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# Review of Edward Young's 'Night Thoughts, with Illustrations by William Blake'

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## Edward Young's *Night Thoughts, with Illustrations by William Blake.* (Book Review)

In late 1794 William Blake was commissioned by the publisher Richard Edwards to produce watercolor designs for a planned illustrated edition of the then-popular poem by Edward Young entitled *The Complaint; or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*, known today (when it is mentioned at all) as *Night Thoughts*.<sup>[2]</sup> The poem itself, divided into nine sections, or “nights,” was written and published between 1741 (when Young started writing it) and 1745, the final Night being some three times longer than the first. Though Richard Edwards would only ever publish the first four nights of the poem, which included forty-three of Blake’s designs, engraved by Blake himself, William Blake produced an astonishing 537 designs. This represents by far Blake’s most voluminous single pictorial work.

The set of designs is certainly interesting for what they offer visually, providing as they do innumerable motifs and figures that reappear throughout Blake’s work. However, the occasion of Blake’s executing the designs, some of which he would also later engrave, for the work of another poet, provides an interesting instance of the intersection of art and commerce that remained of particular concern to Blake himself, and continues to be equally interesting to Blake scholars. Additionally, the material arrangements within which Blake’s performed the work (materiality being yet another consistent theme that Blake returned to) are sufficiently complicated to be of continued interest to scholars. And by material arrangements I refer quite literally to the fact that Blake was provided by Edwards with pages of Whatman paper (roughly 420mm by 325mm) from which had been cut a window (slightly off-center). Into this “letterpress” window were glued pages containing the printed text of Young’s poem. The pages as Blake received them in fact contained multiple editions of the poem, ranging in publication date from 1742 to 1745 (dates are provided on the printed title pages for each Night). This scheme was decidedly different from the usual approach to illustrated editions—for which, at least in 1795, there was a considerable market—which involved providing full page illustrations of text on facing pages. In other words, text and image occupied their own, very separate spaces. Edwards’ illustrated edition of Young’s *Night Thoughts*, however, would provide the printed text in a more or less central window, set off with a thin red-lined border, surrounded on the same page by illustration. Thus text and design, though obviously not physically intruding on one another, nonetheless contest for the reader’s eye much more so than is the case when illustration and text are presented on facing pages. Blake’s designs often dominate the page, in fact, as his figures are monumental in scale, occupying an

entire margin from top to bottom. Just as often, Blake implies a colossal figure who is in fact only visible “around” the letterpress window. In other words, the body of such a figure is provided by the printed text itself. A particularly striking example is provided on page 12 of *Night IV* in which Christ is figured such that his outstretched arms are visible in the left and right margins of the page. His robes and feet are visible at bottom, and his head is figured to the top (facing left in the watercolor and right in the engraving). His entire body is the text of Young’s poem. As often, an implied body in action is partially occluded by the letterpress window (for example, the title page to *Night II* shows Death preparing to unleash one of his “darts,” though we can see only part of his body, separated from the hand that holds the weapon). As such, the reader can begin to feel that the printed text is a nuisance, an impediment to the energy of the supposedly secondary illustrations. The interplay of center and margin is striking throughout the designs.

With the 2005 publication of the entire set of designs by the Folio Society, Blake scholars and enthusiasts have access to the full body of work in color, barring of course an extended research stay to grapple with the weighty boxes that have contained the originals in the British Museum Prints and Drawings Department since 1929. And so the publication of such a set (two-volumes, along with a volume of page by page commentary by Robyn Hamlyn) should be celebrated for the wider access it now affords to such an impressive suite of Blake’s work. As is noted in the second volume of the set, “This facsimile edition of Young’s *Night Thoughts* has been reproduced by digital photography from the original edition in the British Museum, London, each folio comprising a letterpress page framed by a pen-and-watercolour drawing [···] The edition consists of 1000 numbered copies for sale to members of the Folio Society and 20 lettered copies which are not for sale” (n. pag). The British Museum copy of the set is lettered “H.”

