

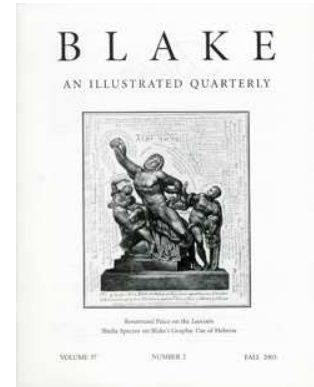
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Encyclopaedic Resistance: Blake, Rees's Cyclopædia, and the Laocoön Separate Plate

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## Encyclopaedic Resistance: Blake, Rees's *Cyclopædia*, and the *Laocoön* Separate Plate

BY ROSAMUND A. PAICE

There is an obvious, and frequently noted, visual connection between Blake's *Laocoön* separate plate (printed c. 1826; illus. 1)<sup>1</sup> and the representation of the famous *Laocoön* sculpture on Plate III of the "Sculpture" engravings that he produced for Abraham Rees's *Cyclopædia* (1802–20). Yet, in spite of there now being a significant—if small—body of works dealing with the former, there has been little investigation into either its relationship to the Rees venture, or the *Cyclopædia*'s relationship to it. James Bogan, in his 1980 essay "From Hackwork to Prophetic Vision," did at least touch on these issues, but, although he commented that, in the *Laocoön* separate plate, "We are a long way from encyclopedia information," and "If Blake had turned in this version of Laocoon to Abraham Rees, he would have been cashiered" (39–40), it is unfortunate that he failed to pursue this line of enquiry further. This failure, and the failure of subsequent critics, to tackle such issues may stem from the fact that, whilst it is now ten years since Robert N. Essick noted the disinclination of scholars to address Blake's commercial engravings,<sup>2</sup> the reluctance remains. Moreover, since there is a certain awkwardness when it comes to addressing even Blake's engravings of other artists' creative works, it should be no surprise that the association of this "visionary artist" with the production of a compilation such as an encyclopaedia seems to be regarded as an embarrassment. When Blake's plates for the *Cyclopædia* are mentioned at all, they are generally dismissed fairly abruptly with a gesture towards Blake's financial difficulties (e.g., Bogan, "Blake's Jupiter Olympus" 156).

1. There are two impressions of this plate, designated A and B in Essick, *Separate Plates* (hereafter cited as *SP*) no. 29. Copy B (collection of Robert N. Essick, Altadena, California) has a "J Whatman / 1826" watermark; copy A (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University) has no watermark, but the paper on which it is printed has been judged to be of the same stock as that of copy B, and, therefore, the two impressions were probably printed together. See Essick and Viscomi's analysis, *Illuminated Books* (hereafter cited as *IB*) 5:241; and *SP* no. 29, fig. 51. The text of the *Laocoön* is transcribed in Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (I refer to the revised edition of 1988, hereafter cited as *E*) 273–75.

2. Essick, *William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations* (hereafter cited as *CB*) 1.

Monetary considerations unquestionably did play a part in Blake's acceptance of the Rees commission; yet this was the case with so many of Blake's commercial engagements—not to mention those creative works produced under patronage, often to order<sup>3</sup>—and none of those led to the creation of a work comparable to the *Laocoön* separate plate.

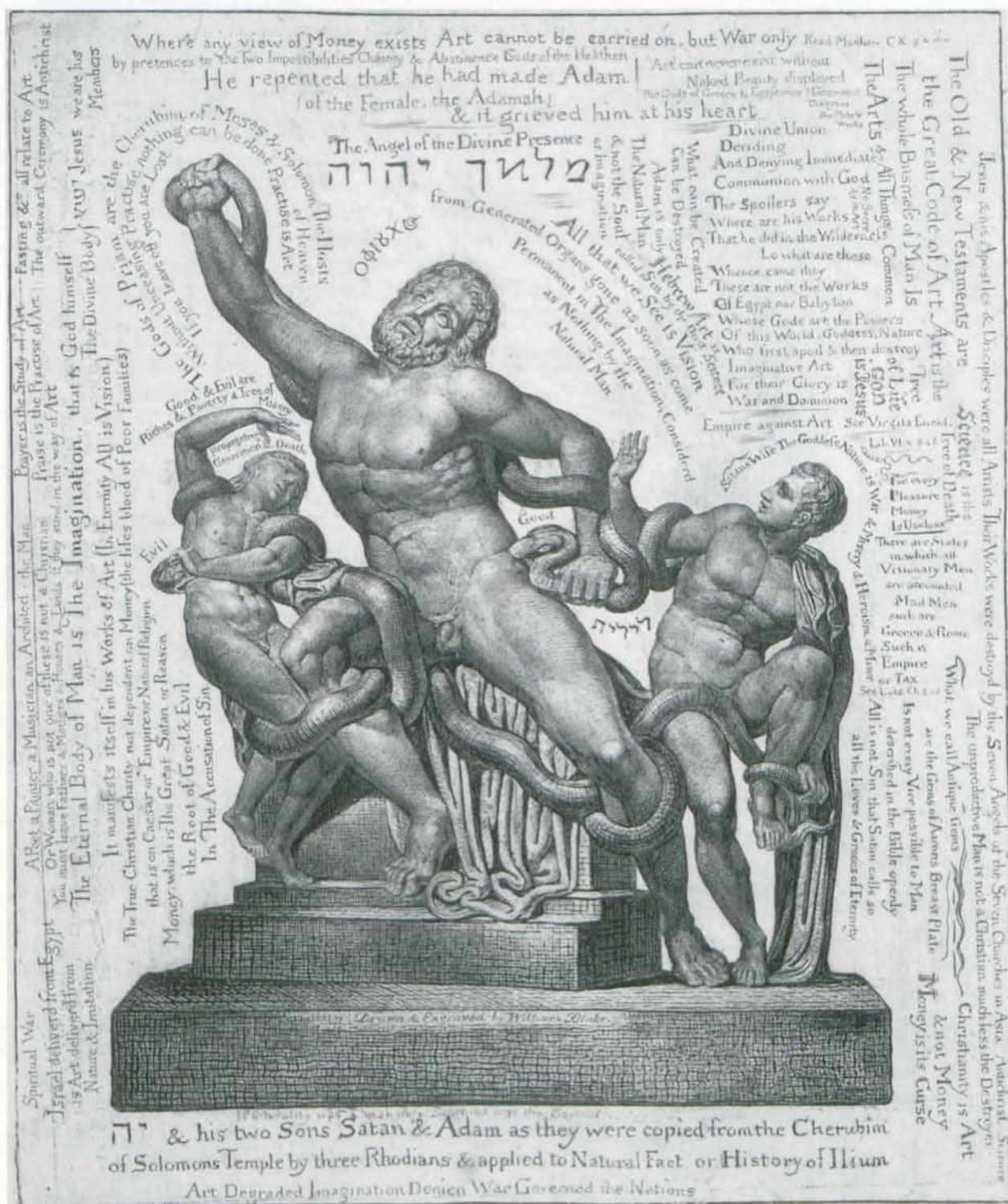
Only David E. James, in his consideration of the *Laocoön*, has significantly addressed this issue. At its most instructive, James's article highlights the engraving's opposition to art as commercial undertaking, and preoccupation with the evils of money (230–31).<sup>4</sup> There are, though, certain problems with James's analysis. His notion that this work was intended directly as a challenge to the *Cyclopædia*'s "Sculpture" article, written by John Flaxman, misses the real significance of that article to Blake, dismissing the many points of connection, indeed agreement, between it and the separate plate (230, 234n6). Moreover, by arguing that the *Laocoön* engraving "redeems his [Blake's] original engraving" for the "Sculpture" article's third plate "by transforming it into a work of art," and "reclaiming [it] for spiritual uses" (230), James makes a questionable assumption—that from the outset Blake had in mind the end purpose of the engraving. I hope to show that the relationship between the *Laocoön* separate plate and the *Cyclopædia* commission is more intricate than has been recognized.

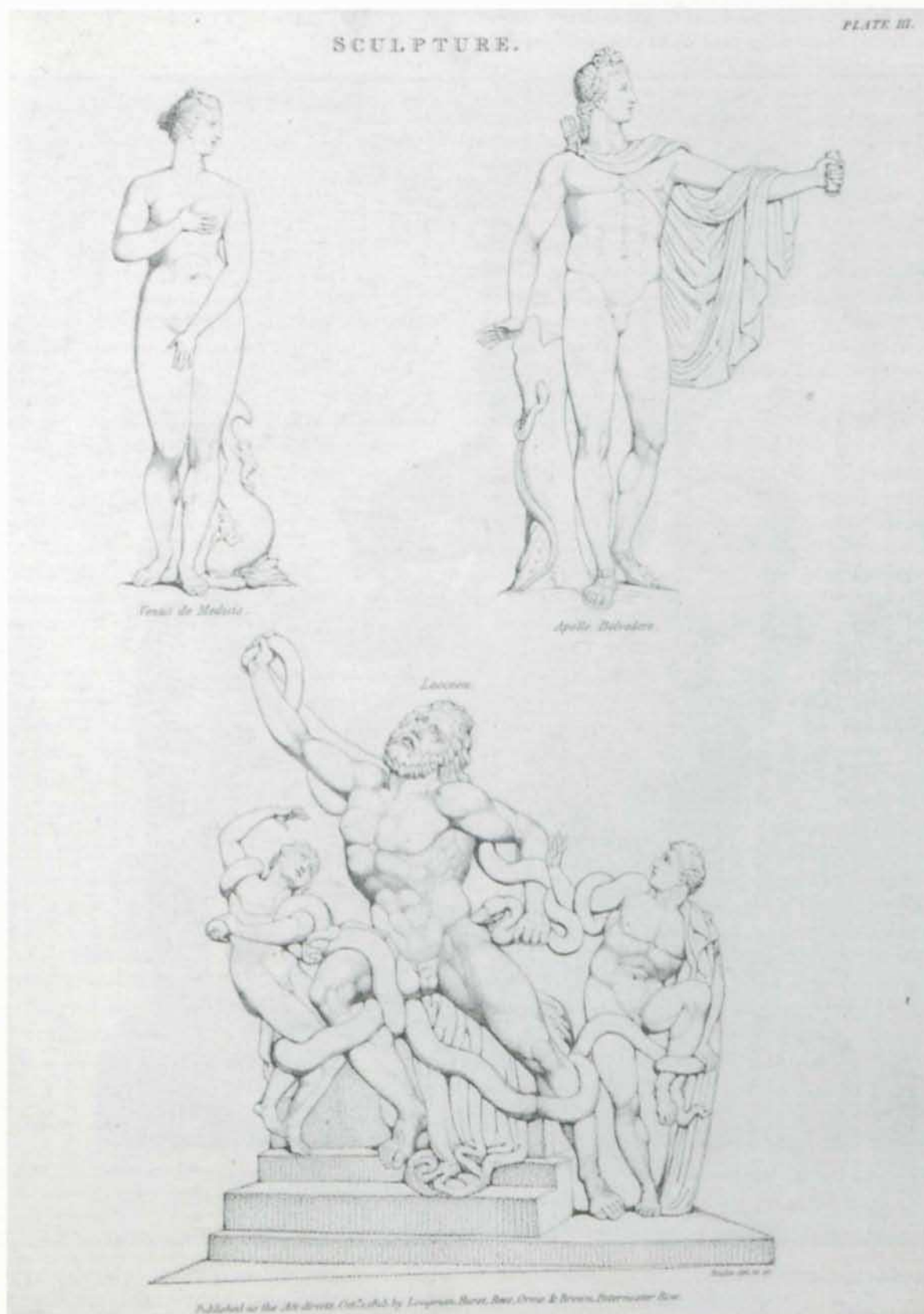
On the surface of things, the two seem ill matched. The *Cyclopædia* was a commercial venture, its aim to attract a wide readership, and to deal in empirical facts. The *Laocoön* engraving exists in two impressions only, and nobody knows whom, if anybody, Blake had in mind as an audience for it. Blake's engraving style in his *Cyclopædia* plates is also strikingly dissimilar to what we encounter in the *Laocoön* separate plate. The former appeared in print between 1816 and 1819, and comprise images of many sculptures, all lightly rendered in stipple. The latter, on the other hand, was printed in 1826, features just one sculpture, and involves both image and text; its rendition of the famous *Laocoön* statue is also more densely engraved than any of Blake's *Cyclopædia* images, and is reproduced in hatching, and crosshatching, including "dots & lozenges" (*E* 572). Nonetheless, the relationship between the two is important: the *Cyclopædia*'s nature and production history, in connection with features of the "Sculpture" article and Blake's engravings for it, raise issues of authorship, graphic style, and verbal definition that are played out in the composition and content of the *Laocoön* separate plate.

