

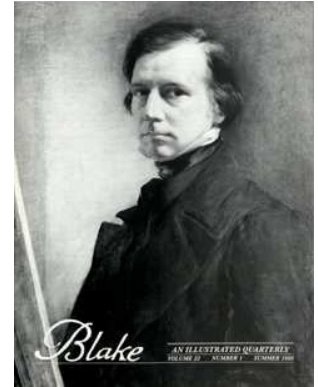
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R E V I E W

Morton D. Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime*

Joseph Wittreich

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THE PAINTINGS OF WILLIAM BLAKE



RAYMOND LISTER

For the most part, Lister is careful to note related works (and their location), but there are some inconsistencies in his procedure. In a few cases, he fails to cite closely allied studies. For example, in his discussion of Blake's "Pestilence" (pl. 2), he refers to the versions of this composition in Steigal Fine Art at Edinburgh, the City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and an American private collection, but no mention is made of the pencil drawing of "Pestilence" in the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery (published in *Blake* (winter 1984-85): 132-40).

Although adept, Lister's discussion of Palmer's and Blake's techniques is limited by the restrictions imposed by the audience to which it is directed. Some of the basic data necessary for a scholarly reading is not included. For instance, he does not identify the state of the print he reproduces in Palmer's "The Lonely Tower" (pl. 70), although he emphasizes the difference in quality between earlier and later impressions. He could have supplied this information by citing the entries in his own publication, *Samuel Palmer and his Etchings*. The addition of Butlin's catalogue numbers would also make Lister's Blake book of greater use to the scholar.

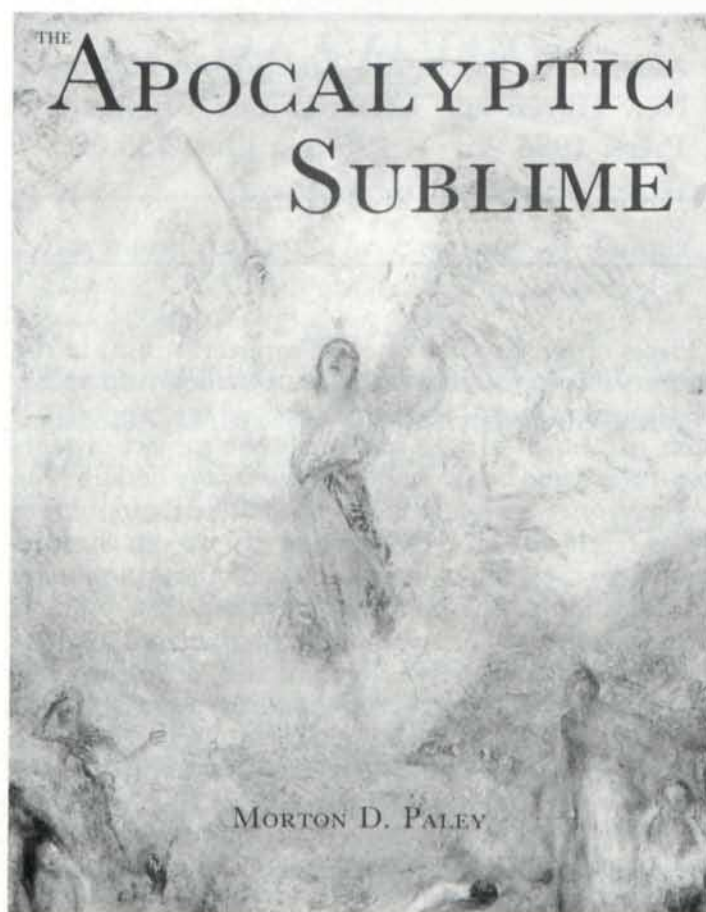
Since these are picture books, they rely primarily on the quality of the copious color reproductions. With few exceptions, the color is good, ensuring the popular success of both publications.

Morton D. Paley. *The Apocalyptic Sublime*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986. xii + 196 pp.; illus. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Joseph Wittreich

"Pieces of art, in the frame of Prophecy": thus, in the late seventeenth century Thomas Beverley¹ anticipates the phenomenon—the translation of the Apocalypse into paintings—that is nominally the subject of Morton Paley's fine book. And I say *nominally* because *The Apocalyptic Sublime*, like any book of first importance, has a reach that exceeds the grasp of its seven chapters and three appendices. Indeed, encoded within the very organization of the book—its threefold structures, its septenary design—is an ambition (perhaps too modestly expressed) to redefine romanticism, at least in England, in terms of a preoccupation with the apocalyptic myth. Shared by poets and painters alike, this preoccupation, when fully understood, is with history (the creation of a new history) and with poetics (the formation of a new aesthetics). Paley's concern, then, is with the poetry of history as it registers itself in the history of painting. That concern, in turn, is centered in romanticism, which is a breakthrough—a revolution—in both ideology and aesthetics but which, paradoxically, is rooted in the past. Paley's book (appropriately given the occasion that inspired it) is a necessary supplement to Northrop Frye's *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968) and M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971). It extends the conclusions of both these books into another art form, another dimension of romantic culture.

