BLAKE'S COMPOSITE ART

A Study of the
Illuminated Poetry

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TO

THE MEMORY OF

EARL R. WASSERMAN

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COMPOSITE ART

Chapter One

BLAKE'S COMPOSITE ART

It has become superfluous to argue that Blake's poems need to be read with their accompanying illustrations. Almost everyone would now agree with Northrop Frye's remark that Blake perfected a "radical form of mixed art," a "composite art" which must be read as a unity.[1] It is not superfluous, however, to ask in what precise sense Blake's poems "need" their illustrations, and vice versa. Neither element of Blake's illuminated books is unintelligible or uninteresting without the support of the other. Indeed, a notable feature of the history of Blake's reputation has been the extraordinary success which his paintings and poems have enjoyed without the mutual support of one another. For over a century Blake's admirers had a truncated view of his art, some admiring the bust, others the torso, all finding a sufficient aesthetic unity in the fragment they beheld. This suggests that Blake's poems do not need their illustrations in the same sense that Wagner's libretti need their musical settings to be aesthetically successful. It suggests that his composite art is, to some extent, *not* an indissoluble unity, but an interaction between two vigorously independent modes of expression. "When a Work has Unity," Blake reminds us, "it is as much in a Part as in the Whole. the Torso is as much a Unity as the Laocoon" ("On Homer's Poetry," E 267).

Suzanne Langer has argued that this sort of composite art is impossible, that "there are no happy marriages in art—only successful rape."[2] Her argument must be borne in mind by anyone who would ravish one of Blake's art forms for the sake of elucidating the other. Langer suggests that the juxtaposition of two art forms always re-

[1] Frye, "Poetry and Design in William Blake," in *Discussions of William Blake*, ed. John Grant (Boston, 1961), p. 46; reprinted from *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, X (Sept. 1951), 35-42. Jean Hagstrum, *William Blake: Poet and Painter* (Chicago, 1964), was, I believe, the first to refer to Blake's illuminated books as a "composite art."

[2] *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (New York, 1957), p. 86. Langer goes on to say that "every work has its being in only one order of art; compositions of different orders are not simply conjoined, but all except one will cease to appear as what they are."

sults in the absorption of one form into the other, poetry being subordinated to musical values in song, musical values subordinated to visual considerations in ballet. A picture hanging on the wall in a set for *Man and Superman* is not seen as an aesthetic object in its own right, but is absorbed into the dramatic illusion. Similarly, an illustrated book tends to become either a portable picture gallery with running captions or a literary text with attendant illustrations. The historical fact that Blake's illuminated books have been read in *both* of these ways strongly suggests that his composite art is an exception to Langer's rule, a successful marriage of two aesthetically independent art forms.

This is not to say that the partnership is equal or harmonious on every plate of Blake's illuminated books. There are many individual instances of the subordination of one mode to the demands of the other. Many of Blake's visual images move toward the realm of language, operating as arbitrary signs, emblems, or hieroglyphics which denote the unseeable, rather than as "natural" representations: an eagle is "a portion of Genius" and a serpent may symbolize nature as a whole.[3] Similarly, the text sometimes derives its coherence not primarily from its verbal order, but from the series of pictures for which it provides titles, as in *The Gates of Paradise* series. In general, however, neither the graphic nor the poetic aspect of Blake's composite art assumes consistent predominance: their relationship is more like an energetic rivalry, a dialogue or dialectic between vigorously independent modes of expression.

I. VISUAL-VERBAL DIALECTICS

The most obvious manifestation of the independence of design from text is the presence of illustrations which do not illustrate. The figure of a young man carrying a winged child on his head in the frontispiece to *Songs of Experience* [1], for instance, is mentioned

[3] I am employing here the conventional distinction between language as a system of arbitrary signs and pictorial representation as a system of more or less "natural" signs, containing intrinsic resemblances to that which is signified. Emblems and hieroglyphics thus occupy something of a middle ground between linguistic and pictorial representation. The key phrase in the distinction is "more or less," some kinds of pictorial representation being more explicitly verbal (and thus less "natural") than others. Further elaboration of this concept may be found in E. H. Gomrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, 1972), p. 212, and Ronald Paulson, *Emblem and Expression* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 8.

nowhere in the *Songs*, nor for that matter anywhere else in Blake's writings. In the absence of explicit textual associations we are forced, I would suggest, to concentrate on the picture *as a picture in the world of pictures*, rather than seeing it as a visual translation of matters already dealt with in words. We have to look at the picture's expressive content, "reading" facial expressions, bodily gestures, and details for their innate significance, and we tend to see it not in relation to words but in the context of other, similar compositions both in and out of Blake's *œuvre*. It is inevitable, of course, that this concentration on the picture as picture will move over into the world of verbal language at some point—the moment, in fact, that we begin to articulate an interpretation, or the moment that we encounter a related composition that *does* have an explicit verbal equivalent.[4] The mysterious figure carrying the cherub has an obvious pictorial relative, the figure looking up at a child on a cloud in the frontispiece to *Songs of Innocence* [2]. And this latter composition *does* have an explicit verbal equivalent: it serves as an illustration to the song of the Piper "piping down the valleys wild" and seeing a child on a cloud, the introductory poem to *Songs of Innocence*. We cannot, however, make a direct verbal translation of the frontispiece to *Experience* from the Piper's song by way of the intermediate association of the picture of the Piper. It is clear that the two frontispieces function not just as companion pieces with similar compositions but as "contraries" whose differences are as important as their similarities. Any words we find to describe the frontispiece to *Experience* will have to involve transformations and reversals of the language discovered in the poem and illustration which introduce *Songs of Innocence*.

This process of transformation goes on quite unobtrusively and

[4] Roland Barthes argues for the tendency of all symbolic forms to aspire to the condition of language: "it appears increasingly difficult to conceive a system of images and objects whose *signifieds* can exist independently of language: to perceive what a substance signifies is to fall back on the individuation of language: there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language" (*Elements of Semiology*, tr. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith [Boston, 1968], p. 10). Barthes' difficulty in conceiving of a system independent of language may, however, say as much about the linguistic bias of structuralism as it does about the actual nature of things. If Blake teaches us anything about symbolic systems, it is that there is an equally strong tendency for language to fall back into that which cannot be designated, the wordless realm of pure image and sound, and that this realm may have systematic features independent of language.

perhaps unconsciously whenever we interpret a problematic illustration in Blake's illuminated books. It is generally assumed without question that since the frontispiece to *Innocence* clearly depicts the Piper, the frontispiece to *Experience* must depict the analogous figure in the latter group of poems, the Bard whose voice is heard in the opening poems to *Songs of Experience*. This assumption seems wholly justified, but it is important for us to remember that it is not directly "given" by the text or its illustrations, but must be arrived at by a series of associations, transformations, and creative inferences. And once this initial inference has been made, the problem of interpretation has only begun. We must then account for other transformations suggested by a comparison of the two frontispieces: in one the child floats without the aid of wings on a cloud above the Piper; in the other the child has wings and yet must be carried by the Bard. The Piper looks up at the child, his setting an enclosed grove of trees; the Bard looks straight ahead, backed by a vista of open fields. The significance of these contrasts may not strike us as terribly complex, but the process by which we arrive at that significance is rather involved and it entails a good deal more than simple matching or translating of visual signs into verbal.

The creative inferences involved in reading this sort of picture are multiplied when we make associations in pictorial realms outside of Blake's own art. The Bard carrying the child is rather similar, for instance, to representations of St. Christopher carrying the Christ-child across the river, a theme which Blake and his readers could have seen in many English churches and in the works of European masters such as Dürer [3].[5] The implication that the child on the Bard's head is Christ is certainly consistent with the symbolism of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and it introduces a whole new set of verbal associations to be found in the legends of St.

[5] The widespread familiarity of the St. Christopher image is suggested by H. C. Whaite in *Saint Christopher in English Medieval Wallpainting* (London, 1929). Whaite notes that despite the tendency to casually obliterate medieval paintings with whitewash in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "it is surprising how much material has survived. Of the hundreds of paintings of St. Christopher which at one time adorned the walls of English churches, there are still over sixty known to exist in fair condition. In Keyser's list of 1883 one hundred and eighty representations of the subject are mentioned" (p. 13). The best general work on this theme is Ernst K. Stahl, *Die Legende vom Heil Riesen Christophorus in der Graphik des 15 und 16 Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1920). Stahl cites Dürer, Cranach, Altdorfer, Schongauer, Bosch, and van Veen (whose work Blake definitely knew) among the artists who made prints of St. Christopher carrying the Christ-child.

Christopher, the saint who, according to Jacobus de Voragine, is not only the "Christ-bearer," but "hast . . . borne all the world" upon his shoulders.[6] For some readers the allusion might evoke the popular image of the patron of travelers (English folk belief had it that anyone who saw St. Christopher's image in a church could not die that day),[7] giving the Bard a kind of protective significance, as guide and guardian in the approaching journey through the dangerous world of Experience. The allusion would thus reinforce the contrast with the carefree, wandering figure of the Piper, who is blissfully unaware of the road ahead and need not carry his Christ-child muse as a burden.

For readers more deeply versed in the lore of St. Christopher more complex intersections with Blake's imagery would emerge. St. Christopher was called "reprobus" (reprobate or outcast) before his conversion, a striking analogue to Blake's later description of the prophetic Bard as an angry "Reprobate" crying in the wilderness.[8] Disparities between Blake's frontispiece and the saint's iconography also invite transformational inferences: Blake's Bard carries his child on his head rather than in the traditional place, on the shoulders, perhaps a way of stressing the suggestion in *The Golden Legend* that the burden of Christ's weight is mental rather than physical.[9] The presence of wings on the child (something that never occurs in traditional representations of the Christ-child), and the ironic contrast between this weighty cherub and the weightless but unwinged child of the Piper may suggest sinister overtones: Geoffrey Keynes sees the winged child as a "Covering Cherub," an image of what Blake called the Selfhood, that burden of alienated consciousness which emerges in the state of Experience.[10] In this reading, our

[6] *The Golden Legend*, tr. William Caxton, ed. Frederick S. Ellis (Hammersmith, 1892), pp. 645-48. Blake was probably familiar with Caxton's translation of this classic collection of saints' lives, perhaps learning of it during his apprenticeship among the antiquarians.

