BLAKE'S PUBLIC ADDRESSES

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Abstract: Blake never delivered a public speech but he produced several written addresses "To the Public." These include his prospectus of 1793 listing for sale his "illuminated books;" the advertising material he created for his 1809 exhibition and his engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims; and his unpublished "Public Address" (c.1810), which expands his Chaucer prospectuses into an artistic mission statement. This article explains how prospectus-writing taught Blake the language of proclamation that became a key part of his creative repertoire. This shaped not only his promotional writings but also literary works like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Jerusalem*, discussed briefly here. The article ends by suggesting that Blake's transformation of this now largely forgotten genre mirrors that of other Romantic writers, notably Wordsworth, whose "Prospectus" to *The Recluse* Blake copied out by hand. His development of the "public address" element of the prospectus is also a powerful example of the revaluation of public utterance which this special issue explores.

Keywords: William Blake, public, prospectus, proclamation, exhibition, subscription, advertising, engraving, printing

> The times require that every one should speak out boldly
> William Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue* (1809)

As far as we know, Blake never delivered a public lecture or speech, but as a self-published poet, engraver and artist he had frequent occasion to address the public in writing, in order to promote, explain or defend his work.[1] A notable feature of his creative personality, indeed, is his tendency to address the public even in the most seemingly private of his writings, such as his personal correspondence

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(which often reaches out beyond the addressee to the public at large) or his marginalia, where his combative annotation is typically directed at both the author he is reading and an imagined public. His literary work, too, is intensely dialogic, oriented to a public audience he imagines himself addressing aloud (as "The Voice of the Bard," "The Voice of the Devil," or some other strongly vocal persona). Many commentators have noted the paradox that this most publicly-oriented of authors – in whom the renascence of orality and public utterance explored in this special issue took multiple forms – was virtually unknown as a writer in his lifetime, gaining only a tiny readership. As a commercial engraver and book illustrator he enjoyed greater public recognition, but this success was temporary and the fading of it after 1805 created severe complications in his relationship to the public, whom he never stopped addressing – or imagining himself addressing – but in increasingly fraught and, at times, desperate ways.

This article will examine an aspect of this topic which has not, thus far, received proper attention, namely Blake's use of one particular form of written public address: the prospectus. This genre, associated with his literary and artistic work and with his activities as a printer, makes visible his commercial motivations while also giving insight into his creative ambitions and working practices at different stages in his career. His first and best-known prospectus is the one he wrote and printed himself in 1793 to advertise several of his "Illuminated Books" and other self-published works. Many years later, in 1809-1810, he issued prospectuses for his large engraving of his painting of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims. Two versions of this prospectus survive, printed by different printers and with different wording; there is also a manuscript draft. Another, much longer, description of the Chaucer painting, together with a brief announcement of the subscription for the engraving, is contained in his *Descriptive Catalogue* for the 1809 exhibition at which the painting was first exhibited. The fact that Blake devotes several pages of this description to a point-by-point rebuttal of a "rival's prospectus"[2] – Robert Cromek's, for an engraving of Thomas Stothard's painting of the same subject – is a further reason for including the *Descriptive Catalogue* among the corpus of Blake's prospectuses (its polemical quality is part of its public engagement, even if the quarrel with Cromek was a largely personal one). The same may be said of Blake's printed advertisement for the exhibition, in which he exhorts the "Noblemen and Gentlemen" of the art establishment, and the public at large, to support his work, announcing the exhibition as "the greatest of Duties to my Country" (K 561). The inclusion on the first page of the advertisement of the

[2] *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 573. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses as K followed by a page number.

Miltonic motto "*Fit audience find tho' few*" underlines the epic scale of his ambition while also suggesting that he did not anticipate a huge public response – a prediction which turned out to be all too accurate.

I include as a final example of the genre, though an untypical and textually problematic one, Blake's so-called "Public Adress," an unfinished, unpublished text (found in Blake's manuscript Notebook) which appears to be another reworking of his Canterbury Pilgrims prospectus, though it also addresses the short-lived Chalcographic Society, offering a counter-statement to its controversial plans for promoting the art of engraving in Britain. The shifting audience to whom this inchoate text is addressed, and the personal invective with which the public argument is interspersed, are part of what makes it problematic, but these features also show why the genre of the prospectus was such a fertile medium for Blake, eliciting deep reflection on his artistic motivations and beliefs as well as vehement comment on his competitors and critics.

In tracing Blake's various deployments and adaptations of the prospectus, my interest is in the expressive possibilities of the genre as much as its advertising function: its tendency (very marked in Blake's case, as in certain other Romantic writers) to spill over from commercial discourse into autobiographical and creative writing, and to become a form of artistic manifesto or mission statement. It is partly through writing prospectuses, I will argue, that Blake learned the language of proclamation (that is, of public announcement on matters of great import) which is so distinctive and powerful a feature of his style, evident not only in promotional writings but also in visionary works such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Jerusalem*, on which I will touch briefly. I begin, though, by explaining what a prospectus was, and in what forms Blake would have encountered this versatile and widely used device.

