

“Sublime and Fall: Benjamin West and the Politics of the Sublime in Early Nineteenth-Century Marylebone,” Nicholas Grindle

A key characteristic of recent writing on British art by Anglophone historians is a drive to see the conflicts of the present in the art of the past. Thus the three decades in which the public good was increasingly identified with the pursuit of private interest has seen historians’ interest turn away from government patronage of art, and towards the workings of a private market.<sup>1</sup> This has been especially the case for the period covered by this volume. There are signs that the tide is turning, with books published recently on the government’s sponsorship of art in a time of increased bureaucracy needed to maintain a fiscal-military state (an early instance of what David Egerton has called the “warfare state”).<sup>2</sup> But one area in which historians have been especially reticent is altarpieces. Even where historians have acknowledged that the Royal Academy exhibitions witnessed a constant trickle of altarpieces, a widely held assumption that a society is more modern in proportion to the degree it is secular, has meant that these works have been held as exceptional cases, oddities and quirks that belong with drawings made from human hair and the like.

A corollary of the assumption that modern societies are necessarily more secular, has been to associate representations of Apocalypse with radical politics. Apocalypse, meaning “revelation,” describes the vision recorded by the disciple and apostle John in the book of Revelation, foretelling the final battle between God the Father and Satan, and the vindication of believers and martyrs when Christ returns. Historians have argued that a belief in the literal imminence of these events was the resort of those whose political aspirations were frustrated.<sup>3</sup> If this is true of antinomian sects in the mid-seventeenth and late-eighteenth centuries, it is also true of a number of significant artists, most notably James Barry, for whom the promise of moral revival through the visual arts in the form of the Royal Academy under the patronage of the King had disappeared. Critics have seen in Barry’s work an

exemplary and incoherent amalgamation of brute masculinity and socialized virtue that exemplifies the contradictory aims of moral reform in the context of capitalist society.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have suggested that if James Barry, Henry Fuseli, John Flaxman, William Blake and others, who all produced apocalyptic subjects, all held beliefs deemed esoteric relative to the doctrines of the Church of England, it only confirms the fact that the church established by law was incapable of being an agent of the radical reform sought by those whose aims necessitated the overthrow of existing structures.<sup>5</sup>

One outcome of disinterest in the public patronage of art, combined with a reading of apocalyptic imagery as political critique, is that the continued sponsorship of painting for churches in the Romantic period, and the Apocalypse as a quintessentially Romantic subject, are subjects kept far apart from each other in the historiography of British art. The singular exception, leaving aside William Beckford's commissions for Benjamin West to decorate his chapel at Fonthill, is West's commission for George III's projected Royal Chapel at Windsor. The designs for the Chapel, often referred to as the Chapel of Revealed Religion, included five scenes from Revelation, only two of which were exhibited (*The Opening of the Four Seals, vide Revelation, a sketch*, and *The Destruction of the Beast and the False Prophet*, shown at the Royal Academy in 1796 and 1804 as numbers 246 and 30 respectively). The commission was abandoned definitively in 1804, a decision that has been attributed by historians to the King's sensitivity to Revelation as a subject which appealed to "democrats," among whose number he was thought to count West.<sup>6</sup> The fact that it was never completed, but that West continued as President of the Royal Academy for the next sixteen years, has tended to be cited as the exception that proves the rule.

Controversy about a commission for a religious history painting arose once more in the final decade of West's life. In the first initiative of its kind for more than a century, the government voted a grant of £1 million to build new churches. The decision was set against a

chorus of warnings about the effects of overpopulation and the chaos that would result from a populace starved of religious instruction; a subject which readily lent itself to being cast in apocalyptic terms. Marylebone in London was the parish that was cited as the exemplary instance of lack of church provision, and its select vestry was held to ridicule for its dithering attitude to church building. Yet this same parish was the focus for West's largest commission in this decade, a design for a transparency that would stand 17 feet high when finished. The sublime scale of the piece, and the principal figures, not to mention West's charge to the parish, who thought they were getting the design *gratis* from an eminent parishioner, were frequently cited by contemporaries, yet they sat in sharp contrast to the polished manners of West himself. It is evident that West was able to achieve this commission because he was known as a painter of sublime subjects, yet he himself was the very antithesis of the excessive masculinity that historians have suggested was characteristic of his contemporaries such as Fuseli, and younger artists such as Blake. It is almost as if his own person recuperated the destructive excess inherent in the sublimity of his paintings in a way that had evidently not been the case in 1804, when he was suspected of democratic sympathies.

This essay will show that a Whiggish discourse of the sublime served to govern the reception of both West's subjects and his ambition, but that Tory speakers used the same discourse to frame a different cultural politics after 1815, one which highlighted the imminence of apocalypse and undermined the security of West's discursive position. The discourse about sublime painting for churches was one of a number of discourses which, as Peter de Bolla has shown was the case with the discourse on debt in mid-eighteenth century England, are not only about excess, but are themselves characterised by excessive language.<sup>7</sup> Other examples included the discourse on population, and the discourse on church building. For de Bolla, whose focus is on the embodiment and practice of the sublime as a discourse, as well as its theorisation, William Pitt the Elder is the exemplar of the subject as a "functional

effect,” that is, not as an individual but as a subject position who embodies the discourse and at the same time renders it as a public text, not as the destroying specter of private ambition. I will argue that West was an exemplary subject who “worked his socially legitimating magic in proportion as the transitions from text to public are smooth and uninterrupted.”<sup>8</sup> That is to say, West’s mastery of the technical demands made on him by very large altarpieces issued in a recognition of his own exemplary sublimity, that is, his public constitution as someone who is himself sublime. Yet his exemplary nature proved to be insecure, and I shall suggest that, taken as a discursive specter or function-effect of discourse, West failed to contain the contradictions **between** private ambition and public interest. In this sense, he offers an interesting view of other exemplary public bodies associated so closely with Marylebone, especially the Prince Regent, and the parish vestry.

