From the Religious
to the Psychological Sublime
The Fate of Young’s Night Thoughts
in Blake’s The Four Zoas

Blake’s 537 watercolor drawings to Young’s Night Thoughts were produced between 1795 and 1797. He began work on The Four Zoas toward the end of this period, in 1796 or 1797. This temporal proximity, along with the profound formal and thematic influence of Night Thoughts on The Four Zoas, explains in part why the watercolors that illustrate the former frequently seem to allude to events detailed in the latter. Some of the Night Thoughts designs assume an even closer relation to The Four Zoas. From page 43 onward, Blake wrote his poem on proof sheets of the engraved designs. On the recto, the text of The Four Zoas appears alongside the Night Thoughts designs, written in the blank space intended for Young’s text. On the verso, Blake drew new designs to accompany his poem. This creates the impression, as one pages through the poem, that Night Thoughts designs have been woven into its verbal and visual fabric. At the same time, the designs are not entirely assimilated to their new location: while playing an important role in

1 I would like to thank John E. Grant and Michael J. Tolley for their perceptive criticism of drafts of this essay.

2 Grant, in “Visions,” writes that Blake might have seen “significant relationships among the Night Thoughts engravings and many of the Vala drawings that face them and also some of the drawings on the versos of the engravings or elsewhere in the manuscript” (160–61).
the poem, they continue to evoke their original context. This means that, although Young’s poem often provides a crucial interpretative context for *The Four Zoas*, the reverse can also occur: *The Four Zoas* sometimes provides an interpretative frame for aspects of the *Night Thoughts* designs and, through them, the earlier poem. This insistent intertextuality has implications for our reading of *The Four Zoas*, as well as for our understanding of Blake’s watercolors and the nature of his response to Young. In this paper, I will skirt the first and second of these topics by focusing on what seems to me to be the crucial element in the third: the question of the sublime in Blake and Young. My argument will move from a consideration of the religious sublime of reason in *Night Thoughts*, to the critique of Young’s sublime in Blake’s watercolor designs, and then briefly to Blake’s humanist or psychological sublime in *The Four Zoas*.

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3 There is no consensus on whether Blake’s designs for *Night Thoughts* illustrate, extend or are critical of Young. Heppner distinguishes among: Paley’s view that if read in relation to Blake’s mythological system, the designs often invert Young’s ideas (148); Helmsdatter’s more moderate formulation of this argument; and his own belief that Blake’s illustrations vary and extend rather than oppose and invert Young (170). This makes him skeptical of Grant’s claim that the illustrations to *Night Thoughts* form “a coordinated program of visual commentary” (153). Heppner makes a strong case (one that few critics would dispute) that the designs are closely related to their context in Young’s poem, but this does not preclude the possibility that there are other, more critical levels of interpretation, or that the designs might allude to contexts that suggest a less accommodating response to Young. Blake himself recontextualizes some of the designs by placing them within *The Four Zoas*. The argument that follows suggests that Blake’s use of proof engravings for *Night Thoughts* in *The Four Zoas* dramatically extends a critique of Young’s poem that does more than vary and extend Young’s ideas. See: Grant, “Re-View”; “Jesus”; and “Envisioning”; Helmsdatter, “Blake’s *Night Thoughts*” and “Blake and Religion”; and Paley.

4 There is an extensive literature on the sublime. Although I don’t always share their conclusions, I have found the following helpful: Cresap; De Bolla; Ferguson; Freeman; Fry; Hertz; Kant; Lyotard, Monk; Pease; Weiskel. For an account of the sublime in Blake’s *auvre* very different from the one advanced here, see De Luca, “Wall of Words” and *Words of Eternity*.
In Life of Johnson, Boswell relates an anecdote about an evening spent by Edward Young and Mr. James Ralph at the house of Lord Melcombe. He writes that

The Doctor, happening to go out into the garden, [his host] observed to him, on his return, that it was a dreadful night, as in truth it was, there being a violent storm of rain and wind. 'No, Sir, (replied the Doctor,) it is a very fine night. The Lord is abroad.' (1110–11, n.3)

For the past 150 years, Young's reputation for unwarranted prolixity has been so high that it is likely that contemporary readers will be relieved to learn that here, in a little less than four lines, we can find a model of the primary plot that generates the sublime profusion, nine nights, and many thousands of lines of Night Thoughts.

Boswell describes Young roused from the pleasures of social intercourse by a storm. In Young's Night Thoughts the narrator is woken from sleep—the sleep of mortal pleasures and attachments—by Death. The deaths of Philander and Narcissa stop the narrator's life in its tracks and produce a radical change of scale and perspective. Just as the storm is a natural phenomenon that dwarfs the social occasion at Lord Melcombe's, so too Death puts into perspective the earthly things that had previously engrossed the narrator. Death prompts a painful self-consciousness. As the narrator exclaims:

A Part how small of the terraqueous Globe
Is tenanted by man? the rest a Waste,
Rocks, Deserts, frozen Seas, and burning Sands;
Wild haunts of Monsters, Poisons, Stings, and Death:
Such is Earth's melancholy Map!

"But far / More sad!" is the recognition that this geographical "truth"

... is a true Map of man:
So bounded are its haughty Lord's Delights
To Woe's wide empire; where deep Troubles toss;
Loud Sorrows howl; envenom'd Passions bite;
Ravenous Calamities our vitals seize,
And threat’ning Fate, wide-opens to devour.
(I:284–94)5

This perception deflates the narrator, inducing a painful sense of melancholy, and brings his life to a standstill. Death removes the objects of his desire to the far side of an unbridgeable gulf, and so blocks the passage between desire and fulfillment.6

The phrase “happening to go out into the garden” suggests that, for the company gathered at Lord Melcombe’s, Young’s exit was without rationale. Why leave the pleasures of conversation for the embrace of rain and wind? Yet in Night Thoughts this apparently irrational behavior is in effect what Young recommends. Rather than retreating from Death, or valuing life more highly because it is fleeting, Young’s narrator exhorts Lorenzo to “welcome, Death!” (III:487), “let It reign, / That Kind Chastiser of thy Soul in Joy!” (III:304–05).