I

Although now mostly forgotten, prospectuses were a very familiar part of the Romantic book world, produced in large numbers and used to advertise a wide range of subscription projects, from expensive illustrated books, premium editions and encyclopaedias to privately published volumes of poetry.[3] Engravings, too, were frequently sold by subscription, the terms of which would be announced in

[3] For an overview, see David Duff, "The Book to Come: Literary Advertising and the Poetics of the Prospectus," in *Forms, Formats and the Circulation of Knowledge: British Printscape's Innovations, 1688-1832*, ed. Louisiane Ferlier and Bénédicte Miyamoto (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 229-52.

a printed prospectus (or "proposals to publish," the older term). New journals and newspapers, which proliferated in the late eighteenth century, would also typically announce themselves by means of a prospectus, seeking subscribers or simply advertising their presence. Other common uses for prospectuses were for public lectures and lecture series, for new cultural institutions such as the picture galleries of the 1780s and 90s (most of which were linked to large-scale publishing projects, each with its own advertising campaign, of which prospectuses were part), and for the fashionable lecturing institutions that sprung up in London and other cities after the founding of the Royal Institution in 1799. In the increasingly competitive cultural marketplace, every new artistic association or educational establishment would issue its own prospectus, to define its aims, explain its financial and other arrangements and attract subscribers. Some of these had a very wide circulation, even if few copies survive today.

Serving such a variety of purposes, prospectuses took many forms and could range from a single printed page to four, eight, twelve or more pages, written by the author, proprietor or publisher, or a combination of these. Whichever "voice" was speaking, public address was at the heart of the genre, and, along with numbered "Conditions" of sale, a narrative section entitled "To the Public" was a common feature. Here the author or publisher would explain the rationale for publication, draw attention to the merits of the projected work and compare it favourably to competitors. In the case of a cultural institution or educational establishment, the address to the public would become a mission statement, explaining why the institution mattered and what it could offer to subscribers.

A typical example of a prospectus – and one that probably passed through Blake's hands – is that of the *New-Jerusalem Magazine*, launched in January 1790 by the London Universal Society, a splinter group of the Swedenborgian "New Church" with which Blake was briefly involved.[4] Written in the third person by "a Society of Gentlemen" (a conventional formula found on many prospectuses), this opens with an address "To the Public" which explains the "Motive and Design" of the magazine, highlighting its unique features (including the printing of extracts from previously untranslated work by Swedenborg) and appealing for "public Encouragement" of the venture.[5] Like other publication announcements, the prospectus emphasizes the material qualities of the magazine (to be "Elegantly

[4] For Blake's Swedenborgian connections and probable knowledge of the *New-Jerusalem Magazine*, see Robert Rix, *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007); and Leslie Chambers, "The Swedenborgian Influence on William Blake" (PhD diss., The Open University, 1995), 86-92.

[5] *Proposals for Publishing on the First of January […] The New-Jerusalem Magazine; or, A Treasury of Celestial, Spiritual, and Natural, Knowledge. By a Society of Gentlemen, Members of the New Church* (London, 1789), 1-2. British Library copy.

printed on superfine Paper") as well as its intellectual value, and goes on to proclaim the historical significance of the publication by referring to the "very important Revolutions now taking Place in the World." These, it says, are evidence that the "great Events" prophesied in the sacred scriptures (i.e., the Book of Revelation, the seminal text of the Swedenborgian movement) "are absolutely fulfilling at the present Period." Although the tone is restrained compared with more "enthusiastic" millenarian writing of the time, the implication is that the new publication will capture these apocalyptic energies and connect the Swedenborgian struggle for "*Spiritual Liberty*" with the fight for "*Natural Liberty*" in the sphere of politics.[6] In this context, the announcement of the new journal became itself a prescient "event."

The manifesto-like quality of a periodical prospectus like this, with its intermingling of commercial and political discourse, its sense of historical urgency and its fusion of advertising hype with other grandiose language, is typical of the 1790s, and such documents undoubtedly helped to shape Blake's perception of what a prospectus should or could be.[7] Blake, though, would also have been familiar with other kinds of prospectus, as a professional engraver and book illustrator working for a range of prominent publishers who made use of this marketing device. Several prospectuses from the 1790s feature Blake's name in their list of engravers for an illustrated book or series. These include two of the most ambitious publishing projects of the time (both linked to specially created picture galleries), Robert Bowyer's folio edition of Hume's *History of England*, advertised from 1792 and eventually published in 1806, and Joseph Johnson's projected quarto edition of Milton's *Poetical Works*, with engravings after Henry Fuseli, a prospectus for which was issued in 1791. In the event, Blake produced engravings for neither, as the Milton edition was abandoned due to lack of subscribers and Blake was dropped from the Hume project before receiving any commissions (a source of lasting resentment against Bowyer). A third large-scale subscription project, for Richard Edwards's illustrated edition of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (announced in a prospectus of 1797[8]), saw Blake engaged as both designer and engraver, but this venture too ran into financial problems, and of over five hundred water colours Blake painted for it, only forty-three were engraved and the edition folded after just one of the four volumes had been published.[9]

6 *Proposals for Publishing*, 1-2.

