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A fly in the ointment: exploring the creative relationship between William Blake and Thomas Gray

JON SAKLOFSKE

Between 1797 and 1799, William Blake added illustrations and poetic commentary to the poetry of Thomas Gray and presented the composite collaboration to the wife of his friend and supporter, John Flaxman. Although he was largely dependent on such friends for his commissioned work during this time,¹ these were productive years for Blake overall: in 1797 he had completed 537 designs for Edward Young's 'Night Thoughts', 43 of which were selected to be engraved for a publication that, although financially unsuccessful, would become one of the artistic works by which Blake was chiefly known to his contemporaries. In contrast, Blake's Gray illustrations, a private commission to the Flaxmans, were nearly lost and, following their rediscovery in 1919, remained unpublished until 1922. Although critical interest in the Gray illustrations has slightly increased in the 30 years following the 1971 publication of the full-colour Trianon Press edition and of Irene Taylor's critical volume, these 116 designs are often only briefly considered or mentioned in Blake criticism and remain largely unexplored. This is unfortunate, for not only are the designs excellent examples for those who wish to explore the dynamics of Blake's temporally and methodologically staggered collaborations, but Blake's small *textual* additions to the Gray volume crucially hint at his own perceptions of the function of illustration.

This creative intersection between Blake and Gray also provides a useful arena in which Blake's complex relationship to enlightenment ideas can be explored². Blake's written couplet that precedes his illustrations to Gray and the poetic dedication to Mrs Flaxman that concludes the illustrated volume comprise only a portion of this creative partnership. However, the consideration of these particulars along with Gray's 'Ode on the Spring' and Blake's 'The Fly' will be more than sufficient not only to illustrate the intricacies of the connection between enlightenment thought and the creations of Gray and Blake, but also to further consider the relationship between Gray's written word and the Blakean image. More generally, these relationships similarly display both symbiotic and parasitic characteristics and maintain a precarious and paradoxical balance between collaboration and contention.

In Gray's 'Ode on the Spring', which initially describes the spring season as a sensory, connective time, a contemplative moralist reasons in solitude. Generalizing and establishing hierarchies with his 'sober eye', he contrasts man with nature, finds man insignificant, then equates the inconsequential flutter of insects to human existence.³ Thus, Gray's narrator recognizes a

1 – Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (New York: Knopf, 1996), p. 205.

2 – This paper has grown out of a presentation that I gave at the *Friendly Enemies: Blake and the Enlightenment* conference hosted by the University of Essex in August 2000. I am thankful both for the opportunity to share these developing ideas at that conference and for the very helpful and encouraging comments and questions received from those who attended. I also wish to gratefully acknowledge the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their assistance in funding this research.

3 – An interesting connection that surfaces here involves a comparison between Gray's narrator and the type of man that Alexander Pope criticizes in Book IV of his *Dunciad*: 'O! would the Sons of Men once think their Eyes/And Reason giv'n them but to study *Flies!*/See Nature in some partial narrow shape/And let the Author of the Whole escape'. (Herbert Davis, ed., *Pope: Poetical Works* [London: Oxford University Press, 1966], p. 573, author's emphasis.) Pope's earlier writing thus disagrees with the enlightenment pursuits of Gray's narrator (and also the ignorance of Gray's insect) and condemns the analytical, scientific vision that allows the importance of the particular to overshadow a more religious consideration of an all-encompassing creator. It is worth noting that Blake's counter-solution, discussed below, manages to marry the either/or opposition between Pope and Gray by discovering the interdependence between the particular and the whole.

fundamental irony of the enlightenment: the increase of human understanding to the point where human insignificance is recognized. Figuratively and literally, though, there is a fly in the narrator's rational ointment. An insect addresses this moralist and points out that the moralist, while implicitly placing himself *above* the human mass for recognizing the triviality of human existence, is not only one of the flies, but a solitary, removed one who has wasted his own spring. Thus, in the insect's revolutionary reply, the hierarchy is reversed: the youthful, social 'insects' occupy a more desirable position than the lone thinker. Gray's insect, although condemning the 'moralist', proposes a way to overcome the enlightenment thinker's fate in the form of a subtle *carpe diem* moral: 'frolic while 'tis May', sacrifice the individuality that leads to isolation, return to the active, 'busy murmur' of the generalized mass and do not waste youth and life in thought. This notion that wisdom is a greater folly than innocence is also echoed in Gray's 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College', which equates youthful innocence with bliss and advances the possibility that the mere perception of youth is enough to 'breathe a second spring' into one whose youthful paradise has been destroyed by thought. This view does little to resolve the melancholy of the 'Ode on the Spring', however, for not only have the moralist's meditations overthrown humanist values, but the narrator is also impossibly invited to return to an already lost and condemned innocence.

When considered in relation to Gray's 'Ode on the Spring', Blake's 'The Fly', a song of experience, rejects Gray's problematic enlightenment strategies of hierarchy and ignorance and presents an alternative possibility. Initially, like the personified hand of 'rough Mischance' that harms man and insect alike in Gray's Ode, Blake's solitary moralist engages in thoughtless action and brushes away the summer play of a little fly. This experience prompts a self-reflective examination that allows Blake's narrator to emerge from and expand his restrictive, self-centred perceptions. Thus while Gray's narrator, who, already prone to enlightenment rationalism, categorization and self-centredness, is invited to return to thoughtless, ignorant activity at the end of the Ode, Blake's narrator begins from where Gray's moralist ends and undergoes a transition from thoughtless innocence and action to reflective and expansive perception. Interestingly, and perhaps fittingly, the initial ignorant activity of Blake's narrator harms the very creature, the insect, which, for Gray, acts as an ambassador of such thoughtless action. The reflective stanzas of 'The Fly' that follow the harmful conduct of the innocent narrator's 'guilty hand' (a phrase deleted from the poem's final version), are apologetic, suggesting a sense of humility and conscience that neither Gray's narrator, nor the sportive fly that chides him, possesses. Indeed, in the second stanza of Blake's poem, as Kathleen Raine has aptly noted, the narrator humbly recognizes that he is as insignificant as the fly, then manages to avoid the melancholy of Gray's narrator by also recognizing that the fly is as significant as he, choosing the more optimistic and self-flattering option.⁴ An essential difference between the approach of the two poets, though, is that where Gray's narrator promotes a general, metaphoric, and largely abstract equation between insects and humankind and condemns both while excluding himself from the equation, Blake's narrator uses simile to recognize an intersection between an individual fly and an individual man and finds vastness and connection within particularity and subjective

4 – Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 165.

experience. In doing so, he remains respectful of their individuality, recognizes relativity between the two without hierarchy and maintains an optimistic humanist stance by rejecting a generalist and critical one.