[7] Whaite, *Saint Christopher*, p. 9.

[8] Blake did not arrive at the term "Reprobate" for his wrathful prophet until writing *Milton*, but he certainly presents a clear image of the "just man raging in the wilds" in the Argument to the earlier *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. I would not argue that he *meant* his readers to see the Bard of Experience as a "Reprobate" in 1794; but his later use of that term to describe the prophetic stance may have been an outgrowth of the St. Christopher legend.

[9] Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, p. 645.

[10] Commentary in Keynes' facsimile edition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London, 1967). Keynes' interpretation, like my association of the

Bard/St. Christopher may begin to resemble Christian of *Pilgrim's Progress*, whose burden is his own sense of guilt, depicted in Blake's illustrations to Bunyan as a childlike form swaddled in a fleshy bundle that grows from Christian's back and shoulders [4]. This darker reading of the winged child is not really incompatible with our earlier association of the child with Christ; it serves rather as a way of complicating the image, and rendering what Blake saw as the ambiguity of the poet's relation to his own inspiration in the state of Experience. Unlike the Piper, the Bard must carry the weight of his inspiration (or perhaps hold it down to prevent it from flying away), and he has to watch where he is going. The burden of Christian prophecy is, for Blake, inseparable from the burden of the Selfhood, and its weight, as he was to suggest in a later sketch in the pages of *The Four Zoas* [5], is equivalent to the weight of the world, the burden of Atlas.

The absence of direct illustrative function in the frontispiece to *Experience* allows the picture to be experienced as the focus for an invisible text compounded from a wide range of verbal and visual associations. While these associations involve creative inferences and transformations, they are anything but "free" in the sense of random, arbitrary, or capricious: the test of their validity is their coherence and adequacy in returning us to our point of departure, the picture itself, with a more precise and comprehensive sense of its significance. A more discriminating and lengthy analysis would differentiate between historically probable "meanings" and the more open realm of "significance" (Blake could not have "meant" in 1794 to link his Bard figure with his later drawing of Atlas in *The Four Zoas*, but the figure could have assumed that significance for him at a later date).[11] The crucial element in either kind of reading is the demand for creative participation. It is almost as if there were a missing poem that Blake could have written to go with this picture. By refusing to supply this poem, he challenges us to fill the void, and places us in a position analogous to that of his Bard/St. Christopher,

Bard with the Reprobate, involves an anachronism: we go forward in Blake's writing to find words adequate to pictures he conceived much earlier. I think this procedure is justified as long it is done consciously. It seems highly probable that Blake often developed graphic images long before he found the words adequate to describe them, and the act of anachronistic interpretation may have real value in tracing the process of Blake's imagination as it moves from vision to verbalization.

[11] The distinction between "meaning" and "significance" here is drawn from E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967), p. 8.

making us work for our meanings rather than passively receive them as we do in the frontispiece to *Innocence*. The Bard is thus an emblem not only of the poet but of the reader in the state of Experience, and a full encounter with the picture is not just a glimpse through the window into Blake's world, but a look at ourselves in the mirror he provides.

The wealth of independent, nonillustrative pictorial significance which Blake can deposit in a given design is, of course, most obvious in "illustrations which do not illustrate," and the frontispiece to *Experience* is a kind of limiting example of how far this process can go. But other, subtler kinds of visual-verbal independence and interplay occur—as, for instance, when Blake plays text and design off against one another, an effect rather like counterpoint in music, or, more precisely, like the interaction of image and sound in cinema. In plate 8 of *America* [6], for example, the text begins with the words "The terror answerd: I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree" (8:1, E 52), printed on a cloud bank which hangs over the sea. Seated on this cloud bank, however, we find not the youthful Orc but the aged Urizen, or his political equivalent, Albion's Angel. For a moment Orc's voice seems to emerge from the figure of his aged antagonist. This effect lasts only a moment, however, for Orc's voice goes on to describe how "Urizen perverted to ten commands" the "fiery joy" of human energy (8:3), and we begin to see the design at the top of the page as an image not of the speaker but of the speaker's *vision*. We are invited, in other words, to see Urizen through Orc's eyes by his presence as an invisible narrator-commentator on the image before us.

Two plates later in *America* [7] a similar effect occurs: the text, printed among flames which wash up the page, begins, "Thus wept the Angel voice & as he wept the terrible blasts/ Of trumpets, blew a loud alarm across the Atlantic deep"—lines which evoke the seascape of *America* 8 with its "angelic" aged Urizen on the bank of clouds. But the picture now shows Orc, not Urizen or Albion's Angel, and the accompanying voice belongs not to one of the characters but to the omniscient narrator of the poem, Blake himself, describing the "perturbation" of Albion's Thirteen Angels as they sit in their Atlantic kingdom. Why does Blake couple his vision of Orc with a verbal description of Orc's apparent opposites, Albion's Angels? The answer comes at the top of the very next plate: "Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd/ Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc" (*A* 11:1-2). What

we have witnessed in the orchestration of this series of texts and designs is a kind of cinematic transformation or conversion. The angel has become a devil (a conversion that Blake presents in a narrative fashion in plate 24 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). The cold, oppressive, aged figure of plate 8 has become the flaming youth of plate 10, a transformation which can be seen even more dramatically if one superimposes mentally (or with film transparencies) the "lineaments" of one figure over the other. The aged figure can then be made to "dissolve" into his youthful counterpart, and vice versa. The effect is a kind of counterpoint in which each medium proceeds with its own independent formal integrity, while interacting with the other to form a complex, unified whole.

In Blake's longer books he employs a technique of maintaining the independence of design from text which Northrop Frye has called "syncopation"—the placement of a design at a considerable distance from its best textual reference point.[12] In general, however, this sort of syncopation is achieved not by physical distance but by the introduction of iconographic disparities which complicate and attenuate our equations of text and design. Blake invites us, for instance, to see the title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [8] as an "illustration" of the textual episode on plate 24 near the end of the book, the conversion of the angel into a devil. And yet he complicates this equation with a number of disparities: (1) the textual devil and angel seem to be males, while the pictured figures look female, or (in some copies) sexually ambiguous; (2) the text describes a single conversation followed by a self-immolation, while the design depicts a sexual encounter followed by a flight (if we can infer that the couple in the foreground will soon join the others floating up the center of the page); (3) none of the other details in the design refers directly to the scene of conversion related in plate 24, particularly the figures arranged along the "ground line" at the top of the page. These disparities produce a metaphorical richness which multiplies the independent complexities of text and design: conversation becomes copulation, immolation becomes flight, single conversion becomes catalyst for mass resurrection.[13]

[12] "Poetry and Design," p. 48. Frye's example of "syncopation" is the female figure harnessed to the moon at the bottom of plate 8 of *Jerusalem*, a figure which is not mentioned in the text until plate 63. Even more important than the physical distance, however, is the fact that the textual reference ("the Fairies lead the Moon along the Valley of Cherubim"; *J* 63:14) does not really explain the picture, but simply gives us a clue for further investigation.

[13] Note, too, that all these metaphors can and perhaps should be reversed, since the scene of mass sexual resurrection comes before the more personalized encounter of devil and angel. This analysis, by the way, is the product of an exchange with John Grant in the footnotes of *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David Erdman and John Grant (Princeton, 1970), pp. 63-64 (hereafter cited as *VFD*).

The most interesting feature of the title page to the *Marriage* is that Blake manages to play upon all these metaphoric lines while keeping the design a simple and direct evocation of the book's central theme, the interaction of contraries. Every aspect of the composition—the strong contrasts of color and shape of flames and clouds, the thrust and recoil of the opposed trees at the top of the page, the aggressive inward thrust of the devil versus the receptive outward pose of the angel—is designed to embody the encounter of active and passive contraries. These contraries are seen not as they are perceived by the religious, as categories of good and evil (Blake employs none of the conventional imagery of horns, tails, wings, or halos to distinguish devil from angel), but as mutually "necessary to Human existence" (*MHH* 3). This does not mean that they are presented in an absolutely symmetrical balance, however. Blake clearly sides with the devils in the text because he sees the history of his culture as the deification of the angelic virtues of rational passivity and self-restraint. Thus, despite the theoretical and representational equality of devils and angels, the thrust of the design cuts diagonally across the page rather than vertically down the middle, tipping the balance of the composition in favor of the devil's party. And in one detail at least, this implicit preference verges on overt satire: on the ground line, the left (devil's) side shows a harmonious vision of the sexes, a couple walking beneath the trees, while the right side displays an inharmonious "di-vision" in the figure of a young man playing a musical instrument, apparently unable to stir a reclining female out of her bored passivity.[14]

The independence of Blake's text and designs, then, allows him to introduce independent symbolic statements, to suggest ironic

[14] The reclining figure is clearly a woman in copies C and D. The instrument held by the kneeling figure is only suggestively etched—perhaps a flute, shepherd's pipe, or lyre. The absence of conventional imagery to distinguish devil from angel (noted above) must be qualified in copies A and I, where, as Erdman notes (*TIB*, p. 98), the devil and angel *share* a halo. This humorous little touch may suggest that the conversion is, from another point of view, the transformation of the devil into an angel; similarly, the androgynous ambiguity of the devil's and angel's sexes stresses the major point of conversion, transformation, marriage of equals, rather than the superiority and victory of one point of view.

contrasts and transformations, and to multiply metaphorical complexities. The most important kind of independence to watch for, however, is found not where the picture clearly departs from or contradicts the text, but in cases where the design seems nothing more than a literal illustration. The second illustration to "The Little Black Boy" in *Songs of Innocence*, for instance, seems to be a merely literal rendering of the concluding stanzas:

> When I from black and he from white cloud free,
> And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:
>
> Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear,
> To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
> And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
> And be like him and he will then love me.