7 For other prospectuses of this kind, see David Duff, "The Prospectus War of the 1790s: Literary Advertising in an Age of Revolution," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 44, no. 2 (2020): 41-75.

8 Reproduced in G.E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 78-79.

9 See Luisa Calè, "Blake and the Literary Galleries," in *Blake and Conflict*, ed. Sarah Haggarty and Jon Mee (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 185-209.

Though these disappointments left deep scars, Blake's involvement with such high-profile publishing projects must have taught him much about the power of advertising, including the central place of the prospectus in its repertoire of genres. The Hume edition, in particular, was extensively advertised over several years, and the many versions of Bowyer's prospectus include one dated May 1793 which lists Blake's name and is explicitly addressed "To the Public."[10] The 35-page "Descriptive Catalogue" Bowyer issued the same year, which describes the paintings and drawings on show in the Historic Gallery in Pall Mall, with Blake again listed as one of the prospective engravers,[11] may well have served as a model for Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809. Both unite the functions of *catalogue raisonné* and sales brochure and appeal for public encouragement of an enterprise designed to, in Bowyer's words, "combine the effects of the Arts with that of Historic Eloquence,"[12] or poetic eloquence in Blake's case (not Hume, but Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, the authors from whom many of his subjects are taken).

Blake meanwhile had been pursuing a more complete synthesis of visual art and verbal eloquence in his "Illuminated Books," and 1793 was also the year in which he issued a prospectus advertising six of these for sale along with two "small books of Engravings" and two separate "Historical Engravings" (K 207-8). No copy of this prospectus survives and we know nothing about its print run or circulation, but a transcription of a now lost copy appeared in Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (1863). This reveals that it was a single-sheet flyer containing an introductory address labelled "To the Public" followed by a numbered list of works, with titles, formats and prices. Invaluable though it is as a source of information about Blake's outputs and publishing operation, the transcription bears little resemblance to the original prospectus, which, as Gilchrist notes, was printed (in blue ink) in "engraved writing," like the illuminated books themselves.[13] It was thus a sample of the wares it was advertising, like many other prospectuses of the time (prospectuses were frequently printed on the same paper and in the same format and typeface as the work they advertised, and sometimes contained specimen pages). The difference was that in Blake's case the printed lettering was crafted by hand rather than by conventional typography – this being one of the technical innovations which the prospectus announces.

10 Cited in Bentley, *Blake Records*, 62.

11 Robert Bowyer, *Historic Gallery, Pall Mall. Exhibition of Pictures Painted for Bowyer's Magnificent Edition of the History of England … Descriptive Catalogues, 6d. each* (London, 1795), 25.

12 Bowyer, *Historic Gallery*, 23.

13 Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus." With Selections from his Poems and Other Writings*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1863), 262-63. Gilchrist notes that it was "printed in blue on a single sheet about 11 x 7 1/2 inches," i.e., approximately quarto size.

Blake's differs, too, from a regular prospectus in that he is not seeking subscriptions, but rather advertising works he has already published or that are to be offered for sale at a later point. The prospectus does, however, have other standard features, including information about book formats, number of illustrations, prices and place of sale (Blake's studio residence in Lambeth). The address "To the Public" is another standard feature, written in the third person but clearly in Blake's own voice, as author, engraver, printer and distributor. That unique combination of roles underpins the first of the striking claims Blake makes in his prospectus: that his method of working has given him total artistic independence and made possible a new, direct relationship with "the Public" (a word capitalized throughout and used repeatedly), unmediated by a conventional publisher.

As so often in prospectuses, there is a competitive edge to this claim. In remarking that even men of genius like Shakespeare and Milton "could not publish their own works" (K 207), he alludes to contemporary editorial projects such as Boydell's Shakespeare and Johnson's Milton, implying that publishers are the exploiters of other men's talents and that the "Labours of the Artist, the Poet, the Musician, have been proverbially attended by poverty and obscurity" (K 207) not because the public neglect them (the usual charge) but because they lack the means of reaching the public without the aid of middlemen. Blake, by contrast, is publishing his work himself. He has no need of picture galleries and booksellers because his "illuminated books" contain their own illustrations, designed and executed by himself. The list of works he advertises for sale confirms his status as an independent publisher offering original, inexpensive alternatives to the grand publishing schemes of Boydell, Bowyer and Macklin: instead of a deluxe edition of Hume, there is his own "History of England, a small book of Engravings. Price 3*s*." (K 208); and, for a different kind of history, "America, a Prophecy, in Illuminated Printing. Folio, with 18 designs: price 10*s*. 6*d*." (K 207) Blake's insistence that he is not seeking subscriptions for these "great works now in hand" (K 208) is another competitive signal, differentiating his book-selling methods from those of regular publishers of illustrated books.

