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Night Thoughts

Blake's Iconographic Ruminations (and Iconological Revelations)¹

1 INTRODUCTION

In the past year the opening of a major exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London, followed by one at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, has drawn attention to the paintings of the English poet and painter, William Blake (1757–1827). From time to time Blake's visual art has become fashionable, and he has always had a small group of constant followers, but his ambitions to be an artist renowned for historical painting on a grand scale were never realised. Ironically, the large Tate exhibition in small measure achieves the public presence for which Blake yearned throughout his life. And the new major scholarly biography, published in Spring 2001 through The Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art at Yale University Press, by one of the world's foremost Blake scholars, G.E. Bentley Jr will certainly help to consolidate Blake's position as a major eighteenth-century artist. Belated attention to Blake the visual artist may in part stem from the fact that his times have proven

¹ This essay is based on a presentation which I gave at Eötvös Loránd University in Spring 2000 to Professor Ágnes Péter's seminar on Romanticism. I would like to thank her for giving me the opportunity to work through some ideas about Blake's *Night Thoughts* designs, and to thank the students in the seminar for their searching and intelligent responses. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. Anna Jakabfi who invited me to Budapest to take part in the University Celebrations of Canada Days.

deeply engaging for our own, as the proliferation of popular biography of eighteenth century figures and the profusion of contemporary novels set in the eighteenth century attest.

The market, the painter, the text

Blake was prolific, with well over two thousand of his paintings surviving. The intensity and the intimacy, and of course the small scale and detailed colouring, of many of these surviving works make them not particularly accessible to the exigencies of an enormous public gallery showing. Much of his work is book illustration, "illuminations," as Blake himself styled them, providing commentary on specific texts. Without a knowledge of the text which they originally accompanied his works become reduced to a gathering of rather odd if beautiful abstractions. It was through the text, which was generally a classic or a popular work, that the public arena for the visuals was created in Blake's time.

Since he made his living as a commercial engraver, those designs of Blake's which were guaranteed a public reception would have been encountered by viewers who had an interest in the text which they accompanied. Those works which Blake created in both text and design and printed himself on his own printing press were, on the whole, issued on demand and were then never really part of a public discourse.

Blake also created pictures for private patrons, many of these are of Biblical subjects, or of illustrations to Shakespeare, or Bunyan, or Milton. They are, like the designs which he created for his own press, illuminations rather than just illustrations, and as commissioned works they were most often created for patrons who were already sympathetic to his cast of mind. Such is the case, for example, with his great series of Biblical water-colours executed for Thomas Butts, and such also is the case with his exquisite water-colour designs to the *Poems of Thomas Gray*, drawn and assembled as a unique book, a birthday present for Nancy Flaxman, wife of his close friend, the sculptor John Flaxman. Blake laid each page of Gray's poems into a larger sheet of paper and then drew his designs around the text-box on each page. The result is an atemporal, "collaborative," Blake-Gray, unique work.

The poet, the painter

The process apparent in Blake's designs to Gray at the close of the 1790s was one which he had developed a little earlier for a project which has both a commercial and a private aspect. This project was a series of water-colours commissioned by the English publisher and bookseller Richard Edwards, and created by Blake sometime after 1794. (The paper on which the drawings appear is watermarked "J Whatman, 1794.") The commissioned drawings were the beginning, that is the first stage, of a commercial endeavour which occupied Blake for well over two years. Edwards hired Blake to make a design for each page of the international best-selling English poem *Night Thoughts* (1742–45), written by the mid-eighteenth century poet, Edward Young. Young's poem had become an international best-seller, translated into all the major European languages and illustrated by some of the premier book-illustrators of the day, including Charles Grignion, and also Francis Hayman. Both Blake and Edwards, not unreasonably, could hope to prosper from the project.

In the *Night Thoughts* text which Edwards gave to Blake there are over five hundred pages.² Blake did a water-colour for each page, and Edwards then selected from these drawings those he considered to be appropriate to a projected luxurious engraved edition of Young's poem. This was the plan, and the poem was to be published in four volumes with subscribers for each volume as it was issued. In the end, only one volume and a few dozen designs were published, and the two volumes of water-colours, a major work in its own right, which Edwards had had bound in a handsome red leather binding, were lost from view for decades. The drawings are now in London, in the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings, where they can be viewed by appointment, and 20 years or so ago they were also published in a large format, but not full-size, edition, with some of them reproduced in colour.

