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From Fierce Rushing: William Blake and the Cultural Politics of Liberty in the 1790s†

"*America,*" wrote Henry Crabb Robinson in an 1811 essay, "appears in part to give a poetical account of the [American] Revolution, since it contains the names of several party leaders. The actors in it are a species of guardian angels. We give only a short example, nor can we decide whether it is intended to be in prose or verse." Like its sister book *Europe: A Prophecy*, Robinson concluded, *America* is a "mysterious and incomprehensible rhapsody, which probably contains the artist's political visions of the future, but is wholly inexplicable."[1] * * *

Reading *America* a little later in the nineteenth century, Blake's first major biographer, Alexander Gilchrist, found himself dazzled by the "unquestionable power and design" of the plates: "Turning over the leaves, it is sometimes like an increase of daylight on the retina, so fair and open is the effect of particular pages. The skies of sapphire, or gold, rayed with hues of sunset, against which stand out leaf or blossom, or pendant branch, gay with bright plumaged birds; the strips of emerald sward below, gemmed with flower and lizard and enamelled snake, refresh the eye continually."[2] But even Gilchrist found the text "hard to fathom; with far too little Nature behind it;—the fault of all this class of Blake's writings; too much wild tossing about of ideas and words." * * * Through the chaotic storm clouds of prophecy, he writes, "the merely human agents show small and remote, perplexed and busied in an ant-like way."

Given the perplexed early reception history of Blake's *America*, it is striking that this prophecy, of all of Blake's work, is the one around which a fairly clear consensus has emerged in modern scholarship, a consensus which has only in the past few years faced systematic questioning.[3] There has been much discussion of the various divisions in Blake studies, but on the question of *America* there has been a rare convergence of the conflicting strands of scholarship.[4] Although it is often argued that it was the unfinished piece *The French Revolution*, due to have been printed in 1791 by Joseph Johnson—the publisher of William Godwin, Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Joseph Priestley, and other well-known radicals—that confirmed Blake's position in the 1790s struggle for "liberty," according to the critical consensus it was in *America* that Blake produced his most political work.[5]

This view has largely developed from a tendency to see Blake, in Gilchrist's

5. W. J. T. Mitchell has written of the 'schematic, allegorical surface of Blake's prophetic books', *Blake's Composite Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 118. For Robert Hole's discussion, see *Pulpits, Politics, and Public Order in England 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 101–2.

† From *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 16–22, 23–24, 28–29, 34–35, 39–40, 77. Abridgement of chapter 3 approved by the author. Footnotes and page references have been adapted for this edition.

1. Henry Crabb Robinson, "William Blake, Artist, Poet, and Religious Mystic," in *Blake Records* (2004), ed. G. E. Bentley, p. 602. [Makdisi also quotes from Alan Cunningham's account in *Blake Records*, p. 656, para. 51—*editors' note.*]

2. Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake* (1863; reprint, Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1998), pp. 109–13.

3. Most recent accounts of *America* are derived in one way or another from David Erdman's magnificent study *Blake: Prophet against Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977). According to Erdman, *America* tells the story of the American War of Independence and celebrates the goals of the American Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence. John Howard questions Erdman's reading of the significance of Barlow's *Visions of Columbus* as a source for *America* but confirms Erdman's argument that Blake's prophecy "recounts the struggle in America of the contrary forces during the 1770s." See John Howard, *Infernal Poetics: Poetic Structures in Blake's Lambeth Prophecies* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1984). Also see Stephen Behrendt, *Reading William Blake* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), and "History When Time Stops: Blake's *America, Europe*, and *The Song of Los*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 28, no. 4 (1992); Michael Ferber, *The Social Vision of William Blake* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), and "Blake's *America* and the Birth of Revolution," in *History and Myth: Essays on English Romantic Literature*, ed. S. Behrendt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990); Nicholas Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and James Swearingen, "William Blake's Figural Politics," in *ELH*, vol. 59 (1992). Other critics have questioned the extent to which *America* can be read simply as a celebration of the War of Independence: Minna Doskow questions such optimistic readings, as does James McCord. See Minna Doskow, "William Blake's *America:* The Story of a Revolution Betrayed," *Blake Studies* 8, no. 2 (1978); and James McCord, "West of Atlantis: William Blake's Unromantic View of the American War," *Centennial Review* 30, no. 1 (1986).