The blocking power is now seen as “the Crown of Life” (III:526),

... the great Counsellor, who Man inspires,
With every nobler Thought, and fairer Deed!
Death, the Deliverer, who rescues man!
(III:512–14)

Rather than bringing life to a standstill, Death offers a passage between this life and the next. It breaks the chains that tie us to “this

5All quotations of Edward Young’s The Complaint, and the Consolation; or, Night Thoughts (1742–44) are taken from Cornford’s edition. References give Night in Roman numerals and line numbers in Arabic numerals. Blake’s watercolor designs to Young are reproduced in Grant et al., William Blake’s Designs. Citations of the watercolor designs and proof engravings of those designs refer to this volume. References to the proof engravings are followed by E (e.g., NT40E).

6Blake’s watercolor illustration to lines I:284–91 (NT25) focuses on the moment before the individual’s life is brought to a standstill by Death. A naked traveler, gripping a staff firmly in his left hand, strides across the page. He gazes intently at what lies before him, unaware of the desolate landscape through which he passes, the lion that stalks him, and the snake poised ready to strike. Evidently, “Monsters, Poisons” and “Stings” will soon bring his journey to an end. The text panel (carrying Young’s grim Maps of Earth and of Man, as well as the threatening serpent, whose long body frames the upper portion of the text) presses against the traveler’s back, diminishing his stature, bending him almost double.
little *Isle of Life, / This dark, incarcerating Colony ... And re-admits us ... to our Father’s Throne*” (IV:664–65, 669–70). In a remarkable paradox, the agent of separation is found to be a vehicle that ferries us back to those it had taken away. Even more surprising is the statement that “This King of Terrors is the Prince of Peace” (III:534). Death, it seems, is closely aligned with Christ.

Young’s proclamation that “the Lord is abroad” effects a transformation which, although less dramatic, is of the same type: far from being a social nuisance of the first order, wind and rain are coincident with the divine. For the guests at Lord Melcombe’s, as for the reader of *Night Thoughts*, this metamorphosis is likely to have been accompanied by another. One imagines that Young’s auditor could not fail to have been startled by the sudden elevation of their friend from dinner guest to one who bears news of God. Similarly, in *Night Thoughts* the thought of Death produces an inflation of the thinker which precisely inverts the initial deflation. Death’s reign, Young writes,

> will spread thy glorious Conquests far,  
> And still the Tumults of thy ruffled breast;  
> Auspicious Era! Golden Days begin!  
> The Thought of Death, shall, like a God, inspire.  
> (III:306–09)

The individual, at first dwarfed by the empire of Death and blocked by its implacable force, becomes a conqueror who can claim Death as publicist and general. Even these claims are trumped by a reflection on the death of Christ in which the narrator is elevated into the company of the divine:

> I gaze, and as I gaze, my mounting Soul  
> Catches strange Fire, Eternity! at thee,  
> And drops the World—or rather, more enjoys:  
> How chang’d the Face of Nature? how improv’d?  
> What seem’d a Chaos, shines a glorious World,  
> Or, what a World, an *Eden*; heighten’d all!  
> It is another Scene! another Self!  
> And still another, as Time rolls along,  
> And that a *Self* far more illustrious still.  
> (IV:499–507)

It is no doubt already evident that the steps that I have been tracing correspond closely to the plot of the sublime. An experience of the sublime begins with a moment of blockage in which all the motions of the soul “are suspended, with some degree of hor-
ror.” As Burke writes, “the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.” Strangely, this moment of stasis is followed by a sense of transport. The blocking power moves the mind that it has filled, “anticipates our reasonings” and “hurries us on by an irresistible force.” Transport concludes with, first, the generation of a feeling of “admiration, reverence and respect” for the blocking force and, second, an elevation of the self (53). As Burke explains, “when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects” the mind claims for itself “some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates. Hence proceeds what Longinus has observed of that glorying and sense of inward greatness, that always fills the reader of such passages in poets and orators as are sublime” (46–47).

Burke’s sublime is an empirical and psychological phenomenon. By contrast, in Young’s religious sublime it is reason, not nature or passion, that is the prime actor. Reason even takes precedence over faith for, although faith removes “Death’s terror,” it is itself based on reason. As Young schools Lorenzo, we believe because “’Reason bids, / All-sacred reason!’ ... Source, and Soul, of all / Demanding Praise, on Earth, or Earth above!” (IV:724, 728–29, 731–32). The rhetoric used to advance this argument gives reason the attributes of God. With the earlier identification of Death and Christ, this completes the set of tropes that enable Young’s sublime. The movement from blockage to transport and from deflation to inflation is underwritten by a scandalous rhetoric that aligns Man, Reason, Death, Christ and God. Indeed, when Young exclaims, “How Nature opens, and receives my Soul / In boundless Walks of raptur’d Thought? Where Gods / Encounter, and embrace me!” (IV:511–13), he moves so quickly between these terms that they seem to become one.

The plot of the sublime collocates what to modern sensibilities often appear as quite disparate aspects of Night Thoughts: its power to arouse a sense of the pathetic and the sublime, while offering readers moral instruction. Pathos is the “first fruit” of the thought of Death. As Boswell reports, in this poem there is

... a power of the Pathetick beyond almost any example that I have seen. He who does not feel his nerves shaken, and his heart pierced by many passages in this extraordinary work, particularly by that most affecting one, which describes the gradual torment suffered by the contemplation of an object of affection-
ate attachment, visibly and certainly decaying into dissolution, must be of a hard and obstinate frame. (1111)

In Night Thoughts, however, the Pathetick (and the moment of blockage which is its concomitant) serves as the backdrop against which reason’s kinship with the divine can be seen. Tutored by the thought of Death, reason turns from the things of this world to the soul, immortality and God. This turn gives the poem a very different power, one that is glimpsed in the whole rather than the parts. This is the aspect of the poem remarked on by Johnson:

> Particular lines are not to be regarded; the power is in the whole; and in the whole there is a magnificence like that ascribed to Chinese plantation, the magnificent of vast extent and endless diversity. (1111)

Although superficially opposed, in Night Thoughts pathos and sublimity emerge in a symbiotic relation with each other. The eternal world glimpsed by reason heightens our sense of the insubstantiality of this world, which in turn intensifies our desire for sublime transcendence. As this cycle proceeds, the eternal becomes an ideal to which our mortal selves are sacrificed, in the hope of proving worthy of eternal life. The pathetic and the sublime are propaedeutic to an understanding of the “Christian Sacrifice.” In Boswell’s words:

> To all the other excellencies of Night Thoughts let me add the great and peculiar one, that they contain not only the noblest sentiments of virtue, and contemplations on immortality, but the Christian Sacrifice, the Divine Propitiation, with all its interesting circumstances, and consolations to “a wounded spirit,” solemnly and poetically displayed in such imagery and language, as cannot fail to exalt, animate, and soothe the truly pious. (1111-12)

Blake’s observation that the “Sublime & Pathos” of fallen humanity have become “Two Rocks fixd in the Earth / His Reason his Spectrous Power covers them above” (J 1.4–5; E144) seems an apt description of Night Thoughts.