It should be noted that in 1980, the Oxford University Press (sometimes referred to as Clarendon) published a two-volume set, edited by John Grant, Edward Rose, and Michael Tolley, with David Erdman as coordinating editor, that reproduced all of the 537 designs, though in black and white and at a reduced size from the originals; some of the designs were also reproduced in color. Also included was a facsimile reproduction of *Night Thoughts* as it was published in 1797 (from the collection of Robert N. Essick), along with pages from Blake’s *VALA* (or what later became *The Four Zoas*) manuscript, many of the pages of which were produced on proof sheets from the *Night Thoughts* project. The introduction to the volume suggested that a commentary was in the works; however, none ever appeared. And so while the 1980 edition of Blake’s designs for *Night Thoughts* provided less than ideal reproductions of the designs themselves, it did make study of the larger collection of related

projects—the 537 designs for *Night Thoughts*, Edwards' 1797 *Night Thoughts* edition (with the 43 plates engraved by Blake), and pages of Blake's manuscript *The Four Zoas*—relatively easy. Notably, each of these projects (the watercolors, engravings, and manuscript) seem deeply connected, particularly in the material sense, and yet ironically independent of one another. To take just one example, in some ways the 1797 illustrated *Night Thoughts* bears little relationship to the designs as Blake produced them, since many of the engravings were included on pages of text with which they had *not* been associated when Blake made the designs. Consider further that many commentators argue for the influence that Young's poem, or at least the designs Blake created for that poem, had on *VALA/The Four Zoas*. After all, in using proof sheets as he began what he initially entitled *VALA*, Blake faced designs he himself had created for Young's work. It would be easy to imagine the considerable influence those designs must have had as Blake created his own long poem, which, like Young's, was divided into nights. However, a number of the manuscript pages, distant from one another in Blake's text, are in fact executed on pages containing various proof states of the *same* design (for example, Night IV:53 and Night VI:71 of Blake's *The Four Zoas* are both drafted on proofs of what became the *Night Thoughts* Night I:7 engraving). In other words, Blake was faced with more or less the same image as he drafted his poem.

But this is to digress into the many speculative possibilities that the designs, the 1797 *Night Thoughts*, and Blake's manuscript poem seem to endlessly provide. The focus here is the 2005 Folio Society's production of the *Night Thoughts* designs; suffice it to say that the 1980 Oxford press effort offered a particular kind of approach, less interested in providing ideal visual quality and more with providing access to a suite of related works. And when it comes to visual quality, there is no comparison to be made between the 1980 edition and the Folio Society edition of 2005.

For its sheer beauty, not to mention the access it gives to Blake as a water-*colorist* (which the 1980 edition of the designs suggests, but not particularly well), this new Folio Society set of Blake's designs is incomparable. All 537 of the designs are reproduced, in what is indicated in the second volume as "facsimile," using digital photography undertaken by the British Museum. (Which means that the entire set of designs now exists digitally, and will hopefully be publicly available online at some point in the future.) One wonders, however, just how readily available to scholars the Folio Society edition itself will be given the considerable price tag of \$1700 (USD).<sup>[3]</sup>

It is thus finally puzzling that for such a painstakingly produced volume—hundreds of digital photographs checked and rechecked, attention to details of paper, binding, and presentation, not to mention the hefty price—some rather obvious problems remain:

## Coloring

For a facsimile whose primary improvement over the 1980 edition of the designs is that it provides Blake's work in full color, there are some pages in which coloring, when compared side-by-side with the originals, is noticeably off. Problems of coloring are not evident throughout the designs, but are particularly apparent in pages involving a range of tones from dark to light. Often, the facsimile colors appear more washed out, and noticeably duller, than in the original. A prime example is the title page to *Night the Third* (a version of which is actually used on the cover of volume two of the set), on which is figured a coiling "ouroboros"—a serpent eating, or about to eat, its own tail—encircling the letterpress box. Also, the title character of this night, Narcissa, occupies the right side of the page. She is astride a crescent moon (she seems to leap up from the moon, the curve of which faces to the top of the page). Hamlyn's commentary on this design suggests that "the brightness of the sun or Phoebus/Apollo [is] beyond her" (52). She appears, in other words, surrounded by a radiant light, in stark contrast to the dark tints of the serpent. Hamlyn says further, and more generally of Blake's coloring, "sometimes Blake's use of color, limited but so often brilliant in a uniquely Blakean way, observes conventional symbolism [...] the bright yellow (that is, golden) of the sun and skies is used as a sign of God, his heaven and eternity." He makes particular mention of "the often brilliant colours of serpents and snakes" (xix-xx). Hamlyn even outlines the "conventional symbolism" of coloring: green is the vegetative earth, virtue is white, death is black, scarlet is sin, and blue is faith and constancy. In fact, Hamlyn is here overly programmatic (a more general problem with the commentary, I believe), but the point is clear that specifics of coloring matter, not least the contrasting dark and lights and their symbolic import. This is particularly evident in the title page for *Night the Third*.