The third stanza of 'The Fly', 'For I dance/ And drink and sing,/ Till some blind hand/ Shall brush my wing', reinforces a key advantage that Blake's narrator has over Gray's.⁵ The thoughtful contemplation that has emerged as a result of his experience allows Blake's narrator to recognize his own interdependence with the playful fly and to condemn both the blind perception that would place one creature above another and the type of thoughtless, self-centred action that results in injury. In contrast, Gray's isolated narrator constantly systematizes and ranks that which he observes. For Gray, nature, although secondary to the narrator who perceives and classifies it, reigns over insects and men. Despite the narrator's superior contemplative awareness, he, unlike Blake's self-aware narrator, needs to be reminded by an insect that he is not only a part of the lesser category that he has just placed insects and men within, but that his solitude puts his position even further beneath that of the lowly collective. The sportive insect, then, although reversing the narrator's hierarchy, practices the same type of divisive ordering that produces the narrator's ignorance and, further, offers a solution that merely repeats the process. Opposing both Gray's narrator and the alternative offered by the naïve insect, Blake's thinker, individually experienced beyond an enlightenment standpoint, promotes a state of awareness that leaves room for insects and men, youth and age, contemplation and action. Thus, Blake's strategy in 'The Fly' reconfigures Gray's style, structure and subject, allowing an escape from the lingering futility and ignorance of the 'Ode on the Spring'. Blake's poem recalibrates the contemplative eye to recognize individuality over generalization and to perceive relativity and interdependence without resorting to hierarchy or dismissal, simultaneously preserving and redirecting enlightenment perspectives. As well, Blake demonstrates that thoughtful involvement with or experience in the world that one reflects upon can be enough to move beyond the ignorance that permeates Gray's 'Ode on the Spring'.

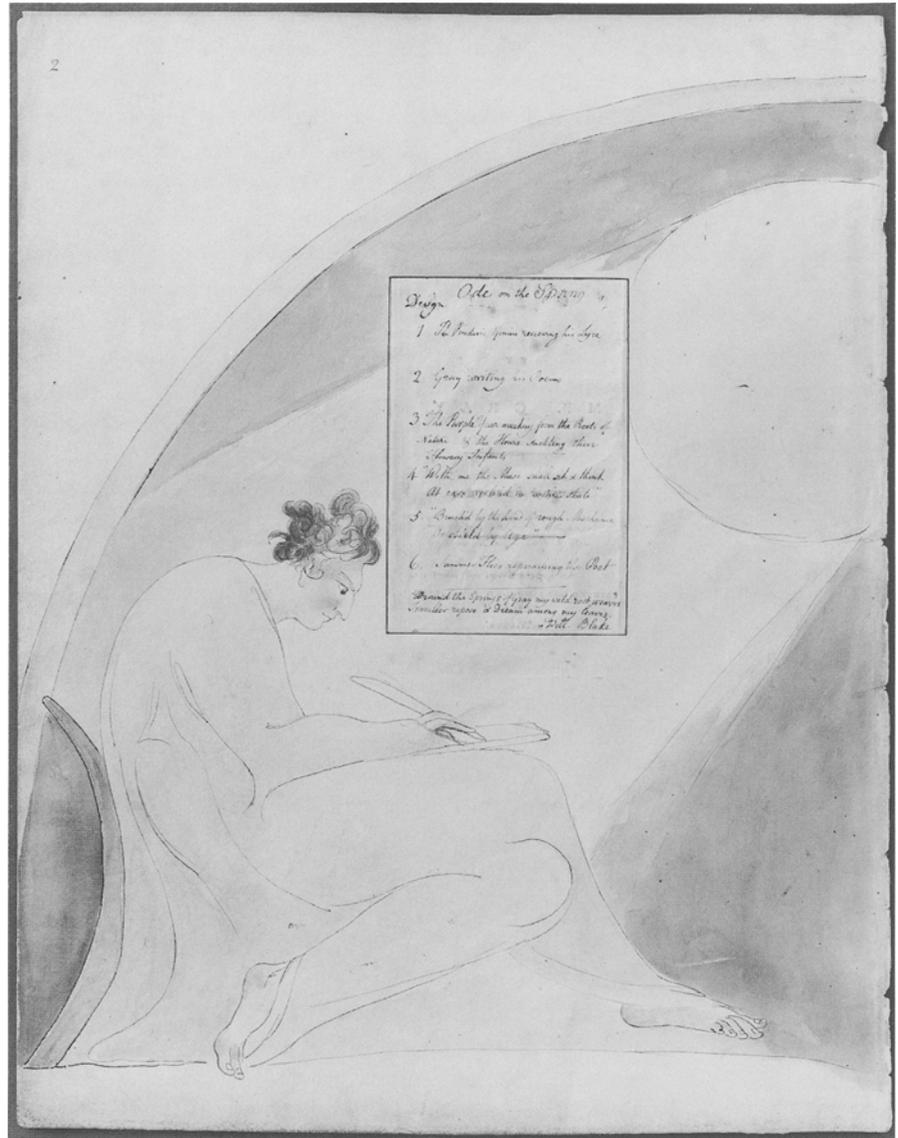
This philosophical difference and poetic relationship between the poets is also metaphorically reinforced by a couplet, written by Blake and inserted beneath the list of his designs for Gray's Ode on the Spring: 'Around the Springs of Gray my wild root weaves/ Traveller repose & Dream among my leaves' (figure 1). The phrase 'springs of Gray' condenses the season and the idea of a fresh source of flowing water into a single term, and links Gray and his poetry with both. In the Ode, Gray defines the spring season as an 'untaught harmony', and Blake's association between Gray and that same season suggests that Gray's definition is aptly applied to himself. What, then, is implied in the connection between Thomas Gray's work and the untaught harmony of spring? Morris Eaves notes that in the eighteenth century 'harmony' was used to describe a 'unity of effect',⁶ and became both a technical recipe and a standard of judgement of a work of art. More generally, though, harmony was useful to enlightenment thought, for it encouraged repetition, extension, translation, clarity, collaboration and improvement, and favoured a general and dominant vision over idiosyncrasy.⁷ Indeed, Gray's narrator is chided for his isolated thoughts that have harmed rather than improved the perception of humanity, and, in true enlightenment style,

5 – David Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, revised edn (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 23.

