11   The sister arts in British Romanticism

WHICH first, the good news or the bad news? In honor of optimists who test their commitments by rising above the worst, I submit a three-part package of disheartening wisdom. W. J. T. Mitchell on pictures and words: "The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a 'nature' to which only it has access." John Barrell on recent efforts to shelter the two arts of picturemaking and word-making under one critical label: "'Romanticism' has never become a well-established term in the discussion of English painting, and art historians do not seem, on the whole, to have found the term of great explanatory power even when applied to such obvious subjects as Turner, Palmer, or Blake himself." And finally, the most quotable line ever written about all relations among all arts, Susanne Langer's heartstopping proclamation that "there are no happy marriages in art – only successful rape."[1] These warnings open suitably dark themes that we would be mistaken to bypass, because they are fundamentally true to life. Awesome combinations of failure, difference, distance, lag, divergence, and conflict establish the relations of texts and images in the Romantic period to such a degree that we cannot hope to understand those relations without them. Any elevation of spirits about the future of scholarship in "literature and the visual arts," as it has come to be standardized in a phrase, can only be achieved by climbing a mountainous collection of depressing realities.

I say so outright, at some risk of stating the obvious, because the verbal copulation of literature and the visual arts summons likeness and comparison and positive augmentation. These are, after all, the "sister arts," as the

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[1] Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 43; Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "The Body of the Public"* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 223; Langer, "Deceptive Analogies: Specious and Real Relationships among the Arts," *Problems of Art* (New York: Scribner's, 1957), p. 86.

eighteenth and some of the nineteenth century knew them, and were they not supposed to be a naturally compatible pair? The pairing has had, on occasion, and especially when the subject is Romanticism, the power to return us to nineteenth-century dreams not of arts but of Art as the single revelation that singleminded, multitalented creative personalities seek in complementary modes, some with a talent for words, others for music or pictures, all epitomized by an impossibly rare double or triple Romantic Genius such as William Blake, poet, painter, engraver, and, it was said, a natural musician.

Given the encouragement to cross-fertilization provided by the metaphors of Romantic aesthetics, which names "Vision" in poetry and "Poetry" (in painting) among its highest ideals, it is unsurprising that students working under the literature-and-visual-arts authorization have launched searches for philosophical, theological, psychological, aesthetic, and most recently political bases for comparing Romantic verbalizations and visualizations. This is bound to be an attractive procedure because almost every Romantic issue, theme, or aspect can be formulated, in some sense at some level, in both words and pictures, and doubly attractive because the double formulation allows us to tie great writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley to great artists like William Blake, John Constable, Samuel Palmer, and J.M.W. Turner, not to mention the lures of a European Romanticism that frequently extends the field of possibilities.

In studies of British Romanticism authoritative themes for students of the sister arts have included the pictorialism of Keats's poetry, informed and reinforced by his experience of painting and sculpture; "nature" as a common focus of literary and pictorial attention; the "visionary" theories of knowledge, perception, and self, expressed and exemplified in both Romantic poems and pictures; the influence of certain aesthetic categories, principally the sublime, the picturesque, and the organic, on literature and painting alike; and, most recently, literary and visual responses to crucial historical events such as the French Revolution. I would deny neither the abiding importance of these topics nor their fascination, not even the still-fertile promise of the time-honored favorites – such overplowed fields of comparison and contrast as the Nature verbalized in Wordsworth's poetry and visualized in John Constable's Suffolk landscapes, the sublime of indefinity that supposedly links poet Shelley and painter J. M. W. Turner, or the sublime of vision that makes Samuel Palmer a successor to Blake.

The problem is that the studies themselves have typically taken top-down approaches to subjects that need to be researched from the bottom up to protect them from glibness and forgettability. Certainly, as Barrell says,

attempts to explain British wordmaking and picturemaking with the single term "Romanticism" have met with (occasionally entertaining, usually insipid) failure regularly, success rarely. Although one might reasonably expect adding arts to add intellectual excitement, the most useful lessons, even of much of the latest criticism, have been about the artificiality and superficiality required to hide the dangerous unreliability of flawed approaches.

The signs of stress have often been all too visible right on the surface: at its most obvious, the uninhibited reaching across strong and significant geographical, linguistic, cultural, and chronological borders in search of comparisons; at its most egregious, the implicit or explicit use of implausible, anachronistic models of intellectual association (from Delacroix, Sand, and Chopin, through Baudelaire, Ruskin, the Impressionists, and the Bloomsbury Group, to Stein and Picasso). Is it insignificant that Wordsworth did not learn how to look at paintings from (even) Constable, or Coleridge from Caspar David Friedrich, but from the aristocratic amateur George Beaumont and the American fundamentalist Washington Allston respectively, two very conservative and yet also very different sources?

The blame for questionable procedures does not rest entirely on the shoulders of the scholars who have adopted them. What has been missing are the adequate histories that allow one to assess the complexities of the cultural situation. Often the fundamental weaknesses of art history and literary criticism, instead of cancelling each other out, have combined to defeat heroic efforts that have tried to fly before they could walk. In any case, at least for the foreseeable future, the best work will continue to be about problems not solutions, and in moods to match. In literature and the visual arts, this is a Jacobean not an Elizabethan age.

But the thrill of adventure remains. Despite a handful of recent works that have risen considerably above the previous norm, the study of British Romantic literature and the visual arts is a vast underexplored critical wilderness approached by many promising but mostly untried roads. Even the big, obvious subjects have not received sustained or sophisticated attention. We could profitably hear much more than we have about Coleridge's association with Washington Allston or Wordsworth's with his painter-patron George Beaumont; about the relevance of Hazlitt's experience as a trained portrait painter to his literary work or the influence of Benjamin Robert Haydon's ideals of history painting in the circle of the Romantic poets; about the bizarre continuities and discontinuities of visual neoclassicism that connected the elder Josiah Wedgwood with the artist and sculptor John Flaxman and painter Benjamin West, and the literary neo-Hellenism

associated chiefly with writers of a later generation like Shelley – widely separated phenomena joined by strong filaments.

The exception to the rule of neglect would seem to be William Blake, the object of almost overwhelming critical efforts for the better part of this waning century. And indeed, to learn about literature and the visual arts in the Romantic period, one must always circle back to confront Blake as the central figure or the central enigma. In some accounts he is not a Romantic at all but a cultural souvenir lost in time from an earlier era of Enlightenment, and yet in other accounts he is the futuristic prototype of "visionary" Romanticism. He has often been made to seem the harbinger of the post-Romantic modern world, the point at which Romanticism predicts the coming of Marx and Freud. In that version of the story of British Romanticism Blake's "illuminated books" in "illuminated printing" as he called them, or his "prophecies" as they are often called, become the prototypes of Romantic poetry in its most ambitious epic reaches. Extracted from the range of his other work, these illuminated books have frequently been treated as a master canon of Romantic artistic ambition, unified by medium because they are (most of them) watercolored relief-etchings; by biography because they are (more or less) the output of a productive lifetime; and by theme and manner because they (sometimes) repeat characters and incidents and display a (rough) pattern of evolution from the more fragmentary efforts of the 1790s to the more comprehensive mythical structures of *Milton a Poem* and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* from the years after 1800. Finally, to the extent that these prodigiously complex structures threaten to unread themselves into a tantalizing illegibility – which is to a very significant extent – Blake has even gained some currency as the most eligible Romantic liaison with the postmodern, an alliance further encouraged by the realization that his "poems" are not just printed lines but media events.

Of course, there are significant issues that cannot be raised through Blake, who as an artist sits uncomfortably in our art histories and as a poet was tangential to his written culture. But in major respects, having bequeathed to posterity a stock of work that concretely and intricately consolidates or at least splices elements of written language and graphic design from his own hands, Blake would seem to be the Romantic literature-and-visual-arts subject *par excellence*. If that is true, as it may be, it is equally true that Blake, even as he tempts us to put faith in the viability of these interdisciplinary approaches, also provides the paradigm *par excellence* of the array of obstacles that frustrate the literature-and-visual-arts project.

Words and pictures

Blake's illuminated printing gives us an opportunity to reassess the problem that some commentators have identified as the root of those frustrations, the vexing relation between words and images. Asking when a word is a word or an art an art is a bit like asking when a male is male or sex is sex. Langer's malicious claim that the intimate relations of texts and images can only be characterized as acts of criminal violence inflicted by one gender on another is an hysterical exaggeration of some conventional observations: words are different from images; the difference can be dangerous; and the most satisfactory resolution of the crisis of relationship is no relationship. The conclusion that the difference between texts and images is one that divides, and even threatens conflict and dominance, may seem most powerful when the opposing parties are located differently on the body. When words are oral and aural and images are tactile and visual, they are perhaps as different as they ever get to be. But a closely related set of observations – of two senses contributing, as it were, to a single human body's task of perceiving the world – motivates the opposite conclusion, that the difference between the two senses is complementary.

The way to avoid such petrified oppositions is to notice how the differences are not fixed. They are sensitive to context – technologically sensitive, for instance. They threaten to collapse when words are not primarily sounds but sights (see figure 11.1). The words in plate 81 of Blake's *Jerusalem* are produced by the same technology, relief etching, that produces the pictures. Hence the distance between the two is one of the factors subject to the producer's control, as here, where the fairly regular lines at the top of the plate seem least like the images of human bodies in the middle, while the words left of the central human figures seem well on their way to becoming images: rotated ninety degrees from horizontal lines and reversed to obstruct legibility, curved to conform to surrounding image structures (clouds, bodies, black graphic envelope) – to yield to them, hence acknowledging their priority at this point – and arranged on the left symmetrically opposite the graphic elements on the right to complete the bifurcated global shape. We would be remiss to overlook the powerful element of choice left to the reader/spectator, who *may* look at these words for image-form before reading them for lexical-content – but may not, and may even ignore one or the other altogether.

