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Further Thoughts on Night Thoughts

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being illustrated, and ending with an account of the specific features of the illustration. I gather that Grant has no problem with my final characterization of the design as "visionary, enthusiastic, and apocalyptic"; what he doesn't care for, evidently, is my suggestion that Young's moon-goddess (rather than the canonical figure of "Narcissa," named on the title page) is the textual reference point. He says that this is too complicated to go into, that it's all dealt with elsewhere, and cites a "well-established tradition" to support the identification of the woman with Narcissa. My claim is that the fact of Blake's allusion to Young's moon-goddess is quite uncomplicated (though its meaning may be rather subtle), that it ought to be at least mentioned in the commentary (not in an uncited essay), and that "well-

established traditions" ought to be presented with some critical scrutiny. This one seems to have arisen from a neglect of Young's text.

As to my "unscholarly" poking of fun at the enumeration of details: I deny any "dyspathy" with "exact reporting." But I still think an obsession with the presence or absence of Death's Big Toe in Blake's designs is an occasion for a certain amount of humor, especially when its sublime significance is represented in the grand proportions of full size print in a lavish edition like this. All I was asking for was a certain sense of proportion, both in the scholarly apparatus and the critical commentary. I continue to hope that something like this will prevail in the forthcoming supplement to the Clarendon edition of the *Night Thoughts*.

Further Thoughts on *Night Thoughts*

Morton D. Paley

John Grant's discussion article falls into three parts: a consideration of the reliability of the published *Night Thoughts* reproductions, some new information and conjecture, and a defense of his mode of interpreting the designs. On the first subject, there is little more to be said. Comparing these reproductions against the originals in the British Museum Print Room was the most depressing experience I have ever had as a book reviewer. How the Clarendon Press, one of the world's few truly great scholarly publishers, came to accept such poor work is beyond my comprehension; that they did dismay me as it does many others. There is no point in quibbling about this, as Grant concedes the major objections that his reviewers have made.

Regarding the new material in Grant's essay, I am concerned about three matters. One is the reversal of images from water color to engraving in some instances, something that has a fairly simple explanation. If we imagine Blake's procedure, we can see that when he executed the water colors he had no idea as to whether the pictures finally selected for engraving would be on recto or verso pages. He could only know, with the obvious exception of title pages, whether the pictures were recto or verso in the edition that he in effect created by using Dodsley's printed pages. However, since Edwards' letterpress would have been printed first and the leaves later passed through a plate printer's press,¹ Blake would have known whether the pictures to be engraved were to be recto or verso simply by counting lines. The

text was not centered on the page but was offset to the left on recto pages and to the right on verso pages wherever there were illustrations. This was in accordance with standard book production procedures of the period—a subject of which Grant takes little cognizance. In some instances, therefore, reversal was necessary for formal reasons. *All the designs that were reversed in engraving were on pages that had to be changed from recto to verso or vice versa*, as follows: 14, 20, 24, 31, 87, 94, 99, 121, 125, 143, 148, and 153—a total of twelve engravings out of the forty-three published.

The incredible theory that the NT 6 water color followed the engraving is one of those mare's nests too frequently encountered in the *Night Thoughts* edition ("grotesque coloration," as Grant now admits, being another). All the differences that Grant notes between NT 6 and engraving 1E are there—and all can be accounted for by Mr. Blake's revising and re-revising on the copper plate using his burnisher. Blake was if anything unusually fecund in his improvisations on the plate. No *ur-NT 6* is necessary to account for changes in the mother's nose or in the angels' hands or in any of the other details that Grant mentions. We normally assume that drawing precedes engraving unless it can be proved otherwise; by this assumption we now know the New Zealand set of *Job* to have been produced by someone other than Blake, since engraving preceded drawing in this instance, as Bo Lindberg has shown. As if to becloud the issue, Grant laboriously proves that the state of the engraving that obviously is the first state is—the first state. At this point, a careful reperusal of Essick's *William Blake Printmaker* would be in order.

Third, did Blake color *any* copy of the Edwards edition? There is no certain proof that he did. From time to time the *Night Thoughts* editors admit this, yet

Grant says that "Type I colored copies are normally *not* by Blake" (emphasis his) and that "Type II colored copies" are "probably not by Blake." No one doubts this, yet there is something about the peculiar wording that makes one sense in these references to a classification system itself seriously open to question an insinuation that *some* copy actually was colored by Blake. This is the time to assert that for all we know Blake may have colored one or more copies of the Edwards *Night Thoughts*, but it has never been proved that he did so. Again, the New Zealand set of *Job* ought to offer a cautionary example.