The design shows a white boy leaning on the knee of a shepherd Christ, the black boy standing behind him to "stroke his silver hair" [9]. The details not mentioned in the text, such as the flock of sheep in the background or the willow tree (emblem of paradise), do not introduce complications, but are predictable features of the heavenly state which the black boy envisions. And yet this design is not simply an imitation of the text, but introduces its own symbolic dimensions. Blake seems to be making a pictorial allusion to the theme of a guardian angel presenting a human soul to God, as treated in the seventeenth-century emblem book *Amoris Divini Emblemata* by Otto von Veen (Vaenius) [10].[15]

This allusion completes the transformation in consciousness which is only implicit in the text: the black boy's emerging sense that despite his lessons in racial self-hatred ("I am black, but O! my soul is white"), he is equal and even superior to the English boy because he has had to suffer (ironically referred to as "bearing the beams of love"). Whereas the poem begins with the English boy "white as an angel" and the black boy in a fallen, damned condition ("bereav'd of light"), the design presents a near—but not total—

[15] Hagstrum suggests that van Veen, among other well-known emblematists, "surely caught Blake's young eye in the engraver's shop where he worked and in the print shops he frequented as a boy" (*Poet and Painter*, pp. 50-51). The *Amoris Divini Emblemata* would probably have been more congenial to Blake's temperament than van Veen's emblems after Horace, or those on secular love. Mario Praz notes three editions of this work, two published in Antwerp (1615 and 1660) and one in Amsterdam (1711). See his *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, rev. ed. (Rome, 1964), p. 526.

reversal of roles. The black boy is now the angel who has absorbed and been refined by God's light and heat, and the white boy has, in a sense, been "bereav'd of light" in that he has not yet learned to bear the beams of love. Thus the design puts him in the position of the lost soul who has been rescued by his black "guardian angel." Even without the added dimension provided by its design, "The Little Black Boy" is a great poem, but it is a great fragment whose unity is part of a larger whole produced by its interaction with a design that has its own independent symbolic integrity.

The most pervasive kind of rivalry between text and design in Blake's illuminated books is simply the matter of conflicting aesthetic appeals. To open one of Blake's books is to be confronted with two equally compelling art forms, each clamoring for primary attention. Frye suggests that in some books this contest is clearly won by one art (text in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, design in *Urizen*), but that in general Blake moves toward a balance of pictorial and poetic elements.[16] I suspect, however, that there are many readers like myself who find it difficult to read Blake's text in his illuminated books with any extended concentration. This difficulty must have been felt by contemporaries of Blake such as Dawson Turner, who despite what Blake considered "the Loss of some of the best things" asked for separate prints from the Lambeth books without their texts.[17] The difficulty arises in part from occasional illegibility and frequent smallness of print, from the distraction continually offered by rather striking designs, and from a tendency of readers to take the line of least interpretive resistance. Blake's pictures may contain "mythological and recondite meaning, where more is meant than meets the eye" (*DC*, E 522), but they are also clear and distinct pictures *of* something. His text makes fewer concessions to the "corporeal eye" and is thus most readily grasped, as a text, in a form

[16] "Poetry and Design," p. 46.

[17] Blake later complained, "Those I printed for Mr Humphry are a selection from the different Books of such as could be Printed without the Writing, tho' to the Loss of some of the best things. For they when Printed perfect accompany Poetical Personifications & Acts, without which Poems they never could have been Executed" (Blake to Dawson Turner, 9 June 1818 [K 867]). It is interesting to note further that when Blake supplied these separate plates, the captions he inscribed on them were in no case quoted from the poems they were supposed to "illustrate," but were apparently written as Blake's latest responses to the independent symbolic meaning of the designs. Thus the title page of *Urizen* is inscribed not with a line about Urizen or the "primeval priest" but with a playful question evoked by the symmetrical quality of the design: "Which is the way, the right or the left?"

where it can be underlined, annotated, and easily read. The total effect is rather like that of one of those medieval illuminated bibles, a *biblia pauperum* which provides us visionary paupers and illiterates with something to feed our imaginations.

Northrop Frye has remarked that the independence of Blake's designs from his words is rather surprising in view of the prevailing conventions within which he worked. The tradition of historical painting, Frye argues, tended to dictate a slavish fidelity to the text, and the naïve allegories of the emblem books were generally "an attempt to simplify the verbal meaning."[18] Blake's departures from these traditions have too often been explained, however, by recourse to value judgments and odious comparisons.[19] Not all the allegories were naïve, and history painting had its masterpieces. Blake's departures from traditional ways of connecting poetry and painting cannot, I would suggest, be understood simply as an improvement in the quality of his use of the two modes of expression. In the eighteenth century the ideal of relating the "sister arts" of painting and poetry had become grafted to aesthetic concepts which were in many ways alien to Blake's philosophy of art. In order to understand his stylistic departures from these conventions we need to compare the assumptions that lay behind them with Blake's own understanding of the purposes of art, and of the nature of composite art in particular.

II. BLAKE AND THE TRADITION OF THE SISTER ARTS

It is probably an exaggeration of Blake's originality and uniqueness to say that his composite art has "scarcely a parallel in modern culture."[20] Blake seems so original because—to invoke Eliot's paradox in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"—he is so deeply traditional. His art is not reducible to the conventions of manuscript illumination, the emblem, the *impresa*, the book of icons, or other forms of book illustration, because he is capable of using any and all of these forms when it suits his purpose. But he does not seem particularly eclectic in the loose sense: there are important aspects of the tradition of the sister arts that he conspicuously avoids, both in relations

[18] Frye, "Poetry and Design," p. 45.

[19] Rosemary Freeman, for instance, compares Wither's marigold emblem with Blake's sunflower, but she can only point to the superiority of Blake's poem, not the underlying difference in purpose. See her *English Emblem Books* (New York, 1970), pp. 24-29; reprinted from original edition (London, 1948).

[20] Frye, "Poetry and Design," p. 46.

between text and design and in the formal qualities of his poems and pictures taken separately. Jean Hagstrum is certainly right to see in Blake "a theoretical commitment to the values of pictorialism, broadly conceived,"[21] but this could be said with equal force of Keats or Hogarth. The question is, what unique modification did Blake give to the tradition of the sister arts, and at what point was he likely to depart from it?

As illustrated books, of course, nothing like Blake's illuminated poems had been seen since the Middle Ages.[22] Although book illustration had become a minor industry in the eighteenth century, it was essentially a business of assembling work by different hands (printer, engraver, painter, and writer) into a final product which reflected the division of labor that went into it. The free interpenetration of pictorial and typographic form so characteristic of Blake's books is technically impossible in a medium which separates the work of the printer from that of the engraver. Blake's books unite the labors of the craftsman and the artist: he invents both the text and its illustrations (often at the same time), cuts both into the copper plate as parts of one total design, and prints them on his own press, retouching and adding final color by hand. In one sense, then, there is almost something perverse about discussing the "relations" between the constituent parts of an art form which is so obviously unified in both conception and execution.

Blake could hardly have been unaware, however, that his age was obsessed with the idea of unity in general, and with the goal of uniting the arts of painting and poetry in particular. The eighteenth century was, after all, the age that discovered that art could be spelled with a capital "A," and Abbé Batteux could entitle his 1746 treatise *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*.[23] As he set about uniting

[21] Much of the following section is the product of an exchange between Hagstrum and myself in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*. Professor Hagstrum's brief essay there, "Blake and the Sister Arts Tradition," was written partly in response to my claim in "Blake's Composite Art" that Blake was more critical than appreciative of the sister arts tradition. I have tried in the following pages to meet his objections and have altered my own views where appropriate. I should stress, however, that my debts to Professor Hagstrum's splendid scholarship far outweigh any disputes with his conclusions.

[22] For an informative survey of the history of style and technique in this field, see David Bland, *The Illustration of Books* (London, 1951).

[23] For a general study of the rise of aesthetics as a distinct discipline in the eighteenth century, see Paul O. Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* III

his two art forms in a single composite form, then, Blake must have meditated on the kinds of "unity" he did and did not want to achieve. It seems evident, for instance, that he had an instinctive antipathy to abstract notions of unity, systems based on the assumption that "One Law" governs the multiplicity of phenomena. If "One Law for the Lion & Ox is oppression," it seems reasonable to suppose that one law for painting and poetry is oppression too.

The problem is only aggravated when that one law or "même principe" is called "nature," and is defined as a reality external to and independent of human consciousness. Blake's rejection of an art based in the imitation of nature transcends the usual boundaries which divide artistic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wordsworth and Pope get equally bad marks for "following nature," despite the fact that they mean radically different things by the word. In Blake's view the reliance on nature encouraged a tendency to evaluate art not in terms of its imaginative or visionary coherence, but in terms of its correspondence to the general idea of what is "out there." It did not matter to him whether the "there" was defined as the Lockean "ratio of five senses" or a Platonic realm of abstract forms to be apprehended through memory and reason. The problem with both concepts was that they split the perceiver from an "objective" world outside himself, and they encouraged, not just technical verisimilitude in art ("fac-simile representations of merely mortal and perishing substance"; *DC*, K 576), but conventionality and a tame correctness.

The doctrine of nature as the source, end, and test of art also had important consequences for the understanding of the relationship between the arts. If painting and poetry were imitations of the same thing, they ought to be reducible to their common origin. *Ut pictura poesis* ("as a painting, so also a poem") became, in eighteenth-century aesthetics, not a casual comparison but a commandment for poets and painters.[24] The dominance of this principle had, I would

(1951), 496-527. Useful recent studies include Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1970), and James S. Malek, *The Arts Compared* (Detroit, 1974). Malek notes that "comparative discussions of the arts, along with aesthetic speculation in general, gradually increased in popularity during the eighteenth century in Britain. In terms of total numbers of works produced, this branch of aesthetics achieved its most rapid growth between 1760 and 1790" (p. 154), precisely the period in which Blake was growing up.