In the original design for the title page, the serpent is, in many places, deeply colored in dark, black pigment, though with many variations in the application of the watercolor. By contrast, the "brightness" (to use Hamlyn's term) of the sun behind Narcissa is clearly evident. However, the facsimile provides more a dull, grey-ish wash in many places on the serpent's body. And the patches of color on the serpent—red, yellow, and blue—do not come out as effectively in the facsimile as in the original (although the blue is a relatively accurate match). Equally disappointing is the yellow associated with Narcissa and her solar nimbus. The original yellow is noticeably brighter than the dullish yellow (almost a brown) that is provided in the facsimile.

Of course, watercolor is particularly difficult to reproduce, since the color in an original production is partly a result of the coloring of the paper itself showing through. But because the set of designs represents in and of itself a pictorial narrative sequence, in addition to its being a set of designs

to accompany a poem with narrative aspects (though Young's poem is more didactic and expository than narrative), issues of coloring are of the utmost importance, since coloring patterns will emerge and change as the sequence progresses. Within the designs it is thus crucial to represent the coloring of the originals as closely as possible, less for the rather static symbolic system that Hamlyn suggests, and more for effects of contrast and variation within and between pages.

Notably, there are a number of color schemes that seem to have been employed in the published edition of the poem with illustrations in 1797. In one system the figure of "Death" is pictured on the title page in a robe of white; in another system he is pictured in a robe of green. (This has led to adoption of the rather amusing descriptors "green death" and "white death" to identify the color schemes.) There is no secure evidence as to Blake's involvement as the colorist for all of the copies, though copies Q and R are inscribed "This Copy was coloured for me by Mr. Blake" and "This copy col[ored] by W.Blake" respectively (Bentley 173). He may have colored some himself, maybe with the aid of his wife Catherine, or he may have provided a model for a professional colorist to follow—but such radical differences in a central character's coloring should be caution enough against an overly systematic approach to color symbolism.

Overall, in terms of color, while there are some of the facsimile pages that do not do justice to their original counterparts, the entire set does provide very good access to Blake as a colorist. (And we recall that this is a vast improvement over the mostly black and white edition of 1980.) One could provide other examples of individual facsimile pages which do not represent their original counterpart's coloring well, but on the whole (short of an extended period of study in the British Museum Prints and Drawings department) the facsimile provides trustworthy evidence of Blake's approach to the designs, as a colorist, over the span of the more than five hundred illustrations. It should also be noted that the facsimile is of sufficient quality that many of the initial pencil sketches that Blake started on the design pages are still quite visible; many are not easy to see, even in the originals.

A more concerning issue, related to coloring, is the choice to produce facsimile pages which do not, in fact, provide the entire page as it was eventually bound after Blake executed the designs:

## **Borders and Margins**

It should be pointed out first and foremost that the title of the Folio Society edition purports to offer Young's *Night Thoughts* with Blake's *Designs*. And this is, to be strictly accurate, what the facsimile provides: Young's text is available in the letterpress window cut into the larger page, and Blake's designs occupy the considerable marginal area around the letterpress (though in some cases, as with frontispieces, Blake had access to the entire space of the page). After Blake had completed all the

designs, Edwards had the entire set bound in two, hefty volumes. Part of this procedure involved mounting the design pages on even larger sheets of paper, along with the addition of a colored border, keyed in more or less obvious ways to the coloring of the design it encloses. The bound pages (that is, the pages as they are accessible at the British Museum, though now dis-bound and mounted individually) measure about 38.5cm wide x 52cm tall. The facsimile pages in the Folio Society edition are about 33cm wide (the binding makes it hard to get an exact measurement) x 49cm. In other words, there is considerable marginal space (including the colored borders) that is simply not provided in the facsimile.

Again, to be fair, what the facsimile promises is Blake's "designs"—and that is what it provides. However, it is difficult to understand why, given the intensive labor involved in digitally photographing each and every page, the border and marginal material would not have been included. Not least of what's troubling is that, as above, the entire set of designs is digitally (though not yet publicly) available; however, the digital photographs do not include the entire page space, limited as they are to the watercolor designs themselves.

