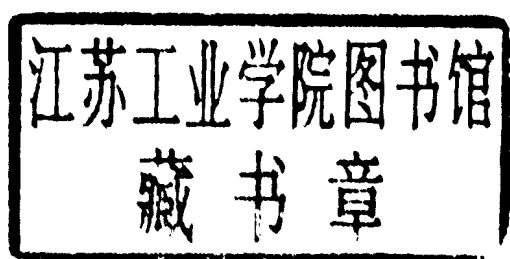


WILLIAM BLAKE: THE CONTINENTAL PROPHECIES



WILLIAM BLAKE

*The Continental
Prophecies*

America: a Prophecy

Europe: a Prophecy

The Song of Los

Edited with Introductions and Notes by

D. W. DÖRRBECKER

BLAKE'S ILLUMINATED BOOKS

Volume 4

General Editor DAVID BINDMAN

The William Blake Trust / The Tate Gallery

WILLIAM BLAKE: *The Continental Prophecies*

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General Editor's Preface

WHEN THIS SERIES of facsimiles of Blake's Illuminated Books was originally planned the proposal was to produce five volumes in all. The fourth was to be a composite volume dealing comprehensively with the six so-called 'Lambeth Books' of 1793 to c. 1795, including both the Continental Prophecies and the Urizen Books. It became apparent, after the first four volumes of illuminated books were completed, that one volume would not be sufficient to do justice to the richness and complexity of all the Lambeth Books, so the decision was taken, when the texts were nearly complete, to enlarge the whole series to make six volumes in all instead of five. This has led to some anomalies in the numbering of the volumes which does not now bear any relation to the chronology of their original production by Blake. The present volume consists only of the Continental Prophecies and is number 4 in the series; *Milton a Poem* is now number 5, and the final volume, the Urizen Books, is number 6. The volumes are, of course, intended to stand on their own, and altogether present a complete corpus of Blake's illuminated books.

The Continental Prophecies are unified in theme and content, and were probably completed within a period of two or three years. They deal with the four continents, America, Europe, Africa and Asia but in other respects they are very different from one another. *America* in all known copies is strongly inked and washed or watercoloured in relatively reticent colours, while *Europe* is usually completed in Blake's own method of colour printing. *The Song of Los* is known only in a small number of densely colour-printed versions, and the stories of Africa and Asia which are contained within its very short text are very compressed, and represented more by dramatic and highly-wrought visual images. The Continental Prophecies represent Blake at his most urgent, fully engaged with the sublime events of Europe in revolution.

The scholarship behind this volume, though the longest of the series, has been the lone work of Dr Detlef Dörrbecker, and the Blake Trust is greatly indebted to him for the insight and care with which he has completed his task. As with the other volumes in the series it has entered a safe harbour through the skills and effort of John Commander, who has guided all stages of its editing and production. The Blake Trust continues to owe him a very great debt. As always, we are greatly beholden to the libraries who have, without exception, willingly and generously allowed us to photograph and reproduce material in their collections. We hope that they will share our satisfaction in seeing their precious charges exposed to a wide and appreciate audience.

DAVID BINDMAN

Foreword

BEGUN IN 1991, the William Blake Trust's series of critically annotated colour reproductions of copies of all of 'Blake's Illuminated Books' is being completed with the publication of the present volume and its companion on the Urizen trilogy (volume 6), edited by David Worrall. Editorial work on the continental prophecies was commissioned in Spring 1992 and, considering the complexities presented not only by the texts and designs in the illuminated books of the mid-1790s, but also by the production of a volume with some sixty high-quality colour reproductions, it seems something of an achievement that the project could be completed in such a relatively short span of time. This would not have been possible without much help I received from various quarters.

I have vastly profited from the scholarly advice and intellectual encouragement generously offered by David Bindman, Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, Joseph Viscomi, and David Worrall. To all of these friends and colleagues I would like to extend my renewed thanks. John Commander in guiding the production of this pictorial edition of Blake's continental prophecies has provided editorial reassurance and assistance in refining my text for publication. Such inconsistencies and factual errors which remain, must be laid at my door.

