

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

# BLAKE

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## Blake's Laocoön

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 10, Issue 3, Winter 1976-77, pp. 72-81



# Notes

## Blake's Laocoön

Irene Tayler, discussion leader,  
MLA Blake Seminar, New York, December 1976

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The Blake seminar will meet at this winter's MLA to discuss Blake's important plate *The Laocoön*. This work has received little critical attention by Blake scholars, though it is clearly a kind of summary index to Blake's later thought. I am here offering a few of my own ideas about the work in the hope of stirring up a scuffle or two in the wars of truth. Two or three short papers delivered at the seminar itself will raise other issues relevant to the Laocoön, after which the meeting will be open to general discussion. Those wishing to attend should write to me (Department of Humanities 14N423, MIT, Cambridge, MA 02139), kindly including a self-addressed return postcard. Members will be admitted on a first-come first-served basis. For details of room and time, see the MLA Program.

Blake's Laocoön plate addresses directly, by its own appearance, the problem of vision and the language of vision: how we see and how we think about what we see. The central image is of course an engraving of the classical statue which, recovered in 1506 among the ruins of the house of Titus in Rome, has been influential in art circles ever since. Apparently Blake first engraved it about 1815 as an illustration for the article on sculpture that Flaxman had written for Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (illus. 1); probably around the same time he also did a pencil drawing of his own version of the Laocoön theme (illus. 2). The engraving used for Blake's major plate with its surrounding aphorisms (illus. 3) is striking in its depiction of the depth, the mass, the solidity of the figures, as if one might turn the page around and see their sides and backs. But this three-dimensionality, established so firmly in

the rendering of the statue itself, is then utterly subverted and denied by the rest of the plate--a crowded clutter of two-dimensional symbols that stand, by the most arbitrary of human conventions, for words and ideas. Editors have always had problems with the phrases and aphorisms because there is no progressive order in which to arrange them, no directive as to sequence, or even grouping. Moreover, not only does the printing run up and down the sides as well as across the top and bottom of the page, but some of it actually outlines the gesturing figures, a powerful if almost parodic reminder of Blake's central contention that the creative intellect draws the outline it perceives, that to omit the outline--that which distinguishes one object from another, one idea from another--is to "leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist" (DC, E540).<sup>1</sup> Some minds, of course, are so bungling and derivative that they perceive no outline at all--only blots and blurs; about them Blake has a great deal to say, all bad. But we who see his Laocoön, seemingly so stable in its representation of a physical object in the central image, are invited to perceive in the encircling words the visionary significance of that image, the outlines of intellect that define its meaning, that make it what it is.

"Mental Things are alone Real" (VLJ, E555), Blake tells us, but of course for a visionary, mental reality does not inhere in words any more than in statues or pictures of statues. I have spoken of an element of parody in those verbal outlines: as naive observers we are the butts of a double joke. On the one hand strings of outlining words would seem to





affirm the visual coherence of an object whose true reality is intellectual, but on the other hand there is no intellectual coherence to the piled up words themselves--or rather that coherence is not analytic or rational, but *visionary*. We are not to understand them in cognitive sequence, but rather to *see* their meaning, in all its minute particularity of idea, whole and at once, fully organized: "Knowledge is not by deduction, but Immediate by Perception or Sense at once. Christ addresses himself to the Man, not to his Reason" (Anno Berkeley, E774). Blake seems to be choosing a similar mode of address.

Let us approach his meaning--his organized idea--through some of its particulars, starting with the three phrases directly beneath the pictured statue; together they serve more or less as complementary titles for Blake's work. One names the figures depicted, in such a way as to distinguish their eternal significance from that lent them by the historical allegory of Virgil: "Jehovah & 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." Another defines that eternal significance in broad prophetic terms: "Art Degraded Imagination Denied War Governed the Nations." The third--written in tiny letters just under the base of the statue--connects the two by wryly addressing the opposition between Classical and Hebraic religious values as Blake had come to perceive them: "If Morality was Christianity Socrates was the Saviour." I don't think Blake's tone here is sarcastic. He is not suggesting that Socrates was a pernicious man (in J93 he notes that others thought so, but adds "So Caiphas thought