We now know that the ways Blake prepared plates for illuminated printing depended heavily upon the technologies of handwriting and freehand draw-

Figure 11.1 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 81 (copy D), relief etching, c. 1804–20.

ing adapted to the requirements of relief-etching.[2] Without minimizing these technical requirements or their effects – such as writing/drawing on copper rather than paper, and writing/drawing in reverse (thus the backward writing on plate 81, the hardest for us to read, was the only writing on that plate executed in the easiest way, conventionally forward) – we can see that, as Blake used them, the handicrafts of writing and drawing overlap: same hand, same surface, similar tools. So used, they blur the differences between words and images that human physiology may seem to reinforce. A circle on one of Blake's plates may be the outline of an eye or the letter O or both – if an eye, then "drawn," if a letter, then "written." We generally maintain the distinction between "writing" and "drawing" anyway for purposes of cultural organization, as any schoolchild knows who is waiting for "writing" class to end and "drawing" class to begin, and regard one as indispensable basic education and the other as play, but at that level the distinction becomes much more a matter of how we use and value what we see than of how we make it.

In any event, the dominant reproductive technology of Blake's time was not relief-etching. It was letterpress printing with movable type, which, though a visual means of reproduction, to a certain extent reinstates the difference between words and pictures by establishing a visual context resistant to nonalphabetic images (see figure 11.2). To incorporate images into the alphabetic regimen of printing technology, other media – woodcuts, engravings (or in this reproduction of pages from a modern edition, photolithographic halftone) – had to be accommodated in roundabout ways, leading to the rigid segregation, by medium, of pictures from texts. The segregation did not follow directly from any difference between words and pictures but indirectly from the particular technological means by which movable type made the reproduction of words so efficient – leaving, as it were, images in its economic wake. We can see this most easily by comparing letterpress printing with other reproductive media. Engraving and photography, for example, "see" words as images; it is as easy to engrave words on copper as to engrave pictures and as easy to photograph the word *tree* as to photograph a tree. Likewise, computer designers exploit the enormous flexibilities of the electronic digitization that allows letters to be "written" and "read" *as* pictures, and all to be reproduced indiscriminately by pixels. The word-picture distinction does not disappear – as long as users come to the technology wanting letters and words, the technology will have to include that category in its *modus operandi* – but it seems fair to say that "graphically-

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[2] See Robert N. Essick, *William Blake, Printmaker* (Princeton University Press, 1980), and Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

oriented" computer environments treat words as a special case of pictures.

Thus the segregation of two overlapping cultural categories, words and pictures, was powerfully influenced by letterpress printing, which made pictures hard to deal with because movable type could not reproduce them and image-reproducing technologies like engraving were inefficient and expensive by comparison. Letterpress printing was the dominant technology of a particular historical moment that happens to have been Blake's moment, and the Romantic moment. Conversely, since that time, photographic, cinematographic, and videographic technologies have given pictures a new lease on reproductive life and hence a new hold on cultural life.

Even so, it is important not to be hypnotized by "words" and "pictures" into imagining these convenient names as stable, discrete categories that are promoted and demoted in a simple reproductive ratio regulated by available technology. Rather, "audio" and "video," "texts" and "images," "literature" and the "visual arts" are unstable entities that slip and slide this way and that under the complex pressures of history, among which are the pressures of technology. "Words" and "pictures" are not things-in-themselves but ways of understanding things. Put philosophical pressure on any conceivable definition of the terms, and they yield. Even in movable type, after all, an L or P "is" an image if seen as one, and, indeed, type- and book-designers have made a business of seeing and understanding type, pages, and books as two- and three-dimensional images, with all the help from visual aesthetic categories that "design" suggests.

Social hierarchy

If the distance between literature and the visual arts in the Romantic period is in part the technological distance between words and pictures, that distance is both cause and consequence: it depends on available technologies, but the availability of technologies also depends on social and historical negotiations at many levels. One set of such broader cause-effects involves the distribution of social privileges and rewards. Words and images are assigned to divergent patterns of distribution, Blake again being a usefully indicative case. Readers often notice his marked difference from the other Romantic poets. Positively, they may say that he is the most original or imaginative; negatively, that he seems insane. In some respects a more satisfactory translation of these readerly reactions would be simply "he is a London engraver of the period 1757–1827," which is very far from saying "he is one of the six major British Romantic poets." As an engraver, his social, intellectual, political, religious, and professional affiliations were not

(a)   She hid them in his loins; raving he ran among the rocks,
       Compelld into a shape of Moral Virtue against the Lamb.
       The invisible lovely one giving him a form according to
       His Law a form against the Lamb of God opposd to Mercy
       And playing in the thunderous Loom in sweet intoxication   80
       Filling cups of silver & crystal with shrieks & cries, with groans
       And dolorous sobs: the wine of lovers in the Wine-press of Luvah

       O sister Cambel said Gwendolen, as their long beaming light   c
       Mingled above the Mountain[:] what shall we do to keep
       These awful forms in our soft bands: distracted with trembling   85

PLATE 81
       I have mockd those who refused cruelty & I have admired
       The cruel Warrior. I have refused to give love to Merlin the piteous.
       He brings to me the Images of his Love & I reject in chastity
       And turn them out into the streets for Harlots to be food
       To the stern Warrior. I am become perfect in beauty over my Warrior   5
       For Men are caught by Love: Woman is caught by Pride
       That Love may only be obtaind in the passages of Death.

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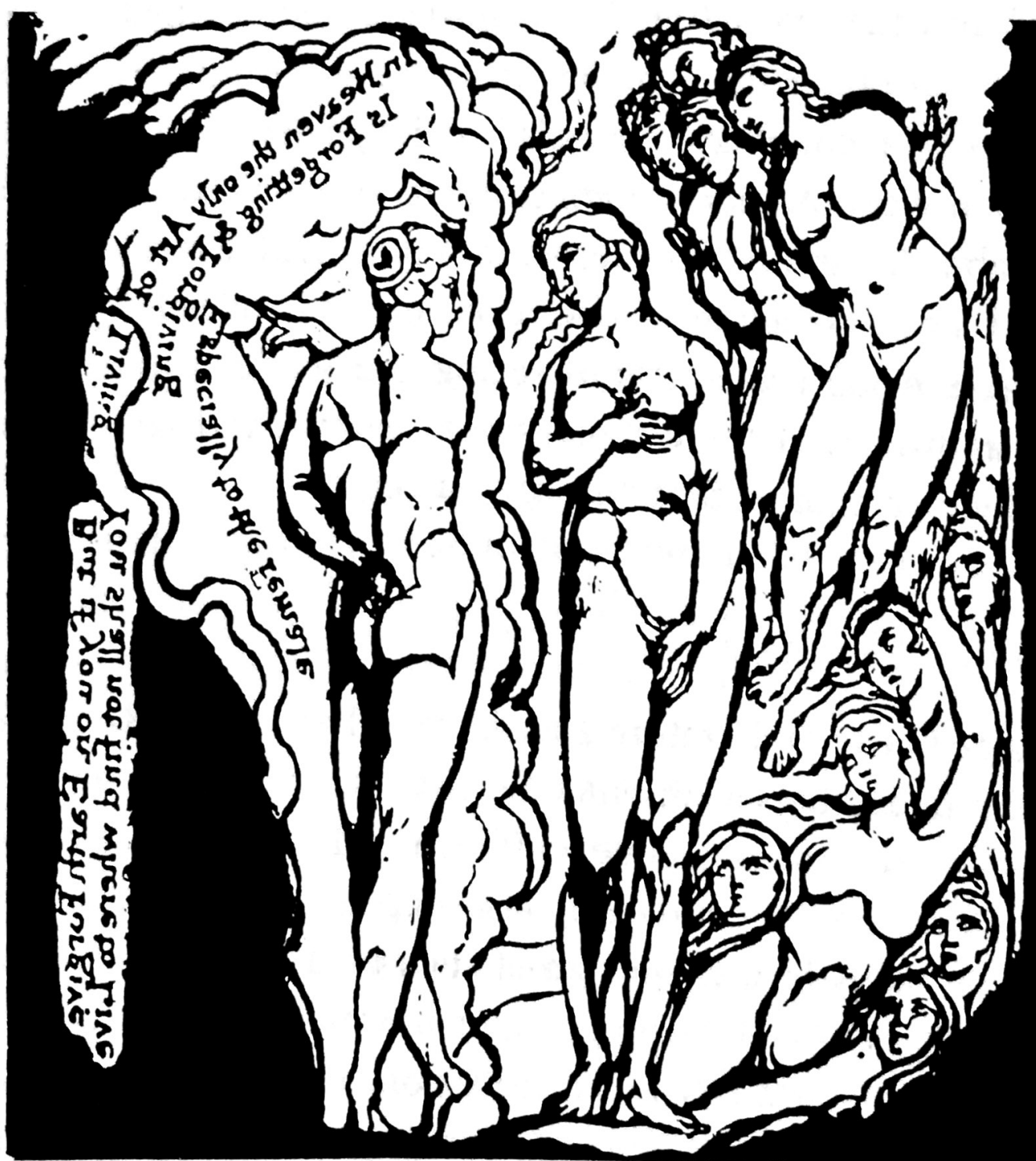

Figure 11.2 (a) and (b)   William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 81 (copy D), and
corresponding text from David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of
William Blake*, newly rev. edn.

(b)   Let us look! let us examine! is the Cruel become an Infant
Or is he still a cruel Warrior? look Sisters, look! O piteous
I have destroyd Wandring Reuben who strove to bind my Will   10
I have stripd off Josephs beautiful integument for my Beloved,
The Cruel-one of Albion: to clothe him in gems of my Zone
I have named him Jehovah of Hosts. Humanity is become
A weeping Infant in ruind lovely Jerusalems folding Cloud:
In Heaven Love begets Love! but Fear is the Parent of Earthly Love!   '15
And he who will not bend to Love must be subdud by Fear,

PLATE 82

I have heard Jerusalems groans; from Vala's cries & lamentations
I gather our eternal fate: Outcasts from life and love:
Unless we find a way to bind these awful Forms to our
Embrace we shall perish annihilate, discoverd our Delusions.
Look I have wrought without delusion: Look! I have wept!   5
And given soft milk mingled together with the spirits of flocks
Of lambs and doves, mingled together in cups and dishes
Of painted clay; the mighty Hyle is become a weeping infant;
Soon shall the Spectres of the Dead follow my weaving threads.

