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Conscripting Imagination: The National "Duty" of William Blake's Art

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...plus d'informations

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Abstract

This paper explores William Blake's creative and commercial positioning relative to late-eighteenth-century galleries, exhibition culture and artistic spectacle. Demonstrating a desire to reintroduce originality into reproductive processes while also embracing the exaggerated and politicised rhetoric often associated with the spectacular visual displays of exhibition societies and new media diversions, Blake confronts modern spectacle with corrective spectacles of his own, bringing clarity, detail and focus to bear on otherwise unmanageable sights. By combining the vocabulary of modern visual spectacles with a dutiful commitment to the maintenance of national strength and progress in the advertisements for and descriptions of his 1809 exhibition, Blake optimistically reconfigures his public as a homogeneously capable body of intellectual and consumer ability. Viewing his own artistic assertion as dramatic performance on national and political scales, he appeals to spectatorial intellect in an era of increasingly sensationalist visual displays, individually attempting to reconfigure the taste of his beloved "public" through a seductive hybridization of spectacular novelty and gallery traditions. However, his "failed"

exhibition allows us to see the overall incompatibility between his intended functions for art on national and political fronts (the conceptual), the rhetoric of spectacle (the visual), the individualism at the heart of Blake's revolutionary nationalism and the persistent economical/commercial foundations of this project. Blake's vision of a direct link between the strength of artistic expression, the potential of the urban audience and the strength of a nation is complicated by the economic demands faced by the artist and the inherently commercial nature of spectacle.

"The times require that every one should speak out boldly"

Blake ("Descriptive Catalogue" Erdman, *Complete* 549)

Despite his persistent efforts toward the pursuit of commercial and critical success, many aspects of William Blake's work display an anti-commercialism and anti-institutionalism that were at odds with contemporary British counterrevolutionary economies. By all accounts, Blake possessed a disheartening "innocence" when it came to the world of artistic commerce, but then again, Britain in the late eighteenth century was a politically charged arena in which attitudes of revolutionary republicanism and counterrevolutionary nationalism, though fundamentally opposed, were connected by virtue of their unforgiving attentiveness to the political implications of British artistic expression. Rather than falling into practices and producing works which reflected popular sentiment, William Blake consistently engaged with and often challenged contemporary political dialogue from an aesthetic vantage point. His writings repeatedly equate artistic production with national strength, asserting a close interplay between individual creativity, social currency and national vitality. Although Blake could have been a much more successful commercial engraver, his creative efforts to increase the profile and reputation of English painting and engraving via an artistically embodied nationalism drove him beyond reproduction toward an innovative antagonism to traditions and accepted aesthetic notions that had kept England at a quaint distance from continental art markets and developments. However, his esoteric and personal expressions repeatedly failed to inspire public and critical acceptance, most notably and anti-climactically during a self-directed public exhibition of his art in 1809. Regardless of whether Blake was a small-scale John Boydell, participating in patriotic rhetoric to encourage public (or parliamentary) patronage, or a genuine patriot unmotivated by a desire to achieve public acceptance and commercial success through compromise, his revolutionary nationalism, expressed through this largely invisible spectacle, was a failure. Few have examined the conceptual and historical ironies of his initially hopeful equation between the strength and success of this exhibition and the "Glory of [his] Nation" (Erdman, *Complete* 528). Blake's inability to normalize or successfully publicise his idea of England's path to national redemption and triumph through exhibition interrogates the impositions between commerce, display, nationalism, and creative individualism during this time, relationships which Blake was evidently aware of and frustrated by.

"Spectacle" is a word usually associated with a public show, a display of pageantry without the trappings of a dramatic narrative frame. Often the term is synonymous with live performances that aim to entertain

and astonish their audiences with unexpected, novel or excessive visual stimulation, such as Philip Astley's early versions of what would become circus variety shows in both France and Britain in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. Other examples from Britain and Europe in the late eighteenth century include the Phantasmagoria's illusory supernaturalism, the Panorama's immersive efforts toward realistic and all-encompassing depictions of the natural world, and the dioramas of the early nineteenth century, which added depth and lighting illusions to panoramic allure. All of these developments demonstrate an increasing presentational sophistication that attempted to seduce and capture the visual attention (and money) of their spectators (Darley 39-43). These popular forms of commercial entertainment and diversion, which grew in scope and number through the nineteenth century, were most often focused on sensationalist visual accomplishment, rather than intellectual appeal, and the term "spectacle" has gained this association as well.

