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Reply to John Grant

W. J. T. Mitchell

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Reply to John Grant

W.J.T. Mitchell

Several reviewers of the *Clarendon Night Thoughts* found the reproductions inadequate, the scholarship uneven, and the interpretive commentary tendentious and unconvincing. John Grant's lengthy reply to these reviews concedes that there is considerable merit to all these complaints, and yet manages also to convey the impression that an injustice has been done. Sometimes the injustice comes about because of things the editors inadvertently left out of their book: my review, for instance, might not have objected to the neglect of crucial details in the commentary if the editors "had not carelessly neglected a footnote referring to an article by one of the editors" on the problem in question. At other times Grant's complaint is that the reviewers are hostile to Blake, or that they have inadequate theories (despite the accuracy of their specific objections), or (in my case) that they fail to do the editors' job for them, and write a satisfactory commentary rather than objecting to inadequacies in the one provided by the Clarendon edition. In all cases the strategy is one of apparent concession, followed by an attack on the motives or the intellectual and scholarly competence of the reviewers. It is not, on

the whole, pleasant reading.

Let me take up first the issue of hostility to Blake. Grant delivers the opinion that ninety percent of the *Night Thoughts* illustrations are "fine pictures," and suggests that anyone (like David Bindman) who disagrees with this judgment is engaged in the sort of "Grecian mocks" that Blake despised. Despite Grant's opening promise to "clarify standards and deviations from them," his assertion invokes no discernible standard but his own authority as one who has been deeply involved in the study of the *Night Thoughts* designs for many years. The question of the relative quality of these designs both within Blake's oeuvre, and in the context of late eighteenth century book illustration, is an interesting one, but it is not likely to be settled by accusing anyone who dares to question Blake's accomplishment of uttering "Grecian mocks." Until this problem is subjected to more sober discussion, my instinct is to trust the judgment of a well-informed art historian who, like David Bindman, has demonstrated his ability to look at Blake's pictures sympathetically.

Grant's defense of the commentary on the *Night Thoughts* designs opens up the most interesting and potentially fruitful part of this discussion, because this aspect of the project, unlike the reproductions and the scholarly apparatus, has yet to be published and is still subject to correction. My review attempted, no doubt unsuccessfully, to offer some friendly advice about ways

to make this commentary more useful to both the general reader and the specialist. I recommended that the commentary pay more attention to the specific connections of Blake's designs with Young's text, that it try to say something more definite about the art historical context of Blake's designs, and that it bring Blake's other work to bear with some precision and discrimination. This last bit of advice was directed at what I saw as an unfortunate tendency to construct "neo-Blakean fables" around sequences of designs by importing the familiar clichés of Blake's "system" or monomyth. I see that Detlef Dörrbecker arrived independently at the same feeling of dissatisfaction with what he calls "pseudo-Blakean associations."

Grant's reply to this objection concedes only the stylistic point about the tremulous religiosity of the commentary ("English was not always kept up. Occasionally a dismally religious tone obtrudes. Such lapses should have been corrected"). But the style, I'm afraid, is not so easily separated from the substance. The real problem, which I did not see until Grant assembled the various reviews in his reply, is the programmatic theory about Blake's designs that Grant is pushing in his commentary. Grant may well be right that there was a program in the sense in which Gombrich and others discern a program in Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling. He is wrong that "the tide of taste is running against" this way of reading pictures in art history or anywhere else. No self-respecting art historian would ignore a program, especially one preserved in explicit, extant documentary instructions. Blake's own "Last Judgment" paintings are "programmatic" in this sense, as his "Descriptions of the Last Judgment" and "A Vision of the Last Judgment" clearly demonstrate. The problem with applying the programmatic model to the *Night Thoughts* designs is twofold: (1) we have no textual evidence of Blake's program (if any) for this series; (2) a series of illustrations and ornaments physically conjoined to a text is a rather different sort of creature from a series of panels, tableaus, and murals in an architectural setting with no textual accompaniment.

I don't raise these objections to prove the impossibility of there being a program behind Blake's *Night Thoughts* designs, only to suggest that any such claim has to be argued, not asserted as a matter of faith, and that it will always be, at best, a controversial, somewhat speculative theory. It is all too easy to construct narratives out of a sequence of pictures, especially if that narrative concerns such vague matters as "fallen man" and "regeneration," and far too difficult to prove or disprove that any such narrative is "correct." Grant makes much of the fact (if it is a fact) that "nobody has shown that it [his theory] doesn't work." If this is a sample of the "standards" that govern what goes into the Clarendon *Night Thoughts* then we are in deep trouble. Surely a

theory ought to have more going for it than the fact that it hasn't been disproved. Nobody bothered to disprove the phlogiston theory either; it just dropped into oblivion because it wasn't interesting or productive.

My suggestion was that the commentary at least begin with the specific connections between Blake's pictures and Young's text. I offered this as a matter of common sense with the expectation that the editors probably had this in mind all along. But now Grant informs us that his "theory of pictorial units" (what I read as "neo-Blakean fables") "remains on the docket for the *Night Thoughts* commentary because nobody has shown that it doesn't work." I urge the editors to reconsider this matter, and to reflect on the indisputable fact that this commentary will be canonized by their edition; it will remain as the basic point of departure for generations of Blake scholars and aficionados. It ought to be a relatively restrained, conservative document, providing the reader with reliable information, specific references, and with speculations about Blake's "program" clearly identified as such.

I must conclude by saying just a word about John Grant's suggestions that I manipulated the evidence in my review to make it appear that I was "discovering" something that was in his text already, and that my poking fun at some of the descriptive enumeration was "unscholarly." On the first point, there is simply a misunderstanding. I never claimed that it was any "discovery" of mine (or anybody else's) that the female figure of NT 78 is drawn from the iconography of the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation. I took this as uncontroversial, public knowledge. The problem, I tried to suggest, was to say something about the meaning of this motif as an illustration to Young. More specifically, I suggested that Blake was starting from Young's figure of the Duchess of Portland as the Greek moon-goddess "Cynthia! Cilene! Phebe!" in Night III, which this design introduces, and that his design "transforms Young's Greek lunar goddess into her Christian analogue, the Virgin as Queen of Heaven, the 'woman clothed with the sun' described in Revelation 12 with 'the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars,' contending with 'that old serpent, called the Devil.'" I went on to suggest that

The fact that Phebe was usually depicted with the moon on her head astride a chariot drawn by serpents makes Blake's transformation of Young's figure an iconographic "inversion" in a very precise sense. Blake's title-page emerges, in the light of these facts, as a witty illumination of Young's text, a transformation of his stoic, latitudinarian morality, stale Greek mythology, and urbane social flattery into a visionary, enthusiastic, and apocalyptic statement. And he does this, we should note, not against the spirit of Young's text, but as a way of freeing what he sees latent in it.

Now, no doubt, I'm more partial to my own speculative interpretations than to John Grant's, but these at least have the advantage of starting with the text

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 dismays 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