

Whirlwinds of Empire:

Subversion and the Gothic in William Blake's *The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth*

JONATHAN PERRIS

Between 1782 and 1830, some eighty authors directly referenced William Pitt the Younger in poetic verse. George Canning's 'The Pilot that Weathered the Storm', in particular, came to be instrumental in the construction of the Prime Minister's myth and consequently in the understanding of Britain as a benevolent and moralising imperial power. Yet the ambiguity of response to such mythologies of empire, and indeed to the authors who created them, is often underestimated. This article suggests the interesting possibility that one of William Blake's paintings, The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth (1805?), is a direct response to Canning's poem. It will propose that the sublime terror employed by such texts to construct the imperial Self (by appeals to the colonial Other) is subverted to intense irony through the painting's engagement with nascent Gothic modes and its satirical employment of the genre of 'apotheosis'. In particular, Blake's allegorical use of the destruction of Sodom, the biblical beast Behemoth, and the iconography of Hinduism is seen as satirically echoing both the construction of state narratives and the 'moralising' violence of imperial and colonial encounters.

On 28 May 1802, in the cavernous fourteenth-century dining hall of Merchant Taylor's Hall, London, a birthday celebration raged in honour of the former Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger (Prime Minister of Great Britain 1783–1801 and 1804–6). Among the 975 Londoners in attendance was Charles Dignum, the popular Drury Lane tenor, who had been employed to perform a song, 'The Pilot that Weathered the Storm'. The song had been authored for the occasion by George Canning – Pitt's loyal supporter – and was subsequently, due to its popularity, circulated as a poem.¹ The thirty two lines spoke of the gratitude owed to Pitt for guiding the

¹ A letter from Canning to J. H. Frere containing a copy of the poem is held in the British Library. Add. MS. 38833, f.114. All subsequent citations are taken from this version.

country through the ‘dark tempests’ of unrest in the farthest reaches of the empire and through the ‘loud whirlwind’ whipped up by the more proximate French Revolution.²

Indeed, the speaker went on to claim that Britain was the ‘one kingdom preserv’d midst the wreck of the world’ and, with starkly colonial verve, the nation ‘[w]hose example with envy all nations behold’.³ These lines, together with the metrical predictability of alternating rhymed couplets, emphasise Pitt’s role in maintaining Britain as a sanctity of stability. This discourse is extended in the closing quatrain, in which the speaker imagines that the country will require Pitt once more – when ‘the rude whirlwind should rise’ again and ‘fresh darkness deform’.⁴ Thus, the poem undermines any notion that Pitt’s successor, Henry Addington, was capable of weathering this ‘whirlwind’.

Seven years later, in a small flat above a hosiery shop in Soho, London, a painting presented Pitt in a strikingly similar vision – also raised on a ‘whirlwind’ of war. The artwork, *The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth* (figure 1), was displayed as part of William Blake’s only public exhibition.⁵ The *Descriptive Catalogue* for the event, in a notable echo of Canning’s poem, stated that the painting was ‘a grand [apotheosis], depicting Pitt ‘[riding] on the *whirlwind*, directing the storms of war’.⁶ Indeed, the composition has the then recently-deceased Prime Minister encircled by halos of fire, his arms outstretched in Christ-like bearing. Thus, Canning’s earlier depiction of Pitt (and therefore Britain) standing alone, unruffled ‘midst the wreck of the world’ while ‘Terror and Doubt through the universe reigned’ might initially appear to find an echo in Blake’s vision of Pitt’s apparent ‘apotheosis’ – his divine ascension above the chaotic scenes below.⁷ Indeed, Blake’s experimentation with tempera and gold – a revival of Renaissance mediums usually associated with religious icons – might emphasise this supposed deification.⁸

It is likely that Blake had heard of Canning’s popular verse by the time he conceived of *The Spiritual Form*, as ‘The Pilot’ was often referenced and even imitated.⁹

² Canning (1802), ll. 1–2.

³ *Ibid.* l. 16, l. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.* l. 29, l. 29.

⁵ For accounts of the 1809 exhibition see G.E. Bentley, *Blake Records*, new edition (London and New Haven, 2004), pp. 281–95; Brown, David Blayney, and Martin Myrone. ‘William Blake’s 1809 Exhibition.’ *Tate Papers* 14 (2010); Troy Patenaude, “‘The Glory of a Nation’: Recovering William Blake’s 1809 Exhibition’, in *The British Art Journal* vol.4 no.1, 2003, 52–63. The exhibited items are documented in Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London, 1981).