3. I owe this observation to Robert N. Essick, who kindly read over, and commented on, drafts of this essay.

4. Eaves, however, also draws attention to the fact that, in the *Laocoön* separate plate, Blake's "attack on commerce broadens into a blanket denunciation of money itself, with money and art explicitly opposed" (*Counter Arts* [hereafter cited as *CA*] 162).







2. William Blake, "Sculpture" PLATE III (second sequence), from Rees's *Cyclopædia* (Plates, vol. 4).  
Collection of Robert N. Essick.



The seven engravings that Blake produced for the *Cyclopædia*, which appeared in fascicles between July 1816 and September 1819, tell a story. Of the three that appeared in September 1819, the one entitled "MISCELLANY. GEM Engraving," was drawn by John Farey, and engraved by Blake (fascicle F);<sup>5</sup> the other two, accompanying the "Basso Relievo" and "Armour" articles, are simply signed "Blake sc." (fascicles F and 78 respectively). The four plates that were produced to accompany the article on "Sculpture" appeared earlier: the first ("PLATE III"; fascicle 66, July 1816) is signed "Blake del et sc.," and shows the *Venus de Medici*, *Apollo Belvedere*, and *Laocoön* sculptures (see illus. 2); on the second ("PLATE I"; fascicle 67, October 1816), third ("PLATE II"; fascicle 68, October 1816), and fourth ("PLATE IV"; fascicle 69, February 1817) plates—which depict a variety of ancient sculptures—we read, as on the "Basso Relievo" and "Armour" plates, simply "Blake sc.," or "Blake, sculp." (CB 109–12).

Although these engravings display no unusual artistic merit, the manner in which they were incorporated into the *Cyclopædia* is worthy of some attention. As is clear from its eventual placement in the "Miscellany" section of the *Cyclopædia*'s plates (Plates, vol. 3), the single "GEM Engraving" plate was not for a major article, and cannot be considered a significant commission. Moreover, Blake engraved only half of this plate, the rest being the work of Wilson Lowry, the principal engraver in this encyclopaedic project. Blake's "Armour" engravings constitute Plates IV and V of their section; however, both "plates" were engraved onto a single piece of copper, and were printed onto the same sheet (Plates, vol. 1). The first three plates that illustrate the "Armour" article, all engraved by T. Milton, are dated 1 September 1802 (Plate I), 9 January 1804 (Plate II), and [?] June 1803 (Plate III)—that is, about fifteen years before Blake's 1818 plate. This, added to the fact that Plate II bears a later date than Plate III, suggests that the earlier part of the sequence was intended from the outset, and that Blake's plate was an afterthought. Similarly, there are four "Basso Relievo" plates (Plates, vol. 2), the first three of which are dated 2 January 1804 (Plate III) and 1 December 1807 (Plates I and II), with Blake's plate (Plate IV) again produced in 1818, some ten years later. As with the "Armour" plates, the earlier date on the third "Basso Relievo" plate suggests that the first three were at least in the planning stage at the same time. Both cases indicate that Blake was not considered in the original plans for the *Cyclopædia* en-

5. There are two versions of this plate: both are dated "1819," and both were used in copies of the *Cyclopædia* (see footnote 44). The three views of the engraved gem of Jupiter Serapis on this plate are based on plate 2 in Johann Laurenz Natter, *A Treatise on the Ancient Method of Engraving on Precious Stones* (London, 1754), engraved by C. H. Hemerich (Essick, "Blake in the Marketplace, 1992: Appendix" 159, crediting Alexander Gourlay with the discovery of this source).



3. Robert Cromeek, "Sculpture" PLATE I (first sequence), from Rees's *Cyclopædia* (Plates, vol. 4). Collection of Robert N. Essick.

gravings; the dates on the other plates in these sections suggest that he did not become involved in the work—despite knowing of it<sup>6</sup>—before early 1808.

The earlier "Sculpture" engravings (Plates, vol. 4) offer a slightly different picture. The most salient feature of this particular commission is that Blake's remit evidently allowed him to take over as principal engraver: whilst his are not the first of the six plates for this article, they are the majority, and they do start a new plate sequence. Plates I and II of the first sequence, which were engraved by Robert Cromeek after drawings by Henry Howard, and offer different views of a marble group of Cupid and Psyche, are dated 1 November 1804. Their engraving style is quite different from the one that Blake employs for the later plates: the first plate is hatched (illus. 3), and the second displays figures in simple outline. Blake's later plates also emphasize outline, but since the lines are stippled the touch seems

6. The first mention of Blake in connection with the *Cyclopædia* is in a letter of John Flaxman to William Hayley of 2 January 1804, but here Blake is merely a courier for Flaxman's "Basso Relievo" article; see Bentley, *Blake Records* (hereafter cited as BR) 138.



lighter, the images more delicate. Here too we have a more concrete indication of the date of the commission: the well-known anecdote of Henry Fuseli's encounter with Blake as the latter sketched the Royal Academy's cast of the *Laocoön* sculpture (BR 238) is proof that Blake was engaged on the work by early (spring?) 1815.

An obvious question arising from the dates of Blake's *Cyclopædia* engravings is why it was then that he became involved, and not earlier. The answer lies in the involvement in the Rees project of Flaxman, who no doubt recommended Blake's graver to Rees and his publishers (CB 109). As I have noted, during the period when Blake very probably produced the Rees plates (?1808–15), he was certainly—and as usual—suffering from a shortage of funds; just as certainly, Flaxman knew of these pecuniary problems, and his recommendation of Blake for this commission must have been, in part, an attempt to remedy Blake's situation (see BR 138 and 151). Yet the earlier engravings, by artists other than Blake, in the "Sculpture," "Armour," "Basso Relievo," and "Miscellany" plate sequences, prove that initially Blake was not on Rees's lists. Since it is unlikely that Blake would have been involved in the project without Flaxman, we must conclude that the latter either had not used or could not use his influence with the publishers in the early stages of its production. Given Flaxman's frequent recommendations of Blake's graver to publishers over the years, the more probable of the two explanations is that Flaxman was not in a position to assert his authority in this case until after the initial engraving work had been commissioned.

What seems to have given Flaxman sway over the choice of engravers in the subsequent years is best demonstrated by the complications of his involvement in the "Sculpture" article—complications that have been ignored by Blake scholars. In G. E. Bentley's *Blake Books*, we are referred back to several sources in which this article is attributed to Flaxman (no. 489): the *Annual Biography and Obituary for the Year 1828* (issue no. 997); a note on Blake's sketch of the *Laocoön* sculpture (in Frederick Tatham's hand); and W. Bent's *List of New Publications* for April 1803. Subsequent Blake scholars have accepted, apparently without investigation, this attribution (e.g., Tayler 72, James 226); even Essick, who does note that *The Philosophical Magazine and Journal* gives Flaxman as co-author of the essay on sculpture, parenthesizes the fact that he is named "(with John Bacon and Prince Hoare)" (CB 109).<sup>7</sup> Yet it is not only *The Philosophical Magazine*, but also the Preface (1802) to the *Cyclopædia* itself, that lists three authors—"Flaxman, P. Hoare, and Bacon"—for the essay (1:v). It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the article was the result of a straightforward collaboration: Flaxman's *Lectures on Sculpture*,

delivered to the Royal Academy over roughly the same period as the *Cyclopædia* was being produced, frequently contain passages identical to sections of the *Cyclopædia* article, and there is no reason to doubt that the latter was his work. Rather, we need to consider how, and when, he came to be sole author of the essay.

It is difficult to work out exactly what happened in the case of Hoare, but the evidence suggests that he ceased to be a part of the project soon after the printing of the Preface. Although Hoare's name is linked with the *Cyclopædia* in that Preface, none of the prospectuses to which I have had access—all of which were printed after the Preface—mentions him as a contributor to the *Cyclopædia*, either as an artist or as a writer.<sup>8</sup> Flaxman and Hoare were well known to each other by the early 1800s—exchanging articles, pamphlets, and letters (BR 136, 177); thus, some sort of collaboration at the time might have seemed natural. It is more difficult to account for his disappearance from the project. Even after Hoare's name had been dropped from the prospectuses, there is evidence of his and Flaxman's continued professional relationship, which indicates that the parting of ways was amicable. Around the beginning of 1804, Flaxman sent a copy of his "Basso Relievo" article to Hoare (BR 139); later, in 1807, he also contributed to Hoare's serial publication, *The Artist*, an essay on the state of the arts, and sculpture foremost, in England, prior to the foundation of the Royal Academy.<sup>9</sup>

Whether Hoare's initial decision to withdraw from the project was due to other commitments, or to ideological differences with its aims or contributors, cannot easily be judged. That he afterwards stressed the latter, however, is clear from the following statement, found in his 1813 work, *Epochs of the Arts*:

look at the crowded repositories—may we not almost say *manufactories*, of compilation, in which a circulating sale is, with equal industry and ingenuity, established in every street in London! Look at the torrents of science which every shop and every hour pours forth! Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, Galleries, Magazines, Repositories! Panoramic, Pantological, Allegorical, Historical, Biblical; Chymical, Medical, Practical, Universal! (122–23; author's own emphasis)

This is not the statement of a man who is currently engaged on an encyclopaedia article. It seems rather the statement of one who wishes to parade his resentment; at the very least, it suggests this former contributor's unease over his relationship to Rees's *Cyclopædia*.

