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## “William Blake’s Pestilence, Sympathy, and the Politics of Feeling”

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**Abstract:** Pestilence has often been encountered as an 'invisible enemy'. What happens when we give it visual form? This essay examines the dynamics of sympathy, spectatorship, and the politics of feeling activated in William Blake’s watercolour *Pestilence: The Death of the First-Born* (c. 1805). While the Exodus narrative controls fear of the plagues by encouraging reader identification with the chosen people protected by providence, Blake’s visual invention articulates an alternative politics of feeling. Drawing on David Hume’s and Adam Smith’s theories of sympathy, I demonstrate how Blake’s composition invites the viewer to engage with the Egyptian plagues through a dynamic of divided attention, alternating between different points of view, identifying with the position of the destroying angel, the chosen, and the victims. This dynamic contrasts the gigantic figure of the pestilential destroyer, which initially arrests the eye, with the miniaturized figures of the victims. By giving the tenth plague of Egypt an imposing physical form, and a face and reciprocating gaze to a child threatened by it, Blake’s scene of pestilence becomes a virtual test of moral sentiments in which viewers confront an ethics of freedom built on sacrifice.

How do we cope with an invisible danger? What happens when we attempt to visualize it?

And how can visual narrative intervene and reframe a story? The Biblical account of the plagues of Egypt channels the fear of unpredictable and random threats by inscribing a series of natural catastrophes within a providential plot, which provides them with a logic, an order, and a system of justice within a narrative of liberation from the oppression of slavery. This essay explores the dynamics of sympathy, the politics of feeling, and the ethical work of visualisation in William Blake’s watercolor *Pestilence: Death of the First Born* (c. 1805), a rendering of Exodus, Chapter 12. The textual narrative calls on the reader to sympathize with the chosen people brought together by the Lord and shielded from destruction. But at what cost? In bringing the Egyptian plagues of Exodus before the eyes of the viewer, Blake confronts the ethics of retribution and the logic of sacrifice that divides the chosen from the

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victims. His strategy of visibility enables spectators to see the plagues from different points of view.

The adoption of multiple perspectives produces ways of seeing that translate Blake's dialectical take on the Bible into the visual field. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake includes the voice of the devil, his companion: "we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense" (44). While reading the Bible in its literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses consolidates its providential design, reading in the "infernal or diabolical sense" interrupts teleological meaning, shifts the terms of the story, and subverts narrative identification. Blake's heterodox exegesis informs his practice of illustration in re-envisioning Biblical scenes. Through visual storytelling, I argue, Blake invites the viewer to engage in a thought experiment: what comes into view if we set aside the Biblical structure of sympathy that provides comfort in adversity to the people who have been chosen and who will escape pestilence and slavery? What if, instead, we also witness the plagues from the point of view of the Egyptians?

### **The Bible in Pictures**

"Blake read the Bible, but he also *saw* it. The white page came stained with colour and scored with line," Jean Hagstrum observes, evoking the experience of illuminated manuscripts (88). Leslie Tannenbaum historicizes this visual culture of the Bible: "the tradition of Western art formed a *Biblia Pauperum* for the illiterate and the literate alike" (12). While cycles of paintings in Churches supplemented oral Biblical transmission through the liturgy, a mixed oral and verbal approach to images emerged in medieval manuscripts and early books including short textual captions to identify subjects for those who could read and interpret the Bible. The late fifteenth-century block-book folio known under the title of *Biblia Pauperum* placed on the same page a New Testament subject in the center of the composition

next to its Old Testament prefigurations: for instance, the Annunciation is juxtaposed to the Temptation of Eve; the crucifixion to Moses and the Brazen Serpent. Serialized illustrated Bibles published in the Romantic period encouraged readers to consider episodes in sequence, alternating or integrating reading and looking, but engravings also functioned as stand-alone works outside of the bindings of books, which represented Biblical narratives in one or more images freed from the comparison with the facing text. Blake followed this episodic approach when he produced over 135 Biblical subjects for his patron Thomas Butts between 1800 and 1806 (Butlin 317, 335-6). Among them were fifty temperas, probably intended for furniture pictures and perhaps for the girls' boarding school run by Butts's wife, Elizabeth, as Joseph Viscomi argues. Traces of matting surviving for some of the more than eighty Biblical watercolors indicate that they were prepared "in a style suitable for display," possibly for the school or for portfolios (Viscomi 15-16). David Bindman has suggested that the watercolors could also be interleaved into a large folio edition of the Bible (1997, 76-7); their size is within the range of a large Bible, slightly smaller than the large folio series of Bible gallery engravings published by Thomas Macklin in the 1790s, which was the most important Biblical initiative of Blake's time. Extra-illustration might make sense of Blake's duplication of some subjects, with the original watercolor intended for insertion in a Bible and the tempera intended for display. However, Naomi Billingsley argues that this plan may have changed when Blake concentrated on thematic groupings, such as Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, which draw on different books of the Bible, because "their unity as a sequence would have been disrupted by placing them alongside the various relevant passages in the Bible, and some of the designs conflate details from more than one passage" (93). In other words, format had an impact on the selection of Biblical subjects. Whether a composition would be part of a series or not shaped painters' storytelling choices.