6 – Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 246.

7 – *Ibid.*, pp. 250–51.

Figure 1. A self-reflexive couplet footnotes the list of Blake's design titles for Gray's 'Ode on the Spring', Image courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



is invited to harmonize with the masses. However, the term 'untaught', in conjunction with 'harmony', amplifies the irregularity of the ode, the tension and incompatibility between the isolated thinker and the 'natural' mass and also recalls springtime youth and innocence, implying that the insect's invitation involves a measure of ignorance.

This reading of 'untaught harmony', if associated with Gray via Blake's metaphoric connection between the mid-eighteenth-century poet and the very season that he celebrates, implies that Gray's perception in 'The Ode on the Spring' favours ignorance and generalization. Blake's phrase from his 1808 annotations to Reynold's *Discourses*, "To Generalize is to be an Idiot", reveals his distaste for this kind of 'untaught harmony'.⁸ Also evident from Blake's Reynolds annotations is his aversion to the Royal Academy's attempt to 'teach' general principles of art, and his favouring of intuition, 'identity and melody' over reason, 'similitude and harmony'.⁹ In relation to the present discussion, then, it can be offered that Blake, in print at least, favours

8 – Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 641.

9 – *Ibid.*, p. 659.

‘untaught melody’, favours the independent assertiveness and individuality of Gray’s narrator that the insect finally criticizes. Thus, Blake’s phrase implies that the spring-like, ‘untaught harmony’ of Gray’s poem (and, perhaps, Gray’s own life), is a fresh but failed and ultimately misguided attempt at reconciliation between the solitary thinker and the society that he has condemned.

This interpretation is in keeping with the other meaning of ‘spring’ implied by the context of Blake’s couplet. The figurative connection with watery springs associates Gray’s poem with protean instability, linear flow and progress that leads away from smaller sources towards a more generalized ocean. Instability is illustrated by the unresolved tension that persists throughout the ‘untaught harmony’ of Gray’s Ode. The linear, unidirectional flow of a natural spring parallels the developing current in the solitary thinker’s thought that remains irreversible. Finally, progress towards generalization is demonstrated by the constant pull of the insect’s invitation to discard individuality and join the generalized play of springtime.

In relation to Gray’s unstable linear spring, Blake’s ‘root’ suggests a branching growth that draws nourishment from its environment. The term ‘wild’ inserts a sense of freedom and autonomy. Unlike Gray’s ‘untaught harmony’, then, which connects dependence with ignorance, ‘wild root’ suggests a budding independence that relies on, but is not restricted by its source. This characterization of the ‘wild root’ as a combination of imaginative freedom and pro-enlightenment stability recalls the narrator of Blake’s ‘The Fly’, whose individualized employment of enlightenment rationalism and humanism allows him to exceed the limitations that contain Gray’s generalizing thinker.

Despite these differences, it is crucial to note the implied interdependence between the two poets. As exemplified by the initial comparison between the ‘Ode on the Spring’ and ‘The Fly’, Gray’s original springs are the source, the nourishment for Blake’s own creative ‘wild root’. Gray’s poetic springs do not simply flow into and are not merely the unidirectional source for Blake’s more expansive artistic ocean, however. As implied by the couplet, Blake’s creative root ‘weaves’ around the influential springs, protecting, preserving and containing them, as well as transforming them into new configurations. Thus, the couplet’s metaphor specifically defines the relationship between Blake and Gray as an interdependence, a symbiotic exchange of influence rather than a causal, progressive flow between a source and its destination. Together, this apparent alliance invites readers to emulate Blake’s narrator of ‘The Fly’, to ‘repose and dream’, to pause in their mechanical enlightenment progress and employ their creative imaginations (rather than mere critical reason) ‘among’ the artistic thoughts of others.

To understand the full implications of Blake’s couplet, however, we must return to its original context. As mentioned, the couplet is a small textual addition that Blake inserted into his *illustrated* volume of Gray’s poems and, thus, it is necessary to assume that Blake’s words, although useful in describing a more general relationship between the *poets*, also refer to the functional interdependency of Blake’s *artistic* interaction with Gray’s poetic text.

Gray’s pictorialist poetry was no stranger to illustrative accompaniment in the eighteenth century. Henry Fuseli illustrated ‘The Descent of Odin’ around 1771 and completed three illustrations for an 1800 edition of Gray’s

10 – Irene Tayer, *Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Gray* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 15.

11 – Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1960), p. 201.

poems.¹⁰ 'The Bard' was drawn by John Saunders in 1778 and painted by Richard Westall in 1798, and Henry Singleton executed *Odin* and the *Prophetess* in 1793.¹¹ While many of these illustrations were produced after Gray's death in 1771, the poet's friend Richard Bentley prepared designs for six of Gray's poems in 1753. Notably, Gray responded to Bentley's artistic efforts in a series of stanzas that celebrate the translatability and harmonic strength of the sister arts:

In silent gaze the tuneful choir among,
Half pleas'd, half blushing, let the Muse admire,
While Bentley leads his sister-art along,
And bids the pencil answer to the lyre.

See, in their course, each transitory thought
Fix'd by his touch a lasting essence take;
Each dream, in Fancy's airy colouring wrought
To local Symmetry and life awake!

The tardy Rhymes that us'd to linger on,
To Censure cold, and negligent of Fame,
In swifter Measures animated run,
And catch a lustre from his genuine flame.