Substantial portions of an earlier essay on *The Song of Los* have been adapted and revised for the present commentary. The Henry E. Huntington Library has kindly permitted the use of this material. Similarly, my co-editors for volume 3 in the present series allowed me to draw, in what is virtually a paraphrase of the respective pages in that volume, on their account of the conventions for 'Citations, Abbreviations, Texts, and Variants'. Moreover, the general organization of the present book closely follows that of volume 3 and thus, I think, will provide the reader with an easily accessible account of Blake's continental trilogy.

I wish to thank all the institutions who have granted the permission to reproduce works in their collections. I am particularly indebted to the curators and staff of Glasgow University Library's Special Collections and of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum for much help and considerable patience with an occasionally rather demanding visitor to the collections in their care.

This edition of Blake's continental prophecies is dedicated, *amoris causa*, to Gabriele – the book owes much more to her than she would be prepared to admit.

DWD
Trier an der Mosel
Easter 1994

A Note on Citations, Abbreviations, Texts, and Variants

IN PREPARING the printed texts of Blake's continental prophecies and in the presentation of the editorial material I have followed the model established with the earlier volumes in this series, especially that of volume 3. Thus, quotations from Blake's writings, other than those printed here, are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), cited as *E* followed by page number. Parallel references are also provided to *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), cited as *K* followed by page number.

Blake's illuminated books are referred to by title or short-title, plate number, and line number (e.g., '*America* 10:5-9'). Plate numbers and the letter designations for individual copies of the illuminated books follow G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). Where the sequence of plates in copies reproduced here varies from Bentley's 'standard order', the variant number is given first, followed by Bentley's number in parentheses (e.g., '*Europe*, plate 9[11]'). Explanatory notes to Blake's texts and designs are keyed by plate and line number.

Blake's paintings and drawings are titled according to Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1981), cited as Butlin followed by 'no.' and the respective catalogue entry number. Works by authors other than Blake are listed in 'Works Cited' and are referred to by author or, when necessary, author and short-title. Usually, references to exhibition catalogues are keyed to the item numbers of the exhibits (e.g. 'Schiff, *Blake* no. 24.d').

Rather than an attempt to reconstruct what was actually etched on Blake's copperplates, the printed texts below follow the specific copy reproduced. The original lineation, spelling, and punctuation are retained in the typographical versions, but I have not ventured to imitate Blake's letter forms, or his distinctions between roman and italic lettering (see also the textual note for *The Song of Los* 3:1-5). In each case I have decided which conventional typographic mark comes closest to representing Blake's printed and often highly idiosyncratic forms as seen without a magnifying glass in the copies reproduced. All of the letterpress texts are based on an examination of the original books; therefore, there may be an occasional discrepancy between my punctuation and what has registered in the reproductions. The most significant textual variants as well as intentional changes to specific designs and their chronological sequence are detailed in the notes. Readers interested in the peculiar editorial problems one encounters in Blake's illuminated books and in the 'ways Blake's production methods led to the random proliferation of multiple differences' should turn to the chapter on 'Texts and Variants' and the 'Introduction' in volume 3 of this series (see Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi 9-17).

The copies selected for presentation in the present volume were executed in the span of only a few years. They thus share certain group characteristics in drawing, printing, and colouring; at the same time they also demonstrate the range of possibilities offered by Blake's medium of illuminated printing. Stylistically, *America* is easily Blake's most

linear, calligraphic, and graphically most vigorous production of the Lambeth years; since all the early copies of *America* were printed in monochrome, I have chosen one such copy for reproduction. This accentuation of the linear qualities of Blake's illuminated books is here counter-balanced by copies of *Europe* and *The Song of Los* that were heavily colour-printed and which demonstrate the artist's approach to colour as a medium expressive of the sublime. The supplementary illustrations include examples from Blake's preliminary drawings, impressions that show significant variants in the states and/or colouring of the plates, and a few of the artist's visual sources for his iconography and specific motifs.

The illuminated books reproduced in the present volume are:

America: a Prophecy, copy H. The Trustees of the British Museum (Department of Prints and Drawings), London.

Europe: a Prophecy, copy B. Glasgow University Library (Special Collections).