Last comes the question of a general approach to Blake's *Night Thoughts*. In my 1969 essay I offered one perspective: that the designs reflect in many ways the system of Zoas and Emanations that Blake was beginning to conceive for *Vala*. Grant rather over-simplifies my argument in his comments, but I will leave it for the reader to judge its usefulness.² But Grant also challenges me to *disprove* his schematization of the first *Night's* illustrations in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*.³ At first this seems rather hard, since Grant also says that the schematization really depends on his commentary on all 537 designs—a commentary to which, if it exists, I have certainly had no opportunity to refer. Nevertheless, let me offer one instance from "Envisioning the First *Night Thoughts*," comprising water colors 13-17, designated by Grant as Group III, and entitled by him "The Circle of Destiny and Edward Young."

No. 13, showing a winged boy emerging from the cracked Mundane Shell is called "Male Aspiration" by Grant, although we know that the meaning Blake attached to the very similar image in *For Children* (no. 6, plate 8) was birth: "At length for hatching ripe he bursts the shell." Furthermore, since each of Grant's "units" in *Night I* must begin with "a major incursion into the scene of a superhuman character from another realm of existence,"⁴ this image must become one! Even Grant admits that in this case "the symmetry is complicated by the fact"⁵—but in this case is there any symmetry at all?

The caption "Young's Distractions" certainly could apply to *NT* 14, where the picture shows the poet dreaming his dreams in accordance with Young's text. But no. 15, which shows the poet looking into an open grave under a cypress tree is not so clearly one of "Young's Distractions," unless this term is to be trotted out for every graveyard contemplation in this *Graveyard* poem. As for 16, the young woman rising from a broken egg shell does obviously relate to no. 13, but as a parallel image of birth, not of Grant's superimposed "Female Aspiration." Young's own lines on this page are in fact very close to Blake's *For Children* caption:

Embryos we must be, till we burst the Shell,
Yon ambient, azure shell, and spring to Life . . .

And why isn't *this* "a major incursion into the scene of a superhuman character from another realm of existence"? Because it doesn't begin one of Grant's "units"?

In 17 we see a caterpillar-man inside a chained circle, looking at himself in a mirror while a female figure looks on appalled. This is Blake's image of the spiritual condition of Young as described on this *Night Thoughts* page:

How, like a Worm, was I wrapt round and round
In silken thought, which reptile *Fancy* spun,
Till darken'd *Reason* lay quite clouded o'er . . .

This is *Young's* error; there is no convincing reason to designate it as "Masculine Error" or to pair it with 16 as a sub-group called "Female Aspiration, Masculine Error." Nor does the title "The Circle of Destiny and Edward Young" appear particularly useful when applied to the entire "unit," even if one accepts Grant's simplistic definition of the Circle of Destiny ("promising new beginnings fade away into ancient errors and perennial frustrations"⁶) or perhaps *especially* if one accepts this definition, since if the term "Circle of Destiny" is to be used for every such *Night Thoughts* situation, it is not going to mean very much. (Incidentally, it's strange to find an author who objects so strenuously to the presence of Zoas and Emanations in the *Night Thoughts* series here employing a term Blake uses only in *The Four Zoas*.)

It would be tedious to go on. These five pictures don't compose a "unit" in any meaningful sense. Grant's schematization has never gained currency among Blake scholars first of all because of its arbitrariness and secondly for what may be an even more important reason. Viewing the *Night Thoughts* series as a huge linear construction to be divided into linear sub-compartments, each with its own catchy title is an enormous disservice to Blake's artistic accomplishment. It is as if Blake were to be conceived as a Urizenic plodder spinning out his pictorial themes like the caterpillar man of *NT* 16. Is such a model as this really to serve for the projected "Commentary" on *Night Thoughts*? If so, the text volume of this edition is likely to prove as great a disappointment as the plates have been.

¹ This was of course the usual printing procedure, in this instance illustrated by the existence of a copy of the Edwards edition bearing only the letterpress. See G.E. Bentley, Jr., "Young's *Night Thoughts* (London: R. Edwards, 1797): A New Unillustrated State," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, 14 (1980), 34-35.

² "Blake's *Night Thoughts*: an Exploration of the Fallen World," *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1969), pp. 131-57.

³ "Envisioning the First *Night Thoughts*," *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 304-35.

⁴ "Envisioning the First *Night Thoughts*," p. 308.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Envisioning the First *Night Thoughts*," p. 318.