[24] Of the enormous body of literature on this subject, the most useful studies

suggest, three major consequences for the practice of poetry and painting: (1) It encouraged a sense of *translatability*, a conviction that differences in mediums, like those of language, are superficial distinctions. It can hardly be an accident that an age believing so firmly in the possibility of translation turned book illustration and literary painting into a light industry. (2) It encouraged a belief in the *transferability* of techniques from one medium to the other; painting was not merely similar to poetry, it was supposed to borrow techniques from its sister art. (3) Where differences between the two arts were acknowledged, the issue of unity was resurrected in the notion of *complementarity*, the idea that the coupling of the two arts would provide a fuller imitation of the total reality. Blake had, I would suggest, a highly critical attitude toward these notions of the sister arts, and thus a basic foundation for the understanding of his style is an analysis of the way he confronts the prevailing conventions in his own stylistic choices, sometimes rejecting, sometimes assimilating and transforming traditional notions for his own purposes.

1. *Illustration: Visual Translation and Visionary Transformation*

The belief in the translatability of literature into painting is everywhere evident in the eighteenth century's liking not only for individual designs illustrating literary texts but for entire galleries de-

are Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*; Robert J. Clements, *Picta Poesis: Literary and Humanistic Theory in Renaissance Emblem Books* (Rome, 1960); Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts* (Chicago, 1958); Rensselaer Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York, 1967), reprinted from *Art Bulletin* XXII (1940), 197-269; and Ralph Cohen, *The Art of Discrimination: Thomson's "The Seasons" and the Language of Criticism* (London, 1964). One obvious gap in our history of critical theory is the transformation of the idea of *ut pictura poesis* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of the few treatments of this subject is Roy Park's "*Ut Pictura Poesis*: The Nineteenth Century Aftermath," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXVIII (1969), 155-64, which suggests that the critical, antipictorialist, and antivisual attitudes which I ascribe here to Blake are characteristic of Romantic criticism in general. Blake would surely have been aware of his friend Fuseli's sentiments in the matter: "From long bigotted deference to the old maxim that poetry is painting in speech, and painting dumb poetry, the two sisters, marked with features so different by nature, and the great masters of composition, her oracles, have been constantly confounded with each other by the herds of mediocrity and thoughtless imitation" (From the *Analytical Review* of 1794, quoted in *Encounters*, ed. John Dixon Hunt [London, 1971], p. 7).

voted to the pictorial translation of poets. Macklin's "Poets' Gallery" and Boydell's "Shakespeare Gallery" were symptomatic of the belief that painting would be enhanced by an alliance with literature, and that, despite some technical problems, translation from one medium to the other was possible and even inevitable. The pleasures of imagination were, as Addison had pointed out, the pleasures of "the most perfect and delightful of all our senses," our *sight*.[25]

Blake is entirely within the mainstream of eighteenth-century literary painting in the sense that all of his pictures are in some way related to texts. But his usual approach to those texts, in contrast to the general practice of eighteenth-century illustrators, is to provide not a plausible visualization of a scene described in the text but rather a symbolic recreation of the ideas embodied in that scene. The symbolic independence of his designs for Job and Dante has been well-documented,[26] but the peculiar quality of Blake's illustrations is probably best exemplified in his treatment of Milton, the poet who more than any other was illustrated in the eighteenth century. As Marcia Pointon puts it in *Milton and English Art*: "unlike any other illustrator of Milton, Blake incorporated into his designs his own interpretations of the poem. Various artists ranging from Medina to John Martin embroidered on the text in order to portray more convincingly the scene described, but Blake actually contributes to the symbolic content of the poem through his own very personal interpretation . . . his illustrative method is symbolic rather than representational. He is concerned with the idea rather than the narrative."[27]

Blake's vigorous independence as a literary illustrator has often been traced to his intellectual disputes with the texts he illustrated. The Bible must be seen as well as read, presumably, in its "infernal

[25] "The Pleasures of the Imagination," *The Spectator*, No. 411, 21 June, 1712, reprinted in *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays*, ed. Scott Elledge (Ithaca, N.Y., 1961), I, 42. Elledge also quotes John Dennis: "The eye is a sense that the poet ought chiefly to entertain, because it contributes more than any other to the exciting of strong passion" (I, 501). Malek's survey of theoretical statements on this issue indicates the prevalence of visual norms: "painting was to strive for more or less accurate representation of visual particulars; *no one* argued that the province of painting (or sculpture) might include anything other than natural concretes" (*The Arts Compared*, p. 155, italics mine).

[26] The classic study of the *Job* series is Joseph Wicksteed's *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job* (London and New York, 1910). For the Dante series the basic work is Albert S. Roe, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, 1953).

[27] (Toronto, 1970), pp. 137-38.

sense," and Dante's Caesarism, like Milton's Puritanism, must be corrected, not merely reflected by the conscientious illustrator. But these pictorial "wars of intellect" which Blake conducted with the texts of the past continue, in a sense, even into his designs for his own poems. This suggests that his illustrative independence, his refusal to provide visual translations of texts, is not merely a sign of doctrinal differences with his subject, but is a basic principle in his theory of illustration.

The difference between "symbolic" and "representational" illustration can be seen when we compare Blake's treatment of the theme of the expulsion from paradise with that of a contemporary, E. F. Burney [11, 12]. Burney's version is designed as a plausible visualization, with great attention to details of vegetation and drapery. The only clue that this is a supernatural, Biblical scene is the presence of Michael's wings; otherwise, we would simply be seeing a large warrior dragging a half-nude couple through a dense woodland. Blake, on the other hand, makes no attempt to place his scene in a realistic setting. Natural details are schematized, and the human figures, while classically rendered, are placed in a frontally composed row across the surface of the picture plane, rather than (as in Burney) twisting back into the interior space of the design. This symmetrical frontality permeates Blake's entire composition: the lighting does not streak across a distant sky, but forms a jagged border around each figure. The "Flaming Brand" which waves over paradise is not in the distance, but forms a stylized whirlpool of color which seems, like the horsemen of the apocalypse around it, to hover directly over the heads of Adam, Michael, and Eve. In short, Blake's version is the more primitive, stylized, and emblematic of the two, and it is dominated not by the concerns of visual illusionism or verisimilitude but by pictorial ideas, or what Blake would call "Intellectual Vision." This does not mean the picture is a diagrammatic system of abstract symbols, nor is this style completely unique to Blake. Contemporaries such as Fuseli, Barry, Mortimer, and Flaxman were moving in the same direction. But Burney's treatment, with its emphasis on visual translation, is the more typical product of the sister arts tradition as the eighteenth century understood it, because it locates Milton's episode in visualized nature, the realm in which poetry and painting were supposed to converge. The difference between Blake and Burney is the difference between a visionary and a visualizer, a transformer and a translator.[28]

[28] Morse Peckham makes a strong case that Blake's treatment of the expulsion

2. *Pictorialist Poetry and Visionary Prophecy*

The belief in a homogeneous visualizable nature ("Single vision & Newtons sleep") was also the basis for mutual transference of techniques and standards of taste between the visual and verbal arts. Superficial symptoms of this transference were the taste for attaching long quotations to paintings as captions and the construction of elaborate systems of analogies between the two arts by eighteenth-century critics. The test of a poem became its ability to evoke pictures in the reader's mind, pictures like the ones he would see "in nature," or in those faithful imitations of nature, postmedieval paintings—not, Lord Shaftesbury would assure his readers, in those "magical, mystical, monkish, and Gothic" pictures of the "emblem kind" which had dominated the vision of a less reasonable age.[29] Nature, reason, and visual (i.e., homogeneous, single-perspective, three-dimensional) space made it possible for the pleasures of imagination (i.e., visualization) to mean the same thing in poetry and painting.

The most obvious consequence of the vogue for "painterly poetry" was, of course, the descriptive poem, a form which, like the nature it described, cut across the boundaries between classicism and romanticism. From Thomson to Wordsworth to Keats we find a continuing fascination with verbal paintings of real or ideal places and things.[30] Blake seems especially alien to this tradition. The main thrust of his poetry is dramatic, from the dramatized states of mind in *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to the thunderous dialogues of the "Visionary Forms Dramatic" in his prophetic poems. More important, the scenes in which these poetic dramas are set tend to be consistently and increasingly nonvisual. The landscapes

theme was based on Burney, a fact which would bring into clearer focus Blake's consciousness of stylistic transformation. See Peckham's "Blake, Milton, and Edward Burney," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* XL (Spring 1950), 109. For a survey of other treatments of the expulsion, see Merritt Hughes, "Some Illustrators of Milton: The Expulsion from Paradise," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* LX (1961), 670-79, but note that Hughes mistakenly attributes the first "gentle" treatment of the expulsion (the angel holding Adam and Eve by the hands rather than driving them out with a sword) to Blake. Actually, as Thomas Minnick has shown, such a treatment was conceived earlier by Frances Hayman ("On Blake and Milton," Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1973, p. 17).

[29] Shaftesbury, *Second Characters, or The Language of Forms*, ed. Benjamin Rand (Cambridge, Mass., 1914), p. 92.

