June 1995

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Night Thoughts 273 and "Mercury at the Crossroads": Constructing Blake's Quarrels with Young

by IRENE H. CHAYES

It is by now almost a truism in discussions of William Blake's illustrations to Night Thoughts, the long meditative poem by the eighteenth-century poet Edward Young, that in many of the watercolor drawings Blake was contending with, directly or indirectly subverting, or intentionally seeking to expose what he regarded as errors in the verse passages they accompany. In light of the formulation made a few years ago by John E. Grant—i.e., that a drawing in this category may serve as a "critique and correction" of the relevant text—Blake knowingly or unknowingly would have been emulating the poet himself, for Young, otherwise an admirer of Pope, was said to have written Night Thoughts in part to correct the theology of the Essay on Man.1

Grant's formulation is a useful guide for readers and critics of Blake, especially at the outset of a study of the illustrations and in a final summing-up. Along the way, however, there are likely to be practical problems not provided for in the general formulation which call upon the reader's powers of critical improvisation as well as a ready knowledge of other Blake works in both his media and, often enough, of possible art sources that might have been accessible to him. One major problem may be simply to determine what the dispute was about, what there was in Young's text of the moment that impelled Blake the illustrator to quarrel with his author and to do so by the means he chose. Statements of likely Blakean positions sometimes can be drawn from his incidental prose or—at the risk of distorting a dramatic or narrative context—passages from his poems. The problem is compounded when reliable overt statements are not available on either side and the critique and correction of a largely metaphorical text by Young must be constructed out of pictorial images, beginning with Blake's accompanying drawing. Such images may include not

only those from Blake's personal iconographic repertoire but also others he may have borrowed or adapted from outside sources for the occasion. Within or among such images, there may be patterns of gesture, attitude, or spatial position which have significant analogues or complements in other Blake designs. Moreover, as I have described elsewhere,4 the peculiar format used throughout the series, by which the page of Young's existing printed text was inserted in a window cut out of each sheet of watercolor paper, may have a further effect on how the drawing proper appears to the viewer. That is, the impression of distance may be increased or reduced by the presence of the page; one or another of the figures depicted may be brought forward or thrust back in relation to the plane surface it introduces; or the page itself may be incorporated in the composition as an additional image.

As a consequence, the typical quarrel between Blake's drawing and Young's text sets the pictorial and presentational against the verbal and (more or less) discursive, and the key problem for the reader—or, more accurately, the reader-viewer—is to find a common middle ground where each can be at least partially translated into the language of the other, so that the quarrel can be meaningfully constructed and put in communicable form. In the following discussion of one particular transaction of this kind, the task is eased somewhat by compelling internal evidence that the passage from Young's poem and the drawing Blake made for it shared just such common ground from the beginning, in the form of a minor art source, very possibly the same one for both, which originally illustrated and accompanied a text of its own. On this, I am arguing, Young based an allusive literary simile and Blake a new pictorial paraphrase in an illustration which was in specific response to Young. As will be seen, it is through and out of the resulting interactions of word and image, which are not limited to the particular verse passage and its illustration, that Blake's critique and correction takes form and the errors of Young's thought are implicitly exposed.

I

At the beginning of Night the Seventh, "The Infidel Reclaimed," Young uses a simile which at first may seem puzzling because of the name from classical mythology it includes in an unfamiliar context: "Deaths stand, like Mercurys, in ev'ry Way; / And kindly point us to our Journey's End" (VII, 1; 11.4-5). Young's basic allusion was to the ancient highway markers that originally were piles of stones, wayside shrines or perhaps tombs, at which passing travellers left offerings, and were associated with Mercury, or Hermes, in his early function as the god of roads and boundaries.5 By the time of the Renaissance and the emergence of emblems as a genre, in one particular evolving emblem statues of

Mercury surmounting piles of stones, especially those erected at crossroads, came to be seen as guides, and a traveller’s choice among the intersecting roads to signify a sometimes crucial moral decision. The Mercury emblem was included in the collection by Andrea Alciati, beginning with his Emblemata Liber of Paris, 1531, the first edition of the first emblem book, and continuing in successive editions, translations, and adaptations for more than a century thereafter. The emblem in question bore a Latin motto, or *inscriptio*—*Qua dix vocant, eundum* (“Wherever the gods call, we must go”)—which was expanded in the accompanying explanatory epigram, the *subscriptio*, to incorporate the traditional metaphor of man as a traveller and human life a journey: “Where three ways meet [in trivio] there is a pile of stones; above it rises a truncated statue of a god, from the chest up. It must be the tomb of Mercury; oh traveller, hang up garlands to the god so that he may show you the right way.” In the original accompanying woodcut, the *pictura* of the emblem, only an early version of his traditional wand, predecessor of the familiar caduceus, identifies the “truncated statue” as a representation of Mercury. It was in the edition of Paris, 1534 that the winged helmet and a more conventional form of the wand were substituted, although the figure was not yet separated from the pile of stones (Fig. 1). As translated, the epigram concludes: “We are all at the crossroads, and in this path of life we err, unless the god himself shows us the way.”