The alliance of word and picture in the last of the scriptural books, together with the question of which is to be privileged, is the subject of an exchange between Richard Haydock and Joseph Mede; and it is an alliance foregrounded, a question centered, through the juxtaposition of Haydock's and Mede's opinions within the prefatory matter that accompanies most editions of Mede's highly influential, twice translated, and often reprinted *Clavis Apocalyptica*.² Mede marks a turning point in the history of apocalyptic interpretation, making of it a science, and part of that science involves implicating the Apocalypse in the other arts: painting, drama, architecture, and even music. Mede's followers were legion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and what they stressed about St. John's apocalyptic theater (indeed, what is still stressed about that theater today) is that this intricately designed and structured edifice, this mental theater and sacred drama, is filled with "shifting scenes" making up the landscapes of hu-



man life within a panorama of human history—with “pictures on the mind,” boldly colored, “the strongest paintings” of which any artist is capable.³ If in our own century we read about the Apocalypse as a “great picture” or “a gorgeous picture-book” or, more extravagantly, as “a book of spiritual cartoons,” “a magnificent triptych,” “A Nine-Room Picture Gallery . . . Revelation through Pictures,”⁴ it is probably owing (at least in part) to the phenomenon Paley describes, which itself may have taken inspiration, if not direction, from Revelation commentary contemporaneous with it. Following the lead of William Paulet Carey, Paley cites Moses Lowman’s frequently reprinted commentary (1737) as one possible point of reference.

Equally if not more relevant are those late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century commentators who speak repeatedly, insistently of the Book of Revelation in terms of “writing in picture” and symbol or of “visionary scenes” emblemizing the current time of trial and revolution; of Revelation as “Prophetical picture[s]” and “hieroglyphical prophecy.”⁵ And more pertinent still, given the inflection Paley places on “the apocalyptic sublime,” are those like the anonymous commentator of 1790 who emphasize the “sublimity” of the Apocalypse, both in matter and language; or like Joseph Galloway

(1802) who proclaims in a series of comparative statements that there is nothing in Homer, Virgil, or Milton “equal to it in . . . sublimity”; or like Edward Irving (1831) who, in this book “wrought into a beautiful mosaic,” discovers the perfect vehicle “for the embodying of sublime ideas.”⁶ Where the commentator Samuel Hallifax discerns “the plastic hand of the Almighty Architect,” “a sublime geometry,” “an optical experiment,” the artist Henry Fuseli discovers the model for the ultimate in sublime art and in that model beholds a sky split open by revelation.⁷ What Revelation meant as a model is perhaps best summarized by Robert Lowth and James Bicheno for whom, on the one hand, St. John is “endued with a sublimer genius” than any of the other prophets and, on the other hand, his whole prophecy, imbued with that sublimity, “may be considered as a number of scenic pictures,” one of them being “a miniature picture of . . . history” and the others “the same picture variegated . . . on a larger scale.”⁸ As a picture book, then, the Apocalypse is filled with hieroglyphics, emblems, symbols; and in its natural landscape are to be found the types and signs of history as it was unfolding during the years of the French Revolution which eventually came to be regarded as an objective correlative for the drama then playing itself out in the mind of mankind. And so it must have seemed to Blake who, under the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg, probably conceived of Revelation’s heavenly and infernal landscapes as exteriorizations of forms seated within. “The Form of Heaven is like the Form of the Human Mind,” according to Swedenborg, a form in process, gradually perfecting itself: “the Mind is the smallest Image of that Form.”⁹ Swedenborg’s formulation affords the reminder that the Apocalypse, so often regarded as recording the movements of history, also records movements of mind, motions of thought.