The Twelve Daughters of Albion attentive listen in secret shades   10
On Cambridge and Oxford beaming soft uniting with Rahabs cloud
While Gwendolen spoke to Cambel turning soft the spinning reel:
Or throwing the wingd shuttle; or drawing the cords with softest songs
The golden cords of the Looms animate beneath their touches soft,
Along the Island white, among the Druid Temples, while Gwendolen   15
Spoke to the Daughters of Albion standing on Skiddaws top.

So saying she took a Falshood & hid it in her left hand:
To entice her Sisters away to Babylon on Euphrates.
And thus she closed her left hand and utterd her Falshood:
Forgetting that Falshood is prophetic, she hid her hand behind her,   20
Upon her back behind her loins & thus utterd her Deceit.

I heard Enitharmon say to Los: Let the Daughters of Albion
Be scatterd abroad and let the name of Albion be forgotten:
Divide them into three; name them Amalek Canaan & Moab:
Let Albion remain a desolation without an inhabitant: 25
And let the Looms of Enitharmon & the Furnaces of Los
Create Jerusalem, & Babylon & Egypt & Moab & Amalek,
And Helle & Hesperia & Hindostan & China & Japan.
But hide America, for a Curse an Altar of Victims & a Holy Place.
See Sisters Canaan is pleasant, Egypt is as the Garden of Eden: 30
Babylon is our chief desire, Moab our bath in summer:
Let us lead the stems of this Tree let us plant it before Jerusalem
To judge the Friend of Sinners to death without the Veil:
To cut her off from America, to close up her secret Ark:
And the fury of Man exhaust in War! Woman permanent remain   35

utterly different from the other five but very, very different. Wordsworth and Shelley were from different places, generations, classes, and universities; but by comparison Blake was as from a different world. I am not rescuing him from the charge of insanity but saying that the best social vantage point from which to view his mental condition is not the same as the one from which to view Coleridge's. As producers Blake and Coleridge go, so go their products: it is a heady challenge to find one social vantage point from which to view both images and words.

Blake lived and died in a socioeconomic network of painters and paintings, line engravers, stipple engravers, mezzotinters, and prints. In such an environment, dedicated to making and marketing images, words were things to illustrate. He is the only one of the six poets to have completed an apprenticeship (Keats cancelled his) and the only one to have spent a lifetime doing what he learned. He is the only one except Keats without university education and the only one to have had no formal education in the usual sense. Instead of "education" he had "training," all in the visual arts – drawing lessons, apprenticeship, the Royal Academy schools. In these respects Blake's situation was typical of the picturemakers in relation to the wordmakers of his time and place.

As an engraver Blake's life ran on the lower social track of the visual arts, with the reproducers not the producers of pictures. Whenever he painted rather than engraved, as he often did, he was not just changing media but trying to climb a slippery social ladder. Engravers were artisans working at a trade, while painters and sculptors were "artists" in a newly elevated sense. Ever anxious to preserve the social gains that painting and sculpture had lately won as "fine" arts, the Royal Academy, founded in 1768, regularly refused to admit engravers as equals until the twentieth century, always on the grounds that engravers had manual skill but lacked invention, the intellectual ability that raised artisanry to an art and painters to poets.

In what we might call their assigned levels of intellectual responsibility, engravers were closer to printers, painters to poets, but even painters remained socially handicapped by the conditions of their craft. They required a separate course of training outside the grammar schools and universities, and they had to work in messy studios with materials in various degrees of wetness. British painters had only very recently exploited the logic of specialization to set themselves above a rather undifferentiated group that included house painters, coach painters, and heraldic painters. The engravers, who traced the origins of engraving to sculpture but usually worked for painters, tied their social aspirations to the ascendant group by presenting themselves as painters *manqués* both in word (as when they

demanded admission to the Academy) and deed (as when they demanded exhibition space with the painters, or when they themselves took up painting). The painters' own cloudy status made them resist such claims to equality, leaving engravers and their allies to organize separate groups to promote their well-being, which they did repeatedly without much success.

In terms of social distance, what were the consequences? When writer Robert Southey looked in on Blake's one-artist exhibition (at his brother's house in 1809–10), his "melancholy impression" of what he saw should raise profound social as well as aesthetic questions (*Blake Records*, p. 399). So should his subsequent declaration, despite a level of disapproval close to revulsion, that "nothing but madness" kept Blake from "being the sublimest painter" in the world – this from a man who had earlier confessed to Haydon that "In matters of Art I am entirely ignorant" (*Blake Records*, p. 399). Could he under any imaginable circumstances have thought, "Ah, here is one of the three major Romantic poets of the first generation. I should introduce him to my brother-in-law Coleridge and my Cumberland neighbor Wordsworth?"

Much of this distance is social and vocational and could only be closed by the historical amnesia that time can induce over several decades. It is of course not surprising that Blake knew none of his Romantic literary peers. But they probably knew no other engravers either. When Bernard Barton asked Charles Lamb about Blake in 1824, Lamb answered as vaguely about this citizen of London as if he were in India: "Blake is a real name, I assure you, and a most extraordinary man, if he be still living" (*Blake Records*, p. 284). He was, but Lamb was satisfied to leave the personal contact to the ever-curious Henry Crabb Robinson, the only one of this literary crowd ever to converse with Blake.

A very few painters, such as Henry Fuseli of Blake's generation and Haydon of Keats's, managed to be simultaneously middle-class literati and painters, but most chose the comfort of a more segregated social circle. To my knowledge, no engraver of the period, and certainly none with Blake's (not uncommon) combination of radical religious and political opinions, offended this boundary between wordmakers and imagemakers for any length of time. Instead, intrepid agents of the literati such as Crabb Robinson ventured across the line to fetch exotic anthropology from the dark side.

Histories

Across this social divide emerged distinct histories in the service of disparate issues. The separated lives of word and image took numerous forms, virtu-

ally all of which reinforced a hierarchy that put writers in the superior position. That was true both in a very general sense – this was a culture in which words were granted various kinds of superiority over pictures – and in a more particular sense, such that, while British poets were cast as world-class competitors for poetic fame, the painters were cast as latecomers of undemonstrated merit. The abiding question on the literary side was whether the writers could become the worthy inheritors of a relatively recent but highly esteemed history of British accomplishment by reaching the mark set by past successes. The question on the visual side was whether the artists could overcome a history of British failure and neglect.

By the generation of Wordsworth and Coleridge the literary gold standards were Shakespeare and Milton, though one could extend and deepen the history, and enlarge the stock of poetic possibilities, by adding primitives such as Chaucer and the ancient bards of Scotland. Shakespeare's plays were taken as a demonstration that the British could compete for literary laurels with the greatest of any period or nation, and Milton's poems proved that Shakespeare's success had been only one manifestation of a British way with words that deserved a place in the history of European letters beginning with Homer. Some literary critics have emphasized the anxiety induced in British poets by this daunting history. An intimidating question for late-arriving poets like Wordsworth and Keats was whether they had any hope of becoming anything larger than a footnote. Then there was the question of sufficiency – whether the plethora of great poems from Homer to Milton had left room for any more – and the potentially devastating "modern" question addressed by Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry* and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* – whether the course of history was eliminating the function of poetry. But as they studied intently the competition across generations and nations, British writers virtually ignored the possibility for competition across arts. They wasted none of their anxiety on the painters and musicians to whom we look whenever we are tempted to broaden Romanticism to take in Constable's landscapes and Beethoven's symphonies.

On the other side, the producers of British imagery found themselves in an historical predicament marked not by what they had had but by what they had lacked. Shakespeare's visual counterpart was stunningly absent. For decades Continental critics – Montesquieu, Du Bos, Winckelmann, and others – had pointed to the uneven distribution of verbal and visual accomplishments in Britain and attributed it to fixed conditions of climate (cold) and temperament (calculating) that produced good merchants but bad pictures. The most mercantile of the visual genres was portrait painting, and naturally the British had done best in that.

For British artists the legal tender was not British but Italian, and the touchstones were Raphael and Michelangelo, which did not increase the allure of Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough, not to mention William Hogarth. By comparison with the rich, layered literary culture to which writers like Dryden, Pope, and Swift had (various kinds of) access, the culture of British imagery was meager indeed. After all, while Shakespeare was vying for position in a pack of fiercely competitive native writers, "British painting" would have been only a laughable contradiction in terms. The court painter to Henry VIII was the German Hans Holbein the Younger (*c.* 1497–1543), who settled in England for the last few years of his life, and the painter to Charles I, one of the most avid and ambitious art collectors ever, was the Flemish Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). When Virginia Woolf inquired as to the whereabouts of Shakespeare's sister, it did not occur to her that she might have been an Elizabethan painter.

Hence painters and their cultural allies spent much of their intellectual capital defending themselves against charges of chronic inferiority, putting their belated arrival in the best light, and designing remedial programs for themselves and their spectators. These polemical, critical, and instructional bids for status began as early as the late seventeenth century, perhaps with William Aglionby's translation of some of Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* into English (1685); continued in the early eighteenth century with Jonathan Richardson's extensive efforts to outline – in *The Theory of Painting* (1715), *Essay on the Art of Criticism*, and *The Science of a Connoisseur* (1719) – a theory of painting suited to the British situation, including instructions for becoming a proper judge of painting; and then entered a far more programatic phase of development with the establishment of the Royal Academy in 1768 (see figure 11.3), just in time to run parallel with the two generations of British Romantic writers who are the main concern of this volume. As its noisy critics proclaimed, the Royal Academy was never a disinterested body. In a state-sponsored institution it consolidated aesthetic, pedagogical, and commercial initiatives to improve the lot of British painters (especially of its self-selected membership). It contacted the public most effectively at its annual exhibitions, where potential customers could see in a single visit the current work of British painters, thus giving weight and substance to the notion that there indeed existed a British School of Painting. Writers were not perceived to need anything comparable to the economic development plan that made the Royal Academy seem so necessary and so late in arriving on the shores of Britain.

