

History and Poetry: William Blake and *The French Revolution**

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William Blake's poem *The French Revolution* is probably the first British literary representation of the revolution in France. Blake wrote it in 1790 and 1791, that is, during the first phase of the revolution, without the benefit of any historical perspective. It is remarkable that even Voltaire and Rousseau still represent revolutionary ideas in this poem; it was only a few years later that Blake associated them with the "Unholy Trinity": the rigid rationalism of Newton, Bacon and Locke. However, the capitalised words Religion, Order and God appear here as the "mind-forg'd manacles" in Blake's well-known social views: as the restrictive powers setting up boundaries against human freedom. Facing contemporary history helped Blake develop his intricate system of mythology and find the aesthetic qualities matching his radical ideas. Of course, ideology and imagery in Blake should not be separated, even in case the reader wants to give his texts a purely political reading. Ideas and images form a dynamic unity in Blake, mutually shaping each other. In this paper I will make an attempt to outline how these two produce the aesthetic qualities of this early poem.

In *The French Revolution* Blake contrasts images of war with the notion of pacifism; even the king fits into the peaceful vision of the closure. Instead of decapitating him, Blake finds a place for him in a new world order. One should remember that the poem was written between 1790 and 1791, before Louis XVI lost his popularity, tried to flee the country and was eventually executed. The imagery obviously follows the biblical pattern of regaining Paradise, with former enemies finding peace and forming universal harmony. Pacifism is the ruling principle of the poem. Paris becomes a heavenly Jerusalem, where soldiers and noise have no place:

Awful up rose the king, him the peers follow'd, they saw the courts
 of the Palace
Forsaken, and Paris without a soldier, silent, for the noise was gone
up

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And follow'd the army, and the Senate in peace, sat beneath morning's
beam. (ll. 304-306)

This restored harmony, however, has a precondition: the revolution itself. The most important formal sign of dynamic forces in the background of the static image is the anapaestic rhythm, a metric pattern very rarely used by Blake. Rising feet, particularly a combination of iambs and anapaests, often imply the dynamism of revolution and military events; one can find well-known examples in Byron and Petöfi as well as in romantic music, such as in some works by Rossini, Beethoven and Chopin. All these features demonstrate that *The French Revolution* is a characteristic representative of a major tendency in European thinking between 1760 and 1815: a trend largely determined by the idea of revolution (Bronowski 1972: 4).

Blake published *The French Revolution* as the first part of a longer poem, but he never wrote the rest of it. Whether he was really planning to add further cantos is not quite clear; one hypothesis is that advertising the later parts was the editor's idea to increase subscription. It can be read as a completed text; nevertheless, it was abandoned before Blake's death. G. E. Bentley's monograph mapping Blake's reception mentions only one reference to it in 19th-century criticism (1975: 51). There is every reason to believe that Blake himself was dissatisfied with the poem. This is also one of the very few texts that he did not publish with his own design. The complete works of Blake edited by David V. Erdman contains only three "unengraved" prophetic books; the other two are *Tiriel* and *The Four Zoas*. Nevertheless, *The French Revolution* received attention in the 20th century, since its discussion may contribute both to reading Blake's life work as a cohesive whole and to studying the literary and political features of the era in which it was written: the last decade of the 18th century.

Although the typical figures of Blake's mythology do not appear in this text, it still shows a number of characteristics that can also be discerned in his "engraved" prophetic books. The most spectacular of these is the symbolic role of nature: social events are either represented by metaphorical images of surreptitious natural phenomena (lightning, thunder, the mysterious changing of sunlight and shade) or the social and the natural become mirror images of each other. *The French Revolution* starts with a vision of "dead brood" (the word "brood" recalling the notion of contemplation, as it also does elsewhere in Blake), and finishes with an image of early morning sunbeams (natural light symbolising the rebirth of society). The imagery of nature in the poem suggests that Blake was conscious of using the aesthetic quality of the *sublime*: the visions of *The French Revolution* are sensual representations of human freedom, but this freedom also transgresses human boundaries; consequently, it evokes simultaneous anxiety and pleasure. Before discussing the manifestation of the sublime in the poem, I will briefly survey how three German philosophers of the age saw this category.