Painters and engravers illustrating the Book of Exodus often choose to focus on the heroic life of Moses. Apart from *Pestilence*, Blake's selection of the stories of The Finding of Moses, Moses at the Burning Bush, and Moses Striking of the Rock follows tradition.<sup>1</sup> Bindman points out that Blake's depictions of Moses from Exodus and Numbers can be understood as a cycle in which the Old Testament prophet and lawgiver finds a typological counterpart in Christ; his typological reading of Blake pits the wrath and retribution expressed in *Pestilence* against Christ's mercy in the New Testament subject of *The Woman taken in Adultery* (1977, 143-4). The fourfold senses of Biblical exegesis train the believer to understand the literal meaning of Old Testament stories by revealing their allegorical (also known as figural or typological) meaning, which is to say their historical fulfilment in the New Testament. The tropological or moral sense identifies what to do by finding the moral prescriptions adumbrated in a Biblical passage; the fourth, anagogical sense discloses future salvation. In Sheila A. Spector's anagogical analysis, Blake's "*Pestilence: The Death of the First Born* conveys the delusion about mortality, an error exposed by *The River of Light* in the New Testament." Seeing anagogically means reorienting the material world of living nature towards spiritual transformation. The harmonizing method inherent in typological and anagogical exegeses redeems the harshness of Old Testament sacrifice through the New Testament promise of forgiveness.

Blake's infernal sense disrupts such attempts to justify means with ends. He found progression in the tension between opposites, but his method as a dialectical thinker was not to resolve or redeem but to exacerbate antinomies, as Chris Rowland has shown (147). Crucial to a liberated practice of reading is the co-existence of divergent, even contradictory interpretations of the Bible that Blake advocates in *The Everlasting Gospel*: "both read the Bible day & night / but thou readst black where I read white" (524). Jon Mee set Blake's approach to the Bible in a political arena in which the prophets were interpreted as members

of the political opposition (27-29). Their millenarian Bible “rouzes the faculties to act,” as Blake said to the Rev. John Trusler (702); it is open-ended and multi-authored, because “every honest man is a prophet,” meaning “a Seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator” (617). This visionary openness contrasts the narrative focus on Moses as a figure of authority receiving the tablets of the law. In Blake’s *America a Prophecy* (1793), Orc’s revolutionary action emancipates the reader from the “stony law” of the ten commandments enshrined in the Mosaic book of religion, which is disbound “as a torn book,” so that its leaves can be scattered “to the four winds” and “renew the fiery joy” (54). Jerome McGann has shown that, though attempts to establish and control the corpus of the Bible produced different denominational canons, late eighteenth-century Higher Criticism discussed discontinuous, inconsistent, and repetitive narrative units as evidence of different historical layers of composition (320-322). In *America a Prophecy* Blake’s injunction that “none shall gather the leaves” challenges editorial control that shapes narrative units into continuities, binding individual actions and points in time into a teleological narrative (54). Blake’s alternative, reversible, open-ended scattered leaves reflect the engraver’s nonlinear vision of the book. This disaggregating agency is also at work in visual additions to the codex. Illustration interrupts the flow of the written text, capturing an action suspended in its climactic moment, and thus opens up alternative ways of seeing. Such visions reinvent the dominant narrative, potentially producing alternative interventions and trajectories. In what follows I will explore what happens to unbound illustrations, when they are set free from textual bindings and ways of seeing associated with the facing letterpress.

Evidence of circulation shows Blake’s *Pestilence* taking a different route from his other Exodus scenes. The checklist of Blake’s works that William Michael Rossetti contributed to Alexander Gilchrist’s *Life of William Blake* (1863) registers the watercolor under the title *Pestilence: The Death of the first born* (2: 207, no. 56), identifying the tenth plague inflicted

on Pharaoh to free the Jews from Egyptian captivity (Exodus 11:5; 12:12-13, 29-30). Rather than group it with the other Biblical subjects sequentially, book by book, or typologically, Rossetti's checklist places *Pestilence* after *Plague* and before *Famine* (2:207, no. 54, 56), recording that all three were owned by C. J. Strange, who acquired them from the 1853 sale of Butts's collection, where *Pestilence* parted company from the other Exodus scenes. Strange's selection of watercolors included seven Biblical subjects from different books of the Bible, two series illustrating Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Comus*, respectively, and Shakespearean miniatures. In 1890, all of these works were acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, whose acquisition numbers list *Plague*, *Famine*, and then *Pestilence* first of the Biblical subjects, followed by a second: *Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent* (Numbers 21:9). These two Biblical subjects had also been entered one after the other in the 1853 sale (lots 119-20). The juxtaposition of *Pestilence* with the *Brazen Serpent* invites viewers to see the two scenes as episodes in the fight against idolatry. For John Wesley the brazen serpent "signified Christ, who was in the likeness of sinful flesh though without sin, as the outward serpent had the outward shape, but not the inward poison, of the other serpents" (1:531); hence, the typological reading of the serpent's mast as foreshadowing the Crucifixion, as evidenced in sheet 25 of the *Biblia Pauperum*. But in the second book of Kings, as Wesley explains, the Brazen Serpent "had been hitherto kept as a memorial of God's mercy; but being now commonly abused to superstition, was destroyed" (2 Kings, 18:4; Wesley, 2:1239). Unlike Blake's subjects focused on Moses, however, *Pestilence* interrogates the moral meaning of the Biblical source, challenges its traditional ethical prescription, and questions its politics of the future. The painting's pathos formulae communicate the plight of the victims and thus open up an alternative politics of feeling. By bringing alternative points of view before viewers' eyes, Blake's visual composition becomes a test of sympathy, in

which viewers discover who they are and what they are willing to sacrifice in their fight for survival.