Predictably, Blake is the subject of the keystone chapter in Paley’s book. The chapters preceding this crucial fourth one reveal affinities, establish indebtedness; those following it acknowledge analogies with Blake’s apocalyptic art, even sometimes measure its possible influence. The imaginary landscapes of Benjamin West (chapter 2) and Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg (chapter 3), the historical landscapes of J. M. W. Turner (chapter 5) and naturalistic ones of John Martin (chapter 6), the personalizing as well as politicizing of the Apocalypse in the paintings of Samuel Coleman and Francis Danby—all find their counterparts in Blake’s art as do the various forms and counterforms of the apocalyptic sublime: the terrible sublime, the material sublime, the retrograde apocalypse, and the apocalyptic grotesque. If Nicolas Poussin (*The Deluge*) provides a prototype of the “sublime painting” (8) and John Hamilton Mortimer (*Death as a Pale Horse*) affords “the first example of the apocalyptic sublime” (18), Blake is the quintessen-

tial artist of the apocalyptic sublime. If it can be claimed for West that he establishes this category of painting and for de Loutherbourg that he explores the subtleties of this new genre, Blake must be credited as the artist who, no less attentive to iconographic detail and pictorial devices, to the fine particularities of the Revelation aesthetic, in his poetry and painting alike grasps and appropriates to both the stupendous architectural design of the Apocalypse, its dramatic and theatrical potential, its multiple planes of activity, the synchronism and simultaneum of its structure, along with its elaborate optics, its intricate and often illusionary perspectivism, its grammar of allusion and quotation within a syntax of typology, its system of contextualizations, the significance of its obscurities and silences—all within a poetics of the glance and an aesthetics of disclosure. If here Blake seems a throwback to West and de Loutherbourg, there he seems to look ahead to Turner and Martin, Coleman and Danby.

It is especially with these chapters devoted to later artists that the one on Blake can be meaningfully, pointedly cross-referenced. Following the lead of Ronald Paulson, for example, Paley remarks of Turner's *St. Michael's Mount* that the artist may have identified himself not with the angel but with the visionary who sees and records the scene (121). Or later, commenting on Martin's *The Opening of the Seventh Seal*, Paley allows that if, in one sense, "the viewer sees from John's perspective In another sense, the tiny, astonished observer is part of what the viewer sees, and so a double perspective is established, one inside and the other outside the picture" (148). This double perspectivism, the binocular vision accompanying it, the multiplying perspectives it anticipates, have an obvious bearing on Blake's own apocalyptic designs, very notably *The Angel of Revelation* (see 86), but also on the designs arrayed around the texts of both *Milton* and *Jerusalem*—or even around the texts of other poets (the last design in Blake's *Paradise Lost* series is a good example). But more, it is in these moments (*The Apocalyptic Sublime* is strewn with them) that critical discourse shows painterly procedures intersecting with hermeneutical tenets. According to Charles Daubuz, John as artist and seer assumes a role in the apocalyptic drama (rather as Blake does in a number of the illuminations for *Milton*):

. . . this Practice may be illustrated by the like of the Dramatic Poets in the old Comedy, who used to mix the Representation with the Action, and the Spectators with the *Drama* itself; and so might commit Anachronisms, which would seem intolerable, were they not excused by this Reason, that no man can be deceiv'd thereby; and that this Method heightens the Liveliness of the *Drama*. So *St. John* is spoken to as an Apostle, and Spectator of Vision, and also farther yet as a Representative, and one that bears a Part in this Dramatic Vision.¹⁰

St. John's apocalyptic theater affords the apt analogy for Blake's visionary forms dramatic; the program notes provided by Revelation's commentators, in turn, are the best glosses we have on Blake's poetics of perspectivism, not to mention his theory of the poet's secretaryship. When Blake proclaims himself to be none other than secretary to the great artists who dwell in eternity he apparently means to align himself with John of Patmos who was commonly regarded as "the Secretary of Christ."¹¹ It is unremarkable that the patron saint of artists should author the book constituting a code for their art.

Particularly (but by no means only) in the example of Blake, we find the romantic artist aligning himself with a theory of the imagination—and a hermeneutic situated in the imagination—such as is set forth by East Apthorp:

Critical interpretation consists, not merely in weighing the moment of words, but in seizing the genius and spirit of composition. In *sacred* composition especially, a rigid adherence to the diction and letter would prevent the discovery of truth, conveyed from and to the imagination Nothing is more adverse to the prophetic spirit, than a cold and barren fancy, with a rigid and abstracted judgment, and a will fixed in a contrary system. The requisites which feel and admit this evidence, are those which are most perfective of the human mind: a memory stored with history, manners, and opinions; a fancy replete with ideal images and poetical combinations; a judgment serene and flexible¹²