It is likely that the popularity of Night Thoughts in the late eighteenth century derived at least in part from the poem’s sublime mastery of Death. Yet it is precisely these pleasures, the delights of the sublime of reason, that George Eliot, writing in the Westminster Review for January 1857, is unable to discern. Eliot is writing in a nineteenth-century humanist tradition in which the transcendental drive of the religious sublime has been muted and
its scenarios psychologized. Read from within the tradition of nineteenth-century humanism, measured with a yardstick that valorizes the present, the visible and the human, Young becomes an exemplar of

... that deficient human sympathy, that impiety towards the present and the visible, which flies for its motives, its sanctities, and its religion, to the remote, the vague, and the unknown. (385)

For Eliot, Young’s

... spiritual man recognises no motives more familiar than Golgotha and “the skies” it walks in graveyards, or it soars among the stars. His religion exhausts itself in ejaculations and rebukes, and knows no medium between the ecstatic and the sententious. (337)

What is most daring about Young’s poem, what no doubt raised Lord Melcombe’s opinion of the character of his guest, is precisely what Eliot excoriates.

The publication of “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young” marks the point of collapse of Young’s reputation from the high estimation of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the neglect of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One might imagine Blake’s illustrations to Young’s Night Thoughts as occupying a point midway between, on the one hand, Boswell’s estimation of the poet as “the greatest of any generation” and Night Thoughts “as a mass of the grandest and richest poetry that human genius has ever produced” and, on the other hand, Eliot’s indictment of Young as insincere, false and lacking any genuine emotion. Blake shares aspects of both the religious rhetoric of Young and the humanist discourse of Eliot, but in a relation that would have left both unimpressed.

Following the central preoccupations of Night Thoughts, Blake’s designs return again and again to the inaugural moment of the sublime, the sense of blockage and reduction produced by the overwhelming power of Death. In NT20, for example, we see Death standing on the lifeless bodies of two Kings (see p. 189). The first, his head lying on the ground near the right-hand side of the page, still wears his crown. The head of the second is not depicted,
although his crown lies near the left-hand margin. Death's right foot rests on or near the neck of the former; his left foot is thrust out toward the second crown, as if to measure the extent of the slain. Despite their previous social stature, these figures are now no more than a vantage point for a much grander project. Elevated by the dead, Death's left hand is long enough to be placed firmly on top of the sun, suspending its aerial revolutions, holding it down and making it a target for the arrow held in his raised right hand. Earth and sky, father and sun, perhaps even reaction and revolution are brought together by Death.

Confronted with a figure of this magnitude, life shrinks. What had at first appeared to be without bound is now dramatically diminished. Some of the most striking of Blake's designs attempt to give a sense of this reduction. On NT197, for example, an anxious figure grips with hands and feet the thread of life which keeps him from plunging into the abyss below. His labors are, however, of no avail, for above him an unnoticed female figure of Destiny, shears in hand, prepares his end. On the previous page (NT196) the soul of a man, who does not yet experience "The Thought of Death," sleeps in "more than Midnight Darkness" "on a Precipice" where he is liable to be "Puff'd off by the first Blast, and lost for ever" (V:677, 679–81). The mortal self in this design corresponds to the dog, unaware of his master's state, unwilling to bark the thought that would take him from danger.

As designs such as these suggest, when concerned with this first step in the scenario of the sublime, Blake's illustrations closely follow Young. However, when it is a question of how the moment of blockage should be interpreted, and precisely what state it disrupts, Blake's designs draw apart from Night Thoughts. In the first Night, for example, Young asks in amazement,

How was my Heart encrusted by the World?
O how self-fetter'd was my groveling Soul?
How, like a Worm, was I wrapt round and round

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7 It is possible that the man's head has been severed from his trunk and Death's right foot rests on his shoulder.

8 In NT5E the heads of both Kings can clearly be seen, and their bodies are wound together. Perhaps Blake was alluding to the recent decapitation of Louis XVI while suggesting a possible future "end" for George III. Mee notes that between 1794 and 1795 a controversy "raged around the prophecies imagining the King's death and the destruction of London written by Richard Brothers" (108).
In silken thought, which reptile Fancy spun,
Till darken'd Reason lay quite clouded o'er
With soft conceit, of endless Comfort here,
Nor yet put forth her Wings to reach the skies?

(i:155–61)

Blake illustrates these lines with a design centered on an aged man looking intently at his reflection in a mirror (NT17; Fig. 1). The lower part of his body is locked in a cocoon, while the man himself is enclosed within a globe, itself encircled by a chain which hangs from a larger starry globe at the top of the plate. Outside both globes, hovering to the left of the text, a young woman raises her hands in horror at the spectacle. This composition does, of course, closely follow Young’s metaphors, but it deploys them in subtly different ways. For Young it is Fancy, and so by implication the world of sense impressions, which have encrusted the narrator’s heart and “clouded o’er” his reason. To the extent that Fancy is limited to the retention and re-presentation of sense impressions, it is likely that Blake would have agreed. In this design, he develops Young’s conceit with the further implication that to be engrossed by the affairs of this world is a kind of narcissism. Although old, the man depicted here is still immature, a worm not yet able to break his chrysalis, an embryo not yet able to leave the womb. However, the design also suggests that he remains caught by his reflection because of a fundamental sexual immaturity, or rather, because of his a-sexuality. It is, for example, only the lower portion of his body which is enclosed by the cocoon. Moreover, the womb-like space in which he is shut divides him from the female figure (drifting above and apart from him) who suggests the possible object of the man’s sexual desire as much as the soul or unclouded reason preferred by Young. Blake’s characterization of Young’s narrator as an embryo closed within a womb-like space, suggests that exodus from a state of self-absorption might involve birth rather than sublime inflation. The distance between the man and the floating woman suggests that this birth might be effected through embrace of others rather than worship of reason and its transcendental objects. Where Young’s transport is vertical, infla-

9NT16 depicts a naked woman, arms outstretched, floating in the air above a broken, egg-shaped object from which she appears recently to have emerged. An unopened cocoon lies inert, on top of the text panel. Some of the consequences of this unequal development (birth and stasis, freedom and confinement) are explored in NT17.
Fig. 1. *Night Thoughts* 17. Watercolor.
© The British Museum.
In all the Glories of a God array'd!
What need I more? O Death, the Palm is thine.