### **The Politics of Sympathy**

Eighteenth-century moral philosophers oscillate between conceiving of sympathy as the fundamental principle of cohesion that brings selfish individuals together as a society and as a destabilizing physiological force—a disorder of the animal spirits contracted by contagion and infectious like the plague, which can dissolve the boundaries of personal identity. For David Hume, sympathy is a form of transport that enables us to “enter into the sentiments of the rich and poor, and partake of their pleasure and uneasiness” (362). Such “easy communication of sentiments” is contagious because “the passions ... pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts” (605). In Hume’s epistemology, “affections depend more upon ourselves, and the internal operations of the mind, than any other impressions” (319). What makes it possible to identify with others is the “force and vivacity” that translate ideas into impressions, so that we feel what they feel. In Hume’s theatre of the mind, the passions act like persons with reason as their slave; we are under their influence (253, 415). Hume’s use of personification participates in the wider tendency to associate them with gods or demons in the attempt to understand and contain their overpowering agency. According to Adela Pinch, Hume’s analysis suggests that “people’s feelings are not always authentically their own” (8). As the boundaries of selfhood are blurred into the collective identity of an imagined community built around fellow-feeling, the metaphor of contagion flags concerns that the dynamic of sympathy may become uncontrollable. Mary Fairclough has traced eighteenth-century epidemiological analogies re-emerging in the revolutionary period, when Edmund Burke denounced revolutionary principles “operating like a contagion” and argued that England



should be protected from the French Revolution by “the most severe quarantine” (70).

Contagious transmission of affect is central to Blake’s visual enthusiasm. Seeing has the performative power to dissolve the difference between self and other in ways that explore both the utopian and dystopian possibilities of assimilating to what comes into the field of vision. Against the “images of wonder” that might enact religious enthusiasm in *A Vision of the Last Judgement* (560) stand more dystopian experiences of subjugation in *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, in which Blake’s characters “became what they beheld” (97, 177-178, 336, 338).

Working against the danger of contagion and dissolution, Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) harnessed the principle of sympathy through a controlled moral practice of reflection and self-regulation in an attempt to protect and define the boundaries of personal identity. Smith pointed out that “we have no immediate experience of what other men feel,” because “our sense never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations ... we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him” (1). The spectator’s practice of sympathy involves exercises in substitution and “analogous emotion” to test whether “the emotions of the by-stander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the sufferer” (3). The reverse exercise in point of view structures morality as a practice of self-regulation:

I divide myself, as it were, into two persons ... I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the

agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion[.] (113)

Smith's legal analogy brings morality into the field of vision, harnessing spectatorship as an engine of moral sentiment through a technology of the self that regulates conduct by interiorizing judgement. If sympathy is reversible, the position of the observer generates the imaginary experience of being observed, the possibility of reciprocity, and the chance to shift allegiances. Taking this moral dynamic into the aesthetic sphere means rethinking the power dynamics of the spectator. Indeed, if sympathy is reversible and reciprocal, its practice of spectatorship can cross orthodox boundaries dividing chosen people from sacrificial victims, question the morality of ends justifying means, and pave the way for alternative action.

Blake had a bleaker view of the dynamics of sympathy. While Smith was keen to desynonymize sympathy from pity and compassion, "words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others" (3), such feelings' failure to reconfigure a dynamic of fellow-feeling among equals is central to Blake's critique. In the song of experience "The Human Abstract," Blake denounced "pity" and "mercy" as a structural product of social inequality: "Pity would be no more, / if we did not make somebody Poor" (27). James Chandler defines the "sentimental mode" as a rhetorical structure that presents a sentimental case to the reader or viewer and engages them through a "technique of vicariousness" in a practice of "visual mutuality" (173, 170, 150). For Chandler, Blake's poetry obstructs "a vicarious exchange of places of the sort that builds moral sentiment" through "a grammatical structure that defines his medium as inhospitable to the sentimental impulses his readers would bring to it" (277). Blake also resists the visual dynamics of sympathy. In the song of innocence "On Another's Sorrow," he engages with visual sympathy through the repeated question "Can I see," and specifies what "another's woe" consists of through a series of sentimental cases that test the possibilities of sympathy, but neither answers nor visualizes

any evidence (17). As Steven Goldsmith argues, the illuminated plate of “On Another’s Sorrow” is “one of Blake’s most aniconic, withholding the kind relief of the graven image it invites us to expect” (194). The poem’s turn from seeing to hearing seals the refusal to visualize scenes of compulsive compassion offered up in a repertoire of stock sentimental images (197, 200).

Yet visual culture has the potential for an alternative practice of feeling in which the viewer becomes actively involved in an open-ended moral dilemma. In *Watchwords*, Lily Gurton-Wachter detects in the reciprocal spectatorship of Blake’s prophecies the dystopian conditions of political surveillance, “the vertiginous paranoia of a spy culture in which even the surveillers were surveilled” (34, 47, 50, 56-58). Blake’s “watchmen” (53) and “watch fiends” (136, 183) capture the “militarization of attention” of an anti-revolutionary network of spies, informers, and volunteers. Against such “militarized habits of attention,” Gurton-Wachter identifies in Blake alternative modes of “double attention” – abstraction, distraction, irritation, peripheral perception, co-presence (33-58). Like Chandler, Gurton-Wachter finds in Blake’s syntax and punctuation “a model of reading poetry in which meaning is produced when the reader’s attention divides and interrupts itself” (35), and “keep[s] ... moving between ... options” (55). While both Chandler and Gurton-Wachter focus on how sympathy and attention operate in Blake’s writing, I explore his visual work as a site of experiment in alternating and reciprocal spectatorship, a practice of sympathy that generates alternative possibilities for moral action. Visual composition produces a form of “double attention” that asks the viewer to shift between different points of view, between competing calls for sympathy, and between alternative kinds of fellow feeling. In what follows I test the visual structure of attention and the politics of feeling that Blake articulates in his watercolor *Pestilence*.