Jesus"); rather Socrates was a "moralist," one whose ideas were rooted in the experience of the mortal body instead of the immortal spirit. As such he was forced to depend on systems of moral virtue to keep his world in order. Blake explains in *Vision of the Last Judgment* how "while we are in the world of Mortality we Must Suffer," being caught in the double bind of the fallen condition. "You cannot have Liberty in this World without <what you call> Moral Virtue & you cannot have Moral Virtue without the Slavery of that half of the Human Race who hate <what you call> Moral Virtue" (E554). Like all Classical thinkers, then, Socrates was trapped (as later the Deists were trapped) in the limitations of allegorical thinking, building mental constructs on things that are not real: "Allegories are things that Relate to Moral Virtues Moral Virtues do not Exist they are Allegories & dissimulations" (VLJ, E553). The visionary or prophetic mind avoids that trap not by avoiding allegory altogether, but by perceiving in it the eternal reality that it exemplifies. The legends of Arthur, for example, are allegoric fable; yet the visionary reader will perceive in them, Blake says, the eternal reality of what he calls the giant Albion, "Patriarch of the Atlantic": "The stories of Arthur are the acts of Albion, applied to a Prince of the fifth century" (VLJ, E534).

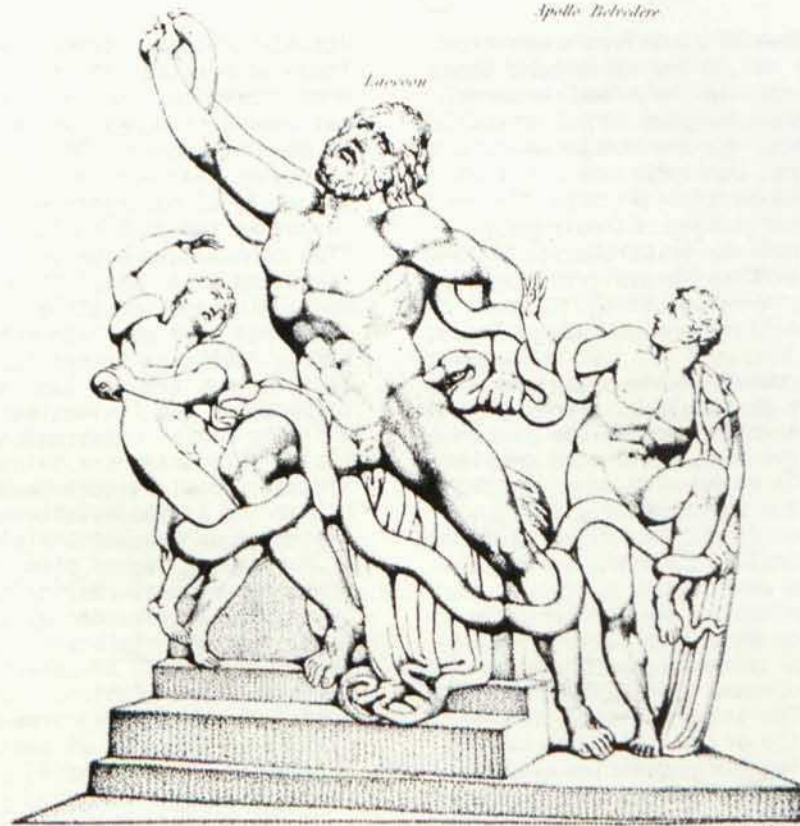
The Cherubim of Solomon's Temple, then, represent eternal truth as spiritually perceived by the Hebrews. In his article on sculpture for which Blake engraved the Laocoön as illustration, Flaxman noted that in ancient Hebrew culture



1 The engraving by Blake that accompanied Flaxman's article on sculpture in Abraham Rees, *The Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Literature* (1820).