Of course Blake's design is of the utmost importance and having the design is what most scholars will likely be interested in. But there is considerable activity going on in the various margins on many of the pages, very little of which is included in the facsimile. In fact, inclusion of manuscript activity happens more by default: if it occurs in the space of either the letterpress box or Blake's watercolor page, it is visible (though not always noted in Hamlyn's commentary). If such activity happened to occur in the pages as they were mounted for binding, then it is not available. It is, of course, hard to predict how this marginal activity might be useful to future scholars, but since it is not provided in the facsimile, any line of enquiry that might arise from it will have to depend on the originals. (It is worth noting the bibliographic fervor of the Blake industry, so the uses of manuscript annotations within a set of designs may be many and diverse. Such things are impossible to foresee.) I here offer a sense of the various annotations in the *Night Thoughts* text and designs, indicating whether or not the annotations are included in the facsimile:

Within the letterpress box (and as such included in the facsimile) there are, most obviously, line numbers, written in a bold hand in ink. The numbers (running up by tens) are inaccurate and are often occluded by the framing page. As such they must have been added before Richard Edwards cut his copy (or copies) of Young's poem and mounted each text box onto a larger page (the page on which Blake was to execute his designs). Grant, Rose, and Tolley suggest that it could well have been Young who numbered the lines, though there is no particular evidence for this. Why would Young number lines of

his own poem—a purportedly autographed copy no less? A later sale catalogue for the two-volume design set would indicate that the blank page with Young’s autograph had been lost due to “inattention” by the binder (quoted in Grant, Rose, and Tolley, 85 n.9).

There are also numerous corrections to the text (visible in the facsimile), again some of which may be by Young himself, though it is equally possible that later owners provided textual corrections. Some of these are particularly interesting, such as the change of “Heaven” (struck through) to “Kings” in page 44 of Night II, which changes the line “Wits spare not Heaven” to “Wits spare not Kings.” G.E. Bentley, in his Blake biography, *The Stranger from Paradise*, remarks that Blake as an illustrator was “an extraordinary choice for such a Church-and-King publisher as Richard Edwards” (163), though it is useful to note that this line did not appear in the 1797 edition that Edwards actually published.

Many corrections are simply changes in punctuation (likely not by Young since they often do more harm than good, like those on V:34 which change question marks to exclamation points and alter the correct “hers” to “her’s”). On many of the text pages one can find individual lines marked with X’s (in pencil) or with asterisks (some pencil, some ink). Close study, especially under magnification, reveals that where the X’s cross the outer edge of the letterpress box they are not occluded by the framing page; they were thus applied after mounting and so are likely Blake’s or Edward’s indication of which line is to be illustrated in the design (see V:41, for example). Some sigla, in pencil and often close to an “x,” within the letterpress *are* occluded and thus were marked before mounting (see VII:19, for example). We must be careful then in ascribing textual markings to Blake (or Edwards, for that matter) as always indicating lines to be illustrated/engraved. They may have been reader’s marks that occurred years before the text ever arrived into Edwards’ hands. Sigla more like asterisks than “x’s,” also usually (but not always, see IX:14) *do* get occluded when they cross the edge of the letterpress box, thus indicating they were added before mounting and are quite likely not by Blake. They could still be the work of Richard Edwards, or just as easily the marks of previous owners. In addition to letterpress sigla, there are numerous instances of underlining within the text, always in thick, though not dark, pencil. Again, this is likely Blake, if we assume that he underlined and X’ed for the same reasons, maybe even at the same time, though there is no evidence to prove this supposition.

A more substantial marginal notation occurs on page 24 of Night I. In the right margin, next to the final lines of the text, someone has written “we penetrate” in red pencil. It is a surprising note, to say the least; however, it is meant only to indicate the catchphrase for the following page of text (page 25, Night I) which begins, “We penetrate.” Below the red pencil annotation, this time in graphite but seemingly by the same hand, is added “see page 25 in pencil.” This annotation is to draw the reader’s

attention (we can assume a bookbinder's attention) to the page number penciled at the top right of Night I, page 25, which reads "25." Oddly, there is another series of page numbers, running consecutively, penciled at the bottom center of the pages. The marginal notations (in red and in graphite) are visible in the facsimile. The penciled page numbers, however, are not. Night I page 24 also features an extended manuscript note in the footer. This is not provided in the facsimile. The note begins in red: "Page 25 is wrong plac[ed]." It continues in pencil: "as are also several others, I have [or this could be an individual's name] number[ed] the Corner of the Pages as they ought to follow \_ to the End of Night the Fourth\_\_\_."