William Blake, *Pestilence: Death of the First Born*, about 1805, Pen and water over graphite pencil on paper, 30.4 X 34.2 cm (11 15/16 X 13 7/16 in.) © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

### ***Pestilence: Death of the First Born***

Blake imagines pestilence as a huge figure claiming the center of representation. Its color, size, and dynamic form attract and arrest the attention. Blake's personification differs from the pictorial form of Death in Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery and Blake's own Miltonic series. Both Fuseli and Blake envisioned the figure of Death as a Herculean male nude whose barely

visible volume appears and disappears into the background.<sup>2</sup> This strategy of invisibility conveys personification as a form that is and is not embodied: now you see it, now you don't. By contrast, in Blake's watercolor, the emerald body of Pestilence, silhouetted in white, stands out against the dark background. Illustrations of the plagues of Egypt in the Biblical book of Exodus usually depict the plagues as horrible tiny creatures. Here, the scale is reversed: Pestilence is embodied as a gigantic form traversing the composition. Its superhuman stride cuts through the dark, possibly putrid air enveloping the small human world below. The inclined head and outstretched arms suggest a dance-like pose. Wispy and wavelike shapes delineated in whitewash and ink against the sombre background radiate outwards from the contours of the creature's body, playing up potential miasmatic or aquatic associations. The description published in Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* claims that it "pours deadly influence from his outstretched arms" (2: 207). But rather than liquid cast off from a body emerging from the Nile, their shapes suggest flames or wings, perhaps traces of the upwards movement of the arms, recalling arrows from the choreographic notation of a dancing manual, directing dancers to open their arms like birds taking flight.

The color and texture of Pestilence suggest a cross-species being. While its body has the sculpted build of a heroic human form, the scaly, iridescent skin delineated in ink suggests an insect or a reptile. The reptilian allusion turns the destroying angel into a compound image encompassing the previous animal plagues. Bethan Stevens has tracked the sources and transformations of Blake's reptilian imagination in the coming together of the eel and the dragon, the one an everyday food staple fished in Thames water and the other the fantastical creature of fairy-tale, popular and Biblical subject matter. Reptile-human hybrids illustrate moments of transformation. Milton's decision to transform Satan into a serpent emphasized the phallic associations of his metamorphic temptation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*. By contrast, in a watercolor depicting the apocalyptic subject of the angel Michael binding

Satan, Blake captures the human face and bust of a dragon morphing into a monstrous scaly serpentine form.<sup>3</sup> The figure of pestilence is at the human end of reptilian metamorphosis, where the dialectic between the heroic and the demonic dramatizes the tension between repulsive beast and seductive superhero, showing the reptile skin tightly wrapped around his idealised classical body.

Skin metamorphosis is central to Blake's experiments across media. As an envelope that protects the body from corroding agents, skin lends itself to allegories of alchemical transformation. Blake's inventions often allude to the metal work involved in their material production. In relief etching, the method that Blake invented for his illuminated books, the impervious liquid used to draw on the copperplate envelopes forms in a protective layer that preserves them from the acid bath that bites into the metal. This "infernal method" is figured in the phantasies hidden in sulphurous fluids in *The Book of Urizen* (1794: plate 10, 75). Traces of the process may be detected in the porous body armour of evil in plate 5 of *Europe a Prophecy* (1793). A different material practice brings into view the element of Fire embodied in the form of a Satan calling his legions in Hell in the emblem book *The Gates of Paradise*, first issued *For Children* in 1793 (plate 5). The scaly skin of this alchemical spirit of sulphur is not produced with the acid bath technique but with intaglio etching and engraving, which cut through its body using the method of hatching; the degeneration of Fire's scaly skin is emphasized through cross-hatching and dotting added to the copperplate in late printing sessions when the book was reissued under the title *For the Sexes* (1818, 1825, 1828-9). Blake's watercolor of Pestilence may also reference alchemical transformation. The iridescent green skin evokes the colour of a bronze statue oxidizing in contact with the elements. While no lesions can be detected in Pestilence's body envelope, the watercolor palette suggests disquieting transformations where the outside meets the body's inside. The orange-red colour used for the almost pupilless eyes and the hair suggests

the fiery texture of a fluid interior. We are left to wonder whether the personification of pestilence is a sulphureous being taking a human form or a heroic human form fighting inflammation. In the latter case, the toxic environment that endangers the creature's reptile skin has medical and geo-political coordinates.

The pyramids shadowed in the background locate Blake's plague scene, activating a contemporary context for the Biblical account of the Egyptian plagues. After 1801 references to Egyptian pestilence triggered associations with the diseased bodies of French and British troops returning from the Egyptian campaigns (1798-1801). Pestilence's symptoms of inflammation—in particular, its orange-red eyes—register descriptions of Egyptian ophthalmia in early nineteenth-century medical writing. Assistant military surgeon George Power summarized contradictory literary, medical, and historical sources and contemporary reports on this “endemic” disease (2) by medical doctors writing from different Egyptian locations, who saw it as the consequence of irritation caused by extended exposure to the blazing reflection of the desert, particles of sand “blown into the eyes by the wind” (8) or by nitrous powder in the air. Power concluded that the Egyptian disease was a “putrid virus” associated with miasma, an acidic environment, which also manifested itself as peeling skin, “ichorous blotches on the skin denominated by the natives *Serpents' breath*” (20).

Commenting on Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), which Blake illustrated, Emily Senior notes that in the eighteenth century skin integrity was considered essential in protecting the body from a hostile environment, while the emerging science of dermatology was revising its understanding of skin as a mediating layer whose “excretive function ... made skin the visible register of internal corruption” (96). Such lexicon of corruption reveals the impact of religious categories in medical ways of thinking.

Contemporary religious exegesis offered a moral diagnosis of skin symptoms. In *Notes on the Old Testament* (1765), the Methodist preacher John Wesley discusses the divine control of Moses's "leprous" hand in Exodus 4:

This signified, that *Moses*, by the power of God, should bring sore diseases upon *Egypt*, that at his prayer they should be removed. And that whereas the *Israelites* in *Egypt* were become *leprous*, polluted by sin, and almost consumed by oppression, by being taken into the bosom of *Moses* they should be cleansed and cured. (1: 207)

Wesley's note emphasizes God's omnipotent power to spread and control disease as a form of punishment. To read for the moral sense of the passage is to find a cure for the chosen people through obedience and prayer, but there is no corresponding concern, let alone duty of care, for the Egyptian victims.