⁶ William Blake, *The complete poetry and prose of William Blake*. (California: Univ of California Press, 2008) 578–79. All subsequent reference to Blake’s poetry and prose are from this edition.

⁷ Canning (1802), l. 16; l. 13.

⁸ For more on Blake’s use of tempera and gold, see Whitehead, Angus. “‘This Extraordinary Performance’: William Blake’s Use of Gold and Silver in the Creation of His Paintings and Illuminated Books.” *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 42.3 (2009): 84–108.

⁹ See Miles Johnson and A. D. Harvey. ‘Political Verse in Late Georgian Britain: Poems Referring to William Pitt the Younger (1759–1806).’ *Electronic British Library Journal* (2004), p. 5.

A memoir to Canning published in the *Whitby Magazine* (October 1827) claimed that the verse, despite its ephemeral nature, had ‘become, in a great measure, national [...] the song is so universally admired’.¹⁰



Figure 1. The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth, William Blake (c. 1805), Tempera and gold on canvas, 740 × 627, Photo © Tate, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0, N01110.

¹⁰ ‘Biographical memoir of the late Right Honourable George Canning’ in *The Whitby Magazine, and Monthly Literary Journal*, Volume 1, No.10. Whitby: Ralph Horne, Bridge Street (October 1827), p. 294.

Thus, in the context of the panegyrics to Pitt that littered late Georgian political verse, Blake's painting and its companion piece, *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* (which, for space, this article will not analyse in depth), might ostensibly be understood to be engaging in similar political narratives. The paintings have Pitt and Nelson 'guiding' the biblical beasts Behemoth (described by Blake in 'Jerusalem' as 'War | By Land astounding'¹¹) and Leviathan ('War by Sea enormous'¹²) – which, the argument might run, are allegories of Britain's righteous war against Napoleon.¹³ That is, they are representations of Pitt's Flanders Campaign and Nelson's Battle of Trafalgar, respectively. Yet, as Paul Barlow writes, the paintings 'have historically proved something of an embarrassment to Blake scholars, who have found it difficult to understand why a radical such as Blake would have apparently celebrated the "heroes" who fought against Napoleon'.¹⁴ This article, however, will examine the subtle dissimilarities between the 'whirlwinds' employed by Canning and Blake to suggest that the painting functions not as panegyric but as intense satire.

Canning's metaphor of Pitt as a 'Pilot' and Britain the vessel he navigates through the world engages not only with contemporary travel discourses but also with colonial narratives. The speaker employs emotive language that would likely have conjured, for example, the recent voyages of the *Resolution* and the *Bounty* – 'Rapine', 'Treason', 'perils', 'wreck', 'sinks', 'lost'. Such terms emphasise the anxieties surrounding these dangerous expeditions and, by extension, the world outside the domestic. This narrative is further explored through appeals to the unnamed terrors that one might find in far-flung lands – 'Terror', 'Doubt', 'evils', 'dangers', 'darkness', 'fears'. The horror evoked by this indistinct colonial gaze speaks to residual notions of the sublime, heightening the enjoyment of the poem by engaging in popular discourses of sensation. Yet this fear also creates a sensationalised Other against which the speaker's descriptions of Pitt find contraries – 'Virtue', 'humble', 'talents', 'uncorrupted', 'courage', 'constancy', 'firmness'. This construction of an imperial archetype might ostensibly be seen as the fawning of a devoted lieutenant to his political hero; however, Pitt himself was not in fact in attendance at the party and thus not the intended audience. Indeed, Canning composed the poem under the pseudonym 'Charles Sprout, Esq.' – presumably in an attempt to conceal that the work had originated from, in the words of the pamphleteer William Cobbett, 'the *fidus Achates* of

¹¹ William Blake, 'Jerusalem', 91: ll. 39-41, reprinted in Blake, William, and David V. Erdman. *The illuminated Blake: all of William Blake's illuminated works with a plate-by-plate commentary*. (Anchor, 1974)

¹² *Ibid.* l. 42.

¹³ For notable arguments along these lines, see Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 359 and Bo Lindberg, *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job* (Finland: Abo, 1973), pp. 300–11.