4. See Doskow, "William Blake's America," pp. 169–77. Nicholas Williams argues that "the apocalyptic joy of the poem must always be read in the light of this historical deconfirmation, not indeed as an exercise in pessimism but as a way of suggesting that the promises of that earlier struggle have yet to be fulfilled, a fulfillment that they will find only in the medium of history, as Blake's continuation of the line from *America* to *Europe* . . . eventually serves to show." See Nicholas Williams, *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 116–17.

5. Critics interested in politics often pay more heed to *America* and its sister prophecies from the mid-1790s than to the later works, while those interested in psychic themes generally do the opposite. Erdman's work continues to be the reference point for politically and historically oriented scholarship on Blake. *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, Jackie DiSalvo argues, "definitively established" Blake's place in the political struggles of the era of the French Revolution (though DiSalvo herself is one of the critics who have taken the study of Blake's politics beyond *America*). There is a prevailing consensus, even among such thoroughgoing critics as Helen Bruder, that the task of historicizing Blake in the political context of the 1790s "has been largely completed." See Jackie DiSalvo, *War of Titans: Blake's Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), p. 12; and Helen Bruder, *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 91.

words, as "an ardent member of the New School, a vehement republican and sympathiser with the Revolution, hater and contemner of kings and kingcraft. . . . To him, at this date, as to ardent minds everywhere, the French Revolution was the herald of the Millennium, of a new age of light and reason." Blake has often been made to fit seamlessly into a respectable company of rational, sensible, judicious, and essentially (if not actually) secular intellectuals, for whom revolution was first and foremost a matter for ardent minds. His class position—that of a small tradesman, an independent artisan—has been repeatedly invoked as a more or less sure indicator of the extent to which he must have conformed to the standards of secular radicalism, as they supposedly filtered down from the ideologues who attended Johnson's dinner parties to the cadres of the London Corresponding Society (LCS), which was made up largely of tradesmen and artisans occupying the same social stratum as Blake. Radicalism in this context has often been taken to imply a mobilization of light and reason to peer into the dark recesses and gloomy mysteries of the old regime. This, of course, is explicitly the Enlightenment role that Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft claimed for themselves in their confrontations with Edmund Burke, and many modern scholars have taken their position for granted as definitive of all radicalism in the period, including Blake's. As a result, the complex political positions of both Blake's early work and his later work have often been read reductively, either—in the case of the early work—as a conformist celebration of "liberty," or—in the case of the later work—as a kind of apolitical quietism.[6] Thus, Blake has been configured as a soft liberal who was buoyed by the false hopes of a foreign revolution only to soften into respectable quietism in later years when that revolution supposedly revealed its true nature.

[I propose that although] *America* is indeed concerned with Blake's commitment to the radical struggles of the 1790s, as well as with the relationship between the events that unfolded in the American War of Independence and the events defining London radicalism in the 1790s, Blake's concern has nothing to do with a gratuitous celebration of either the American War or the notion of liberty being heralded by Tom Paine and his followers. While I concur with David Erdman's reading of Blake as a "prophet against empire" and as a constant opponent of the forces of tyranny and what he would call oppressive codes (such as the iron laws of "State Religion, which is the source of all Cruelty"),[7] I am not convinced that there is much evidence of Blake's sharing the fundamental conceptual and political assumptions of the advocates of liberty. *America*, which was written at a crucial turning point during the political struggles of the 1790s, confirms both Blake's attack on the old regime *and* his disruption of the philosophical, conceptual, and political narratives underlying the discourse of "liberty," and in particular his critique of the narrow conception of freedom animating much of 1790s radicalism.[8] * * *

The academic understanding of the 1790s as a crystalline moment of struggle between two highly polarized forces—on the one hand, the defend-

6. Indeed, in * * * one of the most thorough studies of Blake's radicalism, Jon Mee argues that [Erdman's] *Prophet against Empire* may ironically have led scholars astray to the extent that its engagement with *America's* politics makes the other prophetic books seem less political by contrast (*Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994]).
7. Blake, annotations to Watson, p. 459 herein.
8. See David Worrall, "Blake and 1790s Plebeian Radical Culture," in *Blake in the Nineties*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (New York: St. Martin's, 1999); and Jon Mee, "The Strange Career of Richard 'Citizen' Lee" in *Radicalism in British Literary Culture*, ed. T. Morton (2002).

