

Allegory and Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century: the frontispiece to William Blake's “There is no Natural Religion”

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Abstract:

In a reading of William Blake's frontispiece to “There is no Natural Religion” that draws largely on the history of the allegorical mode, I offer a narrative that explores the creative ways in which Blake illuminated his ideas about the value of Enlightenment thought.

Keywords:

Allegory, Blake, Education, Enlightenment, Illustration.



Fig. 1. William Blake, frontispiece from “There is no Natural Religion” (c. 1788).

In his first illuminated book, “There is no Natural Religion,” William Blake adopted the personifying practises of the allegorical mode not as a reaction to but as the natural outcome of his desire to expound Enlightenment educational ideals. This work was originally produced in c. 1788 and continued to be printed by the engraver for many years: in fact, Blake celebrated the work over thirty years later as his “Original Stereotype” (1822, p. 272). Blake's clear recognition of “No Natural Religion” as an important work in his illuminated oeuvre has not, however, generated an appropriate response from Blake scholars, the majority of whom have hastily described the engraved plates from “No Natural Religion” as little more than what S. Foster Damon referred to as “the smallest as well as the

first examples of Blake's illuminated printing" (1924, p. 36)—a fleeting assessment which would later be repeated in the highly influential monographs of Northrop Frye (1947) and David V. Erdman (1954). This paper aims to offer a reassessment of “No Natural Religion” which will contribute to the long over-due repositioning of this work as a defining text in Blake's catalogue by investigating why Blake believed that “No Natural Religion” was the foundation upon which his subsequent prophecies were built.

I will initiate this investigation by analysing the specifically allegorical nature of the figures which appear in the frontispiece of “No Natural Religion” [Fig. 1]. In this frontispiece, Blake presented his readers with the image of an elderly couple who were seated in the shade of an overhanging tree. To the right of this couple stood two men, both of whom were unclothed. In order to analyse the allegorical contents of this illumination, we must first learn how an eighteenth-century artist would have understood and consequently adopted allegory. We can do so by looking at contemporaneous pieces of literary criticism that investigated the practical functions of the allegorical mode. This study will reveal the dominant conventions of allegory during this period, allowing us to produce a relevant methodology that will help us to decode the allegorical contents of Blake's frontispiece.

1. Allegory in the Eighteenth Century: the literal and the mythical

The eighteenth century is often identified as a period that was antithetical to allegory. However, throughout this period writers made effective, innovative use of allegory, as works as diverse as James Thomson's *The Castle of Indolence* (1748) and Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771) demonstrate. Accordingly, eighteenth-century literary criticism frequently investigated the recurrent methods of this popular tradition. John Hughes, in his “Essay on Allegorical Poetry” (1715), wrote:

An Allegory is a fable . . . in which, under imaginary persons or things, is shadowed some real action or instructive moral . . . it is that 'in which one thing is related, and another thing is understood.' It is a kind of hieroglyphick, which, by its apt resemblance, conveys instruction to the mind by an analogy to the senses, the literal and the mythical: the literal sense is a dream or vision, of which the mythical sense is the true meaning or interpretation. (p. xxi)

Hughes argued that an allegorical work must necessarily contain two levels of signification. The first level of signification, which Hughes called the “literal sense,” was any superficial reading of a work that was purely deduced from the

material surface of the page. The second, “mythical” level of signification, on the other hand, was an interpretation of the literal work that had been informed by external factors. A reader of allegory was therefore expected to unravel the symbolic contents of an allegorical work by discovering the resemblances between its superficial literal signifiers and its suggested mythical signifieds.

The discovery of each level of signification in Blake's frontispiece may prove difficult for a twenty-first century reader. This is because, as Roland Barthes argues in “The Photographic Message” (1977), each historical era harbours its own “period rhetoric.” This rhetoric is constituted of a “stock of stereotypes (schemes, colours, graphisms, gestures, expressions, [or] arrangements of elements)” that exist before and during a work's composition (p. 18). These elements prompt contemporaneous readers of a work to immediately recognize the familiar, literal significations of the text, after which they are expected—via subsequent reflection and contextual comparison—to identify the underlying mythical significations of the allegory. In order to apply Hughes's interpretive methodology to Blake's frontispiece, then, we must first fabricate the contextual conditions of an eighteenth-century reading by looking at other contemporaneous works that contained similar signifiers. This comparative study will help us to accurately interpret the literal and mythical significations of the frontispiece according to the cultural rhetoric of the eighteenth century. I will begin this investigation by addressing the immediate, literal significations of the frontispiece, uncovering how an eighteenth-century reader would have originally interpreted the print prior to their later allegorical analysis.

