

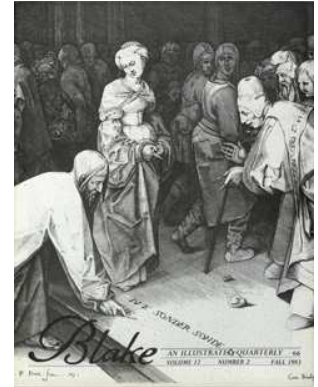
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A R T I C L E

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The Woman Taken in Adultery: An Essay on Blake's "Style of Designing"

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I

In a letter to Dr. Trusler of 16 August 1799, Blake writes that "I find more & more my Style of Designing is a Species by itself."¹ The context of that remark is Blake's description of the process by which he starts from a text or subject, in this case Trusler's request for a painting to illustrate Malevolence, and arrives at a finished design. This essay is an exploration of that process as it reveals itself in a watercolor Blake drew for his friendly patron Thomas Butts in or around 1805, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (illus. 1). I have chosen this particular design both because it originates in a well-known text, and because it shows a text about to be inscribed into the design itself; it thus offers a rich field for an exploration of the multiple relationships between text and design in Blake's practice as an inventor of significant images.

The design known as *The Woman Taken in Adultery* has no title that can be traced back to Blake, and is not referred to in the artist's accounts with Butts, but obviously illustrates the story told in John 8:1-11, which I quote here in the Authorized text:

- 1 Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.
- 2 And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.
- 3 And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,
- 4 They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.
- 5 Now Moses in the Law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?
- 6 This they said tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.
- 7 So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.
- 8 And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.
- 9 And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the oldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.
- 10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?
- 11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

This apparently simple story has in fact a rather complex structure: everyone involved in it is on trial in one way or another. The intent of the scribes and Pharisees in setting up the situation is to tempt Jesus "that they might have to accuse him," the accusation of the woman being an attempt to trap Jesus into direct confrontation with the Mosaic Law. Jesus's challenge to the accusers can be construed as the *peripeteia* in his own trial, by virtue of which he is freed and the accusers in turn become the accused, leaving "convicted by their own conscience." The words of Jesus to the woman define the moment of *peripeteia* in the third trial, that of the woman, which is effectively declared a mistrial by the failure of anyone to appear in the roles of accuser or judge. Not surprisingly, these two dramatic moments of reversal become the focal points in the iconographic history of the episode, as Louis Réau suggests when he sums up that history as consisting of two main branches, one showing Jesus bending down to write the words "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," and the second showing the woman kneeling in tears before an upright Jesus.² The development of this complex history is worth looking at in some detail.

The first known European versions, which follow a few very early Syro-Egyptian pyxes, fall into one or other of the two patterns described by Réau. An example of the first is the Codex Aureus of c. 870 which shows Jesus bowing before the woman and pointing at the words "Si Quis Sine Peccato." An example of the second is a fresco of c. 800 at Müstair which shows Jesus seated and pointing upwards with one hand while with the other he blesses and forgives the woman. A little later come several versions which illustrate both key moments in the narrative. Some do this by means of distinct and successive images, while a mosaic at Monreale of c. 1190, though presenting only one image, combines both episodes: Jesus looks down and points with one hand to the ground in allusion to his written words, while with the other he absolves the woman.

The subject is rare in Gothic art, and makes a substantial return only with Michael Pacher's altar painting of 1481, which has similarities with the Monreale

fresco just described. The episode is then taken up by other artists, with Titian, Rocco Marconi, and Lucas Cranach (illus. 2) all painting versions early in the sixteenth century. The last two follow Titian in showing the participants in relative closeup, allowing detailed observation of facial expressions; the focus of interest shifts from the level of theology to that of human debate.

This balanced and humane perspective is soon replaced by more overtly dramatic structures. Giulio Romano, for instance, in a painting which Blake probably saw, reproduced here in an engraving by Diana Ghisi (illus. 3),³ shows Jesus and the woman in a moment of quiet and tender communion, visually isolated by two sinuous columns from the accusers who rush away on both sides in animated, angry discussion, and threaten to trample the overlooked beggars in their path. Tintoretto went even further in the direction of heightening the visual drama. In one of his versions he has added the naked and youthful respondent, who is dragged in by a figure who must be the wronged wife; opposite the respondent is a kneeling and naked older man, probably the wronged husband; in between stands the richly attired adulteress.

The decrees of the Council of Trent, made known during the years up to and including 1563, demanded a clarity and faithfulness to the text which ensured that there would be no repetition of Tintoretto's nude respondent. These demands may well be reflected in the striking grisaille painted by Pieter Bruegel in 1565, reproduced here from an engraving by P. Perret dated 1579 (illus. 4).⁴ This returns to the early tradition of showing Jesus writing on the ground the words "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone," but the words are now in the vernacular. As Jesus writes he is watched by a wonderful variety of faces that belong to apostles, soldiers, and working people. The new message has become available to all, but many hurry by in pursuit of their daily lives.

The decrees of the Council of Trent are also reflected in the allegorical treatment by Alessandro Allori, which mirrors the human interaction between Jesus and the woman by showing an angel descending with a pair of scales and a sword, representing the justice of God's Law, while a *putto* seizes the angel's sword hand to represent love and mercy controlling mere justice. Another sober version is that by Agostino Carracci, made at the very end of the sixteenth century and reproduced here from an engraving by Blake's business rival, Bartolozzi (illus. 5). The atmosphere is one of deep thought, in which texts are pointed at and brought to bear upon the patiently standing woman. This battle of texts will find distant echoes in Blake's version, as we shall see.

In the seventeenth century there is a Rubens based on the version by Titian, and a magnificent Rembrandt which is unique in its approach to the story (illus. 6).

Here the human figures are dwarfed by the setting, which carries much of the significance of the design. The central conflict is between Jesus, barefoot and dressed in a simple smock, and the High Priest of the Temple, resplendent in a huge throne raised in a dazzle of gold high above the floor where Jesus dispenses his new and different morality.⁵ I think Blake, in an appropriate mood, might have admired the basic invention, but the emphasis on the setting itself is quite alien to Blake's art.

In another, more central seventeenth century tradition, stands Poussin's version (illus. 7, reproduced from an engraving by F. Chereau). The critics of the later part of the century described history painting by comparing it with "a Tragedy or Epick Poem,"⁶ and there is indeed a theatrical aspect to Poussin's painting. The architectural setting could almost be a stage set with a perspective backdrop⁷ if it were not for the strong lighting from the left, and all the figures, with one exception, are well to the front. The moment chosen is the *peripeteia* in which the accusers retreat before the challenge of Jesus's written words, and the visual drama of the scene lies in the contrast between the serenity of Jesus, who points to both the woman and his new text, and the angular gestures and angry brows of the would-be accusers. In the middle distance, in the charged space between Jesus and the adulteress stands a woman with her baby, calm and unexplained, setting up a resonant tension between the relationships created by the dramatic situation and those created by juxtaposition on the surface of the painting.