Historians writing about West and history painting, particularly in the light of his relationship to the Crown, have tended to look to the personality and politics of West and his patron, King George III, and how the artist’s sympathies were perceived to clash with the King’s in the light of the Revolutionary war with France, in order to explain the significance of apocalyptic subject matter in West’s painting.<sup>9</sup> But rather than conceiving of painting in terms of personalities and subject matter, I would like to think of it as a mode of discourse, which does not take the artist or patron as coherent personalities, but as subjects whose words and actions are not substantial but have a signifying function within the discourse; or, in other words, whose words and actions serve to embody the discourse. For example, if the specter of rampant unbridled power as visualized in West’s second version of *Death on a Pale Horse* had discomfited George III when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1796, and even more so when admired by Napoleon in 1802, it is important to note that as far as West’s contemporaries were concerned, all his paintings of religious subjects were sublime, not only

in their subject matter but also in their physical scale, and in what they revealed about the scope of West's ambition.

*The 'elegance and pathos' of Mr West*

Joseph Farington's diaries are littered with comments about the enormity of West's undertakings. He notes in some detail the objections raised at court against West in November and December 1804, recording gossip that "the King's great prejudice was against West, & that He considered those who acted with Him to be *Democrats*," and that the King's influence in the Academy was declining in the face of "the Democratic disposition that prevailed in it."<sup>10</sup> This talk focused in the immediate instance on West's desire to get Robert Smirke elected as a member (Smirke would later be a key player in the improvements effected in Marylebone). "The King had considered Smirke to be a *Democrat*," Farington recorded, and in the same entry also noted the King's decision "that the pictures which West had painted for the Chapel at Windsor should not be put up, except the Altar piece, *that should not be a Bedlamite scene from the Revelations*."<sup>11</sup> Historians have seen in the King's supposed reference to Bedlam, a sensitivity both to the chaos wrought by revolution and to his own bouts of mental illness.<sup>12</sup> Farington, however, barely mentions the subject matter, referring only to *Death on a Pale Horse* to note Joseph Nollekins's displeasure that it sat in the midst of his pictures at the Academy show in 1796, and that West was allowed to choose its position on the Salon walls when it was exhibited in Paris in 1802.<sup>13</sup> What attracted his interest at this time was what West himself said about his work: "He talked of what had been said respecting His account given to the King for pictures painted, and asked what we thought of the charges He had made, when for the *large picture of the Crucifixion*, intended for one end of the Chapel at Windsor, the size 36 feet high by 28 feet wide, & containing near 70 figures, many of them Colossal in size, He had charged only 2000 guineas."<sup>14</sup>

West was evidently trying to persuade Farington and Smirke that his charges were reasonable, given the scale of the work itself. Earlier in the year he had discussed the size and charge of a comparable commission, the altarpiece for the Chapel at Greenwich Hospital. The context for this discussion is worth explaining. John Singleton Copley had claimed unpaid fees from Sir Edward Knatchbull, who claimed Copley had overcharged for a large family portrait. The plaintiff had subpoenaed West and other artists to speak in his defense. Discussing this with the Smirke family, Farington, and one of the Daniell brothers, West said “that He had £1200 for the Altar Piece which He painted for Greenwich Hospital Chapel which is 27 feet high.”<sup>15</sup> At the hearing itself, he later told Farington, J.M.W. Turner, and the sculptor J.C.F. Rossi: “He was asked what the size of the Greenwich Chapel picture was? & the price? – He said 27 feet high by 16 or 18 wide and contained abt. 50 figures, the largest of which were 8 feet high. For that picture He had 1200 pounds and thought himself well paid.”<sup>16</sup> West did not disparage Copley in as many words, saying that although Copley’s original fee was a “handsome price,” “some circumstances which had come out in evidence might render it proper to go beyond that.”<sup>17</sup> Even so he still managed to cast his compatriot in a poor light by painting himself as a public servant who did not haggle over a fee but was, by contrast, pleased to be paid the sum he was. Whereas the scale of Copley’s painting only served to draw attention to the scope of his personal ambition, which revealed itself in a bitter fight to claim enormous fees from a client, West, in his own representation, as recorded by Farington, was careful to offer himself as the model of socialized virtue whose public spirited conduct made safe the ambition revealed by the epic dimensions of his paintings. Matters were slightly different when West discussed the success of his enormous painting *Christ Healing the Sick*, which he exhibited at the British Institution in 1811. The painter told Farington that “after paying Him 3000 guineas and all other expenses, they [the British Institution] wd. be £2000 in pocket by it.”<sup>18</sup> But even here, West moved comfortably between

the axiom that a successful artist tackles significant subjects on an ambitious scale for huge profit, and the public interest, because having “spoke of the success attending the Exhibition of His picture,” he went on: “that it had happily proved that He had not overcharged the *King* when for painting His design of the Crucifixion, for a painted window to be executed from it, which picture was 28 feet high, and for the smaller picture, the *study* of the subject only 8 feet high He asked only £1500, yet that sum was thought by those abt. the King to be a very high price.”<sup>19</sup> It is therefore not surprising that when West was asked to paint a design for the new chapel (soon to be the parish church) in Marylebone, he should let Farington know. “He told me,” the diarist wrote in 1815, “he was at present employed in painting a picture for Marybone [sic] church.” In 1817, however, Farington heard from a third party that West had charged large fees: “Thomson sd. West had 800 guineas for the transparency at Marybone [sic] new Church.”<sup>20</sup> This is almost as much as Farington says about the major public commission of West’s final decade (as we shall see, Smirke has a bit more to say), but the two isolated sentences are revealing. I want to consider the Marylebone commission in more detail in order to see the fine grain of the politics of the sublime.