¹⁴ Paul Barlow, 'The Aryan Blake: Hinduism, Art and Revelation in William Blake's Pitt and Nelson paintings', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 12:3 (2011), 277–292.

the late state pilot'.¹⁵ It is likely, then, that Canning was attempting to foster a grassroots notion that, as he famously wrote to his friends in a succinct rhyming couplet: 'Pitt is to London | As Addington is to Paddington.'¹⁶ Thus, the prospects of Pitt's re-election are bolstered by the equation of Pitt with the metropole and Addington with (at the time) an unknown outer suburb.

In notable contrast, while Canning's 'Pilot' passively weathers the tempest of violent revolution and the anxieties of imperial collapse, Blake's Pitt is actively 'directing the storms'.¹⁷ The painting's composition is divided: Pitt, with his left hand, instructs 'the Plowman' (identified by Blake in *The Descriptive Catalogue*) to decimate a city in flames.¹⁸ Indeed, the fire appears to emanate from Pitt's finger.¹⁹ With his right hand, Pitt not only guides Behemoth but in fact holds a leash attached to the colossal biblical beast who, Blake informs his audience, is feasting on 'the Vines [bodies] of the Earth'.²⁰ At Pitt's right hand, 'the Reaper' employs the crescent moon as a sickle, to portion the flailing masses for the monster. These scenes do not speak of what Canning calls 'the dawning of peace' (30), they speak of *initiating* the very violence that imperial and colonial narratives might claim to suppress. Not only does this undermine the narrative of Britain's passive place as 'one kingdom preserv'd midst the wreck of the world', it also makes irony of the notion that the empire represents a moralising power.²¹ The whirlwind of *The Spiritual Form*, then, is not the storm that Canning's speaker discusses – that is, continental war – it is, rather, Pitt's storm, Britain's storm. This subversion finds an echo in Blake's radical contemporary, Thomas Paine:

When [Pitt] came to the helm, the storm was over, and he had nothing to interrupt his course. It required even ingenuity to be wrong, and he succeeded [...] he ransacked Europe and India for adventures and abandoning the fair pretensions he began with, he became the knight-errant of modern times.²²

This subversive narrative is extended by the city blazing across the painting's horizon, framed by the Plowman's great scythe. The scene has been identified by David

¹⁵ 'Faithful Achates', the name of the faithful companion of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*; William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*. Vol. 2. (London: Wm. Cobbett, 1802), p. 1033.

¹⁶ Quoted in Johnson and Harvey (2004), p. 12.

¹⁷ Blake (2008), p. 578–579.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ David Fallon has linked this to John Barrell and Jon Mee's study of the radical satires that proliferated from the 1780s onwards, depicting Pitt as a magician and illusionist. David Fallon, "'That Angel Who Rides on the Whirlwind': William Blake's Oriental Apotheosis of William Pitt." *Eighteenth-Century Life* 31.2 (2007): 1–28, p. 11; John Barrell, *Exhibition Extraordinary!!* (Nottingham: Trent editions, 2001); Jon Mee, 'The Magician No Conjuror: Robert Merry and the Political Alchemy of the 1790s.' *Unrespectable Radicals?* (London: Routledge, 2016), 41–56.

²⁰ Blake (2008), p. 579.

²¹ Canning, l. 16.

²² Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*. (Broadview Press, 2011), p. 97.

Fallon as Sodom aflame and the foregrounded figures as Lot and his two daughters making their escape (figure 2).²³

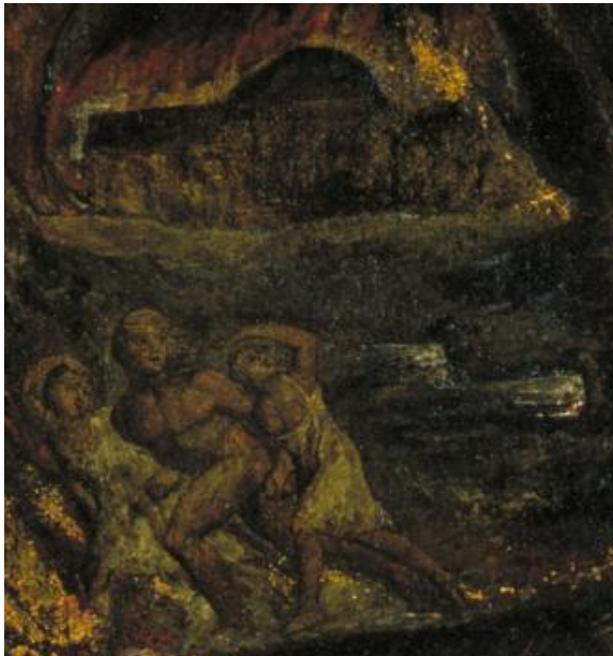


Figure 2. Detail of *Sodom and Lot and his daughters* from figure 1.