Then welcome, Death! thy dreadful Harbingers are
Age, and Disease; Dire Fate, and Time's Decay.
That plucks my Nerves, those tender Strings of Life,
Which plucks a little more, will toll the Bell.
That calls my few Friends to my Funeral:
Where feeble Nature drops, perhaps, a Tear,
While Reason and Religion, better taught,
Congratulate the Dead, and crown his tomb
With wreath triumphant. Death is Victory;
It binds in chains the raging IIs of Life:
Left and Ambitious, Rages and Avarice,
Drag'd at his chariot wheel, appalled his Powers;
That IIs our sloth, Cares importunate
Are not immortal too, O Death! it is Thine:
Our Day of Difflusion?—Nay, 'tis right
'Tis our great Pay-day! 'Tis our Harvest, rich
And

Fig. 2. Night Thoughts 107. Watercolor. © The British Museum.
tionary and involves the division of the temporal from the eternal. Blake’s design suggests a movement which is, at least initially, horizontal, expansive, and dependent upon assumption of the physical body. In Blake’s Night Thoughts designs, these very different modes of transport are both described in detail. I will put aside, for the moment, the latter in order to focus on Blake’s complex analysis of the former in his watercolors to Young.

A reasonably straightforward account of the steps that lead to the inflation and idealization of Death can be seen in NT107, 108 and 109 (Figs. 2, 3, 4). The first depicts Age, a figure that (as it were) precedes the more fully-bearded Death, with eyes closed, descending to the earth with a woman who pours disease from two small phials. Although illness might cause death, Young assures his audience that “Death is Victory; It binds in chains the raging Ills of Life” (III:495–96). The moral to be drawn from this reversal, that the “King of Terrors is the Prince of Peace” (III:534), can be seen on the facing page (FZ 108). Death is here depicted as the “great Counsellor,” “the Deliverer” and “the Rewarder” (III:512, 514, 515) who in the following design (page 109) is shown releasing Young from his chains. Insofar as it is the thought of Death that sets Young free, we shouldn’t read this release only as that effected by his actual death. Young’s right hand, pushing downward to the earth, lifting his torso above the ground, suggests that he has divided himself from merely temporal concerns. His left hand, palm facing upward, gestures toward the supersensible identity that he is confident he now shares. Young’s release is preceded by a female figure who floats at the left of the text, above the figure of

10Young does, of course, put a high value on aspects of the temporal world, such as male friendship. Moreover, as one of its lesser effects the religious sublime adds a virtue and an order to “nature.” However, for Young this world has value primarily in relation to the transcendental object and redemptive narrative of Christianity; it is most precious as it prepares us for the next. Tutored by the thought of death, we cling to reason as a representative and guarantor of the immortal and divine in man.

11The expansion referred to here involves exodus from a closed state rather than augmentation of a given state or self.

12Grant discusses NT108/30E in “On First Encountering” (76–77, 10n).
Fig. 3. Night Thoughts 108. Watercolor.
© The British Museum.
Fig. 4. Night Thoughts 109. Watercolor.
© The British Museum.
Death. Perhaps she is moving toward the position indicated by Young’s left palm as a destination for them both. The proximity of her erstwhile chains to those of Young suggests either that this is Narcissa, usually identified as Young’s stepdaughter or, just as plausibly, Young’s wife.

A more complex depiction of sublime transport can be seen in the remarkable title page of Night the First (NT6; Fig. 5). In this design, Death is shown as both sheltering and marking the limits of temporal life. Between his extended left foot and his right arm a mother is winding thread on a distaff, while her four children are preoccupied with activities such as reading, writing and playing the harp. Life is an island, bounded and dwarfed by Death. Although part of Death’s bow and arrow protrudes beneath the text, near his right foot, Death is not to be feared. While his right hand marks life’s limit, his left hand forms a platform from which a naked female figure, head upturned, arms raised, is drawn toward the skies. Death is the Prince of Peace, a point which is underlined by the paternal (or more accurately, the patriarchal) relation he holds to the family.

Yet this design is not entirely positive. While illustrating Young’s ideas, Blake adds details which suggest that sublime transport is not as benign as it first appears. Perhaps the most curious feature of this page is that the mortal father of the children between Death’s legs is nowhere to be found. Instead, Death has taken the role of the father, and stands in his place in this family portrait. On the one hand, one could read this as a powerful representation of the paternal role played by Death in Night Thoughts. On the other hand, one might suspect that the design invites its viewers to unmask Young’s Death as no more than a valorized or inflated earthly father (“Nobodaddy,” or no-body’s-daddy, as Blake calls a similar personality in his Notebook [E500]). A number of elements make it difficult to exclude this possibility. For example, beside Death’s right foot, protruding from beneath the text, are his bow and arrow. Has Death been disarmed or has this aspect of Death merely been disguised by his characterization as the “Prince of Peace”? And why are Death’s eyes closed? Death is, of course, often described as blind, but surely this association is at

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13A fifth child, a young boy, presents a scroll to his mother, who looks at it with an expression of mild disapproval. It is possible that the boy confronts the maternal spinner with a prophecy (in visual terms, perhaps NT6 itself), detailing the poverty and illusions of a life governed by death.
odds with the roles that he plays here. The rhetoric of Young’s religious sublime depends upon the division of Death’s right hand from his left, time from eternity, death from immortality. Perhaps Death’s blindness is the convention that enables the oxymoron of a loving Death.  