And while it may seem a fairly banal occurrence—pages were shuffled out of order, then someone corrected the problem—it actually presents quite a puzzle. Most obviously, why the multiple numbering schemes? More generally, the notations point to an aspect of the dealings between Edwards (possibly Blake) and the binder who put the two-volume set of designs together. (The binder named in the original binding was "Benedict." Charles Ramsden, in his *London Bookbinders 1780-1840*, identifies Francis Benedict I and II along with Charles working out of 38 Arundel St., Southhampton Bldgs, Chancery Lane in London.) And while I can offer no definitive conclusion, the problem itself does not even arise if one has recourse to the facsimile alone, in that all but the "we penetrate" and "see page 25 in pencil" are not provided. Indeed, these notations may be extremely confusing without the further manuscript context; and Hamlyn does not mention anything in his commentary.

We must assume that the notes in red pencil (one in the right margin of the text, the other at bottom) were done first, for reason of position and because the pencil notation that continues in the bottom seems to respond to the first note. Somebody writes "we penetrate" in red as a catchphrase for the following page and also "Page 25 is wrong plac[ed]." (The "p" of "penetrate" and "plac[ed]" are extremely similar.) Perhaps the bottom annotation was made first, when the reader discovered that the text following page 24 was not correct. He turned back to page 24 and wrote "Page 25 is wrong plac[ed]." To fix the problem, he found page 25, put it back in place and added the catchphrase "we penetrate" to page 24. (Though one wonders why the catchphrase would be necessary if the pages were back in order.) The reader continues on, only to discover a number of other pages out of order. This reader numbers, in pencil, the pages in the upper corner (recto and verso) starting at Night I page 25 (with the number 25, visible in the original) continuing on consecutively, though now in many places clipped from when the page was bound, until the bizarre occurrence at Night II page 19 of a page number that looks like 127 (the 7 is slightly cut off at the page edge, but it is certainly a 3-digit number). The manuscript page numbering that has been running at the bottom of the pages is now at 54, though

the next page, 55, is seemingly by a different hand. The numbering (both bottom center and upper corner) on Night II:25 is inverted, the sheet having been upside down when numbered, as is the case on Night II:26. (So presumably both sets of page numbers were done at the same time.) Night II:28 is oriented correctly, numbered 61 at bottom (though someone has added, in manuscript all-caps, "VERSO"); the top left number is 138. By the time we get to the title page to Night III, the upper numbering has returned to a more reasonable "77" (the bottom now "78"). Another odd page numbering happens at Night IV:12. There are two numbers penciled at the page bottom: 121 (seemingly the consecutive running number) and a smaller "61" below that. The design itself has been marked "Eng[raved]," though it was engraved in reverse for the published edition. The multiple pagination runs to the title page of Night V (did the annotator forget to stop after Night IV ended?); the preceding page, entitled "A Proposal," written by the printer R. Dodsley and not part of Young's poem, is numbered 157 at bottom and 76 in upper left (the "7" cut by page trimming). The Night V title page numbering includes the correct 158 at bottom and a surprising 153 in the upper right.

Who is responsible for these various, and seemingly erratic, numberings? Was Blake involved? What was the life of these pages at that point, sometime in 1797 or 1798, as they were shuffled between publisher, binder, and potentially others? Were there other possible groupings that someone (Edwards? Blake? Benedict the bookbinder?) may have imagined for various pages? We know that Richard Edwards himself was leaving the book trade (ultimately to take up a sinecure in Minorca), but future possible projects may have easily been taken up by his brothers, James and Thomas. By 1802, Richard himself was back in possession of the designs, signing his name and address, "High Elms," in both volumes. Also, Blake was paid a miniscule amount for his considerable work on the designs. Some have suggested that further payment would have been forthcoming had further engravings been required for later Nights. Is it at all possible, though, that Blake and Edwards had considered entirely alternate uses for some of the pages and/or designs? I am not, after all, convinced that the notations correcting page sequence were not perhaps done by Blake, or that he did not still have a hand in the project at that point. Admittedly, the content of the notes is not something Blake would likely have been concerned with (much more likely to be Edwards on that score), but consider this pair of related notations, not available in the facsimile, in a hand very similar to that responsible for the page order notations.