Again, many commentators have used this imagery to suggest that Pitt might 'be understood as an agent of divine cleansing' – a literal interpretation of the *Catalogue's* description of Pitt as 'that Angel who [is] pleased to perform the Almighty's orders'.²⁴ Blake's presentation, the argument might then run, is somewhat bizarre but still echoes much contemporary political verse that praised Pitt's

1784 India Act for its purported stymying of the much-debated corruption of British nabobs. The clergyman Thomas Gilbank Ackland, for example, held Pitt to be 'amidst corruption pure',²⁵ and one anonymous ode declared that Pitt 'stemm'd Corruption's rapid tide'.²⁶ Thus, as Genesis 18:20 tells of Sodom's righteous overthrow 'because their sin is very grievous', the argument might run, so Pitt suppresses corruption by introducing the effective control of the British government over the East India Company.²⁷ Again, however, this analysis neglects the subversive irony inherent in Blake's text and imagery. In this case, the destruction of Sodom had been discussed at some length in Emanuel Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia* (1756), an exposition of the meanings of *Genesis* and *Exodus*. Blake's interest in the Swedenborgian Church is well-documented and it is therefore likely that he had read the work.²⁸ 'That "Sodom" signifies the state of the human race as being in such great evil,' wrote Swedenborg, 'is because by "Sodom" is

²³ Fallon (2007), p. 20.

²⁴ Blake (2008), p. 578.

²⁵ 'On the Death of the Right Honourable William Pitt', in *Miscellaneous Poems* (London: G. Wilkie and J. Robinson, 1812), pp. 152–6.

²⁶ Anonymous. *Regular Ode; addressed to the Honourable William Pitt* (London: J. Robson, 1784).

²⁷ Genesis 18:20 KJV.

²⁸ See, for example, Harvey Bellin and Darrel Ruhl (eds.), *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is true Friendship* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1985), pp. 121–32.

not meant Sodom, but all those in the universal world who are in the love of self'.²⁹ Blake had already treated this kind of egocentric 'selfhood' to extensive criticism, describing the characteristic as a 'Satan' ('Jerusalem', c.1808: l. 52), 'altogether an Evil' (ibid.), 'which must be put off & annihilated away' ('Milton', 1804–10: l. 36). In this context, the iconography of Sodom, rather than conjuring imagery of righteous and divine cleansing, serves to foreground egotistical narratives that seek to set individuals above one another. Thus, the notion that Pitt is to be *deified* because he proports to quell narratives of *selfhood* emerges as intense irony, much as it is ironic that Pitt's India Act was praised for its moralising power yet led to intense colonial violence.

Swedenborg's *Arcana* goes on to state that 'such a [self-aggrandising] man, if exalted to the highest honours, seems to himself like Atlas carrying the terraqueous globe on his shoulders'.³⁰ Indeed, Lord Minto had referred to Pitt as 'the Atlas of our reeling globe'³¹ and the satirical *Criticisms on the Rolliad* (1784–85) had encouraged the reader to 'Behold the infant Atlas of the state'.³² One might suggest that the rather unique haloes clustered around Blake's Pitt exhibit more than a passing resemblance to Atlas's celestial spheres, which, of course, Atlas was forced to bear after attempting to overthrow the gods. Indeed, the celestial orbs containing seven figures circling around Pitt's head might conceivably be connected to Atlas's seven daughters, the Pleiades, who were catasterised (metamorphosed to stars) following the Titanomachy and spent their remaining days weeping for their father bound to the Earth – an archetype for divine sorrow at the plight of fallen man. Whether Blake is referencing Greek myth or not, the satirical treatment of Pitt's deification is evident. Thus, the kinds of discourses that permeate Canning's text, as well as other political propaganda, are subverted. The depiction of Pitt becomes a sardonic representation of how the imperial Self wishes to be viewed, set in an illusory space that, by its own nature, requires the viewer to segregate the composition. A jarring effect results when one attempts to connect the fragmented narratives.