West was approached to design an altarpiece for the new church in Marylebone in March 1815. “Resolved, that Mr Hardwick do Consult B[enjamin] West, Esquire of Newman Street as to a design for the Windows at the back of the Altar in the New Church, and Report thereon to this Board.”<sup>21</sup> In this way the select vestry of St Marylebone parish recorded in its *Proceedings for New Churches and Chapels* its decision to approach one of its most eminently suitable parishioners about the question of decoration for the new parish church then being erected to the designs of Thomas Hardwick.<sup>22</sup> They had only recently taken the decision to upgrade the building from a chapel into the parish church, and it soon became clear that the unusual organ design for the new church would leave a large space in the window behind the altar. Unusually for a church, the nave ran on a north-south axis, with the

altar at the south. West was almost certainly approached not only because he was a parishioner, because as Kit Wedd and others have shown, there were plenty of artists living in Marylebone, though West as President of the Royal Academy was pre-eminent; but because of his work for George III. Robert Southey's dig that "for thirty years [the King] employed Mr West when that admirable artist had no commission from any other person" may not be entirely true – he worked for William Beckford  but it shows the how the public perception was shaped by West's twenty years of exhibiting at the Royal Academy designs for paintings to hang in George III's projected scheme for the Royal Chapel at Windsor Castle.<sup>23</sup> West had also painted altarpieces for a number of churches in the capital such as St Stephen Walbrook and Greenwich Hospital Chapel, and had been involved in projects to produce windows for large churches in the capital, namely St Anne Limehouse and St James Piccadilly.<sup>24</sup> The vestry were offered a design that Gerald Carr has shown was very similar to a window in the ensemble completed by West in St George's Chapel, Windsor, which, in Carr's words, "was praised unstintingly by many and criticized by few."<sup>25</sup> The subject was the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds outside Bethlehem. In West's own words, the transparency was sublime. "That Picture is in height 17 feet by 8 in Width," he wrote to the vestry, in terms that should be familiar by now:

and its subject, demanding the principal Angel to maintain its preeminence in Character, could not be less than 7 feet in height: this height has been considered the sublime, or standard for Visionary Figures, or beings supernatural, such as the Apollo, St Michael and other celestial characters and, under this elevation of a 7 feet figure, I thought proper to delineate the principal Angel in that Picture; that all those persons, who might be seated in distant parts of the church, should see the energy with which he announced good tidings and great joy he brought to all people.<sup>26</sup>

West's design was also close to a frontispiece he drew for Jacob Duché's *Discourses on Various Subjects*, the main difference being that in the window at St George's chapel and in the transparency there was only one figure. William Paley and David Bindman have shown that Duché and his engraver, William Sharp, both millenarians, had close relations with West over a number of years, yet as Martin Myrone has pointed out, West's work was never characterized by the kind of radical dissociation between artistic value and socialized virtue which characterized the hyper-masculinity of figures by Barry, Fuseli, and Blake, and the characters of those artists themselves.<sup>27</sup>

West's St Marylebone commission is very well documented in the parish records, and is notorious, in a minor way, for two reasons. Firstly, as Smirke gossiped to Farington, "From the manner in which he undertook this business the Trustees concluded that what He was to do wd. be gratuitous, but He surprised them by making a charge of 800 guineas, which was paid Him."<sup>28</sup> Smirke's comments echo what Thompson told Farington a year earlier, and what had already been said at court about West: that he charged high prices. The more serious insinuation here, moreover, was that West charged a fee when the patron had understood the work, a public commission, to be a gratuity. It was, as Smirke told Farington, who recorded it all in great detail, identical to what happened at Greenwich Hospital:

The Governors of the Hospital considered [a design for a pediment sculpture] to be *gratuitous* from Him, but judged it proper to present Him a *piece of plate* as an acknowledgement for what He had done. A person was deputed to wait upon to signify this to Him, but Mr. West said, that He was not a man in rich circumstances & that money would be more acceptable than plate; and being requested to mention a sum, He said, one thousand pounds, which when reported to the Governors astonished them, but the money was paid Him.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, the transparency was dismantled only ten years later, in 1827, and while the vestry minutes suggest that plans were made to auction it through Christie's straight away, it did not come up for sale until 1840, and was sold for only ten pounds. A contemporary newspaper reported "the picture was originally removed from the church of St Marylebone, at the instigation of the then rector and several of the congregation, as giving the church a Popish appearance."<sup>30</sup> Explanations for why it was removed have rehearsed the view that it was "too popish." This may be true. A new rector had in fact replaced the previous incumbent just a year earlier, and as Claire Haynes has suggested, "there were 'no consistent rules, laws, doctrines, or legal precedents to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable images' within the Church of England, and that 'at times of political uncertainty, practices previously tolerated could suddenly appear Popish or schismatical.'"<sup>31</sup> But rather than trying to trace the politics of individuals, I want to focus a bit more on the politics of the sublime as traced in the vestry's relations with West in 1815-17.