On page 19 of Night III somebody has made the pencil manuscript note (preceded by an encircled 'x': "so *Night* is personified in the 9<sup>th</sup> Night line 558." Below this is written, "A Starry Crown thy Raven Brow adorns." The second manuscript "Night" here, referring to the section of the poem, not to

the character, is nearly identical to the manuscript "Night" in the annotation to l:24 ("...to the End of Night the Fourth"), and I am convinced it is the same hand. Within the printed text someone has underlined "Darkness" and, in the following line, "Raven wing." This last is marked with an encircled 'x' (the same as that which begins the footer notation). Turning to Night IX (page 28), we find a siglum next to the printed line "A starry Crown thy *Raven-Brow* adorns" ("*Raven-Brow*" is underlined in pencil, as is "NIGHT" two lines above). In manuscript at the bottom of the page, in pencil, we find: "see also Night 3<sup>rd</sup> Line 360 Darkness personified." Oddly, the line number should be 260, not 360. This is the only set of paired annotations of its kind within the text, calling from an early Night (III) all the way to the final Night (IX). (There are minimal annotations in the printed text of Night VII which direct the reader to what the annotator must have felt were corresponding lines; for example, the line on VII:49, "Behold this Midnight Glory; Worlds on Worlds!" is marked in brown ink with an "x" and is followed by "p.61.L.12"; the companion line, on page 61, reads "Turn up this Eye, survey this Midnight Scene," annotated with "p.49.L.995." Each of these is mildly occluded by the water color paper and thus was done prior to Edwards' mounting.)

Perhaps it is the subject matter of 'night' that has caught the annotator's interest, given the title of the entire work, *Night Thoughts*. But who would care about this? It is hard not to believe that Blake himself would be most particularly interested in this kind of "linked" description, since it seems to suggest how one might visualize "Night" itself as a character (which of course Blake did for the designs on the respective pages). And yet the annotations are on the mounting page, presumably made after all the designs were complete (unless we are prepared to revise theories about when Edwards had Blake's watercolors mounted). Were these annotations not by but *for* Blake? Perhaps the collected pages were returned to him in order that he might prepare a general title page for the entire 2-volume bound set (although what became the general title page was the design he'd initially made for Night IV, "The Christian Triumph"). To add to the mystery, the manuscript hand responsible for the notes on l:24 about page numbering is very much like that responsible for the Night III-Night IX linked annotations, despite the import of the annotation being, or at least seeming to be, entirely different: the former concerned with material arrangement, the latter concerned with interpretation.

In a decidedly different hand from those mentioned above, and in ink, an owner previous to Richard Edwards (perhaps Young himself, though these would be odd annotations to one's own published verse) has annotated a collection of pages within Night VII, all with quotations from Addison's 1773 *Cato: A Tragedy* (Hamlyn 172). As part of the text, these are visible in the facsimile, sometimes occluded by the watercolor page, though never so as to impede legibility. These "Cato" annotations are

all followed by a slight flourish, a kind of annotator's signature, perhaps. And though it is indecipherable, it is helpful in identifying the various hands at work in the designs. Another "signed" annotation, for example, occurs on VII:27. At the footer of the text someone has written "x Nebuchadnezzar." Within the printed text, Young's phrase "proud Eastern" has been marked with a companion "x." There also happens to be a penciled "x" at this line. It is hard to know how, or if, the ink annotation ("Nebuchadnezzar") influenced Blake, but the design for this page is borrowed from his large color print of that title, "Nebuchadnezzar"; (Hamlyn mentions this "reworking" in his commentary, page xv, though does not connect the annotation.) The figure in the design is shown licking the earth whereas the color print figure looks out from the frame; both figures are positioned similarly, however, and certain features are quite clear, such as the long toe nails, the long hair, and the articulated body. Of course, the verse itself, regardless of the annotation, could certainly have suggested the subject matter.

Sense, or fatigue, being the better part of valor I will not attempt to offer a final, conclusive explanation of these various hands at work in the design pages. Let it be enough to reiterate that little of this arises from the facsimile, as nothing marginal beyond Young's text and Blake's watercolor is included.

## The Commentary

In their "History of the Designs," part of the Oxford press 1980 edition of the designs, Grant, Rose, and Tolley write of the watercolors, "their great number, and indeed the very fertility of Blake's invention in these designs, have confounded the occasional bold spirit attempting to study them one by one" (3). Robyn Hamlyn, in his volume of commentary that accompanies the Folio Society facsimile takes what is perhaps the most reasonable approach to a page by page discussion of the works in view of their ability to confound even the boldest and headache resistant of spirits: he offers a lucid, compact reading of each design with particular attention to historical precedent in Blake's choice of figures and figural arrangement, textual sources—classical and biblical—for both Young's text and Blake's design, and close attention to Young's text itself for how it might help to elucidate Blake illustrations (quite an irony given the fact that Blake was to have "illustrated" Young's work); often, for example, Hamlyn will draw attention to parts of the poem well removed from the page at hand for what they may offer in deciphering Blake's meaning. Hamlyn is also careful to point out where one illustration comments on another, ironically or not, again sometimes materially distant within the overall set. As Hamlyn notes, Blake "looked backwards and forwards in the poem as he shaped his design" (vii). It is Hamlyn's stated aim to reach a general audience: "a principal aim of this commentary has been to look at the poet and artist together, so that a wide readership will be able to understand and appreciate the text and its

illustrations in parallel and across the entire work” (vii). It will have to be an extremely well read “wide readership” if some of the commentary, as steeped in allusion as it is, is to aid in appreciation.