The episode was common in eighteenth century painting, often in softened forms. D. Tiepolo gives a spacious architectural setting to the animated soldiers and accusers, some of whom have upraised arms, while ominous stones lie nearby. But his handling of Jesus and the woman is uncomfortably sweet when compared with Poussin's rendering. In the third quarter of the century, J.C. Seekatz, B. Altomonte, and U. Gandolfi all show Jesus stooping down to write before the woman, who in the versions of Seekatz and Gandolfi is half naked and has her head turned away in repentant shame. In these versions there is a shift towards a sentimental treatment of the story of the fallen woman which is reminiscent of the episode between Mr. Harley and the harlot in Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*.

This overview takes us up to Blake's time, though there is one more version, almost exactly contemporary with Blake, that I shall discuss later in this essay. One can perhaps summarize the iconographic history of the episode by suggesting a general shift from doctrine to drama to sentiment. Somewhere in the period pointed at by the second of these terms Richardson commented on the episode in some detail, and that commentary affords a useful bridge between iconographic history and a consideration of just how Blake went about inventing his own version of the story.



1. W. Blake, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

II

Jonathan Richardson included an analysis of the episode in his discussion of "Invention" in *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*.⁸ This analysis offers an excellent approach to the manner in which the period understood the term. He does not mention any specific names, but would appear to have such versions as those by Carracci and Poussin in mind. Richardson discusses the story to illustrate the argument that the painter of histories must choose "*one single point of Time*,"⁹ and shows an acute awareness of the role of narrative in history painting. The development of the argument makes it clear that he is interested in dramatic expressiveness rather than theological implication.

Richardson's analysis proposes four points at which the story could be intersected in order to afford a possible subject for the painter. The first is the act of "the Scribes and Pharisees accusing her [the woman] to our Lord"; this is rejected because it makes the Scribes and Pharisees, and not Jesus, into the chief actors. The second possible moment is that showing "our Lord writing on the Ground," but that also is rejected, because "stooping down, and writing on the Ground makes not so graceful, and noble an Appearance as even the Former would have done"; Richardson wants a noble hero involved in an expressive and decorous action. The fourth possible moment is that of the pronouncement of Jesus's "Absolution, *Go thy way, Sin no more*." This would give him his decorous action—he calls it "the principal Action, and of the most Dignity in the whole Story"—but this moment is rejected because it would show only Jesus and the woman: "the Scene would be disfurnished."

This leaves the third possible moment, "Jesus pronouncing the last of the Words, *Let him that is among you without Sin cast the first Stone at her*," and this is the moment Richardson recommends to the painter, on the grounds that Jesus is at that moment the principal actor, and in a dignified posture. In addition, the choice of this moment gives an opportunity for a rich and varied display of both expressive faces, since the accusers are "asham'd, Vex'd, Confounded," while the accused shows "Hope, and Joy," and also of expressive posture as the accusers disperse, "some being in Profile, some Fore-right, and some with their Backs turn'd. . . ." It is evident from this analysis that Richardson sees history painting as a kind of frozen drama, and the vocabulary of the theatre—"Action," "Actors," "Vigorous Moments," "Scene"—pervades the whole account. It is the conflict of personalities, and the varied expressive gestures that arise from the conflict, that Richardson sees as the source of energy and interest.

Richardson's essay was reprinted several times during the eighteenth century, was widely read, and influenced such major figures as Hogarth, Lessing, Reynolds, and Benjamin West.¹⁰ It can be taken as both summing up a tradition of history painting as it had developed by 1715,

and as outlining values and methods for the succeeding period. There is no specific evidence that Blake read it, but given its availability and the nature of Blake's interests it is very likely that he did, though he obviously did not follow its prescriptions. Before turning to Blake's *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, however, I shall look at one more version of the episode, one almost contemporary with Blake's.

This version was painted by W. Artaud for Macklin, and presumably displayed by him in his Poets' Gallery; it was published in his Bible in 1800 in the form of an engraving by P. Thomson dated 1794 (illus. 8).¹¹ Blake shows a painful awareness of Macklin's projects: "I was alive & in health & with the same Talents I now have all the time of Boydell's, Macklin's, Bowyer's, & other Great Works. I was known by them & was looked upon by them as Incapable of Employment in those Works" (letter to Hayley, 11 Dec. 1805, K 862). Blake must have seen Artaud's design, probably in both its painted and engraved forms, and one can think of Blake's Bible paintings for Butts as a kind of personal challenge to Macklin's Bible, a project which he had not been invited to join as either designer or engraver.

It is almost possible to imagine Artaud as Blake's spectre or *alter ego*, an image of the moderately successful history and portrait painter that Blake might have become if he had gone to Italy in the 1780s and had ruthlessly and totally suppressed the poet and creator that he was.¹² But Artaud no doubt had his own substantial and rather pedestrian existence.

Artaud's design is obviously indebted to Poussin's, and chooses the same moment—not quite Richardson's, but nevertheless a moment in which Jesus is clearly the principal actor. Artaud's Jesus has already written his challenge on the ground, and now stands gesturing towards the woman with an open right hand while indicating his text with the left. Artaud, like Poussin, places a woman with a baby in the space between Jesus and the adulteress, and again like Poussin he shows the accusers in a wide variety of positions, as if to illustrate Richardson's words, "some being in Profile, some Fore-right, and some with their Backs turn'd. . . ."

Despite the relationship, however, Artaud's design leaves an impression very different from that made by the earlier painter's version. Poussin's strong, angular, theatrical gestures have been softened and rounded, and Artaud's Jesus and woman in particular have a sentimentality that accords with Boase's comment on the illustrations in the Macklin Bible taken as a group: "The century of the novel and of the rise of romantic as opposed to classical drama has not been without its effect, and the Biblical heroes and heroines are touched by the new tradition of Pamela and Clarissa, of Garrick and Mrs. Siddons."¹³ Tragic drama has become sentimental theater; this is the age of Kauffmann and Stothard. Even



at the mechanical level of perspective there are serious defects in the handling of the flagstones. The design is now of interest only because it shows how a very mediocre painter exactly contemporary with Blake visualized the episode in the light of the tradition of history painting as he received and interpreted it, and throws into strong relief the fundamentally different aesthetic which shaped Blake's design.

III

If we turn now to look at Blake's watercolor against the background formed by the versions discussed above and by Richardson's analysis of the painterly possibilities of the subject, we are immediately struck by the absence of most of the usual expressive elements. The bareness is most noticeable at the level of setting and costume. The often rich and ornate architecture of the temple has been simplified to the bare indication of a low, massive arch. The costumes are highly generalized; the accuser on the right has a hood slung back over his garment, but apart from that detail the robes are very simple, though varied in color. Jesus and the woman wear equally plain robes, both clear white to stand out against the colored robes of the accusers.

There is a corresponding simplification of the dramatic elements of the scene: no onlookers, no sulking respondents or angry husbands, not even the usual soldiers standing as embodiments of the physical power of the law. Jesus and the woman have remarkably impassive faces, and surprisingly similar features—large eyes seen in profile, strongly curved eyebrows, long straight noses. No other post-medieval version known to me approaches the visual simplicity of Blake's.