Ah! Could they catch his strength, his easy grace,
His Quick creation, his unerring line;
The energy of Pope they might efface,
And Dryden's harmony submit to mine.¹²

12 – Jean H. Hagstrum *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 288.

13 – *Ibid.*, p. 288.

14 – *Ibid.*, p. 289.

Jean Hagstrum aptly observes that Gray's poem gives 'high praise to the power of illustration and views the combination of the two arts as a happy one in which poetry is invigorated and improved'.¹³ Indeed, the combination of an excessive praise for Bentley and a self-criticizing humility in the above lines suggests that Gray favours the 'genuine flame', 'strength', 'easy grace' and 'unerring line' of the visual arts over the 'tardy rhymes' and 'transitory' thoughts of his own poetic language.¹⁴ This hint of envy borne from poetical politeness, as well as the acknowledgement of his own inferiority in comparison with the poetry of Pope and Dryden, reinforces the enlightenment mentality of classification and hierarchy that Gray occupies and expresses in 'Ode on the Spring'. Despite Gray's implicit wish that poetry could possess some of the exclusive and immediate energy of the illustrated image, it must be noted that not only do Bentley's illustrations faithfully, safely and respectfully follow, animate and illuminate Gray's words, but also that the above stanzas consistently present poetry as the primary partner and illustration as the illuminating but subservient and dependent assistant that answers to the lyre. The hierarchical harmony that Gray celebrates, then, is that which results when painting is used to enhance a poetic foundation. However, just as Blake's 'Fly' poem reconsiders Gray's maintenance of hierarchy and generalization as a response to enlightenment thought, Blake's dedication to Mrs Flaxman at the end of his illustrated volume of Gray (figure 2) reconfigures the function of his own particular set of illustrations and, in doing so, calls into question Gray's harmonic and hierarchical perception of the sister arts:

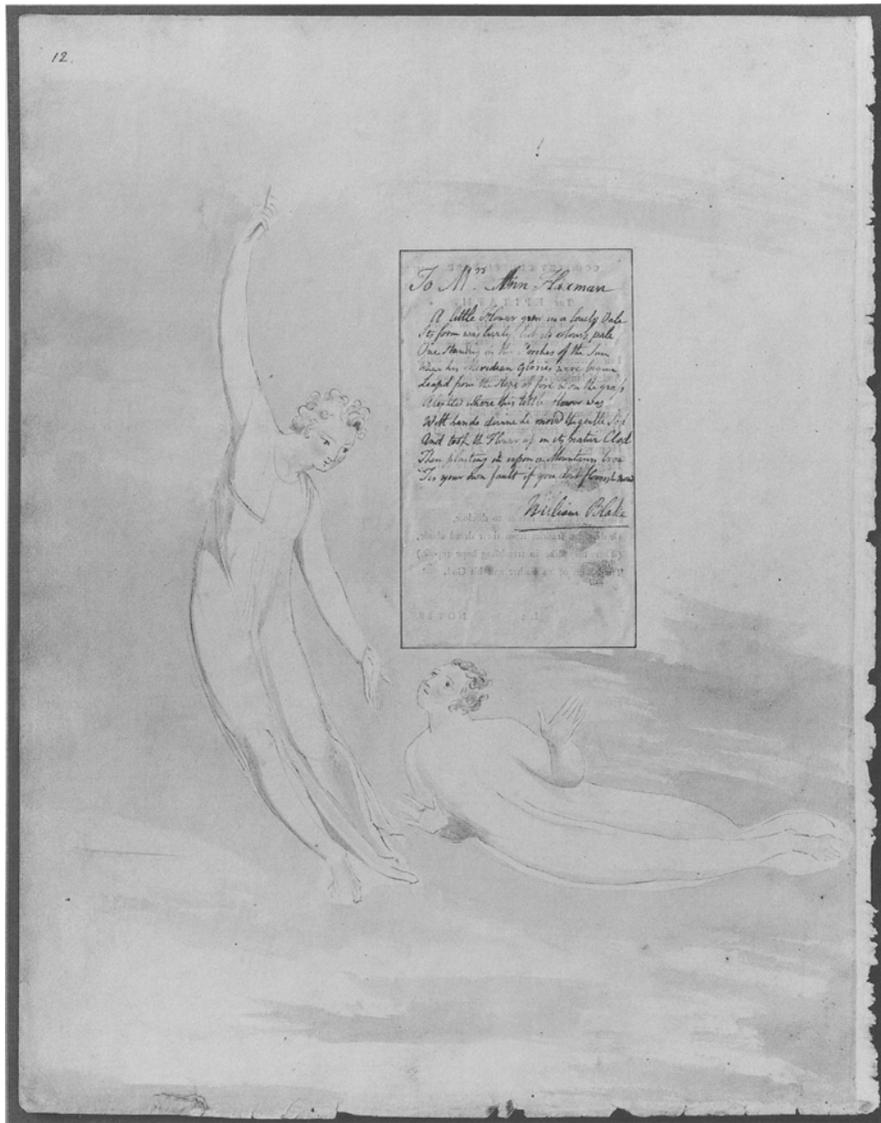


Figure 2. Blake's poetic dedication to Mrs. Ann Flaxman. Image courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

A little Flower grew in a lonely Vale
 Its form was lovely but its colours. pale
 One standing in the Porches of the Sun
 When his Meridian Glories were begun
 Leapd from the steps of fire & on the grass
 Alighted where this little flower was
 With hands divine he movd the gentle Sod
 And took the Flower up in its native Clod
 Then planting it upon a Mountain brow
 'Tis your own fault if you dont flourish now¹⁵

Although M. E. Bacon chooses to interpret this verse as indicative of the relationship between Blake, Flaxman and Hayley,¹⁶ and Frank Vaughan interprets the poem as referring to Blake's frustrated attempts to gently 'educate' Anne Flaxman,¹⁷ it is possible to interpret the dedication as following the same artistically self-conscious tone of the earlier couplet. That is, although Blake, the artistic 'mover', respects Gray's flower 'in its native'

15 – Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 482.

16 – M. E. Bacon, 'Blake and Gray: a case of literary symbiosis', *Culture*, 29 (1968), p. 46.