In London, spectacular modes of presentation and promotion were certainly not unique to late-eighteenth-century "new media." Indeed, it is quite likely that the commercialization and marketing of such visual technologies were inspired by the techniques already associated with art exhibitions staged both by the city's main exhibition societies, including the Society of Artists, the Royal Academy, the British Institution and the Society of Painters in Water Colours, and the less prestigious but equally competitive art galleries and print shops. For example, while the Royal Academy's exhibitions at Somerset House attempted to maintain an appearance of exclusivity by charging a one shilling entrance fee (which eventually became a commonplace entry fee for most exhibitions, including Blake's 1809 exhibit) and warning patrons with a message in Greek over the entrance to the Great Room which, when translated, read "Let no stranger to the Muses enter" (Hook 207-8), the increasingly colourful artwork on the crowded gallery walls could not compete with the social spectacle of the attending crowds, who often appeared to be more concerned with exchanging gossip and spotting celebrities. This transformation of the art gallery into a mere stage for urbanites to confirm their sense of taste to each other, ensured profitability, but compromised the attempt at exclusivity and revealed a sensationalist flavour usually associated with less-respectful cultural pursuits. Such pressures took their toll on the character of the works featured in the exhibitions; Holger Hoock notes that it was a critical commonplace to link the spectacle of such exhibitions to "a fashion show with its tendency to promote a flashy, gaudy exhibition style: Academicians touched up their pictures at the last minute for maximum effect of colour and chiaroscuro so as to outshine their neighbouring performances" (214).

Ann Bermingham, in an excellent chapter from James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin's *Romantic Metropolis* entitled "Urbanity and the Spectacle of Art" demonstrates that the efforts of Rudolph Ackermann—a businessman who capitalized on (and popularized) the spectacle of art through his hybrid print shop, gallery, art school, tea room and salon, called the Repository of the Arts—were not all that different from the mercantile intentions behind the veneer of Royal Academy professionalism. Following from William Hazlitt's criticism regarding the Royal Academy's transformation of art into a commercial trade, Bermingham notes that both the Academy's exhibitions at Somerset House and the Repository functioned

as "'shops' in the business of selling art in the form of a fashionable commodity to a public consumed by personal vanity and ignorance" (167). Like the spectacle of the dandy, the public space of these galleries was a sign of "aristocracy without its obligations," simultaneously representing "London's aesthetic awakening" and a conservative, "nostalgic reverence for traditional signs and class privilege" (Bermingham 157). The functional diversity of Ackermann's Repository establishes it as a hybrid between the exclusive exhibitions of private collections, the institutional and educative nature of the larger societies and the egalitarian availability of printshop display windows, and exemplifies the inventive efforts made by artistic entrepreneurs to compete for the visual attention of London's crowds.

Though traditional schools of visual art and new visual technologies still managed to maintain a theoretical distance from each other by appealing to different urban classes, shared presentational techniques inspired by parallel commercial motivations confirmed the collective inferiority of all visual art to those who subscribed to long-standing perceptions of hierarchical difference between the sister arts of painting and poetry, between visual art and literary productions. The extent to which Romantic period writers, in their individual quests for beauty and sublimity, often reacted against the perceived emptiness of the type of experience offered by the visual arts has been well- documented. In *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture 1760-1860*, Gillen D'Arcy Wood effectively chronicles the result of the influence that the increasing prevalence and popularity of visual media had on the content and consumption of the arts during this period. However, little is said regarding Blake, whose creative embrace of images and words, two forms of mediation that Wood posits as definitive opponents in a late-Georgian culture war, complicates the sometimes binary considerations of Wood's study. It is true, though, that while Blake is a fairly anomalous and marginal figure in relation to or perhaps because of the growing contest for the public's attention, taste and capital between emerging technologies of spectacle and established traditions of poetry, many of Blake's contemporaries were certainly eager to voice an exclusive preference for language and its literary uses. Such a preference—at times inspiring a critical condemnation of Blake's efforts specifically—is to be expected in a nation whose literary traditions far outweigh its lack of a reputation in the visual arts in the late-eighteenth century, but is still surprising given the radical and revolutionary sympathies of many of the period's writers.

One would think that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a man who values the synthesizing powers of the imagination and the sustained contraries necessary for the poetic genius, would have much to say about Blake's composite artistic marriages. While Coleridge did call Blake a "genius" and a "mystic" in an 1818 letter to the Reverend H.F. Carey, and reacted with both perplexity and pleasure to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* poems in a letter to C. A. Tulk that same year, in the letter to Tulk he variously describes Blake's art as repulsive, masterful and emblematic, and offers some amusing criticism of two of the collection's etched and coloured drawings. Coleridge's brief focus on Blake's artistic efforts is eclipsed by a much more specific and favourable response to Blake's poetic output, which is expected, given the anti-pictorial assertions in his seventh lecture on Shakespeare. In the course of this lecture, which discusses the ability of poetry to "reconcile opposites and to leave a middle state of mind more strictly