It is, though, Blake's new method of "Illuminated Printing" that is the central theme of the prospectus and the one on which most commentary has focused: his invention of an etching and printing technique that allows him to combine letterpress and engraving in a single printed design, and thereby produce illustrated books "in a style more ornamental, uniform, and grand, than any before discovered," and "at less than on fourth of the expense" (K 207). Blake's vocabulary here is standard prospectus-speak: "ornamental," "uniform," and "grand" are clichés of the book trade, as is his boast to have exceeded "in elegance all former methods" and to have undersold his competitors. But his printing technique

was a genuine innovation which can justly claim to be "a phenomenon worthy of public attention" (K 207). Announcing his discovery, commercial hype yields to the heightened language of artistic ambition as – finally naming himself – he proclaims "Mr. Blake's powers of invention" and his record in bringing before the public "works (he is not afraid to say) of equal magnitude and consequence with the productions of any age or country" (K 207). The disarming parenthesis underlines the earnestness of his proud claim.

Blake's 1793 prospectus, then, is both an advertisement and a manifesto: a public address which requisitions and then moves beyond marketing clichés to announce a major technical discovery and a startlingly original body of creative work. Whether or not the date that appears at the top of the prospectus, "*October* 10, 1793," has the precise political significance attributed to it by Michael Phillips,[14] who reads it as a counter-statement to a printed address from a "Society of Loyal Britons" launched that same day in the vicinity of Blake's home, the polemical quality of his announcement is unmistakeable. However many or few people actually saw it, the prospectus is a bold intervention in the literary and artistic marketplace and the confident self-assertion of a revolutionary artist at the height of his powers.

II

Blake's 1793 prospectus can be contrasted with the promotional documents he produced in 1809-1810 for his engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims. The interval is a long one, and if he produced any prospectuses in between (as is quite possible) they have not survived. His work had featured, however, in prospectuses issued in 1805 by Robert Cromek for an illustrated edition of Robert Blair's *The Grave*. This project was to have been a highlight of Blake's career, since Cromek, an engraver and entrepreneur, had offered Blake a lucrative commission to produce both the designs and the engravings for the deluxe edition. Cromek's first prospectus, published in November 1805, features Blake in both capacities and includes a testimonial from Henry Fuseli praising the quality of his designs. Within a matter of weeks, however, Cromek had changed his mind – possibly after seeing Blake's specimen engraving of *Death's Door* – and replaced Blake with another, more conventional and better-known engraver, Louis Schiavonetti.[15]

[14] Michael Phillips, "Flames in the Night Sky: Blake, Paine and the Meeting of the Society of Loyal Britons, October 10th, 1793," *Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* 44 (1997): 93-110.

[15] Both prospectuses are reproduced in Bentley, *Blake Records*, 210-15.

Cromek reissued the prospectus, substituting Schiavonetti's name for Blake's as the engraver. Since the engravings were by far the most lucrative part of the commission, this was a crushing blow to Blake, not only financially but also in terms of his reputation. As Bentley notes, "he lost the opportunity to appear before a really large contemporary audience in his most characteristic way, combining his two primary arts of designing and engraving."[16] The designs were still his and his name still appears on the amended prospectus (beneath Schiavonetti's) but the reputational damage was done, and there was worse to come when the edition was finally published in 1808. The reviews uniformly praised Schiavonetti's work rather than Blake's, and the designs were widely criticized, the most damning comments being those of Robert Hunt in the *Examiner* (7 April 1808).[17]

This painful episode – first the betrayal (as Blake saw it) by Cromek and then the hostile reviews – proved to be a turning point in Blake's career. Instead of securing his reputation, the *Grave* project compounded the disappointments of his commercial publishing ventures of the 1790s and alienated him further from the artistic establishment and reviewing community. The experience also set the terms of his next attempt at public engagement and his next involvement in subscription publishing and advertising. The occasion for this was his solo exhibition of 1809 and the subscription for his engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims. These two ventures were closely linked. Blake had completed the large, frieze-like painting on which the engraving was based in 1808 and it was the centrepiece of his exhibition the following year, which was intended to sell his paintings and drawings and attract subscriptions for the engraving (following essentially the model of the literary picture galleries of Boydell and Bowyer). The importance of the Chaucer picture can be judged from Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue*, which devotes nearly half of its 66 pages[18] to this work (whose full title was *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury*; K 566), and which carries a note under the "Conditions of Sale" stating that although this picture, like all the others, was for sale, the purchaser would have to allow Blake to keep it for twelve months after the exhibition closed, to allow him time to engrave it (K 563).

16 G.E. Bentley, Jr., "A Unique Prospectus for Blake's *Grave* Designs," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 35, no. 3 (1974): 323.

17 A full account of this episode is given in G.E. Bentley, Jr., "Blake and Cromek: The Wheat and the Tares," *Modern Philology* 71, no. 4 (1974): 366-79. Hunt's review is reproduced in Bentley, *Blake Records*, 258-61.

18 Page count in the original printing. A digital facsimile can be found on The William Blake Archive, https://www.blakearchive.org/.

