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Imitation in Blake's Night Thoughts Illustrations

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When discussing Blake's designs, scholars tend to focus on his originality and his development of a personal mythology. Jean Hagstrum, for example, says that "Blake's [use of] emblem creates its deep and mysterious resonances . . . because it is profoundly traditional" and "freshly original." "Had he not gone beyond that influence [of eighteenth-century personification] . . . he would not have been the Blake who transformed Thomson's Winter into Urizen and Gray's Spring into Los. . . ." Like Hagstrum, Mary Lynn Johnson discusses Blake's artistic originality, exploring the "borderland" between the allegorical and the symbolic uses of emblems where he "passes from allegory to myth." In a similar vein, Janet Warner asserts that Blake worked "with personification, linking personification to myth." More recently, Stephen C. Behrendt says that "where Blake appears indebted . . . visually to a predecessor, he takes only the icon itself, infusing it with different values and new implications that leave him less a debtor than a genuine original."

But are these values and implications always expressed through new and personal symbolism? Does Blake move from allegory to his own mythology in every instance of his use of emblem? Behrendt appears to suggest otherwise when he says regarding Blake's designs for Paradise Lost that his "primary focus . . . is on Milton's poem as he read it," not on his personal myth although elements of it can be detected in the designs.

Like Behrendt, David Bindman finds that Blake could be imitative and still maintain his identity and integrity as an artist since painters during his time "did not regard borrowing [from other artists] as shameful, but on the contrary . . . with pride." Indeed, Blake's fellow artist Henry Fuseli openly advocated the use of figures from other artists:

“Horace . . . when treating on the use of poetic words, tells his pupils, that the adoption of an old word, rendered novel by a skilful construction with others, will entitle the poet to the praise of original diction. The same will be granted to the judicious adoption of figures in painting.”

Such adoption is precisely what Judith Wardle finds in several of Blake’s designs: “Blake’s general iconographical practice was to repeat and vary traditional images in such a way that the original concept came to be modified, and thus he assimilated images into his personal iconographic style. However, in some instances he simply adopted the conventional way of representing an idea, following [Cesare] Ripa and his successors.” Wardle explores several similarities between images by Ripa and his followers and illustrations by Blake. But apparently not wishing to deemphasize Blake’s originality and mythology, she overlooks some parallels, especially (but not solely) between Blake’s *Night Thoughts* designs and George Richardson’s *Iconology* (1778–79), which is a composite mostly of earlier iconologies, in particular, Ripa’s—the “summa of iconography.” This essay brings these parallels to light and, in doing so, suggests that Blake’s imitation could at times be creative and perceptive without necessarily involving his personal symbolism or mythology.

Before examining the parallels between the *Night Thoughts* designs and the *Iconology*, it is important to understand his views regarding imitation since he was a highly principled artist, who considered hypocrisy and plagiarism the worst vices. Whenever imitation involved learning “the Language of Art,” he encouraged it as necessary training for the artist. As Irene Chayes explains, “The value of the exercise lay in the act, not in the product per se.” But when imitation merely copied nature or infringed on personal genius or employed bad artistic models, then it was a serious mistake. Thus, regarding the imitation of nature, Blake asked rhetorically in his *Descriptive Catalogue*: “. . . shall Painting be confined to the sordid drudgery of facsimile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances . . . ?” (p. 541). Concerning Bacon’s advice in the *Essays*, “In the discharge of thy place set before thee the best examples,” Blake was even more critical: “Here is nothing of Thy own Original Genius but only Imitation what Folly” (p. 623). The true artist reveals his

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8. Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), p. 163. The first illustrated edition of Ripa’s *Iconologia* appeared in 1603, and up to 1669 there were several other Italian editions involving significant expansion by Ripa and other iconologists. The first English edition, a popularized abridgement, was published in London by P. Tempest in 1709. References to this edition are cited by page numbers in parentheses. Richardson’s edition of the *Iconology* was printed in two volumes in London for G. Scott. References to this edition are cited by volume and page numbers in parentheses.


original genius by imitating his imagination, and the "distinguishing mark" of its mental copies is "clear and determinate outline" or the lineament, as Morris Eaves notes. 11 Regarding the imitation of bad artistic models, Blake was also critical as his comments on Rubens and Correggio indicate (p. 580). But to imitate great artists like Michaelangelo, Raphael, and Durer is a good way to learn taste. Such imitation is not easy, though; one must know first how to draw: "... the style of Alb Durers Histries & the old Engravers ... cannot be imitated by any one who does not understand Drawing" (p. 572).