It might actually be argued that Hamlyn’s approach makes Blake seem overly conventional, almost too steeped (mired?) in traditional allusion. This is often the case when scholarship takes as its principle aim to facilitate “understanding,” since, especially in Blake’s case, the material does not always line up in ways that are satisfying to rational, orderly ways of making sense. Were it not for the actual designs, so attractively weird in and of themselves sometimes, not to mention the recourse we have to Blake’s other works (one thinks, for example, of the various scenes of flying genitalia and mutual masturbation that adorn the *VALA/Four Zoas* manuscript), Blake may come off as rather too concerned with historical precedent in his work. Again though, it must be made clear: Hamlyn’s historicizing, contextualizing approach is a valid and useful one, especially given the sheer scope of the designs on which they propose to comment.

What the page by page commentary could stand more of, if anything, it seems, is greater focus on the degree to which Blake’s illustrations so often subvert the text itself, not to mention the potential self-referentiality that arises from the material situation in which Blake found himself: inventing designs for another author’s work. In his commentary on the Night I title page verso design, Hamlyn points out that “the motif of the scroll, book, sheet of paper or writing tablet, sometimes with a writer or reader working on it, occurs throughout Blake’s illustrations” (7). This constellation of related items occurs with equal frequency in Blake’s own poetic and artistic work, almost always fraught with complications; books particularly are modes of communication but also modes of control.

Hamlyn notes “how carefully Blake usually followed Edward Young’s words,” showing “respect for the author and his text” (vii). Yet page by page we do not always see a straightforward, sympathetic reading. Indeed, on multiple pages Blake has taken care to indicate, as part of his design, books or scrolls with the title of “Night Thoughts” (or at least enough text that is legible to suggest undoubtedly the title of the work at hand). For example, on page 69 of Night VIII a fiery character tears a bound volume in two (this act provides the title to my book on Blake’s marginalia, *The Torn Book: UnReading William Blake’s Marginalia*). Hamlyn writes that “Lucifer is seen in hell tearing the *Night Thoughts* apart” (259-60). The identification of Lucifer is drawn from the text of Young’s poem. On the visible pages of the book is legible enough of “Night” (in ink over pencil) and “Thoughts” (in pencil) to make the reference clear. Fiery figures are so often creative figures in Blake’s art, however, it is tempting to understand something slightly different going on—or if not different, then at least “other.” That is, the illustration works faithfully with the text; yet it also invites alternate readings. The text is not destroyed and

forgotten (as Young's verse relays) but is infused with a creative energy, since so often Blake figures creativity as a fiery, though initially destructive, force. In Blake's *America: A Prophecy*, for example, the pages of the stony ten commandments are torn apart and scattered to the desert winds:

The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,  
What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness:  
That stony law I stamp to dust: and scatter religion abroad  
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves;  
But they shall rot on desart sands, & consume in bottomless deeps;  
To make the desarts blossom, & the deeps shrink to their fountains,  
And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof.

Erdman 54

Here the torn pages do not disappear for good; rather they grow to fuel the fires of revolution. Could Blake so completely disconnect from imagery he'd employed in his own work when fashioning designs for Young's text? It seems unlikely. And while Hamlyn often draws attention to where Blake imports images from his previous work (like "Nebuchadnezzar," mentioned above), there is little speculation as to how this self-referentiality actually operates in terms of Young's poem.