[30] On this subject see Cohen, *The Art of Discrimination*, Chap. III.

of the early lyrics are simply identified as "valleys wild" or "ecchoing greens": there is none of the dwelling on the patterns of light and shade or the effects of distance which we find in the "picturesque" poetry of the eighteenth century. Blake seems to have heeded Johnson's remark that "scenery is fine—but human nature is finer," for his settings never become the subject of the poem, and are never treated as if they were independent of the human theme Blake is dramatizing. This obliteration of the visual and objective aspects of the poetic landscape reaches its radical extreme in the phantasmagoric "fluxile" spaces of the prophetic books, in which the "look" of Blake's scenery changes with every change in the mind of the perceiver. Thus we find Blake, like the blind Milton, avoiding painterly or picturesque descriptions in favor of visual paradoxes such as "darkness visible" and "the hapless Soldiers sigh" which "Runs in blood down palace walls." And we also find him going beyond Milton, using the vast, cosmic abysses of *Paradise Lost* as an interior distance whose shape is not fixed or picturable, as it is in Milton, but rather is seen as the raw material of psychological transformation:

> First I fought with the fire; consum'd
> Inwards, into a deep world within:
> A void immense, wild dark & deep,
> Where nothing was; Natures wide womb.
> And self balanc'd stretch'd o'er the void
> I alone, even I! the winds merciless
> Bound; but condensing, in torrents
> They fall & fall; strong I repell'd
> The vast waves, & arose on the waters
> A wide world of solid obstruction
> (*U* 4:14-23, E 70-71)

The "scene" around this narrator is indistinguishable from his consciousness of it: he *is* the "wide world of solid obstruction" which arises on the waters within himself. The visual world Blake creates here is not the objective, homogeneous "natural" perspective of postmedieval painting; it is more like the kaleidoscopic world of the modern cinematographer.

It is possible, of course, for poetry to be pictorial without containing descriptions of natural scenes. Jean Hagstrum has argued that despite Blake's disregard for the picturesque he was a pictorialist in his use of "verbal icons" (imagery that "suggests or is organized

into pictures or other works of graphic art"), "picture gallery form" (in which "the reader moves like a spectator from tableau to tableau"), and the "visualizable personification."[31] It is true that all these elements may be found in Blake's poetry, but they are not used in a visual or pictorialist manner, as the eighteenth century understood it. Blake frequently alludes to icons or artifacts: shields, buildings, sculpture, tools, ornamented fabrics, books, and whole cities are mentioned or described—but not in a way that invites us to visualize them, or to think of their visual appearance as especially significant. Despite his fondness for the artifact, Blake never makes one of them the controlling image of a poem, in the manner of Keats's Grecian urn. When a single image such as, for instance, a tree does become the focus of a poem, its visual, natural properties as an object of description are minimized:

> The Gods of the earth and sea,
> Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree
> But their search was all in vain:
> There grows one in the Human Brain
> ("The Human Abstract," *Exp*; E 27)

When Blake does pause to describe a fixed object, such as the city of Golgonooza, the result is anything but a visualizable set of images:

> The great City of Golgonooza: fourfold toward the north
> And toward the south fourfold, & fourfold toward the east
> & west
> Each within other toward the four points. . . .
> (*J* 12:46-48, E 154)

There is a similar problem with the idea of "picture gallery form." Blake does not move, as Spenser or Thomson does, from one picture or visualizable scene to another, but rather from vision to vision—and these visions tend to be not visual but synaesthetic, tactile, and phantasmagoric. Their relationship, moreover, is not like that of items in a sequential gallery of distinct visual structures. They tend rather to be linked in a dramatic fashion, as the oratory or stream of consciousness of characters who have conflicting visions to express. The effect is more like watching a furious debate, in which the contestants are capable of projecting vast multimedia displays to demonstrate their arguments.

[31] "Blake and the Sister Arts Tradition," *VFD*, p. 85.

Blake's deepest connection with the pictorialist tradition is in his use of personification, but not, I think, the "visualizable" personification. Blake rarely describes his personae in visual terms, perhaps because he knew his own illustrations were worth the proverbial thousand words, but also because they are, in the corporeal, three-dimensional sense, invisible. Keats's "Ode to Psyche" treats a visualized personification in the typical pictorialist fashion (as his Grecian urn treats the icon). Keats has never really seen his goddess outside of pictures and statuary,[32] but he adopts the fiction that he *has* seen her in a dream or with "awakened eyes," placing her and Cupid in a lavishly detailed natural landscape. Such a treatment of personification is alien to Blake's whole sense of where his characters exist, the human mind. Keats recognizes the mental nature of Psyche in a theoretical way, but when he tries to give her a home in his mind, he visualizes that home as a picturesque landscape, where thoughts become pines "murmuring in the wind," receding into the distances of a Claude Lorrain or Salvator Rosa landscape: "Far, far around shall those dark-clustered trees/ Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep." Blake would probably have sympathized with the humanistic theme of "Ode to Psyche," but he would have seen Keats's treatment of it as that of a fanciful voyeur, too obsessed with his externalized visualization of Psyche.[33]

Perhaps the simplest test of Blake's antipictorialism, however, is the fact that his poems do not refer us visually even to his own illustrations. His characters are rarely described in terms that would allow us to "see" them if we did not have actual pictures of them. Urizen is "this Demon of smoke,/ . . . this abstract non-entity/ This cloudy God seated on waters/ Now seen, now obscured" (*Ah* 2:10-13, E 83). Los is too busy hammering and building and dividing to hold still for a verbal portrait. This lack of verbal visualization makes the task of identifying characters in the illustrations rather problematic. We conventionally assume, for instance, that Urizen looks like the old man with the white beard we find in the illustrations. But in the poems Urizen frequently acts not like a patriarchal deity but like the Satanic rebel against a heavenly order (he is characterized as the "prince of light" in *The Four Zoas* 25:5). Similarly, Los

[32] Ian Jack suggests some of the specific pictorial sources Keats may have used in *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford, 1967), Chap. XII.

[33] Walter Jackson Bate points out that Keats himself was "aware of the limitations of the genre" of descriptive poetry, and worked to free himself from its influence. See Bate's *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 124.

is not invariably depicted as the heroic artist-liberator: he sometimes adopts the role of jealous patriarch and oppressor, forming "nets & gins" like his adversary Urizen. While Blake's illustrations provide a stable visual element that is absent in his poetry, then, even they do not provide us with unambiguous portraits of his personae or their settings. They are more likely to be what David Erdman has called "multi-purpose emblems,"[34] designs in which a few simple forms can be "seen" in several different ways.

It is, of course, impossible to write poetry for very long without introducing some visual imagery. Blake acknowledges that "it is impossible to *think* without images of somewhat on earth" (Annotations to Lavater, E 590; italics mine). But he does his best to place his visual imagery in a nonpictorial, nonobjective context, treating it as the malleable content of a consciousness that sees much more than meets the eye in three-dimensional spatial perspective. One suspects that Keats was on a parallel track: his interests in dramatic poetry and in synaesthesia were both motivated, in part, by a desire to free himself from the luring sirens of description ("I am getting a great dislike of the picturesque"; "descriptions are bad at all times").[35] Blake seems not to have been so tempted by the pleasures of the eighteenth century's version of pictorialism, deriving his imagery from the older and more radical pictorialism of sacred literature, in which language becomes vision and the word is made flesh:

> Hear the voice of the Bard!
> Who Present, Past, & Future sees
> Whose ears have heard,
> The Holy Word,
> That walk'd among the ancient trees.
> (Introduction to *Experience*)

> I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing. . . .
> (*MHH* 12, E 38)

3. *The Picture as Text: Narrative, Allegory, and Vision*

The other half of the pictorialist program for the sister arts was to make painting more "poetical." If this goal is seen in the sense of the Leonardesque *paragone*, as the attempt to make painting as intellectually respectable as poetry, then Blake is certainly a poetical painter. But the tradition as Blake received it had become more particular and demanding. It had come to mean not only the literal, visual fidelity to historical and literary texts epitomized by Burney, but also a tendency to see pictures as literary texts in themselves, containing narrative episodes, "depth" characterization, and allegorical details to be "read" like words, as signs of a reality not presented in the picture.[36]

Hogarth (who like many eighteenth-century painters referred to himself as the "author" of his compositions) exemplifies the attempt to give a narrative, temporal dimension to the visual arts. The simplest way of doing this was to fill the picture with details that would evoke various stages in the "story" behind the scene depicted. The first plate of *A Harlot's Progress* [13] for instance, shows the York stagecoach which brought the girl to town at the left, her initial encounter with the procuress in the center, and the would-be seducer waiting in the doorway at the right. The other details (toppling baskets, dead goose, the haggard woman on the balcony in the background) are all omens of the more distant future. So pervasive was the taste for pictures that could be "read" in this fashion that some critics even found narratives where none were intended. Le Brun, for instance, insisted on reading the different reactions of the Israelites in Poussin's *Fall of the Manna* as a narrative sequence, showing the state of the Jews before, during, and after the descent of the manna.[37]

Although Blake considers himself in some sense to be a "history painter,"[38] it is clear that he has little interest in attempting to construct his compositions as narrative texts.[39] His designs concentrate on a few foreground images, usually arranged symmetrically, with a minimum of subordinate detail, encouraging an instantaneous grasp of the whole design rather than an impression of sequence. Occa-

[34] Erdman, *TIB*, p. 209.

[35] Quoted in Bate, *John Keats*, p. 124.

[36] See Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, Chap. IX, "The Unity of Action."

[37] For a fuller analysis of *A Harlot's Progress* and the traditions of literary, historical painting that lie behind it, see Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: His Life, Art, and Times* (New Haven and London, 1971), I, 259-76.

[38] Blake's exhibition of 1809 contained "Poetical and Historical Inventions," according to his *Descriptive Catalogue*, and he regularly identified himself as a painter of history, meaning heroic, sublime, epic subjects.