ers of the old regime (e.g., Edmund Burke, Hannah More, Patrick Colquhoun), and on the other, the rational and secular advocates of a newfound liberty (e.g., Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin)—has been complicated in recent scholarship. Iain McCalman, Jon Mee, David Worrall, Mark Philp, E. P. Thompson, and others have demonstrated the extent to which the decade of the 1790s was characterized, especially among radicals, by a complex and heterogeneous network of forces and tendencies, making such straightforward polarizations difficult to plot. In particular, critical attention has been drawn to the resurgence during the 1790s of forms of popular enthusiasm and radical antinomianism, explicitly reaching back to the writers and activists of that earlier moment of revolutionary crisis in the seventeenth century, many of whose tracts were reprinted in fresh editions during the 1790s.[9] Richard Brothers, the ex–Navy officer who in 1792 began prophesying earthquakes and revolutions and the fall of monarchies (as well as a quasi-colonialist fantasy in which he, the Nephew of God, would lead the Hebrews to Palestine, where they would "rebuild" Jerusalem) until he was arrested and declared to be insane and consequently locked up from 1795, is only one of the many colorful figures of late-eighteenth-century London radicalism of whom we are now more aware, [and whose] activities and publications * * * complicate the often-invoked polarization between the educated spokespersons of a secular and rational radicalism on the one hand and the tradition-bound defenders of the old regime on the other. * * *

The fact that various seventeenth-century currents had resurfaced in 1790s London allows us to more fully appreciate the extent to which Blake (whose antinomian affiliations had been recognized as early as 1958 by A. L. Morton and were amplified in Michael Ferber's 1985 study, before being further elaborated by E. P. Thompson and Jon Mee)[1] was not alone in his faith in the "everlasting gospel," that key concept in antinomian thought linking Blake and other 1790s enthusiasts to seventeenth-century heretics like Abiezer Coppe and Laurence Clarkson.[2] "For all his individual genius," McCalman points out, "William Blake was a more typical figure in his day than many scholars have realized."[3]

However, the recent scholarly emphasis on the heterogeneity of 1790s radicalism, and on the extent to which popular enthusiasm could be combined with secular rationalism in a pungent revolutionary blend, should not prevent us from discerning the presence of a strand of radicalism that sought to rise above the fray and to assert its own legitimacy, partly by making its own claims on "respectable" political discourse, partly by denying, excluding, and disassociating itself from other forms and subcultures of radicalism (which it regarded as inarticulate, unrespectable, unenlightened, and hence illegitimate), and partly by working to assimilate as many grievances as possible into its own agenda for reform, rearticulating them when necessary—and thereby exercising, in effect, a form of hegemony, albeit one whose dominance was

9. See Jon Mee, "Is There an Antinomian in the House? William Blake and the After-life of a Heresy," in *Historicizing Blake*, ed. S. Clark and D. Worrall (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).
1. See A. L. Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1958); Michael Ferber, *The Social Vision*; and E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: New Press, 1993).
2. The concept of the "everlasting gospel" is invoked both by Blake and the Ranters. See Blake, *Everlasting Gospel*, E518–25 [p. 445 herein]; also see Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649), reprinted in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Junction Books, 1983).
3. Iain McCalman, "Introduction," in *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, ed. Iain McCalman (New York: Marcus Wiener, 1991), p. 11.

still very much in question at the time and would fade altogether amid the deepening crises of 1796–97, only to return early in the nineteenth century. This strand of radicalism enjoyed the allegiance of many of the best-known radical intellectuals as well as relatively broad-based popularity among the artisan class whose members constituted the core of London's radical culture. * * * [It] centered almost exclusively on what are by now familiar ideas, namely, demands for universal (male) suffrage and annual parliaments, or in other words for an extension of the political franchise through more adequate representation in parliament. These demands would reemerge in modified form after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and would gather strength under the banner of Chartism.[4] The persistence of what may usefully be thought of as this liberal-radical tendency is what tied together, for example, the great open-air meetings organized by the London Corresponding Society at Copenhagen Fields in October and November 1795 (which according to some drew up to two hundred thousand participants) and the now more famous Peterloo gathering of 1819. * * *

Both in the 1790s and in the early nineteenth century, however, the spokesmen of this liberal-radical tendency had to articulate their own position, and reinforce their claims to legitimacy, by focusing attention on certain questions—principally those concerning political representation—and suppressing those questions that were seen to be incompatible with their own epistemological and philosophical foundation. * * *