There are only two groups of figures in the design, the defeated accusers, and Jesus with the woman. The accusers are visible only from the back, and apart from the color of the robes little attempt has been made to differentiate them; indeed, the similarly uplifted heels of both the central and right hand figures suggest the repetition of a single movement. The possibilities for dramatic and expressive variety have not been exploited. Bindman calls this "undifferentiated mass of humanity . . . one of Blake's most original ideas,"¹⁴ and the originality lies precisely in the refusal to apply the art of invention as it was usually understood.

One effect of these separate but identical retreating backs is to emphasize the sense of John's statement that



the accusers left "convicted by their own conscience." They turn away from us into their own world. John emphasizes their inward-turned isolation by saying that they "went out one by one"; Blake's figures are isolated by their virtual identity with each other, which short-circuits the animated conversation and interaction typical of previous versions of the scene.

The unanimous flight of the accusers also emphasizes the power of the words that Jesus has just uttered; their effect has obviously been irresistible and universal. These words were, we must assume, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." In most previous versions these words start a debate; here they produce an immediate conviction of sin. The accusers have become the self-condemned in a *peripeteia* more sharply focused than in any other version, though Giulio Romano's approaches it. Blake has designed his painting to pay tribute to the power of Jesus's words to return people to their true selves, rather than to display his own power to differentiate shades of response.

The woman's hair is disheveled and her breast bare to remind us that she "was taken in adultery, in the very act." Many previous versions show her making some

2. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Christ and the Adulteress*, courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

3. Giulio Romano, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, engr. Diana Ghisi, courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

gesture towards modestly covering her bosom, and many show her with head lowered or averted in shame and repentance. In Blake's version, she stands with upright dignity, and makes no gesture towards covering her bared breast. Despite her half-nakedness and disheveled hair, she stands with grace and strength. Her strongly physical presence implies a sexuality not yet obliterated by shame and remorse.

Blake shows her with wrists bound behind her back, and he is the only painter I know of to do this. This detail increases her apparent helplessness, and makes her release more obviously dependent upon the act of another. But it also almost forces her to stand upright, and prevents her from covering her body. The woman is thus in a state which combines bondage and helplessness with freedom and defiance. She is in a no-man's land between life and death; her would-be accusers have fled, and with them the threat of immediate death, but she is still bound. She looks at Jesus's hand with steady concentration,

waiting for the words that will release her into life.

Blake has shown Jesus in the act of beginning to write with his finger on the ground. This is a common enough moment to choose for illustration, as the historical survey above has shown, but again there are unusual elements in Blake's handling of the figure. Bruegel and various eighteenth-century painters had shown Jesus lowering himself onto one knee in order to write. But no painter known to me had, since the ninth century, shown Jesus simply bending from the waist to write. As a moment's trial will show, Blake's Jesus is doing something rather difficult, despite the apparent ease of the gesture. He has, like the woman, an almost athletic physical presence; the painting comes near to implying that such bodily strength and grace are alone sufficient to deflect accusation.

Jesus's face, again like the woman's, shows a calm concentration upon the act he is about to perform. Emotion, even pity, would be misplaced: it is imaginative understanding that is needed. Once again Blake bypasses

an opportunity for a display of invention as traditionally understood in favor of total concentration upon the essential situation.

Having looked at the individual figures, we should now consider the moment and situation defined by Blake's design. That design is unique in ways that become apparent when it is placed against the background of previous versions, and those are in turn set in the context of theological commentary on the episode. I shall focus on the act of writing on the ground, which forms the central action of Blake's design.

Theological commentary offered a wide variety of interpretations of this act. Ambrose and Augustine suggested that the act of writing on the ground was an allusion to Jeremiah 17:13, "O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters." In this interpretation, to write on the earth is to write words that will be quickly washed away. Jerome suggested that Jesus



wrote down the sins of the accusers, and this became a fairly popular interpretation.¹⁵

Another tradition of commentary on the passage held that Jesus did not in fact write words at all, that the act of putting his finger to the dust expressed simply a postponement of decision, or a refusal to be caught in a dilemma. Various versions of this appear in the Protestant reformers; Luther's commentary implies that the act of appearing to write in fact represented a refusal of communication,¹⁶ while Calvin is explicit that Jesus wrote nothing at all: "By this gesture casting down his eyes He showed that He despised them. Those who suppose that He wrote something or other are mistaken, in my opinion."¹⁷

Most of these interpretations pose obvious difficulties for a painter. The Jeremiah text needs to be written in full and interpreted for its relevance to become apparent. Jerome's suggestion would demand a fairly long and legible text to be intelligible to a viewer. The attempt to illustrate the interpretations of Luther and Calvin would raise the problem that we shall soon face in pushing towards a

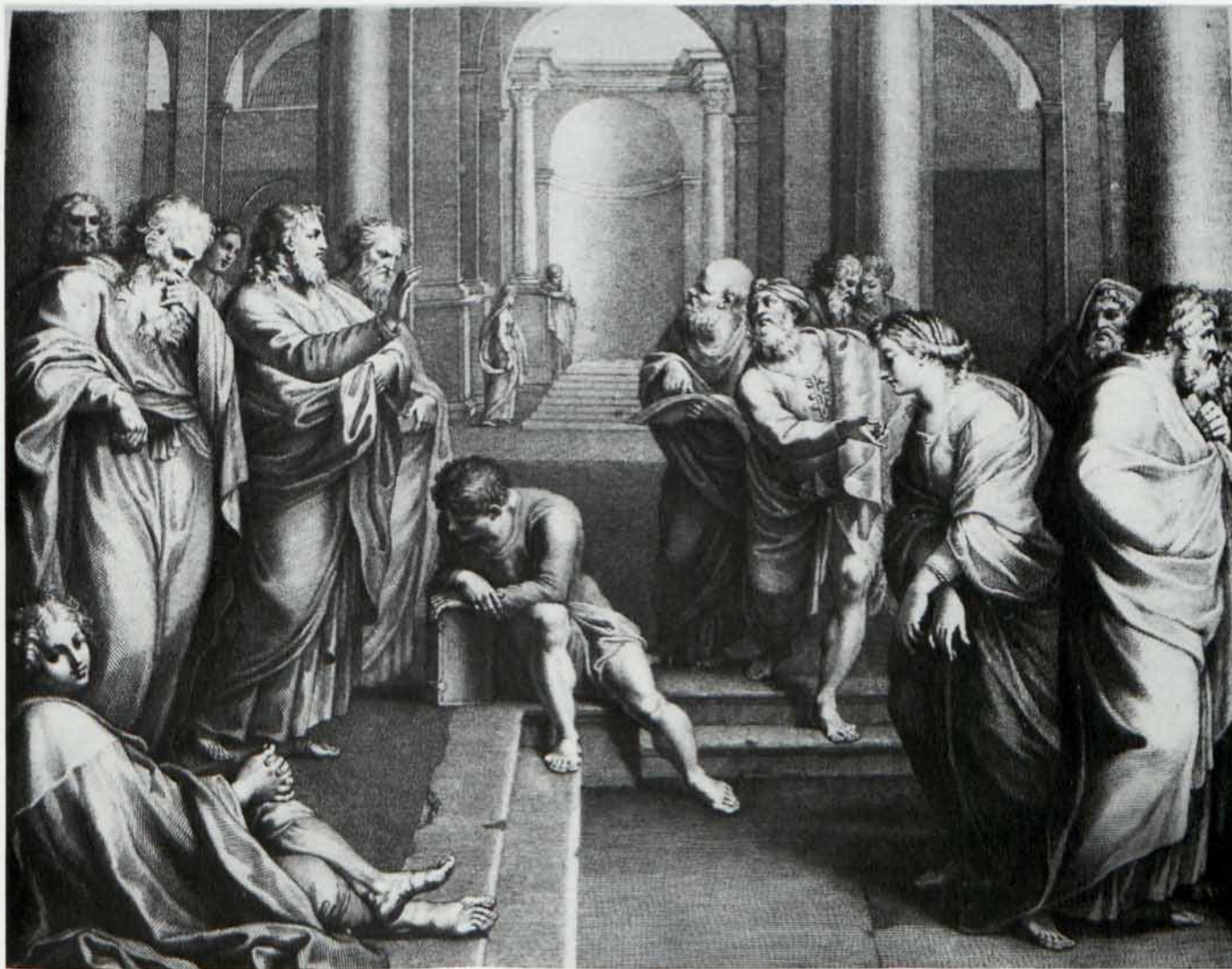
fuller interpretation of Blake's design: is Jesus, with his finger in the dust, about to write something or not, and if so, what?