2. Angelic Instruction: the literal significations of “No Natural Religion”



Fig. 2. William Blake after Raphael, *Abraham and the Three Angels* from *The Protestants Family Bible* (1781), detail.

Several illustrations in contemporaneous texts contained the same literal signifiers as those seen in Blake's frontispiece. For instance, in *The Protestants Family Bible* (1781) [Fig. 2], eighteenth-century readers were exposed to the image of an elderly man who was seated on the ground, to the left of which stood a group of men. This print, engraved by Blake, was a reproduction of Raphael's *Abraham and the Three Angels* (1517). The signifiers contained in Raphael's popular piece—the elderly man seated on a low level and the group of men stood on a high level—were all reproduced in “No Natural Religion.”

It is therefore likely that the literal level of signification in Blake's frontispiece depicted a similar scene of angelic visitation. This is because its primary signifiers, as Barthes notes, “refer to clear, familiar signifieds” (pp. 22-23). These significations are “familiar” and therefore literal due to their inception in the Bible and their subsequent reproduction in both religious scripture and art from the beginnings of antiquity to contemporary times. Indeed, the signifiers used by Blake in the frontispiece to “No Natural Religion” were frequently employed by artists throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to depict scenes of angelic visitation. Investigating the Biblical contexts of these continually replicated literal signifiers can help us to formulate an accurate idea of how Blake would have expected eighteenth-century readers to react to and initially interpret the frontispiece to “No Natural Religion.” Moreover, by tracing the gradual evolution of religious and philosophical treatises that examined the same subject between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we can uncover the allegory's hidden tier of enlightened, mythical signification that readers would have only identified upon subsequent reflection.

The literal signifiers in Blake's frontispiece originated in the Bible. Due to the similar signifiers used in both Blake's and Raphael's works, we can assume that the opening plate from “No Natural Religion” was intended to invoke the story of Abraham in the mind of the reader. In this story, as related in Genesis, the usually bearded Abraham was found resting “in the plains of Mam-re” with his wife, Sarah. “Lift[ing] up his eyes,” Abraham realised that “three men stood by him: and when he saw *them*, he ran to meet them” (18:1-2). Upon reaching the group, Abraham “bowed himself toward the ground” and said to the three men, “rest yourselves under the tree” (18:2-3). The arrangement of the literal signifiers in Blake's frontispiece has now been achieved: the angelic men are standing beneath the tree and Abraham and his wife are seated “toward the ground.”

This pictorial structure was representative of the hierarchical relationship between the angels and humanity. Dionysius, in *The Celestial Hierarchies* (c. fifth century), argued that “the Word of God has given our [human] hierarchy into . . . the direct guidance of Angels” (p. 35). Therefore, because God had attributed

the governance of humanity to the angels, the former were lower on the celestial chain than the latter. This hierarchy was usually depicted in visual art via the implementation of Jacob's Ladder. Accordingly, in an early seventeenth-century engraving by Theodore Galle [Fig. 3], audiences were exposed to the image of “a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28: 10). At the bottom of this ladder sat the bearded prophet. The angels were therefore pictured on a high level while the bearded prophet was positioned on a low level. This pictorial arrangement assumed the same visual structure as the frontispiece to “No Natural Religion.”



Fig. 3. Theodore Galle, “Mater Sanctae Spei” from *Pancarpium Marianum* (1618), detail.

The practical function of this visual hierarchy was revealed in Abraham's story. Once the above structural arrangement had been achieved, the visitors began to relay a divine message to their hosts, saying: “Sarah thy wife shall have a son” (18:9-10). What is of interest here is not the contents of the message; rather, it is how a standing group of individuals have imparted a previously unknown piece of informative knowledge to a seated audience. Brian E. Colless, in “Divine Education,” argues that angelic messages such as those described in Genesis and Enoch are instances of what he calls divine education. Colless writes: “in the Bible . . . God is represented as giving instruction on the basis of a set programme of education . . . which was implemented with the help of specially selected teaching assistants” (1970, p. 140). These teaching assistants are the angels.

