

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Robert Essick and Jenijoy La Belle, eds., *Night Thoughts on the Complaint and Consolation*

Karen Mulhallen

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 11, Issue 1, Summer 1977, pp. 41-42



Reviews

Robert Essick and Jenijoy La Belle, editors. *Night Thoughts or the Complaint and the Consolation*. Illustrated by William Blake. Text by Edward Young. New York: Dover, 1975. pp. xxx + 95. \$4.00 paper.



Reviewed by Karen Mulhallen

This publication consists of the complete text of Richard Edwards' 1797 edition of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, accompanied by reproductions, reduced 35% from the originals, of Blake's forty three engravings, as well as editorial material--a two-page introduction, a thirteen page critical commentary, and a two-page annotated bibliography. Though the 1797 *Night Thoughts* isn't scarce--copies appear each season at auction and in booksellers' catalogues--it has become increasingly costly, and its importance for any study of Blake's art, as well as its intrinsic beauty, have made a facsimile desirable. There is still such a need, but the present edition, along with the descriptive bibliographic notes in Easson and Essick's *William Blake: Book Illustrator*, is a useful substitute for the original.

Let's consider the quality of the reproductions in the present edition before turning to the usefulness of the supplementary material and commentary. Something of the compelling beauty of Blake's original engravings was conveyed in the *Library Companion* (1824) by Thomas Frognall Dibdin who recounted how "amidst the wild uproar of the wintry elements--when piping winds are howling for entrance round every corner of the turretted chamber" he loved to read "the text of Young which has been embellished by the pencil of Blake." Scale was an arresting feature of Blake's originals--especially when viewed next to Stothard's or even Westall's designs. The reduction in the present edition makes the overall page appear busy, gray and even claustrophobic. The airy personification of Night on page 1, for example, has no room to soar. The figure of the sleepless shepherd-poet becomes more decorative than engaging. And when Death, with his emblems, appears to the sleepless poet, on page 7, the urgency conveyed by the original scene is absent. Airy supernaturalish, dynamic confrontations, the recognition of giant forms who inhabit at once several dimensions--these aspects, ineffables perhaps, are distorted by reduction. Of course, to claim that on page [17] Time's scythe--in the original as long as this reader's forearm--is decoratively tame rather than menacing is rather subjective. But when, as on page 37, in the ambiguous depiction of Christ as a good Samaritan, the mood of a scene is conveyed by hanging that scene on a vast tree, which expresses the oppressiveness of the vegetable world, then diminution becomes a critical element of interpretation.

Two last niggling points about the printing of this Dover edition. Because of the complex and

remarkable way the 1797 *Night Thoughts* was printed, there are numerous variations in the copies of the first edition, and my comparison of this reproduction with the 1797 edition in the Toronto Public Library turned up an anticipated number of variations, such as the presence of inscriptions on different pages. An unexpected difference, however, was found in the use of borders in the reproduction. We can see this clearly on page 24, where the word "Pub." is cut off in Essick's original inscription, which should, therefore, begin "June" at the exact lefthand edge of the page. Instead, there's a border of approximately 7/16 of an inch. Such borders--appearing along the bottom and the top, as well as, more irregularly, along the inner and outer edges--make Blake's designs, which no longer occupy the whole space, rather picturesque, as borders and frames tend to do. Christ triumphant, page [65], who leaps up in the original design, is now tamed. Finally, although the tonal quality is generally not problematic, on page 80 the feeling of reflected light on the man who prays by the seashore, and the delicate gradations in tone in the whole engraving, have disappeared, so that the man, who looks awe-struck in the original, appears fearful in the reproduction.

The editorial material--introduction, commentary, and bibliography--is excellent, concise, and sensitive to Blake's iconography. And it also acknowledges Young's importance for Blake. The plate-by-plate commentary is non-partisan and stimulating. In discussing, for example, the hunter Nimrod on page 70, Essick and Labelle point to both the Genesis reference and iconographic resemblances in Blake's later and earlier work. Similarly, they present several translations for the Hebrew letters on the scroll of the King of Terrors, page 63. Yet, partly as a result of brevity, and partly because of problems in their critical stance, a few "little monsters" of caution appear.

Even had we not Blake's enormous output of *Night Thought* designs as evidence, we need to assume that Blake respected the poet whose work he agreed to illustrate. And the poem enjoyed a considerable contemporary reputation. The *Night Thoughts* was an international best-seller and a major artistic force--influencing Goethe's *Werther* and Klopstock's *Messiah*. Burns quoted the poem in his letters; Coleridge and Wordsworth echoed it in verse. I think that Essick and La Belle overstress the illustrations where Blake criticizes Young. And when Blake does criticize, it is quite legitimate in his task as an illustrator. To criticize is not to disparage. On page 72, for example, there is a moving hymn by Young in which he would "drink the spirit of the golden day." Surely here the poet has not, as the editors contend, "forgot the visionary themes of salvation and resurrection." And the editors might allow that on page 80 the poet is rejecting the "nameless HE" for Christ, a position Blake would commend.