Thus, the liberal-radical position very carefully distinguished the political rights of the property-owning and [the] individual from collective or communal rights of any kind. "Assured that man, Individual man, may justly claim Liberty as his birthright," one of the earliest declarations of the London Corresponding Society begins, "we naturally conclude that, as a member of Society, it becomes his indispensable duty to preserve inviolate that Liberty for the benefit of his fellow citizens and of his and their posterity."[5] * * * [T]he early leadership of the LCS had to wage two continuous struggles: on the one hand, against the state, and, on the other, against those radicals and enthusiasts [who formulated] very different—and far more "excessive"—political demands, and, moreover, far more excessive means to achieve them. Political arguments here merged with philosophical, religious, and epistemological ones, for these different political demands grew out of different conceptual frameworks, different understandings of identity, being, and community. Hence, what might on one level seem like a narrowly political gesture often had an epistemological or conceptual motivation. * * *

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* * * In considering the 1790s, then, we need to keep sight of distinctions among varieties of radical ideology, some of which would not only ultimately rise to respectability, but would develop into the very bases of the modern liberal democracy and the free market that we presently inhabit, while others would continue—and still continue—to be thought of as mad, bad, and dangerous to know. The spokesmen of the former position tended

4. See Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
5. London Corresponding Society, *Address to the Nation*, 24 May 1792, in *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society*, ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 10.

to formulate their arguments around the concept of the sovereign individual (the modern subject first systematized by Locke),[6] they tended to draw on rationalist arguments and natural law for their justification, and as a result they were to a certain extent, as Lottes observes, "unable to break free from the political language of the established system in which their political consciousness had been formed."[7] The advocates of the latter position, often though not always drawing their strength and inspiration from an older radical subculture, sought to question the primacy of individual rights and the very status of the individual as a transcendent metaphysical category, a unit granted ontological privilege as the alpha and omega of all historical processes and political developments.

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* * * [W]ith such lines in mind,[8] we can see in the illuminated books a joyous form of freedom—that is a political formulation—utterly incompatible with the doctrine of individual rights and opening up a radically different set of concepts concerning subjectivity, temporality, identity, and community.

* * *

[T]he only revolutionary "action" that can properly be said to take place in *America* is carried out not by Washington, Franklin, and company (and their revolutionary army, with whom the sacred cause of liberty celebrated by the hegemonic radicals of the 1790s is to be associated), but by ordinary citizens: "Fury! rage! madness! in a wind swept through America / And the red flames of Orc that folded roaring fierce around / The angry shores, and fierce rushing of th' inhabitants together" (*America* **16**/14:10–12). * * * [T]he decisive scene in *America* is this collective action of a crowd of angry citizens surging through city streets in precisely the sort of spectacle of urban mayhem which the radicals in London were at the time of the prophecy's appearance desperate to avoid, and which they avoided all the more desperately the more the situation in Paris got out of control.

In *America* it is only "the fierce rushing of th' inhabitants together," who "all rush together in the night in wrath and in raging fire" (*America* **16**/14:19), and not the frozen and almost comical posturing of the revolution's "real" leaders (who never come to power in Blake's prophecy), that apparently could keep Earth from "losing another portion of the infinite." Afterward, "the millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw their hammerd mail / And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood a naked multitude." (*America* **17**/15: 4–5).[9] * * *

6. According to Etienne Balibar, "the key philosophical notions which are still in use today when dealing with individual rights and personality were actually invented or systematized by Locke." Thus, Balibar says, "we may suggest that the best way of reading Locke is not to characterize him as a 'forerunner' of any of the particular modern ideologies which have become projected into the past (for example, as a supporter of 'possessive individualism,' in a Marxist paradigm, or as a representative of 'natural political virtue,' in a conservative-liberal paradigm), but rather to understand how he made all these different ideologies possible, by creating their common ground." See Etienne Balibar, "What Is 'Man' in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy? Subject, Individual, Citizen," in *The Individual in Political Theory and Practice*, ed. J. Coleman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 215–41, esp. pp. 233–39.
7. See Gunther Lottes, "Radicalism, Revolution and Political Culture," in *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, ed. Mark Philp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 85.
8. "He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only. Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" (*There Is No Natural Religion*, p. 7 herein).
9. Cf. Constantin Volney's depiction of revolution as a mass phenomenon, "a numberless people, rushing in all directions, pour through the streets and fluctuate like waves in the public places" (*The Ruins of Empires* 1792; rpt. Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1991), p. 63.

[T]he fierce rushing toward the end of *America* is quite inconsistent with those readings of the prophecy which, following David Erdman's magisterial account, see it either as a narrative of the American War of Independence, as it unfolded following the intervention of the colonial elite into what had begun as a mass uprising, or as a more or less straightforward celebration of the radical struggle for liberty in 1790s London as articulated in the work of Tom Paine or the LCS.