## SCULPTURE.

PLATE III

*Venus de Medici**Apollo Belvedere**Laocöon*

Published at the Art directors, Oct. 5, 1825, by Longman, Hurst, Ross, Orme & Bohn, Stationers, London.



the art of sculpture was not only allowed, but encouraged and employed in the service of religion, in the representation of divine attributes or the symbols of divine Providence,

adding that of such work Solomon's Temple stood at the top--"the most magnificent production of Hebrew art." These figures of the Rhodian copyists thus shadow forth in allegoric fable what was originally a work of divine vision, however muddled in transmission. "Let it here be noted," Blake tells us in his *Vision of the Last Judgment*, "that the Greek Fables originated in Spiritual Mystery & Real Vision," although in their stories "Reality was Forgotten & the Vanities of Time & Space only Remembered & called Reality. Such is the Mighty difference between Allegoric Fable & Spiritual Mystery." (E545)

The allegorized version of that eternal truth, preserved for mankind in the Laocoön statue, tells the climax of a time-and-space story familiar from many Classical sources, but notably from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book II. The townspeople of Troy are there seen to be wavering over the question of whether to bring into their city the massive wooden horse, a Greek gift consecrated to Athene and left at the Trojan gates when the Greeks pretended to return to their homeland. Laocoön, a Trojan priest, rushes forward to warn his people against the great figure:

Do you think they have gone, the foe? Do you think that any Gifts of the Greeks lack treachery? Ulysses,-- What was his reputation? Let me tell you, Either the Greeks are hiding in this monster, Or it's some trick of war, a spy, or engine, To come down on the city. Tricky business Is hiding in it. Do not trust it, Trojans, Do not believe this horse. Whatever it may be, I fear the Greeks, even when bringing presents.<sup>2</sup>

With that Laocoön hurls his spear at the horse, piercing its wooden side and almost revealing its secret. He seems on the point of convincing his people when suddenly a Greek soldier, a pretended turncoat, allows himself to be discovered and slyly convinces the people that it is to their interest to bring the statue into their city and give it protection.

One final terrible event--the climax depicted by the Laocoön statue--decides the issue. Aeneas is telling the story:

Then something else, Much greater and more terrible, was forced Upon us, troubling our unseeing spirits. Laocoön, allotted priest of Neptune, Was slaying a great bull beside the altars, When suddenly, over the tranquil deep From Tenedos,--I shudder even now, Recalling it--there came a pair of serpents With monstrous coils, breasting the sea, and aiming Together for the shore. Their heads and shoulders Rose over the waves, upright, with bloody crests, The rest of them trailing along the water, Looping in giant spirals; the foaming sea

Hissed under their motion. And they reached the land, Their burning eyes suffused with blood and fire, Their darting tongues licking the hissing mouths. Pale at the sight, we fled. But they went on Straight toward Laocoön, and first each serpent Seized in its coil his two young sons, and fastened

The fangs in those poor bodies. And the priest Struggled to help them, weapons in his hand. They seized him, bound him with their mighty coils, Twice round his waist, twice round his neck, they squeezed With scaly pressure, and still towered above him. Straining his hands to tear the knots apart, His chaplets stained with blood and the black poison, He uttered horrible cries, not even human, More like the bellowing of a bull, when, wounded It flees the altar, shaking from the shoulder The ill-aimed axe. And on the pair went gliding To the highest shrine, the citadel of Pallas, And vanished underneath the feet of the goddess And the circle of her shield.

I quote at length both because of the power of the story itself, and to allow the reader familiar with Blake to get a fuller sense of what a very Blakean vision it is.<sup>3</sup>

The story tells, among other things, of a degrading abuse of the art of sculpture, although because the abuse is in the service of war and dominion it is seemingly not even perceived by Virgil--sympathetic though he was to the Trojan cause--as an abuse of art. Laocoön, in his role as priest, saw the great horse with prophetic or imaginative insight as "some trick of war" and attacked it outright; but then Pallas Athene enforced the deception by sending out of the water the two serpents to punish and silence the priest and his two young sons.

The people trembled Again; they said Laocoön deserved it, Having, with spear, profaned the sacred image. It must be brought to its place, they cried, the goddess Must be appeased.

And the sack of Troy ensued. "Art Degraded Imagination Denied War Governed the Nations."