This compartmentalised structure is used not only to satirise Blake's subject, but also to disrupt the very techniques one might employ to construct panegyrics. The classical effect of apotheosis, the painter Joshua Reynolds wrote in his *Discourses* (to which Blake published annotations in 1808), is achieved by distinguishing the central figure through position and chiaroscuro, thus drawing the viewer's eye.³³ At first, Blake might appear to adopt this technique – Pitt is central, golden against a darkened backdrop, and thus the gaze is initially drawn to him. However, on second approach,

²⁹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia: The Heavenly Arcana Contained in the Holy Scripture, Or Word of the Lord, Unfolded, Beginning with the Book of Genesis Together with Wonderful Things Seen in the World of Spiritis and in the Heaven of Angels*. (New York: Swedenborg Society, 1949), 2246.

³⁰ Ibid., 822.

³¹ Quoted in Briggs, Asa, *The Age of Improvement, 1783–1867* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 129.

³² Quoted in Johnson and Harvey, p. 24.

³³ John Barrell, *The political theory of painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: the body of the public*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 102–103.

the detail becomes apparent – Pitt is not lit by divine light emanating from himself or from heaven, as one might expect from conventional apotheoses; instead, he is surrounded by fire, emanating from the deep (figure 3).

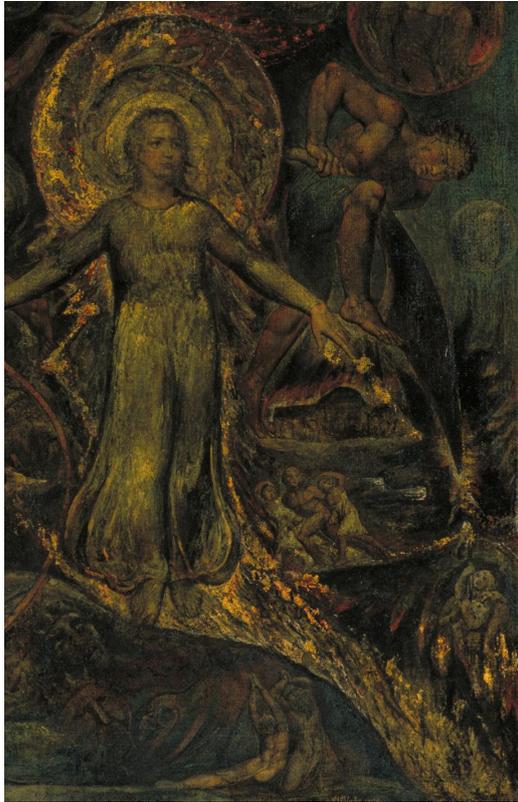


Figure 3. Detail of Pitt from figure 1.

The use of destructive flames to create a golden halo (and indeed the use of tempera and gold) becomes ironic when paralleled with Canning's assertion that Pitt is 'By Pow'r uncorrupted, untainted by Gold' (12). Pitt is not untainted by gold, the composition declares; he is literally composed of it. This golden river of fire curves over Behemoth's back, drawing the eye from Pitt downward, toward the scenes of violence beneath. The surrounding figures create a similar effect by directing their gaze away from Pitt (whereas Reynolds advocates that peripheral figures should look *toward* the central figure). Thus, the momentary 'apotheosis' immediately

collapses into the two scenes of catastrophic violence below; and where a political hero might usually be praised for his unifying power, Pitt serves only to split the canvas asunder. The notion that, as Canning's speaker holds, the masses 'unheeding, unthankful [...] bask in the blaze | While the beams of the sun in full majesty shine' (14–15) becomes intensely ironic, as the very flames (the political verse) that light the political hero above are those that torch the masses below.

From political verse, then, Blake borrows and subverts the imperial figure – not only in the obvious figure of Pitt, but also in Behemoth curled at his feet (and, indeed, Leviathan in *Nelson*). These mythical beasts have their origin in the *Book of Job* (illustrated by Blake at various points in his career). In the book, God questions whether Job is able to 'take [Leviathan] for a servant', whether he is able to 'put an hook into his nose', whether he can 'hook [...] his tongue with a cord which [Job] lettest down', implying that he cannot.³⁴ The gigantic Behemoth and Leviathan are used to illustrate the impotence of Job compared with the elemental forces that God alone is able to control.

³⁴ Job 41:1–3 KJV.