The Song of Los, copy A. The Trustees of the British Museum (Department of Prints and Drawings), London.

The Continental Prophecies

The Continental Prophecies

BY 1791 WILLIAM BLAKE had written the first part of *The French Revolution*, a historical poem which was to be published by Joseph Johnson, but was withdrawn from publication for unknown reasons. Its text survives today only because a set of the page proofs has been preserved. On 10 October 1793, Blake addressed a prospectus 'To the Public' in which he briefly describes and offers for sale 'numerous great works now in hand' (E 693, K 208). The list includes entries for the illuminated *Songs*, *The Book of Thel*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *America: a Prophecy*, and for 'The History of England, a small book of Engravings'. Of the latter, no copy has been traced, and it seems unlikely that Blake ever engraved and published such a work. However, a manuscript draft with a list of subjects for the projected series is part of the poet's Notebook where it is accompanied by a similar list for another series of images, illustrating the Exodus from Egypt (E 672-3, K 208-9). Again, no such sequence of engravings can be found among the prints Blake is known to have executed. Nevertheless, Blake did not entirely abandon the project; rather, he apparently decided to incorporate many of the subjects from both of these lists in *Europe: a Prophecy*. Such moving of subject-matter resulted in an important generic shift from the specific in the 'History' series to the universal in the 'Prophecy'. What was first conceived, say, as 'The fire of London' ended as a representation of the 'Fire' (see Moore 155-7; Dörrbecker, *Europe*, *passim*; Behrendt, *Reading Blake* 108, 124, 136; also pages 206-7, below).

Obviously, Blake's ideas about the functioning of word and image underwent significant changes during the years immediately following the Revolution in France. With the so-called continental prophecies the poet and artist clearly moved beyond, and away from, any direct historical representation in poetry as well as from the conventions of history painting (see Bindman, *Art and Times* 33-7), and on to his own visual/verbal mythmaking. The historical chronicle was replaced by a new and 'prophetic' mode of historical representation as interpretation. Writing in 'struggling times' (*Europe* 10[12]: 16), Blake hoped to 'speak . . . in the ears of all the people', and his idea of prophecy appears to be generally indebted to Jeremiah's account of the 'prophets that have been before me and before thee of old [and who have] prophesied both against many countries, and against great kingdoms, of war, and of evil, and of pestilence' (28.7-8). As a self-proclaimed prophet the poet and artist thus joins the radical counter-culture which had newly surfaced in Britain during the years following the French Revolution. For at least some of Blake's subject-matter in the continental prophecies and the Urizen trilogy the writings of such figures as Joseph Priestley, Richard Brothers, or Thomas Spence provide an important context, demonstrating that Blake's politicized readings and re-workings of the bible are by no means an entirely isolated phenomenon (see Paley, 'Prince of the Hebrews', Worrall, *Radical Culture*, and Thompson, *Witness against the Beast*).

The Urizen trilogy tells of the fall into creation, and thus into historical time. It is the religious, social, sexual, and hence political history of humanity under the 'Laws' which 'Urizen [gave] . . . to the Nations' (*The Song of Los* 3:8) that supplies the common

denominator which unites the narrative of the continental prophecies, and that can be described as their thematic continuity. 'In *Africa*, which forms the first of the sequence of political prophecies, Blake's emphasis upon the Flood as a symbol of the Fall explains why each of these prophecies is named after a continent. According to biblical tradition, after the Flood, the three sons of Noah each became the possessor of the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe' (Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition* 191). And despite the fact that 'each poem works with a different time-frame and with different historical referents', the three continental books 'all conclude at virtually the same [millennial] moment, In all three the Urizenic forces of patriarchal oppression have been challenged and the balance of power altered' (Behrendt, *Reading Blake* 112).

