

THE BEGINNING

America: A Prophecy

William Blake

*'Washington spoke; Friends of America, look over the Atlantic sea;
A bended bow is lifted in heaven, & a heavy iron chain
Descends link by link from Albion's cliffs across the sea to bind
Brothers & sons of America, till our faces pale and yellow;
Heads deprest, voices weak, eyes downcast, hands work-bruis'd,
Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of the whip
Descend to generations that in future times forget.'* p.5: 6–12

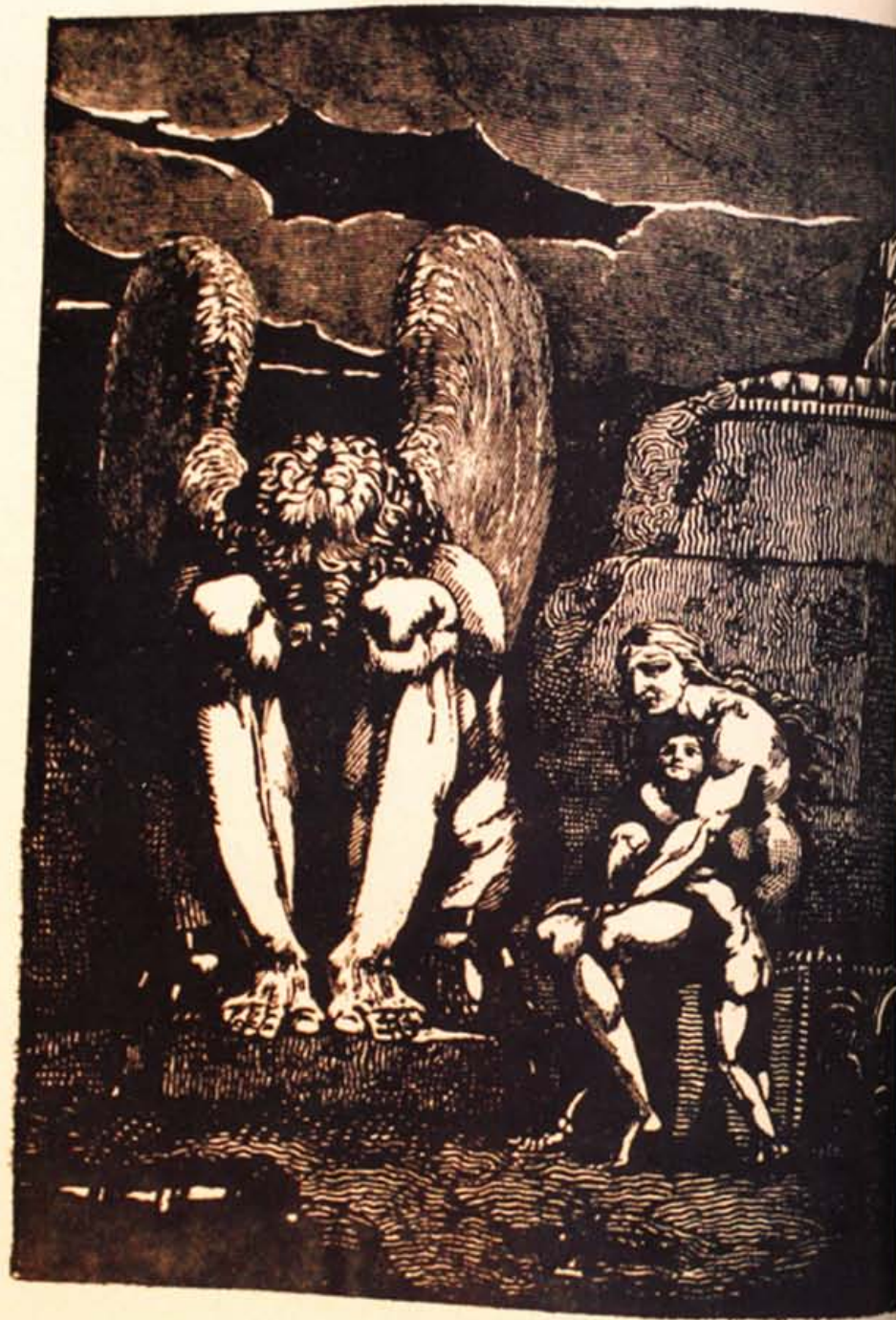
William Blake was the first book artist. As a poet, engraver and printmaker he had the skills to produce his own books. The books, in some cases mammoth works rich with his ideology, political opinions and raw enthusiasm come at us like a tidal wave. They are full of poetry, vision, passion and a deeply human take on the world. His primary intention was to educate and enlighten his readers with an ideology that was both personal and radical, steeped in dissenter Christian philosophy that was current in Europe and Britain at the time. Blake wanted to connect with an audience, which, however, didn't materialise until after his death. To understand his work by reading a single book is not possible. It is, however, important to place him at the beginning. The core of his work rests in his republicanism and his strong sense of social justice.