Although in our retrospective eyes the period from Reynolds and Gainsborough through Flaxman, Blake, Constable, Turner, and Palmer may
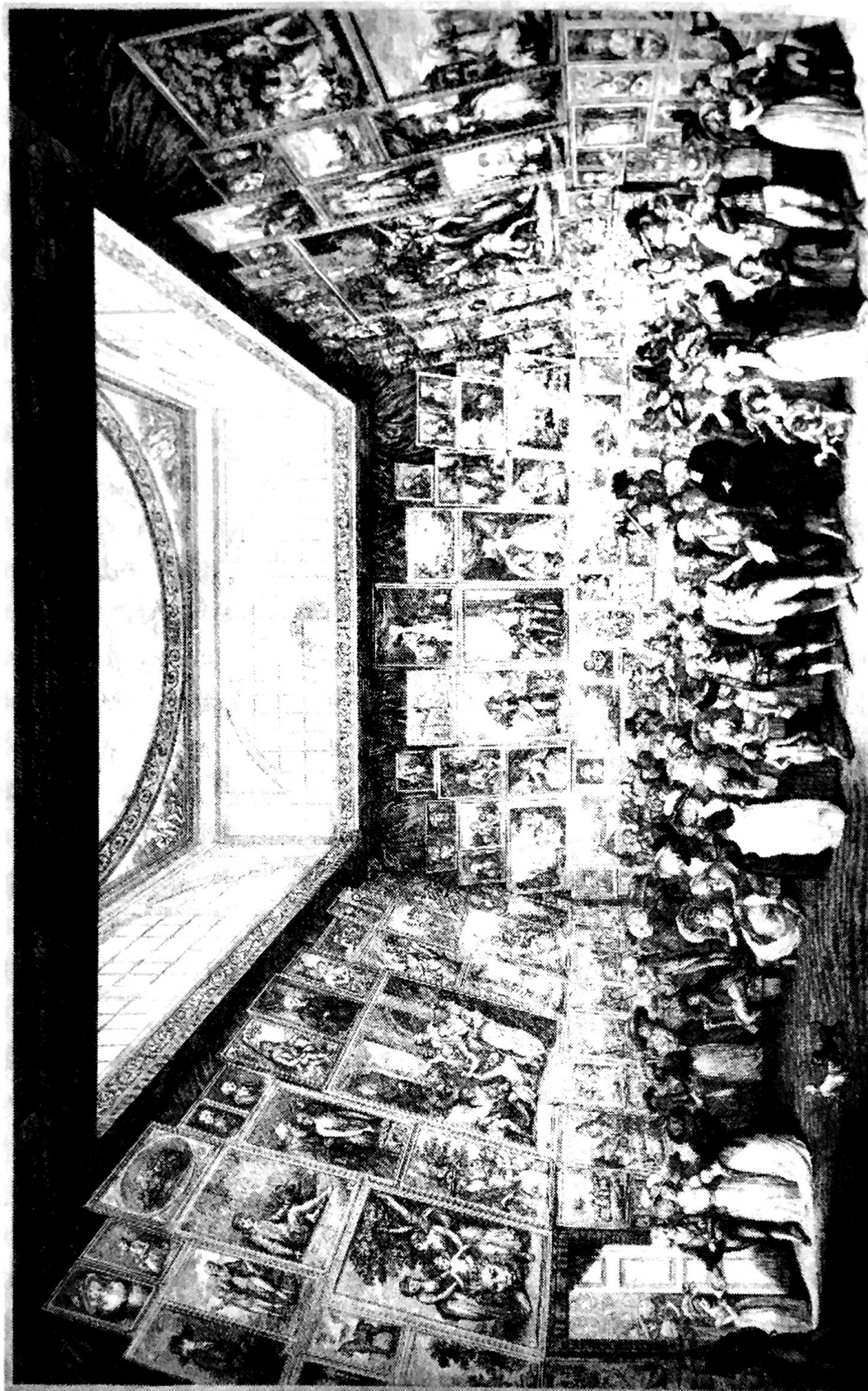
STAIR—AMOTED—EIITH

THE EXHIBITION OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY, 1787.

Figure 11.3 Pietro Martini after J.H. Ramberg, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787*, engraving, 1787.

appear to have been a great age of British art, throughout the last quarter of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, inferiority, failure, and neglect remain the prime generative topics of British art writing, spawning a standard gloomy vocabulary of urgencies, inquiries, trials, perils, and crises that keeps the rhetorical temperature high: "The present moment is considered by artists as teeming with the crisis...of the destiny of their Art in England," proclaims Prince Hoare on p. 211 of his *Inquiry into the Requisite Cultivation and Present State of the Arts of Design in England* (1806), refurbishing a title already employed a quarter of a century earlier in James Barry's *Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England* (1775) and dusted off yet again nearly a quarter of a century later in Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Some Enquiry into the Causes Which Have Obstructed the Advance of Historical Painting for the Last Seventy Years in England* (1829).

They reported a history of "obstructions" – the Reformation, the Civil War, occupation by an army of foreign artists – that had unnaturally blocked the course of a natural "advance" that would have occurred in Britain as it had in other European nations, especially Italy and France. Most of the proposed remedies involved notions of "cultivation" and "acquisition" through public and professional education: systematic training in theory and practice to educate the artists, exhibitions to educate the artists and the audience, and official support for public projects to "encourage" (employ) British artists and make their work as visible as the work of artists in other countries. The kind of art most congenial to such proposals is an international one that can be measured by rational standards such as those laid out in the most formidable of British art theories of the period, Joshua Reynolds's fifteen *Discourses on Art* delivered at the Royal Academy from 1769 to 1790. This standard does not appeal to British uniqueness: although it may accept British history or British landscape as content, it does so on equal terms with any other national history or geography. All local content competes on an international market by moving beyond locality and singularity, by generalizing its particulars and by delivering that generalization in internationally sanctioned techniques and forms. To "acquire" that standard repertory of content, form, and technique, most painters spent at least months and preferably years in Italy copying from the verified (foreign) old masters. To gauge meaningfully the possibilities for literature and the visual arts in Romantic Britain, one must study the calculus of differences between the academy-less education of native poetic genius that Wordsworth and Keats designed to elevate themselves to positions in the British literary record, and the programatic training, in the service of international-

ism and eclecticism, by which British artists aimed to move their art into the European mainstream.

Markets

The formulation of the crisis-ridden narratives of British art in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century cannot be understood as a merely historical activity. It was an exercise in self-understanding and self-justification, certainly, but it was, and perhaps was more significantly, also an element in a marketing strategy. The dissimilar histories of British literature and visual arts were, among other things, responses to dissimilar markets. The literary market was broader, more settled and mature, but also more parochial and less innovative. The art market was immature, and very much in flux. It had international aspirations, not simply because the British art market was small – although it was – but because images promise more portability than words. On the market, British painters and their commercial allies often display the mentality of the oppressed, sometimes self-defeatingly compliant and/or stubborn and inclined to copy the standards of others rather than to create their own, at other times devilishly clever, inventive, and resourceful in finding ways to show and sell their work (see figure 11.4). For British writers of the period, the familiar four-way
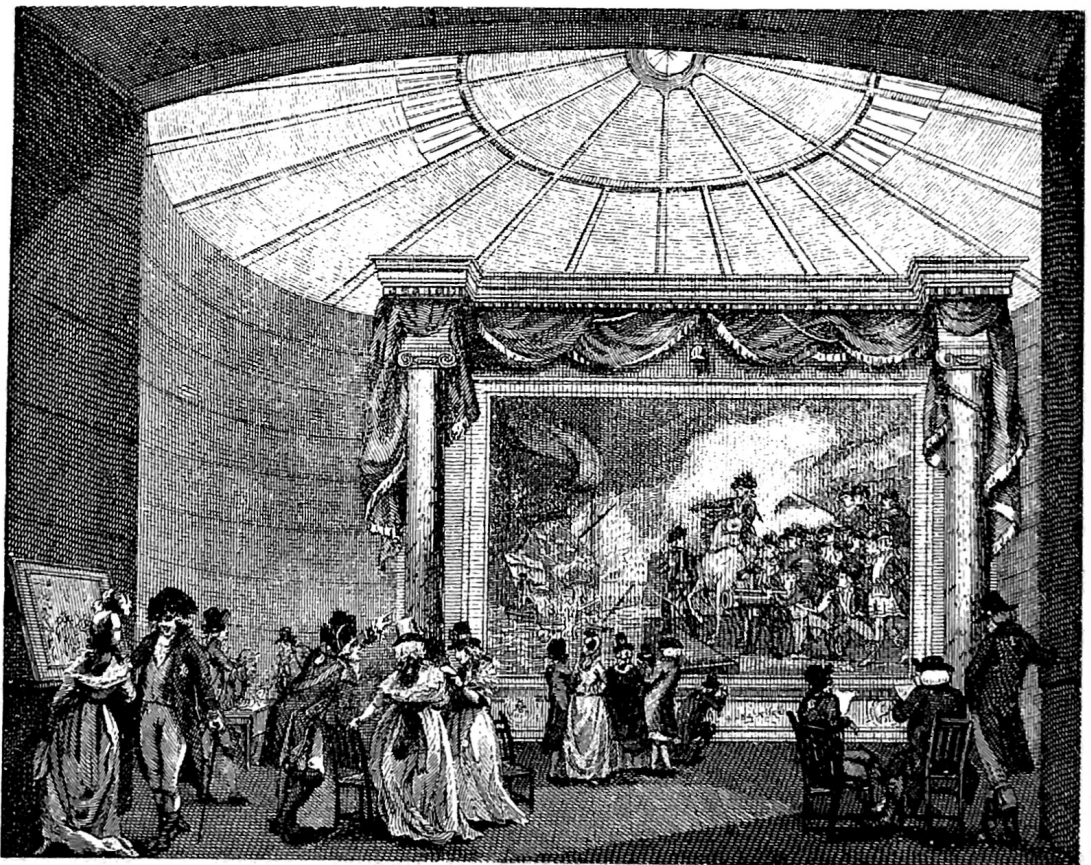

Figure 11.4   Francesco Bartolozzi, engraved ticket of admission to the 1791 exhibition of Copley's *Siege of Gibraltar* (facsimile of ticket by unidentified artist).

alliance of author, publisher, printer, and bookseller, though it could be adjusted to suit the situation, was firmly established as the dominant commercial arrangement and relatively well integrated with the educational institutions that served as the training ground for writers. In the visual arts the mechanisms of training, production, and marketing were far less sure and successful, and far more open to, as well as desperately in need of, innovation. This engraved ticket of admission illustrates a marketing concept with which several painters had great success. Exploring the boundary that painting shared with the theatre, the raree show, and other spectacles for public amusement, it called for the public display of a huge history painting with contemporary interest – here John Singleton Copley's *Siege of Gibraltar*, a patriotic spectacle that drew thousands of visitors to a tent in Green Park in 1791. Profit came from the price of admission and the sale of subscriptions to a forthcoming engraving (often with a key to the faces in the painting). Throughout the period (and well beyond), other painters with a knack for history painting as spectacle, most memorably John Martin (1789–1854), continued to exploit the effects of sheer immensity. Like his predecessors, he understood the advantage of marketing a single image in multiple formats. With a bit of modification, Martin's large images were easily converted to stage sets. Reduced, they could be turned into prints and sold as private souvenirs of the stupendous public originals, either separately or as illustrations to the text that had provided the occasion for the painting to begin with.