appropriate to the imagination" and to call on the imagination to produce a "strong working of the mind", Coleridge opposes the distinct forms of painting to poetry's ability to "substitute a grand feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image" (311). He uses the conventional example of the skeletal representation of Death in paintings to show that visual art, instead of keeping the mind in a state of activity, reduces it to "a mere state of inactivity [and] passivity" (312). The philosophical and aesthetic motivations that define Coleridge's preference for the written word demonstrate that the bias against visual images was not exclusively a backlash against the increasing prevalence of entertaining spectacles, but was part of a longer tradition of artistic discrimination. Blake does remind us of the reinforcing link between late-eighteenth-century artistic economies, this convention of poetic preference, and national weakness when he suggests in his *Public Address* that that overpriced engraving adds to a general contempt for art by Englishmen (which is the greatest curse that can fall upon a nation) (Erdman, *Complete* 577). It is important to note that this indictment of conventional practices which have disabled the power of English painting to contribute to national strength does not target new visual technologies, thus preserving their possibly redemptive potential (in Blake's mind at least). Indeed, not only do the inclusiveness and inventiveness of Blake's artistic efforts challenge Coleridge's criticism of the shortcomings of visual art in that they imaginatively synthesize visual images and written words, they also demonstrate Blake's desire to reintroduce originality into reproductive processes while embracing the exaggerated and politicised rhetoric often associated with the spectacular visual displays of exhibition societies and new media diversions.

William Wordsworth also appears much more conservative than Blake when, in his 'Preface' to the two-volume 1802 edition of *The Lyrical Ballads*, he attempts to trace the origins of this increasing public desire for spectacle while condemning its effects:

> For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind…The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident…To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers…are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.—When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it.
>
> xv-xvi

Against this, Wordsworth asserts that "the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants" (xv). In 1845-46, as noted by Wood, Wordsworth's continued attempt to counteract the "degrading" effects of "outrageous stimulation" caused him to assert his conservative

preference for the power and purity of prose and verse writing in a critical sonnet, "Illustrated Books and Newspapers." The irony of Wordsworth's attack on popular forms of media resides in his suggestion that "A backward movement surely have we here,/From manhood—back to childhood; for the age/Back towards caverned life's first rude career" (6-11). These lines clearly contradict many of the "backward" glances toward childhood and to "low and rustic life" that Wordsworth initially relied on to counteract the blunting effects of modern spectacle and which became invaluable to his earlier poetic philosophy and work. His perception of a growing perceptual exclusivity, identified in the rhetorical question which asks "Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear / nothing?" is problematically remedied through a reactive exclusivity and elitist anxiety of his own (13-14). While the seeds of this judgement can be found in his some of his earlier writings (such as the excerpt from the 'Preface' quoted above), there is a relative openness to the power of seeing in "Book Seventh" of *The Prelude* (1850). Here, Wordsworth appears to change his strategy somewhat, poetically cataloguing the spectacles of the city, but also offering a perceptual strategy for incorporating such visual excess into a holistic, imaginative and complex philosophical understanding:

> Oh, blank confusion! true epitome
> Of what the mighty City is herself,
> To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
> Living amid the same perpetual whirl
> Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
> To one identity, by differences
> That have no law, no meaning, and no end --
> Oppression, under which even highest minds
> Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.
> But though the picture weary out the eye,
> By nature an unmanageable sight,
> It is not wholly so to him who looks
> In steadiness, who hath among least things
> An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
> As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.
>
> 723-736

This conceptualisation and responsive strategy helps us understand more fully how Blake's 1809 exhibition can be considered to both participate in and constructively answer the centre and circumference of London's urban "spectacle." Wordsworth's suggestion that the power of sight in the context of patience, imaginative intelligence and powerful feelings can overcome the confusion of the city's oppressive environment, reveals a more holistic and manageable cityscape, and serves to remind us of another definition of "spectacle"—a means of seeing, a window, mirror, model, pattern, standard, or medium through which anything can be viewed. One must confront the modern spectacle with corrective

spectacles of one's own, bringing clarity, detail and focus to bear on unmanageable sights. Some of Blake's artistic visions, presented in his small-scale 1809 exhibition, both challenge and reinforce the visual shifts, technological innovations and evolving ways of seeing that Wood identifies as an essential feature of England's Romantic period context.