With Pitt contradicting God by clasping the leash of Behemoth, then, the narrative of the Fall enters Blake's composition and the imagery becomes a sardonic narrative of man setting himself above the divine. Indeed, Swedenborg's *True Christian Religion* equates the Fall with man becoming God in his own eyes and with those who 'earnestly seek to become saints after death'.³⁵ Not only does Pitt unleash forces that are not his to control, the painting implies, but he also uses them to terrible imperial and colonial effect. This self-aggrandisement, Swedenborg notes, is 'the serpent that deceived Eve and Adam [...] This evil dwells in the love of possessing the goods of all others, and in the love of exercising dominion.'³⁶ In a similar manner, and most notable given Blake's interests, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* compares Satan to Leviathan – so unfathomably massive that sailors mistake it for an island and fix their anchor to it.³⁷ Blake's wish, voiced in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, for Parliament to vote that he 'should decorate Westminster Hall with giants' (that is, the gigantic forms of Pitt and Nelson) becomes deeply sardonic given this association of Behemoth's gigantic form with imperial tyranny and corruption.³⁸ Moreover, the implication that Canning's 'Pilot' weathered the storm by fixing his anchor to Behemoth becomes forceful satire.

For obvious reasons, the use of apotheosis as an artistic or literary mode of representation was, in the eighteenth century, most commonly associated with funereal and posthumous ceremonies. Indeed, Blake's title emphasises this macabre association by asserting that the viewer is witnessing the 'Spiritual Form' of Pitt. This evocation of the supernatural, given the surrounding scenes of spectacular violence, the allusions to corruption and tyranny, and the employment of mythical monsters, emerges as a nascent form of what one might call the Gothic. This evocation of Gothic otherness combines with the painting's allusions to Hindu iconography (recently identified by Paul Barlow³⁹) to create a static 'defamiliarisation' – distancing the spectator and preventing emotional identification with Pitt by reproducing his condition as unassailably strange. The separation of the narrative structures in the painting (the three discrete scenes) is emphasised by this otherness, highlighting the absurdity of a political figure divorced from the policies he enacts.

This use of the Gothic to undermine Pitt's supposed deification is also likely to have combined with the audience's existing understanding of the genre of apotheosis. By the early nineteenth century, artistic apotheoses had become both secularised and rather hackneyed through overuse in the *fin de siècle*. Works such as George Carter's *The Apotheosis of Garrick* (1782), Henry Fuselli's *The Apotheosis of Penelope Boothby* (1796), and Phillippe Jacques de Louthembourg's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1794) aimed at the sublime, yet enjoyed a reception that derided the genre as tawdry. In a similar manner,

³⁵ Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion* [1771], tr. by John C. Ager, (Verlag: Jazzybee, 1906), p. 454.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Milton, John. *Paradise lost*. (London: Hackett Publishing, 2005), ll. 192–209.

³⁸ Blake (2008), p. 578.

³⁹ Barlow, 277–292.

many volumes of formal odes were penned to Pitt, ostensibly aimed at the construction of eternal literary fame for the author; yet, again, the meaning came to dissolve through the burden of overuse, and few of the odes, if any, were remembered. As such, for a contemporary audience these artistic deifications (of both subject and author) are not only made strange by macabre association, they verge on the satirical.

This notion of false apotheosis is heavily alluded to in *The Descriptive Catalogue*. Blake compares these ‘modern heroes’ (Pitt, Nelson, Napoleon) to ‘the Cherubim, which were painted on walls of Temples [...] in [...] Egypt, Moab, Edom, Aram, among the Rivers of Paradise’, yet goes on to state that ‘when erected into gods, [the Cherubim] becomes destructive of humanity’.⁴⁰ The *Catalogue*’s subsequent discussion of King Priam and the fall of Troy has been interpreted by Edward Larrissy in much the same manner – a Fall narrative, which consists of a descent from misconceiving the Cherubim as Gods.⁴¹ These interpretations find an echo in a letter from Blake to William Hayley (28 May 1804), in which he thanked Hayley for books, including John Marshall’s *Life of George Washington* (1804):

[...] as the French now adore Buonaparte and the English our poor George; so the Americans will consider Washington as their god. This is only Grecian, or rather Trojan, worship, and perhaps will be revised in an age or two.⁴²

The references to fallen angels and false (possibly orientalist, given the reference to Troy) apotheoses would appear to dispute any notion that Blake is genuine in his description of Pitt as an ‘Angel’. Indeed, Blake’s irony finds a notable echo in the earlier *Mustapha’s Adoration of the Sublime Sultan Pittander Omnipotent: Part II* (1795), in which Pitt is likened to a destroying angel.⁴³ Similarly, Blake had already used this imagery of a divisive ‘angel’ in *America, A Prophecy* (1793). The epic poem has George III with ‘Fury! rage! madness!’ (167) seeking to divide the colonies ‘with diseases of the earth’ (156). Yet the very acts of violence that would contain America return to smite England’s ‘Angels’:

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 Angels⁴⁴

Thus, the purported moralising and subduing force of the destroying ‘angel’, instead of bringing peace, serves only to intensify the violence.