In this brief essay I would like to explore these *Night Thoughts* designs, placing them in context and examining some of the ways in which Blake used them as a kind of private notebook to which, as he had done with his marginalia

² Nights I and III are second editions; the other seven nights are all first editions. Whenever I quote the *Night Thoughts* text I am citing these editions as they appear within Blake's designs. My page numbers refer to the composite work and my whole numbers are those which identify the pages within the sequence as a whole. Figures 1, 2, 22, 23, and 24 are reproduced from John E. Grant, Edward J. Rose & Michael J. Tolley eds. *William Blake's Design for Edward Young's Night Thoughts: A Complete Edition*. Co-ordinating editor David V. Erdman. Oxford: OUP, 1980.

in the various books which he annotated for his own library, he trusted his dissent from the politics, and the religion, and the science of his day.

The enormous group of *Night Thoughts* drawings was created at a pivotal time in Blake's career immediately after his Lambeth prophecies, including *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Europe*, *The Song of Los*, and so on, and they were also created at a time in Blake's life when he was undergoing profound religious and political revaluations. The commission came when England was making an enormous effort to catch up with European book production, and many new large scale projects involving illustrations to the Bible, to Shakespeare and to Milton were employing England's painters and engravers. It was a period of change not only in France, and not only in politics, but also in western European industrial methods. Revolution everywhere. And so it is no surprise that the *Night Thoughts* drawings, in addition to illustrating a poem which is not a narrative, but rather a series of meditations on life, death and the hereafter, might lead us into the everyday worlds of the illustrator, into politics, the visual arts, and science, as well as into more formal considerations of the relationship between text and design. In studying Blake's work we can attempt to re-construct and re-create the conditions under which he worked. Of course, we can never really know Blake's time, but through a process of sifting documents, and following hunches, we may in some way create a narrative which seems to make sense.

A working method

I have called my excursion "*Night Thoughts: Blake's Iconographic Ruminations (and Iconological Revelations)*," first, because I want to establish for myself with a vague title a little bit of room for exploration, and second, because I want to draw attention to a very old-fashioned way of working and a very old set of assumptions. These assumptions constitute a methodology as set out in Erwin Panofsky's *Meaning in the Visual Arts*,³ and *Studies in Iconology*,⁴ and they are arguments which stem from the first three decades of the twentieth century. Iconography, as Panofsky defines it, is quite simply the study of primary subject matter, both factual and expressive, in art history; it is the very opposite of deconstructionism which assumes from its ironic position that there is no

³ Erwin Panofsky. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1955.

⁴ Erwin Panofsky. *Studies in Iconology*. New York: Harper, 1939.

meaning. Iconography also works at the other end from formalism which is the study of the formal aspects of a work of art.⁵ Form does enter into meaning, or into the creations of meaning, but iconography concentrates on the humanistic, rather than the technical aspects of a work.

Iconographic identifications of form and their relations are the first stage of a process which leads to a recognition of the arrangement of images into stories. The next stage is the establishing of meaning or content which reveals attitudes, the attitudes of a nation, a period, a class, a philosophic persuasion, and so on. The form of these attitudes is a manifestation of principles which are symptomatic of what Panofsky calls "something else." This "something else" he identifies as "symbolical values," which are values manifest in a work, and which may even be unknown to the artist himself. These "symbolical values" are the object of iconology, which is synthesis rather than analysis. Using Panofsky, we may summarise the process of reading a work of art as

- (1) identification of motifs (i.e. iconography);
- (2) understanding of the relationship of the motifs as stories;
- (3) interpretation of these motifs in a symbolic way (i.e. iconology).

I admit that this is a great simplification of Panofsky, but it does give us some principles for reading Blake's *Night Thoughts* designs, principles which I think are appropriate to Blake's own humanistic way of thinking.⁶ What follows, then, in my essay will be a very general introduction to a pivotal group of Blake's designs, with analysis deriving from Panofsky's principles.

2 THE NIGHT THOUGHTS PROJECT: ITS FORMAL ASPECTS (ICONOGRAPHY)

Edward Young's poem charts a psychological journey, ostensibly precipitated by the deaths of several loved ones. In fact, *Night Thoughts* (1742–45) is not one poem, but several poems, presented in nine Nights, and held together by topics, by narrative voice, and by primary setting. By moonlight the narrator of *Night Thoughts* debates with Lorenzo, his alter-ego, the meaning of life. In the end, he finds consolation for mortality in the promise of the life divine. The poem is in a

⁵ Panofsky. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, pp. 28–29.

