



“AMERICA, A Prophecy” (1793) **by William Blake**

While for most of the conflict, the majority of the British public supported the war against the colonies, there were also many who sympathized with the Americans. There were yet others more or less neutral, and who sought, to their credit, to approach matters from a Christian and humanitarian outlook; and which included providing charity to victims of the war, such as American soldiers and sailors held as prisoners¹ or homeless and exiled Loyalists. Ethan Allen’s view of the British, as expressed in his *Narrative* (1779) is edifying on this question of British perspective of the conflict because although on one hand he manifests implacable hatred of “Britons” and British tyranny, he also shows a liking and affection for individual British people who displayed benevolence and understanding of the American’s or an individual American’s predicament.

And yet despite the obvious appeal of such British altruism and impartiality to us today, it was not always so easy a thing for a serving British army or naval officer to show himself as being too kindly. For he risked the disdain and contempt of combatants on both sides; from fellow British for lack of loyalty, and from Americans, in a kind of reverse psychology (that perhaps we might attribute to man’s fallen nature), who might construe his friendliness as a sign of weakness. For this reason, it seems all the more incumbent on us now to appreciate and respect those officers, soldiers and sailors who were just minded and charitably disposed.; since it was often they who served to make the war more humane and less bitter between the contending parties than it might otherwise have been.²

Surely one of the most curious reactions by a Briton to the American war was that of artist, poet and visionary William Blake. In his “America: A Prophecy” (1793), one among a number of his twelve “Continental Prophecies,” by means of verse and pictorial illuminations, he depicts both Britain and America as being governed and impelled by gargantuan or global “myth-like” spirits or spiritual personages; themselves driven by passionate impulses desiring freedom and or else the enslavement of someone else. I use the term “myth-like” because for Blake these were not mythical beings as we might ordinarily conceive them to be, but in some spiritual and imaginative sense quite palpable and real forces directing and shaping great and international events. Yet how and to what extent *real* and in quite what way (perhaps psychological?) readers of Blake will have to interpret and decide for themselves. Those unfamiliar with his “prophecy” will be confused as to “America’s” meaning and symbolism. Unfortunately,

¹ “The committee in London for raising and applying monies for the relief of the American prisoners [of war], began in March [1780] to call upon the public afresh for new subscriptions, as the war continued beyond expectation: the same were readily made. Many individuals exhibited a compassion and liberality to the Americans, that does honor to human nature.” Rev. William Gordon, *The history of the rise progress and establishment of the independence of the United States of America* (1788), vol. III, pp. 416-417.

² Regarding whom and specifically see, for example, Allen’s *Narrative*, and Alexander Garden’s *Anecdotes*, 1st series (1822) p. 71n, and 2nd series (1828) pp.109-111.

it exceeds our present means and the constraints of these monographs to begin attempting an exegesis here. This said, those who *are* desirous or interested can naturally find such in critical books and literary essays on Blake's work.

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## PRELUDIUM

The shadowy Daughter of Urthona stood before red Orc,  
When fourteen suns had faintly journey'd o'er his dark abode:  
His food she brought in iron baskets, his drink in cups of iron.  
Crown'd with a helmet and dark hair the nameless Female stood;  
A quiver with its burning stores, a bow like that of night,  
When pestilence is shot from heaven: no other arms she need!  
Invulnerable tho' naked, save where clouds roll round her loins  
Their awful folds in the dark air: silent she stood as night;  
For never from her iron tongue could voice or sound arise,  
But dumb till that dread day when Orc assay'd his fierce embrace.

"Dark Virgin," said the hairy Youth, "thy father stern, abhorr'd,  
Rivets my tenfold chains, while still on high my spirit soars;  
Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky, sometimes a lion  
Stalking upon the mountains, and sometimes a whale, I lash  
The raging fathomless abyss; anon a serpent folding  
Around the pillars of Urthona, and round thy dark limbs  
On the Canadian wilds I fold; feeble my spirit folds;  
For chain'd beneath I rend these caverns: when thou bringest food  
I howl my joy, and my red eyes seek to behold thy face --  
In vain! these clouds roll to and fro, and hide thee from my sight."

Silent as despairing love, and strong as jealousy,  
The hairy shoulders rend the links; free are the wrists of fire;  
Round the terrific loins he seiz'd the panting, struggling womb;  
It joy'd: she put aside her clouds and smilèd her first-born smile,  
As when a black cloud shows its lightnings to the silent deep.