In Blake's *Pestilence* the diseased body of sin is embodied in the reptilian figure of the destroying angel. The moment in time captured by the watercolour suspends narrative resolution and interrupts analogical possibilities. Whether the reptile skin layer might be cast off as part of a process of regeneration from sin to salvation cannot be worked out within the confines of the individual watercolour. This possibility is suggested by the cruciform shape at the center of another Biblical watercolour in which Blake represents *Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent* from Numbers, which the 1853 sale and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts listed just after *Pestilence*. When *Pestilence* is considered individually, however, the destroying angel functions as a compound image of the plagues. He suffers from the symptoms of the disease he represents and spreads across the city. Both perpetrator and victim, *Pestilence* acts as a contagious allegorical being.

Biblical commentaries on the plagues of Egypt struggle with questions of agency and accountability. Exodus presents the plagues as the Lord's deliberate strategy (Exodus 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10), but commentators explain that Pharaoh is the cause of the suffering of his



people because he has not kept his promise to submit to the Lord's will after the Lord freed Egypt from the initial plagues (9:34-5). The tenth plague is the culmination of God's strategy: "I shall harden his heart, and he will not let the people go" (4:21). This sentence is repeated plague after plague, but the alternation between active and passive form ("and the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go," 9:7) raises the question of responsibility. Commentary in the Douai Bible, revised by Bishop Richard Challoner in the mid-eighteenth century, explains that the Lord's involvement in punishing Pharaoh was "not by being the efficient cause of his hardness of heart but by permitting it; and by withdrawing grace from him in punishment of his malice; which alone was the proper cause of his being hardened" (117, commenting on Exodus, 7:3). In short, the Lord's strategy is paradoxical in breaking the Pharaoh's will by making him more and more wilful. Challoner returns to the difficult doctrinal point of punishment for hardening, stubborn, and perverse dispositions resulting in recalcitrance to God's will with reference to other passages in *Exodus*, *Deuteronomy*, *Joshua*, and *Kings* (119, 338, 421). This philosophical analysis of causation demonstrates the difficulty and discomfort that commentators, readers, and believers experience in reconciling the agency of retribution with the compassionate God of mercy advocated by Ecclesiastes (33:30).<sup>4</sup>

Where Challoner uses philosophical reasoning, Wesley explains God's involvement in more accessible terms as an epic struggle, attributing Pharaoh's stubbornness to Satan's influence: "After he has frequently harden'd it himself, wilfully shutting his eyes against the light, I will at last permit Satan to harden it effectually" (1:208, commenting on Exodus, 4:21). Wesley's next step is to claim that the plagues are manifestations of Pharaoh's inner Satanic delusions: "Before he had *hardened his own heart*, and resisted the grace of God, and now God justly gave him up to his own heart's lusts, to strong delusions, permitting Satan to blind and harden him" (1:223, commenting on Exodus, 9:12). Wesley's allegorical reading,

in other words, distances the Lord from the cruel exercise of punishment by delegating agency to personifications of evil. Where Wesley interprets Pharaoh's dominant passion and punishment in terms of the Christian struggle against evil, *The Royal Universal Family Bible* (1780-1), which Blake illustrated, offers a philosophical model for the rule of the passions: "God ... withdraws the interposition of his divine providence, and leaves the man to his own inclination and as the sober, heathen Seneca, says, a man need not be left to the power of a greater enemy than his irregular desires and almost ungovernable passions" (commenting on Exodus, 9:12). To interpret the plagues through Seneca's philosophy is to see the Lord's withdrawal as an indication that Pharaoh's stubbornness can only be vanquished through a Stoic practice of self-control, rather than external intervention. Another Bible to which Blake contributed plates, *The Protestant's Family Bible* (1780-1), considers God's active involvement in Pharaoh's stubbornness a translation error: the verb "to harden" should be rendered in the passive form, rather than attributing the action to God directly (commenting on Exodus, 7:13). Commenting on the chapter detailing the tenth plague, Wesley justifies the plagues as "standing monuments of the greatness of God, the happiness of the church, and the sinfulness of sin; and standing monitors to the children of men in all ages, not to *provoke the Lord to jealousy*, nor to *strive with their Maker*. The benefit of these instructions to the world doth sufficiently balance the expence" (1:226, commenting on Exodus, 10:1). While these Biblical commentators find different justifications for the Lord's strategy of hardening Pharaoh's will and the punishment of the Egyptian people as a whole for the faults of the Pharaoh and the slave-holding class, Blake's visual retelling takes a different approach by positioning the victims in front of the viewer.

## Towards a New Moral Sense

Scale and colour contrast control the temporality of looking at *Pestilence*. From the vibrant green creature that initially captures your attention, adjust your eyes to the dark tones of the surrounding air, look downwards, and notice the victims delicately delineated against the sombre grey atmosphere in the lower foreground. The foreground normally takes precedence in channelling the gaze through the composition, but these miniaturized grey on grey forms require a renewed act of attention. They seem unaware of the gigantic destroyer towering over them, stepping across the composition. The stride of the destroyer divides the people at his feet into two categories. Behind the plague victims in the foreground, a golden light emanates from the house of the Jews, protected by a guardian angel, framed by the destroyer's legs, which literally *pass over* it, visualizing the words of Exodus in a powerful act of inter-art translation.