The vestry minutes record two occasions on which West attended meetings of the Committee, and in two instances special mention is made of his manners. On February 1, 1817: "Mr West attended and informed the Board, that he had executed the design for a glass window, agreeably to their request; and that the same was now fixed in the New Church in the place appropriated to receive it, and that the subject was the annunciation of the Birth of our Saviour."<sup>32</sup> He also offered them, "as a gratuitous mark of his great esteem for the parish of Saint Marylebone in which he had resided with such satisfaction and happiness for a period of near 40 years," a picture to be placed "in the centre of the screen at the back of the altar," whose subject was yet to be decided but which would correspond to the Annunciation. The vestry minutes record that "this memorable and impressive speech of Mr West was delivered with such elegance and pathos" that they formed a committee to prepare a vote of thanks to West, and allocated him tickets for the consecration.<sup>33</sup> I want to focus on the way

the minutes take the trouble to note the character of West's speech, because the minutes reveal an interest in how well West performed, as it were, the role of a figure able to stir the feelings of the vestry in a way that was fitting for a painter of sublime subjects. If West's design was sublime, on a scale large enough for "the principal Angel to maintain its preeminence in Character," it was fitting that he himself knowingly embodied those very values, in order to function as a means by which the public (here taken as the vestry) might share in them, and therefore find their own collective identity. In other words, the minutes find the vestry's own justification in the figure of West, and the legibility of his conduct.

It is worth noting, at this point, that the vestry itself had been select since 1768, meaning that vestrymen were co-opted by existing members rather than being elected by ratepayers, a move instigated by Lord Foley, a relative of the Duke of Portland, who wished to develop forty acres of land north-west of Cavendish Square.<sup>34</sup> West, it hardly needs to be said, was President of another self-selecting body, founded in the same year for the same purpose, namely the interest of its members. These are important points to note because they help explain what happens next.

Two weeks after West had attended the Vestry, a report was made on a meeting with West regarding the subject of the picture, about which an explanatory letter from West was read out, cited above. A further letter was also read, in which West wrote "that Mr Collins and other Gentlemen of the Vestry are solicitous of a letter from me, addressed to the Vestry, what the Parish was indebted to me for the picture."<sup>35</sup> He is not independently wealthy, he wrote, otherwise he would donate his work; and given the size of the design, he suggested £800 would be a reasonable fee. An emergency meeting of the vestry was called, and a motion was proposed and passed by 30 to 10 to pay West his charge.<sup>36</sup>

If the vestry were pleased by West's initial appearance, and if their feelings were stirred by his speech, any charge that he was acting on mercenary principles risked

undermining their own claims to taste, that is to say their own awareness of being transported by the power of his eloquence, and their own self-consciousness as a body of gentlemen, since it would remove West as the exemplary instance of taste in which they have fleetingly, but significantly, identified with themselves as a corporate body, and would lead people to think that they themselves were mercenary, since they were effectively putting a price on taste. Therefore, they decided to pay him, and they took the trouble to invite him to vestry again and thank him for his “very handsome present” of a small canvas to be placed behind the altar.<sup>37</sup>

The vestry’s position was essentially a conservative one, assuming the integrity of private feeling and the reconciling effects of custom to a body of private gentlemen (which is how West and the vestry address themselves). For them, West offers the specter of a subject who in his capacity to stir feelings through oratory and painting is both entirely private, and entirely public. He gives figure to their own incorporation. This is why they have no choice but to retain that fiction when its contradictions begin to appear.

#### *The “incapable” Mr West*

The altarpiece at St Marylebone was a transparency, that is, a painting on paper that would be lit by the sun shining through the windows behind the altar, which faces south. There is contemporary evidence that this is in fact what happened. Many years later a writer for the *Art-Union* recalled that: “The effect was so transcendent, that on the second Sunday after the opening of the church, the picture was suddenly strongly illuminated by the sun, and attracted the attention of the whole congregation, and called forth spontaneous expressions of admiration.”<sup>38</sup> The principal subject of admiration was presumably the angel, who West had painted over seven feet in height, explaining to the vestry “this height has been considered the sublime, or standard for Visionary Figures, or beings supernatural, such as the Apollo, St Michael and other celestial characters.” The effect on the congregation recalls the poses

struck by leading actors such as Sarah Siddons and her brother John Philip Kemble, which would be held on stage to great applause from the audience. This is probably more than simply coincidence, since West meant the figure to be seen by people “in the distant parts of the church.” Hardwick’s church, for its part, was not unlike a theatre. Prior to rebuilding in 1885 it had two balconies, and like all other churches and theaters, was built “to the full extent of the human voice,” and for preachers to be “impressive, articulate, and audible,” like actors. Moreover, as F.H.W. Sheppard points out in his magisterial study of local government in Marylebone, “At the sides of the organ were private galleries, fitted with chairs and fireplaces, which ‘so exactly resembled the private boxes which look upon the proscenium of our theatres, that the spectator might almost suppose he was in a **building** that originally had that destination.’”<sup>39</sup>

“Indeed the theatre is a better school of moral sentiments than churches,” wrote Edmund Burke in 1790, “where the feelings of humanity are [...] outraged.”<sup>40</sup> Asking why pitiful scenes moved him, he said:

...because it is *natural* I should [be moved]; because we are so made as to be affected at such spectacles with melancholy sentiments upon the unstable condition of mortal prosperity, and the tremendous uncertainty of human greatness; because in those natural feelings we learn great lessons; because in events like these our passions instruct our reason; because when kings are hurl’d from their thrones by the Supreme Director of this great drama, and become the objects of insult to the base, and of pity to the good, we behold such disasters in the moral, as we should behold a miracle in the physical order of things.<sup>41</sup>

Plays in theaters, Burke wrote, appeal to our feelings. He allowed for the possibility that a viewer can pretend to be moved by something she or he sees on stage, but argued that just as moral sentiments are *natural* (his emphasis), so a natural sense of shame will prevent such

‘hypocrisy’ and ‘folly’: “I should be truly ashamed of finding in myself that superficial, theatric sense of painted distress, whilst I could exult over it in real life. With such a perverted mind, I could never venture to shew my face at a tragedy. People would think that the tears that Garrick formerly, or that Siddons not long since, have extorted from me, were the tears of hypocrisy; I should know them to be the tears of folly.”<sup>42</sup> Burke was taking up a Whig position which reconciled human understanding and moral conduct, and following Richard Steele and Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* some eighty years earlier, he appealed to the theater as a case to prove his point. St Marylebone was itself a thoroughly Whig parish, being closely associated with two aristocratic Whig dynasties, the Cavendish and Bentinck families. The parish patrons were the Dukes of Portland, and the third duke (d.1809) was a former Prime Minister from the same Rockinghamite faction of the party as Burke, which may help explain why the vestry were so keen to play the part of gentlemen ready to be moved by West’s performance both on canvas and in person.

By the time St Marylebone was consecrated in 1816 and the congregation “called forth spontaneous expressions of admiration” at West’s altarpiece, Burke’s Whiggish theory of moral sentiments was under attack from conservative and radical critics alike. Debates on altarpieces and on West’s work in particular helped crystalize the issues. This was due in part to West’s prominence as an artist whose ambitions were situated precisely at a point where church and theater could be said to meet, that is, in large-scale paintings of Biblical history presented at public exhibition in London.

For contemporaries such as Benjamin Robert Haydon, West’s painting *Christ Healing the Sick*, which was shown at the British Institution in 1811 and bought by them for the record-breaking sum of 3000 guineas, was an exemplary instance of how these lines were blurred. Haydon, who had a complex relationship with the President of the Royal Academy, was sickened by the sum spent by the British Institution on a single painting when artists such

as himself were struggling to win commissions for the kind of public history painting to which he aspired. His frustrations are borne out by the vestry minutes. Before West approached the Marylebone vestry with an offer of a painting for their new church, Sir Thomas Barnard offered them a choice of biblical paintings by Henry James Richter, William Hilton, and Richard Westall, saying “Should either of them [sic] prove a desirable possession, and an Ornament for the Altar of the new Church, I will endeavour to obtain the Offer of it as a Donation from the Institution.”<sup>43</sup> The vestry sought Hardwick’s opinion, who replied that the pictures were too large for the church (it turned out they were not); yet when the painter John James Halls proposed that they *buy* one of his pictures for the new chapel of St Mary, Bryanston Square, they silently ignored his request.<sup>44</sup> When Richard Westall’s large painting *Ecce Homo* was donated to the new Marylebone church of All Souls Langham Place, its recent display at the Royal Academy “in a very conspicuous situation in the principal room” did not stop *The London Magazine* sniffing that the artist “is known so well as a profit-making artist in the *trade*,” and *The Examiner* drawled: “his elegant mind supplies the Public in many of their best book embellishments.”<sup>45</sup>

Residual doubts about the moral character of artists help explain the anxieties felt about how painters might threaten to introduce the church to commerce. Writing in the conservative *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Review*, July 1823, John Wilson doubted that most artists were inclined to adopt the kind of solemn attitude with which the vestry liked to think of themselves approaching the matter of public worship:

As for the future world, I strongly suspect it is far from occupying anything like a due proportion of their attention. [Artists] seldom go to church at all, the more is the shame to them; and, when they do so, it really is not much better, for instead of attending to the divine truths which the eloquent preacher is uttering, they are generally studying some *effect* about the chandeliers or the window-curtains, or

scratching down the heads of the church-warden and his lady on the fly-leaf of the little red Prayer-book.<sup>46</sup>

Haydon was foremost among those who had something to say on the matter. “It was a disgrace to Mr West to have charged 800,” he wrote, consoling himself by noting that West “was as incapable of conceiving or executing the character of Christ as he was of performing his miracles.”<sup>47</sup> Haydon took the view that it was artists like himself, and not the church, who were threatened by the spread of what was called “the *trade*.” Publishing his views in 1818 in a pamphlet titled *New churches considered with respect to the opportunities they afford to encourage Painting*, he urged that the Church of England, now in receipt of £1 million to build new churches, had a duty to preserve art from commerce by spending three percent of the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s grant on altarpieces:

As a matter of art it would correct the great fundamental and pernicious effects of exhibitions. Where a picture is bought or sold, as it happens, and then hurried into obscurity, no opportunity is ever given for candid examination, nothing is left to time; its errors or its beauties are pressed on the people according to the interests or enmities of those who conduct, or of those who oppose, the society where it is exhibited; parties puff or censure, ridicule or praise, just as it suits; the whole town is in a whirl of feeling, and before any one has time to estimate with perspicuity, the exhibition closes, and the picture and the painter are remembered or forgotten till a new season and a new subject obliterate the recollection of both.<sup>48</sup>