Soon as she saw the Terrible Boy, then burst the virgin cry:

"I know thee, I have found thee, and I will not let thee go:  
Thou art the image of God who dwells in darkness of Africa,  
And thou art fall'n to give me life in regions of dark death.  
On my American plains I feel the struggling afflictions  
Endur'd by roots that writhe their arms into the nether deep.  
I see a Serpent in Canada who courts me to his love,  
In Mexico an Eagle, and a Lion in Peru;  
I see a Whale in the South Sea, drinking my soul away.  
O what limb-rending pains I feel! thy fire and my frost  
Mingle in howling pains, in furrows by thy lightnings rent.  
This is Eternal Death, and this the torment long foretold!"

## A PROPHECY

The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent:  
Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow to America's shore,  
Piercing the souls of warlike men, who rise in silent night.

Washington, Franklin, Paine, & Warren, Gates, Hancock & Green;  
Meet on the coast glowing with blood from Albion's fiery Prince.

Washington spoke: "Friends of America! look over the Atlantic sea;  
A bended bow is lifted in heaven, & a heavy iron chain  
Descends link by link from Albion's cliffs across the sea to bind  
Brothers & sons of America, till our faces pale and yellow;  
Heads deprest, voices weak, eyes downcast, hands work-bruis'd,  
Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of the whip  
Descend to generations that in future times forget."

The strong voice ceas'd; for a terrible blast swept over the heaving sea;  
The eastern cloud rent; on his cliffs stood Albion's wrathful Prince  
A dragon form clashing his scales at midnight he arose,  
And flam'd red meteors round the land of Albion beneath.  
His voice, his locks, his awful shoulders, and his glowing eyes,  
Appear to the Americans upon the cloudy night.  
Solemn heave the Atlantic waves between the gloomy nations,  
Swelling, belching from its deeps red clouds & raging Fires!  
Albion is sick. America faints! enrag'd the Zenith grew.  
As human blood shooting its veins all round the orb'd heaven  
Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood  
And in the red clouds rose a Wonder o'er the Atlantic sea;  
Intense! naked! a Human fire fierce glowing, as the wedge  
Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were fire  
With myriads of cloudy terrors banners dark & towers  
Surrounded: heat but not light went thro' the murky atmosphere.

The King of England looking westward trembles at the vision.

Albion's Angel stood beside the Stone of night, and saw  
The terror like a comet, or more like the planet red  
That once inclos'd the terrible wandering comets in its sphere.  
Then Mars thou wast our center, & the planets three flew round  
Thy crimson disk: so e'er the Sun was rent from thy red sphere;  
The Spectre glow'd his horrid length staining the temple long  
With beams of blood; & thus a voice came forth, and shook the temple:

"The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen leave their stations;  
The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up;  
The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry'd.  
Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! awakening!  
Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds & bars are burst.  
Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:  
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;  
Let the inchained soul shut up in darkness and in sighing,  
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years,  
Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open.  
And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge.  
They look behind at every step & believe it is a dream,  
Singing. 'The Sun has left his blackness, & has found a fresher morning,  
And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night;  
For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease.'"

In thunders ends the voice. Then Albion's Angel wrathful burnt  
Beside the Stone of Night; and like the Eternal Lion's howl

In famine & war, reply'd. "Art thou not Orc, who serpent-form'd  
Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children;  
Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, hater of Dignities;  
Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of God's Law;  
Why dost thou come to Angels eyes in this terrific form?"

The terror answer'd: "I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree:  
The times are ended; shadows pass the morning gins to break;  
The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,  
What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness:  
That stony law I stamp to dust: and scatter religion abroad  
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves;  
But they shall rot on desert sands, & consume in bottomless deeps;  
To make the deserts blossom, & the deeps shrink to their fountains,  
And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof.  
That pale religious lechery, seeking Virginity,  
May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty  
The undefil'd tho' ravish'd in her cradle night and morn:  
For every thing that lives is holy, life delights in life;  
Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd.  
Fires inwrap the earthly globe, yet man is not consum'd;  
Amidst the lustful fires he walks; his feet become like brass,  
His knees and thighs like silver, & his breast and head like gold."

"Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets & alarm my Thirteen Angels!  
Loud howls the eternal Wolf! the eternal Lion lashes his tail!  
America is darken'd; and my punishing Demons terrified  
Crouch howling before their caverns deep like skins dry'd in the wind.  
They cannot smite the wheat, nor quench the fatness of the earth.  
They cannot smite with sorrows, nor subdue the plow and spade.  
They cannot wall the city, nor moat round the castle of princes.  
They cannot bring the stubbed oak to overgrow the hills.  
For terrible men stand on the shores, & in their robes I see  
Children take shelter from the lightnings, there stands Washington  
And Paine and Warren with their foreheads rear'd toward the east.  
But clouds obscure my aged sight. A vision from afar!  
Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets & alarm my thirteen Angels!  
Ah vision from afar! Ah rebel form that rent the ancient  
Heavens; Eternal Viper self-renew'd, rolling in clouds,  
I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's shore,  
Writhing in pangs of abhorred birth; red flames the crest rebellious  
And eyes of death; the harlot womb oft opened in vain  
Heaves in enormous circles, now the times are return'd upon thee,  
Devourer of thy parent, now thy unutterable torment renews.  
Sound! sound! my loud war trumpets & alarm my thirteen Angels!  
Ah terrible birth! a young one bursting! where is the weeping mouth?  
And where the mothers milk? instead those ever-hissing jaws  
And parched lips drop with fresh gore; now roll thou in the clouds  
Thy mother lays her length outstretch'd upon the shore beneath.  
Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets & alarm my thirteen Angels!  
Loud howls the eternal Wolf: the eternal Lion lashes his tail!"

Thus wept the Angel voice & as he wept the terrible blasts  
Of trumpets, blew a loud alarm across the Atlantic deep.  
No trumpets answer; no reply of clarions or of fifes,  
Silent the Colonies remain and refuse the loud alarm.

On those vast shady hills between America & Albion's shore;  
Now barr'd out by the Atlantic sea: call'd Atlantean hills:  
Because from their bright summits you may pass to the Golden world  
An ancient palace, archetype of mighty Emperies,  
Rears its immortal pinnacles, built in the forest of God  
By Ariston the king of beauty for his stolen bride.

Here on their magic seats the thirteen Angels sat perturb'd  
For clouds from the Atlantic hover o'er the solemn roof.

Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd  
Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc  
And Boston's Angel cried aloud as they flew thro' the dark night.

He cried: "Why trembles honesty and like a murderer,  
Why seeks he refuge from the frowns of his immortal station!  
Must the generous tremble & leave his joy, to the idle: to the pestilence!  
That mock him? who commanded this? what God? what Angel!  
To keep the gen'rous from experience till the ungenerous  
Are unrestrain'd performers of the energies of nature;  
Till pity is become a trade, and generosity a science,  
That men get rich by, & the sandy desert is giv'n to the strong  
What God is he, writes laws of peace, & clothes him in a tempest  
What pitying Angel lusts for tears, and fans himself with sighs  
What crawling villain preaches abstinence & wraps himself  
In fat of lambs? no more I follow, no more obedience pay!"

So cried he, rending off his robe & throwing down his scepter.  
In sight of Albion's Guardian, and all the thirteen Angels  
Rent off their robes to the hungry wind, & threw their golden scepters  
Down on the land of America. indignant they descended  
Headlong from out their heav'nly heights, descending swift as fires  
Over the land; naked & flaming are their lineaments seen  
In the deep gloom, by Washington & Paine & Warren they stood  
And the flame folded roaring fierce within the pitchy night  
Before the Demon red, who burnt towards America,  
In black smoke thunders and loud winds rejoicing in its terror  
Breaking in smoky wreaths from the wild deep, & gath'ring thick  
In flames as of a furnace on the land from North to South  
What time the thirteen Governors that England sent convene  
In Bernard's house; the flames cover'd the land, they rouse they cry  
Shaking their mental chains they rush in fury to the sea  
To quench their anguish; at the feet of Washington down fall'n  
They grovel on the sand and writhing lie, while all  
The British soldiers thro' the thirteen states sent up a howl  
Of anguish: threw their swords & muskets to the earth & ran  
From their encampments and dark castles seeking where to hide  
From the grim flames; and from the visions of Orc; in sight  
Of Albion's Angel; who enrag'd his secret clouds open'd  
From north to south, and burnt outstretch'd on wings of wrath cov'ring  
The eastern sky, spreading his awful wings across the heavens;  
Beneath him roll'd his num'rous hosts, all Albion's Angels camp'd  
Darken'd the Atlantic mountains & their trumpets shook the valleys  
Arm'd with diseases of the earth to cast upon the Abyss,  
Their numbers forty millions, must'ring in the eastern sky.