Exodus explains the conditions governing the divine dispensation of retribution and salvation. The covenant that binds the chosen people to their god is marked by a ritual of blood, in which animal sacrifice substitutes for the blood of their own children. The Lord instructs Moses: "And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye *are*: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy *you*, when I smite the land of Egypt" (12:13). In *Observations upon the Plagues Inflicted Upon the Egyptians* (1794), Jacob Bryant explains that the blood of the sacrificial lamb marking out the house of the Jews signals their covenant with the Lord (184). This final plague reverses the injunction to kill the male children of Israel at the beginning of Exodus (1:15-16, 22). Blake's composition also evokes a subject from the New Testament, the massacre of the innocents resulting from Herod's request to put the male children of Bethlehem to death (Matthew 2:16-18). This layered iconography reflects ways of reading the Bible typologically in the attempt to see a providential pattern that mitigates scenes of

cruelty by juxtaposing the hardship of the Old Testament with the promise of the New and justifying means through ends. Yet the emotional charge of these images has the power to invite the viewer to break the cycle of retribution, a vicious circle in which history is trapped.

Blake's radical hermeneutics goes against the grain of Biblical narratives of liberation. Blake judged "Abominable & Blasphemous" the Biblical passages reacting to "the destruction of the Canaanites by Joshua," which defend the destruction of a nation "under pretence of a command from God" (614-15). This comment, which Blake penned in the margin of Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible* (1796), reflects the difficulty encountered in reconciling the sacrifice of innocent victims with moral justice. The Canaanite episode had led Tom Paine to call into doubt the divine authorship of the Bible. Answering Paine's critique, Watson argued that "to believe the Bible true, we must, you affirm, unbelieve all our belief of the moral justice of God; for wherein, you ask, could crying or smiling infants offend? ... crying or smiling infants are subjected to death" in both human actions and natural calamities such as earthquakes, fire, famines, and pestilence (5). Yet, comparing the loss of infants in war to natural calamities to suggest that both need to be accepted as part of the order of nature undermines the argument for providential design. For Blake, Watson's argument has the power to turn even Christ into an unbeliever; it is "an Example of the possibility of Human Beastliness in all its branches" (614). In the 1780s Blake engraved a heroic equestrian battle scene depicting the destruction of the Canaanites by Joshua's army designed by Thomas Stothard, which was republished in an edition of Flavius Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*.<sup>5</sup> This scene of conquest, dispossession, and annihilation rings alarm bells about the ideological uses of "scriptural imperialism."<sup>6</sup> Edward Said has advocated a "Canaanite reading" to challenge the single vision of Exodus politics. For Said, *Exodus* is a "tragic book in that it teaches that you cannot both 'belong' and concern yourself with Canaanites who do not belong" (106). In *Pestilence: Death of the First Born*, the search for

the moral sense of the Bible disables the unidirectional teleological narrative of the chosen people.

Blake's strategy of visualization disrupts any attempt to identify a stable dystopian focus of accountability in *Pestilence*. Despite its potentially bestial, reptile skin, Pestilence has a human face. Physiognomists compared human with animal heads to capture a character's dominant trait and the bestial bent of certain human inclinations. For Johann Caspar Lavater serpents' heads indicate malice, falsehood, and deceit: "is there one capable of inspiring us with anything like affection or confidence? Figure to yourself similar features on a human face – with what abhorrence would you turn your eyes from it!" (2:127). However, Lavater's character marks do not map onto Blake's destroying angel, for his "sunk eyes" do not denote the "mischievous cunning" or "craftiness" that Lavater sees in reptile heads (2:127). Janet Warner has demonstrated that Blake relied on Charles Le Brun's *Method to Learn to Design the Passions* (1734) to express internal feelings through facial expressions (38-46). In Le Brun's visual system, the creature's bent head, downward turning eyes and mouth express bodily pain and sadness. By humanizing the reptile-human destroyer, Blake invites us to consider Pestilence as a fellow being.

Blake's practice of sympathy thus crosses the boundaries of species, subverting the dynamics of alterity that Jonathan Lamb identifies in Milton's "horrid sympathy" (105-128; *Paradise Lost*, X.540). When Satan's angelic essence is "mixt with bestial slime" in the "foul descent" that marks his demonic incarnation into a snake in *Paradise Lost* (IX.165-6), his monstrosity is a sign of misrecognition, "when the outcomes of a person's actions are suddenly perceived by them as disturbing events, and they are estranged from their own persons" (114). Satan's actions are disowned by means of his metamorphosis into a serpent. Entering the condition of another species produces a feeling of horror, estrangement, alterity, whereas it is reassuring to establish clear boundaries between species, self and other, good

and evil. Demonizing the perpetrator is a way of rejecting guilt and responsibility: there can be no shared accountability for the unjust form of punishment. However, this strategy of demonization does not work in Blake's composition. Pestilence has tragic depth; the rotation of his torso indicates his unwillingness to carry out the task of the destroyer, as he turns away from the task ahead, perhaps pleading against performing the command from above. In giving a human face to Pestilence, Blake invites us to feel what it must be like to be the perpetrator of a cruel punishment.

While *Pestilence* was a striking new composition for Blake, the plague victims were a pictorial subject to which he returned again and again. An early watercolor dated 1779-80 and titled *Pestilence, Probably the Great Plague of London* locates a grouping of the dead, the dying, and the grieving in front of a church with an impressive colonnade, perhaps evoking St Paul's Cathedral. This setting is repeated in another watercolor produced between 1780 and 1784. Three more versions dated around 1784 locate the plague in an unidentifiable townscape.<sup>7</sup> The choreography of grieving is enhanced by the dramatic pathos formula of a man holding a woman desperately bending over her dead child, which is repeated version after version, including in a later watercolor dated 1805 that shares *Pestilence's* size, subject matter, and provenance history, from Butts to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1890.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these group studies, Blake also represented the plague through the theme of confinement in the house of death, focusing on the figures of the suffering in a full-plate illustration to his relief-etched *Europe a Prophecy* (1793) and in the three versions of the large colour printing *The House of Death* (1795/1805), which illustrates the Lazarhouse from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where variant details capture the agony of the recumbent figures through muscular contractions, an open mouth, a face turning, an extended hand.<sup>9</sup> This historical and literary repertoire demonstrates Blake's sustained engagement with the composition of the plague as a pictorial subject. Yet in confronting the story of the tenth

plague from Exodus, the artist's groupings acquire a more explicit ethical dimension of accountability.