⁶ For a searching and complex discussion of iconology incorporating more contemporary French critical practices, see W.J.T. Mitchell. *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

long tradition of what has been termed “Christian apologetics.” But this is in no way to suggest the work is merely formulaic, or to diminish its powerful blank-verse paragraphs.

Night-visions may befriend, (as sung above)
Our waking Dreams are fatal: How I dreamt
Of things Impossible? (could Sleep do more?)
Of Joys perpetual in perpetual Change?
Of stable Pleasures on the tossing Wave?
Eternal Sun-shine in the Storms of life?
How richly were my noon-tide Trances hung
With gorgeous Tapestries of pictur'd joys?
Joy behind joy, in endless Perspective!
Till at Death's Toll, whose restless Iron tongue
Calls daily for his Millions at a meal,
Starting I woke, and found myself undone?
Where now my Frenzy's pompous Furniture?
The *cobweb'd* Cottage with its ragged wall!
Of mould'ring mud, is *Royalty* to me!
The *Spider's* most attenuated Thread
Is Cord, is Cable to Man's tender Tie
On earthly bliss; it breaks at every Breeze.

(Night I, pp. 13–14)

Night Thoughts is an imagistic poem, and perhaps excessively concrete. Young piles metaphor on metaphor. He calls the night stars the “manuscript of heaven,” since it is from them we learn natural religion. In a single passage, he might introduce a long series of metaphors any one of which Blake might choose for illustration. Life in this world is called “the dim dawn,” “the twilight of our day”; we readers give “to time eternity's regard / And dreaming, take our passage from our port”; the poet sees himself caught in darkness “the worm's inferior and in rank beneath / The dust I tread on”; and life is “like a vessel on a stream.” Blake responded not only to the poem's spontaneous flow, its building of ideas and its recurring images, short narrative sections and impassioned dialogue, but also to its highly visual language which he humanises and from which he constructed his own vision. In Night IV, for example, Young questions the elements for the creator's presence:

Where art thou? Shall I dive into the *Deep*?
 Call to the *Sun*, or ask the roaring *Winds*,
 For their Creator? Shall I question loud
 The *Thunder*, if in that th'Almighty dwells?
 Or Holds He furious *Storms* in streighten'd Reins,
 And bids fierce *Whirlwinds* wheel his rapid Carr?

(Night IV, p. 24)

Responding to the beauty of Young's passage, Blake drew a dramatic water-colour showing a prophet-poet, arms serenely folded across his chest, contemplating an energetic God of the Thunder and the Whirlwinds.

Blake worked intently on this project, and appears to have completed at least five drawings a week. The images are laid down in India ink and water-colour, with pencil sketching apparent underneath a few designs. The large Whatman sheets (measuring 16" x 12") surround the text box (9" x 6") which is mounted off-centre toward the upper left. Blake had to cope with the very real problem of making a design around a window. Not only must he adapt to margins varying recto-verso, but he must also think across pages verso-recto, and keep variety in mind as well. He gains visual force by pairing figures of a similar size, as in Night V (pp. 56-57), where the pairing pages show humans as slaves to the powerful male figure of Lucre, on one page, and the delicately rendered female figure of Fortune on another. Sometimes the text itself seems in motion because the size and position of the figures vary as they move around and through the text-box. Night VI, pp. 35-42, yields an interesting example of such a movement. A circle of figures, around the text-box on page 35, is followed by an ouroboros surmounted by a single figure in the lower left of page 36, a large "Daphne" figure, with root- and branch-like limbs, stretches up to the right of the text on page 37, a single figure stands on a cliff to the middle left on page 38, a solitary climber rises and reaches up out of a rocky landscape on the lower right of page 39, then a suite of designs emerges with Christ on the upper left, on page 40, and a castrated king in the middle right of page 41, concluding the entire Night and run of designs on page 42 with a shift of scale as an enormous Christ ascends, triumphant, up the left edge of the text while the soft figure of Death kneels with the text-box on his back. If we were to view the run of designs quickly as if each page were the frame of a film we could readily grasp the principle.

The commission must have been inspirational, for Blake is very much the technical innovator in these drawings. On one page he experiments with figure

and ground in a reverse ground technique, possibly suggested by wood-cut processes. For Blake who was committed to clarity, to what he termed “the wirey line of rectitude,” a world where foreground and background are not distinguishable could only be a fallen one. The applied woodcut technique is found in several other drawings and used by him notably in defining water and chaos (Night VIII, p. 5; Night V, p. 31; Night IX, p. 73; Night IX, p. 36).