These ambivalences are emphasized by uncertainty about the fate of the figure standing on Death’s hand. The two angels at the top of the design seem to be steering her away from the top, right-hand corner of the frame containing the title of Night the First. They are, perhaps, guiding the rising soul away from the shoals of time and thus ushering her into heaven. However, in contrast to the very fleshly figure standing on Death’s palm, and the very physical angels stretched the full length of the text, this soul or spirit, notwithstanding the skirt she now wears, seems on the point of fading away. To lose one’s body to this Death might be to lose one’s soul.

The other designs illustrating sublime transport seem equally ambivalent. In NT109, discussed previously, Death has set free a male and a female figure, Young and his wife; but to what end? Death still divides one from the other. Moreover, Young’s body is turned away from his wife; his gaze is directed to the right of the page, far away from her. To be released from one’s body by Death is at the very least no guarantee of marital bliss.

Ambivalence about the sublime is even more pronounced in NT108. Emerging from beneath the scroll held by Death are two arrows. A third lies to the right of Death’s left hand. They suggest the reality that this design is intended to obscure. Faced with this individual one would no doubt hope to find written on the scroll a promise of eternal life, but in the watercolor drawing even this is uncertain because the words are indecipherable. With three arrows pointed in the general direction of the reader, and an incomprehensible scroll, this Counselor is surely one few people would trust. Whatever faith in his good intentions might remain is likely to be removed by the engraved design. Blake has increased the number of arrows, and replaced the indecipherable letters with reversed Hebrew script that has been construed as: “Lord you are

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14One could argue that Death’s closed eyes recall the blindfold often worn by Justice and that they therefore signify his impartiality. However, an impartial Death is likely also to seem heartless and cruel.
Death, YHWH The fire was with the fire. You ... dust” (Grant, "Visions" 162).15

The critique of the sublime implied by Blake’s watercolors to Young reappears in much less ambiguous form in Night the Third of The Four Zoas. In the title page we see Urizen, a figure closely related to both the inflated reason and Death of Young’s poem, enshrouded as “King of Light on high upon his starry throne” (FZ 37.1; E326). Urizen is both King, God the Father and, as the poem itself makes clear, a King of Terrors who would like to believe that he is the Prince of Peace. In this Night, however, Urizen’s elevation creates a dilemma not admitted by Young.

In Night Thoughts, Reason can be lifted above the veil spun by “reptile Fancy” (I:158) because it is an immortal faculty that has merely been “clouded o’er” (I:159) rather than compromised by the temporal world. The sublime elevation of reason assumes and itself produces a division between time and eternity, the body and one’s supersensible existence, the physical world and reason. By contrast, in The Four Zoas, Urizen finds that this division is unstable and, finally, untenable.

Urizen is, of course, one of the four Zoas; he appears in the fallen world accompanied by his emanation, Ahania. In the mental geography of this poem, Zoas are active, male powers, while the emanations are passive female powers. The former can be identified by their ability to make, the latter by their capacity to receive change. A Zoa is associated with spirit, will or active essence, while emanations are aligned with the animate and inanimate bodies of the temporal, physical world. In the prelapsarian world, Zoa and Emanation are part of a single identity. In the fallen world, they draw apart.

Night the Third begins with Urizen anxious that his elevation might not be permanent, that he might ultimately be unable either to divide himself from or govern the material world. In relation to these fears, Ahania is in a double bind. On the one hand, she is a necessary counterpart to Urizen’s designs: without a passive

15In the engraved version (NT30E), the number of arrows was increased to sixteen, the figure of Death more clearly situated in the air, and Death’s gaze redirected so as not to meet that of the viewer.
power, his world would have no substantive reality. On the other hand, as emanation, she links Urizen to the temporal, bodily realm that he believes he has left behind. This is why Ahania can offer him only ambivalent comfort:

Why sighs my Lord! are not the morning stars thy obedient Sons
Do they not bow their bright heads at thy voice? at thy command
Do they not fly into their stations & return their light to thee
The immortal Atmospheres are thine, there thou art seen in glory
Surrounded by the ever changing Daughters of the Light
Why wilt thou look upon futurity darkning present joy

(FZ 37.5-10; E326)

In Job 38.7 the morning stars sing with joy at the wonder of God’s creation (as shown in Job 14). Here their response is much more ambiguous: they merely bow their heads at Urizen’s voice. Urizen is surrounded by the “ever changing Daughters of the Light”; but the homage that the Daughters pay to their Father is qualified by their association with flux. Even the King of Light, it appears, is in need of a supplementary elevation if he is to put himself beyond the reach of time. This is hardly a sensible course of action for, if successful, it would divide active from passive powers and so bring about the end of both. In an attempt to warn him of this danger, Ahania describes the events which led to his present elevation over the other Zoas and over the whole man. In effect, she analyzes the mechanics of sublimity.

Ahania begins with Albion, the whole man, walking “in dreams of soft deluding slumber” (FZ 39.16; E327) with Vala. Vala is the emanation of Luvah, the Zoa of desire or love. For Albion to walk with Vala is to be closed within a world bounded by his own desire: Vala, one might say, draws a veil between Albion and the rest. This state is broadly similar to the self-absorbed slumber characteristic of Young’s narrator in Night Thoughts before he thinks the thought of Death. For both Blake and Young this sleep is the consequence of a fall from a more expansive state.

In Night Thoughts, the scenario of the sublime begins with the arrival of an overwhelming power, which wakes the narrator and alerts him to the existence of a more extensive world. Aroused by Death, he turns from temporal dreams to eternal reality. In The Four Zoas, Albion’s experience of the sublime is also centered on the advent of an awesome power, but there are some important differences. The blocking power appears only when Albion turns away from Vala, away from the body, and “ascended mourning into the splendours of his palace” (FZ 40.2; E327). Sublimity de-
pends on (and mirrors) a longing for self-purification; it relies on a preliminary "elevation." Furthermore, turning away from Vala does not wake the dreamer. This suggests that the transcendent figure that subsequently appears is a self-delusion, a figment from deep within the realms of sleep. Finally, Ahania implies that, rather than breaking decisively with Vala (as Young’s dreamer detaches himself from time), Albion still "walks" with Vala because his "turn" remains within the original dream: although he is unaware of the fact, he is still wrapped within Vala’s world.

When the blocking power subsequently appears, he is described in terms reminiscent of the composite figure at the heart of Night Thoughts:

... a Shadow from his wearied intellect
Of living gold, pure, perfect, holy; in white linen pure he hover’d
A sweet entrancing self delusion, a watry vision of Man
Soft exulting in existence all the Man absorbing.

