

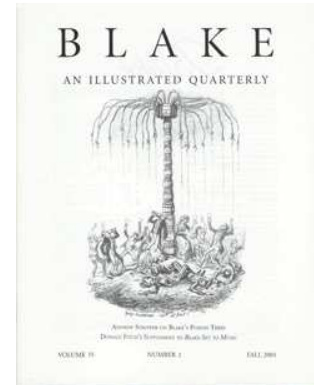
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R E V I E W

Frances Carey, ed., *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*, catalogue of the British Museum exhibition

Mei-Ying Sung

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YOUNG, Douglas, 1947- UK
Journey Between Two Worlds; for chorus, rock group, steel band, and orchestra. Ms., composed 1979. Text incl. Blake: The Divine Image. 1st perf. 3 Apr. 1979, de Montfort Hall, Leicester. Biog: Baker 20. S: G&T.

(YOUNG)
A Little Child Lost and Found. Ms., composed 1979. Blake texts: 1. A Little Girl Lost. 2. The Little Girl Found. 1st perf. Autumn 1979. S: G&T.

(YOUNG)
Natural Histories. Ms., composed 1976-79. Blake texts: 1. To See a World in a Grain of Sand. 2. For the Sexes (frontispiece: What is Man!). 1st perf. Wales, Autumn 1979. S: G&T.

R E V I E W

Frances Carey, ed. *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*. London: British Museum, 1999; Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000. 352 pp., illus. £25; \$39.95. Catalogue of the British Museum exhibition, 17 December 1999-24 April 2000.

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 Apoca-

lypse," 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."¹ 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-

1. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre, eds., *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, 16 vols. and index (New Haven and London, 1978-96) Vol. IV p. 1334 (28 Dec. 1799).

ture are shown in an engraved diagram by Joseph Mede, a seventeenth-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 Lordes and His Christes," that is, the redemption of mankind. Showing how intricate this iconology 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 interpretations. 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 rough relief woodcut prints of "Poor Adam" never published before. 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 either 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 perhaps 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 similar 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 century 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 printsellers Bowles and Carver in the 1780s, and J. Catnach in 1830s, remained very similar in many respects in both their composition and detail, 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 contemporary viewers. Facing such imagery, students of Blake will easily recall the full-page illustration of Albion worshipping 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 barren tree with the fruits of Deism, Anger, Envy, etc., intertwined 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 description 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.

N E W S L E T T E R

www.rochester.edu/college/eng/blake

Our web site now has a Features section, which will include both new material and online versions of items previously published in the print edition of the journal. We are very pleased to debut with an extract from Janet Warner's novel "Blake's Wife." In conjunction with the article by Donald Fitch in this issue, we are also making available online both G.E. Bentley, Jr.'s review of *Blake Set to Music* (from the summer 1996 issue), and Thomas Dillingham's review of Finn Coren's two-CD album *The Blake Project* (from fall 1998).

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).

Winter Issue

Upcoming in our winter 2001/2002 issue: Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi undertake "An Inquiry into Blake's Method of Color Printing," and Martin Butlin details some Blake watercolors that have come to light.