17 – Frank Vaughan, *Again to the Life of Eternity: William Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Thomas Gray* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), p. 17.

unrefined ‘clod’ of language and, in a seemingly collaborative effort that recalls Gray’s words to Bentley, attempts to illustratively elevate it into colourful prominence, the dynamic between the transplanting figure and the transplanted flower explicitly favours the creativity and agency of the artist’s ‘divine hands. Blake’s dedication, then, not only suggests that the artist’s activity improves upon the formally adequate, but imaginatively inadequate verse of a cautious, melancholic and isolated poet, but also that, in this case, illustration diversifies a restricted creation. However, an overall reversal of Gray’s implied hierarchy that would favour Blake’s artistic authority is prevented by the source of Blake’s melody: Gray’s springs of untaught harmony. As Christopher Heppner has asserted, Blake’s illustrations to the poetry of others are often limited by the limitations of his source.¹⁸ Indeed, the dedication suggests that Blake, as artist, can only act on Gray’s original. Yet these illustrations *are* more powerful than Gray’s sister arts celebration would like to admit: they are powerful enough to effect change. Blake illuminates Gray’s ideas, but also transforms them into his own melody and medium. These two poets, ideas and media, then, coexist on the same page, individual yet relative, comprising an overall excess of assertion that, recalling Blake’s ‘Fly’ philosophy, should not be completely equated, divided or ranked.

Returning to the couplet provides further support for these claims. Gray’s springs of language, fluid but channelled, are the origins of Blake’s wild artistic root. Interestingly, the characteristic differences between the two media suggested by the couplet’s metaphors parallel those outlined by Gotthold Lessing in his 1766 *Laocoön*. In his essay, Lessing reacts against the eighteenth-century reunion of the sister arts, re-emphasizes the differing abilities and continual rivalry between painting and poetry, and frowns upon any attempts by either to imitate the other. Lessing assigns form, colour, space, bodies, visible properties¹⁹ and stillness²⁰ to painting, many of which are also suggested by Blake’s ‘root’ metaphor. In contrast, supporting the channelled fluidity of Gray’s metaphorical ‘springs’, Lessing reserves sound, time, action²¹, process²² and motion²³ for poetry. His is a call to respect the limits and distinctions of each art:

Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other’s domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders, and effect a peaceful settlement for all the petty encroachments which circumstances may compel each to make in haste on the rights of the other.²⁴

Despite this apparently diplomatic call for peaceful but segregated and politicized friendship (after such strong delineation), Lessing, similar to Gray’s implicit favouring of poetry in his lines to Bentley, tips the balance between the arts by proposing that a poetic use of language, via the intangibility of its images, encompasses a wider sphere that both contains the limited aspects of painting and suggests the infinity of imagination.²⁵

Although Blake’s couplet seems to agree with Lessing’s characterization of the arts, Blake rejects the hierarchical and competitive ranking of the arts and the ignorant isolationism that both Gray and Lessing embrace. Gray, like Lessing, not only favours poetic dominance in his lines to Bentley, but his enlightenment narrator in ‘Ode on the Spring’ also echoes Lessing’s

18 – Christopher Heppner, *Reading Blake’s Designs* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 151.

19 – Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), p. 91.

20 – *Ibid.*, p. 109.

21 – *Ibid.*, p. 91.

22 – *Ibid.*, p. 100.

23 – *Ibid.*, p. 139.

24 – *Ibid.*, p. 110.

25 – *Ibid.*, p. 43.

empirical establishment of borders by employing the word as a structured divider that names and classifies his world. However, this use of words also isolates the solitary fly and prevents him from directly experiencing the rest of the universe. Although Blake attempts to mend such division by reflecting on the experience of 'The Fly', his own words also lead to an assertion of difference and distance from Gray, once again resulting in division and opposition. Blake's weaving artistic root, however, metaphorically penetrates the integrity of the border that Lessing and Gray strive to maintain between painting and poetry, and also disrupts the dominant position that both writers assign to language.

Blake's visual imagery, as suggested by his couplet, is a wild, imaginative 'root' that conventionally depends on, unconventionally deviates from, and also remains symbiotically beneficial to and interdependent with the word in a composite attempt to emerge from enlightenment restriction and limitation. Indeed, Blake's illustrations, although ultimately different from poetry, connect with and add to, but can neither completely oppose nor overcome Gray's words. Blake's individualist, 'wild' drawing and painting, then, answers enlightenment rationalism and illustrates his philosophy in 'the Fly' by connecting him with Gray while also depicting his melodic hopes beyond a merely harmonic illumination of Gray. As the dedication suggests, Gray is still on his own: 'Tis your own fault if you dont flourish now', yet Blake still invites readers of Gray's poetry to take a rest from their progression through words, and reawaken imagination among the artist's inspired and various leaves.