Although many of Blake’s scenes are set in celestial or at least spiritual realms and his colour vocabulary reflects this spiritual dimension there are some pages where he employs what reads as naturalistic colour for the landscape. The coming together of an ideal and a “real” colour lexicon is remarkable and may have influenced the pre-Raphaelite painters who saw these drawings more than half a century after they were completed. (In fact, the first book-length study of Blake was written by William Michael Rossetti, brother of the poet and painter Dante Gabriel. The Pre-Raphaelites were instrumental in mounting the first major exhibition of Blake’s work at the Burlington Club in London.)

Blake also links several pages running with similar ground. Occasionally he illuminates the text as the initial letter in a mediaeval manuscript might be illuminated. Or he might take a title-page (of which there are eleven, one for each of the Nights, as well as one for each of the two volumes into which the drawings were bound) as the occasion for a carpet page, as in the Book of Kells where design and colour overwhelm the text (Night VII, p. 64; Night IX, p. 9; Night II, p. 36; Night IX, p. 53).

Blake’s relationship with Young’s text is dynamic. Many of the designs seem to be simply illustrative, but when one considers the imagistic density of Young’s verse one realises that even in the simplest of designs that Blake is making very specific choices. In Night VI, on page 32, for example, he agrees with Young’s emphasis, following him closely as he shows the charming girlish figure of Vanity about to fall into the grave. The poet asks:

Are there, who wrap the world so close about them,
They see no further than the Clouds; and dance
On heedless Vanity’s phantastic Toe,
Till stumbling at a Straw, in their career,
Headlong they plunge, where end both dance and song?

In Night IX, on page 37 [Fig. 1], he expands on one of Young’s impassioned passages on the planets, turning it to an expression of the relationship of age and

youth, or rather of age over youth, and seems to question Young's breezy optimism and confidence in an appropriately hierarchical cosmos.

Nor stands thy *Wrath* depriv'd of its Reproof,
 Or – un-upbraided by this radiant Choir;
 The Planets of each System represent
 Kind neighbours; mutual Amity prevails
 Sweet Interchange of Rays, receiv'd, return'd;
 Enlight'ning, and enlight'ned! All, at once,
 Attracting, and attracted! Patriot-like,
 None sins against the Welfare of the Whole;
 But, their reciprocal, unselfish Aid,
 Affords an Emblem of *Millennial Love*...
 Thus Man his *sov'reign* Duty learns in this
Material Picture of Benevolence.

Although the elder figure pours liquid down into the waiting bowl of the younger, it is the younger figure whose world is largest, and who animates the bottom ground of the design. So Blake always presents his differences from Young's views. Perhaps this is most dramatically depicted in the ending where Young apocalyptically ends with "dreadful Midnight" reigning supreme, and Blake shows that this darkness is a mere prelude to a world where the biblical Samson, once blinded, is given vision again (Night IX, p. 119).

The designs interweave motifs, such as compasses, and butterflies, and display short narrative patterns. Night V, for example, presents a little epic where Death destroys all merriment (pp. 46–52). Night VIII shows the narrator's alter-ego Lorenzo being seduced by Frivolity, (pp. 43–44), and a Satan figure ominously seen viewing a banquet in Night VIII will then preside over the death of the revellers (pp. 63–64). Of these three examples, only the epic of death and mirth, in Night V, was present in the verbal material.

Young was an upper-class cleric with strong connections to his own class; his imagery reflects his social position, his interests and his time; the law, the theatres, the courts, ships and the sea, become in the designs a Blake-Young shared language. The later drawings are more dramatic than the earlier, as Blake responds to the flow of Young's imagery. Yet Blake will continue to disagree vehemently with some of Young's emotionally charged positions, his mathematical Creator, and quantifiable Universe. In Nights IV and IX, for example, Blake shows the consequences of Young's Natural Religion, his Deism, in his depictions of

imprisoned and over-burdened sun-worshipping indiscriminate Deists (Night IX, p. 42; Night IV, p. 15; Night IX, p. 80 [Fig. 2]).

While maintaining his independence, Blake at the same time complements each of the nine Nights by responding to its dominant image and mood. We can summarise this response in a brief schema:

Night I, On Life, Death and Immortality, concentrates on the bearded figure of Death and reinforces images of this life as a chain of metal or thorn, which binds man, in opposition to psyche figures who fly free.

Night II, On Time, Death and Friendship, introduces the figure of Time. Weights and balances often appear, as do pairs of figures.

Night III, Narcissa, is heavily elegiac. A Night burial and an overall theme of mutability are reinforced by frequent occurrences of various phases of the moon (see Night III, title-page and title-page verso).