The narrative of Exodus activates a structure of sympathy that unifies the political body of the chosen people against their Egyptian neighbors. The figure of the neighbor and the Gospel's injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:37-39) mark the turning point in accounts of the limits of sympathy. Smith argues that to overcome "the selfish and original passions of human nature" and to correct "the otherwise natural inequality of our sentiments" (135, 136), the range of our fellow-feeling needs to expand from selfishness to an attention to the interests of our neighbour. Harder work, Smith argues, is required to make the "man of Europe" feel for distant inhabitants of China swallowed up in an earthquake. What stops "a man of humanity" willing "to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them?" It is the reflective structure of "reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct" (137). For Smith, "the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator" (137). In other words, sympathy is not an "organic emotion," but requires a self-reflective practice, which produces what Lauren Berlant calls a "technology of belonging" (5). In a late essay "Of National Characters," Hume indicates that stereotyping is at the heart of sympathy, functioning as a structuring principle for the political body: "the propensity to company and society ... makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions" (202). And yet, the visual dynamics of sympathy offer a point of departure from the group mentality coalescing around that uniforming work of fellow-feeling, which limits the boundaries of the imagined community to the nation. William Godwin articulates a Kantian notion of the impartial spectator "of an angelic nature ...

beholding us from an elevated station and uninfluenced by our prejudices,” a citizen of the world (174). From that cosmopolitan perspective, the relationship between neighbors is connected “with a society, a nation, and ... with the entire family of mankind” (169) committed to reciprocal justice.

Blake’s watercolor stages an exercise in self-reflection and self-knowledge that uses the visual field as a medium for moral judgement. The rhetoric of “the chosen people” activates a technology of belonging structured around the contrast between us and them, but Blake invites the viewer to try out the positions of the other rather than Hume’s notion of sympathy as contagious identification in the group mentality. In Smith’s more deliberative practice of sympathy, “we suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour ... this is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct” (112). By placing the suffering of others in the spectator’s immediate field of vision, Blake offers alternative points of view, makes different demands on the viewer as a compassionate spectator or moral agent, and creates the possibility of a different dynamics of identification. In doing so, Blake’s scene tests the limits of sympathy.

The watercolor’s choreography of mourning modulates the dynamism of despair, as figures converge from the margins towards the center of the composition. Their movement is slowed down by the static, symmetrical positioning of two kneeling figures arching backwards and framing the mourning woman bending over the recumbent dead man at the center. Blake follows Exodus to the letter in having the destroyer passing over and thus separating the chosen people from the plague victims, yet he inverts the focus of the Biblical text by placing the victims in the foreground. As a result, viewers must observe or pass through their suffering. Note the desperate figure rushing out of the door and into the scene of distress in the bottom left foreground: her animated gesture of despair intensifies the dramatic



moment unfolding in front of her, guiding the viewers' eyes to the sombre bent down postures of the victims. Dark skin and fleshy lips identify her as Egyptian, in contrast to the straight "Greek noses" of the bearded man leaning forward in front of her and the features of the mothers on the right-hand side of the image. Her presence in the scene might signal the role of Egyptian women in protecting Moses. Gale A. Yee identifies in them traces of a multi-racial ideal community (214-22). Blake's choice to bring this multi-racial presence into view stands in the way of a polarizing dialectic of us and them.

In his writings, Blake celebrates the end of slavery as a crucial moment in human redemption.<sup>10</sup> However, in this watercolour, rather than representing the exit from Egyptian bondage so often used as a trope of racial liberation, Blake focuses on the culminating scene of Egyptian suffering. His approach to pestilence is layered, shifting between the Egyptian context and other plague scenes that can prompt associations for the viewer who takes up the position of the victim. Erasing markers of racial difference might help bring the Egyptians' case home to the white British viewer, exposing the limits of sympathy as a practice of self-reflection. However, that practice of identification does not erase racial dynamics. On the contrary, the choice to Europeanize the Egyptians implicates Europe in the figure of Egypt, raising questions about the contemporary relevance of the Exodus narrative. The composition invites viewers to take up different subject positions, among them contemporary slaveholders confronted with the punishment and suffering of their Egyptian counterparts.

Blake's *Pestilence* turns visual invention into an ethical arena in which to address the divisive politics of sympathy articulated in the Biblical source. Follow the lines of sight. The eyes of *Pestilence* redirect our own up and outside of the frame of the painting to the divine source propelling his actions, but in the human scene below him two figures stare at us: the angel protecting the house of the Jews and the baby in its mother's arms. The angel tells us that we will survive, but our way out to that promise of freedom in the background is halted

by the infant's gaze. At the right corner of the image, Blake groups two mothers, each holding a child in their arms: the child furthest to the right is dead, his head dangling from the embrace of his desperate mother; the second mother bends forwards and looks downwards, but her child stares out at the viewer, us. Is his sacrifice the cost of our freedom? Should we stop, reach out, and help him? The recognition of the suffering of the other obstructs the line of flight traced through the depth of the visual field towards personal survival and the collective salvation of the chosen people. Working against that technology of belonging, then, is an alternative type of identification, predicated on the moral imperative to intervene. In a reversal of the power dynamics of the gaze, the spectator is summoned as a moral agent.