In 1788 Blake first experimented with relief etching, a printing method that would give him full artistic control over the production of his books. He wanted to cut his production costs; be free of publishers and printers. His wife Catherine became his partner in production. But the risk he took by becoming so independent was that he stepped too far beyond the publishing norm of his time and consequently had to struggle to sell his books and find a readership.

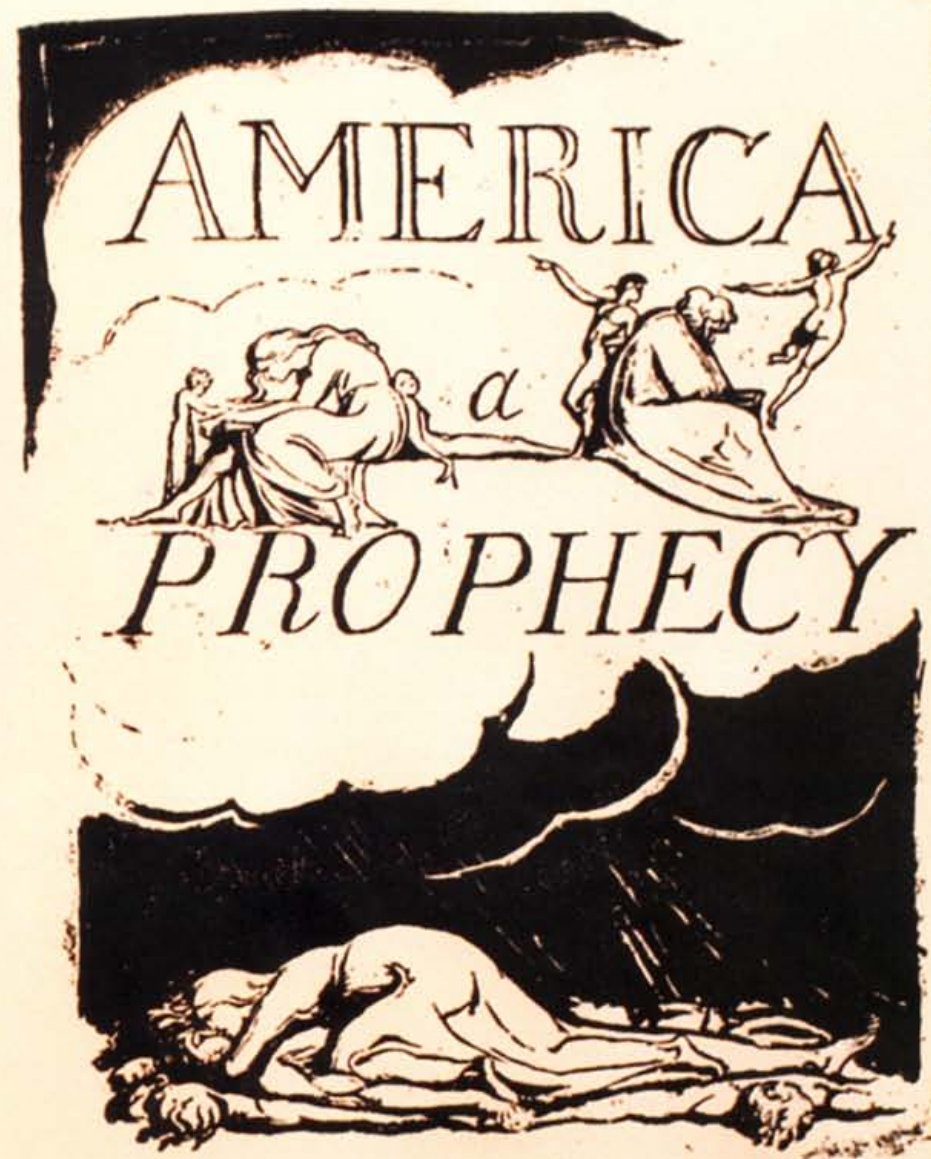
America: A Prophecy was published in 1793. The specific subject is the American War of Independence, also known the Revolutionary War. The war deeply affected Blake and many like-minded Britons, who

were supporters of the American cause. George III was unpopular and his decision to go to war with the American colony only heightened the anger of the populace against him. By and large the Britons considered the Americans to be their brothers so their outrage was more intense, and some even considered it to be a civil war.

However, Blake does not stick to historical facts, and historical figures such as Washington, Franklin, Paine, George III (whom he does not name) rub shoulders with characters from his own developing personal mythology, in particular Orc and Albion, who are his personifications of revolution and England. This cast of characters becomes more comprehensible when we understand the book's theme is actually revolution and the struggle of an oppressed people against a tyrannical ruler. It was a subject Blake had dealt with before in earlier works; among them **The French Revolution** (a book that was never published) and **Gwin, King of Norway** which was published in his first edition of poetry, **Poetical Sketches**. **America** is now grouped in a trilogy know as the Continental Prophecies, with **Europe: A Prophecy**, which heralds revolution on the Continent and **The Song of Los**, which predicts revolution in Asia and Africa. Grouped together in this way there is a suggestion that Blake was 'letting King George know' that the global wave of revolution was sweeping ever closer and the king should sit up and take note.



format: 22.5 x 29 cm
(9 x 11 3/8")
date: facsimile 2011 (1793)
production: letterpress off
photo polymer plates
paper: Magnani Velata Avorio
binding: single sheets,
paper cover
publisher: Ant Press



LAMBETH
Printed by William Blake in the year 1793.