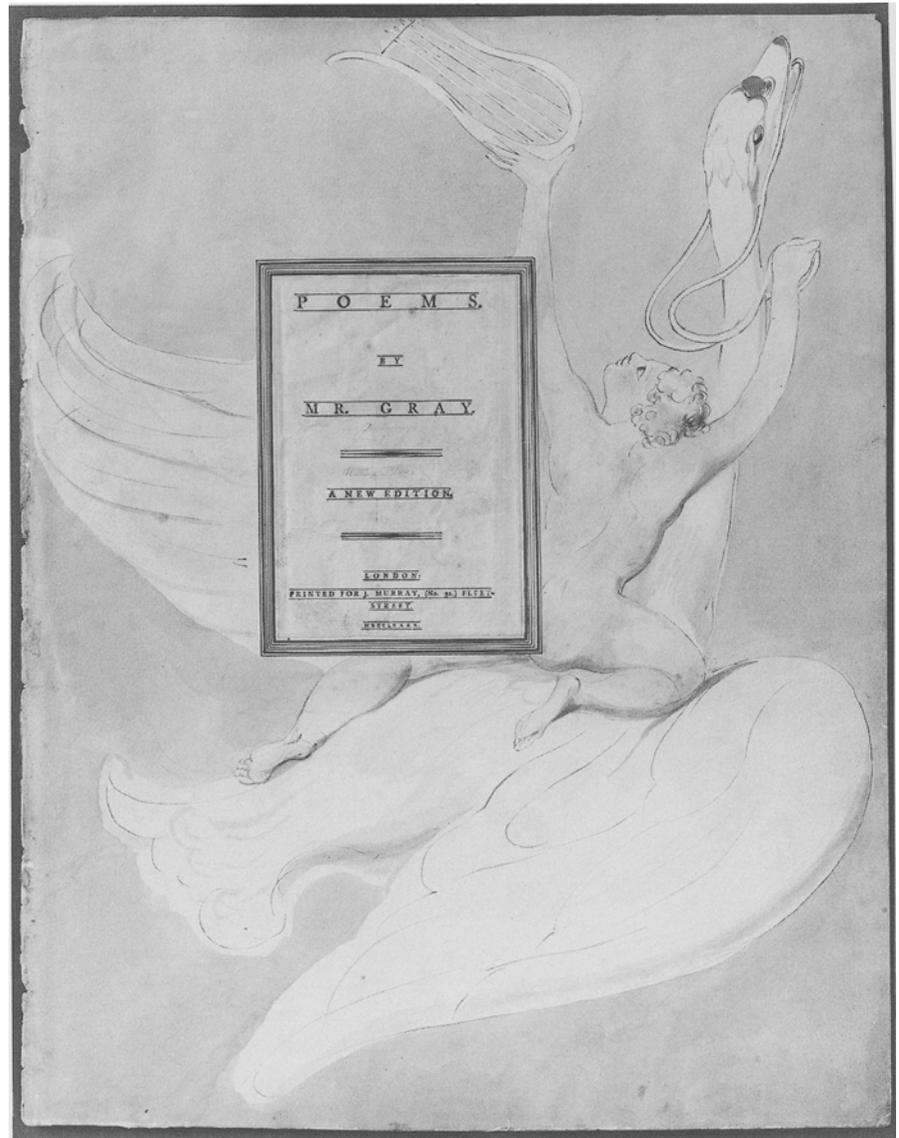
To exemplify the process by which Blake artistically asserts the philosophical differences between himself and Gray while remaining faithful to aesthetic principles that resist exclusion and hierarchy, it will be useful to closely examine the visual images that populate a few composite pages from 'Ode on the Spring'. While this series of pages remains a fertile collection for interpretive speculation and diversity, my intention here is not to 'read' the designs, but to demonstrate that Blake's artistic efforts allow him not only to collaborate with and enhance Gray's poetic imagery, but also to confront, relocate and diversify the didactic direction of Gray's textual spring.

The first illustrated page of Gray's 'Ode on the Spring' is actually the frontispiece for the entire collection (figure 3). The original text box identifies the collection as consisting of 'Poems by Mr. Gray'. Blake's added images show a naked, curly-haired figure who, on the back of an ascending and disproportionate swan,²⁶ touches a musical instrument. Indeed, the title that Blake supplies for this illustration is 'The Pindaric Genius receiving his Lyre'. It is possible to interpret the figure on the swan as an image of Gray himself, as the features do resemble the picture identified as Gray on page 2. If this is, indeed, the case, the illustration for the title page and its title, both supplied by Blake, initially indicate a fundamental respect for the poet.

On page 2, Blake 'draws' the poet into the picture (see figure 1). It is here that Blake's titles for his illustrations appear, identifying the figure on this page and its features with Gray, breaking down the disconnection between the poet and the narrator of the following ode and suggesting a more explicit relationship between the two. This physical resemblance is maintained through the pages and weaves the curly-haired image of Gray with a possible personification of the purple year on page 3, images of the contemplative

26 – It is useful to note that swans have, from Greek times, traditionally been associated with music and song. A swan is fabled to sing beautifully before it passes away, and a Pythagorean fable suggests that the souls of all good poets including that of Apollo, God of music, pass into swans. Although I do not wish to suggest that Blake is using the image of the swan to *exclusively* establish this flattering classical allusion in connection with Gray, the potential for association is useful in that it does convey Blake's fundamental respect for the poet, despite their theoretical differences.

Figure 3. Illustrated frontispiece for the collection of 'Poems by Mr. Gray'. Image courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



27 – I do not wish to commit to either possibility here, because doing so would be to participate in the interpretive exclusion that Blake’s ambiguous figures resist. Rather, to consider both possibilities simultaneously reveals the complex levels of perception that Blake attempts to unfold. The indeterminate gesture embodies both the accusation and invitation of the sportive fly on later pages. Blake’s illustration does not respect the chronological progress of the text, instead condensing a variety of moments and possibilities into a single figure. This condensation artistically hints at the earlier-indicated paradoxes that are shared by the contemplative moralist and the solitary fly, yet Blake does not definitively reject or rewrite the encounter as he does in his own ‘The Fly’. Rather, this is one of many artistic methods by which Blake is able to inclusively encourage escape from the first-person, linear perspective invoked by the language and situations contained in Gray’s ode.

moralist on pages 4 and 6 and, if we stretch our interpretive desires far enough, the posture of the personified figure of ‘rough mischance’ on page 5. While there is none of Gray’s own text to contend with here on page 2, Blake ‘sets the stage’, illuminating his poet-figure with a single light/source, placing him in a barren setting and surrounding him with abstract geometrical forms.