8. The earliest of these prospectuses is from c. 1802. I am indebted to the University of Reading for providing me with copies from their library archives.

9. Flaxman, "Cursory Strictures on Modern Art, and particularly Sculpture, in England, previously to the establishment of the Royal Academy in 1769," *The Artist* XII (30 May 1807): 1–16.

7. Since this essay was submitted for publication Paley, too, has acknowledged this attribution ("T" & his two Sons" 201n2).



The other major problem with Rees's 1802 list of contributors is that John Bacon died in August 1799. His inclusion in the Preface's list, however, seems not to have been a mistake: Bacon alone is specified as the author of the "Sculpture" article in the first prospectuses for the *Cyclopædia* ("Dr. Rees's New Cyclopædia" [1802] 3). Nor would this have been impossible, since Bacon had already written the addition to the "Sculpture" article of Ephraim Chambers's greatly admired *Cyclopædia* (1st ed. 1728), which appeared in an edition enlarged by Rees in 1781–86.<sup>10</sup> This earlier article need only have been slightly adjusted, and added to, for the new work. Had the alterations not been made by the time of Bacon's unexpected death, they could have been performed by another hand. Some sources do specify Bacon as the sole author of the article in Rees's *Cyclopædia* (e.g., Redgrave 17 and 18; *DNB*, "Bacon, John, R. A. 1740–1799"<sup>11</sup>); these later attributions, however, probably stem from a misreading of Allan Cunningham's statement, in *The Lives*, that Bacon wrote a "Disquisition on the Characters of Painting and Sculpture, published in Rees's edition of Chambers's Dictionary" (3:230). On reading the articles from the Chambers and Rees encyclopaedias together, though, what is obvious is their difference: not only is the latter far more extensive in its coverage, but also it focuses much more on the biblical origins of sculpture, giving an almost mythological aspect to the history of that art. Thus Bacon must posthumously (probably post 1802), and quietly, have been ousted from the Rees project.

In fact, the attribution of the "Sculpture" article to "Flaxman, P. Hoare, and Bacon," in the Preface to the *Cyclopædia*, signals a significant change: from sole contributor, Bacon is now third in line. By the time an advertisement appeared for the eighth part of the *Cyclopædia*, Bacon's name had disappeared altogether—and without explanation—from the list of contributors ("Dr. Rees's New Cyclopædia" [1804] 2). Bacon's untimely death clearly consigned him to a previous generation, and naturally it became more desirable that an alternative author be found for the "Sculpture" article of Rees's *Cyclopædia*. That Flaxman should have taken over the project, however, is a notable development.

Flaxman and Bacon had been near neighbors when the latter lived in Newman Street, but it is unlikely that they were ever friends. Bacon's ability to secure commissions, and his resulting financial successes, were the envy of many artists of the time, with some regarding him as unscrupulous. Indeed, amongst those known to have been at odds with Bacon was another of Blake's friends, Fuseli. Ann Cox-Johnson attributes the tensions with Flaxman to the con-

trast between the latter's "mystical tendencies" and Bacon's evangelistic Methodism (21), but it is probable that the differences between the two men were as much professional as they were religious. The pair were in competition to secure commissions for the national monuments to commemorate naval and military heroes and victories. Moreover, though both were members of the Royal Academy, Flaxman was also Bacon's replacement there, being elected, along with Martin Archer Shee, to the Academy's Committee only following the deaths of Bacon and James Barry. Perhaps it was the Royal Academy promotion that made Flaxman desirable enough to the *Cyclopædia*'s publishers for them to give him charge of the "Sculpture" article; or perhaps outright control became his in 1810, when he was elected as the first Royal Academy professor of sculpture.

However the transition from triple to single authorship came about, then, clearly it did so against the background of Flaxman's personal and artistic conflicts with Bacon. In light of this, it is questionable whether or not Flaxman would have agreed to take on unconditionally what amounts to sole authorship by default. Yet, even if Flaxman's undertaking of the task did not actually depend on his being allowed greater input in the project (and presumably a greater fee), such things undoubtedly would have resulted from his raised authorial status. A further sign that Flaxman was in favor with the *Cyclopædia*'s publishers is found in the prospectuses: from the time that his name appears in association with the "Sculpture" essay, it is also consistently at the head of the (non-alphabetical) list of those who have made drawings for the work. In addition, prior to Flaxman's name appearing in the prospectuses (?1802), only two artists—"Messrs. Milton and Lowry"—appear to have been engaged to engrave the *Cyclopædia* plates. Within the succeeding years, there was work for such a beleaguered engraver as Blake evidently was at the time.

Blake's commission, then, evolved out of a complex enterprise involving conflicting personalities, styles, and attitudes, and was probably a direct result of the issue of the article's authorship having been resolved. To Blake, the nature of the resolution must have seemed to herald the triumph of ideas with which he had sympathy, Flaxman's ideas—some of which feature, in a modified form, in the *Laocoön* separate plate. It is important, too, that these ideas were not those of Hoare and Bacon. That Hoare had jumped—or been pushed?—from the project by this time, and that the "Sculpture" article had once been in the hands of Bacon, might have acted as further inducements. As I have noted, the latter's sculptures had gained him ample monetary reward; Blake had not received the like as a result of his painting and engraving, and he no doubt found Bacon objectionable for the same reasons that Flaxman and Fuseli did. In the case of Hoare, however, the situation is more complicated.

10. Rees first re-edited Chambers's *Cyclopædia* in 1778, but it was only in the 1781–86 edition that he incorporated the extra material.

11. Ironically, the *DNB* fails to specify Flaxman as author of the "Sculpture" article ("Flaxman, John 1755–1826").



Hoare and Blake met as a result of Flaxman's recommendation to the former of Blake's engraving skills,<sup>12</sup> and the two were evidently on good terms for a time;<sup>13</sup> indeed, in a letter to William Hayley of April 1804, Blake is found asserting that Hoare is a man "worthy of every Confidence you can place in him" (E 747). By the end of 1809, though, Blake clearly had begun to resent Hoare. In the fragment of a doggerel poem, "And his legs . . ." (c. 1809), Blake characterizes Hoare as "trembling Hare [who] sits on his weakly paper [*The Artist*]<sup>14</sup> / On which he usd to dance & sport & caper" (lines 17–18, E 504). Bentley attributes this attack on Hoare to Blake's overreaction, writing that Hoare had "merely praised" Robert Hunt (the prime target of this poetical attack), but that this seems to have been enough to confirm him as an enemy of Blake's (BR 218). Blake's description, however, is likely to have been influenced by additional factors. During the period when Blake was engaged in attacking Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Works* (between 1798 and 1809; E 886 [textual notes], Bindman 522), Hoare had not only praised Reynolds extensively in his *Inquiry into the Requisite Cultivation and Present State of the Arts of Design in England* (1806), but had also commissioned Blake to produce the work's sole engraving, after a painting of "Theory" by Reynolds himself.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, a year later *The Artist* printed John Hoppner's epistle commending Thomas Stothard's painting of the Canterbury Pilgrims (no. XIII [6 June 1807]: 12–14), and Richard Cumberland's equally approving remarks in response, with no reference to Blake's own version (14–16); even the notice for Blake's "Designs for Blair's Poem of The Grave" which *The Artist* did include (no. XXI [1 August 1807]: 11) failed to give the name of the artist responsible (Essick and Paley 31).<sup>16</sup> By the time the "Sculpture" article first appeared, then, Hoare and Blake had long since gone their separate ways, and, though it is quite possible that Blake knew of his former friend's views

on "crowded repositories . . . of compilation"—expressed just three years previously—they may, temporarily at least, have increased the appeal of the Rees venture. Had the *Cyclopædia* commission been offered to Blake in, or earlier than, 1806, he might have felt rather differently.

In addition to the bonus of Hoare's and Bacon's having disappeared from the *Cyclopædia* project, one wonders whether Blake was thinking also of the state of his friendship with Flaxman when he undertook the commission. Flaxman and Blake were on rather strained terms by the early 1800s, and the offered work might have suggested a proffered hand, a gesture of solidarity. If Blake originally did feel optimistic about his engagement on the project, however, he no doubt soon saw that his relationship with Flaxman was not resuscitating with great speed; indeed it never fully recovered.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, his engravings for Flaxman's article appear to have proved less an exercise in solidarity than a subordination of Blake's artistic inclinations to those of Flaxman, and to the aims of the *Cyclopædia* as a whole. As Essick writes, in Blake's day, reproductive engraving was generally

dependent upon a rigorous division of labour and the subordination of individual expression to uniformity and repeatability. All illustrations in a book had to conform to its format, and this mechanical unity was extended to graphic style. If more than one engraver was employed, all had to practise compatible techniques. In spite of an engraver's prerogative to 'sign' his plates, the truly autographic tended to be submerged beneath the anonymity of a corporate and systematic enterprise. (CB 5)

In this instance, however, the engravings plainly diverge from the rather harsher house style of the *Cyclopædia* as a whole. Whereas, twelve years earlier, Cromek produced his hatched "Sculpture" plates, Blake's new series was to consist entirely of the stippled lines which were so fashionable at that time (Viscomi 36, 171). As Essick has pointed out, the only other instance in which Blake fully adopts the stippled-line technique is in his engravings for Flaxman's *Compositions from Hesiod*, published in 1817 (CB 109). Blake does use stippled lines in his engravings of Flaxman's *Iliad* designs (1805; CB no. 46, figs. 208–10), and the first state of the *Mirth* engraving (c. 1816; SP fig. 48), but only in combination with more strongly linear outlines.<sup>18</sup>

12. Hoare employed Blake's graver on two occasions (BR 136, CB 90–91, 94).

13. Blake seems to have acted as a kind of go-between for Hayley and Hoare, from February to July 1804, relaying messages of mutual respect, and urging Hayley (unsuccessfully) to take up the editorship of a periodical proposed, through Hoare, by the publisher Richard Phillips; see letters to William Hayley, 23 February 1804 (E 742), 16 March 1804 (E 744), 7 April 1804 (E 746–47), [26] <27> April 1804 (E 747–48), and 16 July 1804 (E 754).

14. *The Artist* folded in 1809, although it was reprinted in the form of two volumes in 1810.

15. Hoare again praised Reynolds in *Epochs of the Arts* . . . (viii and xiv–xx).

16. The differences in artistic opinion between Blake and Hoare may also have come to the former's attention after 1806. For example, in his *Inquiry*, Hoare credits the engravers Francesco Bartolozzi, Robert Strange and William Woollett with having "universally established the reputation of English Engraving" (260). By contrast, in 1809–10 Blake singled out the latter two as the chief culprits of "the English Style of Engraving," which comes in for heavy criticism in his *Public Address* (E 573; CA 155).