Back in the early 1790's, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake had described a vision strikingly similar to this, though altered in its ending. As he and his friend the angel hung over the abyss, "fiery as the smoke of a burning city" (like Troy then, Paris now), they saw

a cataract of blood mixed with fire and not many stones throw from us appeared and sunk again the scaly fold of a monstrous serpent[.] at last to the east, distant about three degrees appeared a fiery crest above the waves[.] slowly it reared like a ridge of golden rocks till we discovered two globes of crimson fire, from which the sea fled away in clouds of smoke, and now we saw, it was



the head of Leviathan, his forehead was divided into streaks of green & purple like those on a tygers forehead: soon we saw his mouth & red gills hang just above the raging foam tingling the black deep with beams of blood, advancing toward us with all the fury of a spiritual existence. (E40)

The angel, of course, retreats at once, and in doing so reveals the monstrous serpent to have been the product of his own "metaphysics," a mere "reptile of the mind." "Mere," however, is a potentially misleading word, for such reptiles are the ultimate powers of destruction. To Blake's perception, I think, the Laocoön of Virgil's story was destroyed by just such a reptile. A priest of the religion of war and dominion, Laocoön himself was too much a party to the abuse he warned against, and so was destroyed by the spiritual existence that expressed its fury. Despite that, he was a struggling prophet, who did after all see the degradation; his imagination, undenied, might have saved his "unseeing" people, as Aeneas called them. Ultimately it was Athene who triumphed; and in her we see the very concept of wisdom perverted--by abstraction--from a "mental deity" who resides in the human breast into a "god" who "orders such things" (to borrow language from *The Marriage*, plate 11). I don't think Blake anywhere suggests such a connection, but Athene's role in this story, and her larger significance in Greek myth as the embodiment of wisdom, align her in some respects at least with Blake's Urizen figure: the presiding deity at an occasion of deception, contention, and death of the imagination. As the woman beneath whose feet Leviathan vanishes, she is surely also a variant of that "System of Moral Virtue, named Rahab" (J35/39, E179).

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake might be thought of as a kind of modern Laocoön whose angelic contemporaries were busy appeasing goddesses, embracing deceptive images, and hypocritically trembling for Blake himself, in view of the eternal lot they figured he deserved. But Blake knew what his angels did not, that "All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics"; that is why he could remain on that pleasant bank hearing a harper by moonlight. Unlike his ancient forebear, the unhappy Laocoön of the Rhodian statue, Blake always refused to serve the religion of War and Empire. "Let us teach Buonaparte & whomsoever else it may concern," he cries in his Public Address, "That it is not Arts that follow & attend upon Empire but Empire that attends upon & follows The Arts" (E566). Indeed "The Foundation of Empire is Art & Science Remove them or Degrade them & the Empire is No More--Empire follows Art & Not Vice Versa as Englishmen suppose" (Anno Reynolds, E625-26). He wished to prove by his own life and work that political prophet, religious visionary, and true artist are necessarily one and the same--but never in the service of some Pantheon of abstractions.

That Blake knew Jacob Bryant's *Mythology*<sup>4</sup> he tells us himself and gives ample evidence in his work, perhaps even in the early "All Religions are One," certainly in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, where he appears by name: "The antiquities of every Nation

under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing as Jacob Bryant, and all antiquaries have proved" (E534).

In his *Mythology* Jacob Bryant had argued that all religions had indeed originally been one--"I have mentioned that the nations of the east acknowledged originally but one deity, the Sun" (I, 306)--a notion that Blake may well have found compatible with his belief in the Poetic Genius, mythologized as Los in his own work, and similarly as Apollo the god of sun and poetry in the classics. Bryant explains how a nation so warlike as Greece could have achieved such vision. Just as "The Greeks adopted all foreign history; and supposed it to have been of their own country" (I, 175) so also their religion had its source elsewhere:

The mythology of Greece is a vast assemblage of obscure traditions, which have been transmitted from the earliest times. They were described in hieroglyphics, and have been veiled in allegory: and the same history is often renewed under a different system, and arrangement. A great part of this intelligence has been derived to us from the Poets; by which means it has been rendered still more extravagant, and strange. . . . We must however make this distinction, that in the allegorical representations of Greece there was always a covert meaning, though it may have escaped our discernment. (I, xvii)

This meaning, in Blakean terms, would be the residue of earlier visionary truth. In his *Descriptive Catalogue* he expands Bryant's point, applying it to Greek works of art:

No man can believe that either Homer's Mythology, or Ovid's, were the production of Greece, or of Latium; neither will anyone believe, that the Greek statues, as they are called, were the invention of Greek Artists; perhaps the Torso is the only original work remaining; all the rest are evidently copies, though fine ones, from greater works of the Asiatic patriarchs (E522)

Bryant further contends that the progress from monotheistic sun-worship to polytheism resulted in the main from those confused borrowers who mistook the various attributes of the initial sun-god for separate subsidiary gods, thereby literally deifying mere abstractions.<sup>5</sup>

This work must have confirmed Blake in many of his views, not only of the history of religion in general, but of the place of Greek mythology in that history. But another work by Bryant that I think was surely of special interest to Blake in connection with his thought about the Laocoön was the later publication entitled *A dissertation concerning the War of Troy and the Expedition of the Grecians, as described by Homer, shewing that no such expedition ever existed* (1796). Bryant's point again is that the key material has been imported. Guessing Homer to have been of a family of Greeks who had long







resided in Egypt, he supposes that Homer took the outlines of Egyptian story and borrowed for the protagonists the names of local, provincial Greek deities. "Homer had certainly some ancient, and foreign history before him, which he modelled to his own mind" (*Dissertation*, 53).

Bryant's most interesting piece of evidence for his theory that no real Trojan War ever occurred is one for which he cites numerous older authorities, and to which Blake would surely have been attracted, namely that "the whole poem was an allegory." This was the opinion, he says, of Anaxagoras the Preceptor of Socrates (*Dissertation*, 86); other later scholars grew more specific, he claims, and argued "that the poems of Homer were an allegorical description of Virtue and Justice." Some even suggested "that the Deities introduced by the Poet were merely Physical qualities" and represented "the works of Nature"--Agamemnon might, for example, have stood for "air" (*Dissertation*, 87). Bryant refuses to take up problems of detailed interpretation, only reiterating that there was indeed no real historical war of Troy, though there were important points of consensus concerning it. "The cause of war according to all poets, was the Judgement of Paris, and his decision in favour of Venus." Moreover the earliest commentators--whom we might well trust on the grounds of their proximity--did agree in reading "the whole as fable. They maintained that it was a mere allegory, and signified a contention between virtue and vice" (*Dissertation*, 88-89).

An allegory of the contention between virtue and vice: if early interpreters saw this meaning in the story of the entire Trojan War, so Blake apparently saw, in that suspended moment captured for the ages by the Laocöon statue, the eternal significance of that contention. It is a prophetic vision of fallen creation in the toils of the true Leviathan, a "spiritual existence" like that from *The Marriage*, self-divided into the eternally desolating false contraries of "good" and evil," as Blake labels the serpents that crush the agonized "Jehovah & his two Sons Satan & Adam." To Blake this moment is the true paradigm of the entire classical culture because that culture is rooted in contention, with all its corollaries and consequences: the Judgement of Paris arose from a contention among goddesses and resulted in a contention among men. The Trojan War, according to sources available to Blake through Bryant if not elsewhere, had itself long been considered an allegorical representation of the contention between virtue and vice, which is in turn the very epitome of the fallen human condition--as seen also in Hebrew myth, where Eve incites the fall by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. "The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars," Blake says in his plate "On Homer's Poetry" (E267), for increasingly he saw all of classical culture as a terrible, perverse celebration of the fallen world of nature. Its virtues (chiefly the heroism of physical prowess) were the virtues of cruelty and power, and so ultimately of political empire and the repression and taxation that support



