In 1967, during the “Summer of Love,” tens of thousands of young people in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and elsewhere celebrated the dawn, in William Blake’s words, of a “New Age.”¹ This was the high point of the “innocent” 1960s, when the poet and Blake enthusiast Michael McClure witnessed in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco the birth of a new way of life based on peace, love, and mind-expanding drugs.² The symbol of this movement was the flower.³ Sometimes it was a rose, like the ones on Grateful Dead posters and album covers (fig. 1), and sometimes the sunflower, like the one on a card designed in 1966 by Lorraine Schneider. It carried the legend: “War is not healthy for children and other living things” (fig. 2). The poster version of Schneider’s card quickly colonized antiwar protests, coffee houses, nurseries, and dorm rooms everywhere. To more literary-minded peaceniks and hippies like McClure, however, flowers and “flower power” recalled Blake’s lines: “To create a little flower is the labour of ages,” from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell; “To see a world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wildflower,” from “Auguries of Innocence”; and “Ah! Sunflower! / Who countest the steps of the Sun / Seeking after that sweet golden clime,” from Songs of Experience (fig. 3).⁴
William Blake and the Age of Aquarius

A few months later, on October 21, 1967, nearly one hundred thousand people of all ages, including activists Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, and Dr. Benjamin Spock, rallied at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington to protest the Vietnam War. They then marched to the Pentagon. This was a signal event in the “experienced” 1960s, an era of war, assassination, rising criminal violence, corruption, and state repression of legitimate speech and protest.

Among the crowd that descended on the seat of military power were the poets Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell, the novelist Norman Mailer, the musician and poet Ed Sanders, and Abbie Hoffman, the leader of the Youth International Party, or “Yippie” movement. They chanted and sang in an effort to levitate the Pentagon and exorcise the demons within. Some protestors inserted flowers into the gun barrels of tense National Guard troops (fig. 4). Others rushed past soldiers toward the building itself, which remained stubbornly earthbound. About 650 people were arrested and hauled off to makeshift jail cells in a U.S. post office in Alexandria, Virginia.

In the van carrying him away, Norman Mailer imagined the Pentagon as an ancient Egyptian temple, “slab-like, excremental, thick walls, secret caverns . . . giant mud pie on the banks of America’s Nile, our Potomac!” His crew were hippies and dreamers: poets, ministers, artists, architects, and musicians, including Tuli Kupferberg from The Fugs, a satiric rock group whose name derived from the sanitized epithet repeated throughout Mailer’s novel The Naked and the Dead (1948). Kupferberg and the band (cofounded by Sanders) had recently set to music Blake’s “Ah! Sunflower,” “How Sweet I Roam’d,” and “The Sick Rose.” As he sat on a bench in jail across from Mailer, he may have remembered some subversive proverbs from Blake’s Marriage of Heaven and Hell:

Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion.
The fox condemns the trap not himself.
The weak in courage is strong in cunning.
Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse un-acted desires.

The protesters had plenty of experience with prisons and brothels in the respectable form of schools, colleges, churches, and temples. They needed no prompting to condemn traps—“Hell no, we won’t go,” they chanted in defiance of the military draft. And they had no lack of cunning—the Pentagon exorcism, and all the publicity it generated, proved it. But that last line of Blake’s was the kicker. How serious was he? The lyric could be used to justify both state terror and the violence of a revolution that goes out of control. In fact, it predicted the mayhem that concluded the 1960s: the assassinations of 1968; the murder of Sharon Tate, the eight-months-pregnant wife of movie director Roman Polanski, along with eight others, by Charles Manson and “the family” in August 1969; the Chicago police killings of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark while they slept in their beds on December 4; and the death two days later of a stoned and violent concertgoer at the hands of a Hell’s Angels biker at a rock concert at Altamont Speedway in Northern California.
ABOVE

