caricatures pick up on this wider awareness of millenarianism which formed the object of his political satires. In his hand-colored etching The Prophet of the Hebrews,—The Prince of Peace Conducting the Jews to the Promised Land, 5 March 1795, Gillray depicts the millenarian prophet Richard Brothers (1757-1824), the self-proclaimed Prince of the Hebrews and Nephew of the Almighty, as a revolutionary trampling on the Beast of Revelation with king's and bishop's heads. Brothers carries a bundle on his back containing the Elect recognized as the Whig opponent Charles James Fox and his colleagues, and approaches the Gate of Jerusalem, which is a gibbet. The satire on both Brothers and Fox is for their support of a peace treaty with the French Directory, which was opposed by Edmund Burke. In another colored print, Presages of the Millenium [sic];—with The Destruction of the Faithful, as Revealed to R: Brothers the Prophet, & attested by M.B. Hallhead Esq., 4 June 1795, Gillray uses Brother's prophecy to satirize both opposing political parties at the time. The Prime Minister, William Pitt, is depicted as Death on a pale horse, taking the image from West's well-known painting, his bottom kissed by a small figure of the Prince of Wales, and his horse kicking the opposing party led by Charles James Fox.

The anticipation of millennial apocalypse in Blake's time was a result of the revolutionary atmosphere, where political anxieties were involved with religious enthusiasm. However, Blake seemed more inclined to represent religious ideas than contemporary political surroundings. Although many of the prophets or prophetesses, such as Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott, were satirized in the contemporary prints shown in the exhibition, Blake took a more moderate view of millenarianism and regarded himself as a prophet in the role of an artist—as he says, "Every honest man is a Prophet" (E 617). The exhibition gave Blake a major part in the section on English Apocalypse, where 21 out of the 53 images on display were his works. In addition to the ten watercolors directly depicting the scenes from the Book of Revelation, the exhibition also brought together scenes from Blake's illustrations of Night Thoughts, Jerusalem, and Dante's Divine Comedy with apocalyptic implications. Of course, the rationale for Blake's inclusion in the exhibition is that the idea of apocalypse underlies almost all of his major works throughout his life, and led to his myths of the spiritual history of mankind from creation to the fall and redemption. However, the exhibition also successfully revealed the print tradition of apocalypse, which would have been familiar to Blake. In the context of the exhibition as a whole, Blake's view of the apocalypse stood out as a revolutionary contribution to the tradition. His many images of Death and the Beast contrast radically with all the others, especially those of his contemporary, the Royal Academician Benjamin West.

For modern artists, the meaning of apocalypse seems more an expression of desperation than of hope for redemption. War, death, illness, madness, and chaos dominate the entire scene after the section on the eighteenth century. For the coming of an atheistic age, biblical apocalypse turns into something beyond Blake's world. It seems Blake is one of the last artists who had hope in the apocalyptic end of time.

We hope also to expand the online Newsletter to become, potentially at least, a clearinghouse for Blake-related information, and for that we request your assistance. If you know of an upcoming lecture, reading, performance, exhibition, or other noteworthy occurrence, please contact the Managing Editor, Sarah Jones (sjns@mail.rochester.edu).

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