Since Blake understood drawing, he was not above advocating imitation in his own work—imitation that involved personal choice and creativity. For example, in a letter to William Hayley on September 28, 1804, he wrote:

I cannot help suggesting an Idea which has struck me very forcibly that the Tobit & Tobias [a painting by Romney] in your bedchamber would make a very beautiful Engraving done in the same manner as the Head of Cowper [engraved by Blake] after Lawrence. The Heads to be finishd & the figures left exactly in imitation of the first strokes of the Painter. The Expression of those truly Pathetic heads would then be transmitted to the Public a singular Monument of Romneys Genius in that Highest branch of Art. (p. 755)

As this passage indicates, Blake was quite open to combinations of individual creativity and close imitation. The heads of Tobit and Tobias would be "finishd" after his own manner, as with the head of Cowper, and the figures would be "left exactly in imitation of the first strokes" of Romney. The outcome, based on Blake's judgments and decisions as a genuine artist, would achieve that which any true imitation should accomplish over servile copy work: something new and expressive to the public and also a "Monument" to the original.

In his Public Address, Blake expressed his desire to revive and outdo his artistic models and not merely copy them: "To recover Art has been the business of my life to the Florentine Original & if possible to go beyond that Original. ... To Imitate I abhore" (p. 580). Blake's ideas on imitation may seem confusing and even contradictory. But they are not. Indeed, they may have been partly influenced by the views of Fuseli, who differentiated types of imitation as follows:

Our language, or rather those who use it, generally confound ... "copy" with "imitation," though essentially different in operation and meaning. Precision of eye and obedience of hand are the requisites of the former, without the least pretence to choice, what to select what to reject; whilst choice directed by judgment or taste constitutes the essence of imitation, and alone can raise the most dextrous copyist to the noble rank of artist. 12

Although Blake sometimes used the words "copy" and "imitation" inter-

12. Fuseli, p. 6. Fuseli's translation of Johann J. Winckelmann's Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks, which Blake had in his library, makes a similar distinction (p. 256): "... copying we call the slavish crawling of the hand and eyes, after a certain model: whereas reasonable imitation just takes the hint, in order to work by itself ... " (London: Printed for the Translator, 1765).
changeably, he knew the difference between slavish precision and creative imitation, and it was the latter that he practiced in some of the Night Thoughts illustrations.  

From the ninth illustration on in the series, Blake portrayed Night as a woman dressed usually in a thick dark robe. His depictions conform mostly to the text although they are imaginative as in NT 10, where Night’s association with the grave (I, 33) is indicated both by a skull near her feet and by her complete envelopment in a robe as if it were a shroud. In NT 446 (fig. 1), however, Blake ventured even further beyond the text, rendering Night in swirling garments that are in various shades of grey and greyish black. Not only is her crown star-studded, as the text mentions (558), but so is her dress, making her comparable to “Night” (fig. 2) in the Iconology, where her dress is likewise dark yet dotted with stars. (In each of these illustrations, the right foot of Night is also exposed.) While Blake drew stars on Night’s dress perhaps to conform to Young’s text (566), the veil and wings of “Night” in the Iconology appear in NT 501 (fig. 3), where the text makes no reference to a veil and only a tangential one to wings—Night’s “Daughter-Train, so swift of Wing” (1731).