RIGHT
The death by drug overdose of some of the most talented popular musicians of the generation—Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Janice Joplin—was also a blow to the solidarity of a youth “counterculture” hooked on the products of the music industry. Indeed, the recuperative power of advertising and mass culture (what the philosopher Herbert Marcuse called “affirmative culture”) was already in evidence with the 1968 Broadway production of the musical *Hair*—its best-known song containing the refrain “this is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.” The musical appealed to a broad middle-class audience, and its many road company productions further dispersed the formerly subcultural hippie style. By the mid-1970s, the Age of Aquarius was little more than a fashion whose time had passed and its music and art were used for purposes far from their creators’ original intent. Even Blake, whose work was revived in sync with the rise of the counterculture, was affected. The fate of his four-stanza, alternate rhymed poem titled “Jerusalem” (“And did those feet in ancient time . . .”) from the preface to *Milton* is an example. Made into a hymn by the composer Sir Hubert Parry in 1916, orchestrated by Sir Edward Elgar a few years later, its suppressed erotic content (“Bring me my arrows of desire, . . . Bring me my Chariot of Fire”) was boldly reaffirmed by Jimi Hendrix in “Voodoo Chile” (1968). But a dozen years later, it was used as a patriotic anthem in the British film *Chariots of Fire* (1981). Margaret Thatcher even marshaled it to boost enthusiasm for the Falklands War!

Blake’s preceding paragraph from the *Milton* preface, however, resists recuperation:

Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers by the prizes they pretend to give for contemptible works or the expensive advertising boasts they make of such works.

William Blake, an impoverished, ghost-seeing, politically contrary eighteenth-century poet and artist thus prefigured the rebellion of the 1960s. The conditions that gave rise to his career, as we shall see, parallel those that led to the establishment of the 1960s counterculture; and the products of both periods are potentially valuable resources for social movements still to come.

**WILLIAM BLAKE’S LIFE AND TIMES**

Blake was born in London in 1757 and died there seventy years later. Both his parents were religious Nonconformists, but their child was baptized in the Anglican St. James Church, Piccadilly. His father owned a hosiery shop of moderate size selling merchandise made on looms in the north of England, supplied through London wholesalers. (It is also
possible the business hired its own local laborers.) At the age of ten, William was enrolled in a drawing school for tradesmen’s children and four years later he was apprenticed to a successful engraver named James Basire. The idea was that Blake would enhance his natural skills as a draughtsman and at the same time learn copy-engraving in order to make a living. (The family hosiery business was already promised to his elder brother.) Upon completing his training in 1779, he gained admittance to the Antique School of the Royal Academy as a probationary student. This meant making drawings of statues and plaster casts while also making money as a printmaker engraving designs by other artists. Examples of this latter work include the head-pieces for Joseph Ritson’s *A Select Collection of English Songs* (1783) drawn by Thomas Stothard and expertly engraved by Blake. One of the songs collected by the eccentric Ritson, number XIX, contains a line, “Busy, curious, thirsty Fly, / Drink with me, and drink as I,” that was a source for Blake’s own poem “The Fly” in *Songs of Experience*, published a decade later (fig. 5). His more thoughtful lyric, however—and its accompanying image of children playing shuttlecock—sets it apart. Here are the second and third stanzas of Blake’s poem:

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance
And drink and sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

In 1782, Blake married Catherine Boucher, the illiterate daughter of a market gardener, and soon taught her to read. A year later, the Reverend A. S. Mathew and the sculptor John Flaxman published about two dozen poems—a mix of lyric, dramatic, and prose-poetry fragments—in a slender volume titled *Poetical Sketches*. He exhibited drawings at the Royal Academy in 1780, 1784, and 1785 (their subjects derived from the Hebrew Bible and early English history), and again in 1790, 1800, and 1808. In the last of these exhibitions, he showed the watercolor *Jacob’s Dream*, with Busby Berkeley beauties traveling up and down a stairway to heaven and Jacob swooning at their feet (fig. 6). The drawing is truly psychedelic because Blake’s use of the complementary colors blue and orange (possibly a bit faded with time) and the spiral of the staircase create a visual confusion about surface and depth of the kind found in 1960s rock posters by Victor Moscoso, such as *The Doors, Avalon Ballroom, 4/14–4/15, 1967* (fig. 7).

For a while, Blake continued to find steady work producing engravings for books published by, among others, Joseph Johnson. By 1788, his income was sufficient to allow him to take on an apprentice (the only time he is known to have done so), and in March