Let's leave the question of attitude and look briefly at tactical issues. First a caveat against explaining any of Blake's designs with quotations from his poetry of a later period. Essick and Labelle unnecessarily quote *Milton* plate 26, to

explicate the title page to the first Night; also against assuming Blake's "iconographic consistency" (p. xiii). How would the editors explain the cup held by the child about to be cut down by Time, on page 26? Such a cup is often associated in Blake with bacchic figures and with the Scarlet Whore. Hence, it is ordinarily a sinister icon. Odd that it appears in the hands of a child. It is true that the editors express a mild reservation about iconographic consistency (p. viii), but the assumption should be that Blake adapted his images to his context.

The editors' commendable compression of iconographic material has led to small omissions and overstatements. The design, on page 90, of Christ touching an "afflicted" man is said to be "almost identical" to the frontispiece for Blake's *There Is No Natural Religion*, second series, and to those two figures in the lower right corner of "The Divine Image" in *Songs of Innocence*. The "same basic motif" is pointed out in "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Innocence*. Yet, among these designs the editors should have drawn an important distinction. In "The Chimney Sweeper" and the *Night Thoughts* designs the two figures touch; in "The Divine Image" and *There Is No Natural Religion* they do not. Hence, while all four designs share the theme of resurrection, in only two is there a touch which humanizes the action.

The process of iconographic selection is always complex. Very rarely in this edition does that selection appear indelicate. It does seem significant, however, that the "spiritual presences," "Angels," on page 93, are wingless. In the *Night Thoughts* Blake often uses winged creatures for ascension, and wingless beings for visitations.

I think that it is more often in the designs with clear Biblical referents (particularly pages [43], 72, 80, 88) that the editors' interpretations seem to demand the reader's critical attention. On the title page for the third Night, the woman clothed in the sun is pregnant. Through her pregnancy she may escape the endless revolutions of time, turn time to eternity. (Nonetheless, the verso in the water colors shows her even more a prisoner.) On page 88, where Jacob wrestles with an "angel," it is the equality of man and God that Blake seems to stress, an equality quite consistent with the Biblical account and with Blake's emphasis throughout the *Night Thoughts*. (It's an emphasis which also shows Blake's preparedness for the Bible illustrations done for Butts.)

Can we offer an overall interpretation for the *Night Thoughts* engravings? The editors don't suggest one, though many of their comments are interpretative. The repetition of images and of the figures of Death, Time, and Christ do unify the designs and suggest, as Fuseli wrote of Blake's designs for Blair's *Grave*, that they "form of themselves a most interesting Poem." With one exception all of the Christ images appear in the fourth Night. Thus, the grouping of the figures suggests a progression from the world of Time and Death to a world informed by Christ--a progression in keeping with the movement of the poem.

Since the Dover edition is for the general reader, its annotated bibliography is quite properly short. It is short as well because there's been little work done on the *Night Thoughts*. The major studies are listed, though some interesting brief mentions of the *Night Thoughts*, such as John Grant's in *Blake Newsletter* 13, pp. 23-24, are omitted. The first entry in the chronological bibliography is out of order. If the editors wish to consider Thomas Edwards as their first entry, his name should be listed, along with the titles of his catalogues. I must quarrel as well with the fifth entry, which dismisses Adeline Butterworth's *William Blake, Mystic*. Butterworth was, after all, the first to reproduce both the engravings and the full text of the first two Nights. Her reproductions of the engravings are by no means "poor-quality"; the paper stock on which they are printed is superior to that of the Dover edition.

Despite its minor failings, many of them deriving, as I have suggested, from compression and the exigencies of commercial printing, Essick and La Belle have performed a service for students of Blake. Like Robespierre, we can all go to the guillotine with the *Night Thoughts*, now "embellished by the pencil of Blake," in our pockets.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell by William Blake. A reproduction, with introduction and commentary by Geoffrey Keynes. Oxford University Press, London & New York, in association with The Trianon Press, Paris. \$16.95 cloth; \$7.95 paper.



Reviewed by John Beer

This new edition of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, issued as it is at a reasonable price, marks an important step in making Blake's work available to the ordinary reader in the form in which he meant it to be seen. For the Blake specialist who already has access to existing facsimiles through a good library it will serve a further important purpose. In recent years it has become clear that a new dimension of Blake's work opens when one looks at the various copies which he executed throughout his life, since almost all of them show interesting variations from one another. It is in some ways a subsidiary enterprise, since there is no evidence that these various executions betray any fundamental change of mind about a book, once constructed, but they can still give evidence of the continuing processes of his mind: the themes which he may now wish to emphasize by rearrangement, by the insertion of an additional plate or plates, or by the different perspectives on a text which can be given through the choice of different colors or the emphasis on particular visual motifs.

The pioneers in this enterprise have been David Erdman and his associates, who have described such variations in detail, but there is a limit to what an individual scholar can do, particularly when, as must often happen, he is forced to carry some differences in his head from one copy to another. It is even more difficult to convey them to other readers