Marketing brings us back to some fundamental influences on the circulation of words and images in this period. The market for words is dominated by the commodity in its second-order, reproduced rather than produced, form – newspapers, magazines, and books rather than manuscripts. But in images the market is still dominated by the art object, the first-order, the produced, form of the commodity – the watercolor, the painting – even as efforts were being made to find cheaper, more efficient modes of reproduction. Old-line "great-man" patronage, which rested largely on the production of unique art objects, remained more influential in painting than in literature, both in fact – as Benjamin West was patronized by George III for several good years in West's prime – but perhaps even more significantly in the artists' polemics: they dwelled on the dearth of aristocratic and state patronage (contrasted to the supposed abundance of "opportunity" and "encouragement" in foreign climes) even to the point of distraction from the primary business at hand.

And indeed there emerged new ventures that did not depend upon traditional patronage, such as Josiah Wedgwood's heavy investment in neoclassicism – not, of course, the neoclassicism that literary historians associate with

Dryden, Pope, and Swift, but a late-eighteenth-century visual fashion with no significant stylistic counterpart in the mainstream of British Romantic writing of that period. (The neo-Hellenism of the younger generation of Romantic writers is a good deal later and very differently formulated.) In employing artist and sculptor John Flaxman to create spare and elegant neoclassical designs for his pottery, Wedgwood cleverly capitalized on the commercial advantages of an international style. It was radically simple and adaptable, it leveraged the prestige and authority of the Greek-centered (and anti-British) histories of art developed by Continental critics such as Winckelmann, and hence it traveled extraordinarily well (see figure 11.5). In such a project as Wedgwood's copy of the Portland (or Barbarini) vase – here engraved by Blake for Wedgwood's friend Erasmus Darwin's *Economy of Vegetation* (1791) – we can glimpse something of the complex intersection and divergence of literary and visual cultures that a term such as "neoclassicism" can cover. Wedgwood's immensely successful merchandizing of visual neoclassicism through Flaxman's designs for Wedgwood ware is one interesting strand; it was Flaxman who first urged Wedgwood to come to London to see the Portland vase. The double appropriation of neoclassicism by reactionary and radical politics is another; the radical side is represented here by the implicit proximity of the radical intellectuals Darwin, Wedgwood, Priestley, *et al.*, but the circle of evidence stretches much further, from George III's employment of Benjamin West to the Revolution's employment of Jacques-Louis David. The British literary background is quite different: there "neoclassic" is conventionally treated as the opposite of "Romantic" and calls to mind Dryden and Pope, not Wordsworth. And yet one only has to name the Elgin (Parthenon) marbles for which painter Benjamin Haydon lobbied so intensely, Keatsian Grecian urns, Shelleyan grecophilia, and Byron's sponsorship of Dryden and Pope to see that the mutual infiltration of visual and literary neoclassicisms is one of the most tantalizing, least exhausted sister-arts topics in all of British Romanticism.

Far more often than they collaborated with potters and other artisans, however, visual artists attempted to join forces with writers. Earlier I made the point that the technological basis of word-production and image-production caused a lack of coordination that made intimate relations difficult. It also had serious consequences in marketing. The relative efficiency of letterpress printing and the inefficiency of engraving defeated one of the most promising marketing gambits of the era – the attempt to tie the fortunes of British images to the prestige of British words. This is clearest in the 1790s, in British imagemaking the decade of the "gallery," a marketing experiment constructed from more or less familiar components.

The Portland Vase.

Figure 11.5   William Blake, *The Portland Vase*, engraving for Erasmus Darwin's
The Botanic Garden part 1, *The Economy of Vegetation*, 1791.

"Alderman" John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, conceived in the mid-1780s and opened with great fanfare in 1789, was the most important of several gallery projects of the decade, including Macklin's Poets' Gallery, inaugurated in 1788 and followed by Macklin's Bible project in 1790, painter Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery the same year, and Bowyer's Historic Gallery in 1792. (Only Fuseli's Milton Gallery was to consist of paintings by a single artist.) Boydell's was the most elaborately planned of these ventures in artistic opportunity based on commercial speculation rather than aristocratic patronage and thought perhaps to be particularly well suited to the British genius for trade. Indeed, just before the opening of the Gallery and three months before the fall of the Bastille, a crowd of dignitaries including Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, and the Prince of Wales toasted Boydell as the "Commercial Maecenas" (after the Roman patron of Horace and Virgil), "an English tradesman, who patronizes the art better than the Grand Monarque of France."[3]

The marketing nucleus of his project was simple and entirely conventional: exhibit a painting (one either commissioned for the purpose, or one to which the reproduction rights have been purchased) and take orders ("subscriptions") for engraved prints of the painting, with the printseller stationed at the commercial intersection of painter, engraver, and customer. In the 1770s and 80s Boydell had built Britain's most successful printselling business by effectively applying this formula to popular paintings. In the 1790s he elaborated it into the logic of a multidimensional "gallery" in several ways, as follows.

He sold a theme instead of a single painting, thus multiplying both the number of related products available to the consumer (in the familiar commercial form of a "set" or "series"), and he sold in multiple formats to attract buyers with a range of disposable income. He chose a theme that could sell British images by selling Shakespeare, that is, by standing them on the strong shoulders of British literature. He increased his international opportunities by choosing the British wordsmith with the best international reputation – Italy had Jesus and the saints for their paintings, Britain had Shakespeare – and adding to his difficult language images that would increase his legibility, as it were, even to foreign consumers. At the same time, cautious not to allow the words to seem a mere excuse for the pictures, Boydell projected the most authoritative edition of Shakespeare ever.

On the home front he sold the crisis of British art by appealing to national shame and pride, hammering on the familiar themes of British art history –

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[3] Quoted in Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Holden Furber (Cambridge University Press), v, 465.

obstructed aspirations, chronic neglect, unsympathetic criticism from the
Continent, etc.:

> In this progress of the fine Arts, though Foreigners have allowed our lately
> acquired superiority of Engraving,...yet they have said with some severity...that the
> abilities of our best Artists are chiefly employed in painting Portraits...While the
> noblest part of the Art – HISTORICAL PAINTING – is much neglected. To
> obviate this national Reflection was, as I have already hinted, the principal cause
> of the present undertaking.[4]

Boydell exploited the stock opposition between portrait painting – associated
with commerce, the gratification of personal vanity, and the low aims of
English art – and history painting by designing a project that could produce,
at one level, history paintings, theoretically the highest and most celebrated
but practically the most expensive and most neglected genre, but sell them,
at another level, through the popular medium of book illustration, which
was, with portraiture, one of the two mature areas of the British market. The
Shakespeare Gallery would thus display history paintings but sell book
illustrations.

Boydell embodied in himself the promise of "this progress in the fine
Arts." Claiming that his previous projects had won international recognition
for the slighted English School of Engraving, he would now turn his attention
to the English School of Painting. The number of painters and engravers he
could involve allowed him to speak as the collective voice of the English
School and to sell his project as a public service rather than a private
speculation. Hence he decorated and furnished the Shakespeare Gallery as a
mock-public institution, complete with dignified facade and commissioned
sculpture in Pall Mall, entirely apart from his own printshop in Cheapside (see
figure 11.6). As the Royal Academy lent reality to the British School in
one way, Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery attempted to lend it reality in
another, by presenting itself architecturally in quasi-institutional form – and
indeed, after the Boydell lottery in 1805, the Gallery building was immedi-
ately taken over by the new British Institution, which built a collection and
sponsored thematically organized exhibitions and competitions. To the
extent that its activities overlapped the Academy's, it was a competitor,
despite its own declarations to the contrary. Cultivating the role of public
benefactor, Boydell declared that he would eventually give the Gallery to the
nation.

After more than a decade, Boydell's exciting venture reached the begin-

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[4] Preface to the 1789 catalogue of the first exhibition in the Shakespeare Gallery, quoted in
Sven H. A. Bruntjen, *John Boydell 1719–1804: A Study of Art Patronage and Publishing in
Georgian London* (New York and London: Garland, 1985), p. 71.

The Alto Relievo in the front of the Shakespeare Gallery Pall Mall.