According to August Wilhelm Schlegel, the sublime is absolute or unparalleled greatness; when we perceive it, we can feel pleasure only after

overcoming our initial rejection (1980: 555). It follows that whereas we observe the beautiful with relaxed contemplation, the sublime unsettles our souls; the former is pure enjoyment, the latter is a mixed feeling (1980: 558). According to Hegel, “the first decisive purification of the absolute [meaning] and its express separation from the sensuous present, i.e. from the empirical individuality of external things, is to be sought in the *sublime*. Sublimity lifts the Absolute above every immediate existent and therefore brings about the liberation which, though abstract at first, is at least the foundation of the spirit” (1975: 362). As mentioned above, in Schlegel’s definition the sublime means something unsettling, a quality that is constructed of controversial tendencies. Hegel suggests that the essence of these controversies, that is the structure of the sublime, can be grasped in the interplay of the external and the inner: “Sublimity presupposes the meaning in an independence in comparison with which the external must appear as merely subordinate, because the inner does not appear in it but so transcends it that nothing comes into the representation except as this transcendence and superiority” (1975: 372). In other words, Hegel concludes that in the sublime “transcendence and superiority” are primary in contrast with what is transcended. Blake’s pacifism can be viewed as a political manifestation of such transcendence as an overwhelming force. The third German philosopher in this brief survey, Schiller, distinguishes between moral and immoral sublime (Szerdahelyi 1984: 124), two categories that seem to be particularly significant in Blake’s poem, since these two qualities represent the two forces entering a conflict: revolution, which has morally justifiable roots, and the antirevolutionary forces, which become sublime in and by their fall.

For all the interfaces mentioned above, Blake, of course, did not know Schlegel’s, Hegel’s or Schiller’s aesthetic views. The theoretical work in which he read about the beautiful and the sublime was Edmund Burke’s highly influential *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, first published in 1756. In this essay Burke draws a sharp dividing line between the two aesthetic qualities indicated in the title. In his view, beauty is “no creature of our reason, since it strikes us without any reference to use”; it is “some quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses” (Needham 1952: 175). The sublime, on the other hand, is based on horror, pain, danger, and threat. It has a stronger effect upon the observer, since “the idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure” (Needham 1952: 176-177). In Burke’s interpretation, the sublime is a representation of power, not that of freedom (as beauty is). The sublime, furthermore, creates a sense of the infinite, which “has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” (Needham 1952: 179). This concept of the sublime is an essential element of Blake’s imagery. Even the representation of the seven towers at the beginning of the poem recalls Burke’s theory, since he emphasises the importance of vertical greatness in sublimity. Burke’s theory also influenced Blake’s contemporaries; this explains the similarity of *The French Revolution* to some English paintings of the period.

Primarily Philip James de Loutherbourg's pictures and (from the younger generations) John Martin and William Turner show the influence of Burke's concept of the sublime (Paley 1986: 132). One reason why Blake did not design the poem in his usual way may have been that the pictures that could have served as illustrations (*viz.* de Loutherbourg's paintings) already existed.

While Blake followed in the wake of Burke's definition and discussion of the sublime in many respects, he also deviated from it: as Morton D. Paley has pointed out, he rejected the principle of obscurity (1986: 100). Burke went as far as concluding that "a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to enthusiasm whatsoever" (Needham 1952: 68). Blake writes just the opposite in his *Annotations to the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*: "Art is Definite and Determinate [...] Vision is Determinate and Perfect [...] Without Minute Neatness of Execution. The Sublime cannot Exist! Grandeur of Ideas is founded on Precision of Ideas" (1982: 646).

In *The French Revolution* Blake achieves a sublime effect by transforming the historical events represented in the poem into a timeless condition, thus creating visions with "Minute Neatness of Execution". He removes the revolution from its original historical context, its causes and consequences; to use Coleridge's later phrase, this means removing the film of familiarity. In other words, he makes the historical event *apocalyptic*. Blake was not at all unique in this respect: the apocalyptic view is a basic factor of British painting and engraving between the second half of the 18th century and the mid-19th century, too. The method of transforming history into apocalypse largely determines the form of his poem as well. G. Béla Németh writes in a study that "the apocalypse as a *genre* came into being as a form of revolt or political and social rebellion. It is very likely that it was so in the age of antiquity. In recent centuries, particularly in modern art, its *direct* political character often (even usually) is pushed into the background" (1982: 1457). What we can witness in Blake's poem is that a political intention and an apocalyptic view are intertwined again.

For Blake and many of his contemporaries the revolution was an event that put their intellectual revolt into practice. It was not only a political peak, but also an aesthetic one. Using Eliot's phrase, Joseph Wittreich suggests that the revolution in France "came to be regarded as an objective correlative for the drama then playing itself out in the mind of mankind" (1988: 22). The artist obsessed with the idea of the sublime became a spectator of the revelation of history. The moment of the revolution was viewed as the end of the past and the beginning of the future, which offered both a panoramic image of disintegration and a vision of a new world (*cf.* Frye 1983: 136-137). This resulted in the aesthetic quality of the *apocalyptic sublime*, the golden age of which was during the revolution in France, the Napoleonic wars and "the agitation for Reform" (Paley 1986: 1). There developed two main types of the apocalyptic sublime: an abstract trend disregarding history or seeing it only as a threatening force rather than revelation (*e.g.* de Loutherbourg) and a historically inspired movement

(Paley 1986: 70), which reached its highest achievement in Blake's pictures and poetry.