According to the verbal description of “Night” in Richardson’s Iconology, “Her black dress [is] adorned with stars, [to show that night] is not without its splendour” (I, 20). NT 446 captures Night’s splendors by giving her also a striking pose that implies soaring and an expression that implies wonder. Blake, though he did not need it, probably appreciated Richardson’s encouragement of “the ingenious painter . . . to strengthen and distinguish” the attributes of specific emblems, particularly in the lineaments of the face” (I, iii). But besides adding to the emblem of “Night,” Blake being judiciously selective made some noteworthy deletions, specifically the poppies in her hair and the children in her arms. He eliminated the poppies to imply night’s attraction to Young by disassociating it from sleep, which the poppies signify (I, 20) and which Young usually did not appreciate. The children were deleted because they would be redundant, for they signify “death and sleep” (I, 20), the former being Young’s oft-repeated hope and the latter his oft-repeated fear.

Young longed for death (I, 7, 26–27, 32; III, 495; IV, 18–34) in order to escape the pains of this life (anxiety, illness, the loss of loved ones, etc.) and begin the joys of eternity. Unfortunately, as his poem shows, he also feared “dread Eternity”: “how surely mine!” (I, 64). According to C. V. Wicker, Young wrote the Night Thoughts partly as a “corrective” to the optimism of Pope, whom he otherwise seems to have admired (see I,

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14. This line, which describes Night’s “gloomy Grandeurs” (564) as “a sable Curtain starr’d with Gold,” is marked as the subject of the next illustration (NT 447), which depicts in its background a dark curtain with bright yellow stars on it.
Fig. 1. *Night Thoughts* 446. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees of The British Museum.
Fig. 2. “Night,” Richardson's *Iconology*. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
Fig. 3. *Night Thoughts* 501. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees of The British Museum.
454–58), but his dominant focus was on “night and the tomb, the emptiness of human life, and the fear of what comes after.”15 As a result, his poem refers frequently to despondency and despair (see, for example, I, 9–17; II, 44; VI, 11–17; VIII, 1225). Blake recognized, of course, Young’s Christianity and reflected it in the illustrations, especially the magnificent frontispieces on the Resurrection (NT 1 and 264).16 Blake recognized also, however, the depth of Young’s spectrous mind. Thus, he used the frightening emblem of “Despair” from the Iconology (fig. 4) to portray Despair in NT 411 (fig. 5). His portrayal reflects the general sentiment of the text, which refers to the “reeking Blade” of abject souls (VIII, 1230); but as in “Despair” in the Iconology the blade has not yet been plunged.

In the watercolor and the emblem, Despair wields a dagger in the right hand, which is fully extended upward in Blake’s design and closer to the chest in the emblem. Both figures look up with poignant expressions although Blake created the lineaments of desperation much more effectively. The main differences between the watercolor and the emblem are that in the former Despair is a man, whose left hand also is extended upward, whereas in the latter it is a woman, whose left hand bears “a branch of cypress,” which because of its bitterness signifies despair (II, 27). In addition, on the ground in front of her there is a broken compass—a symbol of the disorder of mind, into which despair plunges a person” (II, 27). The absence of a compass in NT 411 may seem odd, a neglected opportunity on Blake’s part since he used the compass elsewhere in his art and poetry to satirize the dangers of reason.17 But again exercising keen selection, he deleted it (and the cypress branch) in order to let Young reveal his own sometimes bitter perspective; in trying to warn the foolishly happy of inner despair the poet implied, perhaps unintentionally, quite enough about reason’s harm:

Then, for Themselves, the Moment Reason wakes
(And Providence denies it long Repose),
O how laborious is their Gaiety?
They scarce can swallow their ebullient Spleen

Scarc, did I say? Some cannot fit it out;
Of their own daring Hands the Curtain draw,
And shew us what their Joy, by their Despair.

(VIII, 1217–20, 1223–25)

Young’s dim view of foolishness was captured by Blake in one of his more revealing designs, NT 32 (fig. 6)—a design whose original had

16. These frontispieces were for the two-volume watercolor edition, NT 1 perhaps having been an afterthought to this edition as its recent editors (see n. 12) suggest (i, 12).
Fig. 4. "Despair," Richardson's *Iconology*. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
Such mighty Numbers lift against the Right,
(And what can’t Numbers, when bewitch’d, achieve?)
They talk themselves to Something like Belief,
That all Earth’s Joys are Theirs: As Aesop’s Fool
Grin’d from the Port, on ev’ry Sail his Own.