A broader definition of "spectacle" further promotes this understanding. A spectacle can be a large-scale, public display or performance that offers a lavishly impressive, unusual or interesting show to the viewer. The use of "spectacle" can also suggestively define the thing (or person) which is exhibited as an object of admiration or contempt. Importantly, then, the visual focus of spectacles can include pleasant and unpleasant visual experiences and stimulation. These wide-ranging definitions support high-culture gallery traditions and practices as well as the emergence of technologically enabled pageantry and performance. The inclusive nature of the term bridges a number of literal and figurative gaps between these contrary modes of display which is something that Blake is also trying to do in his 1809 exhibit. However, the initial definitions of "spectacle," which associate the term with emerging eighteenth-century forms of popular entertainment also suggest a potential reason for his lack of success—Although Blake's "small-scale," (localised—though within the cosmopolitan streets of imperial London, local action has international potential) intellectually motivated exhibition of works, which feature overt political themes and nationalist intentions woven with literary and religious allusions, turns away from Academy grandeur and approval and directly appeals to the buying public for acceptance in a manner similar to that of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and Fuseli's Milton Gallery projects, the artist's faith in this enlightened public seems anachronistic in an age where visceral and escapist spectacles are becoming increasingly popular, where individual gallery attempts regularly fail aesthetically, economically and politically and where even the supposed "elite" spectators attending Royal Academy exhibitions are there merely "to see [and] be seen" (Hoock 203), to become a part of the spectacle themselves.[1] While many Royal Academy exhibitors and critics maintained an air of elitism and exclusivity— including Joshua Reynolds, Henry Fuseli, James Barry, William Hazlitt, Benjamin Haydon, and Charles Lamb—others, such as Benjamin West, Richard Payne Knight and even John Flaxman, recognized the increasing importance of the commercial potential of the academy and the arts, and supported a more egalitarian and commercially functional promotion of the arts to a broader spectrum of the public (Hoock 70-76). Blake's optimistic reconfiguration of the public as a homogeneously capable body of intellectual and consumer ability places him between the argumentative poles that sustained constitutional tensions in the Academy, and such ideals also appear to have determined his decision to advertise his exhibition through a mixture of traditional description and exaggerated fanfare. However, this choice further confirms the "bricolage" approach that John Mee links to Blake's poetic and political complexities, but also demonstrates the dangers involved in such tactics. In *Dangerous Enthusiasm* Mee's early suggestion that our understanding of Blake's unapologetic and radical recombination of "elements from across discourse boundaries" (3-4), leads to the eventual claim that Blake is deeply concerned with the disruption and transformation of hegemonic discourses. Mee's further suggestion that Blake is sabotaged by his own enthusiasm as a radical bricoleur (4) is confirmed by the decision to exhibit sixteen assorted paintings and drawings at 28 Broad

Street (a far cry from Pall Mall, the Strand or, specifically, Somerset House). Such an exhibit, which fortifies Blake's independence from larger academies but also demonstrates the influence of their turn to spectacular self-promotion and self-conceptualization, offered little hope of attracting the over 180,000 status-conscious and socially-motivated spectators who cumulatively crowded into the exhibitions of the Royal Academy, the British Institution and the Society of Painters in Water Colours between 1809 and 1810, regardless of Blake's confidence in the grandeur of his own vision (Hoock 65).

While Blake's attempt to be seen was overlooked by many, Allan Cunningham's second edition of *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1830) recalls that those visitors to Blake's exhibition "who missed the instruction in his pictures found entertainment" in the "wild performance" of his catalogue (644). Robert Hunt's anonymous review in *The Examiner* (17 September 1809) of Blake's exhibit and *Descriptive Catalogue* seems to confirm Cunningham's recollections, as Hunt describes the "amusing" *Descriptive Catalogue* as containing "the wild effusions of a distempered brain" (283-4). However, another more interesting possibility is that Cunningham's recollections were generated by an awareness of the popular opinion generated by Hunt's earlier, powerful critique. If this is the case it attests to the power and influence of the spectator over that of the artist. This power is something that Blake was evidently aware of, given his confidence in his public, but also something that he misjudged, given that Hunt and Cunningham recognise the spectacle of Blake's exhibition and descriptive rhetoric, but not its intended substance.

Mee's chapter on Blake in *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation* suggests that Hunt's earlier criticism of the visual presentation of spiritual and intellectual subjects in Blake's 1807 designs for Blair's "The Grave," signifies a critical preference for regulation and enlightenment intelligence over an undesirable representative amalgamation of passion, intellect and spirit in Blake's work that extended to the perceived "madness" of Blake's 1809 exhibition. However, the majority of Hunt's critique of Blake's enthusiasm is leveled at Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue*, which promotes the artist's enthusiastic embrace of the visual to entice the vision of his spectators. This is perceived by Hunt as "a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibleness and egregious vanity" (283) pointing to an ironically iconoclastic reaction against the images and the spectacular rhetoric that constitute Blake's own iconoclastic challenge to enlightenment sobriety. Hunt's conservative approach and inattention to the actual art objects of Blake's exhibition confirms J. D. O'Hara's suggestion that the "art critics of the Romantic period…possessed uncertain tastes and eclectic standards frequently derived from literature and morality. They attempted at once to guide and to follow their public, and they were equipped with an outmoded vocabulary inadequate to describe contemporary art and to express contemporary ideas about art" (79). While Blake, like the aforementioned art critic, also attempts to guide and follow his beloved public, his *Descriptive Catalogue* demonstrates his desire to connect with a contemporary, progressively intellectual audience by combining the vocabulary of modern visual spectacles with a dutiful commitment to the maintenance of national strength and progress.