Another illustrative example (and one that points to just how odd the designs can be sometimes) is the design Blake executed for the verso of the final page of *Night IV* on which is printed "A Proposal," written by the printer R. Dodsley (responsible for printing, among other things, early editions of *Night Thoughts*). In the "Proposal," completely unconnected from Young's poem, Dodsley seeks subscriptions for a set of cheap volumes of "Old Dramatic Plays" by the likes of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Fletcher. These volumes "shall not exceed Sixpence each play." Blake has provided a fairly simple (though finished in ink and water-color) illustration, for no particular reason other than his own desire to fill the space, and what must have been his compulsion to comment on so blatant an intrusion of commerce into his artistic work (quite literally "into" his artistic work). Pictured at bottom are two swans, each holding what appear to be coins in their bills. They float on a wash of blue water. Up and to the left are visible smaller, airborne birds. Three of these appear to be headed upwards, with coins in their bills (though proportionally over-sized coins). Four other birds are pictured at left, at least one clearly heading back down; none of these holds a coin. Hamlyn comments that the "swan is traditionally linked with great poets [...] Blake is perhaps being ironic: while a few writers are 'for all time', as Jonson wrote of Shakespeare, the survival of Dodsley's 'Old Dramatic Writers' rested on their work being bought for not more than 'Sixpence each Play.'" (100). Hamlyn offers further comment on the swan

allusion but does not extend his discussion to the more obvious irony: the meager sum Blake himself—a poet and painter—is being paid to illustrate another poet’s work (a dead poet’s work at that). Part of the joke must be that swans are imagined to be delivering coins up to the poets and playwrights in “heaven” (or at least upwards on the page), yet in reality the money is going to publishers and printers like Dodsley himself, for it is surely he who stands to gain financially (and not Shakespeare) if his “proposal” were to garner subscribers.

Finally though, Hamlyn’s commentary is a useful guide, of a particular kind, for those looking to attempt travel through the hundreds of watercolor designs. Of course there is rarely mention of the annotating activity I’ve outlined above, but that is largely because the annotations are not included in the facsimile, and so this is hardly a fault to which we can hold the accompanying commentary. One might prefer more comment on the ample pencil pentimenti on so many of the pages, but the finished designs themselves require the lion’s share of attention.

As Hamlyn himself notes, “there is still plenty of scope for a much more comprehensive single commentary on the illustrations” (vii). And as with any good guidebook, it is by no means a replacement for the actual visit. Nor, do I suspect, was it ever meant as such.

### **Compression and Sizing**

One final item is worth noting, though it, like some of what is above, points to a rather limited problem within the overall success of an undertaking of this kind. On some of the facsimile pages there is a noticeable distortion of the image (particularly of figural positions) due to vertical compression of the page. In other words, some facsimile pages are not as tall as they should be. The size of the original watercolor designs is roughly 420mm x 325mm. (After mounting, the page size became 520 x 395mm.) The facsimile page is very close to 420mm x 330mm (exact horizontal measurement is difficult due to binding). This produces a slight vertical compression, since the facsimile page is wider than the original. It is a mere 5mm but has a noticeable affect on the angle of outstretched arms for example (a repeated motif in the designs). This compression can also affect the relationship of figures in a given design, along with how the letterpress window sits on the page. The letterpress window on the title page to *Night III*, for example, measures accurately vertically (247mm in both original and facsimile) but is skewed on the horizontal (173mm in the facsimile and 168mm in the original). On the verso to the title page, the width of the original letterpress box measures 153/4mm while the facsimile letterpress box measures 162mm.

I mention this more because it is surprising in an edition so carefully put together and so expensive in its production. And it should be pointed out that problems of relative positioning as small as these are only evident if one compares the facsimile and the original side by side.

## Conclusion

While I have spent considerable space here pointing out minor flaws of sizing, slightly more significant problems of coloring, and what I feel is the considerable problem of reproducing the designs without their attendant mountings (complete with colored border and intriguing marginal material), it must be said that the Folio Society facsimile, along with Hamlyn's page by page commentary, will be a welcome and valuable resource for those wishing to give further study to this most impressive of Blakean productions. Now a costly research trip to the British Museum can be replaced with a more affordable visit to the nearest well-funded library. And as Hamlyn rightly points out, Blake's designs for Young's poem offer exciting and no doubt fertile ground for further scholarship. The Folio Society facsimile makes such scholarship a very real possibility.

## Notes

[1]

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[2]

Bentley, in *The Stranger from Paradise*, suggests that "the beginning of the project was probably in 1794" (165); the section on Blake's designs for *Night Thoughts* in Bentley's biography is a reworking of his much longer article, "Richard Edwards, Publisher of Church-and-King Pamphlets and of William Blake." Grant, Rose, and Tolley write that "In about 1795, in his thirty-seventh year, William Blake began work on what was to be his most extensive undertaking as a pictorial artist [the designs]" (3).

[3]

This was the price quoted to me by Suzanne Holdsworth of the Folio Society in September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006 correspondence. Membership in the society is free, but requires that a certain number of volumes be purchased in the future.

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