This y grin, but wherefore? And how long the Laugh?
Half Ignorance, their Mirth; and Half, a Lie;
To cheat the World, and cheat Themselves, they Smile;
Hard either Talk! The mofl Abandon’d own,
That Others, if Abandon’d, are undone;
Then, for Themselves, the Moment Reason wakes
(And Providence denies it long Repose),
O how laborious is their Gaiety?
They scarce can swallow their brilliant Spleen,
Searce muster Patience to support the Farce,
And pump o’er Laughter, till the Curtain falls:
Some cannot fit it out;
Oft their own daring Hands the Curtain draw,
And fling us what their Joy, by their Despair.

’Tis a cloathed Hair! you’d Breathe! blaspheming Eye!
In impious Fury still alive in Death!

Fig. 5. *Night Thoughts* 411. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees of The British Museum.
Of Man's miraculous Mistakes, This bears
The Palm, "That all Men are about to live."
For ever on the Brink of being born:
All pay themselves the compliment to think
They, one day, shall not drivel; and their Pride
On this Reverion takes up ready Praise;
At least, their own; their future selves applauds;
How excellent that Life they ne'er will lead?
Time lodg'd in their own hands is Folly's Vails;
That lodg'd in Fate's, to Wisdom they confign;
The thing they can't but purpose, they postpone;
'Tis not in Folly, not to scorn a Fool;
And scarce in human Wisdom to do more:
All Promises is poor dilatory man,
And that thro' every Stage: When young, indeed,
In full content, we sometimes nobly rest,
Unanxious for ourselves; and only wait,
appeared in the *Iconologia* of 1709. *NT* 32 depicts a censorious passage by Young on the foolish way people use their time (I, 405–20). Like “Folly” in the 1709 edition of Ripa’s work (fig. 7), Blake’s figure holds a “whirlagig” and wears a long outer garment and a jester’s cap with a bell on the end of it. Although there are some obvious differences between the two illustrations, I have found no emblem resembling Blake’s design as closely as “Folly” in the *Iconologia*. Typically, the concept is represented by a man or statue with a jester’s cap on and a bell or bells and, occasionally, long ears hanging from it. But I have seen no other emblem of folly or foolishness holding a whirlagig. Often the faces of folly are either laughing or smiling—never downcast or hidden by a hand, and usually the fool is either standing or sitting upright—not reclining as in Blake’s design.18 Here perhaps are the most revealing aspects of his illustration. Despite his whirlagig, Blake’s Folly does not delight “in childish toys, and things of little moment” such as hobby-horses (p. 59); instead he assumes the posture and demeanor of a melancholic.

Indeed, the downcast position of the fool’s head as it is supported by a nearly clenched hand in *NT* 32 derives from some of the iconographic images traditional in the portrayal of melancholy. These motifs have been delineated by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl in their analysis of the background and particulars of Albrecht Durer’s *Melencolia* I—a print of which Blake is reported to have kept near his work table.19 One of these motifs is the drooping head, whose significance ranged from acedia to sorrow to contemplation and even to creative thought. Another of the images is the clenched hand, which in medieval illustrations signified delusions such as those of a “madman who ‘thinks . . . that he holds a great treasure, or the whole world, in his hand.’” In Durer this image implies the “tight-fisted” avarice of the melancholic and the “fanatical concentration of a mind which has truly grasped a problem, but . . . feels itself incapable either of solving or of dismissing it.”20 Although Blake was not concerned with all of these meanings, his illustration does belong to some of the traditions that Durer revived. Just as the motifs of the drooping head, the averted look, and the clenched hand depict melancholy in plate 8 of *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*,21 so do they in *NT* 32.