Together with the conspicuously pointing hand, Mercury’s familiar attributes became standard motifs in the changing illustrations to the Alciati emblem. The major modifications, subsequently copied, imitated, or varied in both the Latin and modern language editions, were made in the edition of the *Emblemata* published by Roville in Lyons, 1548. In the foreground, the pile of stones was replaced by a large boulder; Mercury with his attributes, including his pointing hand, was portrayed in a full-length, half-seated pose which made him seem more a living manifestation of the god than a statue; and the crossroads was reduced from a meeting of three roads to a single road winding upward, on which appeared the figures of distant travellers.

Young possibly could have learned about the roadside Mercuries from his reading. However, because he—or his persona, through whom he speaks throughout the poem—refers to a series of deaths physically pointing the way, Young the author more plausibly would have been thinking of the evolving *pictura* to the Mercury emblem, in which the pointing hand was an iconicographic

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6. Bowen, pp. 222-24 and pls. 31a-d. According to Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth* (Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1947), p. 32, the name Hermes was “probably derived” from the Greek word for stone-heap and hence signified “he of the stone-heap.” Brown (ibid.) also cites the “herm” (“a square-cut ithyphallic block of stone surmounted with the god’s head”), originally named for Hermes. A herm seems to be what Cornford has in mind when, in his note on Young’s Mercury allusion (p. 345), he mentions “the head of Mercury found on classical posts.”

7. The translation from the Latin is by Bowen, p. 222. On Mercury’s wand, see Brown, pp. 15-17. The functions of the three parts of an emblem—*inscriptio, subscriptio, pictura*, and their synonyms—are discussed by Peter M. Daly, *Emblem Theory: Recent German Contributions to the Characterization of the Emblem Genre* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: KTO Press, 1979), chaps. 4 and 5 passim.

8. The later "families" of illustrations and adaptations are summarized by Bowen, pp. 225-29 and pls. 32a-33d. For the woodcut in the Roville edition, see ibid., pl. 32a.

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FIGURE 1, Emblemata libellus, Paris, 1534
By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.
fixture from the beginning. The scene of travellers and road markers, too, would have been memorable in itself. The version he was most likely to have known, which belonged to the group of illustrations stemming from the Roville edition, was the one published in Geoffrey Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes* (Leyden, 1586), the first English emblem book (Fig. 2). The English verse translation of the epigram (not included in Fig. 2 here) is less precise than the original Latin, substituting “duers wayes” for the crossroads and for “traveller” “trauaylinge man.” The conclusion turns Mercury (*deus ipse*) into the Judaeo-Christian deity, announced by an initial capital: “We stumble, fall, and dailie goe astraye, / Then happie those, whome God doth shew the waye.”

The woodcuts or engravings in the later editions of Alciati sometimes show more than one traveller on what look to be different roads, or different branches of the main road, and not all are moving in the direction Mercury indicates. In the version used for Whitney’s *Choice*, the one traveller is walking to the right, although both Mercury and the gesturing figure at the top of the hill (the latter evidently another statue serving as a guidepost) are pointing down to the main road beside which they are stationed. The role of individual choice and the difference between right and wrong choices are both made more definite in a seventeenth-century version of the scene in Jean Baudoin’s *Recueil d’emblemes divers* (Paris, 1638) (front cover). Several travellers are distributed over two different roads, one again leading upward and the other to the right and downward. At the top of the hill to the left is a small shrine or temple toward which, as the goal of the journey, Mercury’s pointing gesture is unmistakably directed.