Night IV, The Christian Triumph, is set to a large amount of yellow and orange wash. Figures are found leaping or rising. Areas of the page tend to be more open visually, and many sections are left unpainted.

Night V, The Relapse, presents night as a woman with her hands in a position of distress. A man is depicted under water. The night ends with figures caught in the throes of endless generation. Overall washes tend to grey; boats in water or figures tensed dominate the whole (see Night V, p. 60).

Night VI, The Infidel Reclaimed, presents arguments from nature for immortality. Blake washes the designs in cool blues, and shows us man in harmony with the animals (see Night VI, p. 25).

Night VII, The Infidel Reclaimed, Part II, presents arguments from man for immortality. Large stationary figures, mainly human, although not always so, are found more frequently here. Satan-Leviathan is repeatedly present.

Night VIII, Virtue's Apology, or The Man of the World Answered, picks up and brings together the figures of Christ, Time and Death. Poet and designer present clear alternatives; Christ is triumphant here.

Night IX, The Consolation, is a two-part journey. The first, "A Moral Survey of the Nocturnal Heavens," takes the reader on a tour of the milky way. It is breathtakingly written and illustrated (see Night IX, p. 83). Night is metamorphosed from a benighted figure in weeds of mourning on page 98, to a creature of beauty. Her dress of stars then becomes the very ground on which man dreams. Part 2, "A Night Address to the Deity," is an evocation of the Trinity. Blake ends emphatically with Samson pulling down the pillars of the Temple of Dagon; Young concludes with a prayer for immortality (Night IX, pp. 83, 98, 28–29).

As I have mentioned, the water-colours were bound into two volumes, Nights I–VI comprising the first, and Nights VII–IX the second. Blake planned for these bindings, since he designed for each volume a frontispiece, each a portrait of the resurrected Christ. The first, which became the title-page of Night IV of the Edwards edition of the engraved *Night Thoughts*, is of Christ pushing aside the heavy clouds as he mounts up from his cast-off grave clothes which remain below to be venerated by the angels who frame the lower page. In the second, He is the enlightener who awakens tormented figures in Death's realm of endless night. The last page of Night VI depicts Christ ascendent. And this design is linked with the end of Night IX, where, as we have seen, Samson, who in Biblical typology parallels Christ, triumphs over Death, and with sight restored, pulls down the Temple of Dagon. [Frontispieces, (whole numbers 1 and 264) and last page of Night VI (whole number 263)]

3 BLAKE'S POLITICAL NIGHT THOUGHTS (ICONOLOGY)

Blake's strongest response to the *Night Thoughts* is religious, not surprisingly, given the nature of the poem itself. In the 1790s Blake's own faith was in a process of change; he seems to have moved away from any organised religion, including the dissenting chapels of his family and his own earlier life, to a strongly individualised faith, as embodied in the major poems of his next ten years, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.

Young's meditations are the reflections of a man who although a cleric lived very much in the world, but as worldly as he was his text comes from a more peaceful period nearly fifty years before Blake's tumultuous times. The designs were executed against a backdrop of London dissent, one vividly drawn by David Erdman in his book *Prophet Against Empire*. Erdman has shown

convincingly, plate by plate, line by line, Blake's debt to, engagement in, and transmutation of the radical politics of his own time: the impact of the American Revolution on his poetry, his exuberant response to the French Revolution, his pictorial and prophetic editorials against what Erdman calls the Pitt Terror. Like his contemporaries, Goya and Beethoven, "Blake saw the age of the spinning jenny and the balloon and the citizen army not primarily as an age of rising industry but as one of increasingly prodigious war and uncertain peace."⁷

Given their proximity to the Lambeth prophecies, and the great number of the *Night Thoughts* designs, it would be surprising if the political engagement of those Lambeth book did not enter this vast commissioned undertaking. And the importance to him of these *Night Thoughts* designs is demonstrated in the way Blake lets them share an iconography with his own privately printed works, something he never does with his highly conventional commercial book illustrations. This iconography includes groupings of figures, solitary characters, such as pilgrims with staves, and motifs, like thorns for a fallen world, serpents for a fall or imprisonment, flowers for joy, and lambs for peaceableness. It is an iconography so similar to Blake's private work that it is tempting to call figures within this series not by their *Night Thoughts* designations, such as the poet, or Death or Narcissa, but rather with names from Blake's own mythology.