[39] This generalization applies mainly to the illuminated books. It is also generally true in Blake's other works, but there are notable exceptions, such as the *Arlington Court Picture*, which has several centers of interest and seems designed to be read.

sionally, to be sure, he does present metamorphic sequences across the foreground plane,[40] usually in marginal designs where (for obvious reasons) radial and bilateral symmetry must give way to some sort of sequential presentation. But these marginal murals embody the passage of time not as a progression from the near to the distant, or from the clear to the obscure, as in Hogarth, but as a movement from the near to the near. All moments in the sequence are immediate and immanent, just as in the poetry the prophetic narrator sees "Present, Past, & Future" as an eternal *now*.[41]

The other desideratum of poetical painting, the representation of the interior life of its human subjects, not just their outward features, likewise seems difficult to apply to Blake's practice. His human figures have a kind of allegorical typicality, and are clearly not designed as subtly differentiated portraits of real persons. We see very little subjectivity or individuality in the faces of Blake's figures for the same reason we do not find complex motivation or intricate personalities in his poetical personifications. Urizen cannot have his own interior life like the character of a novel; he is only an aspect of the interior life of the single human mind that constitutes the world of his poem. Blake certainly expresses passions and states of mind in his pictures, but he does not present them as residing *within* human figures, subtly disclosed (as in Rembrandt) by the way a shadow descends from an eyebrow. He presents the parts of the psyche *as* human figures. His portraits are thus not of men with minds, but of the mind itself, seen as human form. One consequence of this strategy is that the expressiveness of the human figure tends, for Blake, to be diffused throughout the body rather than focused primarily in the face: "I intreat then that the Spectator will attend to the Hands & Feet to the Lineaments of the Countenances they are all descriptive of Character" (*VLJ*, E 550).

The branch of literary painting which seems closest to Blake is, of course, the allegorical world of Dürer, the emblematists, and the Neoplatonists whose *icones symbolicae* point toward an invisible reality. We should beware, however, of assuming that Blake simply rejects in a circular fashion the eighteenth century's rejection of "magical, mystical, monkish" painting of "the emblem kind," and returns to the sacramental pictorialism of the Middle Ages and

[40] See, for example, plates 1, 4, and 15 of *America*.

[41] Sometimes these sequences can be read in both directions, which further undercuts the temporal, sequential impression. See Erdman, *TIB*, p. 139, for a reading of *America* 1 in this manner.

Renaissance. While his pictures do have a more emblematic, allegorical quality than the naturalistic world of eighteenth-century painting, he nevertheless seems, as Hagstrum argues, to have avoided the "Oriental, mystical, diagrammatic grotesques," and the arbitrary, intentionally obscure imagery of the arcane mystery cults.[42] Blake's pictures do contain some grotesques (swan-maidens, human dragons, griffins, etc.) and numerous emblematic attributes (compasses, globes, hammers, veils, books), but never in the profusion that we find in Dürer or the emblematists. Blake is reported to have kept a print of Dürer's *Melencolia I* [108] hanging above his workbench for most of his life.[43] But when he adapted this theme for use in one of his own illuminations, he drastically simplified and condensed the iconography. In *Jerusalem* 78 [105] he depicts a figure in the traditional melancholic pose, seated like Rodin's *Thinker* with his head resting on his left hand. The bird's head on this figure (probably an eagle, reflecting the traditional association of Saturn with melancholy, an association Dürer makes with the eaglelike wings on his figure; for Blake the eagle is primarily a symbol of genius) is the only "emblematic" departure from a rather spare naturalism.[44] Otherwise, Blake has stripped his character naked in both the literal and figurative sense: the elaborately rendered draperies and the labyrinth of allegorical detail which fill Dürer's composition are completely absent in Blake. But this divesting of detail does not reduce the iconographical complexity of the composition. It tends rather to open up the range of allusive contexts that Blake may be evoking, linking his "bird-man" not only with *Melencolia* but with treatments of St. John (author of Revelation) as a man with an eagle's head [106], and further with Blake's own verbal descriptions of "Los's Melancholy," especially the one that appears in the text just below this picture: "Los laments at his dire labours . . ./ Sitting before his Furnaces clothed in sackcloth of hair" (*J* 78:10-11, E 231). What we are seeing in Blake's picture, then, is a portrait of Los as a melancholy

[42] "Blake and the Sister Arts Tradition," *VFD*, pp. 88-89.

[43] Arthur Symons, *William Blake* (New York, 1907), p. 122.

[44] Dürer's figure and the paraphernalia around it have many other intersections with Blake's symbolism. The best discussion of *Melencolia I* is found in Erwin Panofsky's *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1955), pp. 156-71. For the association of the eagle with Saturn, see Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London, 1964). The link between Dürer's print and Blake's use of it in *Jerusalem* was pointed out to me by Judith L. Ott and is developed in her note "The Bird-Man of *Jerusalem*," *Blake Newsletter* X: 2, no. 38 (Fall 1976), 49-51.

prophet of apocalypse, rendered in a fusion of Christian iconography, Renaissance humor theory, and classical mythology. Dürer's composition is the more "literary" piece in the sense commended by the doctrines of *ut pictura poesis*: it is a kind of text full of symbolic details to be "read" by the knowing reader. Blake's design is as iconographically complex as Dürer's, but that complexity has been focused in imagery that can be grasped (although not explicated) almost instantaneously. The ideal of a visionary *biblia pauperum* could not have been better served.

Blake's stripped-down and condensed treatment of the *Melencolia* theme is obviously *not* what Shaftesbury had in mind when he called for eighteenth-century painters to create "True, natural, and simple" compositions to replace the "False, barbarous and mixed" hieroglyphics of the seventeenth century.[45] Blake's style resides somewhere between these two extremes, in a middle ground which may be defined by bracketing one of his designs between examples of what Shaftesbury meant by true and false art. Rosemary Freeman provides these brackets: a seventeenth-century emblematic rendition of *The Choice of Hercules* and an eighteenth-century version of the same theme by an Italian artist commissioned by Shaftesbury to carry out his idea of naturalness [14, 15].[46] Between these let us place a similar composition by Blake, which in the absence of a title we may call *The Choice of Jerusalem between Classical and Gothic Form* [16]. Shaftesbury's version is clearly designed as a plausible visualization of a dramatic moment in time. In Wither's version, on the other hand, "none of the three characters has any particular interest in the others: it is a tableau in which each is posed in an attitude appropriate to his own nature."[47] Shaftesbury subordinates the mythical, symbolic nature of his characters to the demand that the picture be "natural, credible, and winning of our assent: that she may thus acquit herself of what is her chief province, the specious appearance of the object she represents."[48] For Wither, "all objects have an allegorical significance. Both in their patterned arrangement and in the fact of their being present at all, the claims of verisimilitude are ignored. . . . Shaftesbury's criterion of the natural and credible is irrelevant here since in such pictures objects are introduced not for their 'specious appearance' but for their significance."[49]

How does Blake's composition relate to these two? It is clearly

[45] Shaftesbury, *Second Characters*, p. 92.
[46] *English Emblem Books*, p. 9.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

more unified visually and dramatically than Wither's composition. The characters interact even more intimately and intensely than Shaftesbury's, and Blake, like Shaftesbury, seems to have chosen the moment of decision: if Hercules is depicted in "the moment when Pleasure has ceased to plead and Virtue is still speaking," Blake chooses the moment when Vala is about to throw her veil over Jerusalem, and her attendants are still urging her to flee. On the other hand, there are emblematic elements in Blake's design (the icons of classical and Gothic architecture), and the whole composition has a supernatural, unreal quality (produced by the flight of the figure at the right, the clouds around the central group, and the schematic nature of the setting) which draws it closer to Wither's way of seeing things. "Specious appearance," the plausible visual illusion, is not negligible in the picture, but it does not govern the composition as it does for Shaftesbury.

If we meditate a little further on the dramatic unity of Blake's design we notice that this is not the unity of a realistic theatrical scene, but more like the visual presentation of melodrama, mime, or dance, forms which depend upon exaggerated bodily and facial gestures to make up for their lack of verbalization. Shaftesbury's dramatic unity is based, by contrast, on a verbal unity: Virtue speaks and Hercules listens—for a long time, evidently, judging by the boredom conveyed by his face and posture. This sort of verbal unity, the sense that the characters are speaking or about to speak, is perhaps the most literal kind of *ut pictura poesis*, and the kind which is most conspicuously absent in Blake. His characters do not say anything: they are too busy acting out a visionary dumb show in a realm of sensuous (not primarily visual) immediacy, somewhere between the hieroglyphical world of Wither and the visual, verbal world of Shaftesbury. Blake's style of presentation does not reside exclusively in either world, but unites elements of the classical, naturalistic mode of vision with the "Gothic" supernatural. Is it only an accident that his Jerusalem has not yet made her choice either, but stands poised, like her creator, between the illusory veils of Nature, "specious representation" and classicism, and the naked glory of Gothic form?

We will pursue this question further when we come to a more detailed consideration of Blake's pictorial style. What should be clear at this point is the distinctness of Blake's visual art from the "literary" traditions of allegorical and narrative painting. Blake would undoubtedly have accepted the fundamental idea of *ut pictura poesis*, in that it insists on the intellectual respectability of painting.

As he proclaims in the *Descriptive Catalogue*: "Painting, as well as poetry and music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts" (E 532). All the arts are unified in the imagination. They are the "Powers of conversing with Paradise which the flood did not Sweep away" (*VLJ*, E 548). But for Blake, painting does not attain visionary, intellectual status merely by imitating the story-telling or signifying procedures of language and literature. It must be "elevated into *its own proper sphere* of invention and visionary conception" (*DC*, E 532; italics mine)—"The apple tree never asks the beech how he shall grow, nor the lion. the horse, how he shall take his prey" (*MHH* 9, E 36). The "proper sphere" of painting may include some of the techniques of literary painting, but it does not define its essential character in literary, verbal ways.