17. See "My title as [a] Genius . . ." (c. 1801–03; E 505); *Public Address* (c. 1809–10; E 573); BR 331.

18. There are of course several examples of Blake's non-linear stipple work, such as two of his engravings for the *Designs to a Series of Ballads, Written by William Hayley* (1802; CB no. 41, figs. 190–91), and "The Fall of Rosamond" (first state 1783; SP fig. 60). In each of these cases, as in the *Hesiod* engravings, we can infer that the contemporary "mania of the public" for stipple work (Landseer 128) lay behind Blake's stylistic choice.



Flaxman, then, had triumphed in gaining sole authorship of the "Sculpture" article, whilst Blake had been left to reproduce his images in a graphic style that he disliked. Proof of Blake's growing antipathy towards stippled lines can be found in his reworking of the *Mirth* engraving. Essick has concluded that the motives behind Blake's initial translation into stipple of his own watercolor (the first design of Blake's illustrations for Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso") are hard to fathom, unless he had hoped for it to appeal to a commercial audience (Essick, *William Blake Printmaker* 192–93). The dramatic change that takes place between that stippled first state and the second state (post 1816;<sup>19</sup> *SP* fig. 49), however, implies Blake's artistic rejection of stippling as a substitute for outline at around the time he was producing the *Cyclopædia* engravings, or shortly afterwards. At least from the mid-1810s, then, stippled lines were not Blake's own preference for engraving work, and this is evident from the fact that Blake seems to have been only too happy to leave this style under the patronage of John Linnell, whom he met in 1818.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the technique was certainly a strange choice for some of the *Cyclopædia* plates: as Geoffrey Keynes notes, stippling, which is "rather soft and indeterminate, is not a very suitable medium for recording the outlines of sculptured marble" (21), and a quick glance at Blake's separate plate *Laocoön*, with its continuous outlines and bold hatching patterns, supports this opinion.

Indeed, although Blake's theory and practice are far from consistent with each other, both physically and metaphorically the stippled line was diametrically opposed to Blake's concept of the "distinct, sharp, and wirey . . . bounding line" (E 550), and his statement that "a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivision[s]" (E 783). As Morris Eaves writes:

The criterion of mastery [for Blake] is not a repertory of time-consuming skills—"dots & lozenges," "clean strokes & mossy tints," and so on ([E] 572–73)—but a single skill, drawing, represented by a single unit, line, which is taken to be the product in space-time of an "eternal" mental activity. (CA 232)

Not only did the dots of stippling give merely the illusion of lines, in fact refusing firm outlines altogether (Viscomi 171), but also this technique, along with the equally prevalent aquatints and soft-ground etchings, was particularly associated with the reproduction of other art media (Viscomi

36). Whilst it is true that Blake believed all art to entail copywork of some sort,<sup>21</sup> he did distinguish between servile reproduction, or copying nature, and the imaginative use of material found elsewhere, or copywork filtered through Imagination.<sup>22</sup> The mimicry, and abstract illusionism, involved in stippling produced what to Blake's mind were false engravings, since, to him, true engraving consisted of creating "Originals," just as "Originals" are created in any other art form. Stipple, then, did not produce either physical or "autographic" (Eaves, *William Blake's Theory* 42; CA 228) linearity.

Yet many of Blake's commercial engravings entail some level of uninspired copywork: the *Laocoön* separate plate itself has the hatching and "dots & lozenges" that are so often featured in imitative work, a fact to which I shall return.<sup>23</sup> What distinguishes stipple from linear engraving is that it requires less skill, and is less time-consuming; as a result, journeymen could undertake this type of engraving work. It is not difficult to perceive, then, that an engraver engaged on stipple projects might well have had reason to feel that his talents were being insulted. Moreover, payment for stipple engraving in general was proportional to the level of skill that was believed to be required for such work: as stipple was believed to be the poor relation of conventional line engraving, so it contributed to poverty amongst engravers, and was complicit in the commercialization of art (CA 153, 223–24).

Flaxman may simply have been another victim of popular tastes, or of the *Cyclopædia*'s tight purse strings; given parallels between Blake's *Hesiod* and *Cyclopædia* engravings, though, it is quite possible that Blake now found Flaxman advocating these foreign, and often commercially motivated, predilections<sup>24</sup>—Flaxman, whom Blake had once believed to be the "Sculptor of Eternity," "a Sublime Archangel My Friend & Companion from Eternity," his "Best Friend."<sup>25</sup> The absence of stippling in Flaxman's

21. E.g., "To learn the Language of Art Copy for Ever. is My Rule" (E 636); "The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good one Really Does Copy a Great Deal" (E 645).

22. E.g., "Men think they can Copy Nature as Correctly as I copy Imagination this they will find Impossible. & all the Copies or Pretended Copiers of Nature from Rembrat [sic] to Reynolds Prove that Nature becomes [tame] to its Victim nothing but Blots & Blurs. Why are Copiers of Nature Incorrect while Copiers of Imagination are Correct this is manifest to all" (E 574–75).

23. Crome's plates for the *Cyclopædia* show how hatching can produce rather weak and lifeless reproductions, but Blake continued to use this method: the faults of Crome's engravings he no doubt considered to be the responsibility of the artist rather than the technique.

24. See Bogan, "From Hackwork to Prophetic Vision" 36–37. On the contemporary French taste for stippling, see Viscomi 387n15.

25. Letter to Flaxman, 21 September 1800 (E 708). It is notable that in his letter to Flaxman of only a year later (19 October 1801) Blake's manner of addressing the latter is significantly less effusive (E 717–18).

19. Essick now dates all these late revisions of Blake's intaglio plates to a time after his meeting in 1818 with John Linnell, from whom Blake probably learned the burnishing techniques so much a part of the revised states (private communication).

20. Internal stippling can be detected in the faces of the characters of Blake's *Job* illustrations, and in the busts for Robert John Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil* (1821), but this is very different from using the technique for outlines.



sketches does not detract from this hypothesis, since, as I have noted, stippling was often used to imitate, or translate, other media for engravings. It is also conceivable that Flaxman's influence extended to the designs, as well as the engraving technique—the inventor(s) of which is not always specified on Blake's *Cyclopædia* engravings. James Bogan has already pointed out that Flaxman probably had some input in the Jupiter Olympus design of Plate I of the "Sculpture" article ("Blake's Jupiter Olympus" 162; see also "From Hackwork to Prophetic Vision" 36). Also, as I have noted, of the four "Sculpture" engravings, it is only on Plate III that Blake signed himself as both engraver and delineator: the sources of the other designs, then, are open to question. Thus, although he had produced the images on the copperplate, the commercial artist's authorship of those images was not allowed. With authorship went the rights of authorship: Blake would have had limited, if any, control over the style and subject matter of the *Cyclopædia* plates. The stippled lines were foreign to him, and may have been carried out at Flaxman's instigation; the subject matter was inevitably dictated by the articles that they accompanied.

What is evident is that, in his acceptance of the *Cyclopædia* commission, Blake had become part, not of an engraving project alone, but of an implicit and ongoing debate about authorship, graphic styles, and commissions. Interestingly, these concerns also figure in the inscriptions of the *Laocoön* separate plate. For example, the nature of authorship comes under scrutiny in the statement that the central image is of "T & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomon's Temple by three Rhodians . . ." (E 273); graphic choices constitute the subject of Blake's assertions that "Hebrew Art is called Sin by the Deist Science" (E 273) and "The Gods of Greece & Egypt were Mathematical Diagrams . . ." (E 274); and the idea of commissioned work is in direct opposition to Blake's statement that "Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on . . ." (E 275).

These echoes seem less coincidental when we consider one of the further debates that existed within the *Cyclopædia*, and the ways in which Blake engages with it in the separate plate: this debate had to do with the status and definition of sculpture. I have indicated that the significance of Flaxman's gaining control of the "Sculpture" essay was that it marked the ascendancy of his views over those of the more commercially-minded Bacon. The proprietors of the *Cyclopædia*, moreover, probably had a fair idea of what they would get when they requested Flaxman to produce this essay: as I have observed, Flaxman was already engaged in a series of *Lectures on Sculpture* for the Royal Academy, which—in their later, published form at least—match, often word for word, large portions of the *Cyclopædia* article.

In fact, it must be admitted that even Flaxman's lectures were not entirely without precedent. In particular, the fea-

tures that his article has in common with the "Sculpture antique" section of the article on "Sculpture" in the French *Encyclopédie* (vol. 30) suggest that it was consciously expanding on that essay, written by the Chevalier de Jaucourt.<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that, had Flaxman known much about Jaucourt, and his methods of working, he may have been less keen to use him as a model. The Chevalier churned out roughly a quarter of the *Encyclopédie's* articles, and evidently many of his co-contributors were rather disdainful of this "ruthless compiler": "it is pretty clear," writes Lough, "that Diderot and his circle looked upon the worthy Chevalier as a pedantic old bore" (*The Encyclopédie* [1971] 45, 56). More to the point, perhaps, regarding the articles on painting, sculpture and engraving Diderot himself made the comment "*à refaire*," that is, "redo" or "start again" (Diderot 132).

One major point on which the two articles coincide is their concern with the issue of sculpture's place in religion, in particular the role of sculpture in Christianity. Jaucourt wrote that, although the twelve tablets forbade images of false gods, sculpture did not in itself count as idolatry with the Hebrews. The *Cyclopædia* article takes up this idea, but marks this opposition between images of true and false gods in sculpture as a spiritual conflict. Within this conflict, the making of the golden calf becomes a "dreadful attempt to annihilate inspired art at its birth"; the judgment visited upon those responsible is portrayed as the "deliverance from Egypt" and "the deliverance of man, both as to his bodily and mental faculties, from slavery" ("Sculpture," vol. 32, n.p.). Again correspondences are drawn between mental and artistic slavery:

the necessity of such inspired sculptures and other inspired works of art is explained sufficiently in the deliverance of Israel from the idolatry of Egypt; where no one dared to practise any art or science, but that of his fathers; who, like him, were kept from every indication of individual character. And the Hebrew being born a slave, continued so while under the Egyptian yoke: let his inspiration be what it would, he was compelled to work in making bricks, and in iron-furnaces. Such was the deliverance of art and science from destruction and the earth from returning to its primeval chaos.

Through Flaxman's lectures or conversation, Blake must have been acquainted with at least the majority of Flaxman's ideas prior to their appearance in the "Sculpture" article. That, to a significant degree, Blake agreed with those ideas is also clear. He too abhorred unimaginative art and the

26. Although the entire "Sculpture" article in the *Encyclopédie* is said by Lough to have been written by the sculptor Etienne Falconet (*The Encyclopédie* [1971] 53), the sections on "Sculpture antique" and "Sculpture en bronze" are signed "D.J.," initials which were the frequently used abbreviation for the Chevalier's name (see Morris 38–39).