The apocalypse as a central subject matter and the apocalyptic as a method and quality appeared in Blake's career so early that he preceded those older painters who later became famous for their apocalyptic pictures (mainly Benjamin West and de Louthembourg). Blake was obsessed with the vision of divine revelation bringing history to its end and followed by the Last Judgment. This vision haunted him all his life, but, as Morton Paley has pointed out, we should distinguish between two periods: "At first Blake saw this process embodied in the revolutions of his time; later he conceived of it as acting through the artistic imagination, which he equated with the spirit of prophecy" (1986: 71). *The French Revolution*, of course, is a text from the first period. The big change for Blake came later, during the Napoleonic wars after 1800 (Bronowski 1972: 10). Similarly to many of his contemporaries, Blake also saw Napoleon as a betrayer of the revolution. When he was not able to regard and represent him as a superhuman hero any more, he turned to the original source describing the apocalypse: the Bible. This was the time when his art became even more densely biblical, mythological and esoteric than before.

The historical subject matter at least partly explains why the sublime is counterbalanced by another aesthetic quality, namely the grotesque, in *The French Revolution* – a combination that can be detected in some of Blake's apocalyptic pictures, too (Paley 1986: 185). In the poem the grotesque quality can mainly be seen in the sarcastic representation of the archbishop of Paris: he arises "in the rushing of scales and hissing of flames and rolling of sulphurous smoke" (l. 126), like a devil, and encourages the king to order his soldiers to "possess this city of rebels" (l. 155).

This polarity between the sublime and the grotesque increases the apocalyptic tone: the sublime is associated with the spirit and the kingdom of God, the grotesque with the body and human history. But the poem is not an apocalypse as a literary genre; formally speaking, it is much closer to the classic epic tradition. In 18th-century Britain Alexander Pope's translations of Homer were generally accepted examples to follow. English Classicism regarded Homer's epics as the most appropriate representation of its own spirit; as Bronowski has remarked, its function was not unlike that of the *Encyclopedia* in France some decades later (1972: 8-9). Although later in his career Blake proved to be the most merciless destroyer of this concept, in 1790 he was only half way between respecting Pope's ideal of "copying" the ancient masters and creating his own rules. *The French Revolution* starts *in medias res*, and it can be read as the enumeration as it would appear in a longer epic: the author introduces the main characters one by one. (It will be remembered that the text was advertised as the first part of a long poem.) What still distinguishes it from the conventional epic is that its subject matter is a contemporary event, and its major function is to represent the poet's radical political views.

Blake started writing his more famous book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in 1789, and probably completed it in 1790. *The Marriage* and *The French*

Revolution contain similar ideas. The well-known suggestion of the former is that “Heaven and Hell are born together”: the passive goodness of Heaven can only become active if the demonic forces of Hell impregnate it. Although it would be a mistake to read *The French Revolution* as a strict analogy of this Swedenborgian thesis, it also implies that Heaven and Hell, the good and the evil are born together. Thus, this poem is also an example of rejecting 18th-century rationalism and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination – as so many other texts by Blake are. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, as David Erdman puts it, “mocks those who can accept a spiritual apocalypse but are terrified at a resurrection of the body of society itself” (1954: 163). *The French Revolution*, on the other hand, represents a social apocalypse coming into being. When France was proclaimed a republic in spite of the antirevolutionary armies threatening to invade the country, Blake celebrated this event “as a victory for the powers of truth, a dawn of enlightenment” (Davis 1977: 58). He wrote a prophetic hymn of triumph entitled “A Song of Liberty”, which eventually became the closure of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The birth of liberty means the defeat of Urizen, the jealous god at the level of mythology, and the destruction of the lion and the wolf (the emblems of Austria and Prussia) at the level of historical allegory (Davis 1977: 58).

The Marriage of Heaven Hell is an anticipation of later prophetic books in all respects, whereas *The French Revolution* remained a unique experiment in Blake’s life work. It would require a study in its own right to discuss how actual historical personalities and events are reflected in the poem, how these anticipate Blake’s complicated mythology, and how this text compares with the well-known political essays of the same period, mainly Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. In this paper I have surveyed its most important poetic and aesthetic features. To conclude, the artistic force of *The French Revolution* is based on the tension between the historical subject matter and its apocalyptic representation. But this is also its limitation as the reader cannot fully suspend his/her disbelief while reading the poem. It lacks both the documentary power of chronicling history and an elaborate mythological system that could recreate the timeless condition of the apocalypse. For all its merits, it proved to be a dead end, but – as dead ends often do – it contributed to the later development of Blake’s art.

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