The Chancellor Nicholas Vansittart rejected Haydon’s proposals, reportedly saying “let us build churches first and think about decorating them afterwards,” although the painter continued to lobby MPs for some time.<sup>49</sup> An additional problem for Haydon, as his subsequent career showed, was that large-scale paintings were sensational both in the impact they made on the viewer’s senses and in the impact they made on the public imagination. By

the second decade of the nineteenth century, large-scale paintings could be seen at a large number of venues, mainly clustered around Piccadilly, which included sites such as Bullock's 'Egyptian Hall,' where Haydon was to exhibit *The Raising of Lazarus* in 1823. Rosie Dias has noted how many reviewers made a point of favorably comparing these shows to the Royal Academy, and drawing the conclusion that the former were meritocracies that fostered native talent, while the latter was badly in need of reform, which may explain why Haydon hoped the Church, and not the Academy, would save painting.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1810s the character of urban improvement in Marylebone threatened to make the experience of viewing art in churches very similar to the experience of visiting new venues of popular entertainment. St Marylebone was one of five new churches erected in the decade following 1815 (the others were Holy Trinity, New Road, by John Soane; All Souls, Langham Place, by John Nash; Robert Smirke's St. Marys, Bryanston Square; and Christ Church, Cosway Street, by Hardwick. For contemporaries these churches quickly became part of the repertoire of **significant** public buildings, as they were all planned to be seen at the end of the long, new streets which **characterized** the improvements in Marylebone, and which in turn gave an additional cache to the new estates as they were being built.<sup>51</sup> Indeed the whole of the "New Street" project provided spectacular new vistas, such as the view from Carlton House Terrace to Piccadilly, or Marylebone (that is, Regent's) Park to St John's burial chapel, St John's Wood, as well as its reworking of older prospects obscured by the urban sprawl in the interim period, such as the view of James Gibbs's St Martin in the Fields from St James' Palace.

Like churches, theaters and buildings for popular entertainment also served as picturesque *rond-points*, and terminations to new vistas. John Britton's 1833 map *Topographical Survey of the Borough of St Marylebone* shows quite clearly the crescent at the top of Portland Place, with All Souls at one end, and the Diorama and Colosseum at the

other; and at the other end of the New Street was the Quadrant leading into Piccadilly. Marylebone Park itself was organized around a large circus in the south-west corner, and Nash even toyed with the idea of a huge circus encompassing the entire width of the park on its south side.<sup>52</sup> As well as being good for carriages, circular roads and walks also provided the pedestrian with a constantly changing view as they walked, and avoided the monotony of a straight road such as Portland Place, thereby conforming to a key tenet of picturesque beauty, as was appropriate for a road connecting two newly landscaped parks. Britton's map also reveals that some of the new churches were similar in plan and appearance to theaters and buildings for popular entertainment, such as two structures erected on the south-east corner of Marylebone Park, the Diorama and the Colosseum. While the function of the circular plan differs in each – the Diorama's circle meant the seats could move from facing one screen to facing another, whereas the Colosseum used the wall of the circle as a vast canvas, as in Robert Barker's famous Panorama in Leicester Square – they are forms unique to buildings devoted to a single visual spectacle. When Haydon exhibited his giant *Lazarus* in the "Egyptian Hall" the work was shown alongside other curiosities, including a living display of Laplanders. Contemporary illustrations give a sense of the way that works and visitors were crammed together. But visitors to the Diorama, Colosseum, or Cosmorama, in Regents Street and Regent's Park, were invited to contemplate a single large artwork in conditions that resembled the display of West's painting in St Marylebone church.

The moral parity of theaters, churches, and entertainments alluded to by Burke therefore enjoyed architectural expression in the development of Marylebone. It is hardly surprising that conservatives such as Haydon fretted about how the church could wash its hands of the taint of commerce which came from handling art that was so closely associated with exhibition and entertainment.

There have been many suggestions that public “improvements” to the metropolitan fabric in the years after Waterloo were the response of a reactionary government who aimed to contain popular unrest. John Summerson’s perceptive insight that Regent Street was planned as a “social barrier” that separated the light industry and third-rate streets to the east from the first-rate squares to the west remains very persuasive.<sup>53</sup> More recently, Rodney Mace and Dana Arnold have suggested that social unrest was contained by “improving” the environment by re-shaping its physical shape to ensure order could be kept, and by erecting imposing symbols of state power.<sup>54</sup> Lisa Keller has argued that in this regard, New York and London provide comparable case studies in urban planning and control.<sup>55</sup> James Anderson, on the other hand, has suggested that post-war government policy was not confined to the introduction of repressive measures; the government, he argues, sought to create jobs in order to relieve the pressure for reform, a policy in which the “Million Act” played an important part, as did the New Street Act of 1813.<sup>56</sup> This policy was interventionist, not reactionary, and it raised the specter of further inflation, at a time when eighty percent of government spending went on servicing a wartime national debt of almost £1,000,000,000.