Engraved by S. Rawle

Published by J. Sewell at the Bible crown & Constitution, Cornhill, 1 Aug.t 1804.
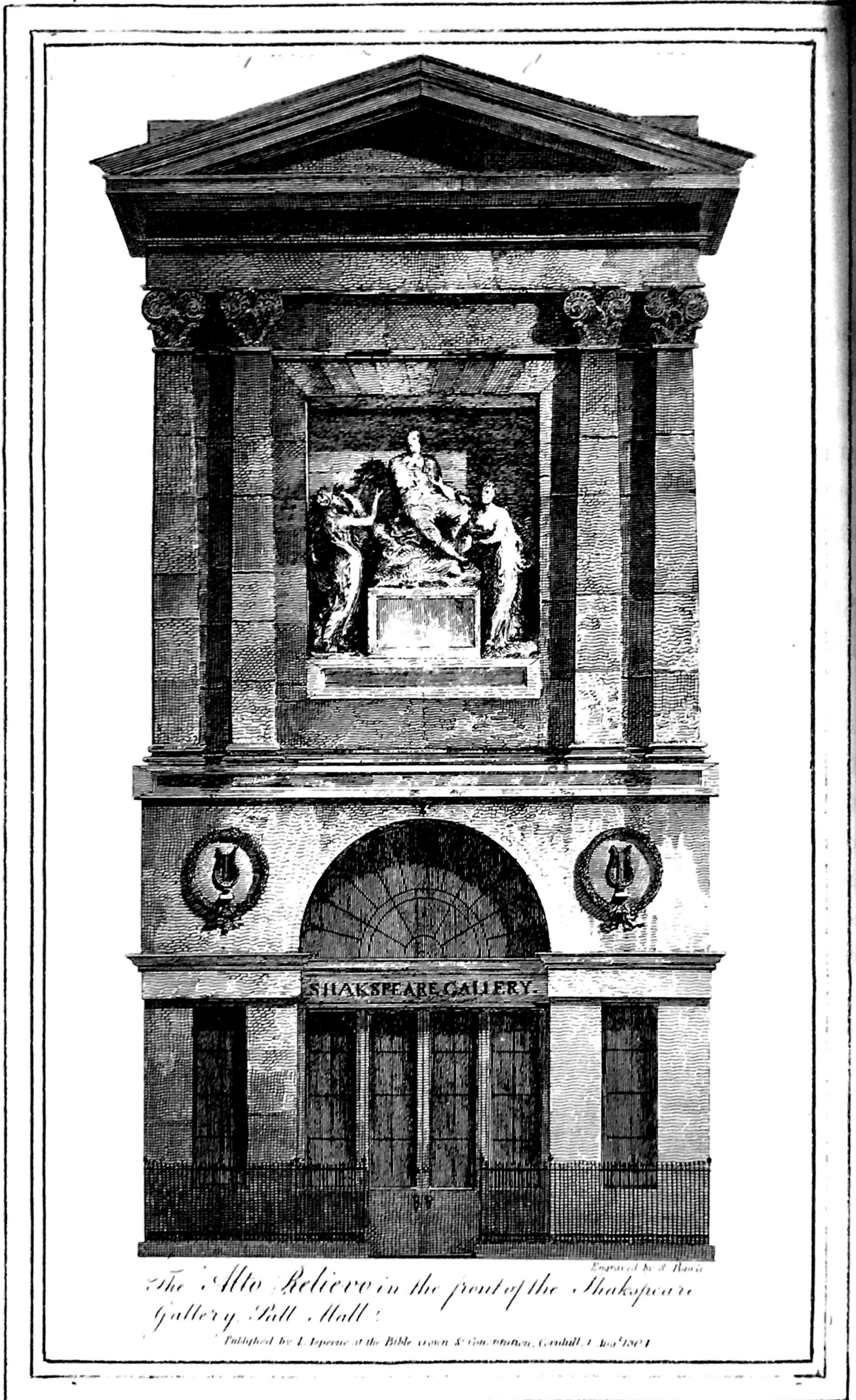
Figure 11.6   S. Rawle, *View of the Shakespeare Gallery*, etched frontispiece to the *European Magazine* vol. 46, 1804.

ning of the end by 1800, the year of the second edition of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* – the end of an era for the visual arts, the beginning of one for literature. In maximizing the economic advantages of his project to so many groups, Boydell necessarily maximized the areas in which failure could occur and the span of time over which it might occur. He died in December 1804, and the next month, January 1805, with Parliament's permission, the Gallery and all its contents were sold off by lottery, a total commercial failure. (None of the other gallery projects fared any better.) Boydell publicly blamed the French Revolution and Jacobin politics for vandalizing, as he said, his markets. No doubt there was something to that, and certainly the advantages of art as an international commodity had turned into temporary disadvantages during the Revolution and its aftermath.

But the Achilles' heel of the Shakespeare Gallery lay in the rift between its images and its words. Boydell had to allow the slowest component in the technological mix, the engraved reproductions, to set the pace for the whole. The more he tried to speed up the copying by using efficient methods, such as "dotting" (stipple engraving), the more his project took on the look of a cheap commercial job and retreated from its claim to being a dignified exercise in national artistic prestige. But the slowness of more prestigious "line" engraving was legendary. Fancy line engravings could take years – to the despair of painters who pinned their hopes on the sale of reproductions. In earlier years and simpler circumstances, most famously in publishing the print of West's *Death of Wolfe*, Boydell had exploited line engraving as well as anyone could (see figure 11.7). Behind both painting and engraving lie strong workshop traditions of dividing labor among a master and assistants, unlike anything in the customary production of poems and novels. The only reason Woollett's engraving took *merely* five years was that assistants did the preliminary work; if Woollett had engraved the *Wolfe* from start to finish, West and Boydell might have waited much longer. As it was, the very profitable engraving boosted the reputations of all three men considerably. For Boydell it was an important step along the way to the Shakespeare Gallery. But on a far larger scale and in a bad market, Boydell simply could not coordinate the key elements of his project. It spun out of control and fell into the abyss between literature and the visual arts.

The Shakespeare Gallery building in Pall Mall was quickly refurbished and reopened in a matter of months as the new British Institution, a self-proclaimed supplement to the Royal Academy in the durable crisis of British picturemaking. A new wave of lament and analysis began: "the Arts of Design in England...are declared to be in danger of perishing for ever. They
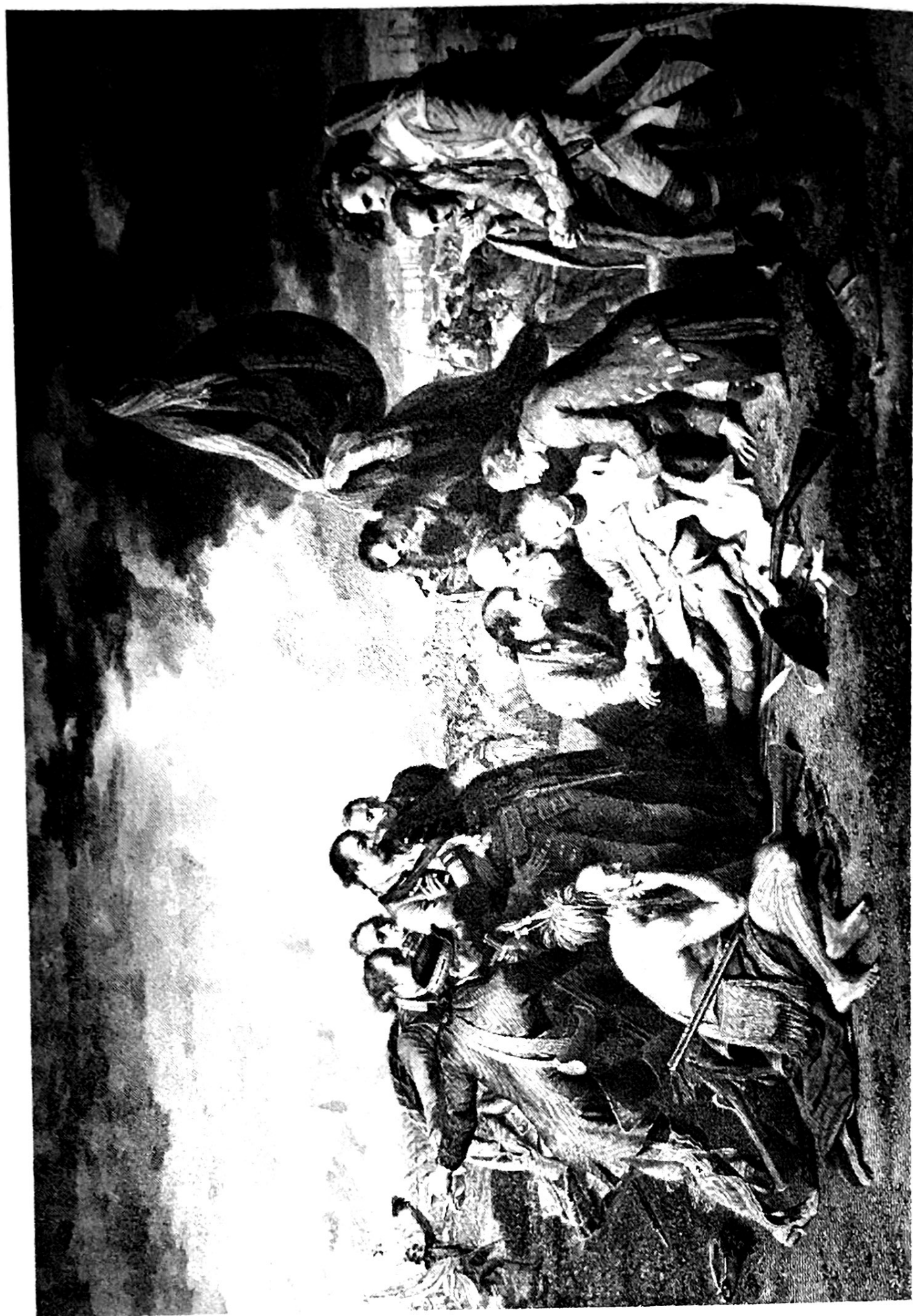
Figure 11.7 William Woollett after Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, engraving, 1776.

stand therefore on the brink of splendour or annihilation; they plead before a profoundly reflecting nation; they demand a trial."[5] Immediately Boydell began to acquire his mythical status as a merchant–hero vanquished by French radicals – following the familiar narrative of achievement thwarted by foreign intervention – and the last quarter of the eighteenth century began to be seen nostalgically as an era of superlative promise. Engraver John Landseer was stopped from lecturing on the history of British engraving when it became clear that he was going to blame its problems on Boydell. New cries for government support went up, old proposals for public art projects were dusted off and new ones put forward, usually in the familiar language of inferiority, announcing projects that promise to "save every true Englishman the painful feeling of being surpassed by our active rival France."[6]

In his *Inquiry* of 1806 – the year after the Boydell lottery, but also the year after a rousing demonstration of British naval power at Trafalgar – Prince Hoare in a letter to the *True Briton* called for reconsideration of a Royal Academy scheme that painter John Opie had first presented in 1800: the Gallery of British Honour, a great circular naval monument modeled on the "Pantheon at Rome." Large pieces of sculpture – Neptune paying homage to Britannia, a statue of George III – would set the mytho-political tone, while in a series of compartments around the circle statues of naval heroes would alternate with paintings of victories. The monument would inculcate patriotism with a visceral sublimity, giving "pleasure" through the "terror and admiration" of "Britain's thunder" – "fire, water, wind, and smoke, mingled in terrific confusion": "In the midst, British valour triumphantly bearing down all opposition, accompanied by humanity...ready to succour the vanquished foe!"[7]

The Gallery of British Honour was no isolated proposal but one episode in the continuing effort to locate the polite arts advantageously in the economy, and more particularly in the effort to create viable formats for public art education, government patronage, and commercial display, three aims that had always been closely linked in the history of efforts to establish a British School. The direction changed somewhat, swerving away from Enlightenment-style internationalism and eclecticism. In these years British art tried hitching its fortunes to the British lion of military adventure, Nel-

[5] Hoare, *Inquiry into the Requisite Cultivation and Present State of the Arts of Design in England* (London, 1806), p. 263.