Blake's advertisements and *Descriptive Catalogue* for the 1809 exhibition synthesises enlightenment

classicism with the contemporary public appetite for novelty and sensation. He advertises that his audience will view a “grand style” of Art (Erdman, *Complete* 528) and repeatedly describes his images as possessing “precision… [and] clear colours…unbroken by shadow” (Erdman, *Complete* 530). The paintings of Nelson and Pitt are “compositions of a mythological cast” recalling ages that produced “stupendous originals now lost or perhaps buried” (Erdman, *Complete* 530). The resulting paintings are “terrific and grand in the highest degree” but are mere miniatures of the monuments that Blake promises to construct under “national commission” (Erdman, *Complete* 531). His Chaucer’s Pilgrims features “characters which compose all ages and nations” and are also all variously described as being first rate, heroic, grand, perfect and terrific—extremes of idealization composed of “unbroken masses, unbroken lines and unbroken colours” (Erdman, *Complete* 538). His rendition of Gray’s Bard promises to demonstrate that “painting, as well as poetry and music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts” and can be “elevated into its own proper sphere in invention and visionary conception” (Erdman, *Complete* 541). Other works, such as “Satan calling up his Legions”, “The Goats” and “The Spiritual Preceptor” are offered as “experiment pictures,” as overworked extremes of unique creative execution.

Blake’s appeal to his fellow Londoners to experience his vision inventively adopts the rhetoric of spectacle, of exaggeration and sensory promise. However, while his descriptions often read like the words of a circus sideshow hawker and appear to circumvent many traditions of artistic production and display, they also contextualise the exhibit as part of an aesthetic, political and spiritual debate and dialogue that parallels the ideals of the exhibition societies. In other words, Blake appeals to spectatorial intellect in an era of increasingly sensationalist visual displays, individually attempting to reconfigure the taste of his beloved “public” through a seductive hybridization of spectacular novelty and gallery traditions. Thus, while Blake, like Ackermann, has faith in the “consolidation of the social domain through the…collective…consumption of the spectacle of art,” he also anticipates Hazlitt’s critical stance against the superficiality of artistic products manufactured by commercially-minded institutions (Bermingham 171). While seductively adopting the hyperbolic language of commercial advertising, Blake persists in his reluctance to simply give in to the shallowness of spectacle and commercial production, implying that such practices contribute to political and national weakness. This is still a familiar perception in our own time—the idea that technological spectacle (cinema, television, video games) discourages individual engagement with and awareness of nationalist or ideological motivations by encouraging passive receptivity, empty experience and shallow extremities of sensationalism. Blake’s unpublished notebook poem, “Now Art has lost its mental charms” illustrates the extent of his concern and offers a crucial link between his individual artistic practice and larger political concerns:

> 'Now Art has lost its mental charms
> France shall subdue the world in arms.'
> So spoke an Angel at my birth;
> Then said 'Descend thou upon earth,
> Renew the Arts on Britain's shore,
> And France shall fall down and adore.
> With works of art their armies meet
> And War shall sink beneath thy feet.
> But if thy nation Arts refuse,
> And if they scorn the immortal Muse,
> France shall the arts of peace restore
> And save thee from the ungrateful shore.'
>
> Spirit who lov'st Britannia's Isle
> Round which the fiends of commerce smile –
>
> Erdman, *Complete* 479

This poem portrays Art and War as fundamentally oppositional but able to achieve the same ends, and generally suggests that renewing the "mental charms" of Art will empower aesthetic creation over warlike destruction. More specifically, Blake is a "Spirit who lovs't Britannia's isle"—and by strengthening Britain's Arts, he will directly contribute to English political dominance and victory over France's war machine. However, the "spiritual" and immortal nature of Blake's angelic inspiration offers possibilities that transcend historical particularity, British dominance and even a receptive public, warning that if England refuses attempts to renew the arts (likely driven by various "fiends of commerce" that Blake was constantly thwarted by), France's victorious republic will eventually offer sanctuary and aesthetic possibility. This mixture of political involvement and immunity for the artist allows Blake ideally, but not exclusively, to associate his aesthetics with historical contexts and British nationalism. Individual motivations and political associations coexist toward the same end and neither are overwhelmed nor overwhelming. The unfinished nature of the poem that found no audience outside of Blake's notebook until well after his death can be read against the strength of his assertions, though, as his system does not account for expressive or communicative failure and leaves the reader with the image of Britannia encircled by the fiends of commerce—ubiquitous "enemies" that are at once local and international, perhaps as transcendent as the artist himself.

Blake's "When Klopstock England Defied" (1797-1799) takes this association between art, national strength and international conflict further, suggesting that the poetic or artistic expression itself is not just a vehicle for commentary and narrative, but an essential tool of performative action against the state of things. Blake's poetic reaction against the German poet, Friedrich Klopstock's criticism of the poetic incapability of the English language and English writers' coarseness of tone (Erdman, *Complete* note 1 for

Klopstock) demonstrates the assertion of a defiant poetic strength against Klopstock's effrontery:

> When Klopstock England defied
> Uprose terrible Blake in his pride
> For old Nobodaddy aloft
> Farted & Belchd & coughd
> Then swore a great oath that made heavn quake
> And calld aloud to English Blake
> Blake was giving his body ease
> At Lambeth beneath the poplar trees
> From his seat then started he
> And turnd himself round three times three
> The Moon at that sight blushd scarlet red
> The stars threw down their cups & fled
> And all the devils that were in hell
> Answered with a ninefold yell
> Klopstock felt the intripled turn
> And all his bowels began to churn
> And his bowels turned round three times three
> And lockd in his soul with a ninefold key
> That from his body it neer could be parted
> Till to the last trumpet it was farted
> Then again old nobodaddy swore
>
> He neer had seen such a thing before
> Since Noah was shut in the ark
> Since Eve first chose her hell fire spark
> Since twas the fashion to go naked
> Since the old anything was created
> And in pity he begd him to turn again
> And ease poor Klopstocks nine fold pain
> From pity then he redend round
> And the ninefold Spell unwound
> If Blake could do this when he rose up from shite
> What might he not do if he sat down to write
>
> Erdman, *Complete* 500-501

The last two lines of this poem effectively counter any suggestion that Blake's "coarseness of tone" confirms Klopstock's accusations. Playfully and defiantly demonstrating a skilful spontaneity that metrically and conceptually turns against Klopstock's critical position, Blake both confirms his rank among the "ancient poets" celebrated on plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Erdman, *Complete* 38) and suggests that the poet whose actions are dictated by his faith for his nation is more powerful than any

false god (nobodaddy). For Blake, writing is doing, is both defensive and aggressive, is as effective as war in the service of national strength. This poem shows us the extent to which Blake viewed his own artistic assertion as dramatic performance on national and political scales.[2]

This link between the arts and national potency is a common eighteenth-century notion. As Holger Hoock acknowledges in *The King's Artists*, "the quality of the visual arts provided an index of the civilization of past and present societies. Art was relevant to the polity and the nation—as evidence of the nation's character and the polity's moral health, as a national economic resource, an asset in the international competition of cultural display, or as the nation's cultural patrimony" (129). Blake's view of his art's redemptive national duty are crystallised in the writings that he produced to advertise and describe his exhibition of 1809. David Erdman, in *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* suggests that this exhibition is driven by "his desire to promote public works [which overrides] his need to make private sales" (448). Indeed, Blake's exhibit, in which he promotes the "portable fresco," is an appeal to "the Rich and those who have the direction of public Works" so that he might be successful in securing public contracts for frescoes and monuments in a time of war as many Academicians had done (453, 448).[3] As well, in his advertisement of the exhibition (15 May 1809), Blake reveals his motivation behind this appeal to artistic "public service." Comments on his lack of success exhibiting at the British Institution and at the Royal Academy in 1809, and resistance to being called "an unscientific and irregular eccentricity" (Erdman, *Complete* 528) lead to the assertion that:

> if Art is the glory of a nation, if Genius and Inspiration are the great Origin and Bond of Society, the distinction my Works have obtained from those who best understand such things, calls for my exhibition as the greatest of Duties to my Country.
>
> *Advertisement of the Exhibition* Erdman, *Complete* 528

Miltonically acknowledging that currently, his works "Fit Audience find[,] tho' few," through this exhibit Blake hopes to generate future opportunities that will take him beyond "The ignorant insults of individuals" which, he asserts, "will not prevent [him] from doing [his] duty to [his] art" (*Exhibition of the Exhibition* Erdman, *Complete* 527). Art and nation are thus equated and Blake claims that his exhibition exercises a fundamental duty to both. His advertisement of the catalogue for the 1809 exhibition extends such a connection through the further hope that his portable frescoes will protect England from "the too just imputation of being the seat and protectress of bad (that is blotting and blurring) Art" (Erdman, *Complete* 528). Renewing the reputation of England's artistic capability on the continent via technical innovation, expressive clarity and originality will enhance her political standing and national character as well. Blake's wish is to "make England like Italy, respected by respectable men of other countries on account of Art" (*Advertisement of the Descriptive Catalogue* Erdman, *Complete* 549). However, the listed monetary charges for the catalogue and for the exhibition itself at the end of the catalogue's advertisement as well as his indication at the beginning of the *Descriptive Catalogue* that his items are both "for Public

Inspection and for Sale by private contract (Erdman, *Complete* 529), remind us of the economic structures and motivations at the heart of Blake's political and aesthetic goals.