"dark Satanic Mills" of England ("And did those feet," E 95); he believed that art had been yoked by (priestly) idolatry; and he frequently linked spiritual to artistic slavery. In Blake's view, these forces turned the artist into the artisan (CA 117–23). There is, though, a particularly strong connection between the "Sculpture" article, and thus the *Cyclopædia*, and the *Laocoön* separate plate, since in the inscriptions of that plate Blake has created echoes of Flaxman's sentiments: "Spiritual War," we read, "Israel deliverd from Egypt is Art deliverd from Nature & Imitation" (E 274). As Morton D. Paley points out, in his essay on Blake and ancient sculpture, this adds "a further dimension [to Flaxman's original equation of art and freedom] by including mimesis as a form of bondage" ("Wonderful Originals" 183).<sup>27</sup> David James, then, is patently incorrect in his insinuation that, in the *Laocoön* engraving, Blake is simply criticizing "Flaxman's deeply flawed ideas about art" (230).

Moreover, as Paley also points out ("Wonderful Originals" 183), Flaxman's lectures and article on sculpture mention as "the most magnificent production of Hebrew art" the Temple of Solomon, which contains "the same cherubim that Moses had seen on the Mount," "done by divine command, for purposes whose importance reaches to the end of time" ("Sculpture"; cf. *Lectures* 30).<sup>28</sup> In Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809) there is a comparable reference to "wonderful originals called in the Sacred Scriptures the Cherubim, which were sculptured and painted on walls of Temples, Towers, Cities, Palaces": their neglect (symbolized by Solomon's quest for more exotic luxury for his Temple), and ultimate disappearance or destruction, mark the increase in distance between conception and execution in art, a key element of the slavery of man's imagination (CA 122–23). Whereas Flaxman considers it impossible to judge the nature of these lost works ("Sculpture," *Lectures* 53), Blake claims that it was from these that the Greeks and Etrurians copied "all the grand works of ancient art" (E 531): in their copies we have some sense of those originals. In turn, this correspondence helps us to understand Blake's description of the *Laocoön* sculpture as "¶" & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomon's Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact or History of Ilium" (E 273).

Thus, in spite of resonances—which it is difficult to believe were not deliberate—Blake's statements make significant moves away from the "Sculpture" article, in which the *Laocoön* statue is described according to the account in Pliny's *Natural History* (XXXVI. iv. 37–38):

The group of Laocoon, animated with the hopeless agony of the father and sons, is the work of Apollodorus,

27. Paley reiterates this point in "¶" & his two Sons" 218–19.

28. See also Paley, "¶" & his two Sons" 218.

Athenodorus, and Agesander of Rhodes. The style of this work, as well as the manner in which Pliny introduces it into his history, gives us reason to believe that it was not ancient in his time.

Yet James is blatantly wrong when he remarks that "In asserting a Hebraic original for the statue, Blake argues against Flaxman, who, on the evidence of Pliny, thought it not ancient" (James 234n6).<sup>29</sup> What actually distinguishes Blake's ideas about this fascinating sculpture from Flaxman's is his conception of it in spiritual terms, as a copy within a much grander scheme of eternal forms. As a copy, its own time of creation is immaterial, just as it is insignificant; but, for all its fallen condition, as a copy of a "wonderful original," it still signifies that original. In turn, Blake's engraving of the *Laocoön* sculpture can be seen as a "copy of a copy," or, within the context of the surrounding inscriptions, "an attempt to go back to the presumed archaic source of its subject"; whilst it is a copy—either of the copy (the Rhodian *Laocoön* statue) or the Original seen in Blake's vision—it is also an anti-copy, and "an original in its own right" (Paley, "Wonderful Originals" 190, 191).

The *Laocoön* engraving derives at least part of its power from "subvert[ing] our preconceptions of what the famous sculpture is" (IB 5:231)—preconceptions that depend on the viewer's immediate recognition of the work, and knowledge of its artistic status.<sup>30</sup> Whilst Blake draws on the *Laocoön* sculpture's connections—some of which were specifically rehearsed in the "Sculpture" article—he also evidently reinterprets the links. The central image may strike us initially as the *Laocoön*, but when we begin to read around it we find that it is not "Laocoön" at all: it is neither the statue nor the Trojan priest of Virgil's account (*Aeneid* II: 40–233). This rather undermines the title that the engraving commonly is given, which we can be fairly certain was not one conferred by Blake:<sup>31</sup> "Laocoön," even as a name, appears nowhere on the engraving; and to call *Laocoön* what Blake specifically has set about reconceiving as *not* "Laocoön" is to be a slave to the "misapplication" of the image to "Natural Fact"—the corruption of its eternal significance—that Blake was opposing. Blake, then, took the documentary-style article of the *Cyclopædia*, and played out the spiritual implications of some of its ideas in connec-

29. Paley also notes this point in "¶" & his two Sons" 219.

30. Amongst the works that had contributed to the statue's fame in Blake's day are numerous engravings, such as those in Jan De Bisschop's *Paradigmata Graphices Variorum Artificium* (1671), and the debate on the nature of the arts played out in Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Mahlerey und Bilderkunst* (1755), and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoon: Oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766). On Blake's transformation of recognizable statues, see Paley, "Wonderful Originals" 171–72.

31. The title may have been conferred on the separate plate by Linnell, who acquired copy A (BB 268).



tion with an artwork that it had characterized only materially. His construction of the statue opposes conventional interpretation, and with it the standard encyclopaedic definition or explanation of the work.

Blake's treatment of the *Laocoön* statue in his separate plate is especially pointed in the light of his reaction against the requirements of commercial engraving. It is not alone the central image, and the views on art expressed around it, that connect the *Laocoön* separate plate to the *Cyclopædia*. The aforementioned concern of the engraving with the evils of money also reflects back to its encyclopaedic forefather, and makes it essential to our understanding of Blake's attitude towards the Rees project. Such phrases as "Christianity is Art & not Money / Money is its Curse" (E 274), and "Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War only" (E 275), focus on the hindrance of art by monetary considerations. These statements do indeed suggest Blake's bitterness at having to undertake engravers' hackwork, and they are linked to Blake's emphasis elsewhere in the *Laocoön* engraving on the necessity of escaping the confines of uninspired art, and the financial obligations that force an artist to bow to the fashions of the day and to produce copywork.<sup>32</sup> Appearing in a work that critically engages with the views on sculpture expressed in Flaxman's article for the *Cyclopædia*, they also point towards that work as a particular target of Blake's attack.

As I have mentioned, reproduction was entailed in all of Blake's commercial engraving; this demand, however, was foremost in the case of an encyclopaedia, whose object is to represent a natural world ordered by reason.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, Blake's engraving displays a lack of conventional order—a fact that has been frequently commented on, but not deeply investigated. One aspect of the non-sequentiality of the written element in the *Laocoön* engraving is to deny what is a keystone of any encyclopaedic enterprise, so-called "logical" order itself. Of course, there are different types of order: the *Cyclopædia* adopted alphabetical order, or dictionary form (which is the most easily accessible, or reader-friendly, type of order), but all encyclopaedic works employ some manner of ordering. Blake, on the other hand, has ensured that there is not even a formal headword, or title, for his *Laocoön* engraving: nothing sits outside the plate's framing line to guide us. We might nominate as the title any of several candidates, including "¶ & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact or History of Ilium," "The Angel of the Divine Pres-

ence," and "אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ" [Angel Jehovah] (E 273). Tayler also nominates the first of these, but, instead of treating it as a definitive title, she suggests that "Art Degraded Imagination Denied War Governed the Nations" and "If Morality was Christianity Socrates was the Saviour" act with it as three "more or less complementary titles" (73). Paley, following Keynes (22), believes that "¶ & his two Sons . . ." is the "true title" ("Wonderful Originals" 191; see also "¶ & his two Sons" 217), and certainly it *could* be; on the other hand, it could just as easily be a subtitle, or not a title of any sort. In fact, none of these phrases, either individually or in "complementary" groups has an indisputable right to a titular role: each time we elevate one, or even three, above the others, the existence of the alternative possibilities—equally prominent on the engraving—undermines our choice. Indeed, if we accept as a rough definition that a title is a means of entry into a work (be it graphic, written, or performed), and is applied to designate, indicate content, or seduce the reader, or a mixture of these (see Genette 73), then it could be argued that the "title" of the *Laocoön* engraving is the image of the sculpture, and not a word, or group of words, at all. On the other hand, if we follow the argument that a title mediates between the viewer and the creation, neither the image nor any of the inscriptions can be titles, as they all form *part* of the creation.

There are many reasons why Blake may have wished to re-frame his relationship to an encyclopaedic enterprise, a few of which are ascertainable by considering the character of Rees's *Cyclopædia* within the context of other contemporaneous encyclopaedic works. The most famous was Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751–72), which, for all the variations in the views of its contributors, was founded on those strong beliefs in the autonomy of reason, and in causality, that we associate with the Enlightenment. Its plates reflect this concern: as Diderot announced in the *Prospectus* of 1750, a primary concern of the illustrations was to demonstrate "*les arts mécaniques*" (see Lough, *The Encyclopédie* [1971] 87); and, as the *Encyclopédie*'s "Sculpture" plates (Planches VIII) demonstrate, presenting examples of works of art was of less concern than presenting the tools and processes by which works of art were created. Overall, the project embodied a confidence in perfectibility and progress within a system of natural principles governing the world; as an encyclopaedia, it also inevitably valued the particular over the general, and observable facts over principles.

Even Archibald Maclaine's generally favorable article in the *Monthly Review* of 1787, however, noted that the *Encyclopédie*'s project to advance the compass of human knowledge entailed opposition to "those who looked higher than *nature*, for the principle object of their veneration and confidence" (243). As John Lough remarks, this criticism became more prominent after 1789, with the *Encyclopédie* being regarded as one of the heralds of, and even contribu-

32. E.g., "Israel deliverd from Egypt is Art deliverd from Nature & Imitation" (E 274); "Money (the lifes blood of Poor Families)" (E 275).

33. That Blake abhorred abstract order is particularly obvious in his poem, *The French Revolution*, in which Order is one of the "terrible towers" of the Bastille; see 1:19 (E 286), and 3:38–43 (E 287–88).



tors to, the French Revolution (*The Encyclopédie* [1970] 12). It is unsurprising, then, that, as many well-to-do, and loyal, British subjects sought to distance themselves from the revolutionaries, some of them began to find the contents of their libraries a source of discomfiture. An entry under the heading of "Domestic Occurrences" in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of August 1798 reads, "The Earl of Exeter has expunged from his large, and well-selected library, and burnt, the works of *Voltaire*, *Rousseau*, *Bolingbroke*, *Raynal*, and that grand arsenal of impiety, the French *Encyclopédie*" (718; author's own emphases).