But why did Blake include such motifs in a picture of Folly? There are two reasons, I think—one better than the other. In contrast to Young, who saw little hope for foolish man (I, 415–20), Blake could have been

18. See, for example, Guillaume de la Perrière, *La Morosophie* (Lyon: Macé Bonhomme, 1553), fig. 19; Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, *Emblemas morales* (Madrid: Luis Sanchez, 1610), fig. 77; and *Gabrieli Rollehaegii selectorum Emblematum Centuria Secunda* (Arnh: Janssonium Bibli, 1613), fig. 53.
Fig. 7. “Folly,” Ripa’s *Iconologia*. The Pierpont Morgan Library.
suggesting (via the positive meanings of melancholy) that foolishness can—dialectically—lead to wisdom: “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 7). But the better, and more accurate, interpretation is as follows: Blake combined some of the main images of folly and melancholy to imply that the real folly here is Young's weighty and dreary mind. If the healthy grapevine that spirals jubilantly around the textbox in *NT* 32 signifies time and experience, as it does in “The Ecchoing Green,” then the melancholy fool merely ponders, rather than participates in, them.

Blake’s depictions of Night and Despair show that he could creatively adapt emblems without significantly altering the main ideas they represent. He could also do both as we see in Folly. To conclude this essay, I will examine two more instances of his creative imitation.

*NT* 365 (fig. 8) apparently portrays the following lines, which were marked with a cross in the left margin: “'Tis Great, 'tis Manly, to disdain Disguise; / It shews our Spirit, or it proves our Strength” (VIII, 364–65). But because Young equivocated (in subsequent lines) about disguise, Blake reflected this equivocation in his design, adapting for the purpose of satire the emblem of “Falsehood” (fig. 9) from Richardson’s *Iconology*. Although these pictures may appear to have few similarities, they actually have important elements in common: the mask, a woman standing upright, and a female form sitting beside her. Blake’s use of the mask to portray disguise does not, at first glance, seem to be very original. Since the time of ancient Greek drama, the mask has represented deception, fiction-making, character-creation, etc. Among emblematists it has been used to portray disguise as in Guillaume de la Perrière’s *Le Théâtre des bons Engins*, in which four masked heads are depicted: one aged and frowning (lower left quadrant), one young and frowning (upper left), one old and smiling (upper right), and one young and smiling (lower right).

Blake himself used the mask in connection with falsehood in other *Night Thoughts* illustrations, and in *NT* 365 he associated it with a siren holding out a mask to a young woman near her. This siren derives from the female figure sitting in the lower right corner of “Falsehood”—a figure that the *Iconology* describes as a “syren . . . an emblem of deception: their melodious singing, is attractive and dangerous . . .” (II, 95). Whereas the siren in the *Iconology* holds out a mirror in order to reflect Falsehood herself, who is donning a mask, the siren in *NT* 365 offers a mask in order to tempt a young woman with deception. Though somewhat different, these sirens represent essentially the same idea (i.e., appearances). Blake’s figure being a little more authentic with her bat-

22. Hagstrum, p. 56. The sexual aspects of experience implicit in “The Ecchoing Green” appear to be absent from *NT* 32, however.


24. See, for example, *NT* 358, which depicts the lines “Their treach’rous Blessings . . . / Like other faithless Friends, unmask, and sting” (VIII, 223–24); and *NT* 364, which portrays two politicians (“State-Rooks”) playing “the Game of Faces . . . / Both cheating, both exulting, both deceiv’d” (VIII, 347, 350).
Are therefore known, because they are conceal'd?
For why conceal'd? — The Cause they need not tell:
I give Him Joy, that's awkward at a Lye;
Whole feeble Nature Truth keeps still in Awe;
His Incapacity is his Renown:
'Tis Great, 'tis Manly, to disdain Difficulty;
It shews our Spirit, or it proves our Strength;
Thou say'st, 'Tis needful; is it therefore right?
How'er, I grant it some small Sign of Grace,
To strain at an Exeuse: And wouldst thou then
Escape that cruel Need? Thou may'st, with Ease;
Think no Part needful that demands a Knave;
When late our Civil Helm was shifting Hands,
So P——— thought; think better, if you can.