While the art in Blake's exhibition establishes and includes Blake in a collective lineage of individuals and imaginative characters by combining heroic poetical and heroic historical subjects—both examples of David Erdman's "English patriotic art categories" (*Prophet* 436)—it also includes a critical interpretative perspective that establishes and fortifies a nationalist ideal and a lineage of national heroes by supporting artists such as Shakespeare and Chaucer and their creations while simultaneously questioning specific political realities and historical figures like Nelson and Pitt. Between and in both of these categories is Thomas Gray's "The Bard"—a figure who makes a politicised spectacle of himself and who Blake unquestionably identifies with, given his politicisation of his own aesthetic practices. Blake's descriptive catalogue, and indeed the exhibition itself, together establish the visionary cliffside rally/rant of this persecuted, misunderstood and defiant artist against power that interrupts the aesthetic character and spiritual strength of a nation. Yet Blake's largely solitary efforts to centralize and control the creation, production, and distribution of his own work minimizes, individualises and marginalises the scope of his 1809 exhibition in a manner radically opposed to what Eric Chandler, drawing from details offered by David Erdman in *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* has referred to as the period's growing "artisan radicalism —elements of the artisan community coming together around entrepreneurial financiers to promote their collective productions" found in exhibitions that included John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery (1786-1804), Thomas Macklin's Poet's Gallery, Robert Bowyer's History Gallery and the intentions behind Henry Fuseli's proposed Milton Gallery (60-61). Perhaps, as Blake suggests in his *Descriptive Catalogue*, he did not have a choice, given his unsuccessful attempts to consistently integrate with the collective motivations of emerging institutions such as the Royal Academy and to negotiate with the selfish commercial motivations of publishers and dealers such as Robert Hartley Cromek (or "Screwmuch," as Blake called him in his notebook poems).

Indeed, although Chandler argues that, as a result of these and other factors, Blake generally shifts away from collective hope toward a writing self in his work (74), his potential involvement in Fuseli's ultimately failed Milton project (1790-1801), the writings accompanying his 1809 exhibition, and a number of statements from his notebook in 1809-1810 that were intended as a "Public Address" (to the Chalcographic Society) (Erdman, *Complete* 571-582, n882-83) attest to his continued faith in a public that had already turned a largely blind eye toward his 1793 prospectus and to his imaginatively reactive work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

In the "Public Address", copies of which Blake intended to sell, he attempts to recover from the critical condemnation of his unique style by a "nest of villains," by asking the English "public" (Erdman, *Complete* 571-2) to "rouze [them]selves from the fatal Slumber" that dishonours a nation by preferring translations or copies to original creations (Erdman, *Complete* 576). However, his appeal is not merely personal, as he hopes that the creative originality of his engraved copies of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims will "redeem

[his] country" from Continental contempt and ridicule that stems from the "Pretences of Englishmen to Improve Art before they even know the first [lines] <Beginnings> of Art" (Erdman, *Complete* 573). According to Blake, such English pretence is driven by commerce, which he suggests is "so far from being beneficial to Arts or to Empire that it is destructive of both" (Erdman, *Complete* 574). Thus art, empire and individual merit are again associated by their common antagonism to commercial exploitation, and Blake proclaims that Empires, and by association Arts and individual talent, "flourish until they become commercial & then they are scatter'd abroad to the four winds" (Erdman, *Complete* 573-574). Following such statements, Blake anticipates those who might interpret his assertions exclusively as reactions against personal injury by clarifying that "Resentment for Personal Injuries has had some share in this Public Address But Love to My Art and Zeal for my Country [are] much Greater" (Erdman, *Complete* 574).[4] His suggestion that "England will never rival Italy while we servilely copy" (Erdman, *Complete* 578) is countered by his "plan" to encourage painting as part of a "Great Public means of advancing Fine Art…[via] Monuments to the dead Painted by Historical and Poetical Artists" (Erdman, *Complete* 581). His Chaucer print, whose only patron is the subscribing public, is offered and defended as appropriate collateral for these claims.

Blake thus continued to maintain hope in the integration between individual imagination, political action, national glory, public patronage and his non-commercialized approach to reproductive technologies at least until 1809-10. However, Chandler's claim that *Milton* (1804-1810), *A Vision of the Last Judgement* (1810) and, ultimately, *Jerusalem* (1804-1820) demonstrate Blake's increasingly inward turn away from actively seeking an audience, a public, to entirely privatized, psychic modes of action that show and tell of a radically self-centred aesthetic is supported by the failure of his 1809 exhibit. As well, though the oddly configured hybrid of engraved image and text that has become known as Blake's *Laocoön* (1826-27) echoes a number of statements from the earlier "Public Address" and *Descriptive Catalogue*, the shift in Blake's approach by this time affirms that Blake discarded much of his initial optimism toward artistic exhibition and demonstration in the midst of increasingly commercial and sensational spectacles.

The formal and expressive challenges at the heart of the composite plate that features the Laocoön engraving demonstrate that Blake remains focused on the public's engagement with and acceptance of his art in an overly commercialized climate of spectacular entertainments. Yet his 1809 optimism wanes here, as he links money, war, reason and, crucially, "outward ceremony" (read "spectacle) to the antichrist, and opposes all of these associations to devotional activities of prayer, praise and fasting, which he relates directly to art as an imaginatively spiritual practise (akin to Christianity), rather than an economic or material system. Further, there is no direct mention of England in this work, suggesting that he has abandoned the nationalist concerns that fuelled "Now Art…" and "Klopstock," likely due to the perception of "Empire against art" asserted in the text of the Laocoön design. Such a shift is clarified by another textual example from the print which advises that "You must leave Fathers & Mothers & Houses & Lands if they stand in the way of Art." Initially, this declaration of independence seems to parallel the following lines from Blake's "Public Address:"