On page 3, a spiralling clutter of roots and vegetation replaces spartan surroundings (figure 4). A number of variously positioned figures, adequately illustrating and personifying Gray’s ‘hours’ and ‘Zephyrs’, are postured so as to suggest movement and activity. Two figures reach for (or point at)²⁷ the smiling naked figure who resembles the figure of Gray on page 2 and who, in a ‘crab-walk’-like position, suspends himself above the ground by pushing his hands and feet against roots that are beginning to extend into branches. Is this figure the poet, the newly woken purple year, or both? Blake’s title for this page suggests that the figure is indeed the ‘Purple Year, awakening from the roots of Nature’. Although this may indeed be Blake’s intended

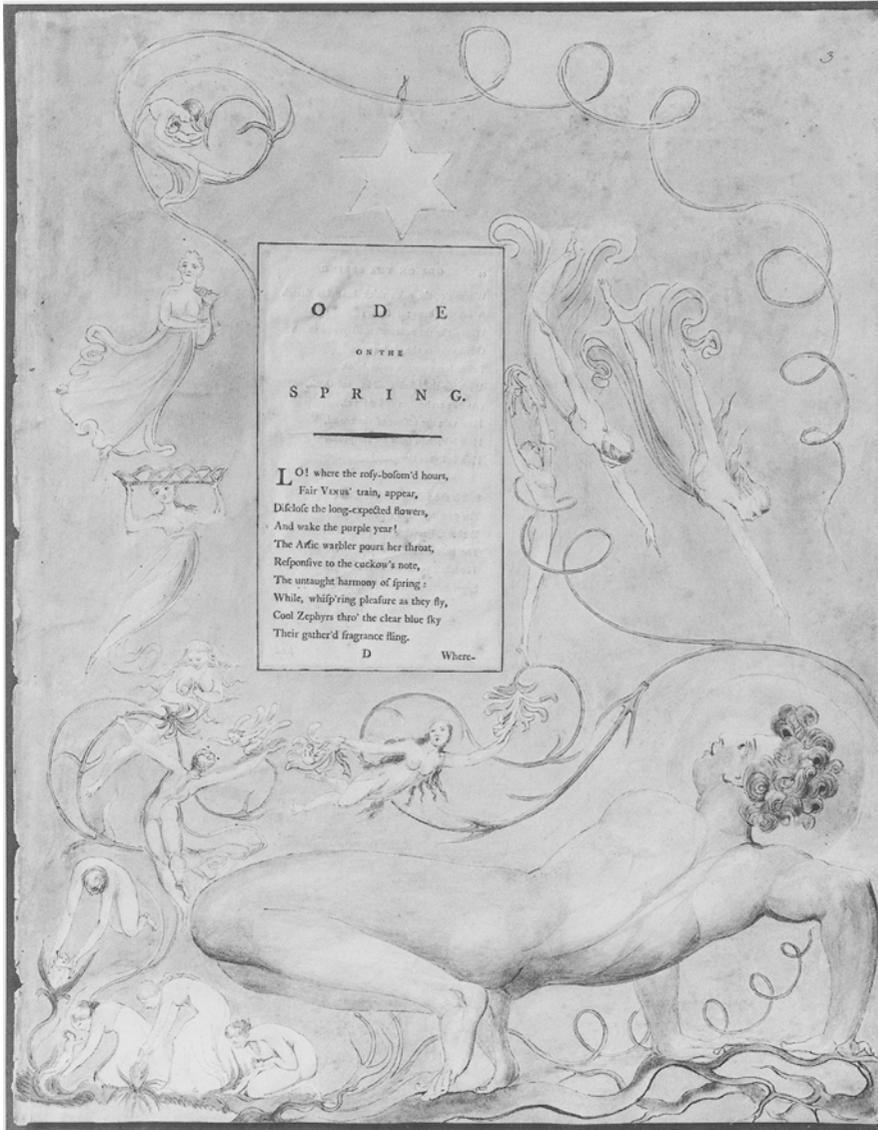


Figure 4. 'The Purple Year awakening from the Roots of Nature. & the Hours suckling their Flowery Infants'. Image courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

identification for this particular page, when one considers the resemblance between the differently identified figures on pages 1 and 2, the different scenes that they inhabit and the subtle links (suggested by Gray's textual images and Blake's couplet, titles and illustrations) between the narrator of Gray's poem, Gray himself, the purple year, roots, the process of awakening, and Blake, the apparent simplicity of the link between Blake's image and Gray's poem is quickly shattered.

While this human figure has already become a dense weave, a nodal point of multifunctional elements, consider this further complication: while 'roots' are purely Blake's textual and pictorial addition to this composite series, Gray's 'long-expected' spring flowers, which, presumably, awake from nature's roots (as textually introduced by Blake), illustratively bear infant figures which suckle at the breasts of airborne female figures who pluck them from the flower petals. Indeed, the posture of the poet-figure could easily be interpreted as sexually participating in this overall picture of fertility and

birth. The drawn female figures also condense many elements of Gray's text: like the 'hours', they disclose the flowers, like the 'Cool Zephyrs', they gather and fling skyward the presumably fragrant infants and petals, and like the insects (and, by Gray's metaphoric implication, mankind) that 'taste the honied spring' and eventually chide the poet-figure, they fertilize the flowers, intrigue the poet-figure's gaze and gesture toward the poet. Relating the condensed figure of the poet, as indicated above, to this additional, condensed pictorial image and placing both in the multiple contexts of the text, the design, the series of pages that encapsulate the poem and the series of composite poems that make up this collection is quickly becoming an overwhelming task. It is as if Blake attempts to incorporate a variety of Gray's poetic ideas and images, as well as his own ideas, into each artistic image and each interaction between these condensed images. Traditional strategies of analysis and interpretation that attempt to 'read', reduce and simplify this expanding and relative universe are obviously ill suited for their task. Yet some might argue that, despite the rapidly growing complexity of this composite design, there is an underlying, accessible order to the chaotic excess that Blake's artistic amplifications and distortions are quickly creating.

However, in addition to the emerging and complex relativity between all of the elements of the composite collection (including Gray's original text), Blake also inserts small and surprising 'quantum' particulars, pictorial icons that challenge efforts toward understanding this composite excess and threaten to rupture the spatial boundaries of the Gray collection by forcing extra-textual considerations and relations. These considerations, brought about by the image, allow a further escape from the limits of Gray's verse, but also bring more to bear on the original text. For example, note the six-pointed star that sits between the singing (or merely open-mouthed) bird and the text box on page 3 (see figure 4). It is not mentioned in the text of Gray's poem and is the only occurrence of this image in the series of illustrations for this poem. However, it does appear twice again throughout the Gray designs. On page 5 of 'The Progress of Poesy', which also has pages artistically populated by small flower figures and Aeolian lyres, the six-pointed star sits among the branches of two trees, in much the same position as the 'Ode on the Spring' occurrence. Within this grove float nine sphere-carrying figures, a cherub and two female flutists in a nearly symmetrical composition. Again, the text makes no mention of this star, but instead describes Cytherea's or Aphrodite's day celebrations where 'rosy-crowned loves' sing and dance in a celebration of beauty. This iconic repetition connects the already complicated composite weave of 'Ode on the Spring' with that being created in the illuminated pages of Gray's 'Progress of Poesy'. Such a connection increases the possibility for and complexity of meaning within this composite vision while encouraging and extending the density of potential allusion and association between the two individual series of pages.