This perspective of angelic tuition was dominant until the latter half of the seventeenth century. Indeed, throughout this period we see angels described as instructive figures in religious treatises and pictured as such in illustrations. For example, John Salkeld, in *A Treatise of Angels* (1613), argued that the function of angels was to “aide, assist, illuminate, and stirre” humanity “up to all good and

vertue” (p. 319). Furthermore, in Thomas Heywood's *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angells* (1635), readers learned of how angels

. . . were from Heav'n downe sent
With full Commision to have government
Or'e all Mankinde; not onely to conduct them,
In their affaires, but tutor and instruct them:
With these [lessons], never to incline
Either to *kill*, *Judge rashly*, or *Drinke Wine*. (p. 289)

The instructional function of angels was also used for a practical purpose in seventeenth-century emblem books. The writers and designers of these illustrated works—which were often used as tools of instruction throughout the period—frequently employed the services of angels in order to inherit the tested, instructive significations of these creatures. For instance, in Otto van Veen's *Amoris Divini Emblemata* (1615), readers followed the growth of a young angel who was being educated by an adult tutor of the same species. Similarly, in Francis Quarles's *Emblems* (1635), readers saw images of a winged individual assisting unfortunate youths in a variety of instructive scenarios [Fig. 4]. As a result of these written and pictorial depictions of angelic tutors, there is no doubt that a seventeenth-century reader would have been familiar with the literal significations of Blake's frontispiece. Can the same be said of an eighteenth-century reader?



Fig. 4. Francis Quarles, “Ah, Treach'rous Soul!” from *Emblems* (1635).

In short, yes. While the production of new angelic works did decrease during the first half of the eighteenth century, certain theological seventeenth-century works continued to be reprinted and remained popular throughout the period. Examples

of these persistent works include the following: Quarles's angelic book of *Emblems* (1635), which was republished regularly during the eighteenth century; Isaac Ambrose's *War with Devils: Ministration of, and Communion with Angels* (1674), which similarly continued to be printed well into and throughout the following century; and, of course, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), whose popularity remained unquestioned. The illustrated contents of Bibles also remained unchanged [Fig. 5]. They continued to be adorned with angelic prints that contained the same literal signifiers as those found in Blake's frontispiece. Therefore, because numerous contemporaneous works contained the same signifiers as those seen in "No Natural Religion," it is highly probable that an eighteenth-century reader would—as a result of contextual comparison and of association—have initially interpreted the content of Blake's print as a typical instance of an angelic visitation.



Fig. 5. "St. Matthew" from *The Sacred Chronicle or, a Compendious History of the Holy Bible* (1731).

This early reception of "No Natural Religion" should be categorized as the allegory's immediate, literal level of signification because of the superficial nature of its interpretation. However, as we learned from Hughes's allegorical methodology earlier, the literal level of signification in an allegory is "designed only to clothe and adorn" the mythical level of signification, "not to hide it" (p. xxxv). Eighteenth-century readers were therefore expected to de-robe the literal significations of Blake's work by reflecting upon the potential moral of the pictorial allegory. Hughes argued that this act, achieved through an internal process of "resemblance" and "analogy," would reveal the "mythical sense" or

“true meaning” of the work (p. xxi). In order to uncover the mythical level of signification in “No Natural Religion,” then, we must first locate any external texts that contained the same angelic signifiers as those seen in Blake's frontispiece. We can do so by comparing the contents of “No Natural Religion” with the instructional illustrations that accompanied contemporaneous children's literature.

3. Enlightened Education: the mythical significations of “No Natural Religion”

The dominant aim of eighteenth-century children's literature was to instruct the young. Juvenile fiction was accordingly adorned with illustrations that sought to render the often difficult process of education as a delightful experience. Thus, in works such as Lady Ellenor Fenn's *Cobwebs to Catch Flies* (1783) and John Marshall's *Goody Goosecap* (1788) [Fig. 6], readers observed scenes of instruction that were carried out by loving, patient parents. The figurative arrangement of these images—with the parent stood above the child—mimicked the fundamental hierarchical arrangement of an angelic visitation regardless of no angels actually being present. The pictorial arrangement of angelic signifiers had therefore, at some point over the last century or so, began to produce a standalone system of signification that had shed its religious context while maintaining its educative function. In other words, the pictorial arrangement of the individuals in a scene of angelic visitation—with the messengers on a high level and the prophets on a low level—was now being used in an alternative but equally instructive context by the writers of secular works.



Fig. 6. John Marshall, *Goody Goosecap* (1788).