Blake was not only a democrat, but he believed in the divinity of each person. His anti-Church and anti-State views find an outlet in these designs. Although the bulk of the *Night Thoughts* water-colours presents abstract figures, that is images embodying ideas, as viewers we also experience what read as actual portraits. Some are prominent political figures of the day, others simply faces which glimpsed convey a kind of reality suggesting they are drawn from life. It is this vague territory, a kind of enigmatic borderzone between the abstract and the real which is most intriguing and resistant to articulation. Partly through abstractions, but also through these portraits, Blake-illustrator sets up a covert narrative commenting on the repressive politics of his own time, the French Revolution and the series of reactionary laws in England instituted by the British Prime Minister William Pitt, and sanctioned by King George the Third. Among the well-known figures to appear in disguise in Blake's *Night Thoughts* are the King himself, Napoleon, and Charles James Fox, the Leader of the Opposition in the British Parliament. It is a rich area to mine, but it is vast; identifications are

⁷ David V. Erdman. *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. xi.

highly speculative, and corroboration can only be conjured by evidence outside the series, for example from satirical prints and straight portraits of dignitaries.

Politics enters the Blake's *Night Thoughts* gradually. The earlier Nights are perhaps deceptively simple. Blake draws out Young's passing allusions to kings and other rulers, and portrays them satirically. In Night I (p. 7) the figure of Oppression is connected with Monarchy and the State, through her spiky crown and chains, as well as with organised religion: notice her accessories of a Cardinal's cap and crook. That spiky crown will appear again and again on figures variously called Sense (V, p. 7), Lucre (V, p. 56), Fortune (VI, p. 28), the World, Vile Appetite and Earth (V, p. 30), but also, and this is an interesting exception, on the psalmist David (IX, p. 30). So that while the spiky crown is a warning, it needs always to be weighed in context. In addition to the obvious satire on rulers of any sort, Blake rarely lets pass an allusion by Young to war (Nights I, p. 17; V, p. 7; IX, p. 30; IV, p. 20).

Several political images echo Blake's Lambeth books. Page 16 of Night III, for example, is a redrawing of *Europe*, plate 11 (copy D, BMPR [Fig. 3]). In *Europe*, this figure is called Albion's Angel because he has acted the King's part in America. The small cross and orb at the top of his crown make it into a Papal tiara and Royal Crown of England combined. In the *Illuminated Blake*,⁸ David Erdman identifies this figure as George III, but I am not certain whether that is correct. Yet I have no doubts about his counterpart in the *Night Thoughts*. Though the *Night Thoughts* text identifies him as Lucifer, his features are indisputably those of the King, and he reappears twice more in the designs in Papal costume (Night III, p. 16 [Fig. 4]; *Europe*, plate 11; Portrait of George III by Allan Ramsay [Fig. 5]; Nights VIII, p. 3, full design [Fig. 6] and close-up [Fig. 7]; VIII, p. 50; and James Gillray caricatures, 1784 [Fig. 8] and 1792 [Fig. 9]).

By the time Blake was at work on these drawings, Napoleon Bonaparte had come to power. The earliest satirical print of him in the British Museum collection is 1797, but his face was well-known before then. The siege of Toulon, where the English were defeated, was 30 November 1793, and Napoleon rose swiftly thereafter. The Italian campaign was 1795, and most of the early prints of him were Italian in origin. In *Napoleon in Caricature*, I, x (1911), A.M. Broadley argues that the first Napoleon portrait is late 1795, but I have found engravings, in BMPR, dating from 1794 (see Jacques Louis David's Napoleon portraits dating from 1797 and 1804 [Fig. 10]).

⁸ David V. Erdman ed. *The Illuminated Blake*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1974.

Several *Night Thoughts* faces are teasingly reminiscent of Napoleon. Night V, page 9 [Fig. 11], speaks of a war being waged in the individual soul and of the soul's pride at his own degradation. Blake's laurel-crowned soldier has the eyes and chin of Napoleon. In Night VII [Fig. 12], another echo appears, as the text mentions Caesar. In Night IX, the cloven-footed figure on a pedestal, like the Pope-George III figure from Night VIII (though with left-foot rather than right-foot deformed), again hints at Napoleon's features [Fig. 13]. The poem speaks expressly of Imperial ambition. The likelihood of this design's topicality is enhanced by the fact that it is an adaptation of Blake's own *Europe*, plate 5 (copy D, BMPR [Fig. 14]), where the face resembles both William Pitt and the King's son, Frederick, Duke of York (Night IX, p. 89 [Fig. 15]; *Europe*, plate 5, copy D).