Not just large conceptions but even such particularities as coloration, to which Paley is keenly attentive, find their counterpart in principles formulated by Revelation's commentators. Thus Apthorp also remarks: "When this mingled mass of poetic colours is seen unmethodized, and in its native form; its lustre is properly Divine; that is, Prophetic. To appear such, it needs only to be distributed into its proper arrangement, whose Lights and Shades will form a Prophetic Picture, or Succession of Pictures, comprehending the whole history of a Character and Action."¹³ Color contrasts and shading, light perspectives and rainbows, blacks, whites, and regions of shadow—all are aspects of the tradition Paley describes. Moreover, for most of the artists who figure in *The Apocalyptic Sublime*, the Book of Revelation led not only, and not even principally, into isolated compositions but instead into elaborate sequences of designs: in the case of West, into a series of designs for William Beckford as well as an intended series in which pictures with "apocalyptic content would have appeared as the culmination of the Progress of Revealed Religion" (38); in the instance of Blake, into "a group of powerful water colors illustrating Revelation itself" (74), as well as four designs for Thomas Butts of which "we may assume that in Blake's mind they constituted a series" (87). Indeed,

as John E. Grant has proposed, perhaps all the Revelation designs by Blake may be viewed as the constituent parts of an elaborately orchestrated whole. What is crucially significant about Paley's book, in this context, is that it isolates moments of intersection between painterly practices and hermeneutical theorizing (Joseph Mede, Moses Lowman, Richard Hurd, Edward Irving), thus discovering a line of influence worth pursuing and surely worthy of documentation. Yet Paley also comprehends that this line of connection extends beyond aesthetics, encompassing matters of ideology as well.

Emerging out of, and about, a moment of crisis, the Apocalypse was now understood to be a book of crises—private and public, inward and psychological no less than outward and historical. The Book of Revelation was as much as sourcebook for apocalyptic glitz as for eschatological despair, as much a sponsor of millenarian hopes as of cultural anxiety in this era of revolutions and of wars. If the apocalyptic myth is the common property of romantic poets and painters, it is also a property often valued differently (by West and Martin, let us say, or by Blake and Byron). In consequence, as some advance others move against the apocalyptic myth: for every apocalypse, it seems, there is a counter-apocalypse; and for every vision of the New Jerusalem, a parodic version of the deluge or the last man. The myth that Blake and Wordsworth in different ways foster is one by which, again in different ways, Byron and Mary Shelley are frustrated. As some move with others move across the grain of apocalypse. If, in one sense, the apocalypse is an aspect of the romantic myth and a harbor for its ideology, it is, in another sense, a myth under siege, subjected to interrogation, even inquisition—a myth in which romanticism finds its identity, but also the myth through which romanticism eventually critiques itself. Romantic poets and painters, no less than Derrida, are able to ask the tough questions: "What benefit? What bonus of seduction or intimidation? What social or political advantage? Do they want to cause fear? Do they want to give pleasure? To whom and how? Do they want to terrify? To blackmail? . . . To lure into an outmatching in enjoyment? . . . What effect do these noble . . . prophets or eloquent visionaries want to produce? In view of what immediate or adjourned benefit?"¹⁴ Romanticism is forever questioning the myths it seems most to court.

The Apocalyptic Sublime is a strong book with perhaps too strong a sense of an ending. Apocalyptic art, "not long after 1848," simply disappears by Paley's account: "The apocalyptic sublime had been a mode of central importance in its time, but that time . . . was

'finished' before the end of the nineteenth century" (183). History may not repeat itself, but it does rhyme; and the history Paley reports surely finds some rhyme, albeit slant rhyme, in the neo-romanticism of *Apocalypse Now* or of Damon's *Peintures de L'Apocalypse* (a gallery of nineteen apocalyptic paintings). Indeed, the series of painterly translations that Paley reports and reproduces, represents and documents, are, more than the beginning of something, but another instance of rhyme within history. As Montague Rhodes James reminds us: in John's presentation of his message "the seer has employed means essentially pictorial; the book cannot be read without calling up to the mind's eye a tremendous panorama of images, and the temptation to translate these into visible forms was . . . inevitable."¹⁵ Not the phenomenon of translation per se, but notable, distinctive features of these romantic translations should now command our attention: the personalizing and politicizing, the historicizing and secularizing of the apocalyptic myth, and the inscription within apocalyptic poetry and painting of a critique of romanticism itself, its myths and ideologies. As an affiliate of prophecy, the Apocalypse invites interpretation and is self-interpreting: it is a system of interrogations that interrogates its own interrogations; it is a token of romantic culture—at once a contemplation and a criticism of that culture.

¹⁴Thomas Beverley, *The Great Charter for the Interpretation of All Prophecy of Scripture, and of the Times Defined by It* (London, 1694) 34.