[6] *The Examiner*, May 13, 1810, 304; quoted in John Gage, "An Early Exhibition and the Politics of British Printmaking, 1800–1812," *Print Quarterly* 6 (1989): 134.

[7] Hoare, *Inquiry*, pp. 47, 50–1.

son, Wellington, and all that, with exhibitions organized on military and imperial themes, and government-sponsored contests to commemorate the new heroes of empire (see figure 11.8). The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars strengthened the motivation to find artistic work in patriotic, nationalistic, militaristic, and imperialistic subjects. In 1799 John Flaxman entered a competition to design a naval monument to commemorate British victories over the French (Blake engraved Flaxman's designs), and Gillray half-parodied, half-entered the competition himself with the design reproduced here. There were numerous other ideas developed at the intersection of artistic opportunity and affairs of empire. Flaxman designed a Trafalgar vase and a statue of Nelson. Prince Hoare revived John Opie's proposal for a Gallery of British Honour in 1806, while others urged that St. Paul's Cathedral be turned into the British Pantheon. Such programs provide a context for understanding such widely separated events as Blake's paintings of Nelson and Pitt (exhibited 1809–10), his 1809 proposal for a "portable Fresco" – "I could divide Westminster Hall, or the walls of any other great Building, into compartments and ornament them with Frescos, which would be removable at pleasure" (Poetry and Prose, p. 527) – and Benjamin Haydon's proposal to have British artists decorate the Houses of Parliament, rebuilt after the fire of 1834, with scenes from British history. The notion that the prosperity of the Italian and French Schools of Painting had rested substantially on a kind of state "encouragement" that had been missing in Britain is a key theme in the discourse of the British School from at least the 1760s, when a group of painters promoted, unsuccessfully, the idea of having British artists decorate Westminster Abbey. Such revealing events as the government's purchase of the Parthenon frieze sculptures – the "Elgin Marbles" – in 1816, for which Benjamin Haydon campaigned so strongly, and the founding of the National Gallery (housed in a building, constructed 1832–8, that it shared for thirty years with the Royal Academy), to which George Beaumont donated his important picture collection, were all promoted in large part through the stock discourse of the British School, adjusted to exploit the newly felt privileges and obligations of an imperial power.

And new, perhaps Romantic, theories and histories of painting begin to appear with revised hopes based on new themes amalgamating nationalism with individualism. Hazlitt, for instance, writes strongly for the genius of the individual painter and against the Royal Academy exhibitions and training programs that, he said, diffuse taste and skill without improving them.[8] The

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[8] "Enquiry Whether the Fine Arts Are Promoted by Academies and Public Institutions," in James Northcote, *The Life of Titian; with Anecdotes of the Distinguished Persons of His Time* (London, 1830), II, 370–83 (appendix 8).
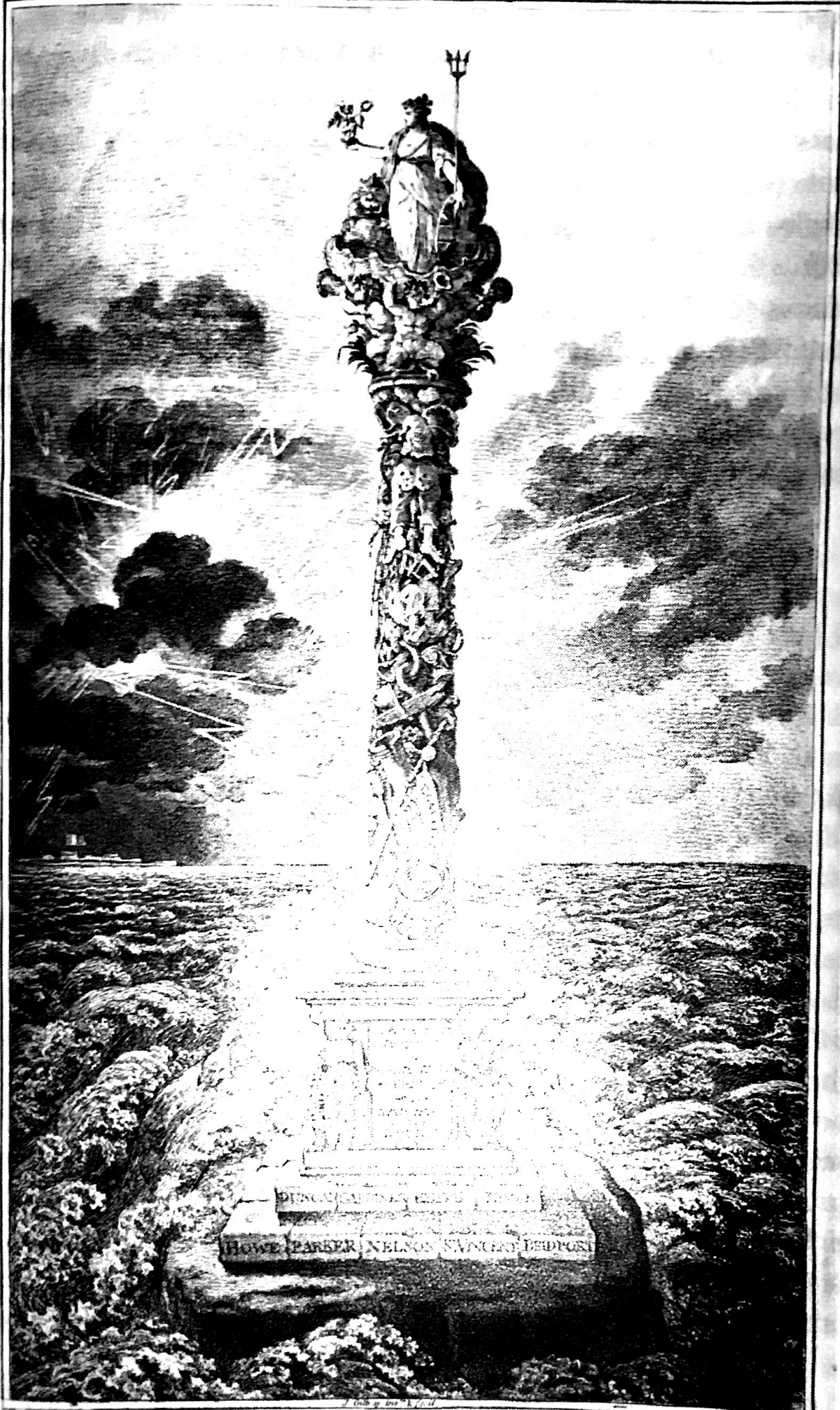
Figure 11.8 James Gillray, *Design for the Naval Pillar*, etching, 1800.

older history of art in Britain, emphasizing its successes in emulating eclectic international styles through painters such as Joshua Reynolds, begins to give way gradually to claims for the unique national genius of British painting. In Allan Cunningham's *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters*, Reynolds's role as father of the British School is downplayed in favor of "the truly English and intrepid spirit of Gainsborough," whose paintings have a national look.[9] In this historical climate Hogarth, previously vulnerable to criticism for a lack of skill and for isolation from Continental traditions, begins to emerge as the previously suppressed first term of an emphatically *British* British art. Sometimes, as in the theorizing of John Constable, the old claims for the poetic nature of painting give way to scientific claims for painting as an applied optics that would accord better with Britain's reputation for native scientific and technical aptitude: "In such an age as this, painting should be *understood*, not...considered only as a poetic aspiration, but as a pursuit, *legitimate, scientific, and mechanical*."[10]

The institutional embrace

I have stressed how little traffic there was between Blake and the other poets at the core of British Romanticism. The only work any of the Romantic poets knew of Blake's was the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which Coleridge and Wordsworth read because an acquaintance who owned a copy wanted to know what they thought. Although both were apparently alerted in advance that they were reading the poems of a probable lunatic, they responded favorably, if condescendingly. As poetry experts, both treated the (illuminated) *Songs* chiefly as occasions for reading not spectatorship, but in any case sought out no more of the work of this strange outsider. Though Blake read some Wordsworth and addressed his final illuminated book, *The Death of Abel* (1822), to Byron the author of *Cain*, if Byron, Shelley, or Keats ever heard of Blake at all they left no record of it.

Yet today, in the house of British literature, we are called upon to recognize that Blake "is" a "poet," one of the usually six "major" poets of this particular national branch of Romanticism. Meanwhile, one of the most interesting facts about the history of visual art that Blake joined is how small a part he has played in it, and what great resistance his work has faced, "an anomaly in the history of painting even though he is now rightly seen as a

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[9] *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (London, 1830–46), I (1830): 356.