3 Blake's own version of the Laocöon theme, pencil drawing. Collection of Sir Geoffrey Keynes.



it; its gods were allegorized abstractions (mathematical diagrams), ultimately reducible to the science worshipped by the skeptics and Deists; its religion was mere morality--the contentions of virtue and vice, ultimately the condition of the Antichrist. This complex of thought Blake calls in *Jerusalem* "the Covenant of Priam, the Moral Virtues of the Heathen," that condition which is eternally opposed to "the Forgiveness of Sins according to the Covenant of Jehovah" (Plate 98, E255-56), and whose ascendancy signals the approach of apocalypse:

The Last Judgment when all those are Cast away who trouble Religion with Questions concerning Good & Evil or Eating of the Tree of those Knowledges or Reasonings which hinder the Vision of God turning all into a Consuming fire <When> Imaginative Art & Science & all Intellectual Gifts all the Gifts of the Holy Ghost are [*despised*] lookd upon as of no use & only Contention remains to Man then the Last Judgment begins & its Vision is seen by the [Imaginative Eye] of Every one according to the situation he holds (VLJ, E544)

The classical and the Hebrew-Christian are thus deeply opposed ways of thinking and seeing for Blake. In matters of intellect it is the opposition between experimental science and inspired art; in artistic method, the opposition between Allegory (the Daughters of Memory) and Vision (the Daughters of Inspiration).

The Whole Bible is filld with Imagination & Visions from End to End & not with Moral Virtues that is the business of Plato & the Greeks & all Warriors The Moral Virtues are continual Accusers of Sin & promote Eternal Wars & Dominency over others (Anno Berkeley, E653)

The Preface to *Milton* had already enunciated the matter pretty clearly in 1804, suggesting at the same time some of the extent of Blake's debt to Bryant:

The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero. which all Men ought to condemn: are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible. but when the New Age is at leisure to Pronounce: all will be set right: & those Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously & professedly Inspired Men, will hold their proper rank, & the Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration. Shakspeare & Milton were both curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword.

And the issue is still central to his small commentary "On Virgil," conjecturally dated 1820 by Erdman (E734):

Sacred Truth has pronounced that Greece & Rome as Babylon & Egypt: so far from being parents of Arts & Sciences as they pretend: were destroyers of all Art. Homer



4 Blake's pencil drawing of "The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan." British Museum.



Virgil & Ovid confirm this opinion & make us reverence The Word of God, the only light of antiquity that remains unperturbed by War. Virgil in the Eneid Book VI. line 848 says let others study Art: Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War & Dominion

Rome & Greece swept Art into their maw & destroyed it. A Warlike State never can produce Art. It will Rob & Plunder & accumulate into one place, & Translate & Copy & Buy & Sell & Criticise, but not Make. Grecian is Mathematic Form Gothic is Living Form Mathematic Form is Eternal in the Reasoning Memory. Living Form is Eternal Existence. (E267)

But there was, in Blake's experience, another "light of antiquity" remaining "unperturbed by War," namely the access of each artist, by his own vision, to eternal truth and to the original art that displayed it. The three Rhodians were perhaps literal copyists at work in the historical Solomon's Temple; but they may just as well have been "original" artists copying visions "with their imaginative and immortal organs" (DC, E532). In Blake's view these may be little more than two ways of talking about the same experience, for his position in the matter seems like a sort of visionary re-understanding of Pope's famous dictum that to copy Homer was to copy Nature. For Blake there is a sense in which to copy Homer--or indeed any other great artist working in any medium--was to learn "the language of art" (Anno Reynolds, E626). As he remarks with some flippancy, "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" (Anno Reynolds, E634).

Blake himself had access to a wide choice of educational material, for, as he tells us in his *Descriptive Catalogue*, he has been

taken in vision into the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia, has seen those wonderful originals called in the Sacred Scriptures the Cherubim, which were sculptured and painted on walls of Temples, Towers, Cities, Palaces, and erected in the highly cultivated states of Egypt, Moab, Edom, Aram, among the Rivers of Paradise, being originals from which the Greeks and Etruscians copied Hercules Farnese, Venus of Medicis, Apollo Belvidere, and all the grand works of ancient art. (E521-22)

Thus he has available to his imagination both the Apollo Belvidere itself (for example) and those grand originals from which it was copied. How must he see his own art in relation to all that material? He had been advised, he recounts in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, to "take the Apollo for the model" of one of his pictures; at such a moment of advice, he says, the Artist "comes to his trial":

He knows that what he does is not inferior to the grandest Antiques. Superior they cannot be, for human power cannot go beyond either what he does, or what they have done, it is the gift of God, it is inspiration

and vision (E534-35).