In order to avoid these problems, and to create an immediately intelligible image, most painters who focused their design on this moment in the narrative made it clear, in one way or another, that Jesus did write words, and that the words were simply a written repetition of the spoken "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Artists such as the illustrator of the Codex Aureus, and Bruegel, accomplished this by making the words clearly legible. Richardson, in discussing invention, recognized "*plain Writing*" as "*one way of Expression more*" in the painter's collection of tricks.¹⁸

Other painters, such as Poussin and Artaud, iden-

4. Pieter Bruegel, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, engr. P. Perret, courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

5. Agostino Carracci, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, engr. Bartolozzi, courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



tified the words Jesus had written by means of an orchestration of the gestures of Jesus and the responses of the accusers. This translation of illegible or inaudible words into visible and intelligible gestures is another painter's device listed and illustrated by Richardson under the general heading "kinds of *Artificial Expressions indulg'd to Painters, and practis'd by them, because of the Disadvantage of their Art in that particular, in Comparison of Words.*"¹⁹

Painters thus had two recognized ways of indicating the text that Jesus wrote on the ground. Those painters who chose to focus their rendering of the woman taken in adultery on the moment when Jesus speaks to the woman had no real choice but to translate the words into gesture, and the usual path was to show Jesus making the sign of absolution. This is not in fact what John writes; in his account Jesus simply refrains from condemnation. But painters can only articulate theology as far as they can render it visible.

The most striking fact about Blake's painting, when looked at in this perspective, is that it implies two texts rather than the one that is usual. He shows the accusers fleeing in a way that makes it clear that they have already heard the challenge "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her"; the words are clearly visible in their effects. But Jesus is shown about to write a text on the ground, with the woman as the only possible witness. He is therefore presumably not merely about to repeat in written form the words he has just spoken, words which would be quite inappropriate if imagined as addressed to the woman.

Since Blake has shown Jesus at just the moment before the first letter becomes visible, it is just possible to imagine Luther's or Calvin's nontexts, but again those were forms of rhetoric addressed to the accusers, and we assume from Jesus's gesture that he is in fact about to write something. It could conceivably be a written rehearsal of the words spoken to the woman in John's account, but that seems awkward and unlikely, particularly in view of John's statement that Jesus initiated the exchange after he "had lifted up himself." We must imagine a new, nonbiblical text, the general sense of which is clear, but the exact form of which is left deliberately open. The vortex of potential verbal meaning which opens from Jesus's finger must be realized and fleshed out in our own imaginations. Blake's view of the Bible was that it consisted of "poetry inspired," and that "Milton's *Paradise Lost* is as true as *Genesis*, or *Exodus*" (E 607). It follows that we can, if up to the job, imagine words for Jesus to write to the woman that are as "true" as the words John describes Jesus as having spoken.

We can also turn to Blake's other treatments of the episode. The first is the brief comment in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that Jesus turned away "the law from the woman taken in adultery" (E 42). *The Everlasting*

Gospel gives a later and fuller version, which totally rethinks and rewords the story. Blake there accepts the traditional identification of the woman as Mary Magdalen, of which there is no evidence in the painting. He also uses both of Jesus's texts, in modified versions: the "breath of God" says, among other things, "Nor may the sinner cast one stone" and, a little later, asks "Has no Man Condemned thee / . . . then what is he / Who shall Accuse thee" (E 513). It is notable in this version of the story that Jesus speaks rather than writes; as Blake well knew, Jesus was a speaker of "parables to the Blind" (E 516) rather than a writer of texts.

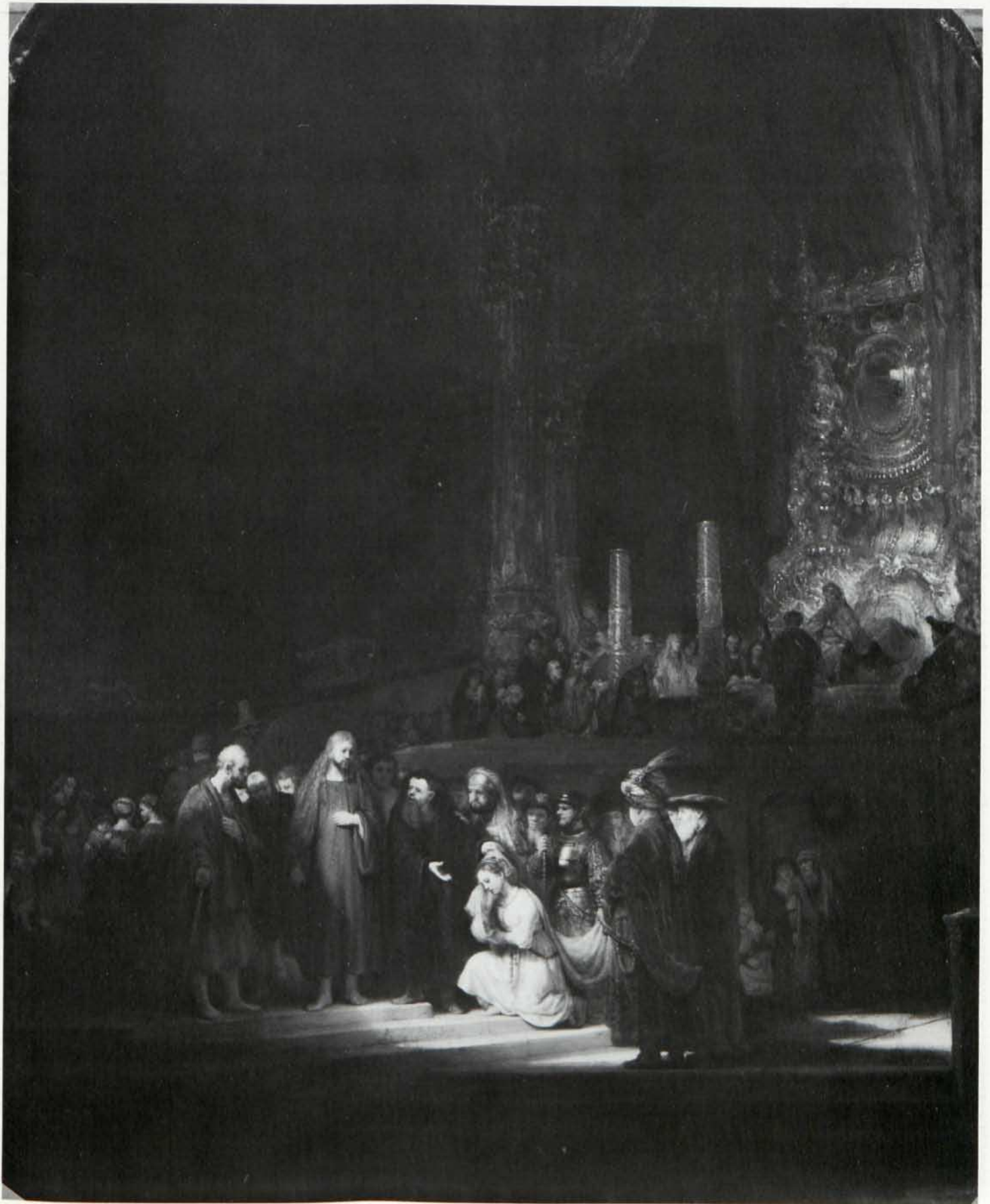
In fact, this is the only episode in the gospels in which Jesus is described as writing; in general, his was an oral message, and this is reflected in *The Everlasting Gospel*, where Jesus puts aside the Law of Moses, visible in "The Ancient Heavens . . . / Writ with Curses from Pole to Pole" (E 512) and then commands "Sinai's trumpets cease to roar / Cease finger of God to write" (E 513).