4. *Painting Plus Poetry or Painting Times Poetry*

One of the more obvious contradictions in the tradition of *ut pictura poesis* was the idea that despite the desirability of making poetry and painting more similar, each had a distinct role to play in the imitation of nature. The personification of painting and poetry as sisters was no accident. It expressed concisely the conviction that the two arts were daughters of the same nature, and that they provided complementary representations of the basic modalities in which reality was apprehended—space and time, body and soul, sense and intellect, and, in the realm of aesthetics, *dulce et utile*.[50] Painting was linked with the spatial, bodily, sensuous world, and poetry with the temporal, mental realm, a division which reflected the traditional feeling that poetry was the "higher" art. The emblem book enjoyed a particularly privileged role in this scheme because it seemed to provide the most comprehensive possible imitation of a bifurcated reality. As the anonymous essayist of *The Plain Dealer* put it in 1724: "*Two Sister Arts*, uniting their different *Powers*, the one transmitting *Souls*, the other *Bodies* (or the outward Form of Bodies), their combining Influence would be of Force to frustrate

[50] The space-time distinction was invoked by Lessing in his *Laocoön* (1766) to refute the pictorialist tendency to blur the differences between the arts. A typical example of the "complementary" use of the distinction appears in an unsigned essay in *The Free Thinker*, no. 63 (22 October 1718; reprinted London, 1722), II, 34-36, which argues that poetry is chiefly effective in time because mass publication permits it to endure. Painting, on the other hand, is ineffective in time because it is perishable, but conquers space because it leaps the language barrier. Poetry and painting as an aesthetic *dulce et utile* is documented in Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, p. 168.

Death Itself: And all the Ages of the world would seem to be *Cotemporaries*."[51]

Blake's critique of this notion of the sister arts can be understood most clearly in terms of his reception of the idea of nature that lies behind it. For Blake, the dualistic world of mind and body, time and space, is an illusion which must not be imitated, but is to be dispelled by the processes of his art: "the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged; this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid" (*MHH* 14, E 38). Relief etching with acid or "corrosives" was the process by which Blake cut his copper plates, melting away the apparent surface of the copper to reveal an art form in which soul and body, rendered in the modalities of poetic time and pictorial space, are united. Blake would agree with the program of the emblematists to unite the two arts, not, however, as a means of imitating or transmitting the full range of reality, but to expose as a fiction the bifurcated organization of that reality. Blake sees the separation of body and soul, space and time, as various manifestations of the fall of man, "His fall into Division" (*FZ* 4:4). The function of his composite art is therefore twofold: it must "melt apparent surfaces away" by satirizing and exposing the illusion of a dualistic nature (thus "All Bibles or sacred codes" have caused the erroneous notion "That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul"; *MHH* 4, E 34); and it must "display the infinite which was hid," by overcoming the fall into a divided Nature with a "Resurrection to Unity" (*FZ* 4:4). For the emblematists, painting was to be *added to* poetry in order to imitate the larger sum of spatial and temporal reality; for Blake, poetry and painting were to be *multiplied by* one another to give a product larger than the sum of the parts, a reality which might include, but not be limited by, the world of space and time.

Blake never refers to his painting and poetry as "sister arts," a curious omission for a man who lived in the age which systematized this metaphor so extensively. The reason may lie in his conception of the dualities that his art was designed to overcome. Blake's most pervasive metaphor for the fall into "division" is the separation of the sexes. The temporal and spatial modalities in which poetry and painting are created are consistently defined in sexual terms: "Time & Space are Real Beings a Male & a Female Time is a Man Space is a

[51] *The Plain Dealer*, II, no. 60 (London, 1730).

Woman" (*VLJ*, E 553). Even more significant is Blake's attribution of spatial and temporal *forms* to masculine and feminine creative forces: "The Female . . . Creates at her will a little moony night & silence/ With Spaces of sweet gardens & a tent of elegant beauty:/ . . . And the Male gives a Time & Revolution to her Space" (*J* 69:19-23, E 221). In Blake's myth the sexes are, like the time and space, soul and body which they personify, illusions that have arisen with the fall of consciousness from primal unity (the fact that he refers to them as "Real Beings" is a way, I would suggest, of affirming the vitality of this illusion, perhaps even its inevitability). Blake generally describes this fall into division as the paradoxical consequence of the attempt to impose an abstract unity of "One Law" on the multiplicity of phenomena. Urizen's attempt to rationalize experience into a homogeneous continuum always begets its own opposite, a chaotic multiplicity which will not obey his iron laws for a moment, and, in particular, a world of polarized forces such as time and space, mind and body, man and woman. Blake describes this process in *Jerusalem*: "When the Individual appropriates Universality [i.e., imposes one law]/He divides into Male & Female" (*J* 90: 52-53, E 248). The danger then arises that these divisions will become permanent, that masculinity and femininity will no longer be seen as contraries within a larger consciousness but will "appropriate Individuality," becoming definitive categories of individual human beings or basic modes of human nature in the way time and space are basic modalities of physical nature: "when the Male & Female,/ Appropriate Individuality, they become an Eternal Death" (*J* 90:53-54, E 248).

The analogy may be extrapolated in physical nature as follows: when Nature appropriates Universality, it divides into Space and Time. When Space and Time appropriate Individuality, they come to be seen as irreducible realities, the "nature of things." Space then becomes indefinite extension, the vast, homogeneous abyss of "Bacon, Newton, & Locke," and time becomes indefinite duration, an endless Heraclitean flux or the "dull round" of cyclical determinism. For the painter, spatial form becomes increasingly visual: the tyranny of sight and the "Druidical Mathematical Proportions of Length Bredth & Highth" (three-dimensional perspective) replace the synaesthetic field of visionary perception in which the senses "discover the infinite in every thing." For the poet, temporal form becomes an art of memory, the endless refinement of classical models, or the raking

up of the poet's own past, an indefinitely extended realm for the egotistical sublime.

The eighteenth-century version of *ut pictura poesis* sought to overcome the separation of time and space, body and soul, by making poetry and painting more similar, adding them together as complementary representations, or reducing them to their common denominator, nature. Blake's strategy, I would suggest, was to transform the dualism into a dialectic, to create unity out of contrariety rather than similitude or complementarity. Blake wanted to combine spatial and temporal form in his illuminated books not to produce a fuller imitation of the total objective world, but to dramatize the interaction of the apparent dualities in our experience of the world and to embody the strivings of those dualities for unification. The aesthetic and iconographic independence of Blake's designs from their texts can thus be seen as having two functions. First, it serves a mimetic purpose, in that it reflects Blake's vision of the fallen world as a place of apparent separation between temporal and spatial, mental and physical phenomena. Second, it has a rhetorical or hermeneutic function, in that the contrariety of poem and picture entices the reader to supply the missing connections. In this light, the problematics of relating text and design serve as an "allegory address'd to the Intellectual powers" which is "fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act."[52] David Erdman suggests that we regard the illuminated poem as a "prompt book" which leads us to make "an imaginative leap in the dark, a leap *beyond* the dark" to "Visions, Expanses, New Songs, and Thunderous Dramatic Forms."[53]

[52] Blake to Thomas Butts, 6 July 1803; and Blake to Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799 (K 825, 793). The idea of throwing difficulties in the path of the interpreter is, of course, as old as allegory itself, and was a favorite technique of the emblematists in making witty, obscure connections between the visual and verbal aspects of their emblems. As Paulson notes (*Emblem and Expression*, p. 14), "the emblem is not merely illustrating a device (motto), a known adage, or an apothegm; it may use one or more of these topoi as its raw material, both visual and verbal, in order to produce a total image that is more than the sum of its parts, that is independent, problematical, to be deciphered." The difference in Blake's art appears to be one of degree, not of kind; his visual and verbal art forms attain more aesthetic independence, each in their own sphere, than we find in the emblem books, and his metaphysic of contrariety demands a multiplicative rather than an additive relationship between visual and verbal form.

[53] "America: New Expanses," *VFD*, p. 93.

The total presentation of Blake's illuminated books, then, is a kind of living embodiment of his theory that "without Contraries is no Progression." The unity of his composite art depends upon the vigorous independence of its component parts. Only in this light can we resolve the apparently contradictory facts that (1) Blake's illuminated books are, technically speaking, the most integrated forms of visual-verbal art since the medieval illuminated manuscript; and (2) the constituent elements of these books, the poems and their illustrations, have a vigorous aesthetic independence which makes them satisfactory, if fragmentary, works of art in and of themselves.

III. THE UNITY OF BLAKE'S COMPOSITE ART

The tradition of the sister arts as modified in the eighteenth century is useful for showing the kinds of things Blake was reacting against as he set about uniting the verbal and graphic arts. But it also sets the stage for an understanding of the positive principles which animate his stylistic choices. Blake would probably not have been impressed by Lessing's attack on the excesses of *ut pictura poesis*, because it only tried to reaffirm the obvious differences between the sister arts rather than to discover a new basis for their unification, and it did not question the basic doctrine of nature as the source, end, and test of art. In Blake's view the attempt to make poetry visual and to make pictures "speak" and tell a story was inherently flawed, not just because it ignored fundamental differences between the two art forms, but because it presumed the independent reality of space and time and treated them as the irreducible foundations of existence. As we have seen, Blake considers space and time, like the sexes, to be contraries whose reconciliation occurs not when one becomes like the other, but when they approach a condition in which these categories cease to function. In the simplest terms, his poetry is designed to invalidate the idea of objective time, his painting to invalidate the idea of objective space. To state this positively, his poetry affirms the power of the human imagination to create and organize time in its own image, and his painting affirms the centrality of the human body as the structural principle of space. The essential unity of his arts, then, is to be seen in the parallel engagements of imagination and body with their respective mediums, and in their convergence in the more comprehensive idea of the "Human Form Divine." For Blake, in the final analysis the body and the imagination are separable principles only in a fallen world of limited perception, and the business of art is to dramatize their unification: "The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION. . . . It manifests itself in his Works of Art" (*Laocoön*, E 271).