(40.3–6; E327)

Ahania’s rhetoric suggests that Albion has been confronted by God the Father (pure, perfect, holy), God the Son (a resurrected, hovering Christ who has not yet put off his cerements) and Death (he absorbs all the Man).16 Yet unlike the composite figure in Young’s poem, this one depends upon a complex process of projection and idealization. Just as Narcissus was mesmerized by his own reflection, Albion has been entranced by a "sweet entrancing self delusion." This "watry vision" inverts and valorizes Albion’s identity, translating the impure and finite into the pure and holy. Rather than emerging from a transcendental realm, the figure of "living gold" is himself a symptom of Albion’s turn from Vala (an expression of the purity Albion desires). It is only after this image has been projected, when Albion measures himself against its purity, that he is deflated. In the plot of the sublime, the moment of blockage has arrived:

O I am nothing when I enter into judgment with thee
If thou withdraw thy breath I die & vanish into Hades
If thou dost lay thine hand upon me behold I am silent
If thou withhold thine hand I perish like a fallen leaf

16 Albion is variously described by Ahania as “the Ancient Man” (FZ 39.14; E327), “The Darkning Man” (39.15), “Man” (40.2) and the “Slumber-ous Man” (40.11).
O I am nothing & to nothing must return again
If thou withdraw thy breath, behold I am oblivion
(40.13–18; E327)

Deflation is the prelude to a remarkable reordering of the living body into two opposing realms. Albion’s reduction to nothing frees him from the flesh, from a body of pain, pleasure and desire, and at the same time replaces it with an absolute body. To be nothing is the precondition for the appearance of what Swedenborg would call a spiritual-natural: an absolute body formed entirely by influx from God. The appearance of this absolute body requires the production of a body of loathing and disgust: a body that contains all those things excluded by the absolute body.

The story of Narcissus describes a shift of attention from the material world to the reflection that shimmers on its surface. As a result, the material conditions that give his reflection a form of existence fade from sight, until finally the shadow is thought to be the substance, and the substance seems ephemeral. In Ahania’s narrative, one can detect an analogous shift. To walk with Vala in “soft deluding slumber,” to be caught in a state of narcissistic self-absorption, is to enter a world defined by one’s desires. This is not a calamitous event so long as Albion walks with Vala. As emanation (of Luvah, a portion of the whole man), Vala gives material existence to Albion’s desires and so ensures that (despite his self-absorption) he can still be approached by others. For Albion to turn from Vala, however, to ascend “into the splendours of his palace,” is to turn self-absorption into a much more rigid form of self-enclosure. This effects a change of focus analogous to the shift of Narcissus’ attention from substance to image. When he turns from Vala, the world in which he is enclosed becomes a mirror, and reflects back to him an image of himself as God. In effect, Vala (and the world she embodies) becomes a screen for Albion’s self-projections.

The interdependence of Vala and the “watry vision of Man” has profound repercussions for Albion and for our understanding of the mechanisms of the sublime. Just as one might imagine Narcissus hoping to separate his reflection from its watery screen, so too Albion must divide his vision of perfection (his idealized self-image) from the material world that is its precondition. Albion wants to disavow all connection between himself and the reflection in the mirror. This is why, as Albion abases himself before his

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17I assume that Ahania’s narrative extends from FZ 38.15 to 42.18.
reflection, Vala trembles and covers her face. It is also why Albion’s self-abasement concludes with the descent of Luvah. As I have argued, despite Ahania’s albeit equivocal rhetoric of transcendence, Albion remains asleep: his turn from Vala and his “watry vision” are products of—and internal to—a world whose precondition is a kind of sleep-walking with Vala. As Vala is the emanation of Luvah, to walk with Vala, and to take this second step into Vala’s world, is to deliver himself over to a portion of his being, to Luvah.

Albion’s sleep and subsequent self-abasement produces a curious sexual configuration. In most philosophical accounts of active and passive powers, it is the active that imposes form on the passive. So, in a heterosexist world, the first is gendered male and the second female. In making Vala the limit of his world, Albion in effect cedes shaping power to the female. So long as Albion remains in his “soft deluding slumber,” Vala determines his identity. The situation is similar to that described in NT17 where, as I have argued, the aged man is divided from both his sexual desire and from the feminine, yet is nevertheless enclosed in a womb-like, feminine space. In The Four Zoas, Blake pictures this state as involving a kind of masturbation, in which the passive power stimulates the male. The text is rather coy on this point. It reads:

the shadowy voice was silent; but the cloud hovered over their heads
In golden wreathes, the sorrow of Man & the balmy drops fell down
And Lo that Son of Man, that shadowy Spirit of the Fallen One
Luvah, descended from the cloud ...

(FZ 40.19–41.3; E327)

The drawing on page FZ 41 (Fig. 6) is much more explicit about what the golden wreaths, the sorrow of Man and those balmy drops might be. Attached to what might be a large penis, Blake has drawn a smaller penis which is being masturbated by a woman who drinks the outcome. Albion has effectively reduced himself to Luvah; the whole man is now a penis (Luvah) attached to a larger penis (Albion shut within a world defined by his narcissistic self-absorption). As we have seen, this formation emerges within the world defined by Vala and confirms its power. We can therefore say that the active power now serves the purposes of the passive; his semen serves not to form but to nourish the female. Of this vision, Albion wants to hear nothing because it links his “watry vision” of masculine authority with impurity and pollution, and suggests the limits of his and his god’s power. Still not willing to
Fig. 6. Four Zoas, page 41.
By permission of the British Library.
(Add. 39764 f21)
accept his dependence on Vala, he struggles with Luvah until desire is also "banished."

One of the implications of Ahania's narrative is that the Shadow of "living gold" that rises from Albion's wearied intellect is Urizen. Ahania does not confirm this suggestion because it identifies Urizen as no more than a part that has assumed authority over the whole. It also suggests that, despite his elevation, he is limited by the passive powers and secretly opposed, even driven, by Luvah. This is one of the implications of the drawing on FZ 42 (Fig. 7), which portrays the nightmare world conjured up for Urizen by Ahania. At the center of the design is Cupid/Luvah. With feet not fully distinguished and still "planted" in the ground, he appears to be a kind of vegetable growth. Born from and still attached to the maternal earth/womb, Cupid is in thrall to the passive powers. He looks up to a kneeling woman who places her left hand around him, while her right seems to be measuring his penis. Cupid inspires love for impossible objects. On his left, an "ideal," aestheticized woman stands with her legs crossed, her right arm raised behind her head, both inviting and refusing desire. Her head is drawn within a slightly larger circle, suggesting that her beauty is seen through a veil.