The opposition Blake posits between Jesus and Moses in this episode exists implicitly in the gospel narrative, as many theologians recognized. It points directly to the relevance of Blake's painting of *God Writing Upon the Tables of the Covenant* (illus. 9), which was executed at about the same time as *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, and whose relationship to the latter has been noted by several commentators.

In the *Covenant* design, God is shown standing in huge power, with white hair, over the tiny, crouching figure of Moses. He is in the act of writing the decalogue, the foundation of the Mosaic code referred to by the accusers in John's story. This moment is also traditionally the origin of the associated arts of writing and engraving, as Blake knew. The letter that God has already written appears to be a "Yod,"²⁰ the first letter of his name, Jehovah. The formalization of a code binding on others is always seen by Blake as an act of the Selfhood, here of "Jehovah Elohim The I Am of the Oaks of Albion" (E 549).

The Jesus of *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, by contrast, has the red hair of imaginative energy, as so often in these Bible illustrations, and bows his body in a gesture which, despite its graceful strength, would have been interpreted by Richardson as ignoble, as a sacrifice of postural decorum. That may indeed be part of the meaning of the gesture for Blake—a sacrifice of selfhood that is perhaps a low-key version of the final sacrifice anticipated by Mary's questions in *The Everlasting Gospel*: "And canst thou die that I may live / And canst thou Pity & forgive" (E 514). Morton Paley seems to imply this in summing up the contrast: "The Old Testament God has his back to us; Jesus bows in a graceful arc before the accused adulteress."²¹

6. Rembrandt, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, courtesy of the Trustees, the National Gallery, London.



The meaning of Jesus's gesture is thus complex. There is first of all the implicit meaning of the gesture itself as a sacrifice of selfhood, a not standing upon decorum in the presence of a transgressor. And there is the potential meaning of the invisible words that are about to be written, which we have in some manner to realize in and for ourselves. The two forms of meaning are profoundly interconnected: because Jesus does not need to stand upon his postural dignity, does not need to maintain a visible Selfhood, he is able to write words that will release the woman from the accusation of sin, whatever precisely those words will be.

By choosing just that moment when Jesus is about to write, but has not yet written one letter, Blake makes it possible to give the gesture yet further significance. The voice that Mary hears in *The Everlasting Gospel* commands "Cease finger of God to write" (E 513), and perhaps one can understand Jesus as not writing, even as erasing a previous text. The act can then be interpreted as

the giving out of a new and uncoded covenant to cancel the written codes that define transgression. It is the written word that holds the woman in bondage rather than the cord on her wrists, and her release depends upon words that do not define or limit. The words that Jesus speaks to the woman in John are nearly all questions or negatives—it is the fact that no man condemns her, including Jesus, that frees her—and the total absence of written words in the design seems the visible symbol of an act which is in essence a refraining from action. The paradox of words that occupy the center of the design, but are as yet unwritten, is a key part of its total meaning.

IV

Several points that I wish to emphasize in concluding this analysis of *The Woman Taken in Adultery* will go some of the way towards defining his "Style of Designing" as it operates within this picture, and by implication others also.

In the basic invention of the design, the strategy adopted to make a story visible, the most striking feature is Blake's decision to show both halves of the episode, and to allow them to coexist relatively independently. Of the

7. N. Poussin, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, engr. F. Chereau, courtesy of the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.



other versions I have discussed, Romano's comes closest to Blake's in showing both the fleeing accusers and Jesus together with the woman, and it is worth exploring the differences that lie behind the resemblance.

In Romano's design, the two columns of the temple are used to define the separate spaces of the two actions, flight and absolution, which take place simultaneously in the present tense. The spoken words of Jesus that motivated the flight are clearly in the past, but the flight itself is fully present to us in this moment, with a variety of gesture and expression that fills much of the design with its activity. Similarly, the gesture of absolution that Jesus extends to the modestly repentant woman is present and completely intelligible in itself. The artist has changed aspects of John's account, converting "one by one" into a noisy rush and substituting a visible gesture for Jesus's words to the woman; the changes have the effect of minimizing the degree to which the intelligibility of the visible action depends upon a viewer's recall of the originating text.

In Blake's design, the flight of the accusers is not so much an immediately intelligible activity (not a single face or hand is visible) as a testimony to the overwhelming power of the words Jesus is understood to have spoken in the moment preceding the one we see. Analogously, the pointing finger of Jesus is a gesture whose meaning is only partly visible in this moment; its meaning can only find fulfillment in the words we must imagine are about to be written, which will define the relationship between Jesus and the woman. Blake has not aimed so much at creating images that are immediately present and intelligible as at creating vivid signs that point to the power of words that lie outside the temporal and spatial framework of the design.

These invisible words are the real motivating powers of the whole design. In fact the syntax of the design, the interconnections that bind the separate figures together, are verbal rather than visual; the figures do not look at each other, but exist in their own separate spaces, with the partial exception of the woman, who watches Jesus's finger for the words that are about to flow.