The exhibition was advertised through printed notices like the one quoted earlier, with the Canterbury Pilgrims foregrounded along with another very large picture, now lost, *The Ancient Britons*. The engraving of the Canterbury Pilgrims was advertised at the same time, in a separate prospectus dated 15 May 1809. This is a formal call for subscriptions, to be received at No. 28 Broad Street, Golden Square, the venue of the exhibition, price 4 guineas (later dropped to 3 guineas). Blake took great pains over this prospectus, producing at least two other versions of it, one of which can be found in manuscript in Blake's Notebook, alongside the "Public Address." All three versions address the public but take a different tack in each case. In the first, Blake invokes the Continental tradition of copperplate engraving with which he aligns himself, and emphasises the importance of his being the engraver of his own painting, since "no other Artist can reach the original Spirit so well as the Painter himself" (K 586). In making this point, Blake refers in parenthesis to the "artfully disseminated insinuations to the contrary" (K 586), an allusion to the episode with Cromek four years earlier. The self-hosting of the exhibition and the arrangements for the Canterbury Pilgrims print, which he was to design, engrave and sell himself, were an attempt to reclaim control over his artistic production and put into practice the precept he had articulated so forcefully in his prospectus of 1793.

One factor, though, complicated his plans. This was that Blake was in competition with another engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims which was being advertised at exactly the same time. In 1807 Cromek had commissioned another artist, Thomas Stothard, to paint a similar frieze-like picture of *The Pilgrimage to Canterbury* (according to Blake, having first seen a sketch of his own picture and not liked it). Cromek had then commissioned an engraving of Stothard's painting (initially from William Bromley, then later from Schiavonetti), to be published, like Blake's, by subscription. Cromek issued a four-page prospectus for this engraving in 1807 and arranged for the original painting to be exhibited at his home in London (and later elsewhere).[19] He appended a second version of his prospectus, naming Schiavonetti as the engraver, to his edition of Blair's *The Grave*, which must have been especially galling for Blake because it made his usurpation by Schiavonetti even more visible and underlined his betrayal by Cromek.

Blake's insistence that the idea for a freeze-like painting and engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims was his and that Cromek had stolen the idea from him has not been upheld by recent scholars, who suggest the order of priority was

[19] For Cromek's extensive advertising campaign, see Dennis M. Read, "The Rival 'Canterbury Pilgrims' of Blake and Cromek: Herculean Figures in the Carpet," *Modern Philology* 86, no. 2 (1988): 171-90.

probably different.[20] Whatever the exact sequence of events, the fact is that there were two engravings of the Canterbury Pilgrims on offer to the public in 1809, which meant that Blake's advertising campaign and exhibition were undertaken in circumstances of intense commercial, artistic and personal rivalry. This fraught situation explains the stridently competitive tenor of Blake's prospectus, where he appeals to the public to, in effect, take his side and find his version of the Canterbury Pilgrims to be superior. His insistence that the engraver should also be the painter is a sideswipe at Cromek's split arrangement, and even his oddly emphatic claim that his own engraving would be finished in one year and no longer ("No Work of Art, can take longer than a Year; … The Value of this Artist's Year is the Criterion of Society;" K 587) covertly alludes to his competitor, as Cromek had been taking subscriptions since 1807 and the engraving had still not been completed (in the event, Schiavonetti and Cromek both died before the work was finished and the engraving was not completed until 1817).

The competition with Stothard and Cromek explains, too, the polemical tenor of Blake's long description of his painting in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, several pages of which consist of a point-by-point critique, at times deeply sarcastic and mocking, of "my rival's prospectus" (K 573). Blake clearly had Cromek's prospectus open before him as he wrote, and the citations confirm that the version he was reading was the one appended to Blair's *The Grave*. The word "prospectus" is repeated no fewer than eight times, as if Cromek's glib advertising copy and ignorant comments about Chaucer embodied all that Blake detested about the commercial exploitation of art and literature.

Of the Stothard painting itself, he is similarly dismissive, declaring: "All is misconceived, and its mis-execution is equal to its misconception" (K 575). Lumping together all his rivals and critics, he concludes:

> I have been scorned long enough by these fellows, who owe to me all that they have; it shall be no longer.
>
> "I found them blind, I taught them how to see;
> "And, now, they know me not, nor yet themselves."
>
> (K 575)

The note of personal betrayal here is unmistakable but it is characteristic of Blake that his wounded feelings and anger produce not only ranting but also sharp, thought-provoking satire, this fine satirical epigram being one of many he wrote at this time.

[20] See Read, "The Rival 'Canterbury Pilgrims;'" and Aileen Ward, "Canterbury Revisited: The Blake-Cromek Controversy," *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1988-89): 80-92.