OPPOSITE LEFT

OPPOSITE RIGHT
1791 he and Catherine moved from their two-room apartment at No. 28 Poland Street to the village of Lambeth south of Westminster Bridge and occupied an entire row house of their own at No. 13 Hercules Buildings. One of the books he illustrated at about this time was John Gabriel Stedman’s abolitionist *The Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). Johnson’s office at 72 St. Paul’s Churchyard in London was a meeting place for Dissenters, abolitionists, and English Jacobins in the decade after the French Revolution of 1789, and Blake’s disturbing illustrations of atrocities, freely engraved after Stedman’s drawings, such as *A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs from a Gallows* (fig. 8), are likely to have attracted considerable attention. The book’s text and images probably informed Blake’s own illuminated poem about slavery and sex, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), published the same year a bill for abolition of the slave trade was narrowly defeated in the English Parliament. The book begins: “ENSLAV’D, the Daughters of Albion weep: a trembling lamentation / Upon their mountains; in their valleys. Sighs toward America.” Blake’s frontispiece (fig. 9) of the manacled figure of Bromion is a version of the tortured Negro in Stedman’s book, but typically for Blake, this character is himself a slaver and rapist, thus inverting victim and victimizer. In the final plate of *Visions* (fig. 10), paralleling the frontispiece, Bromion is absent and the formerly enslaved Oothoon soars above the sea. Emancipation is now possible: “Arise you little glancing wings, and sing your infant joy! / Arise and drink your bliss, for everything that lives is holy!”

By 1800, Blake’s commissions for engraving had declined and he accepted an invitation from the poet William Hayley to stay at a pretty thatched cottage in Felpham on the Sussex coast. There he wrote the epic poem titled *Milton* but also got into an altercation with a soldier that led to a trial for sedition. Blake was acquitted (Hayley paid his bail and hired him a good lawyer), but he returned to London in 1803 shaken by the experience. Six years later, Blake organized a public exhibition of his works in some rooms above his brother’s hosiery shop. Though it attracted some distinguished visitors, including the writers Charles Lamb and Robert Southey, the exhibition was a fiasco. Nothing sold, not even the apparently patriotic *Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* (fig. 11). The exhibition received just a single, anonymous review in *The Examiner*, which stated that the artist was “an unfortunate lunatic whose personal inoffensiveness secures him from confinement. . . . These [paintings] he calls an exhibition, of which he has published a catalogue, or rather a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibleness, and egregious vanity, [are] the wild effusions of a distempered brain.”

For the rest of his life, Blake struggled to pay his bills. Catherine likely helped out by printing and coloring some of his plates, but without a market for William’s work, the couple was desperately short of money. Blake was fortunate, however, to have a few loyal patrons, notably Thomas Butts, a well-salaried clerk employed by the Commissary General of Musters, who bought from him, all told, some two hundred watercolors and tempera paintings of biblical and Miltonic subjects. Blake was also aided by the artist John Linnell, whom he met in 1818 and who facilitated a commission to engrave on wood.


RIGHT

BELOW
Blowings ther groan’d
A noise, as of a sea in tempest torn
By warring winds. The stormy blast of Hell
With restless fury drives the spirits on,
Whirl’d round and dash’d amain with sore annoy.

... I understood, that to this torment sad
The carnal sinners are condemn’d, in whom
Reason by lust is sway’d.²⁰

Blake depicts the whirlwind as if it were a tide or river flowing from bottom right to upper left, making a coil in the middle like the snake that introduces “Night the Third, Narcissus” in Edward Young’s Night Thoughts (1797) (see Mark Crosby’s essay on “Prophets, Madmen, and Millenarians” in this volume). To the right of the tide of lovers is a smaller wave that carries upward Francesca and her lover Paolo, who reaches down to grasp her arm. Below and to the right of them, Virgil stands aghast as his protégé Dante, so moved by the lovers’ laments, faints and “like a corpse fell to the ground” (line 37). At the upper right is a glowing apparition or perhaps a sunburst revealing a pair of lovers, their lips, arms, and legs conjoined. Unlike his friend John Flaxman, who had illustrated the exact same passage from Dante twenty years earlier, Blake has emphasized the sea of entwined lovers, not the visiting poets.²¹ Far from suffering, they appear likely to continue to enjoy their trysts forever.

Blake lived during a particularly turbulent period in British history. In the 1790s, draconian laws were passed to protect private property and ensure that the revolution in France, begun in 1789 with the storming of the Bastille prison, would not cross the English Channel. Beyond this, the putatively polite society and leading politicians of Georgian England responded to the rise of radicalism in extremist fashion. They organized gangs of thugs to suppress democratic discussion; suspended habeas corpus in 1794; restricted the right of free speech and assembly in 1795; and banned the formation of trade unions in 1799. In this context, Blake’s illuminated books, including Songs of Innocence (1789) (figs. 13, 14a/b), The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–1793), America a Prophecy (1793), Songs of Experience (1794), and The First Book of Urizen (1794), must be seen as independent critical responses to politically repressive times. Each is marked by a quality of disruption, lunacy, and most of all energy. “Energy is eternal delight,”