There are two points at issue here. One is the question, much discussed in the eighteenth century, of which exact moment in an episode history painters should choose to illustrate. The consensus was that they should take that moment that best reflects both the past and the future in a pregnant present.²² That is a possible interpretation of what both Romano and Blake have done, but both painters seem to have shaped their designs to encompass the whole incident rather than to provide only a snapshot of one critical moment. The French Academy defended the right of a history painter to take the freedom enjoyed by a dramatist "de joindre ensemble plusieurs evenemens arrivez en divers temps pour en faire une seule action,"²³ and Blake seems to have done just this, though it is very unlikely that he knew of this particular

discussion. But certainly he understood history painting as something more than the photograph of a moment in a theater.

The second and related point at issue is that of the immediate intelligibility, or lack of it, in a design. On this point Fuseli has some comments which are relevant enough to quote here. In Lecture IV Fuseli attacks those "Subjects which cannot in their whole compass be brought before the eye, which appeal for the best part of their meaning to the erudition of the spectator and the refinements of sentimental enthusiasm. . . ." ²⁴ He discusses several paintings, including Raphael's cartoon of the *Donation of the Keys to St. Peter*, which he criticizes for being dependent upon a verbally based allegory, and Poussin's *Exposition of Infant Moses on the Nile*. Fuseli complains of the latter that "not one circumstance is omitted that could contribute to explain the meaning of the whole; but the repulsive subject completely baffled the painter's endeavour to show the *real* motive of the action. We cannot penetrate the *cause* that forces these people to expose the child on the river, and hence our sympathy and participation languish. . . ." ²⁵

This criticism, whether valid or not, is one that would apply to many of Blake's paintings, and ironically a similar complaint was made about one of Fuseli's own paintings when an anonymous critic writing about his *Count Ugolino* claimed to be unable to find the original story in Fuseli's picture: "Ugolino has the appearance of a man who, having in a fit of phrenzy destroyed the young female who lies across his knees, has just returned to a sense of reason and remorse at the act which he has perpetrated. . . . By this material error, that of the professed story, as it were, being not only imperfectly narrated, but absolutely untold, the artist has entirely lost the passion he must have intended to enforce. . . ." ²⁶ Blake came to Fuseli's defense, arguing among other things that "the critic must be a fool who has not read Dante, and who does not know a boy from a girl" (E 705).

This comment implies that for Blake the text illustrated was an integral part of a design, an essential portion of the total context of information within which the design functioned. There is indeed some evidence that Blake wrote out the relevant texts for his Bible illustrations, though there is not a consensus of opinion on the point.²⁷ But whether or not Blake himself actually wrote out the texts, their presence was assumed.

So far I have been considering the basic issues of invention, the overall disposition of the story. If we turn to aspects of Blake's practice in designing that have more to do with style, other issues come to the fore. The most significant can be summed up by the word simplification. In omitting all that might have appeared merely picturesque or distractingly expressive, Blake seems to be following a conscious decision which he referred to in a letter to Butts of 22 November 1802; after citing Reynolds on

the inferiority of the picturesque, Blake writes "I have now proved that the parts of the art which I neglected to display in those little pictures & drawings which I had the pleasure & profit to do for you, are incompatible with the designs" (K 814). The areas in which Blake has "neglected to display" obvious artistry include color, facial expressiveness, and perspective, under which term we can include architectural detail. These latter areas deserve some discussion.

It is a striking feature of Blake's *The Woman Taken in Adultery* that no face visible in it shows any explicit emotion, and no face is turned towards us. One can contrast this with Bryson's characterization of Le Brun: "In his arrangement of battle scenes there is hardly a head which does not turn in some way towards the viewer, to display fully its readable surface. . . ." ²⁸ Blake claimed that the painter could represent accurately expressive figures, and argued this both on his own behalf ("the Hands & Feet . . . the Lineaments of the Countenances they are all descriptive of Character" [VLJ, E 550]), and in defense of Raphael against the doubts of Reynolds: "If Reynolds could not see. variety of Character in Rafael Others Can" (annotations to Reynolds, E 642). ²⁹ But in practice the expressions in Blake's designs are by no means always clearly readable, and the two passages just cited may contain a clue. In both Blake uses the word "Character," though Reynolds is talking about the impossibility of "the expression of a mixed passion." Blake seems not to have drawn a strong distinction between physiognomy and pathognomy: the passions exhibited reveal the true character, and thus exist in an uneasy space between the reflection of a permanent state and the response to the ever-changing moment caught in the design. This ambiguity of function reduces their power to help us in the act of interpretation.

Expressiveness is not of course limited to the face; as Mitchell notes, "the expressiveness of the human figure tends, for Blake, to be diffused throughout the body, rather than focused primarily in the face." ³⁰ There is much truth in that statement, and I have said something above about what is communicated by the stances of Jesus and the woman. But both figures are totally focused on the text which is about to appear, and their expressiveness depends partly upon our ability to provide that text.

If we turn to Blake's overall handling of space in this design we find a comparable lack of specific visual information. There is very little sense of real depth; the architectural setting, simplified to an undecorated column and connecting arches, runs parallel to the picture frame, so that it contributes little to the articulation of the space of the action. The area above the heads of the accusers has been left virtually blank, and even the floor of the temple, which is used in so many paintings to provide information on depth and directionality, is here left completely empty, waiting to be articulated into the semantic space

of language rather than into architectural and dimensional meaning.

Bryson describes perspective as "The great guarantee of irrelevance," as the "instituting into the image [of] a permanent threshold of semantic neutrality"; the exact knowledge of how figures are located in space "is precisely irrelevance and excess, the guarantee of the realism and the authentication of the real." ³¹ Blake's painting contains astonishingly little excess information of that sort. Even the clues that come from the lighting do not help us to reconstruct a quasidimensional space in which the action is represented as taking place: the shadow under the foot of the central accuser suggests a light coming from above and to the right, but the shadow cast by the woman implies a light coming from the left, while the hand of Jesus casts no shadow at all.

These clues seem to point to the haloed head of Jesus as the primary source of light in the design, and it is appropriate that it is a human figure which, through the power of light, largely determines the visual space in which the action takes place, just as it is a human act of signifying which gives meaning to the action. It is the emanations of humanity that define space here rather than architectural perspective.