In quarrelling with Cromek, and mounting and advertising his exhibition, Blake appealed to the public to be his judge. This is explicit in his Canterbury Pilgrims prospectus, the first version of which has the words "*As it is now submitted to the Public*" beneath the title of the picture (K 586). This is a conventional locution but Blake gives it emphasis by placing it in italics and referring repeatedly to the Public (capitalized) as his arbiter. In his *Descriptive Catalogue* his appeal for public endorsement is even more explicit. On the title page, the pictures and drawings are presented "*FOR PUBLIC INSPECTION*" (K 563). In the "Preface," he writes: "Mr. B. appeals to the Public, from the judgment of those narrow blinking eyes, that have too long governed art in a dark corner" (K 563), using the same metaphors of seeing and unseeing, hiddenness and openness, that he so often turns to on his topic. In the description of the Canterbury Pilgrims picture, he talks of the "duty which Mr. B. owes to the Public, who have always recognized him, and patronized him, however hidden by artifices" (K 573) – the artifices being those of his competitors and critics, who had prevented him reaching his true audience. His faith in the judgment of the public seems total.

III

Unfortunately, the response of the public on this occasion was not what Blake had hoped for. Few people came to his exhibition (possibly as few as twenty, whereas 3 000 paid to view Stothard's painting), and he sold only seven or eight subscriptions to his Chaucer engraving (compared with 700 for Cromek's).[21] The exhibition received only one review, by Robert Hunt, who denounced Blake's art as that of "an unfortunate lunatic" and called the *Descriptive Catalogue* "a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibleness, and egregious vanity."[22] This vicious judgment in the high-profile *Examiner* did further damage to Blake's reputation, and the commercial failure of his exhibition and subscription took a toll on his mental health.

Blake's "Public Address" is his response to these disappointments: a reply to his critics, a counter-attack on his enemies, and a fresh appeal for public recognition. The work is textually problematic and was left unfinished and unpublished. It survives only as a set of scattered fragments in Blake's Notebook, written in around 1810, which were assembled by Dante Gabriel Rossetti for Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* and reworked by modern editors like Keynes, Erdman and

21 For the reception of the exhibition, see Troy Patenaude, "'The Glory of a Nation': Recovering William Blake's 1809 Exhibition," *British Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (2003): 52-63; and Martin Myrone and David Blayney Brown, "William Blake's 1809 Exhibition," *Tate Papers* 14 (Autumn 2010), accessed 20 January 2025, www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/14.

22 Bentley, *Blake Records*, 283.

Bentley. In Erdman's version, it contains some 5 700 words pulled together from discontinuous pages of the Notebook. Other editors present shorter or longer versions and assemble some of the material in a different order. The subject matter ranges widely, as do the tone and style, but what unites the fragments, and justifies the editorial assemblage of them, is that the discussion keeps coming back to Blake's engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims and to the painting on which it was based. In this respect, it can be read as another reworking of Blake's 1809 prospectus, and the two fragments that most editors place first (which originate on different pages of the Notebook[23]) tend to confirm this, one of them reading "Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims / Being a Complete Index of Human Characters / as they appear Age after Age," and the other "This Day is Publish'd Advertizements to Blake's Canterbury Pilgrims from Chaucer, Containing Anecdotes of Artists. Price 6^{d}" (K 591).

There is, though, a problem here, as the two fragments, one a straightforward title, the other a publishing announcement, do not exactly match and it is not clear what is being offered for sale: not the engraving itself, but some kind of commentary on it, or advertisement for it (making this an advertisement for an advertisement, so to speak). The confusion of text and epitext, and of different types of epitext, is not the only problematic feature. Gilchrist's shorthand title "Public Address" is retained by almost all editors, but it is not Blake's intended title, being simply a phrase taken from a statement in the Notebook that summarises his mixed motives for writing this work:

> Resentment for Personal Injuries has had some share in this Public Address,
> But Love to My Art & Zeal for my Country a much Greater.
>
> (K 594)

The disarming honesty of the statement and the admirable ordering of priorities are presumably what recommend this as a shorthand title, even if it is an editorial construction.

Further inspection of the manuscript reveals a more specific target for at least part of Blake's "Public Adress," namely the Chalcographic Society, a body founded in 1802 to represent the professional interests of engravers and to raise the status of engraving as an art form. This was a cause close to Blake's heart, and the parts of the text that explicitly address the Chalcographic Society, discussing its proposals for reform and offering his own views, are undoubtedly central to his

23 See William Blake, *The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile*, ed. David V. Erdman, revised edition (New York: Readex Books, 1977), N65, N56.

message.[24] Blake engages, too, with the arguments put forward by other bodies such as the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom (founded in 1805), the Society for the Encouragement of the Art of Engraving (1810) and the British School Instituted for the Perpetual Exhibition and Sale of the Original Works of Modern Artists: Under the Patronage of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales (1802). The rise of these new professional associations, like the picture galleries of the 1780s and 90s, and new lecturing institutions like the Royal Institution and the London and Surrey from 1799, represents a vital moment in the institutionalisation of national art and culture.[25] Their emergence was a process marked by vigorous competition and controversy, one manifestation of which was a battle of prospectuses, as each institution and society published its manifesto and sought public support. Blake's "Public Address" plunges itself into these swirling debates and polemics, offering an impassioned counter-prospectus in which he states his position on a number of live debates about British art and culture.[26]

For Blake, these were not abstract questions and he sought to persuade others not just by theorizing, but through the force of example, appealing to his own record and inviting members of the Chalcographic Society to examine his Canterbury Pilgrims engraving as a model of how engraving should be done. This objective strand in the argument, however, is intertwined with a much more personal one in which he takes issue with those who had, he believed, damaged his career and undermined his reputation. The fact that the Secretary of the Chalcographic Society was Robert Cromek, now his sworn enemy, is one reason why the topic was intensely personal, and he renames him in the Notebook as "Bob Screwmuch."