Emblem books have long been accepted as sources for Blake, both in his poetry and his designs, and Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes* is one that he too would have been likely to know, independently of Young. His drawing accompanying the first page of Night the Seventh, numbered 273 in the *Night Thoughts* series (Fig. 3), is to me persuasive evidence that in this instance he not only recognized the obscure allusion but also was moved to look up a likely pictorial source and verify the details of the scene before making his illustration. Even without Young’s allusion as a clue, the drawing ultimately would be traceable to the Mercury emblem because of its parallels with the composition and main images in the *pictura*: the roadway leading upward from the bottom margin; the large figure in the foreground with legs offset and pointing right hand; and the much smaller figure beyond him, who is moving toward the right with a traveller’s staff in his hand. If it had no other significance, NT 273 would mark an interesting convergence between Young and Blake in probable response to a common arrangement of images which they would have encountered as much as a half-century apart. In their uses of the Mercury emblem, however, there is an

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Figure 2, *A Choice of Emblemes and Other Devises*. Leyden, 1586
FIGURE 3, *Night Thoughts*, no. 273
Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
important difference in how the author and his later illustrator each conceived of the kind of guidance that is being provided to the traveller.

According to the verse epigram in Whitney’s edition, the “trauylinge man, vncertaine where to goe,” needs divine guidance on his life’s journey. Although Young undoubtedly would have agreed with this sentiment generally, in his simile the guidance comes from a series of particular deaths which on his own testimony had been the “Real, not Fictitious” occasion of the whole poem.11 “Philander,” “Narcissa” and “Lucía” are the literary names used in the discussions of those deaths in earlier Nights. In the Mercury passage, the one name cited is that of Alexander Pope (1.6), who died in 1744, a few months before Night the Seventh was published. Collectively, these deaths are analogous to the gesturing statues in Fig. 2 in that they serve as a series of markers along the temporal road to the speaker’s own death, his “Journey’s End.” There is, however, no problem here of choice, right or wrong, or the crucial role of divine guidance in the right choice, but only the repeated corroboration of an inevitability.

In Blake’s drawing, the main features of the original pictura are broadly filled in—landscape, road, pointing gesture, near and far figures—together with modifications that pertain to both Young’s simile and the woodcut in the Whitney edition of Alciati. An addition to the original composition is the tomb at the lower right of the drawing, toward which the traveller is moving. Despite its classical pediment, the tomb is a variant of Blake’s own more primitive image in his design “Deaths Door,” which had already appeared in America: A Prophecy, plate 12 (IB, p. 150) and The Gates of Paradise, plate 15 (ibid., p. 276).12 The greatest divergence from both Young’s text and the woodcut is of course in the figure that replaces the Mercury statue in the latter and the succession of deaths in the former.

Since graves or gravestones appear in a number of Night Thoughts drawings (e.g., NT 77, 96, 181, 283, 424), Blake could have stayed close to the terms of the simile and shown actual gravestones standing by the roadside. Instead, the guide is Blake’s familiar murderous demon personifying Death itself, who with his partner Time relentlessly hunts man throughout the Night Thoughts illustrations. Death in this scene is generally posed in Mercury’s attitude, except that he is standing rather than seated. In contrast to Mercury, however, he is pointing not to the main road nearby but to the tomb in the distance. Moreover, the modified walking attitude of the traveller tells us that he is not to be seen as intentionally choosing the detour that leads to the tomb; rather, he is passively following the pointing hand of Death, toward whom, unlike the travellers in the Mercury emblems, he is looking back over his shoulder for further direction. The gesture of Blake’s Death, in turn, suggests not “kindly” guidance, or the answer to a

11. See Introduction, Cornford, pp. 19-20, and Young’s first Preface (originally preceding Night IV), ibid., p. 35.
question, or (as in the original Latin motto) an irresistible "call" by the gods, but
a command, in effect a death sentence, which Death is prepared to execute with
the bow and the quiver of arrows that are his identifying attributes, here held just
out of the traveller's line of sight.

Blake's drawing at NT 273 paraphrases the *pictura* of the Alciati / Whitney
emblem, or of one or another from the same group, with such relative fidelity that
it very nearly is a conventional literary illustration, subordinated to its text and
reinforcing Young's allusion by recalling the main parts of the scene that in all
likelihood prompted his simile. Very nearly, but not quite, for the substitution of
Blake's own demon Death for the Mercury statue makes the scene as strange in
relation to Young's text as almost any other in the *Night Thoughts* series. The
recurring questions arise once more: not only Why for the substitution but also
What, for the nature of Blake's evident objection, and How, if the drawing at NT
273 does indeed constitute a critique and correction of what Young is saying
about life and death. For answers, it will be necessary to consider Blake's own
emblematic figures of the traveller and (as he appears in the *Night Thoughts*
drawings) personified Death, together with relevant other designs both earlier
and later than the Young series.