ACROSS TWO WORLD WARS

1918–1950

2

'the stupidest times that have ever been'

Walter Struve

In 1986 the art historian Ernst Gombrich recalled his last encounter with Oskar Kokoschka – in 1970, Kokoschka then 84 years of age – and how Kokoschka had referred to his times as the stupidest that had ever been: 'Das ist die dümmste Zeit die's je gegeben hat.'¹ Eric Hobsbawm could easily have slotted these words into the opening pages of his history of 'the short twentieth century' (1914–91), where a bird's eye view was created by quoting 12 individuals, beginning with the British philosopher from Riga, Isaiah Berlin, who stated:

'I have lived through most of the twentieth century without, I must add, suffering personal hardship. I remember it only as the most terrible century in Western history.'²

When we focus on the first three decades of Hobsbawm's short 20th century – the years across two world wars (1914–45), described by him as 'the thirty-one years' world war'³ – a sobering starting point is the introductory note to Erich Maria Remarque's novel **All Quiet on the Western Front**, published a decade after the First World War had ended.⁴ Here Remarque declared:

'This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by war.'

Ernst Toller, whose open letter to Dr Joseph Goebbels – after the book burnings of May 1933 – is included in this catalogue, had reviewed Remarque's novel in January 1929. 'No modern writer has more magnificently evoked a battle, a gas-attack, hand-to-hand fighting, a visit home on leave', he wrote.⁵ Toller – 'one of the best known and probably the most widely translated German dramatist of the nineteen-twenties'⁶ – had fought on the Western Front, at first a convinced patriot ('The words "Germany", "Fatherland", "War" had a magic power', he later wrote).⁷ In May 1916 he suffered a breakdown; 23 years later, in New York – 'now unsuccessful, bedraggled, bitter, disillusioned, and not even knowing where to find next month's rent', as George Grosz reported to Hermann Borchardt⁸ – he took his own life. In May 1939 days before his death, Toller participated in a World Congress of Writers and spoke at its second session, on 'How Can Culture Survive Exile?'; at a subsequent dinner in honour of the French writer Jules Romains, he introduced each of the German writers present. But first he spoke – simply and touchingly, as Klaus Mann remembered – of German writers who were no longer with them:

'He meant Erich Mühsam and Carl von Ossietzky and Kurt Tucholsky, and a hundred others. He meant the martyrs. He forgot none of the fallen friends. He stood at the festively set table and spoke in praise of

them, movingly, in a humane, beautiful and strong voice.'⁹

Franz Marc, the expressionist painter whose name is linked with that of Wassily Kandinsky, August Macke and The Blue Rider group, also fought on the Western Front, but did not survive its shells. Two days before his death in March 1916, he wrote:

'We are of course part of this gigantic story in the West, gruesome and monstrous, as words will never be able to describe ... For days I have seen nothing but the most awful scenes that the human mind can imagine.'¹⁰

His friend, the poet Elsa Lasker-Schüler, wrote:

'He was the one who could still hear the animals speak; and he transfigured their uncomprehended souls ... I never saw a painter with such seriousness, or with such gentleness.'¹¹

The bitter waves of destruction and cynicism unleashed were to be analysed by a host of artists and thinkers, including the Austrian writer Hermann Broch, who 'considered himself a mathematician, a philosopher, and a poet, pretty much in this order'¹² Scattered into the third volume of his novel, **The Sleepwalkers**, is an essay in 10 chapters – 'The Disintegration of Values' – where Broch began as follows:

'... it is as if the monstrous reality of war had blotted out the reality of the world. Fantasy has

become logical reality, but reality evolves the most a-logical phantasmagoria. An age that is softer and more cowardly than any preceding age suffocates in waves of blood and poison-gas; nations of bank clerks and profiteers hurl themselves upon barbed wire; a well-organized humanitarianism avails to hinder nothing, but calls itself the Red Cross and prepares artificial limbs for the victims; towns starve and coin money out of their own hunger; spectacled school-teachers lead storm-troops; city dwellers live in caves; factory hands and other civilians crawl out on reconnoitring duty, and in the end, once they are back in safety, apply their artificial limbs once more to the making of profits. Amid a blurring of all forms, in a twilight of apathetic uncertainty brooding over a ghostly world, man like a lost child gropes his way by the help of a small frail thread of logic through a dream landscape that he calls reality and that is nothing but a nightmare to him.'¹³

For Hannah Arendt – writing in 1949 – Broch's work, along with that of Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, James Joyce and William Faulkner, were the decisive novels of the 20th century.¹⁴ Because their work confronted rather than entertained, Arendt saw that 'the greatest modern novelists have begun to share the poets' and philosophers' confinement to a relatively small, select circle of readers'; she saw also that 'good second-rate production, which is as far removed from kitsch as it is from great art,