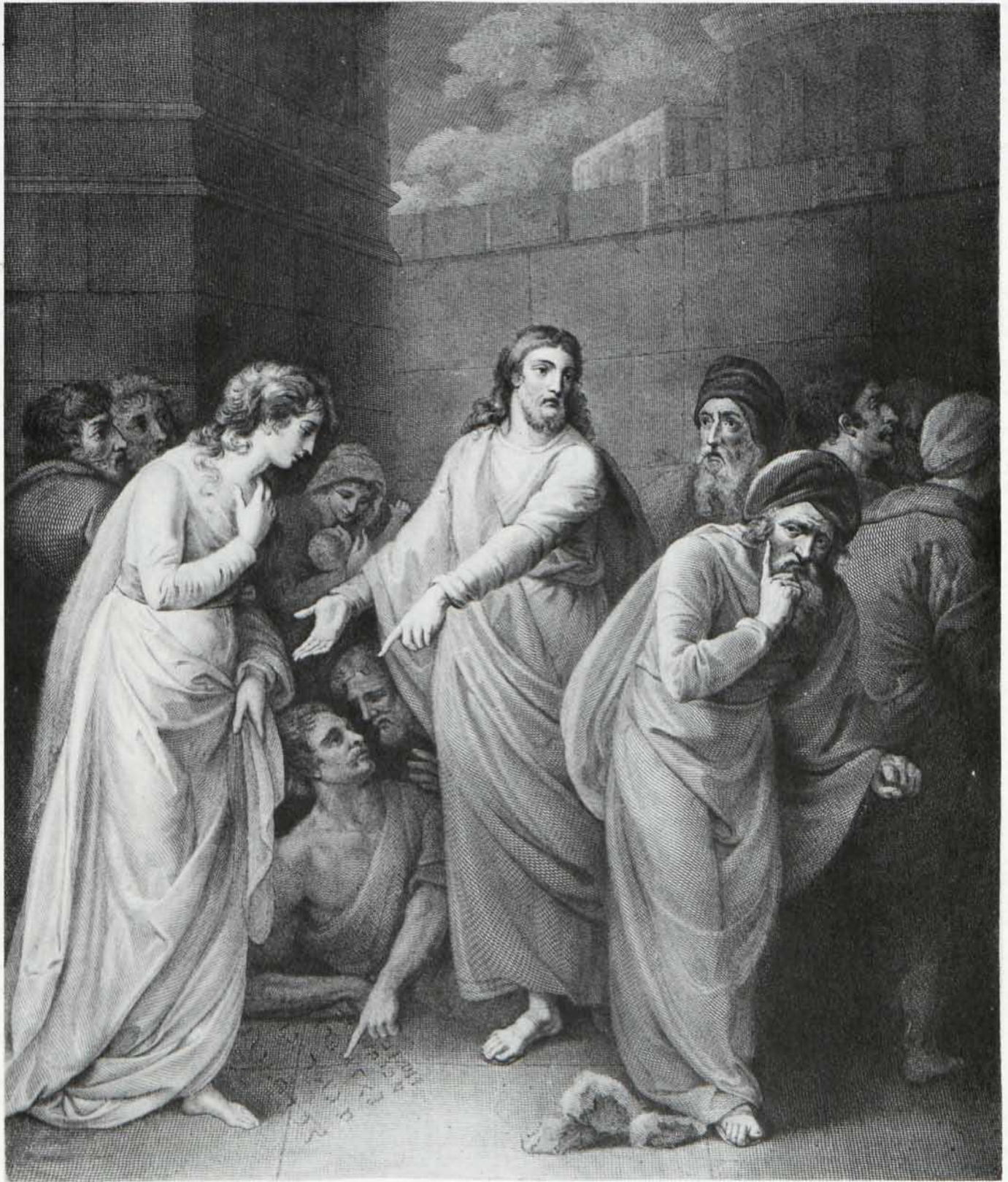
Again a reference to Fuseli will sharpen our sense of just what Blake is doing. Fuseli writes that "All minute detail tends to destroy terror, as all minute ornament, grandeur." ³² Later, Fuseli suggests that "Whatever connects the individual with the elements . . . is an instrument of sublimity," and that the spatial analogy of this is to give "the principal figure the command of the horizon": in the case of Macbeth, "place him on a ridge, his down-dashed eye absorbed by the murky abyss; surround the horrid vision with darkness, exclude its limits, and shear its light to glimpses." ³³ The notion of sublimity here is obviously related to Burkean categories, and sees the manipulation of elemental forces and perspective as ways of browbeating the viewer into an almost physical submission: painting as a form of bullying.

Blake's notion of the sublime is very different: "The Beauty proper for sublime art, is lineaments, or forms and features that are capable of being the receptacles of intellect" (*Descriptive Catalogue*, E 535). In a lighter tone, Blake wrote a little verse:

Nature & Art in this together Suit
What is Most Grand is always most Minute
Rubens thinks Tables Chairs & Stools are Grand
But Rafael thinks a Head a foot a hand (E 505)

The focus of these statements is very clear: it is the human power to signify that is the basis for the sublime, not the sensory properties of the material world. The function of art is not to overpower the senses but to stimulate the imaginative intellect, and that for Blake is the true "Sublime of the Bible" (E 94).

This idea of the sublime as constituted by the power of human expressiveness is related to one of the grounds



8. W. Artaud. *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, engr. P. Thompson for Macklin's *Bible*, courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



9. W. Blake, *God Writing Upon the Tables of the Covenant*, courtesy of the National Gallery of Scotland.

of Blake's quarrel with Reynolds, that of particularity. This quarrel begins in Discourse I, when Reynolds writes that Raphael, after seeing the Sistine Chapel, went from "a dry, Gothick, and even insipid manner, which attends to the minute accidental discriminations of particular and individual objects . . . [to] that grand style of painting, which improves partial representation by the general and invariable ideas of nature."³⁴ Blake responded to this in the margin with "Minute Discrimination is not Accidental All Sublimity is founded on Minute Discrimination" (E 632). Reynolds is talking about Raphael's style in representing all three-dimensional objects, as is clear from a latter passage;³⁵ Blake is really talking about the discrimination of character, as several of the citations above make clear. The two are not talking about the same thing.³⁶

We can perhaps discern an underlying uneasiness in Blake's handling of the role of "minute accidental discriminations" in art. When he is defending Raphael against Reynolds, he says that "The Man who can say that Rafael knew not the smaller beauties of the Art ought to be Contemned" (E 642-43), implying that even these smaller beauties have their function. When he defends himself before Butts, he accepts Reynolds's argument that "Variety of Tints & Forms" is an inferior excellence incompatible with "the Grand Style," and claims that he deliberately "neglected to display" these "parts of the art" (E 690). The decision may have been a conscious one, but Blake sounds less than completely convinced. Bindman, in spite of singling out *The Woman Taken in Adultery* for praise, says that pictorially the group of designs dealing with the life of Christ is the least interesting part of Blake's Bible illustrations,³⁷ and Blake may have had a sense that he could have done better by Butts.

The fact is that there is a problematic thinness of visual information in *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, and this is true both of the setting, costumes, and other "smaller beauties," and of the figures themselves, who borrow some of their expressiveness from our understanding of the drama they enact. Bindman has speculated that the watercolor illustrations of the Bible made for Butts by Blake were "intended not to be hung on a wall but to be either bound in a volume or interleaved in a large Bible," and Essick has made a similar suggestion.³⁸ This seems very probable; these designs work best when seen as imaginative commentaries upon a text, and it may well be that Blake thought of them as a personal response to Macklin's Bible, as illustrations to be bound together with a folio copy.

Such a strong connection with a text can give a sense of intellectual depth and resonance to a design. But it can also lead to a feeling that the design has not fully cut the umbilical cord which still holds it attached to language. This problem seems inherent in the notion of the sublime as created by human hands and faces seen specifically as the agents of the activity of signifying, and Blake seems

increasingly to have felt the need to accompany his designs with written commentary, as in the entries in *A Descriptive Catalogue* and the account of *A Vision of The Last Judgment*. This seems a tacit recognition that such visual images are not quite self-sufficient, that they point in a variety of ways to an underlying text which provides the semantic relationships that shape the meaning of the visual images. Blake was most certainly "both Poet & Painter," but the "&" must be understood as implying that the Painter cannot be separated from the Poet any more than the Poet can be from the Painter.