II

TRAVELLER. The travellers who appear in the woodcuts to the Mercury emblem
would have indirectly grown out of the Latin phrase *suspende viator*, which in
Bowen's translation quoted above is rendered (in reference to the ancient custom
of leaving offerings at the roadside stone-heaps) as "oh traveller, hang up
garlands to the god." At the same time, the structure of the phrase parallels that
of *Siste, viator* ("Halt, Traveller"), in the traditional apostrophe to passersby
which has been traced back to the *Greek Anthology* and the original meaning of
*epigramma* as "an inscription in verse usually placed on a statue, tomb, or
funerary column." The epigram, or *subscriptio*, in Alciati's emblem well fits this
definition, although the statue it accompanies has been removed from the
roadside to the *pictura* of the emblem itself. Inscriptio poems, so-called, were
a minor genre in the eighteenth century, surviving as late as Wordsworth's
"Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree," with its traditional opening ("Nay,
Traveller! rest"), and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the epigram on
Truth and Beauty acquires force by being spoken by the urn, not merely inscribed
on it. 13

In the meantime, the passing traveller addressed in the antique epigrams had
acquired a life of his own in association with the traditional metaphor of human

life as a journey from birth to death.14 As in the passage at the beginning of Night the Seventh, the speaker’s “Journey’s End” in Night Thoughts is his own death, and explicitly or implicitly he is a traveller making his way toward it. See, e.g., the pseudo-epic simile that opens Night the Ninth, beginning, “As when a Traveller, a long Day past / In painful Search of what he cannot find,” and ending, “Till the due Season calls him to Repose” (IX, 1: 11.1-7). Like “travel,” “journey,” and their related forms, the term “traveller” was already part of Blake’s standard poetic vocabulary as early as Poetical Sketches (1783). As a pictorial figure, the earliest of his travellers appears in All Religions Are One (ca. 1788), plate 7 (IB, p. 25) and again, in somewhat larger size, in The Gates of Paradise (1793), plate 14 (IB, p. 275). Both are equipped with the traditional traveller’s basic attributes of broad-brimmed hat and staff, and they are striding toward the right in an attitude like that of the distant traveller in Fig 2 here. Later, especially in the illuminated books Milton and Jerusalem, the traveller and his journey evolved into a shadowy myth, never fully realized, in which distinctions would be drawn among travellers representing the various stages and “states” of human life, including those who are “lost” or “weak,” and the perpetually recurring “traveller thro’ Eternity,” personifying the archetypal creative imagination, whose main avatar in time would be Los.15

As Los, incidentally, is seen in the frontispiece to Jerusalem (pl. 1; IB, p. 280), he himself is a traveller, about to start his symbolic underworld journey through the interior of Albion, simultaneously the land and the body of the fallen “eternal man.” Although his distinctive clothing—sandals, knee-length tunic, broad-brimmed but flat-crowned hat—has been identified as that of “a London night watchman,”16 it could equally well be one of Blake’s many variations on the costume of his travellers. In All Religions Are One, plate 7, and The Gates of Paradise, plate 14, the moving travellers are both wearing tail-coats and their hats have high crowns. The same oddly formal dress recurs in NT 419 (IX, 1), where it is worn by a traveller who is about to enter a tomb like that in NT 273. Since the passage of text it accompanies is Young’s simile of a traveller seeking what he cannot find and ending in death (see above), Blake evidently intended both a reminder of NT 273 and a sequel which would show the uncertain traveller of the earlier drawing arriving at the journey’s end to which he had been directed by personified Death.

Although the Night Thoughts drawings include a number of traveller figures, differing in age, dress, and implied condition of life or state of mind, the traveller in NT 273, and his successor in NT 419, have their most significant affinities with designs in The Gates of Paradise. This was Blake’s own emblem book,

15. See Milton, 15 [17]: 32-35 (PP, p. 109), contrasting the view of earth by “the weak traveller confin’d beneath the moony shade” and that of both heaven and earth by “the traveller thro’ Eternity.”
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originally dated 1793 with the subtitle For Children and later (ca. 1818) reissued in a longer version as For the Sexes. The relevant designs include not only “Deaths Door” (pl. 15) but also two different figures of man conceived as a traveller journeying through life. For the first of the two, already mentioned (pl. 14), the motto on the individual plate is “The Traveller hasteth in the Evening.” The later issue ends with an added epilogue (pl. 19; IB, p. 279) in which another traveller, perhaps to be seen as a subsequent “state” of the earlier one, lies naked and asleep, identifiable only by the staff at his side. As the verse inscription tells us, he is captive to a delusive dream of mortality, “the lost Travellers Dream under the Hill,” which is presided over by Lucifer, the “God of This World.” In the distance the sun, an early glimpse of eternity, has already begun to rise above the horizon.  