⁴⁰ Blake (2008), p. 530–1.

⁴¹ Edward Larrissy, ‘Blake’s Orient.’ *Romanticism* 11.1 (2005): 1–13 (p. 6).

⁴² William Blake and Frederick Tatham. *The Letters of William Blake: Together with a Life*. Vol. 1. (Methuen, 1906), p. 156.

⁴³ *Mustapha’s Adoration of the Sublime Sultan Pittander Omnipotent: Part II* (London: G. Ribeau, 1795), reprinted in Barrell, *Exhibition*, p. 24.

⁴⁴ William Blake, *America, A Prophecy*, ll. 176–8, reprinted in William Blake and David V. Erdman. *The illuminated Blake: all of William Blake’s illuminated works with a plate-by-plate commentary*. (London: Anchor, 1974) p. 152–3.

Whether or not Blake's painting was a direct response to Canning's 'Pilot', this article has shown that *The Spiritual Form* borrows the moralistic imperial figure – and the authorial voice with which it is constructed – from such texts and distorts it to satire. The apotheosis of Pitt becomes a critical representation of the imperial Self, recast in the illusory space fashioned by political and literary narratives. Moreover, the sublime fear of the colonial Other, employed by Canning, is destabilised through appeals to nascent Gothic modes, subverting the affective discourse to conjure a horrifying vision of imperial and colonial violence. Given Paul Barlow's recent identification of the painting's references to the Orient, together with the allusions to imperial tyranny and corruption identified in this article, it is plausible to link this violence to the policies of the Pitt government in India. Thus, the work might be connected to critiques of empire that might conceivably be linked to Edmund Burke or the English Jacobins. The praise that much Georgian political verse afforded to Pitt's India Act and, in Canning's words, the 'Virtue' of the policy's proponents is undermined by these allusions to the violence engendered by increasing political encroachment into the Indian subcontinent. As Blake furiously annotated in the margins of Francis Bacon's essay 'Of Envy', 'What do these Knaves mean by Virtue. Do they mean War & its horrors & its Heroic Villains'.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Blake (2008), p. 623.

APPENDIX

The Pilot that Weathered the Storm

If hush'd the loud whirlwind that ruffled the deep,
The sky, if no longer dark tempests deform;
When our perils are past, shall our gratitude sleep?
No! Here's to the Pilot that weather'd the storm!

At the footstool of Power let flattery fawn,
Let faction her idols extol to the skies;
To Virtue, in humble retirement withdrawn,
Unblam'd may the merits of gratitude rise.

And shall not his memory to Britain be dear,
Whose example with envy all nations behold;
A Statesman unbias'd by int'rest or fear,
By pow'r uncorrupted, untainted by gold?

Who, when terror and doubt through the universe reigned,
While rapine and treason their standards unfurl'd,
The heart and the hopes of his country maintained,
And one kingdom preserv'd midst the wreck of the world.

Unheeding, unthankful, we bask in the blaze,
While the beams of the sun in full majesty shine;
When he sinks into twilight, with fondness we gaze,
And mark the mild lustre that gilds his decline.

Lo! Pitt, when the course of thy greatness is o'er,
Thy talents, thy virtues, we fondly recall!
Now justly we prize thee, when lost we deplore;
Admir'd in thy zenith, but lov'd in thy fall.

Oh! take then - for dangers by wisdom repelled,
For evils, by courage and constancy brav'd-
Oh take! for a throne by thy counsels upheld,
The thanks of a people thy firmness has sav'd.

And oh! if again the rude whirlwind should rise!
The dawning of peace should fresh darkness deform,
The regrets of the good, and the fears of the wise,
Shall turn to the Pilot that weather'd the storm.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ George Canning, 'The Pilot that Weathered the Storm' cited in *Letter to J. H. Frere*, held in the British Library, add. MS. 38833, f.114.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 2: *The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth*, William Blake (c.1805), Tempera and gold on canvas, 740 × 627, held by the Tate gallery, N01110

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