³⁴ G. Keynes, ed., *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 791. References to Blake's letters will be to this edition, in the form (K 867). References to Blake's other works will be to D.V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), in the form (E 456). Research for this essay was assisted by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

³⁵ Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, II.ii (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), 324-25. I have found no full-scale treatment of the iconography of the theme, but there is a useful discussion in Otto Schmitt, *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunst-Geschichte*, IV (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmueller Verlag, 1958), columns 792-803. Also useful for lists of versions of the theme are Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman, I (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 160-61, and Andor Pigler, *Barockthemen* (Budapest: Verlag der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1956), I, 309-14.

³⁶ The design is said to be "D'après Jules Romain" in A. Bartsch, *Le Peintre Graveur*, XV (Leipzig: J.A. Barth, 1867), 434, but it is not referred to in F. Hartt, *Giulio Romano*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958). It is presumably the painting that Blake would have seen at the Truchsessian Gallery—see M.D. Paley, "The Truchsessian Gallery Revisited," *SiR*, 16 (1977), 168.

³⁷ Bruegel has been identified as everything from Catholic to Anabaptist, but was most probably Catholic in the vein of Erasmus; see, e.g., W. Stechow, *Pieter Bruegel The Elder* (NY: Abrams, 1968), and B. Claessens and J. Rousseau, *Our Bruegel* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 1969). For this engraving, see H.A. Klein, *Graphic Worlds of Peter Bruegel The Elder* (NY: Dover, 1963), pp. 271-72.

³⁸ For the suggestion that Rembrandt in this painting was influenced by Mennonite doctrine, see Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), I, 109-12, and the further references there which suggest, very tentatively, a possible link between Rembrandt and Boehme.

³⁹ See R.W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (NY: Norton, 1967), p. 16, for comments by Bellori. The brief quotation comes from Shaftesbury's *Notes of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules* (1713), excerpted in E.G. Holt, ed., *A Documentary History of Art*, II (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), p. 258.

⁴⁰ Cf. the comments by A. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin* (NY: Pantheon, 1967), p. 260.

⁴¹ Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, with note by W. Woodfield (1725; facsim. rpt. Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar, 1971), pp. 53-55. The essay was first published in 1715; the facsimile is of the second edition. There is a similar analysis of the possible versions of an episode in Shaftesbury's *Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*: see E.G. Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, II, 249-50.

⁴² Richardson, p. 53.

¹⁰ See Richardson, "Note" by R. Woodfield, n.p.

¹¹ On Macklin, see T.S.R. Boase, "Macklin and Bowyer," *JWCI*, 26 (1963), 148-77. For a brief general overview, see C.M. Kauffmann, *The Bible in British Art 10th to 20th Centuries*, Exhibition Catalogue (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1977).

¹² See DNB. Artaud was active 1776-1822. He was primarily a portrait painter; he first exhibited in the Academy in 1780, as did Blake. He sent portraits there in 1784 and 1786, won a gold medal for a picture from *Paradise Lost*, and in 1795 won a travelling studentship. He did portraits of, among others, Bartolozzi and Priestley. The parallels are almost as striking as the differences, and it is hard to believe that Blake never came across him.

¹³ Boase, p. 168.

¹⁴ D. Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), p. 143.

¹⁵ See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, II (NY: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 165. There was serious doubt about the status and position of the episode, but the Council of Trent affirmed its canonicity in 1546 by making no special declaration about it; see E.C. Hoskyns, ed. F.N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber, 1940) II, 673-85.

¹⁶ See Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, in *Luther's Works*, XXIII, ed. J. Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 310-12.

¹⁷ *Calvin's Commentaries: The Gospel according to St. John 1-10*, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), p. 207. This commentary was available in English translations of 1584 and 1610—see "Introduction," pp. V-VI.

¹⁸ Richardson, p. 111.

¹⁹ Richardson, p. 103.

²⁰ See S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, With a New Index by M. Eaves (Boulder: Shambhala, 1979), under "Moses," "Angel of the Divine Presence," and "Yod."

²¹ M. Paley, *William Blake* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978), p. 56.

²² See N. Bryson, *Word and Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), p. 85, for debate on the point between LeBrun and Félibien, Richardson, pp. 53-56, and Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting* (London, 1801), p. 126.

²³ An unidentified speaker in the "Sixième Conference" of *Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* [Pendant l'année 1667] (Paris, 1669; facsim. rpt. Portland: Collegium Graphicum, 1972), p. 205 [i.e. 105]. Fuseli took up a related issue in defending Raphael's *Transfiguration* against Richardson's charge that it lacked unity of action: see Richardson, p. 57, and Fuseli, *Lectures*, pp. 148-51.

²⁴ *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, Esq. M.A.R.A.*, ed. J. Knowles (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1831), II, 218.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 221.

²⁶ *Bell's Weekly Messenger* for 25 May 1806, reprinted in P. Toynbee, *Dante in English Literature from Chaucer to Cary* (London: Methuen, 1909), II, 31.

²⁷ See M. Butlin, "Thoughts on the 1978 Tate Gallery Exhibition," *Blake*, 13 (Summer, 1979), 22; M. Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), I, 335-36; R.N. Essick, rev. of Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, in *Blake*, 16 (Summer, 1982), 44.

²⁸ N. Bryson, *Word and Image*, p. 37.

²⁹ Reynolds almost certainly had in mind, among other possible works, Benjamin Ralph, *The School of Raphael; or, the student's guide to expression in historical painting* (London, 1759).

³⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. 26.

³¹ Bryson, *Word and Image*, p. 12.

³² Fuseli, *Lectures*, p. 109.

³³ *Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, II, 225-26.

³⁴ J. Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. R. Wark (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1959), pp. 15-16.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 81: "He [Raphael] never was able to conquer perfectly that dryness, or even littleness of manner, which he inherited from his master. He never acquired that nicety of taste in colours, that breadth of light and shadow, that art and management of uniting light to light, and shadow to shadow, so as to make the object rise out of the ground with that plenitude of effect so much admired in the works of Coreggio."

³⁶ H. Adams discusses some of the ways in which Blake is unfair to Reynolds, as well as his more substantial disagreements, in "Revisiting Reynold's [sic] *Discourses* and Blake's Annotations" in *Blake in His Time*, ed. R.N. Essick and D. Pearce (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 128-44. He does not deal at length with *Discourse IV*, or with the particular point at issue here.

³⁷ Bindman, *Blake as an Artist*, p. 143.

³⁸ Bindman, *Blake as an Artist*, p. 144, and R.N. Essick, rev. of Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, p. 43.

Outside the Toronto Art Gallery

"Mysticism isn't my thing and I pay very little attention to it."—a Gentleman near "The Vision of Ezekiel"

I saw the spirit of William Blake today while on my way to his big show

shining through
the black eyes
of a saucy squirrel

black furred as the black bear was this creature poised at the gate

tiny animal hand
articulated
against
the stone wall

he looked me long in the eye

the Sun
focused
there

a moment passed
then off he dashed
to terrorize
just for fun
a flock
of complacent
birds

into the sky
they rose
as one

James Bogan