In contrast to the lost traveller in The Gates of Paradise is one who appears in a drawing early in the Night Thoughts series. NT 11 (I, 6) (Fig. 4) depicts a figure who, like the most distant of the wise travellers in Baudoin’s edition of the Mercury emblem (front cover), is arriving at the top of a hill he has been climbing. (It is almost a redundancy that Blake’s pencil drawing of the same figure is entitled “The Journey of Life.”) This traveller is nude, which is to say symbolically free of the material encumbrances of similar figures in other journey scenes who still have far to go. He carries a staff, but instead of wearing a traveller’s hat he is using his right hand to shade his eyes, as though he is already gazing at the sunrise not yet seen by the sleeper in Gates 19.

Had Blake chosen to emphasize the difference between the “wrong” path along which the traveller in NT 273 is moving and the “right” path he should be taking, as in the Baudoin engraving, he could have borrowed the figure of his own traveller from NT 11 and positioned him on the main road as a contrast to the falsely guided traveller below. Even without the inclusion of a second traveller, however, and despite the physical distance between NT 11 and NT 273 in the total sequence of drawings, to an attentive viewer of the Young illustrations the contrast between the two travellers is suggested, much as contrasts, and parallels or continuations as well, are suggested between or among other drawings in the series. The contrast is already prepared for in NT 11, where what might well have been the traveller’s fate had he been “weak” enough to be diverted from his upward path is represented on his right by a leaning gravestone and a tomb bearing the effigy of a human figure, both of which he passes without a glance.

17. Among the pencil-drawn emblems in his Notebook from which Blake made his selections for GP is an early alternative to pl. 19 which also looks ahead to NT 273 and 419: a traveller with hat and staff is met at the entrance to a tomb by Death, who in this instance is a traditional skeleton in a shroud. See The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile, ed. David V. Erdman, with the assistance of Donald K. Moore (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973; rev. ed., rpt. Readex Books, 1977), Emblem 2, N17c.

18. Martin Butlin, The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art / Yale Univ. Press, 1981), II, pl. 809 (reversed view). Except that he is carrying his globe of fire in place of the staff, Los returning to eternity at the conclusion of Jerusalem (pl. 97; IB, p. 376) is in a similar climbing pose, similarly shading his eyes. See also the tiny variant figure at NT 3 (t.p., verso), and departing Time in NT 46 (II, 13).

19. See Grant, “A Re-View of Some Problems in . . . Blake’s Night Thoughts,” pp. 161-62, who argues that the drawings for each Night are arranged in a “significant sequence of pictorial units or visual chapters.”
Thro' this Opaque of Matters, and of Soul,
This double Night, transfuse one prying ray,
To lighten, and to cheer: O lead my Mind,
(A Mind that fain would wander from its Woe.)
Lead it thro' various scenes of Life and Death,
And from each scene, the noblest Truths inspire:
Nor let infuse my Guilt, than my Song;
Teach my best Reason, Restraint; my best Will
Teach Restitute and fix my firm Resolve
Wieldom to wed, and pay her long Awe.
Nor let the vial of thy Vengeance pour'd
On this devoted head, be pour'd in vain.

The Bell strikes One: We take no note of Time,
But from its Look To give it then a Tongue,
Is wise in man. As if an Angel spoke,
I feel the solemn Sound. If heard aright,
In other words, the journey's end rejected in *NT* 11 is precisely the kind that awaits the traveller marching toward the tomb in *NT* 273 and eventually is reached by him or another traveller in *NT* 419.

III

DEATH. THROUGHOUT THE Night Thoughts drawings, Death and his partner Time recur as quasi-picaresque demons whose indefatigable and grimly varying pursuits of humankind form a continuing subnarrative, culminating in their joint deaths, impaled on their own weapons, in *NT* 434 (IX, 16; 11. 311-13). Although the figure of Time with his scythe and single forelock was based on traditional personifications of both Time and Occasio (Chance, or Opportunity),20 Death is a more complex variant of Blake's familiar patriarchal and sacerdotal figures, with the addition of a malevolence that is peculiar to him and only one or two others in Blake’s repertoire.21 Undoubtedly obscure guilts and terrors from his personal history, including his early childhood, contributed to Blake's portrayals of the Night Thoughts Death, who as an implacable hunter bent on destroying his prey is given the appearance of a punishing Jehovah. Yet in *NT* 273, with the Alciati / Whitney emblem in the background, Death as a false guide directing the traveller away from the road and toward the tomb can serve, and in this instance may have been intended to serve, as an allusion to and implicit judgment of the obsession of Young’s speaker, and behind him that of Young the author, with the idea of death itself.