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* * * Those 1790s radicals who followed Paine and were inspired by the struggle for American independence adopted as their conceptual and philosophical foundation the Lockean formula of the transhistorical individual (which Rousseau and the Enlightenment would confirm as "born free but everywhere in chains"), whose eternal liberty Paine's *Rights of Man* would in one stroke confirm and guarantee for all time. While Blake accepted the radical attack on the ancien régime, and on priestcraft and kingcraft and patriarchal tyranny in general, he was very far from accepting the radical notion that the Paineite/Lockean individual—developing autonomously through the progressive linear time of modernity—could possibly be the basis for genuine freedom, or even that such an individual could be assumed to have a eternal validity, an ontological priority outside human history, to be taken for granted as it was by Paine and others, as an eternal reference point for all human struggles.

* * * [In] the scene of fierce rushing, the individuals are absorbed into the crowd that they constitute, not simply losing but altogether detonating their prior individuality. For the fierce rushing collective is sharply distinguished from "the citizens of New York" who "close their books & lock their chests," the "mariners of Boston" who "drop their anchors and unlade," the "scribe of Pennsylvania" who "casts his pen upon the earth," and "the builder of Virginia" who "throws his hammer down in fear" (*America* 16/14:13–16). The condition of possibility for the constitution of the rushing multitude is, in other words, the loss—the annihilation—of the individual specificity of the little units, the citizens, who together make up the revolutionary crowd. It is only when they cease ("close," "drop," "cast," "throw") their individual occupations, which are figured here as their hastily abandoned occupational materials and tools, that the fierce rushing collective is brought into being. And, in another, quite different, sense, the rushing multitude—the urban revolutionary crowd par excellence—might be seen to challenge the sturdy independence and frugal individuality of the craftsmen who drop their tools in fear. This collective is much more than the sum of its little constituent parts. It is a form of belonging—a community—whose very existence is predicated upon the annihilation of those parts as self-sufficient, independent, sovereign units (i.e., citizens). While these sovereign units are being broken up and dissolved into a collective body whose parts have no ontologically prior existence, "fierce desire" and "lusts of youth" also dissolve the "bonds of religion." Now with "the doors of marriage open," these reborn sprits, who are depicted as largely female, "Run from their fetters reddening, & in long drawn arches sitting, / They feel the nerves of youth renew" (*America* 17/15: 24–25).

In its uniquely Blakean slippage between political and biological language, this moment in the prophecy highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between political forms and the subjective categories—literally, the psychological and biological forms of identity—to which they correspond. Here, the breakdown of the one is inseparable from the breakdown of the other. For what seems to take place toward the end of the prophecy is the dissolution of one mode of existence, that of the property-owning individual, as well as the political institutions associated with it; and the constitution of a new mode of being, a new sense of community that is no longer commensurate with the political, psychological, or even biological units that brought the transformation about. The "fierce desire" associated with the "fierce rushing" is productive of the surging energy of the revolutionary crowd. This fierce energy is quite incompatible with the discourse of liberty associated with Paine. Indeed, it is reminiscent instead of that "wild democratical fury that leads nations into the vortex of anarchy, confusion and bloodshed,"[9] which most radical activists of the 1790s were desperate to avoid. * * *

No "fierce rushing" took place in London's streets in the 1790s, and the closest things to mass mobilization were the quite peaceful though very well attended open-air demonstrations organized by the LCS in 1794–95. *America* concerns itself not with a celebration of the cause of liberty, but rather with a critique of its conceptual and practical limitations with regard to popular politics and the question of labor. If it subverts the discourse of liberty with questions that most London radicals and reformers preferred not to discuss, Blake's prophecy does not do so because this discourse goes too far, but because it does not go far enough. The prophecy utterly resists being made to conform to the grand narrative of bourgeois revolution, in which critics have attempted to locate it. Much of the significance of Blake's prophecy is derived from its capacity to disrupt a certain kind of logic, a certain kind of philosophy, along with its attendant politics, temporality, subjectivity, and epistemology. What *America* opens up is the confusion and "animated absurdity" of history, rather than the reassurance and order often provided by historians and critics. For it is in just such "animated absurdity" that *America's* prophetic power lies. "Strange" indeed, as Gilchrist himself points out, "to conceive that a somewhile associate of Paine [was] producing these 'Prophetic' volumes!"[1]

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From "How Different the World to Them"