Partly as an inheritance of the English Civil War, Blake lived in a culture which discussed politics in Biblical terms. Some viewed the American Revolution as a secular Apocalypse, that is one which would overthrow poverty and cruelty.⁹ Others saw it as *the* Apocalypse, as set out in the Book of Revelation. Similar views of the French Revolution prevailed in the 1790s. The millenarian Richard Brothers (1757-1824), for example, prophesied in 1795 against the war with France, addressing letters to the King, to William Pitt, and to his ministers. Brothers beseeched George III not to proceed with the war, and predicted the Apocalypse if he did. Arrested in 1795 and incarcerated for 11 years as a lunatic, Brothers' views were reiterated and expanded in several books by his lifelong friend and supporter John Finlayson. In *The Last Trumpet and The Flying Angel*, Finlayson identifies the Red Dragon as George III himself, and the Beast whose number is 666 as the members of the House of Commons (pp. 22-24; 1849) (see two caricatures showing biblical typology, 1795, 1799 [Figs. 16, 17]).¹⁰

Not surprisingly this kind of *odium theologicum* is an important part of the English scheme of satire against Napoleon who also was compared to the Dragon and identified as the Beast of Revelation. Between 1797 and 1815 prophetic broadsides, leaflets and prints made the comparison vivid. An 1809 brochure by Louis Mayer, with a frontispiece of a satirical plate of 1804, identifies Napoleon as the Apocalyptic Beast:

⁹ Erdman. *Prophet Against Empire*, p. 50.

¹⁰ The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, has editions of Brothers' poems, prophecies and polemics.

His brutal and ferocious Dispositions are represented by the Body and Feet of a Tiger; his inordinate Desires by the Chest, Wings and Claws of a Dragon holding out Death and Slavery; his Head with two Horns symbolizes his civil and ecclesiastical Authority; and is intended to point out that though a Dragon and a Tiger have been the most dreadful and destructive of all real and imaginary creatures, yet even their horrid natures are surpassed by the sanguinary and rapacious Dispositions of that implacable Tyrant.

Simple arithmetic reveals that the number of monarch and ruler and warfare designs increases toward the end of Blake's *Night Thoughts*, and that they are increasingly associated with blood, death, struggle, and imprisonment, and contrasted with the serenity of eternity. By increasing the number of satirical subjects and of Biblical archetypes, Blake begins to leave behind his early generalisations and to focus his own obsessions on the Pitt Terror and the War with France. He was seeking a solution, one characterised in the movement of designs in Night IX with its magnificent Samson drawing, but clarified in the title-page to Night VIII, where each element of the Beast of the Apocalypse on which the Whore of Babylon rides engages with Blake's mental warfare against the forces of tyranny (Night VIII, title-page, whole number 345 [Fig. 18]).

It is an echo and counter-type of the title-page to Night The Third, the book of *Narcissa*, where Young's dead daughter becomes Blake's "Woman Clothed in the Sun," pregnant with the redeeming Messiah (from the Book of Revelation). Here, in Night VIII, as the opposing forces gather for the last battle the Scarlet Whore of Babylon appears. She is riding, as in the Bible, the Great Red Dragon crowned with seven heads and ten crowns. The figures on the extreme left manifest the Beast's power.

Reading clockwise we find the Scarlet Whore seated on the Dragon whose aspects are the Law – note the judge's wig; the Military (a steel-helmeted soldier), the Merchant Banks – the scaly, brutish, bearded red and gold image, the Church and the Monarchy – the bleary-eyed figure with triple mitre and orb, the ram's-horned crowned King, and the two ecclesiastically-hatted figures.

Remember that in this period it is Napoleon who most frequently embodies the Dragon from Revelation. A Rowlandson print of 1808, based on an earlier design, shows the seven-headed beast, the upper left figure representing Napoleon. Here in Blake's *Night Thoughts* we find Napoleon's features – the strong jaw, the prominent nose. This design is a view of the Apocalyptic Beast in line with the most popular satire of Blake's day (close-up of upper left figure from

Night VIII, title-page [Fig. 19]; close-up of caricature of Napoleon [Fig. 20]; full-frame of same Napoleon figure [Fig. 21]).