Shall he then "copy" ancient art, and yet maintain his own vision? Having posed the question, Blake reshapes it by changing the verb "copy" to "emulate," suggesting that the copyist's need to learn the language of art is not at rivalry with the original artist's new line drawn out from his own inspired vision, but rather inseparable from it. For the inspired artist, to create is to emulate the prophetic insight of his forebears, finding his vision at least partly through his perception of theirs. Of course the forms he studies must necessarily live in the forms he creates, which is why--as Blake always insisted--one must choose one's models in art so carefully, and avoid (say) the seductive softness of a Correggio. The artist's "trial," then, is not whether to copy, but whom to emulate, and how. Blake's account of his own trial concludes:

He had resolved to emulate those precious remains of antiquity, he has done so and the result you behold; his ideas of strength and beauty have not been greatly different. Poetry as it exists now on earth, in the various remains of ancient authors, Music as it exists in old tunes or melodies, Painting and Sculpture as it exists in the remains of Antiquity and in the works of more modern genius, is Inspiration, and cannot be surpassed; it is perfect and eternal. Milton, Shakspeare, Michael Angelo, Rafael, the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting, and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian, are the extent of the human mind. The human mind cannot go beyond the gift of God, the Holy Ghost. To suppose that Art can go beyond the finest specimens of Art that are now in the world, is not knowing what Art is; it is being blind to the gifts of the spirit. (E535)

Grecian and Egyptian architecture are included among the gifts of the spirit because they are the crystallizations of those forms that it is the duty of prophecy to expose that they may be cast out. Similarly the Laocoön, though the Rhodian sculptors doubtless intended only historical allegory, in truth embodies a vision of creation in the toils of error, the Covenant of Priam in the agony of self-fulfillment: the world as it will be annihilated at Apocalypse.

And this is the sense, too, in which we are to understand such Blakean visions as the spiritual forms of Pitt and Nelson, and the related Bard from Gray, all exhibited together and explained in Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue* in 1809. The *Catalogue* opens with the pair of Nelson and Pitt, considering them as companion pieces and connecting them directly to ancient art both as preserved physical objects seen by the natural eye and as visionary forms seen by the eye of prophecy:

The two pictures of Nelson and Pitt are compositions of a mythological cast, similar to those Apotheoses of Persian, Hindoo, and Egyptian Antiquity, which are still preserved on rude monuments, being copies from some stupendous originals now



lost or perhaps buried till some happier age. The Artist having been taken in vision into the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia, has seen those wonderful originals called in the Sacred Scriptures the Cherubim. . . . The Artist has endeavoured to emulate the grandeur of those seen in his vision, and to apply it to modern Heroes, on a smaller scale. (E521-22)

Just as "those wonderful originals seen in my visions" all contained "mythological and recondite meaning, where more is meant than meets the eye" (E522), so too in these pictures--obviously historical and allegorical--we are invited to penetrate beyond the moment to its visionary truth. Blake's full titles give us pretty elaborate directives: the spiritual form of Nelson is pictured "guiding Leviathan, in whose wreathings are infolded the Nations of the Earth." Leviathan, as we know from the best authority, is very hard to guide. Moreover, a comparison of Blake's pencil drawing of Nelson "guiding" Leviathan (illus. 4) is almost a mirror image, gesture for gesture, of his own pencil drawing of the Laocoön theme (illus. 2). Where there is relationship of outline in Blake, there is sure to be relationship of idea, and one can see multiple connections between Nelson and Laocoön, those two priests of the Covenant of Priam, ringed by the coilings of Leviathan. For one thing, clearly Nelson is implicated in the terrible destruction wrought by Leviathan just as Laocoön was implicated in his own destruction by the serpents from the sea. Although for the moment the confident-looking Nelson may seem to be playing more the part of an Athene in the drama of Blake's drawing--directing the serpents rather than suffering from them--to the spiritual eye it is all one, for through these varying allegories may be seen one eternal vision, the terrible vision of error awaiting judgment, of the powers of the earth encircled by the reptiles of man's fallen mind.