Another reason is that the activities of the Society had been covered in the *Examiner* and Cromek was a close ally of Robert Hunt. In the "Public Address,"

24 See Dennis M. Read, "The Context of Blake's 'Public Address': Cromek and the Chalcographic Society," *Philological Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1981): 69-86.

25 See Jon Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster, eds., *Institutions of Literature, 1700-1900: The Development of Literary Culture and Production,* ed. Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

26 Blake's engagement with these debates has been examined by, among others, Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992) and Thora Brylowe, *Romantic Art in Practice: Cultural Work and the Sister Arts, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). His response to the words and ideas of specific prospectuses, undoubtedly part of that engagement, needs further research.

Blake responds to Hunt's attack, singling out the *Examiner* as one of the papers that has "blasted […] my Character […] both as an artist & a Man" (K 592). He speaks of the "nest of villains" in Beaufort Buildings on the Strand, home of the *Examiner*, and says the manner he had "routed out" the nest "will be seen in a Poem concerning my Three years' Herculean Labours at Felpham, which I will soon Publish" (K 592).[27] Though it was not in fact published till 1820, this is almost certainly a reference to *Jerusalem*, which features an imaginary scene in which the Hunt brothers, fused together as "Hand," are called out and confronted.

Apart from professional bodies and personal enemies, Blake also addresses the public at large. This is another crucial dimension of the text and the one that most obviously justifies the title "Public Address." By public, he means specifically the "English Public," a phrase he uses multiple times. This is the "tribunal" to which he willingly "submits," notwithstanding the failure of his exhibition and the poor response to his subscription. Some of the most eloquent parts of the "Address" are where he speaks directly to this national audience, as for example when he warns of unscrupulous publishers and art dealers:

> Englishmen, rouze yourselves from the fatal Slumber into which Booksellers & Trading Dealers have thrown you, Under the artfully propagated pretence that a Translation or a Copy of any kind can be as honourable to a Nation as An Original
>
> (K 595).

Elsewhere, he touches on another of his favourite themes, the relationship between art and empire, and appeals to his countrymen to resist the imperial ambitions of Napoleon:

> Let us teach Buonaparte, & whomsoever else it may concern, That it is not Arts that follow & attend upon Empire, but Empire that attends upon & follows The Arts.
>
> (K 597)

At moments like these, the "Public Address" rises above its original brief and pushes the art of the prospectus fully into the realm of public oratory.

As the linguistic register rises, the first-person singular often breaks through the third-person voice he maintains elsewhere, the most striking instance of this

[27] For commentary, see David V. Erdman, "Blake's 'Nest of Villains,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 2 (1953): 61-71.

being after a tirade against benighted English connoisseurs and their "doll," Sir Joshua Reynolds:

> Can I speak with too great Contempt of such Contemptible fellows? If all the Princes in Europe, like Louis XIV & Charles the first, were to Patronize such Blockheads, I, William Blake, a Mental Prince, should decollate & Hang their Souls as Guilty of Mental High Treason.
>
> (K 599)

Here the competitive, self-aggrandising language of prospectuses is given a brilliant satirical twist as Blake, using the imagery of the courtroom and of regicide politics, denounces the man he held responsible for the ongoing crisis in British art, while simultaneously proclaiming himself as the cleansing force that will bring him to justice. Blake's memorable reference to himself as "a Mental Prince" offers an irreverent counter-statement to the sycophantic dedications to the Prince of Wales that feature on so many prospectuses (for instance, that of the British School, cited above) or indeed the address to the King on Reynolds's own *Discourses*, over which Blake had scrawled his critical annotations two years earlier.[28]

This mode of public address, whether straight or satirical, is not unique to prospectuses, and Blake's annotations to Reynolds are themselves full of the wit and rhetorical energy of the "Public Address." So, too, are many of Blake's other writings. But the evidence of this article is that prospectus-writing helped to shape the proclamatory (and denunciatory) style that is so characteristic of his work, and that produced some of his most powerful passages. Two final examples will show how readily this proclamatory style, and the performative language of announcement and promise-making which also define the prospectus, entered into his more fully literary writing.