> Let us teach Buonaparte & whomsoever else it may concern
>
> That it is not Arts that follow & attend upon Empire[s] but
> Empire[s] that attends upon & follows [*wherever Art*
>
> *leads*] The Arts
>
> Erdman, *Complete* 577

However, the difference here is that Blake's earlier "Public Address" is a call to teach, to affect, to turn and challenge the general opinion of artistic capability and redefine art as inventive and republican ("...it is Arts that encourage Empires" [Erdman, *Complete* 577]) whereas the Laocoön 's imperative instructs the perceiver to turn away and retreat from those that stand in the way of art, including, perhaps, an unresponsive public. The implied irony (or perhaps tragedy) of this assertion is that Blake remained literally localised in and around London while using his work to establish and fortify an increasing conceptual distance between himself and the politics of his nation. Blake's increasing isolation and symbolic opacity caused him to become much more of a spectacle than he had perhaps intended, an unusual novelty, a marginal distraction rather than a center point of philosophical, cultural and national thought and influence. While this ironically reduced his visibility in an age of relative visual excess, it also importantly abstracted his corpus enough to promote a relatively rapid posthumous resurrection of interest (both commercial and intellectual) in his work that continues to extend well beyond historicity.[5]

Blake's failed exhibition allows us to see the overall incompatibility between his intended functions for art on national and political fronts (the conceptual), the rhetoric of spectacle (the visual), the individualism at the heart of Blake's revolutionary nationalism and the persistent economical/commercial foundations of this project. His vision of a direct link between the strength of artistic expression, the potential of the urban audience and the strength of a nation is complicated by the inherently commercial nature of spectacle and the economic demands faced by the artist. If Blake is right in his assertion of the link between art and nation, however, the failure of his exhibition reveals national weakness, individual powerlessness, a devaluation of originality and imagination and the triumph of the kind of spectacle that he and other Romantic writers resisted. If Blake is wrong regarding the connection between art and nation, *and* his conceptual connections and spectacle-influenced exhibition are part of an imaginative overall attempt at commercial and personal success, then his failure signifies the ability of technology and economy to sustain England's national strength independent of a romantic and pro-revolutionary rhetoric that promotes individual intellectualism. If this is the case, Blake's failure signifies a diminishing impact of artistic influence on the "glory of the nation" and the ultimate triumph of the spectacle. Either way, the proliferation of technologically-enabled popular spectacles over intellectualised and newly-individualised artistic production at this point in time becomes all-too-apparent.

Notes

[1] Of course Blake's project is attempted on a much smaller and centralized scale than the two ultimately failed galleries organized by Fuseli and Boydell. However, the independent nature of each of these efforts as well as each exhibition's attempt to promote the viewing of the art as an affirmation of national strength and cultural history are characteristics shared by all of these examples, despite their differences.

[2] Curiously, though, Blake completed a portrait of Klopstock for Haley while at Felpham as part of a series of famous authors. This action, determined by the demands of patronage, points less to hypocrisy on Blake's part than to the awkward difference between Blake's artistic ideals and the economic reality that he faced because of his lack of public and critical recognition.

[3] Although Blake's attempt to elevate the portable fresco attests to his inventiveness, he is working against a current of opinion, fed by the tributaries of Royal Academy values (See Hoock 66) and the increasing promotion of watercolour as a medium suitable for amateur women painters (See Bermingham 157-59), that was diminishing the prestige and advancements of British watercolour.

[4] This justification offers a potential counterpoint to Dennis Read's claim that Blake's descriptive catalogue and public exhibition were exclusively intended as vengeful, corrective, "exposure[s] of the ways that he [had been] personally exploited and abused by [Robert Hartley] Cromek", who Blake had resented after the highly-paid engraving work of Blake's designs for Cromek's illustrated version of Robert Blair's "The Grave" was offered to Louis Schiavonetti (182). While Blake's efforts initially may have been motivated by spite and revenge, his personal animosity appears to retreat in the face of his national duty. Interestingly, Blake's fear that Cromek was "determined to obstruct his artistic advancement" (171) may have been partially correct, for Cromek's associate, Robert Hunt, authored two anonymous reviews in the *Examiner*; in 1808 Hunt criticized Blake's work on the Grave illustrations and in 1809 he harshly reviewed Blake's exhibition. However, in calling the Descriptive Catalogue "the wild effusions of a distempered brain" as well as "amusing" and an example of "published madness," Hunt confirms the spectacular nature of Blake's self-promotion, but marginalizes Blake's efforts (282-284).

[5] This confirms Mee's suggestion (drawing on Walter Benjamin's terminology) that in Blake's later prophetic works, history is "blown apart by his apocalyptic enthusiasm…Blake offers…the continuing possibility of an unworlding wherein both the individual and the nation are 'blasted out of the continuum of history'" (*Romanticism* 292-93).

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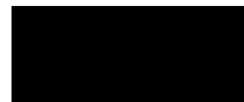

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