Among conservatives, the discourses of inflation, both of debt and population growth, were conducted in inflationary language. Thomas Malthus’s influential work *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, first printed in 1798 and appearing in its fifth edition by 1820, opened with the stark warning that, if the population continued to grow at its present rate, by 1900 it would be 176 million, but that the nation would only have the means to support 55 million, “leaving a population of a hundred and twenty-one millions totally unprovided for.”<sup>57</sup> In reality, however, Malthus wrote, preventative and positive checks served to keep the population at a level more or less proportionate to the means of subsistence. These restraints, he repeatedly wrote, are all resolvable into moral restraint, vice, or misery. Both the specter and the solution were, in a degree, sublime. Malthus impressed on the reader the urgency of

his findings. “The truth is,” he wrote, “that, if the view of the argument given in this essay be just, the difficulty, so far from being remote, is imminent and immediate.”<sup>58</sup>

The sublime visions of vice and misery raised by Malthus worried conservatives such as Robert Southey, but the language of inflation was not lost on him either. In a long essay for the *Quarterly Review* in 1820 he energetically supported calls for more churches to be built to encourage moral restraint. He showed that Marylebone had the same population as Manchester (75,000) but whereas Manchester had churches to cater to 19,000 inhabitants, Marylebone had only half that number. Writing a year after Manchester witnessed the Peterloo Massacre, the point would not be lost on Southey’s readers. He noted that in America there was no established church, and because “the general government has no power to interfere with or regulate the religion of the Union,” chaos must ensue. He quoted the American preacher Lyman Beecher in order to make his point: “Let that tide of population roll on for seventy years as it has done for the seventy that are past, and let no extraordinary exertion be made to meet the vastly increasing demand for ministers, but let them increase only in the slow proportion that they have done, and what will be the result? There will be within the United States seventy million souls, and sixty-four million out of that society will be wholly destitute of religious instruction.”<sup>59</sup> This was not a problem itself for Southey, since as a conservative, his view was that this would see America repaid “for the evils which their political lessons have brought upon Europe.” Indeed, democracy was the problem, because combined with atheism, it brought destruction. He agreed with Beecher that: “The right of suffrage in the hands of an ignorant and vicious population [...] will be a sword in the hand of a maniac, to make desolate around him, and finally to destroy himself.”<sup>60</sup> This image recalls West’s *Death on a Pale Horse*, which the painter had recently exhibited as an enormous canvas in 1817. For Southey’s readers it maybe recalled the charges of democratic sympathies made at West, who was American, in 1802-04, and signals the potential to disturb

that such imagery still presented. Southey agreed with Richard Yates's influential *The Church in Danger* (1815) that building new churches would strengthen both religion and the law, and since the church in question was the church established by law (specifically the Acts of Supremacy), the two were synonymous. Pictures had a part to play, since they were the conduits through which "[the people] are [...] made familiar with the great and leading facts of Gospel history." To this end Southey enthusiastically reviewed Haydon's proposal for funding the purchase of altarpieces, taking the conservative view that people had long been reconciled to the appearance of pictures in churches.<sup>61</sup> He clothed his suggestions in patriotic bombast. Paintings that excite devotion, he argued, "would do for London, by national generosity and the force of native genius, what Buonaparte attempted to do for Paris, by national robbery and force of arms; it would make it what Athens has been in the old, and Rome in the modern world, the acknowledged and unrivalled school of arts."<sup>62</sup> The overpowering images and inflationary language of Southey's essay, which culminated in the **specter** of Napoleon, seeks in vain for a figure to contain or recuperate the excess. The new King, George IV, is one candidate, who through his purchase of the Elgin marbles has aligned himself with the cause of personal reformation which art can effect by speaking to the eye and impressing young imaginations. Likewise, his recently deceased father George III set a similar precedent, when "for thirty years he employed Mr West when that admirable artist had no commission from any other person."<sup>63</sup>

Southey used his remark about West to conclude his essay, and he left his point hanging in the air for the reader to ponder what discursive function West might serve in the conservative cause. West was closely associated with George III but less in the cause of personal reformation and more in relation to "Bedlamite scenes," and both West's works for George and his royal patron, were associated with the madness that Southey had spent much of his essay describing in vivid detail. West was also associated with America, which

Southey points to as an example of the Apocalyptic scenes which will soon overwhelm Britain in general if action is not quickly taken. West was also closely associated with exhibitions, which Haydon had railed against in his pamphlet, which was quoted approvingly at length by Southey. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the accumulation of all these signifiers has the effect of rendering West as a figure associated with exorbitant power – unparalleled Royal patronage, Apocalyptic scenes, democratic sympathies, immense commercial success which did not stop with his death — whose eloquence or conduct cannot be justified as exemplary passion for a public transported by the kind of art called for by Haydon, Elmes and Southey.

---

<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is Jules Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Douglas Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years' War: allegiance and autonomy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> For example see David Bindman, "The English Apocalypse," in *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*, ed. Frances Carey (London: British Museum Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> See Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art, 1750-1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See Bindman, "The English Apocalypse".

<sup>6</sup> On West's commission, see Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Morton Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Bindman, "The English Apocalypse"; Annette Wickham, *Death on the Pale Horse: and other works by Benjamin West* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: readings in discourse, aesthetics and the subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Lamb, "The Subject of the Subject and the Sublimities of Self-Reference," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 56:2 (1993): 203.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*; Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime*; Bindman, "The English Apocalypse"; Wickham, *Death on the Pale Horse*.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Joseph Garlick et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 2454 (entry for November 27, 1804), 2469 (entry for December 14, 1804). All italics in quotes are uniformly italicized in the original.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2461 (December 1, 1804).

<sup>12</sup> See for example Bindman, "The English Apocalypse," 212.

<sup>13</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 528 (April 23, 1796) and 1820 (September 1, 1802).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2468 (December 11, 1804).