In the flames stood & view'd the armies drawn out in the sky  
Washington, Franklin, Paine, & Warren, Allen, Gates, & Lee,  
And heard the voice of Albion's Angel give the thunderous command;  
His plagues obedient to his voice flew forth out of their clouds,  
Falling upon America, as a storm to cut them off,  
As a blight cuts the tender corn when it begins to appear.  
Dark is the heaven above, & cold & hard the earth beneath:  
And as a plague wind fill'd with insects cuts off man & beast,  
And as a sea o'erwhelms a land in the day of an earthquake,  
Fury! rage! madness! in a wind swept through America;  
And the red flames of Orc that folded roaring fierce around  
The angry shores, and the fierce rushing of th' inhabitants together!  
The citizens of New-York close their books & lock their chests;  
The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and unlade;  
The scribe of Pennsylvania casts his pen upon the earth;  
he builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in fear.

Then had America been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic,  
And Earth had lost another portion of the infinite,  
But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire  
The red fires rag'd! the plagues recoil'd! then roll'd they back with fury  
On Albion's Angels; then the Pestilence began in streaks of red  
Across the limbs of Albion's Guardian, the spotted plague smote Bristol's  
And the Leprosy London's Spirit, sickening all their bands:  
The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammer'd mail,  
And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood a naked multitude:  
Albion's Guardian writhed in torment on the eastern sky,  
Pale quivering toward the brain his glimmering eyes, teeth chattering,  
Howling & shuddering his legs quivering; convuls'd each muscle & sinew:  
Sick'ning lay London's Guardian, and the ancient miter'd York,  
Their heads on snowy hills, their ensigns sick'ning in the sky.  
The plagues creep on the burning winds driven by flames of Orc,  
And by the fierce Americans rushing together in the night,  
Driven o'er the Guardians of Ireland and Scotland and Wales.  
They spotted with plagues forsook the frontiers & their banners sear'd  
With fires of hell, deform their ancient heavens with shame & woe.  
Hid in his caves the Bard of Albion felt the enormous plagues.  
And a cowl of flesh grew o'er his head & scales on his back & ribs;  
And rough with black scales all his Angels fright their ancient heavens.  
The doors of marriage are open, and the Priests in rustling scales  
Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc,  
That play around the golden roofs in wreaths of fierce desire,  
Leaving the females naked and glowing with the lusts of youth.

For the female spirits of the dead pining in bonds of religion,  
Run from their fetters reddening, & in long drawn arches sitting,  
They feel the nerves of youth renew, and desires of ancient times  
Over their pale limbs as a vine when the tender grape appears.

Over the hills, the vales, the cities, rage the red flames fierce:  
The Heavens melted from north to south; and Urizen who sat  
Above all heavens in thunders wrap'd, emerg'd his leprous head  
From out his holy shrine, his tears in deluge piteous  
Falling into the deep sublime! flag'd with grey-brow'd snows  
And thunderous visages, his jealous wings wav'd over the deep;

Weeping in dismal howling woe he dark descended howling  
Around the smitten bands, clothed in tears & trembling shudd'ring cold.  
His stored snows he poured forth, and his icy magazines  
He open'd on the deep, and on the Atlantic sea white shiv'ring.  
Leoprous his limbs, all over white, and hoary was his visage.  
Weeping in dismal howlings before the stern Americans,  
Hiding the Demon red with clouds & cold mists from the earth;  
Till Angels & weak men twelve years should govern o'er the strong:  
And then their end should come, when France reciev'd the Demon's light.

Stiff shudderings shook the heav'nly thrones! France Spain & Italy,  
In terror view'd the bands of Albion, and the ancient Guardians  
Fainting upon the elements, smitten with their own plagues.  
They slow advance to shut the five gates of their law-built heaven,  
Filled with blasting fancies and with mildews of despair,  
With fierce disease and lust, unable to stem the fires of Orc.  
But the five gates were consum'd, & their bolts and hinges melted  
And the fierce flames burnt round the heavens, & round the abodes of men.

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William Thomas Sherman

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