Upon noticing this parallel, a contemporaneous reader of “No Natural Religion”—

realising the hastiness of their previous literal interpretation—would have subsequently categorized the frontispiece according to its mythical level of signification, identifying the pictured scene as an instance of secular rather than angelic instruction. Investigating how this secular form of instructional illustration manifested in children's literature can help us to understand why Blake inserted this second tier of mythical signification into his angelic allegory. We can do so by tracing the gradual evolution of instructional works between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, identifying when and why human tutors began to be substituted for angelic messengers.

Mankind's corporeal ascent up Jacob's Ladder was the result of a slow but steady development in works of private pedagogy, the seeds of which can be seen in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century works of Michel de Montaigne and Obadiah Walker. However, these advancements in education would fail to infiltrate instructive illustrations until the latter years of the seventeenth century, when secular in contrast to religious treatises on education started to become common rather than sporadic. These pioneering works focussed primarily on how a tutor should guide a pupil to enlightenment. This aim consequently caused the subjects that a tutor should teach such as scripture and conduct in church to become secondary. An example of a writer who supported this type of guided instruction is John Locke. This influential philosopher successfully assimilated the underlying secular feelings of the seventeenth century by incorporating and then advancing the ideas of prior educationalists, doing so in numerous treatises and essays on the subject of instruction.

The result of this pedagogical advancement is best seen in Locke's *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690). In this work, Locke presented a secular argument which undermined the divine attributes that had often been associated with tutors. He did so by arguing against the outdated but popular notion of paternal authority, which advocated the supposed divinity of two types of tutors: namely, fathers and kings, each of whom had “an absolute . . . power over the lives . . . and estates of [their] children or subjects . . . they being all his slaves” (p. 9). These divine tutors were thought to be “so high above all earthly and human things” that they assumed a similar but certainly more tyrannical role to angelic messengers (p. 5). Locke refuted these paternal claims to divinity by examining the nature of the first appointed King, Adam, whose direct correspondence with God had supposedly established the divine right of humanity's paternal bloodline:

The [divine] law that was to govern Adam was the same that was to govern all his posterity . . . But his offspring having another way of entrance into the world, different from his, by a natural birth, . . . were not presently under that law. For nobody can be under a law that is not promulgated to him. (p. 143)

This supposition prompted a large reaction in the new educational works of the eighteenth century. Further, when combined with Locke's later recommendations of instruction via delightful pictures, secular illustrations in children's books soon became a normality. Images in children's literature now began to depict scenes of instruction that did not include the presence of an angel or the invocation of a paternal divinity; rather, secular prints now portrayed a form of education that was administrated by distinctly human parents or by enlightened tutors. These illustrations did, however, maintain the typical hierarchical arrangement of an angelic visitation in order to inherit the instructional significations of this publicly recognisable structure. Examples of these secular scenes occurred in John Gay's *Fables* (1733) [Fig. 7] and John Newbery's *A Pretty Little Pocket-Book* (1744), each of which placed the tutor on a high level and the pupil on a low level. A further example of an eighteenth-century work that adopted this pictorial arrangement was none other than the frontispiece to Blake's "No Natural Religion."

4. Angelic Instruction or Enlightened Education?: combining the literal and mythical significations of "No Natural Religion"

In short, then, a contemporaneous reader of "No Natural Religion" would have identified two levels of sequential signification in Blake's frontispiece. This reader would have initially distinguished the work's literal level of signification—which identified the scene as an instance of angelic visitation—because of the image's contemporaneous resonance in Biblical prints and religious documents. The reader would then have reflected upon the specific attributes of this immediate interpretation by searching for further pictorial echoes in contemporaneous works. This contextual interrogation would have subsequently resulted in the reader noting a visual comparison between Blake's frontispiece and the illustrations that adorned contemporaneous children's literature, prompting them to re-interpret Blake's illumination according to its previously unidentified level of mythical signification. It is this recognition that would have resulted in the reader uncovering what Hughes had referred to as the "true meaning" (p. xxi) of Blake's allegorical frontispiece: specifically, that the designer of this image, "The Author & Printer W Blake" (1788, p. 2), believed that human tutors were endowed with the same peculiar attributes which had resulted in the religious adoration of angelic instructors because these corporeal teachers—regardless of their sublunary in contrast to divine heritage—possessed an exclusive ability to raise "other men into a perception of the infinite" (1790, p. 39). It is this ability that inspired Blake to use the instructional methods of the allegorical mode to literally simulate the pictured act of instruction, transforming himself into an enlightened tutor and "No Natural Religion" into a practical rather than passive piece of art that illuminated his ideas about the value of a guided,

secular education.

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