Buy This, how rare! the public Path of Life
Is dirty: — Yet allow that Dirt its Due;
It makes the Noble Mind more Noble still;
The World's no Nutr; it will wound, or save;
Our Virtue quench, or Indignation fire;
'Tis true, The World well-known, will make a Man———

Fig. 8. *Night Thoughts* 365. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees of The British Museum.
Fig. 9. "Falsehood," Richardson's *Iconology*. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
wings like those of the sirens in classical mythology. His satiric adaptation of the emblem of “Falsehood” lies in his use of it to render its opposite—disdain for falsehood. His point is that because Young equivocated, granting some merit to the effort to excuse disguise (VIII, 366-69), his emphasis on disdain was not sufficiently assertive and convincing. Like Falsehood, Young’s disdain was not “Manly.” Hence, Blake turned it into its opposite—a frightened lady who with neither “Spirit” nor “Strength” (365) nor disdain objects to falsehood. In spite of the expression on her face and the direction of her left foot, the position of her head and hands in relation to the siren’s offer is ambiguous, reflecting Young’s ambivalence about disguise.

Possibly one of the most imitative of the Night Thoughts illustrations is NT’92 (fig. 10), which depicts Young’s statement: “Ruin from Man is most conceal’d when near” (III, 227). Blake rendered this general remark with a specific example of perfidy that derives from the emblem of “Treachery” (fig. 11) in the Iconology. Each of these designs portrays an apparent embrace between two males, one of whom is about to stab the other in the back with a dagger. But even here when Blake seemed most imitative, he made an important change that modifies and intensifies Young’s generalization considerably. The murderous betrayer in NT’92 is a priest, who wears a cincture and biretta. Thomas Helmstadter suggests that Blake was venting some of his anticlericalism here.25 Had Helmstadter known of the emblem of “Treachery,” he would have been able to show (much more emphatically than he does) how deeply critical Blake’s design is. The verbal description of “Treachery” mentions that the “traitor is capable of putting on the appearance of friendship and benevolence” (II, 118). In NT’92 the traitor can look a man straight in the eye while embracing him and yet stab him in the back. By making this traitor a clergyman, Blake emphasized the profound hypocrisy of those who are supposed to condemn appearances and falsehood and live by the principles of brotherhood and love. According to Kurt Weitzmann, a “copyist [an imitator] . . . by following less literally an earlier text-bound illustration, may, by changing it . . . intensify its meaning.”26 Such clearly is the case in NT’92.

From 1795 to 1797, Blake produced 537 watercolor illustrations for the Night Thoughts. As the recent editors of the illustrations imply, most of them seem to have been freely and quickly invented27—the results, no doubt, of Blake borrowing from images and themes as well as returning to his personal repository of characters, subjects, and designs (borrowing, in effect, from a visual repertoire of ideas absorbed by him yet continu-
By Fate reforb’d, and funk in endless Night,  
Man hard of Heart to man! Of horrid things  
Most horrid! Mid stupendous, highly strange!  
Yet oft his Courtesies are smoother Wrongs;  
Pride brandishes the favours He confers,  
And contumelious his Humanity:  
What then his Vengeance? Hear it not, ye Stars!  
And thou, pale Moon! turn paler at the Sound;  
Man is to Man the foesi, surest Ill.  
A previous Blast foretells the rising Storm;  
O’erwhelming Turrets threaten ere they fall;  
Volcano’s bellow ere they disembogue;  
Earth trembles ere her yawning Jaws devour;  
And Smoak betrays the wide-consuming Fire;  
Ruin from Man is most conceal’d when near,  
And sends the dreadful Tidings in the Blow.  
Is this the Flight of Fancy? Would it were!  
Heaven’s Sovereign saves all Beings but Himself,  
That hideous Sight, a naked human Heart.
Fig. 11. “Treachery,” Richardson’s *Iconology*. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
ally developing). Indeed, only by having such a repertoire could he execute over 500 designs in approximately two years. In light of such circumstances, it is reasonable to suggest that not every one of his *Night Thoughts* designs takes its origin and meaning from his private symbolism and mythology. But even when his illustrations appear most imitative, they are creative and perceptive. From his depiction of night’s splendors to his portrayal of despair, folly, disdain-for-disguise, and “Ruin from Man,” Blake added to, deleted from, and reinvented emblems from Ripa’s and Richardson’s iconologies in order to draw attention to, criticize, and modify Young’s work.

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28. For related and additional views of Blake’s borrowing, see Chayes, 63ff.