4 BLAKE'S SCIENTIFIC NIGHT THOUGHTS

When Blake came of age, almost every philosophical problem was approached in terms of the imagery and doctrines of Isaac Newton. It was a comprehensive system of invisible forces, invisible matter, an "almost" void of matter in motion, all mathematically provable, that is demonstrable. Blake railed against this devouring monster, this *systema mundi*, linking it with famine and political oppression: "Bring out number weight and measure in a year of dearth," he said in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (plate 7). The cry is echoed in *The Book of Urizen* (chapter 4), and continues into "Vala, or The Four Zoas."¹¹

Within the *Night Thoughts*, a Blakean subtext emerges engaging with Young's Newtonian ideas. Blake co-opts the Newtonian iconography in three ways: he humanises the mathematical schema; he subverts the mathematical forces, rendering them as lifeless images of freezing and solidification, drowning or dense vegetation, and he materialises the immaterial.

In London, Blake lived not far from the shop of the instrument maker, scientist, and public lecturer, Benjamin Martin, and he undoubtedly saw some of the popular demonstrations of Newtonianism with their dazzling and expensive machines, cometaries, orreries, quadrants, tide-dials, microscopes, calculators, air-pumps. Although Young often alludes to such machinery; except for the odd compass, or scales, Blake never chooses to depict these machines. Young's Newtonian angels (Night IX, pp. 91-92, 509-510 [Fig. 22: p. 91]), schooled by Blake, put aside their geometry and learn to fly to "the coasts of bliss," meeting other beings, in other populated worlds.

In his manuscript fragment "An Island In The Moon," Blake satirises the scientists as a group of natural philosophers sitting around arguing about the ideas of Voltaire who had popularised Newton in France. In an hilarious take-off on Newton's *Principia* and *Opticks*, Blake's philosophers converse of "Queries in Philosophy" and enquire into "the works of Nature." "Then Mr Inflammable Gass ran & shovd his head into the fire & set his hair all in a flame & ran about

¹¹ All quotations of Blake's own texts are taken from David V. Erdman ed. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

the room.” Meanwhile the lawyer Steelyard sits at his table taking down extracts from “Youngs Night Thoughts,” “The wreck of matter & the crush of worlds / as Younge says,” as the whole company cavorts and sings:

To be or not to be
Of great capacity
Like Sir Isaac Newton
Or Locke...

Later at Mr Inflammable’s house, these “happy Islanders” conduct an experiment: “while Tilly Lally & Scopprell were pumping at the air pump Smack went the glass [...] he ran out of the room, come out, come out we are putrified, we are corrupted, our lungs are destroyd with the Flogiston...” and so forth.

In the *Night Thoughts* Blake animates Young’s references to Newtonian geometry and peoples the void of Newtonian space with human and angelic forms. Flying figures leap with ease across Young’s orbs; figures “initiate in the secrets of the skies” (Night VI, p. 6) defy gravity. Loosing their shackles of Newtonian attraction (Night VI, pp. 8 and 10), they move as they will, in the vast “ocean” of unbounded Space (Night VII, pp. 60–61), and journey “on curious Travel bent” to other inhabited worlds (Night IX, pp. 87–88; and p. 100; Night VII, p. 49 [Fig. 23]).

Although it was argued that the “delightful science of optics” had enlarged and disclosed new worlds, Blake showed his viewers the sun as seen at the end of a powerful telescope, where a naked man imprisoned clutches his head while his whole body shackled at the ankle fills the flaming orb (Night VII, p. 15). And Blake contrast this materialist sun-prison with another view of the sun, only pages later, responding to Young’s line, derived from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

“A *Christian* dwells like URIEL, in the Sun.” Here a magnificent full figure fills the orb and appears to make it move (Night VII, p. 67). Calling on the “Mathematic glories of the Skies / In Number, Weight and Measure, All ordained,” Young conflates astronomy and economics in characteristic neo-Newtonian fashion (Night IX, p. 55). Blake turns Young’s “Great Oeconomist” and his subjects into ghosts. Newton had described God’s relationship to Space as if it were His “Sensorium,” or His Body (Night IX, pp. 94–95). Blake transforms Young’s glowing Globes into a human family, surrounding the living organic form of Christ as the Tree of Life (Night IX, p. 94 [Fig. 24]).

Finally, near the end of the poem, the poet calls on God as the “Cause of causes,” “last link in the golden chain,” the “father of mass,” of “matter

multiform." The illustrator replies by presenting a carpet of myriad human beings with Christ as their radiant centre (Night IX, 109; 527).

Iconography has become iconology. Blake's anti-Monarchical, anti-State, anti-Newtonian narrative finds its completion in the image of the biblical Samson, his eyesight and his strength restored, pulling down the Temple of Dagon, the Temple of the temporal and the material. Mankind liberated from too mortal flesh becomes one in a radiant transcendental harmony.