¹⁵See Joseph Wittreich, "The Apocalypse: A Bibliography," in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Cornell UP: Ithaca, N.Y., 1984) 393, #497.

¹⁶See, e.g., Samuel Langdon, *Observations on the Revelation of Jesus Christ to St. John* (Worcester, Mass., 1791) 18, 21, 27, 29–30.

¹⁷See, respectively, Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 2nd ed. (New York and London, 1907) cxxxii; Roy Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb: An Interpretation of Revelation* (Nashville, 1951) 60; Hanns Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible: The Meaning of the Revelation*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1957) 25; Edwin A. Schick, *A Revelation: The Last Book of the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1977) 9, 18.

¹⁸See, respectively, Richard Hurd, *An Introduction to the Study of the Prophecies* (London, 1772) 288; anon., *A Key to the Mystery of the Revelation* (London, 1785) 96; Edward King, *A Supplement to the Remarks on the Signs of the Times* (London, 1799) 27; William Ettrick, *The Season and Time: or, An Exposition of the Prophecies* (London, 1816) 321.

¹⁹See, respectively, anon., *A Paraphrase, Notes, and Observations, upon the Revelation of St. John* (London, 1790) 89; Joseph Galloway, *Brief Commentaries upon Such Parts of the Revelation and Other Prophecies as Immediately Refer to the Present Times*, 2 vols. (1802; rpt. Trenton, 1809) 277; Edward Irving, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation, in a Series of Lectures*, 4 vols. (London, 1831) 1: 52, 53.

⁷See both Samuel Hallifax, *Twelve Sermons on the Prophecies* (London, 1776) 7, 227, 261, and Henry Fuseli, "Lecture II," in *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, ed. John Knowles (3 vols.; London, 1831) II: 75.

⁸See both Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 2nd ed., trans. G. Gregory (Boston, 1815) 293, and James Bicheno, *The Signs of the Times; or the Dark Prophecies of Scripture Illustrated by the Application of Present Important Events* (West Springfield, Mass., 1796) 10.

⁹Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Treatise Concerning the Last Judgment, and the Destruction of Babylon* (London, 1788) 16, 17; see also 19.

¹⁰Charles Daubuz, *A Perpetual Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (London, 1730) 509-10.

¹¹See, e.g., Richard Capel, *Capel's Remains* (London, 1658) 25.

¹²East Apthorp, *Discourses on Prophecy*, 2 vols. (London, 1786) I: 10-11.

¹³Apthorp, 328.

¹⁴Jacques Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," *The Oxford Literary Review* 6 (1984): 7, 23.

¹⁵Montague Rhodes James, *The Trinity College Apocalypse* (London, 1909) 1.

Bette Charlene Werner. *Blake's Vision of the Poetry of Milton*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986. 320 pp., illus. \$45.

Reviewed by Janet Warner

Since 1980, Blake's designs for the poetry of Milton have been the subject of books by Stephen Behrendt, Pamela Dunbar, and now Bette Charlene Werner. The most beautifully produced book is Behrendt's, and Dunbar's contains much useful information, but because of its ease of reference, and brief, sensitive interpretations, I find Werner's book quietly impressive.

The structure which informs Werner's study is based on the generally accepted idea that Blake saw his role *vis à vis* Milton as clarifying and purifying the visionary element in the poetry: to redeem the sixfold emanation, in this case the six poems by Milton that Blake chose to illustrate. Werner discusses the six poems in the order of Blake's first treatment of them from 1801 to 1825: *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* (Blake's *Comus* designs); *Paradise Lost*; *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*; *L'Allegro*; *Il Penseroso*; and *Paradise Regained*. In cases where Blake produced more than one series of illustrations, such as *Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, and the *Nativity Ode*, Werner usually discusses the designs in tandem. She asserts that Blake's ideas about Milton were re-thought over the years and it is important to view the distinctions between each complete series. Her overview states that Blake's interpretations tend to become more affirmative in successive treatments of the same poem and also in subsequent series of illustrations. She sees Blake's method as "contending with and discarding any obscuring layer of error and then highlighting the area where he finds the work's essential validity." Werner approaches each series with this consistent point of view.

Although her general interpretations of the Milton designs are not unusual and her style is unfailingly moderate, Werner's consistent approach to each design gives such a close "reading" of visual detail that she often makes perceptive observations. For instance, she contrasts the *Paradise Lost* illustration *Satan as a Toad at the Ear of Eve* with *Milton* 38, noting similarities in the male pose and observing that "taken together, the two illustrations convey visually Blake's understanding of sexuality's dual nature, both its proximity to spirituality and its potential for precipitating a further fall into debased carnality" (74).