[10] *John Constable's Discourses*, comp. and annot. R. B. Beckett (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1970), p. 69.

central figure in poetic history."[11] Given the sociointellectual distance between Blake and his literary peers, how is it that we have crossed that distance to rehouse this artist–engraver with these poets? The most important answer, for relations between literature and the visual arts, involves the key issue of specialized institutional memories. The tendency toward specialization is, verging on paradox, very often accompanied by the tendency toward imperialism by which everything, including the messages from other institutions, gets translated into the terms of the institutional discourse. Usually this translation seems innocent enough: as a falling apple may be consulted for its physical interest by a physicist, so a poet (like Coleridge, like Blake) may be consulted for philosophical, psychological, or theological interest by philosophers, psychologists, or theologians. An argument over Blake's cultural location may seem idle, then, unless we remember that the messages sent from that location may take editorial form.

Wrote Henry Crabb Robinson of Blake in his diary: "And of his poetical & pictorial genius there is no doubt I believe in the minds of judges – Wordsworth & Lamb like his poems & the Aders his paintings" (*Blake Records*, p. 313n). This segregation has typified efforts to send, retrieve, and evaluate Blake's work. Earlier, in discussing the word- and image-content of *Jerusalem*, I emphasized the powerful element of choice left to the reader–spectator when it comes to favoring words or imagery. This choice may be made at the level of the choosing individual but also at the level of institutions. It emerges prominently in the history of Blake's reputation, which is the most interesting institutional history among the Romantic "poets" largely because it involves a startling conversion across institutional borders.

Blake invested his life's work in two separate institutions, but far more heavily *in* the visual than the verbal, and he made his investments *from* the cultural location of the visual. This double investment paid off, I should add, but only posthumously, over the long term through the actions of what we sometimes call posterity. During his life and for several decades afterward, the double investment provoked a kind of cultural confusion that had to be waited out and sorted through. As his contemporary audience was dominated by spectators rather than readers, and as he died a minor visual artist working in a minor art, surrounded by other artists, his vocational position was, understandably, taken for granted. Frederick Tatham, faced with the task of selling the only copy of *Jerusalem* that Blake ever colored (copy E, the "Mellon" copy), advertised it the best way he knew how, as a set of "Expressive" and "sublime" prints looking for an appreciative buyer. He perceived

[11] Harold Bloom, rev. of Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, in the *New York Times Book Review*, January 3, 1982, p. 4.

the words and pictures of *Jerusalem* not as a complementary pairing but as an "heterogeneous" embarrassment, "lofty" images drowning in a sea of "ridiculous" words. He discouraged reading and recommended looking because he assumed that the lookers would be his buyers.

Blake was never, as is sometimes thought, forgotten as an artist. But the key to his twentieth-century reputation is his change of cultural venue. That begins during his lifetime, with the anthologization of a few of the *Songs* without designs in printed collections, but the elements to make the change on a significant scale do not come together until the later decades of the century, when Swinburne, for instance, defines Blake as a poet whose images are perhaps useful optical bait for novices but dispensable accessories for serious readers. As Blake becomes something of a late-century fashion, projects to publish expensive facsimiles that can recall his work in illuminated printing *as* illuminated printing affects a small circle of the well heeled and visually committed. But the kind of argument with which William Michael Rossetti reacted against a facsimile of *Jerusalem* published in 1877, that the handwritten script of the illuminated books impedes understanding, was the dominant one: "the publication in ordinary book-form, without designs, and without any attempt at facsimile of text, of the *Jerusalem* and the other Prophetic Books, is highly to be desired. Difficult under any circumstances, it would be a good deal *less* difficult to read these works in an edition of that kind, with clear print, reasonable division of lines, and the like aids to business-like perusal."[12] This is a strong rationale for printing *Jerusalem* – and for *reading* it. Hence the events to watch were happening not in the graphic-arts workshops but on the printing press, where Blake was being reprinted as a poet of poems translated into the clarity of readable type.

The twentieth century has experienced Blake primarily in such institutional translation. His poetic reputation mounted swiftly and steadily as his sponsors piled up useful connections between Blake and twentieth-century writing – Blake and the modernists, Blake and the Beats, Blake and the critical theory of Northrop Frye. He often served as a wild card to be added to any hand, always more quotable than readable. His images, while not forgotten, were lifted clear of their context in the visual arts of his time and relegated to the secondary place of essential afterthought, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* factor that gives poets the tantalizing aura of hermeneutic promise by making them seem larger than the reader's experience of them. Meanwhile, the other Blake, the art-historical one, has lived quite a separate, and a far quieter, institutional life as an odd-man-out who makes an occasional

[12] Quoted in R.W. Peattie, "William Michael Rossetti's Aldine Edition of Blake," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 12 (1978): 7.

appearance in histories of the graphic arts whose reproductive function is largely ignored, and in histories of painting as they pass through something resembling a Romantic period, or at least moment.

The strange passage of Blake from the visual to the verbal column has distorted some of the most heroic attempts to understand him. His cultural location having been misplotted, all sorts of misunderstandings have followed from using a bad map. It is not that Blake's Chaucer (the subject of an essay motivated by the need to explain a painting and an engraving on display and for sale, and by debates about the quality of British art) and Coleridge's Chaucer (the subject of notes and lectures on the history of British literature) cannot be studied together for mutual advantage. They must be studied together. Blake and Coleridge were not speaking from hermetically sealed cultural compartments, but from very different positions to think "Chaucer." The problem is too fundamental to be solved by characterizing Blake as an aberration, because in many fundamental ways he was not. The difficulties he presents for students of literature and the visual arts are typical rather than anomalous, whether the subject is Chaucer, neoclassical style, theories of artistic harmony, production practices, commercial arrangements, politics, or religion.

Some dancing lessons for the sister arts

The confidence necessary to advance literature-and-visual-arts projects may be eroded by the suspicion that all attempts to find firm footing are doomed from both sides: from the certainty that words and pictures are sometimes so different that they cannot be fruitfully combined, either for presentation (as art) or discussion (as criticism), and from the certainty that words and pictures are sometimes so much alike that they cannot be told apart. I see this as a political and historical question like those encountered in studying nation-states, where the welter of crossed and conflicted and discontinuous identities can make nonsense of any firm notion of what it means to be "German" or 'Italian" without some very exact specifications. For, despite all the obvious encouragements, like Blake's illuminated books, for attempting the broader view promised by literature and the visual arts, unfortunately it has to be regularly confessed that "We know how to connect English and French literature more precisely than we do English literature and English painting"[13] – or, for that matter, more precisely than we know how to connect just about any "literature" with any "painting," even when both are

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[13] Mitchell, *Iconology*, p. 44.

expressions of the same brain and hand on the same surface. After all, words and pictures have been separated by some of the deepest chasms, spanned by some of the least reliable bridges, in Western culture, the very ones from which Coleridge warned of the "despotism of the eye" (*Biographia Literaria*, I, 107), Byron declared repeatedly how little he knew or cared about painting, "of all the arts...the most artificial & unnatural – & that by which the nonsense of mankind is the most imposed upon" (*Letters and Journals*, v, 213), and the old Wordsworth, in his sonnet on "Illustrated Books and Newspapers" (1846, *Works*, IV, 75), agitated gloomily over the visual fixations of a younger generation neglecting its books – "Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear / Nothing?" – a theme sounded many times since. Only hopeless optimists would dream of being able to study literature and the visual arts, or texts and images as we now more often say, together without risking the consequences of studying over thin air.

We began on the side of the optimist facing bad news. In the background looms a joke about the optimist who thinks this is the best of all possible worlds and the pessimist who agrees. How to avoid giving the pessimist the final say? If we start by acknowledging that "poetry" and "painting" name two specialized activities carried out under the aegis of specialized cultural institutions and understood in the tailored terms of specialized languages, and that specialization has the indispensable virtue of focusing the attention, we can nonetheless end by acknowledging as well that, because focus on one thing is always achieved at the price of distraction from others, the only kind of study that can ever do any subject justice has to be dialectical, alternating between moments of focused and unfocused attention, aspiring toward higher levels of augmented and integrated attention.

When we study literature and the visual arts, then, we look for points of contact, intersections, and even homologies, but always in a context of contrasts and differences, with an appreciation of the difficulties and an assessment of the complexities of the situation. Furthermore, the study of literature and the visual arts will not be much more satisfying than it now generally is until it more often enlarges its purview to take in the histories of institutions, including the histories of crafts, technologies, and social groupings. That would give us new hope of profitably reopening the books on some of the vast subjects – neoclassicism, the sublime, the picturesque – that have been severely stunted by a too exclusive attention to words or pictures.

Earlier I remarked that many studies of literature and the visual arts produce results that can be, and have been, largely ignored outside the small circle of scholars who do this sort of thing for a living. That is provocative but simplistic because the neglect is not altogether just. It, too, is partly the

product of the very cultural divisions that keep texts and images apart, repeated in this instance in the institutions charged with remembering, studying, and teaching them. The only thing that gives us a prayer of ever capturing an augmented Romanticism that could deal fully, which is to say sympathetically but critically, with Blake, with Coleridge and Washington Allston, Wordsworth and George Beaumont, Keats and Benjamin Haydon, not to mention Wordsworth and John Constable or Shelley and J. M. W. Turner, is the ability to entertain painfully in the mind at once two incompatible propositions: the separability of words and pictures had profound consequences in the Romantic period and has them now *and* the inseparability of words and pictures had profound consequences in the Romantic period and has them now. (Which is not to suggest that the relation of words to images in the Romantic period was what it is now or meant what it does now.) The minute one begins to slip into a one-way logic toward uncritical synaesthesias, organicisms, and global villages or, the other way, toward hypercritical ruptures and discontinuities, the game, at least for the student of literature and the visual arts, is up. Unfathomable abysses and transcendent unities are both mysteries, hence both intolerable to critical intellects. What we want are not unplumbable depths or heights but bridges. They acknowledge the abyss, offer views of it, and give us somewhere to go. The only way to extract any critical energy from a deadening claim like Suzanne Langer's is to allow and resist it. Against her quote Truffaut: "Neither with you, nor without you" (*The Woman Next Door, La femme d'à côté*).