Page FZ 42 is revelatory of the impure world from which Albion fled into the splendor of his palace. It is the "perverse" dependence of male on female powers that sublime transcendence attempts to avoid by dividing one from the other. The absurdity of this attempt can be seen to the left of the design, where a penis has divided itself from the body to which it was once attached, and sprouted bat-wings to lift itself above the passive powers, in the hope of gaining access to heaven. Its chances of escape are slim. The penis, with its single eye/I, is probably blind, and it will soon be recaptured by a woman running with hand outstretched as if to swat it. The penis is attached to a string held in the woman's left hand; perhaps it is no more than a kite that would soon come fluttering down again, even if the string were no longer attached. It is difficult to imagine a more deflationary view of Albion's ascent into his palace, Urizen's elevation, and the appearance of the Shadow of "living gold." All three turn out to be engaged in a vain attempt to divide themselves from the conditions prerequisite to their own existence. Put rather bluntly, it is as if a penis were to attempt to raise itself above the world of sex. Albion/Urizen/the-form-of-living-gold are all unable finally to disentangle themselves from Luvah/Vala.
Fig. 7, Four Zenas, page 42.
(Add. 39764 [21v])

By Permission of the British Library.
Fig. 8. *Four Zoas*, page 43.
By permission of the British Library.
(Add. 39764 f22)
Urizen understands Ahania's narrative as a threat to his authority: "Am I not God said Urizen. Who is Equal to me / Do I not stretch the heavens abroad or fold them up like a garment" (FZ 42.19–20; E328). Rejecting her analysis of sublimity, confronted with a world where his active power remains bound to the passive, he repeats Albion's rejection of Vala; he re-enacts the attempt at purification exemplified by the flight of the winged penis. Urizen now moves to cast

...  Ahania to the Earth he siezd her by the hair
And threw her from the steps of ice that froze around his throne

Saying Art thou also become like Vala. thus I cast thee out
Shall the feminine indolent bliss. the indultent self of weariness
The passive idle sleep the enormous night & darkness of Death
Set herself up to give her laws to the active masculine virtue
Thou little diminutive portion that darst be a counterpart
Thy passivity thy laws of obedience & insincerity
Are my abhorrence.

(FZ 43.3–11; E328–29)

This speech is written on a proof of "Death as Counsellor" (NT108/30E), the first Night Thoughts design to be incorporated into The Four Zoas. The original watercolor design had acted subtly to question Young's identification of Death as Prince of Peace. In the proof, like the engraving, this doubt is underlined by the addition of a legible inscription to the scroll and an increase in the number of arrows, which now stretch from Death's left foot to his left elbow. Placed in The Four Zoas, the NT design also serves to establish a relation of identity between Urizen and Death. As I have argued, in Night Thoughts the sublime elevation of both Reason and Death suggests an alignment of Reason and God, and Death and God. Here Urizen, King of Light, is identified with Death because his reign is built on the repression of Vala, Luvah and Ahania. As he tries to sever all links with desire and the body, his world loses its foundation: as Ahania falls, Urizen also falls "Into the Caverns of the Grave & places of Human Seed" (FZ 44.3; E329).

Page FZ 44 (Fig. 9), the verso to the Death as Counsellor proof from Night Thoughts, gives yet another account of the desire for transcendence, this time from the perspective of Tharmas. In this
Fig. 9. *Four Zoas*, page 44.
By permission of the British Library.
(Add. 39764 f22v)
sketch, Tharmas lies almost engulfed by waves, drowning in the chaotic world precipitated by Urizen’s rejection of Ahania. In a world without governing form, he raises his right hand high above his head as if to call for help. But what kind of help is possible so long as Albion sleeps?

The design on the facing page (FZ 45; Fig. 10) mirrors the plight of Tharmas. Young’s narrator lies on a length of fabric, in a position similar to Tharmas, lifting his left hand high above his head in a call for help. In this design, however, the call has been answered by Christ, who leans over to touch the narrator just above the heart. In relation to Night Thoughts, this event refers to the “Touch” of Christ that

... with charm celestial, heals the Soul
Diseas’d, drives Pain from Guilt, Lights Life in Death,
Turns Earth to Heaven, to heavenly Thrones transforms
The ghastly Ruins of the mould’ring Tomb.

(IV:687–90)

But in the context of The Four Zoas does this provide a real alternative to sublime transcendence? If one is willing to read the healing figure on FZ 45 as Jesus the Imagination, then the answer to this question might be yes.18 The question of transcendence, however, has by this stage of Night the Third become so entrenched that one must admit a more skeptical reading. There is a mirror relation between the two designs: where Tharmas raises his right hand, Young raises his left; Young’s narrator enjoys the help that Tharmas lacks; and so on. This suggests that the designs may have a relation to each other analogous to that between Albion and the god of “living gold.”

Tharmas appears in Night the Third of The Four Zoas at a crucial stage in the narrative. With Urizen’s collapse it is up to him to provide a foundation for the fallen world. This turn in the poem is marked by Blake’s inscription of the text (starting with FZ 43; Fig. 8) on proof engravings of his designs for Young’s Night Thoughts. If one looks at pages FZ 43, 44 and 45 as a sequence, one finds Tharmas lodged between Urizen (God the Father) and Jesus. It is possible that these figures represent the twin pillars of Young’s theology: the first suggesting retribution, the second consolation. As Young writes in Night the Fourth of Night Thoughts, it is ex-

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18 Grant, “On First Encountering,” associates this design with the biblical story of “The Cleansing of the Leper” (89).
Fig. 10. *Four Zoas*, page 45.
By permission of the British Library.
(Add. 39764 f23)
traordinary that a God who dips those who transgress in “sevenfold Night” (IV:204) should be capable of a love which sends his son to die on the cross: that

O’er Guilt (how mountainous?) with outstretcht Arms,
Stern Justice, and soft-smiling Love, embrace,
Supporting, in full Majesty, thy Throne