The most recent editor of *Night Thoughts* deplores the fact that for its eighteenth-century readers “a poem of specifically Christian intent became a seminal work in a secular cult of sepulchral melancholy.”22 Yet, despite what may have been Young’s conscious purpose, the tone and language of many of his passages on death justify the “secular” response of his international audience. The most eloquent expression of what at times sounds like a positive longing for death occurs in the long paean (11. 495-544) that brings Night the Third to a close and includes honorific epithets—“great Counsellor,” “Deliverer,” “Rewarder,” “Crown of Life,” “Prince of Peace”—which make Death seem the Messiah. If doctrine to any degree informs this and similar preceding passages in Night III, it is less an orthodox Christian belief in the ultimate resurrection of the body than a quasi-Neoplatonic anticipation of the release of the fallen soul (“a Soul, a Soul immortal / In all the Dainties of a Brute bemir’d!”23) from its bondage to a material body.

20. The iconography and sources of Blake’s figure of Time are summarized in “Picture and Page,” pp. 449-50 and n. 17. For traditional personifications of Time and Death, see Chew, Figs. 15-51 (Time usually with beard and hourglass, sometimes winged or carrying a scythe) and 140-48 (Death consistently as a skeleton).
21. Death as he appears in *Night Thoughts* would soon be outdone by the nightmare figure in “Death Pursuing the Soul Through the Avenues of Life,” one of Blake’s rejected designs for Blair’s *The Grave*. See Essick and Paley, Fig. 25 and pp. 75-76.
22. Introduction, Comford, p. 17.
There is a brief affirmation of resurrection, only partially in orthodox Christian terms, in the remainder of the passage in Night the Seventh that begins with the allusion to Mercury in lines 4-5. Lines 6-10 continue:

Pope, who couldst make Immortals! art thou dead?
I give thee Joy: Nor will I take my Leave;
So soon to follow. Man but dives at Death;
Dives from the Sun, in fairer Day to rise;
The Grave, his subterranean Road to Bliss.

Blake as a critical reader of Young should have found nothing to question in the image of supernatural dawn, “in fairer day to rise,” for resurrection, since he used similar imagery in both his designs and his own verse. Gates 19 and NT 11 have been mentioned; so should be the concluding vision of The Four Zoas, in which man and nature are united in a restoration of Eden and the sun is compared to “a New Born Man,” issuing each morning “with songs & Joy” (IX, 138: 27-28; PP, p. 406).

Yet in the last half of the Night Thoughts passage just quoted the intended affirmation is weakened or undercut by two curious metaphors whose ambiguities seem to say what Young did not mean, or at least what he was not aware that he meant. In lines 8 and 9 the characteristic movement of the traveller, going up and down hills or trudging along a level road, is suddenly replaced by a different movement: “Man but dives at Death; / Dives from the Sun.” Given the context, in which the speaker regards death as his journey’s end and expects “soon to follow” the recently dead Pope, diving “at death” unavoidably suggests action voluntarily undertaken for the sake of resurrection; that is—however entangled in metaphor and driven by the cumulative force of the rhetoric in the preceding Nights—something close to suicide conceived as an act of faith. In the concluding line of the passage, the word “road” is the last echo of Mercury at the Crossroads, but this road is called “subterranean” and bizarrely it is identified with the grave in which the speaker’s journey of life will have come to a literally dead end. Because of what has gone before, moreover, “subterranean road to bliss” calls up in the mind of the reader an horrific image in which the body to be resurrected continues the journey by laboriously burrowing underground until finally delivered at the Last Judgment. Even though it may have been intended by Young to serve a “Christian” purpose, this is a confused and confusing, fatally defective figure, and its effect on the reader underlines the power of Young’s preoccupation with death to subvert the orthodoxy of the doctrines to which, as one who had taken holy orders, he might have been expected to be more than rhetorically committed.

IV

If Blake’s drawing as a whole, then, is a “critique” of Young’s text, what it might be saying is that in the misdirection of the traveller by the personification of Death should be seen a larger self-misdirection by Young and the speaker in his text in the matter of death, resurrection, and immortality, not only in the lines at hand but also throughout the poem. The passage is implicitly “corrected” also:
not in *NT* 273 proper, but at a distance and by contrast with another design by Blake which can be taken to reflect his own conception of the same “last things,” at least in the mid-1790s.