It is possible that Blake managed to find common ground with the Encyclopedists on account of their links with the Revolution. He had done so with the Deist Thomas Paine in his 1798 annotations to Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible*. Yet, as Paley has demonstrated, the Blake of 1798 became the Blake of *The Four Zoas* and *Milton*, hostile to the Deists (Paley, "'To Defend the Bible . . .'" 37–38). The Blake of 1815 was much more outspoken, both in his aversion to Reason and resistance to natural philosophy, and in his belief in vision. In fact, apart from the esteem in which he held "Minute Particulars" (see, for example, *Jerusalem* 55:61–64, E 205), Blake's views during this period are almost entirely at odds with those of the *philosophes*.<sup>34</sup> Even the *Encyclopédie's* attitude towards established authorities would have been problematic for him: although he no doubt approved of the French *philosophes'* questioning of the State, their challenging of the Church cannot have appealed, given that it was founded not on a wish for reform, but on the total rejection of God.

Even had Blake managed to sympathize with the Encyclopedists, however, this would hardly have made a British encyclopaedic effort appeal the more to him. Hostility towards the *Encyclopédie's* values did not preclude envy of its position as the most scholarly work of its kind; and envy was one cause of the boom in encyclopaedic activity in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Britain (Wells 13). More particularly, the *Encyclopédie's* relation to the Revolution was frequently stated as a major impetus behind the production of these British encyclopaedias, whose editors and proprietors couched the competition with their French rival in political terms. The subversive history of the *Encyclopédie* is alluded to in the Dedication that appears in the third and fourth editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1797–98, and 1810). Addressing King George III, Andrew Bell and Colin MacFarquhar write of the Proprietor's "loyalty and duty," and of the British as "a free, a happy, and a loyal people"; they also express their "earnest prayer" that

"the Sceptre of the British Empire may be swayed by your Majesty's descendants to the latest posterity" (both 1:v and vi). In the 1801 supplement to the third edition of the *Britannica*, however, the editor of that work, George Gleig, goes much further:

The French *Encyclopédie* has been accused, and justly accused, of having disseminated far and wide, the seeds of Anarchy and Atheism. If the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* shall, in any degree, counteract the tendency of that pestiferous work, even these two Volumes will not be wholly unworthy of your Majesty's Patronage. (Dedication, vol. 1)

The object appears to be to stress the contrast between these works and the anti-authoritarian *Encyclopédie*, which had contributed to the removal of the French monarchy.

Rees's *Cyclopaedia* is somewhat more moderate than the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its opposition to the French *Encyclopédie*. Certainly the emphasis of its illustrations is not always consistent with the French work: Blake's own depictions of sculptures, rather than the instruments of their production, are a case in point—although it should be emphasized that many of the *Cyclopaedia's* plates did follow their continental counterparts in depicting tools and processes. What betrays the *Cyclopaedia's* anti-*Encyclopédie* bias most, however, is that, whilst it was intended to rival both the French work and the *Britannica*, Rees's Preface seems more concerned with distinguishing his compilation from the former. The plan of the *Cyclopaedia* is set against only the design of the *Encyclopédie*, with specific indications as to where the two differ, and the reasons why this English production alone followed the plan "most suitable to the nature and design of a Scientific Dictionary" (1:vi).

Contrary to Rees's claim, however, the *Cyclopaedia* and the French work were founded on very similar structural principles, both adhering to an alphabetical, rather than scientific, order, which was at that time by no means a prerequisite of an encyclopaedia. Moreover, this choice was in both cases influenced by Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*. The *Encyclopédie* originated in a proposal to publish a French translation of Chambers's two-volume work; although in passing into the hands of Diderot and D'Alembert it became a very different and much more radical work, Chambers remained the model. Rees's first edition of Chambers's work appeared in 1778; this was followed, between 1781 and 1786, by a four-volume version, which incorporated a supplement and much new matter (reprinted between 1788 and 1791). It was in recognition of these efforts that Rees was, in 1786, elected as a Fellow to both the Royal Society and the Linnean Society. The favor shown him on this account was in large part what led him to begin work on his own encyclopaedia, which, including the six volumes of plates, emerged in forty-five volumes. Though obviously more comprehensive, this too was modeled on the *Cyclopaedia* of Chambers.

34. Michael Ackland has argued convincingly that Blake from the outset considered the *philosophes* as "erring temporal prophets and mockers of divine vision," and would have been aware that Voltaire's writings demonstrated "what amounts to a systematic attack on his most hallowed tenets" (7–18).



The inescapable problem for Blake was that, no matter what political or religious stances they adopted, and no matter how the information was accumulated,<sup>35</sup> encyclopaedias were an attempt to contain the world in a circle of knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, whilst the boom in encyclopaedias suggests that such works were universally in demand, already we have noted Hoare's resistance, and the form had many other detractors. Writing in 1759, on "The present state of polite learning in France," Oliver Goldsmith referred to the "Trevoux, Encyclopédies and Bibliothèques of the age"<sup>37</sup> as "monsters of learning" (*Collected Works* 1:305). Even Goldsmith's choice of phrase—his use of the French names—indicates his wish to distance himself from these productions.

The real genealogy of these "monsters of learning," however, led back, not to France, but to Britain. Whilst not the first encyclopaedia,<sup>38</sup> John Harris's *Lexicon technicum, or an Universal English Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1704) was the first encyclopaedic work to follow the dictionary form. As R. Loyalty Cru points out, prior to being "virtually superseded" by Chambers's *Cyclopædia*, the *Lexicon* enjoyed great popularity (231), and must, therefore, be credited with heralding the rash of encyclopaedic works that followed its dictionary form. Yet the facility of reference that these new encyclopaedias offered—the facility of reference that made them so popular—also could be perceived as offering only a superficial coverage of the circle of knowledge. Ironically, given the *Lexicon*'s original prominence, many considered Chambers's *Cyclopædia* to be the main culprit in what they alleged was the resultant decline in learning. In his *Pursuits of Literature* (1797), for example, the royal librarian Thomas James Mathias wrote of the achievements of his character Dr. Morosophus:

At last the Doctor gave his friends a work!  
(Not verse, like Cowper, or high prose, like Burke,)

35. Chambers favored learning and scholarship. Rees and the French Encyclopedists emphasized experience, visiting artists and craftsmen in their workplaces (cf. *Encyclopédie* 1:xl; Rees 1:iii and vii).

36. According to the *OED*, "encyclopaedia" is derived from a pseudo-Greek word, ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία, which is "an erroneous form (said to be a false reading) occurring in MSS. of Quintilian, Pliny, and Galen, for ἐγκυκλιος παιδεία 'encyclical education', the circle of arts and sciences considered by the Greeks as essential to a liberal education."

37. Trevoux, i.e., *Dictionnaire Universel François & Latin, contenant la signification et la définition Tant des Mots de l'une & l'autre Langue, avec leurs differens usages* (first pub. Trevoux, 1704). Although this work was commonly known as the *Dictionnaire de Trevoux*, after its original place of publication, all editions issued between 1732 and its final publication in 1771 were published in either Nancy or Paris.

38. Many works, from Pliny's *Natural History* onwards, have been encyclopaedic in coverage; the first usages of the word "encyclopaedia" in the titles of books, however, occurred in the sixteenth century (Shackleton 378–79).

Chambers abridg'd! in sooth 'twas all he read  
From fruitful A to unproductive Zed.  
(lines 339–42; author's own emphases)

Paradoxically, then, encyclopaedias were seen by some as a genuine threat to knowledge, drawing the reader away from the true works of science and literature. Blake—ever ready to denounce what he considered to be the false learning of the day<sup>39</sup>—could not have been unaware of the charge, and doubtless had some sympathy with those who levied it.

If Blake did have objections to the *Cyclopædia*'s aims, the inclinations of Rees himself must only have added to them. Away from his involvement in the business of encyclopaedia production, and in the Royal and Linnean Societies (which also turned on ordering the world), this well-known Evangelical Dissenter was also inclined towards the doctrines of Arius—that is, he denied that Jesus Christ was consubstantial with God. Although Blake's writings provide no confirmation of an antipathy towards Arianism, nor of any direct contact with Rees himself, the link with Arius, combined with Rees's evangelism, surely jarred with Blake's outlook. Throughout his writings, Blake equates God and Jesus, and in the *Laocoön* engraving itself we find the words "God himself / The Divine Body" (E 273). Jesus we are his Members," together with the clear statement that "GOD is Jesus" (E 273).

Realistically, any philosophical objections to the Rees project that Blake might have had would hardly have been sufficient for him to have resisted the significant payment he was to receive for his contributions to the *Cyclopædia*:<sup>40</sup> beggars, as they say, cannot be choosers, and Blake, though not destitute, equally was not in a financial position which would allow him to reject commissions. Even more reason, therefore, that he should have expressed his resentment of the necessity of accepting such work in the *Laocoön* separate plate, and should have communicated it as part of a creative statement of his personal artistic creed.<sup>41</sup>

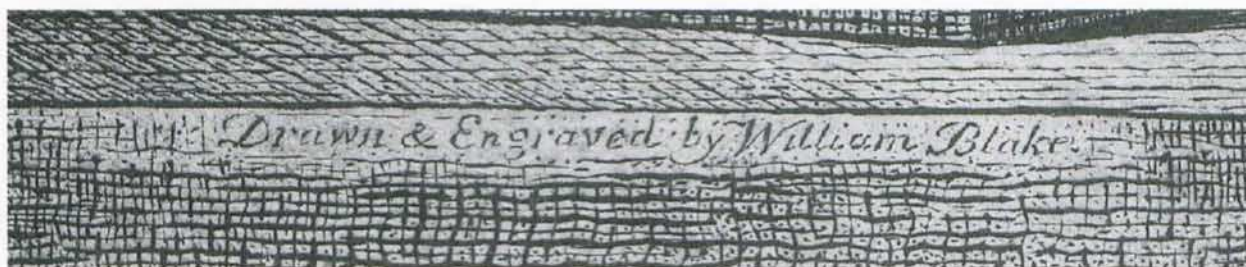
Yet the production, and even the format, of the *Laocoön* separate plate, in particular its conjunction of image and text—which in its ultimate effects is significant—may have been fortuitous. I do not contend that Blake saw no significance in the interaction between the text and image of

39. E.g., *Jerusalem* 15:14–20 (E 159); *The Everlasting Gospel* [k] 38–46 (E 519), [h] (E 525); *Annotations to Thornton* [ii] (E 667).

40. For just one of the "Sculpture" engravings Blake received £10. 10s. 0d.; if this was in line with what he received for the other plates, his total earnings from this commission could have been around £73. 10s. 0d. (Bentley, *Blake Records Supplement* 72).

41. J. C. Strange recorded in his journal that Samuel Palmer "shewed me a fine engr. of Blakes of the Laocoon with writing surrounding being Blakes sentiments on many subjects which P asking him about he had given him one of the prints saying at the same time 'you will find my creed there'" (quoted in Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise* 498).