(IV:213-15)

Although Christ is usually a positive figure for Blake, in this context Jesus and Urizen are both “watry” visions of transcendence, the twin pillars of Death’s kingdom. As if to underline this point, to Tharmas’s right, floating above the waves, between Urizen (on FZ 43) and Jesus (on FZ 45), Blake has drawn a strange female figure. As Magno and Erdman observe, she “has no hands or feet yet visible, no nipples, a small head stuck into a large neck, crown-like horns rather than hair, and a triptich or Gothic chapel outlined in her genital zone” (FZ 50). This brings into relation Young’s religion of sublime transcendence, elaborated between the poles of Urizen/Jehovah and Christ, and the female body it disavows and mutilates. Crown of thorns and Gothic chapel, the Jesus of traditional Christianity and Urizen/Jehovah, rest on a female body. This religion leads to the dissolution of the body. Tharmas thrusts his hand upward, appealing for divine assistance; but his raised hand has already been reduced to a mathematical diagram; his arm is a lifeless trunk; his eyes are empty, staring, like whirlpools. Already the ocean can be seen washing through his chest and loins.

In the fallen world, belief in a transcendent God produces both a desire to enter heaven and a desire for an ideal female body. Pages FZ 44 and 45 are followed by a drawing that concludes Night III, in which Tharmas pushes back the waves in an attempt to uncover his emanation (FZ 46, Fig. 11). Tharmas stands “on the affrighted Ocean” (FZ 44.21; E330), while Enion is lost in it. The former’s erect penis (the head of which is just above his belly-button, making it look like a large fish), his claw-like, inhuman hands, and the look of horror on Enion’s face, underline the violence and impossibility of his quest. Yet this failure will merely fuel Tharmas’s desire for the eternal. Pathos and sublimity are closely related. Failure to find the ideal in this world drives us into the hands of a transcendent God, who promises that after death we will be reunited with the ideal bodies that elude us in this life. In the drawing on FZ 42, Cupid stands at the center of this dynamic,
Fig. 11. Four Zoas, page 46.
By permission of the British Library.
(Add. 39764 f23v)
which leads from the ideal but unobtainable female body on his left to the flight of the winged phallus on his right.

In The Four Zoas and in Blake’s designs to Young’s Night Thoughts, the alternative to sublime transcendence involves the assumption of the body that the religious sublime has put off. I cannot here describe this in detail, but to simplify a complex process, one may catch a glimpse of this alternative to the religious sublime by turning briefly to NT17 again.

As I have argued, NT17 implies that it is the man’s self-absorption that has enclosed him in an orb and divided him from his body. The position he adopts is, however, not the only stance possible within a globe. Blake’s Night Thoughts designs present almost an alphabet of possibilities. In NT79, for example, a woman has woken to the horror of a world that confines her. In NT533, the individual is no longer alone; instead, the globe has been peopled with men and women. A woman weeps at the death of Jesus as another, probably the mother Mary, leans over his sleeping body, and a third beside him turns away. If Jesus the imagination were to wake, it is possible that the fourth figure, a sleeper lying beneath him, would also arise. In NT39, the globe becomes a dwelling rather than a prison: a man “like Uriel” walks within the globe, his hands outstretched as if to measure the extent of his domain. Most dramatically, in the frontispiece to the second volume of Blake’s watercolors (NT26; Fig. 12), the perimeters of the tomb have been broken by the rising sun/son. Rather than being enclosed by an inert, material substance, Jesus claims that body as his own. Rather than forming a limit to the self, the dark globe of NT17 has become a luminous sun/son: Christ’s head and chest extend beyond its perimeter; his eyes look upward and his arms are outstretched. Self-absorption has been replaced by dialogue and embrace. As is evident, the sequence that I have briefly outlined mimes the transformation in The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem of Blake’s fallen imagination, Los (loss), into an expansive Sol (sun).

This transformation does not leave the sublime entirely behind. In fact, Blake translates the coordinates of the religious sublime into what, for lack of a better name, one might call a psychological sublime. First, and most audaciously, the blocking power (whether Death or God) is redefined as an effect of Albion’s with-
Fig. 12. *Night Thoughts* 264. Watercolor. © The British Museum.
drewal into solipsism. Second, transport by the blocking power is reworked as self-transformation produced by an internal power, namely, the imagination. Third, rather than resulting in reverence for the blocking power (pictured in the religious sublime as a Father lodged apart from this world), Blake’s psychological sublime results in celebration of the human divine, Jesus the imagination. Finally, Blake’s psychological sublime exchanges inflation for what one might, with some risk of misunderstanding, call expansion. In the first, the self swells as a result of an identification with a more powerful figure. In the second, the self moves out to the world; it experiences the possibility of leaving one created world and self for another.

Blake’s psychological sublime is at its most uneasy as it attempts to negotiate the movement from blockage to transport. The self must experience the blocking power, but not idealize it; it must read it as a sign not of plentitude but of lack. It can do this only by making two remarkable leaps: first, by reading death and God as the products of certain psychological/sociological states; not, of course, entities dreamed single-handedly by an individual, but powers that appear as the result of a state into which the whole man, Albion, has entered; and second, by treating any fixed form as an impediment which must be reworked. No sooner has something received determinate shape than it must be undone if imagination is to remain active, the active powers are to escape the impress of the passive powers, and Albion is to wake. Where Young’s religious sublime offers eternal rest, Blake’s sublime demands endless activity. This necessity produces a series of curious inversions. For example, in The Four Zoas Blake places a proof illustrating Christ’s ascent (FZ 106) immediately before one that conflates his crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell (FZ 107). Similarly, the last page of the poem is written on the verso of a proof that announces the first Night of Young’s Night Thoughts. To end this poem is to be given an invitation to turn again to the beginning of another. Similarly, the two volumes of Blake’s watercolor designs for Night Thoughts have as their frontispieces representations of the resurrection; but the series as a whole closes with Samson pulling down the pillars of the temple (NT537). In order to express this restless valorization of movement, Blake remains wedded to a religious rhetoric of apocalypse and resurrection, thus ensuring that his psychological sublime moves only half of the distance to George Eliot’s secular humanism. It is at the same time
what makes Blake so uncannily prophetic of many of the moves of a secular postmodernity.

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