It has been argued that 'Blake's inspiration for *America* and its sequels' was the opening of Paine's second part of *Rights of Man* (v. 181), which in turn echoes a passage near the end of *Common Sense* (q.v. 100; first described as a possible 'précis for *America* and the prophecies that followed' by Paulson 89 n.2; cf. Mee 134-5). And when comparing the 'rapid progress' made in America with the state of affairs still prevailing in the old world, Paine appears to anticipate one of Blake's themes in the continental prophecies by stating that in 'Asia, Africa, and Europe . . . [age] after age has passed away, for no other purpose than to behold their wretchedness' (*Rights* 182). Blake's purpose in the continental trilogy is to explain why such 'wretchedness' became possible, and how it may possibly be overcome. However, to accept the admirable prose of Paine's pamphleteering as a model for Blake's mythmaking, entails the temptation to read 'A Song of Liberty' and *America* as the poet's straightforward and unequivocal celebration of the American war of independence and the French Revolution.¹ Indeed, critics of Blake's writings have often described the continental prophecies as a representation of these historical events, claiming that the poet himself had glorified the two Revolutions as the beginning of a millennial and universal liberation of humankind (see, e.g., Damon, *Philosophy and Symbols*, or Erdman, *Prophet*). In consequence, the role of Orc in these poems was mostly said to be an entirely positive one. More recently, this stance has been subjected to severe criticism, and scholars have questioned the validity of such a one-dimensional reading of the continental prophecies. In the process serious doubts were raised concerning an entirely positive interpretation of the poems and their illuminations, and it has been proposed that on the contrary *America* marks the beginning of Blake's critique of the limitations inherent in the political revolutions of his times. Ironically, such scepticism was first aired in 1968(!) by John Beer (see *Humanism* 110). His views, though seldom credited, have since gained considerable currency (see, e.g. Doskow, McCord, 'Unromantic View', or Behrendt, 'American Revolution'). As adherents of both approaches ignore or play down at least some of the evidence that has been brought forward by their opponents, a *via media* between the two critical camps may offer the best chances to come to grips with Blake's meaning. 'Though some critics read this [*America*] as an optimistic, others as a pessimistic poem, it only makes sense *poetically* as

¹ Very similar results can be reached on different avenues of critical thought. For example, and rather than allying the poet with Paine, one may prefer 'to regard Blake's three poems specifically within the context of [his] energetic response to Burke in particular and to those for whom he spoke in general' (Behrendt, 'History' 382). However, the interpretative net profit to be gained from such one-dimensional scenarios of intellectual history will be much the same in both cases.

ambivalent prophecy, a poem partially self-fragmented' (Maniquis 388–9). That this is true not only of the poetical, but also of the poem's *political* 'sense' is part of the argument presented in the subsequent examination of some of its themes and contexts.

In the political prophecies one encounters 'a steady expansion of frame of reference: *America* deals with the events surrounding the American Revolution; *Europe* places contemporary revolutions in a context of 1,800 years, beginning with the birth of a 'secret child' in the year one; *The Song of Los* goes all the way back to Adam' (Mitchell 108), but seems to have lost almost 'any basis in actual history' (Fuller 56; see also Mee 25–6). Paradoxically, and though in the course of the continental prophecies Blake was pushing away from political reportage toward the poetic reconstruction of humanity's spiritual history (and, although to a lesser extent, also the poetic construction of its future), the increasing gap between the themes of his narrative and the 'actual history' of the 1790s by no means results in works which are 'mythical' in the narrow sense of being thoroughly depoliticized. Rather, what the reader/beholder of the continental books encounters is 'a myth created syncretically from many sources, creating a figural situation with historical, political, and psychological meanings' (Paley, *Energy* 63). Whereas the 'facts' of everyday life appear to be less and less important as materials for Blake's poetry and designs in the continental prophecies, they are superseded by a more and more profound engagement in various discursive fields that are all deeply impregnated with the political radicalism of the 1790s.

While Blake's earlier mode (as, for example, in *The French Revolution* of 1791) was still easily accessible to the reader, the making of a 'private' myth generated numerous difficulties and ambiguities. Blake's readers now confront a text that appears to be vague or even obscure. Presumably, it would be fairly easy to understand, even define, what Blake's works are all about, had he been content to remain one of a group of late eighteenth-century history painters and/or the author of historical and allegorical poetry. It seems not unlikely, however, that in that case it would also have been rather boring to look at his prints and paintings, and to read his poetry today. It was only by means of his mythmaking that Blake became a truly modern artist, and it is precisely the openness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified in his works which guarantees 'imaginative discernment and enjoyment' (Bloom 117) – 'because it rouses the faculties to act' (*E* 702, *K* 793).

