

Haunting images by William Blake frame Edward Young's verse in these two rare hand-colored copies of *Night Thoughts*

Edward Young, *The Complaint, and the Consolation; or, Night Thoughts*. London: R. Edwards, 1797. 16 1/2 inches x 13 inches (419 x 330 mm), 109 pages, hand-colored engravings throughout.

Long after his reputation has faded, Edward Young (1683–1765) lives on, like Longfellow, in half a dozen unattributed quotations, most memorably, “Procrastination is the Thief of Time.” If his name is known today, it is largely because William Blake created a series of engraved images to frame his most famous poem, *Night Thoughts*.

This epic poem in nine “Nights” (an original four in 1742, with five supplementary in 1745) is a nocturnal meditation on the mysteries of death and immortality. In Young’s own lifetime and for a generation more, it was a huge success. His vivid metaphors, the appeal to individual moral conscience, and an equally strong sense of personal religion, all cast in vigorous blank verse, found a ready, almost universal market. It was printed and reprinted countless times in Britain. In translation and the original English, it enjoyed an equal renown abroad.

It was almost at the end of its career as a major and still living classic that London bookseller Richard Edwards in 1797 planned what he intended to be the grandest edition of *Night Thoughts* yet to appear. Edwards commissioned Blake to produce 537 watercolors, supplying the artist with an enormous half-sheet of paper, inlaid off-center with a small block of text. The combination of imagination and dexterity that Blake brought to bear on this task mark it as one of his most notable achievements. Young’s abundant metaphors and often familiar similes became literal Blakean forms, vividly imagined, echoing illustrations to *America* (1793) and *Europe* (1794).

For publication, only 43 of the designs (selected only from the original four Nights) were engraved and published in 1797. Of the sixty-four copies whose existence has been recorded, twenty-three are colored — a

remarkable quantity for a work not planned at the outset as a color-plate book. Copies were colored by hand, in two styles tentatively dated to 1797 and 1805.

These two copies include a representative of each style — at least one colored by Blake himself — from the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection at the Library of Congress. Copy J (ca. 1797) is bound in contemporary half red morocco and red cloth, a deeply tooled gilt acanthus scroll running up spine to either side of the ascending title: “Youngs night thoughts blake 1797.” Copy B (ca. 1805) is bound in contemporary full straight-grain red morocco with broad gilt and blind-stamped decorations. Its spine has been rebacked. The original spine cover, in a mylar envelope tipped-in at the rear, is divided into six compartments, the second bearing the title “night | thoughts” and the fifth “by | young.”

The first recorded owner of Copy J was Samuel Boddington, whose armorial bookplate is in the center of the front pastedown. The brothers Samuel and Thomas Boddington were leading collectors of Blake books among the generation following the artist’s death. Lieutenant-Colonel William E. Moss (1875–1953), one of the leading British collectors of the works of Blake, was the first verifiable owner of Copy B.

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