Accordingly the spiritual form of Pitt, who "guides" Behemoth, is titled "that Angel who, pleased to perform the Almighty's orders, rides on the whirlwind, directing the storms of war: He is ordering the Reaper to reap the Vine of the Earth, and the Plowman to plow up the Cities and Towers" (E521). Pitt and Nelson, those "modern Heroes" whom Blake with rather sardonic modesty offers us "on a smaller scale" are modern emblems of the Covenant of Priam, of "War & its horrors & its Heroic Villains" (Anno Bacon, E612). Blake has indeed emulated the artists of the Laocoön--envisioning historical allegory through which the visionary eye will see eternal truth--and these companion pictures of Pitt and Nelson are the result. "The Greek & Roman Classics is the Antichrist," wrote Blake in the year of his own death (Anno Thornton, E656); Nelson and Pitt, plowing and reaping in preparation for Apocalypse, are cognate visionary forms.

But just as the Blake of *The Marriage* had been left on the banks of a river listening to a harper by moonlight, so while we stand at Blake's exhibition and watch the forms of Leviathan and Behemoth we may see another Harper, Gray's Bard "weaving the winding sheet" of tyranny "by means of sounds of spiritual music and its accompanying expressions of articulate speech"--a "bold, and daring, and most masterly conception that the public have embraced and approved with avidity" (DC, E532). Refusing entrapment in the system he seeks to expose, Blake like his Bard can weave the winding sheet of tyranny. He can delineate the Pitts and Nelsons of fallen history as they are surrounded by the beasts of their own metaphysics while as artist he sees through and beyond them: "Bacon calls Intellectual Arts Unmanly Poetry Painting Music are in his opinion Useless," he noted drily, "& so they are for Kings & Wars & shall in the End Annihilate them" (E619). Pitt and Nelson, like the priest Laocoön, are creatures of time and space, of allegoric fable. Like the three-dimensional statue at the center of the Laocoön plate they appear solid and permanent, but are not: "for tho on Earth things seem Permanent they are less permanent than a Shadow as we all know too well" (VLJ, E544). But the artist--that is any true Christian in Blake's sense, anyone who perceives and accepts the Covenant of Jehovah, the forgiveness of sins--knows that in Eternity art is not degraded, nor imagination denied; and that the wars of Eternity are the Wars of Truth. That, I think, is the complex of idea presented to our view by Blake's Laocoön plate with its parodic outlines of intellect, those encircling words that help us to distinguish one idea from another, and out of seeming chaos to find "life itself."

<sup>1</sup> All Blake quotations are from *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 4th ed. rev., ed. David V. Erdman (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970). The abbreviations used in the text are the usual ones.

<sup>2</sup> Verse translation by Rolfe Humphries.

<sup>3</sup> Blake had Dryden's Virgil in his library: in his Notebook dated August 1807 he records opening to a page at random as a kind of fortune-telling experiment (E674). It is not, however, Dryden's translation that he uses when he quotes Virgil, as he does in "On Virgil" and again on the Laocoön plate. The wording in these instances is really paraphrase, and sounds like Blake himself to me, though I have not had time in preparing this paper to go into the question fully. Perhaps someone at the seminar will have fuller information?

<sup>4</sup> *A New System; or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, 3 vols., 1774-76.

<sup>5</sup> Bryant is fascinated by the way in which place names shadow forth earlier religious practice, as he postulates in the section entitled "Of Ancient Worship, and of Etymological Truths thence deducible, Exemplified in the Names of Cities, Lakes, and Rivers" (I, 189). I wonder if this section is a possible source for some of the ideas in *The Marriage*, especially plates 11-13?