IV

The first example is from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, one of the illuminated books advertised for sale in his prospectus of 1793. Completed in 1793, this has a special relation to that prospectus because one of its plates describes a visit to a printing house in Hell which is clearly a version of Blake's own workshop in

[28] Blake's overlay of this printed section can be seen on the British Library copy of Blake's annotations to Joshua Reynolds, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. Edmond Malone, 3 vols. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798). Available on Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

Lambeth.[29] This resemblance (inexact but unmistakable) has often been noted, but the connection with the prospectus is even stronger, because the *Marriage* concludes with a publishing announcement which is like that of the prospectus itself. In fact, there is a double announcement: of a forthcoming Bible to be read "in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well;" and of "The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no" (K 158). The whole of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* could in fact be described as a prospectus and specimen of Blake's "Bible of Hell," a phrase which is a coded reference to his entire visionary corpus, many parts of which mimic the "Books" of the Bible. It is not a coincidence that Blake announced it at a time when there were other large-scale illustrated Bible editions being offered for sale, notably Thomas Macklin's, a multivolume subscription project featuring some of the leading painters and engravers of the day (but not Blake). Blake's illustrated "Bible of Hell" is, among other things, a subversive alternative to Macklin's, and if Blake is not literally seeking subscriptions to it, he is trying to persuade us, as the Devil does the Angel, to join him on his revolutionary reading project.

My second example is the plate entitled "To the Public" prefixed to *Jerusalem*. Printed in illuminated lettering like the rest of the poem, this is one of four addresses that preface the four chapters of the poem, the three others being "To the Jews," "To the Deists" and "To the Christians." This one differs in being addressed to the public at large rather than a denominational group, and in addressing them as "Readers," a word used multiple times (K 620-21). As such, this address has points in common with conventional prefaces to literary works, and the subsection "Of the Measure in which the following Poem is written" connects the poem more specifically with epic and the tradition of *Paradise Lost* – a tradition Blake promptly plays off against by announcing a metrical innovation that breaks both with blank verse and with the "modern bondage of Rhyming" Milton himself had rejected (K 621). Blake's address is Miltonic, too, in its use of the device of epic invocation, offering a very literal version of a conventional scene of inspiration in which he speaks of how his muse "dictated to me" (K 621).

In other respects, though, Blake's address has more in common with the paratextual genre I have been tracing throughout this essay, the prospectus, and his section title, "To the Public," plainly derives from this. The address is prospectus-like in the directness of its appeal to the reader, in its autobiographical quality (Blake explains, with his familiar candour, his reasons for writing the poem and his expectations from it), and in its emphasis on the material text: that is, on

[29] Joseph Viscomi, "The Evolution of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58 (1997): 281-344.

the process of publication and the act of book-making. If divine dictation provides the content of the poem, the published form of it is supplied by a more mundane process of which Blake had equal experience: typography. Both dimensions of his creativity are brought together in the ten-line poem (in rhyming couplets) that he embeds within the prose of his address, which begins with an apostrophe to the reader as the "*lover* of books," pays homage to the God who is the giver of all books and of "the wondrous art of writing," and concludes with a celebration of the power of printing, the redemptive art that makes thought and writing permanent and brings order to chaos:

> Therefore I print, nor vain my types shall be:
> Heaven, Earth and Hell henceforth shall live in Harmony.
>
> (K 621)

In announcing himself as both author and printer, and making this promise to use his twin arts to carry out his visionary mission, Blake takes us back to the infernal printing house of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and thus back to his own workshop. The address "To the Public" is an invitation to readers to share in the joy of writing and reading and book-making, and be part of his mission. The only other Romantic text that announces such a grand plan and promises to fulfil it through the medium of verse is Wordsworth's "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, a text that interested Blake enough to copy it out by hand while annotating his printed edition (K 784). Both texts show how the genre of the prospectus – originally simply a mundane "proposal to publish" – could become a vehicle for a visionary manifesto, an artistic mission statement that in Blake's case would involve the art of printing as well as writing.[30]

In the event, neither Wordsworth nor Blake entirely fulfilled their ambitious plan. The philosophical poem announced in the "Prospectus" to *The Recluse* was never completed, and the messianic appeal of "To the Public" in *Jerusalem* was seen by only a handful of readers, the poem only finally appearing sixteen years after it had been begun. There is, in fact, evidence that Blake tampered with the copperplate of this page after designing it, scratching out the word "dear" next to "Reader" and removing the word "lover" next to "of books" (in most modern editions, such as Keynes's, the words are conjecturally restored but marked as absent by use of italics).[31] If so, this may indicate a crisis on Blake's part with

[30] For Wordsworth's artistic transformation of the genre and its connection with Romantic poetics, see David Duff, "Wordsworth's 'Prospectus': The Genre," *The Wordsworth Circle* 45, no. 2 (2014): 178-84.

[31] See David V. Erdman, "The Suppressed and Altered Passages in Blake's *Jerusalem*," *Studies in Bibliography* 17 (1964): 1-54.

regard to his faith in the public. When this occurred, and precisely why, we cannot be certain, but the huge mental pressures reflected in the, at times, rambling and inchoate prose of the "Public Address" may have led to a further deterioration, which finally affected Blake's confidence, if not in himself, then in the reading public. That was not the end of the story and it remains only conjecture, but it shows how close to the heart of Romantic creativity the genre of the prospectus was, and how the opportunities and challenges of "public address" helped to shape the course of Blake's career.

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