4. William Blake, *Laocoön* separate plate, detail.

the *Laocoön* engraving: I think he saw it quite clearly. I am persuaded, however, that he engraved the image before the c. 1826 execution of the accompanying texts. No such highly wrought figure could have been engraved freehand onto the plate (Viscomi 9n11), and this idea is confirmed by the "boldly etched and engraved crosshatchings" (SP 100), which indicate that Blake employed a "mixed-method" process, etching at least a good proportion of the lines, and then finishing them with his graver. The writing that Blake has added to the sculpture's base, "Drawn & Engraved by William Blake" (see detail, illus. 4), also supports this idea. The statement, within the sculpture, refers only to the sculpture: it suggests that the central image was once the whole work, an end in itself. Moreover, these words tell us that Blake produced an original drawing of the sculpture, which was then transferred onto the copper plate for engraving. By contrast, the uneven spacing, and the mistakes, of the surrounding text suggest that it probably was scratched and/or engraved straight onto the plate. Some portions of writing, for example, are well-sized, commanding the surrounding space, whereas other portions are made up of smaller letters and are crammed into tiny areas. There is also the problem of the Aleph (א) in "הוא וזוה"א," which has been engraved back to front. Again this suspicion is supported by the fact that the inscriptions (including the signature line) appear to have been cut with a graver, and not etched.<sup>42</sup>

The most obvious reason for Blake initially to have produced the central image alone is that it was intended as a commercial engraving, and, in fact, many of the characteristics of the *Laocoön* plate support this possibility. At the engraving's heart is the carefully copied statue, the copy-work as ever implying a commercial context; then there is the matter of the image having been rendered with the hatching, and even a little of the dot and lozenge work, so typical of commercial reproductions. In turn, the most obvious reason for Blake to have transformed the plate into

the work we know today is that it went unused in that commercial capacity. Although to date this has not been the accepted view of the *Laocoön* separate plate's genesis, it is much more probable than the widely held idea that Blake produced the whole work within the last year or two of his life. Whereas the inscriptions could have been—and indeed seem to have been—quite quickly produced, it would have taken a great deal of time for Blake to have etched and engraved the central image. Around 1826–27 Blake simply did not have that time, immersed as he was in producing his *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1823–25; published 1826), and the designs and engravings for Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1824–27). Moreover, he was already sick.<sup>43</sup>

A later addition of text to the central image would account for the disparity between the separate plate's careful central image and array of rather haphazard inscriptions, and explain why it is difficult to determine what kind of audience Blake had in mind for the work. Unlike those who, consciously or otherwise, have remained silent on the matter (e.g., Tayler, Herrstrom), James's reference to "the plate's resistance to commodity status and the consequent precariousness of its existence" (226) at least offers a solution to this problem; once again, however, James's certainty that this effect was Blake's intention from the outset is a failing. As the impulse behind the engraving changed from commercial to imaginative, no doubt at times even Blake himself wondered *what* audience he would find for it. On the other hand, that, at some stage, he did concern himself with the idea of there being *an* audience is pointed to in the aforementioned phrase, "Drawn & Engraved by William Blake": such statements act as a declaration of copyright, and are generally found not on private studies and experiments, but on works intended for circulation.

When attempting to posit a history for the *Laocoön* engraving, however, we encounter some difficulties. Much depends on how we envisage the original state of the engraving: I have argued that it did not include the encompassing text, but there are other possible subtractions, such as the burnishing on the central image. This would include

42. As with the engraved inscriptions in Blake's *Job* illustrations, slight magnification of the inscriptions of the *Laocoön* engraving reveals the "stroking" of the graver, and the places where the tool was lifted from the plate to take up a new angle of attack.

43. First suggested in Paice, "William Blake's so-called *Laocoön*" 117–25; see also Paley, "7" & his two Sons" 213, 214.



the inscription "Drawn & Engraved by William Blake," which appears over one of the burnished areas. What makes it possible that the burnishing was another alteration to an earlier state of the *Laocoön* is that this signature line does not appear to have been part of the original design. There is a long standing tradition of engravers adding their signature to the bases of the statues that they have depicted. This tradition is not least apparent in *Laocoön* plates, such as those by Marco Dente (reproduced in Bieber figs. 2 and 3), which Blake seems to have known, and which he no doubt studied as part of his Royal Academy training (SP 99; Paley, "Wonderful Originals" 174): in such cases the signature appears as if chiseled into stone (literally "sculpsit"). By placing his own signature within the plinth of the statue, Blake certainly gestures towards this tradition (although, in the context of his inscribed protestations against slavish imitation, he may well have been invoking it in order to challenge it).<sup>44</sup> Yet the appearance of his signature differs in one key aspect: the area beneath it has been burnished away, erased, in order to make room for it, and thus it seems to be floating over the plinth, instead of chiseled into it. Had Blake intended this inscription when he began work on the *Laocoön* engraving, he surely would have rendered the stone more lightly, and incorporated the writing within it.

The later addition of the signature is supported by the fact that, although overall the style of the *Laocoön*'s central image appears late (Paley, "Wonderful Originals" 191), if we imagine the image unburnished, and without this line, we find that the hatching itself—in its patterns and darkness—is more characteristic of Blake's earlier work: it is comparable, say, to the darkened third state of his "Canterbury Pilgrims" (c. 1810–20; SP no. 16 3, fig. 36). By contrast, if we compare the *Laocoön* with the *Job* illustrations (1825–26; commissioned 1823), which Essick and Viscomi have suggested as parallels (IB 5:242), we find that they are not at all alike in terms of the basic use of hatching and crosshatching, *Job* containing little of the bold and rather rigid crosshatching so dominant in the *Laocoön* engraving. Rather, the similarity between the *Laocoön* engraving and *Job* illustrations is a result of the burnishing,<sup>45</sup> and the for-

mat of the inscriptions.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, there are other examples of images revised in this way by Blake, including the *Job* separate plate (SP no. 5, figs. 7 and 8), and, most obviously, *Joseph of Arimathea Among the Rocks of Albion* (SP no. 1, fig. 2), in which, as with the *Laocoön*, Blake recontextualizes an image copied after the work of another artist. Although, in the *Joseph* plate, Blake incorporated his own imaginative background for the figure from the outset, it was later that he took the trouble to alter details, burnish areas, and annotate the work. In addition, we might compare Blake's *Mirth* engraving, which, as I have mentioned, also probably was conceived as a commercial production, but transformed into a more individualistic, "private" plate: like the *Laocoön* separate plate, its second state features inscriptions placed over burnished areas.

The likelihood of the *Laocoön* engraving's once having existed unburnished and unsigned returns us to the additional likelihood that it was originally intended as a book illustration. Not only is it much more usual with works of this nature to find the signature placed below the image, rather than incorporated into it, but also in most cases this line would have been inscribed by the house lettering engraver, and not by those responsible for the individual plates. By adding the line within the sculpture, Blake emphasizes his authorship, an authorship that would have been subordinated to the whole in an illustrated book; and, indeed, if the transformation from the hypothetical first state of the *Laocoön* engraving to what we see today was comparable to that of the first to the second state of *Joseph of Arimathea*, Blake's wish to note his authorship at this stage is wholly understandable.<sup>47</sup>

In the light of this theory that there were at least two states of the *Laocoön* engraving, the first of which was designed as a commercial plate, it is inevitable that we should consider in what context it might have appeared. Even as a commercial endeavor, the *Laocoön* may have been a separate plate, but it seems more likely that it was part of a book project. Perhaps the most tantalizing possibility is that it was commissioned for Rees's *Cyclopædia*. The *Cyclopædia* is just the sort of work for which a plate engraver would not have engraved his own signature;<sup>48</sup> clearly too, the sub-

44. The abundant copying of the *Laocoön* statue had been the subject of derision perhaps as far back as Titian's day: see Niccolò Boldrini's c. 1540–45 woodcut, after Titian, of *Three Monkeys Imitating the Laocoön* (Bieber fig. 9). As early as 1667 M. van Opstal had asserted that the image was intended to satirize the excessive admiration for, and imitation of, classical art prevalent in Florence and Rome; the now well-known theory that the print was a specific criticism of Baccio Bandinelli's sixteenth-century marble copy, however, is first found in print in a footnote by none other than Henry Fuseli (*Aphorisms*, no. 199 [note], in Knowles 3:137; see Janson, 356 nn7–8).

45. Whilst allowing the obvious lateness of the burnishing in the *Laocoön* engraving, I disagree with the statement that "though more

conservative in appearance [than the second states of *Job*, *Ezekiel*, and *Mirth*], [its burnishing] was done as an integral part of the engraving process, as in the *Book of Job* plates" (IB 5:242). As I have shown, the burnished area beneath the signature line in itself proves that there was a return to the *Laocoön* after the original engraving work was completed.

46. Although the letter forms are sometimes inconsistent, the fact that the inscriptions in both works are cut with a graver, rather than etched, gives them a similar visual character.

47. In another parallel with the *Laocoön* separate plate, we find a signature line on the second state of *Joseph of Arimathea*, which was not present in its first state.

48. Blake may of course have scratched his signature, as is seen in



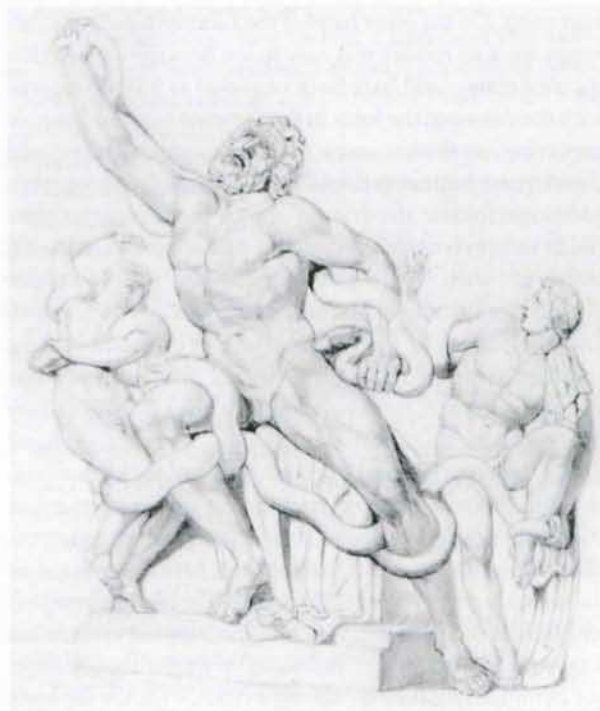
ject and layout are suitable for the *Cyclopædia*'s pages, there being found within it many full-page engravings, including Cromek's image of the Cupid and Psyche statue (Plate I of the first sequence of engravings for the "Sculpture" article). The hatching of Blake's image also is consistent with the technique used by Cromek, although Cromek's image is less accomplished. Furthermore, the fact that Blake's *Laocoön* separate plate, in its final state, hearkens back to issues covered by Flaxman in the "Sculpture" article again suggests a more than coincidental relationship between the two.