This openness in Blake's work which has been termed 'the principle of rhetorical indeterminacy', is clearly in evidence at the end of all three of the continental prophecies. There, apocalypse is shown to be 'a continuous process of transformation, available in the present and continuing in the future' (Mee 211; see also 16–18 and all of McGann's studies in the list of Works Cited, below). The indeterminacy of Blake's myth similarly affects his designs which share 'the chief characteristics of open forms of art'. 'Blake deliberately forces his reader into the process of imaginative creation in the attempt to discover "meaning" or signification. When none can be established with any real certainty, the reader is cast upon her or his imaginative resources and must be content either to have no definitive meaning or to be courageous enough to posit a reading of her or his own' (Behrendt, *Reading Blake* 115). The medium of the illuminated book challenges the reader 'to an actively hermeneutic role', it seeks 'to induce vision . . .

rather than merely presenting it for consumption' (Mee 22). And yet, such ambiguity, openness or 'indeterminacy' must not be mistaken for historical arbitrariness; rather, it figures as part of the political discourse (in particular the so-called 'revolution controversy') of Blake's own times. To cite a simple example; with 'the hindsight given by the French Revolution, the American Revolution was either, if one were a Painite, the opening of a redemptive process which might culminate in universal revolution, or if one were a Burkian, a plague which threatened to engulf the world' (Bindman, 'Blake, Paine and the French Revolution'). On almost every page, Blake's illuminated books obliged their readers and spectators to make a choice and thus to participate responsibly in the construction of 'meaning'.

In spite of the fact that William Blake's poetry and art undoubtedly are 'idealist' in conception (and did in no way prepare the ground for the didacticism of socialist realism), history, politics, institutionalized religion, and the social psychology of the body politic continue to operate among the primary materials in the prophecies written at Lambeth after 1793. However, they are now treated in a distinctly different manner, and are employed for somewhat different purposes, too. In the Lambeth prophecies one encounters history 'condensed into images of diamond pressure' (Deen 60), not least because all the values 'that we conventionally isolate into the separate realms of religion and politics are unified and identified' (James 244). By means of 'an explicit myth', Blake attempts to state 'the simultaneity of cosmic, historical and psychological events' (Schorer 82), and it is seldom possible for the reader and viewer to grasp such multiplicity and simultaneousness of meaning without some serious effort. But Blake never promised to refrain from making demands on the intellectual capacities of his audience (see *E* 702, *K* 793). Whether engaging with Blake's poetry or with his designs, the reader/beholder is confronted with the work of an entirely serious and honest artist whose 'difficulties' are, in the final analysis, the difficulties of understanding what is going on in our lives.

America: a Prophecy marks 'a transition in Blake's work from the narrative topicality of *The French Revolution* to the encyclopedic epic mythology of *Europe* and the later prophecies' (Behrendt, 'American Revolution' 26; see also Behrendt, 'History' 382-3 and Mee 26). What is the creative process that allows Blake to transform the raw materials supplied by the history of his own times into poetic and pictorial myth? And how does he invest them with meaning that transcends the historical interest and that can speak to the modern reader/viewer with undiminished force? The following commentary on the continental trilogy may suggest at least some preliminary answers to these and some related questions.

David Erdman has demonstrated 'the minuteness with which Blake selects those elements which serve as receptacles of contemporary detail' (Erdman, *Prophet* 59).² Working backwards from Blake's narrative, the historical approach has uncovered many of the raw materials for his myth in contemporary politics and in verbal as well as graphic

² Erdman's studies have been (and continue to be) of seminal influence for the study of the historical meaning of Blake's mythmaking. Other important publications in this field include Bronowski's and Schorer's books of the 1940s, Ferber's *Social Vision of Blake* and, most recently, Mee's *Radical Enthusiasm*. In this same critical tradition Behrendt has supplied a general account of the continental trilogy in the context of politicized millenarian thought of the 1790s (see his 'History' article).