This is another of Blake’s emblems in the 1793 issue of *The Gates of Paradise*. Plate 13 (back cover) is a death scene in which the soul of the dead man—white-bearded and gowned, one of Blake’s “good” patriarchs—is rising from the foot of the bed and (apparently) out of the feet of the corpse, achieving instant resurrection. 24 (Young’s “diving” metaphor, in contrast, allows for no separation of soul from body. There the soul, too, seems to be fated to make a long and painful detour to resurrection by way of the grave.) The motto inscribed on the plate, “Fear & Hope are—Vision,” is enigmatic at first glance because, unlike some others in *Gates*, it does not include an easily recognized quoted phrase. By way of the first two of the three nouns, nevertheless, this is almost certainly a literary allusion also—not to the Bible or Dante (see IB, pp. 272, 274, and 276), but already to a passage in *Night Thoughts*, which in fact occurs on the page in Night the First immediately following the one Blake later would illustrate by *NT* 11.

Like “deaths” in the Mercury simile, the two abstractions appear in Young’s text in plural form: “my Hopes and Fears/Start up alarm’d, and o’er life’s narrow Verge / Look down—on what? a fathomless Abyss; / A dread Eternity! how surely mine!” (I, 7; 11. 61-64). This is one of the many expressions by Young’s speaker / persona of ambivalence toward the prospect of an afterlife, which elsewhere are counterbalanced by positive, or ostensibly positive, affirmations of the kind discussed in section III. On this occasion, the half-personified hopes and fears share the same apprehension and both are already looking “down” in search of eternity. Blake’s later illustration of the same passage, at *NT* 12 (Fig. 5), includes separate personifications of Hope and Fear, each represented in the singular, who are crouching back to back on the top edge of the page of printed text, imperfectly united and imperfectly divided, so that they are miming the ambivalence Young’s speaker is expressing in words. Fear is looking down over the corner of the page; although Hope’s clasped hands are pointing upward, she is looking over her shoulder with a downward glance. 25

In advance of the drawing at *NT* 12 and within a different perspective, *Gates* 13 implicitly corrects the apprehensions expressed in the Young text by joining Fear and Hope in a closer unity, equated with Blake’s own term and concept of “vision,” which in his usage broadly seems to be an aspect of the operation of the creative imagination. As I construe Blake’s meaning, once the imagination has been freed from obfuscation and error, it becomes both the cause and the product of an enlarged and refined perception which is no longer limited by the physical

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24. See also Blake’s Blair design, “The Death of the Good Old Man” (Essick and Paley, pl. 10; opp. p. 30, facs.), in which the just-released soul is borne away by angels.

25. That at the time he started work on *GP* Blake too was ambivalent might be suggested by the curious fact that in Copy A (Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress) the word “or” appears in place of the ampersand in the motto on pl. 13: “Fear or Hope are—Vision.” However, since the verb is already plural the apparent variant probably was a slip of Blake’s graver.
It is the Knell of my departed Hours;  
Where are they? with the years beyond the Flood;  
It is the Signal that demands Dispatch;  
How Much is to be done? my Hopes and Fears  
Start up alarm'd, and o'er life's narrow Verge  
Look down——on what? a fathomless Abyss;  
A dread Eternity! how purely mine!  
And can Eternity belong to me,  
Poor Penitent on the bounties of an Hour?  

How poor? how rich? how abject? how august?  
How complicate? how wonderful is Man?  
How paling wonder! He, who made him such?  
Who center'd in our make such strange Extremes?  
From different Natures, marvelously mixt,  
Counselion exquisite of distant Worlds!  
Distinguish Link in Being's endless Chain!  
Midway from Nothing to the Daity!  

A Beam

Figure 5, Night Thoughts, no. 12  
Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
organs of sense. Thus, near the conclusion of Night the Ninth of *The Four Zoas*, the unfinished and unfinishable poem that was Blake’s major response to *Night Thoughts*, “The Expanding Eyes of Man behold the depths of wondrous worlds” (IX, 138: 25; PP, p. 406). This example of emerging vision had already been approached in nonverbal form in the traveller’s shading but not covering his eyes as he is about to complete his final step to the top of the hill in *NT 11*. The sunrise and what it may reveal constitute a vision in the sense of being an object of the traveller’s “expanding” power of sight, which itself is the product of his newly but not yet fully liberated imagination.