At this stage, it is important to distinguish between the overall size of the *Laocoön* plate, which is 26.2 x 21.6 cm. to the framing lines (or 27.6 x 22.9 cm. to the platemark), and the image of the statue, which measured at its widest points is just 21 x 16.8 cm. Clearly, if we consider only the size of the engraving as we know it through the extant impressions, we have to conclude that it is too large for the *Cyclopædia*: the largest single-page engravings in the volumes go up to just c. 24.5 x 18 cm., and even the leaves of the volumes measure, in the largest copies that I have been able to locate, only 29 x 21 cm. By considering the central image of the *Laocoön* engraving only (21 x 16.8 cm.), however, we find that it does fall within this range, even if we allow extra room for a title and imprint line. Moreover, it would still be smaller than the engraving of the "Isis Magna Mater" bust ("Drawing," Plate IV [Plates, vol. 2]), which measures 21.5 x 18 cm. Nor would it have been unusual for the copper plate itself to have been larger than the leaf onto which it was intended to be printed.

In addition to the technical possibility of the *Laocoön*'s having been meant for the pages of the *Cyclopædia*, there is a further suggestion of this provenance in the relationship between the separate plate's central image and the depictions of the sculpture in Blake's extant pencil drawing (c. 1815; Butlin no. 679; see illus. 5) and stipple engraving ("Sculpture," Plate III). It tends to be assumed (e.g., *IB* 5:229 and 230, Tayler 72, Paley, "Wonderful Originals" 191) that the pencil drawing was followed by the stipple engraving, and that the *Laocoön* was produced later. In many important respects, however, the *Laocoön*'s image is closer to the pencil drawing than is the *Cyclopædia* image. For example, the snake coil around the elder son's left ankle is lower down in the drawing and separate plate than it is in the stipple engraving; where it is held by Laocoön's left hand, the serpent is much more curved in the stipple engraving than it is in either of the other two versions; and the right hand of Laocoön is twisted further round, so as to show less of the fingers, in the stippled plate.<sup>49</sup> Differences between the

the first state of Blake's engraving of the "Rev. John Caspar Lavater" (1787; *SP* fig. 65). It would, however, have been left to the house writing engraver to cut the line.

49. One detail that varies with each version is Laocoön's penis. In



5. William Blake, detail of drawing of the *Laocoön* statue. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund.

heads of Laocoön and his sons in the separate plate and the drawing and stipple engraving (e.g., teeth, hair) are difficult to ignore; however, given that in the separate plate the engraving in these areas seems more linear and flowing than elsewhere on the plate, it is possible that these elements were reworked at a later point.

In fact, many of the differences between the drawing and stippled versions can be accounted for if we add the image from the *Laocoön* separate plate into the equation between them, rather than after them;<sup>50</sup> the plausibility of this reordering can be seen by further analysis of the details. The folds at the bottom of Laocoön's cloak in the pencil drawing are a recognizable source for those in the separate plate, whereas their shape is very different from those in the stipple

the drawing it is all but invisible; in the separate plate it is pointed and pronounced; in the stippled plate it is rather bulbous. This area is not very clear in the Royal Academy cast, which would account for Blake's presentation of it in the sketch. The *Laocoön* separate plate seems to be following the tenet that "Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed" (E 275), in its re-envisioning of what had been concealed, or made indistinct: it is possible too that this was one of the plate's characteristics that led to its rejection. The bulbous nature of Laocoön's penis area in the *Cyclopædia* plate tells us that something is there, without being too specific for the tastes of the day.

50. If the untraced drawing of the *Laocoön* (Butlin no. 680) was produced as a transfer for the *Laocoön* separate plate, it would have fallen second in this order of production.



engraving. On the other hand, if the *Laocoön* separate plate's image were its model, it is easy to see how the cloak in the stippled plate could have been engraved as it is. Compared with the drawing, the folds in the separate plate and stipple engraving are thicker, more solid, or even serpentine, and the extreme bottom left fold is more rounded; moreover, additional folds in the drapery appear in the separate plate (folds not present in the drawing or the sculpture itself), which are then roughly repeated in the stippled plate. Equally, the shading on the base of the *Laocoön*'s image follows the pattern of the drawing, whereas the latter's light and dark areas are frequently reversed in the stippled image; again, though, the separate plate's image features heavy shading on the thigh of the younger son, and the right hand side of *Laocoön*'s chest, which is not found in the drawing, but could have been the model for the same treatment in the stipple engraving. It can also be seen that, despite possible reworkings to the figures' heads, *Laocoön*'s beard in the separate plate still shows some of the two-pronged effect seen in the drawing, which in the stippled version has disappeared. Each point individually might signify little, but cumulatively they are strong evidence for the separate plate having been intermediate between the extant drawing and the stipple engraving.

In inspecting the details, however, what is most interesting to note is that there are certain signs of carelessness in the stipple engraving. For instance, where the muscles of *Laocoön*'s neck form a curved section in the pencil drawing, and this shape is suggested by shading in the separate plate, in the stippled plate we see instead an unnatural triangle of heavy shading; the way in which the serpent is wrapped around *Laocoön*'s left leg in the stipple engraving also departs from both of the other versions. More compelling evidence of Blake's inattention is found in the strange bulge to the left of *Laocoön*'s penis on the stipple engraving, which is not present on either the separate plate or the drawing—or, for that matter, on the statue itself. This bulge cannot be read as part of *Laocoön*'s cloak, because not only is it too round and smooth, but also the cloak does not extend to that point in the sculpture; nor is it part of the genital area. It is simply a mistake. Another mistake in the *Cyclopædia* plate can be seen by *Laocoön*'s left foot, in the two unerased stippled lines extending out from the base of the statue; the point where Blake has actually ended the base in this stippled image would be far too narrow for any statue, and indicates that he spent little time plotting his dimensions. Moreover, the stippled image's selective use of the shading patterns in the pencil drawing and *Laocoön* engraving result in an inconsistent, not to mention highly improbable, depiction. As the inferior quality of the second version of the "GEM Engraving" plate leads us naturally to infer that the superior, and rarer, copper plate was the original, and was probably "damaged in the course of printing or lost and the other one prepared as a

substitute" (CB 110),<sup>51</sup> so the facts before us here point to a similar conclusion. The production of "Sculpture" Plate III, then, could very well have been hurried—either after a previous plate was damaged or lost, or perhaps after the rejection of the first state of what later became the *Laocoön* separate plate engraving. Certainly the plate's defects add weight to Bogan's judgment that the "Sculpture" engravings were "mere copywork" ("Blake's Jupiter Olympus" 157), "feeble," "lackluster," and "puny" ("From Hackwork to Prophetic Vision" 36, 37, and 39).

These details all point towards the idea that the *Laocoön* separate plate was begun as a commercial plate, and that it may have been more than just a by-product of the Rees commission. If it was originally intended as one of the *Cyclopædia*'s plates, it is quite conceivable that the instructions for the plates changed, just as the contributors and engravers themselves changed. As I hope to have shown, Rees's work was less ordered in its compilation than its encyclopaedic nature suggests: just as there were complications concerning the authorship of articles, and thus what position those articles would take, it is possible that the specifications for the "Sculpture" engravings altered over time. This may have involved the rejection of a first state of the *Laocoön* separate plate in favor of stippled images.

Whatever the case, it seems likely that the *Laocoön* engraving was begun much earlier than has previously been allowed (probably before 1815), and that the difference, in graphic technique and style, of the work's image and text is the result of its having been adapted from its original purpose towards the end of Blake's life. I would emphasize that I am not suggesting that the *Laocoön* separate plate as we know it was printed before 1826: that would be to deny all the evidence (see IB 5:241). A printing date, though, is not a date of composition, and, as we are constantly reminded by others of Blake's other engravings, a "date" of composition may be "dates." If an earlier state of the *Laocoön* separate plate was produced for a commercial project, it too must once have existed in print, if only so that Blake could see how his work progressed; and, if the plate was rejected by the publishers, it also would have been seen by them in its printed form.

The existence once of an earlier version of the *Laocoön* separate plate cannot be proved: there is of course no known impression of a previous state. Yet the fact that no such impression survives today does not mean that there never was one. A precedent for this argument can be found in

51. In fact, this second version is not only less skillfully executed in general, but also, like Plate III of the "Sculpture" engravings, contains a mistake: whilst in its counterpart the pointed leaves on the far left side of Jupiter's crown number four in both depictions of the head, in the inferior plate there are four leaves in the same area on the bust on the left, but only three in the bust on the right.



Essick's account of the *Ezekiel* separate plate: his claim for a "hypothetical first published state" is based upon similarly indicative features of the known state, and comparisons with *Ezekiel*'s companion piece, the *Job* separate plate, of which two states are extant (SP 21–23). As with the two states of the *Job* plate, the posited earlier state of the *Laocoön* engraving must have been artistically far removed from what it became. All those features that have led to the engraving being placed so firmly in Blake's final few years would have been absent. Unburnished, unlettered, and with its heavy crosshatching patterns, the plate probably would have seemed rather old-fashioned to the eyes of Flaxman and the publishers of Rees's *Cyclopædia*—perhaps even too bold and primitive for the tastes of the day.

Whilst these ideas about the genesis of the *Laocoön* separate plate must remain hypotheses, and although there are many facets of both it and the *Cyclopædia* plates which are not dealt with here, it is evident that Blake's encounter with the Rees project is more significant than has previously been allowed. The commission probably offended Blake's artistic sensibilities, and may further have damaged the already cooled friendship between Blake and Flaxman: it is at least improbable that their relationship could have been aided much by the fact that the aims of the *Cyclopædia*, and encyclopaedias in general, were in many important respects out of keeping with Blake's philosophies. Moreover, we can be sure that Blake had to redo at least one of the *Cyclopædia* plates ("GEM Engraving"). It seems fair to surmise, then, that Blake was not enamored of the *Cyclopædia* project by the time he finished his work for it.

The multifaceted relationship between the *Laocoön* separate plate and the world of commissions, including that for the *Cyclopædia*, demonstrates the need further to attend to Blake's commercial engravings. It also highlights the wonderful irony that the commission for that work of order and reason—a commission apparently so inconsequential in itself—should have suggested ideas, and provided the basis (perhaps even the raw material), for one of Blake's most perplexing works of art. In the *Laocoön* sculpture the figures struggle with their material serpents; in the *Laocoön* engraving the struggle seems to be with those "Reasonings like vast Serpents"—reasonings as present in the *Cyclopædia* of Rees, as they are in any of Newton's works—which Blake felt "Infold[ed] around" his limbs, bruising his "minute articulations" (*Jerusalem* 15:12–13, E 159).

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