- 
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 2251 (February 22, 1804).
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2259 (March 3, 1804).
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2259 (March 3, 1804).
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 3970 (July 15, 1811).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3970 (July 15, 1811).
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4898 (September 6, 1815); 5000 (April 11, 1817).
- <sup>21</sup> St Marylebone Vestry, *Vestry Proceedings for New Churches and Chapels* (hereafter V.P.N.C.), Westminster Record Office, 3.35 (March 31, 1815).
- <sup>22</sup> A detailed account of West's commission can be found in Gerald L. Carr, "Benjamin West's Altar Paintings for St Marylebone Church," *Art Bulletin* 62:2 (1980): 11. A broader discussion of the decoration of the 'Commissioners' churches after 1818 is in Gerald Lawrence Carr, "The Commissioners' Churches of London, 1818-1837: a study of religious art, architecture and patronage in Britain from the formation of the commission to the accession of Victoria" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1976). A slightly older study is M. H. Port, *Six Hundred New Churches: A Study of the Church Building Commission and its Church Building Activities* (London: SPCK, 1961).
- <sup>23</sup> Robert Southey, "Review," *The Quarterly Review*, XLVI (July 1820): 549-91.
- <sup>24</sup> Carr, "Benjamin West's Altar Paintings for St Marylebone Church," 296.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., PAGE #.
- <sup>26</sup> V.N.P.C., 4.6-7 (February 15, 1817).
- <sup>27</sup> See Myrone, *Body Building*, 14.
- <sup>28</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 5173 (March 13, 1818).
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> The unidentified paper was inserted in Benjamin Robert Haydon's diary, and published in T. Taylor, editor, *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon* (London: Peter Davies, 1926), 677-78.
- <sup>31</sup> Claire Haynes, *Pictures and Popery: art and religion in England, 1660-1760* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 135.
- <sup>32</sup> V.N.P.C., 3.356, (February 1, 1817).
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> See F.H.W. Sheppard, *Local Government in St Marylebone, 1688-1835*, (PLACE: PUBLISHER, DATE), 125-7.
- <sup>35</sup> V.N.P.C., 4.6-7 (February 15, 1817).
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 4.10-11 (February 22, 1817).
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 4.195. (October 10, 1818).
- <sup>38</sup> *Art-Union* (August, 1840), 129; quoted in Carr, "Benjamin West's Altar Paintings," PAGE#.
- <sup>39</sup> Sheppard, *Local Government*, 267; the source quoted is Thomas Smith, *A Topographical and Historical Account of the Parish of St Marylebone*, (London: John Smith, 1833), 89-92. [check note]
- <sup>40</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 81. West was referring to the storming of Versailles and the alleged mistreatment of Louis XIV and his family.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 80.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 81.
- <sup>43</sup> V.N.P.C., 2.335-6, (November 26, 1814).
- <sup>44</sup> See Ibid., 6.263, (May 3, 1823). Halls was a frequent contributor of reviews to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*: see Alan Lang Strout, *A Bibliography of Articles in*

---

*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1817-1825* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Technological College, 1959).

<sup>45</sup> "Exhibition of the Royal Academy," *London Magazine* VII (1823): 700-705; *The Examiner*, 880 (1824): 786.

<sup>46</sup> John Wilson, "Lectures on the Fine Arts I: George Cruickshank," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* (1823): 19.

<sup>47</sup> Haydon, *Autobiography*, 678.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon, *New Churches Considered* (London: 1818), 14-16. Also quoted by Southey, "Review," 587. On the government's attitude to expenditure on decoration in churches, see Port, *Six Hundred New Churches*.

<sup>49</sup> On Vansittart see Carr, *The Commissioners' Churches*, 107; on Haydon, see Paul O'Keeffe, *A Genius for Failure: The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon* (London: Bodley Head, 2009), 187, 231-2.

<sup>50</sup> Rosie Dias, "A World of Pictures: Pall Mall and the topography of display, 1780-99", in *Georgian Geographies: essays in space, place and landscape*, ed. Miles Ogborn and Charles W.J. Withers (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 93.

<sup>51</sup> For illustrations of the churches in contemporary topography, see Bernard Adams, *London Illustrated 1604-1851: A Survey and Index of Topographical Books and their Plates* (London: The Library Association, 1983).

<sup>52</sup> For the different plans put forward for the New Street and Park by John White, James Wyatt, Thomas Leverton, Thomas Chawner, and John Nash, see James Anderson, "Marylebone Park and the New Street: A study of the development of Regent's Park and the building of Regent Street, London, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century," (PhD diss., University of London, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> See John Summerson, *Georgian London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) and John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935).

<sup>54</sup> See Rodney Mace, *Trafalgar Square: Emblem of Empire* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2005); Dana Arnold, "Rationality, Safety and Power: the Street Planning of Later Georgian London," *Georgian Group Journal* 5 (1995): 37-50.

<sup>55</sup> Lisa Keller, *The Triumph of Order: Democracy and Public Space in London and New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> See the Introduction to Anderson, "Marylebone Park and the New Street."

<sup>57</sup> T.R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (London: J. Johnson, 1798), 24. See also the Introduction to Anderson, "Marylebone Park and the New Street."

<sup>58</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 143

<sup>59</sup> Southey, "Review", 551.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* In the event, Southey proposed an annual grant instead of taking a percentage of the "Million Act."

<sup>62</sup> Southey, "Review," 587, 589.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 591.