“The face to face both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I,” argues Emmanuel Levinas (T&I 68). “The first word of the face is the ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face” (E&I 89). For Levinas, the “gaze that supplicates and demands” (T&I 75) asks us to recognize and reciprocate their gaze with action. Gurton-Wachter notes the abolitionist power of the black slave staring at the viewer in *Group of Negroes as imported to be sold*, one of Blake's illustrations to Stedman's *Narrative* (2020, 538). In *Pestilence*, the gaze of the child victim also confronts the viewer in a face-to-face exchange. In addressing the viewer in the second person, Blake's watercolor problematizes the technology of belonging that invites the viewer to identify solely with the political identity of the chosen people. If narrative works through othering, as Ahmed argues, the emotional work of “becoming you,” in this instance, invites spectators to opt out of immediate identification with the chosen people in an act of “self-presence” that defies the pressure of social identity, becoming other to their people (1-2, 10).

The attention of the viewer is divided between different areas of the composition. While the gigantic figure of pestilence commands vision at a glance, the structure of the gaze has a choric function: it reroutes the eye alternating between different positions played out in

the miniaturized scene in the lower part of the composition. When engaged in this process of looking, viewers can no longer command the position of the detached autonomous subject, nor can they catch the contagion of visual enthusiasm, which would make them identify with one of the positions afforded by the composition. In short, the reciprocal dynamic of sympathy turns the viewer into the object of the lines of sight within the watercolour. Looking turns the aesthetic into a moral scene. The action is frozen in a point in time in which the viewer is presented with the counterfactual option to change the course of history. “Love thy neighbour as thyself.”

Blake’s composition opens up the Biblical narrative by arresting it at the climactic moment. Even as viewers feel comforted by the light illuminating the chosen people’s route to safety, the irritation of peripheral vision divides their attention, rerouting their eyes towards the child’s face. The arrested moment of the painting produces a moral impasse in which fellow feeling is suspended. “The most sublime act is to set another before you,” reads one of Blake’s Proverbs of Hell (36: *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 7); for Goldsmith, “the most sublime act is to put oneself in a position that disables every conceivable action” (208). In giving the viewer the choice whether or not to join the chosen people in safety or to intervene and save the child, Blake’s visual re-telling produces a structure of sympathy that brings accountability into view. Instead of accepting the verbal text’s invitation to join the chosen people, Blake’s visual morality turns the viewer into the subject who can change the story. There are two alternative heroic actions: exit from the house of bondage, from the house of death, and carve a path from slavery to freedom at the cost of sacrificing the innocent child; or, take up the responsibility to protect and fulfil the duty of care, but in so doing risk contagion. The suspended moment of painting arrests those two sublime acts in a stalled impasse.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Digital facsimiles of Blake's Biblical watercolours are available through the Blake Archive, which also has a dedicated digital exhibition about *William Blake's Biblical Illustrations* curated by Sarah Jones, with essays and galleries by Jared N. Powell, Jennifer Davis Michael, Naomi Billingsley, Sarah Jones, Sheila A. Spector, and Kendall DeBoer, including a list of Blake's biblical subjects produced by Spector:

<http://www.blakearchive.org/images/exhibits/biblicalillustrations/Biblicalillustrations.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> For a copy of Fuseli's Milton Gallery no. 5, see *Satan and Death, with Sin Intervening*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 59.56, discussed in Calè, 142-83; for Blake's see Butlin 529.2 and 536.2, both reproduced by the Blake Archive.

<sup>3</sup> *The Angel Michael Binding Satan ("He Cast Him into the Bottomless Pit, and Shut him Up")*, c 1800-1805, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1915.8 (Butlin 524.1.1). The subject probably derives from Rev. XX: 1-3 or XII: 7-12.

<sup>4</sup> On compassion as an attribute of the God of Mercy and "compassivity" as the fellow feeling that binds us to the sufferings of Christ, see Garber, 20.

<sup>5</sup> *The Battle of Ain, & the Destruction of the City, by the Army of Joshua*, first published in Edward Kimpton's *A New and Complete Universal History of the Holy Bible* (1781), republished in George Henry Maynard's *The Genuine and Complete Works of Flavius Josephus* (1785-6).

<sup>6</sup> On scriptural imperialism, see Sugirtharajah, R. S. Sugirtharajah, 45-73; Yee discusses the demonization of Egypt in the context of Exodus being written under Persian rule.

<sup>7</sup> *Pestilence, Probably the Great Plague of London* (c. 1779-80), pen and watercolor, 13.8 × 18.6 cm, formerly Robert Tear Collection (Butlin 184) and *Pestilence* (c. 1780-84), pen and watercolor, 18.5 × 27.5 cm, Robert N. Essick Collection, Altadena, California. For the generic townscape scene, see *The Plague/Pestilence* (c. 1784), pencil, 24.2 × 29.8 cm, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California; *Pestilence* (c. 1784), pen and watercolor, 31.6 × 48.1 cm, Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, loan of Lois Bateson; *Pestilence* (c. 1784), pen and watercolor, 32.2 × 48.4 cm, City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. On the dating and variants of these depictions of Pestilence, see Viscomi.

<sup>8</sup> *Plague* (c.1805), pen and watercolor over graphite pencil on paper, 30.2 x 43 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 90.105; *Pestilence* (c. 1805), pen and watercolor over pencil, 30.4 × 34.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 90.106 (Butlin, no. 442). Both watercolours were painted for Thomas Butts (1757-1845); they were sold together at Foster and Son's sale (29 June 1853) to C.J. Strange, and were both acquired by the MFA on 29 April 1890: see Butlin 339.

<sup>9</sup> "The House of Death Milton," Tate, N05060, sent to Thomas Butts in July 1805 (Butlin 320); British Museum, 1885,0509.1616 (Butlin, no. 321); Fitzwilliam Museum, PDP, 1769 (Butlin, no. 322).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, see *America*, plate 6, 53 and *The Four Zoas*, IX.18-39, 402-3.