At the time Blake was preparing the original edition of *The Gates of Paradise*, his conception of vision in this sense could be expressed in condensed and relatively simple, aphoristic terms: “What we hope we see.” This is the caption on the preliminary pencil drawing for Gates 13 in Blake’s Notebook,26 and (especially with a comma inserted after the first verb) it might have been a more immediately intelligible motto on the finished emblem than the one he later put in its place. The substitution, however, could well have been made as an early answer to Young, from whose “Hopes and Fears” passage in Night the First, as well as from Blake’s design yet to come at *NT 12*, vision is markedly absent.27

Whatever the circumstances of substitution, the motto Blake chose to engrave is a perfect fit with the design, in which there is a counterpart among the figures for each of the three nouns. Vision is personified by the “good” patriarch, whose gaze is directed out of the picture at the left, on a level above that of the family gathered at his bedside. What he alone sees is presumably his hoped-for life in eternity, and by the circularity built into Blake’s concept he is able to do so because of the degree of immortality his hope has already earned for him. Fear and Hope are represented by his pointing and opposing hands, and by the differing reactions of his survivors. Ascending with his left hand pointing upward, he himself—the “Immortal Man that cannot Die,” as he would be called in the commentary added in 181828—becomes a newly revealed vision of hope to the woman and two children on the far side of the bed. Fear is evident in the dramatically startled attitude of the youth in the foreground, who seems to be reacting only to the fact of the resurrection: the instant separation of soul from body and the soul’s ascent. It may be for the youth’s enlightenment and emulation that the patriarch’s right is pointing—in contrived awkwardness, downward and across his body from one side to the other—to the lower right, as though to indicate his past life on which he is literally turning his back.

26. Notebook, Emblem 40, N61b; see also IB, p. 275 (comm.). Granted that the faded and partially overwritten pencil caption is difficult to make out, Erdman’s reading is more plausible, because more meaningful, than “What we hope to see,” the alternative proposed by G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books: Annotated Catalogues of Blake’s Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 190. (By Bentley’s different numbering, Gates 13 is pl. 15.)

27. It was surely not by accident that *NT 11* and *NT 12* appear as successive drawings in the Young series, for the climbing visionary traveller in *NT 11* has his antithesis in the male figure with deeply bowed head and no visible lower body at the bottom of *NT 12*. The latter figure doubly lacks vision, for he is looking in the wrong direction, downward, and his view even of the abyss is blocked by a symbolic cloud. For a fuller discussion of this figure and the drawing as a whole, see “Picture and Page,” pp. 463–68.

If it had no other significance, plate 13 of The Gates of Paradise would be evidence that in 1793, at a time when the commission for his Night Thoughts illustrations was still in the future (the generally accepted date is ca. 1795), Blake was already reading and thinking about Young's poem. In relation to the ambivalent "Hopes and Fears" passage in Night the First, this emblem may have been Blake's earliest correction of a Night Thoughts text through mainly visual means. Correction in this instance means that Fear and Hope lose the uncertainties they represent in Young's text and in keeping with Blake's motto they are united, despite the different reactions they represent on the part of the survivors, when both become, in effect, organs of vision by and of the resurrected "immortal" body. Although through the allusion in the motto Gates 13 pertains primarily to one passage in Night the First, insofar as the emblem reflects Blake's own positive view of death (which perhaps should be understood in more than one sense) it also helps to correct the lines on "diving" and "subterranean road" at the beginning of Night VII.

Conversely, Gates 13 itself is strengthened when it is set beside those same lines by Young and beside Blake's drawing at NT 273. The "good" patriarch's double gesture gains in significance by comparison with that by the "bad" patriarch Death, whose right hand too is pointing downward and toward the right. By glance and attitude as well as by his gesture, Death is intent on sending the traveller to the tomb, not on demonstrating how the tomb may be bypassed. Nor is there anything in the drawing to correspond to the left-handed gesture of hope by which the survivors in Gates 13 are being directed upward. Instead, it is in his backthrust left hand that Death holds his weapons ready for murderous use. As for Alciati's original emblem, even across a distance of more than two centuries to Blake's time that too is affected in retrospect by the idea of false guidance introduced by Blake in his adaptation of the pictura.

Thus, in an instance somewhat more complex than is usually found among the Young illustrations, Blake is quarreling with his author by means of a series of intricate transactions which take place across the boundaries of historical period, medium, mode, and genre, as well as those formally separating the verbal and visual arts. Woodcut and watercolor; emblem and "graveyard" poem; humanist didacticism and eclectic eighteenth-century Anglicanism; Young's "sublime" rhetoric and Blake's pictorial mimesis: like mirrors set at varying heights and angles, these manifestations of word and image directly and indirectly reflect each other, and the complex whole that is formed is greater than any of its parts. The result is not only the formulation of a plausible Blakean critique and correction of Young's Mercury passage but also, for critic, reader, and viewer alike, an experience of interdisciplinary exploration which may reproduce to some degree the processes that were at work in the making of Blake's drawing.
List of Illustrations