Blake's specific techniques for constructing his art forms as critiques of their own mediums are becoming increasingly clear. In the poetry he creates a world of process and metamorphosis in which the only stable, fixed term is the imagining and perceiving mind. Cause and effect, linear temporality, and other "objective" temporal structures for narrative are replaced, in the prophetic books, by an imaginative conflation of all time in the pregnant moment. The prophetic narrator-actor perceives "Present, Past & Future" simultaneously, and is able to see in any given moment the structure of all history: "Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery/ Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years" (*M* 28:62-63). Consequently, the narrative order of the poem need not refer to any incontingent, nonhuman temporal continuum. Most narrative structures employ what Blake would call "twofold vision": that is, the imaginative arrangement of episodes is constructed with reference to an implicitly objective time scheme. The narrative selects its moments and their order in terms of some imaginative rearrangement of the objective sequence: *in medias res*, *ab ovum*, or *recherche du temps perdu*. All of these selective principles assume, however, that there is an order of nonhuman, "natural," or "real" time which flows onward independent of any human, "subjective," or "imaginary" reorganization of its sequence. For Blake, this objective temporal understructure is an illusion which is to be dispelled by the form of his poetry, or adumbrated in the single mythic episode. The beginning, middle, and end of any action are all contained in the present, so the order of presentation is completely subject to the imagination of the narrator. Hostile critics have always recognized this quality in Blake's major prophecies when they indicted them for being "impossible to follow." That is precisely the point. Blake's prophecies go nowhere in time because time, as a linear, sequential phenomenon, has no place in their structure. *Jerusalem* is essentially a nonconsecutive series of epiphanies or visionary confrontations with the total structure of history (six thousand years) encapsulated in the poet's experience of the personal and historic moments in his own life. That is why Blake has Los, his alter ego, personify Time, Poetry, Prophecy, and the Imagination simultaneously. In this way Blake could dramatize the poet's management of fictive time and the prophet's quarrel with history as versions of the struggle of the individual with

himself. It is also why Blake continues Milton's task of consolidating the forms of epic and prophecy in the embracing form of revelation.[54] The epic form provides the forward pressure, the sense of a journey through time and space (the "passage through/ Eternal Death"). The prophetic strain emphasizes the visionary moment, continually asserting that the time is at hand, the journey really a dream ("the Sleep of Ulro") from which we can awake at any moment. The apocalyptic form provides windows into that awakened state which is found at the center (moment) and circumference (beginning and end) of time, the "awaking to Eternal Life." Blake's prophetic works stress these forms in different ways (*The Four Zoas* is more like a narrative epic, *Milton* a dramatic epic like *Paradise Regained*) which all tend to the final consummation in *Jerusalem*, an encyclopedic song "Of the Sleep of Ulro! and of the passage through/ Eternal Death! and of the awaking to Eternal Life."

A similar consolidation of epic and prophetic styles can be observed in Blake's illuminated prints, in which the human figures of classical, Renaissance history (i.e., epic) painting, are placed in a Gothic (i.e., prophetic or apocalyptic) spatial setting.[55] Art historians have begun to recognize that this sort of hybrid style, far from making Blake a historical maverick, places him in the mainstream of experimental movements in late eighteenth-century art.[56] In historical terms, Blake's style must be defined (along with that of many of his contemporaries) as a kind of "Romantic classicism," an oxymoron which helps us to see that his art has affinities with Michelangelo, Raphael, and the mannerists in his treatment of the human figure, with Gothic illumination in his primitivism and anti-illusionism, and with contemporaries such as Flaxman in his stress on pure outline, Fuseli in his use of the terrific and exotic, Barry and Mortimer in their treatment of the mythic and heroic.

Historical terminology cannot explain, however, how and why

[54] The best recent work on this subject is that of Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr. See, for instance, his "Opening the Seals: Blake's Epics and the Milton Tradition," in *Blake's Sublime Allegory*, ed. Stuart Curran and Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr. (Madison, 1973), pp. 23-58 (hereafter cited as *BSA*).

[55] In the sister arts tradition, history painting was considered the analogue of epic poetry, a comparison which Blake echoes when he writes in the margin of Reynolds' *Discourses*, "A History Painter Paints The Hero, & not Man in General" (E 641).

[56] Robert Rosenblum's essay "Toward the *Tabula Rasa*," in his *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art* (Princeton, 1967), does a great deal to demonstrate Blake's centrality.

these elements are transmuted into something unified and unique in Blake's pictorial style. His art is a curious compound of the representational and the abstract, the picture that imitates natural forms and the design that seems to delight in pure form for its own sake. The "flame-flowers" which are so characteristic of his early work, and which later inspired the arabesques of art nouveau, exemplify the interplay between representation and abstraction that informs all his work. Abstract linear forms such as the vortex or the circle provide the structural skeletons for a seemingly infinite range of representational appearances, and the postures of his human figures are repeated so systematically that they suggest a kind of pantomimic body-language, a repertoire of leitmotifs that can be repeated in widely differing contexts.[57] Blake provides a kind of emblem of the "life of forms" in his art in his picture of a serpent metamorphosing into a flame, then a leaf, and finally into the tendrils of a vine [17].

The effect of this sort of pictorial strategy is to undercut the representational appearance of particular forms and to endow them with an abstract, stylized existence independent of the natural images with which they are identified: serpent, flame, and vegetative form participate in one sinuous formal life. Blake frees his style, in this way, from the task of accurately representing nature ("fac-simile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances"; *DC*, E 532), and develops a style which demonstrates that the appearances of nature are to some extent (but never completely) arbitrary, and subject to transformation by the imagination of the artist.

All art, of course, even that which claims only to provide a mirror image of external reality, transforms its subject matter in some way, through the imposition of some style or convention. But the very subject of Blake's art is this power to transform and reshape visual imagery, and, by implication, the ability of man to create his vision in general. This is what he means when he says that his art "copies Imagination" ("Men think they can Copy Nature as Correctly as I copy Imagination this they will find Impossible"; *PA*, E 563). The word "imagination" does not mean, I would suggest, a transcendent body of archetypal, quasiplatonic forms; it is rather the name of a process ("The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself"; *M* 32:32, E 131). And this process is the activity by which

[57] Northrop Frye ("Poetry and Design," p. 48), was the first to suggest an analogy with Wagner's use of the leitmotif. Janet Warner's important essay "Blake's Use of Gesture," *VFD*, pp. 174-95, attempts to categorize the basic body positions.

symbolic form comes into being, not just the state of its finished existence. Blake's pictorial style embodies the interaction between imagination and spatial reality, then, just as his poetic form enacts the encounter between imagination and time.

The concrete symbol or icon of the imagination in Blake's pictures is, of course, the human body. The nonillusionistic, stylized character of the settings which surround the body is Blake's iconographic way of restating his central stylistic premise, that the shape and significance of spatial reality is not objective or given, but derives its form and meaning from the human consciousness that inhabits it. The environments of Blake's paintings thus serve as a kind of malleable setting for human form: there are no mathematically consistent perspectives, and very few landscapes or architectural backgrounds which would make any sense without the human figures they contain.[58] Pictorial space does not exist as a uniform, visually perceived container of forms, but rather as a kind of extension of the consciousness of the human figures it contains.

The essential unity of Blake's composite art, then, lies in the convergence of each art form upon the goal of affirming the centrality of the human form (as consciousness or imagination in the poetry, as body in the paintings) in the structure of reality. The coupling of Blake's two art forms is thus an enactment of his central metaphor, "The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION. . . . It manifests itself in his Works of Art" (*Laocoön*, E 271). Blake's art is neither representational, imitating a world of objective "nature," nor allegorical, rendering an invisible, abstract, transcendent reality. It is, rather, an art of "Living Form," built upon the stylistic interplay between linear abstraction and concrete representation, the iconographic drama of the human body in pictorial space, and the poetic drama of the imagination in time, working to find the form and meaning of the moment, the individual life, and the total expanse of human history, "Six Thousand Years."

The consequences of this definition of Blake's art are perhaps more apparent in his poetry than his painting. Since Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* the nonallegorical nature of Blake's poetry has been regularly acknowledged,[59] and recent criticism has begun to explore

[58] On Blake's adventurous distortions of perspective, see Rosenblum, *Transformations*, pp. 189-91.

[59] Allegory, that is, in the "corporeal" sense, as a kind of code whose "real meaning" lies behind the symbols rather than dwelling in their sensuous particulars. Blake obviously approves, on the other hand, of sublime allegory which "rouzes the faculties to act," stirring up the imagination of its readers.

the question of form in the major prophecies. *Jerusalem* is no longer treated simply as a quarry for Blakean "philosophy," but is being investigated as a poetic structure whose generic elements are just now coming into focus. The recognition of traditional structural topoi such as the epic quest, the descent into the underworld, the dream vision, the prophecy and apocalypse has become much more eclectic and pluralistic. We are now in a position to assimilate these structures into Blake's theory of poetry as a critique of time, a project which may reveal that the major prophecies have formal and thematic intersections with works like *Tristram Shandy* as well as with the Bible and *Paradise Lost* (more on this in Chapter V).

It is generally acknowledged that the understanding of Blake's pictures has progressed more slowly, partly because art historians are not usually equipped to deal with the formidable complexities of Blake's verbal "system"; consequently the commentary on Blake's pictures has been mostly literary, i.e., concerned with the identification of imagery whose meaning is felt to reside primarily in the text, not in the formal treatment provided by the picture.[60] Our problem, then, is to go beyond the identification of Blake's symbolic figures to a grasp of his symbolic *style*, not just in a historical sense, but as a repertoire of specific formal devices, as a personal expression of the artist's ideology, and as a strategy for manipulating the visual field of the reader/spectator—a kind of visual rhetoric. To this problem let us now turn our attention.

[60] Erdman (*VFD*, p. vii) notes that "in the reading of Blake's illuminations the advance has been slower and less steady," and Hazard Adams (*Blake Newsletter* VII: 3, no. 27 [Winter 1973-74], 69) traces this problem to excessive literariness of commentary on the pictures. A good primer on the thicket of methodological interference between literary criticism and art history is provided in *New Literary History* III (Spring 1972), an issue devoted to this subject; see especially Svetlana and Paul Alpers, "*Ut Pictura Noesis*? Criticism in Literary Studies and Art History," 437-58.