Samuel Foster Damon concatenates Blake's *written* comments on stars and demonstrates the variety of symbolic import that they possess.²⁸ While this further increases the allusive potential of the drawn image and expands the Blakean context of the star, an over-reliance on particular written uses or characterizations of the symbol can potentially lead to attempts at reductive and definitive interpretation, and obscure the expansive and connective functions of the artistic image that is being considered here. Rather than

28 – Samuel Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1979), p. 386.

making an attempt to interpret the specific meaning of the star image and to simplify (and ignore) many of the subtleties within and between the two distant pages by establishing the icon as a thematic signpost or ‘key’, I wish to assert that its repetition between poems increases the expressive potential of each illuminated poem by acting as a connective conduit. The simplicity of its form and function belies the complexity of its effect.

The six-pointed star appears again on page 7 of ‘The Bard’ in a less recognizable form. Although again drawn above the text box, three roughly executed six-pointed stars adorn what appears to be a whip or cat-o’-nine-tails, brandished by a crowned, bearded figure as he descends from the sky toward terrified figures below. While this instance of iconic repetition is perhaps a bit of a stretch in that the stars here appear less like symbols and more like unremarkable elements in a larger design, it still potentially extends the connection between the different poems and pages of the illustrated Gray volume.

Outside of the Gray volume, this star again appears in one other Blake illustration, Plate 91 of *Jerusalem*. Here, lines wound around a six-pointed star connect with the chest of a reclining figure. In *The Illuminated Blake*, David Erdman’s commentary draws numerous links between this design and others in *Jerusalem*, furthering the already identified expansive interconnectivity that threads throughout Blake’s works.²⁹ Blake’s repetition and expansion of a recognizable icon connects and complicates different pages in the same collection, while also inter-textually extending this connective depth beyond the isolated interaction of Blake and Gray. Curiously, and perhaps fittingly for the direction of this argument that began with the consideration of flies, the plate of *Jerusalem* on which this star appears contains a textual assertion that ‘he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect whole must see it in its minute particulars’. Indeed, the example of the six-pointed star that we have traced effectively illustrates how rapidly a minute particular in Blake’s artistic hands can become a nodal point that connects and enriches the larger vision that Blake’s art brings to bear on Gray’s verse.

While identifying links between this and other pages of *Jerusalem*, Erdman makes an attempt to interpret the significance of this star by appealing to the historical and religious significance of the icon. Although this interpretive gesture reductively illuminates only one possibility of meaning for the star, it does call attention to a *further* extra-Blakean layer of significance, which, when added to the already extensive function of the icon as connective conduit, increases the inferential power of this minute particular to a critical mass. The six-pointed star, also known as the Star of David, has been found as early as the third century.³⁰ Of special interest to the original appearance of the star in the illustration to Gray’s ‘Ode on the Spring’, though, is its characterization as ‘Solomon’s Seal’. Solomon, a tenth-century king of Israel, was noted for his wisdom, and his name is generally associated with the term.³¹ Solomon’s Seal itself, though, is a plant with a curious link to the ‘root’ metaphor that Blake offers in his couplet that characterizes the relation between his work and Gray’s. The root of this plant is said to have medicinal or healing value and, as the stems and flowers of this plant decay, ‘the root-stock becomes marked with scars’ that resemble starry signets or seals.³² When this combination of the characteristics of wisdom, healing and decay is added to Blake’s already abundant contextual and inter-textual utilizations

29 – David Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 370.

30 – Ivor H. Evans, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable: Based on the Original Book of Ebenezer Cobham Brewer*, revised edn (London: Wordsworth, 1993), p. 1033.

31 – *Ibid.*, p. 1017.

32 – *Ibid.*, p. 1018.

of the star icon, and this concentration is then linked to the already dense interconnection of elements that have appeared in the first three pages of 'Ode on the Spring', the result is a holistic coherence that defies reductive or exclusive interpretations.

Indeed it would be much simpler (and much more traditional) if Blake illustrated Gray's poem faithfully or at least rejected Gray's poetic images completely in his artistic illuminations. What destroys such simplicity and often frustrates Blakean scholars is Blake's unique insistence on *adding* to, rather than replacing or simply opposing Gray's textual images, notions and directions. As a result, the exclusive strength of Gray's textual voice is lessened and becomes part of an inclusive, multiple and persistently paradoxical vision.

While only half of the composite pages of the 'Ode on the Spring' have thus far been considered, Blake's illustrations have already introduced an almost opaque multiplicity into the basic considerations and directions of Gray's poetic text. As Vaughan, drawing upon W. J. T. Mitchell, suggests, Blake generates his own images in addition to Gray's textual ones, syncoating or separating the text and illustration with disparities that complicate and alter the equation of text and design.³³ Although a further exploration of this series would reveal that this density of possibility continues to increase, there is more than enough evidence thus far to exemplify that the complex dynamic indicated by Blake's couplet is indeed achieved here by adding image to text. Also, while this is, formally, a 'reading' of the function of Blake's designs, I have not searched for exclusive meaning (Blakean or otherwise) in the specific images as if they were merely another meaningful text.

As Heppner and Tayler have already noted in previous studies, Blake's illustrations and annotations stem from and rely on the text. What this all-too-brief analysis has added to their observations, though, is that Blake's illustrations follow the approach to creative production implied in 'The Fly' by relying on Gray's words for nourishment while also overcoming Gray's restrictions without directly opposing them in a textual annotation. The rooted image is fed by the textual spring and established relative to the word, but Blake's illustrative activity is not a confrontational, oppositional revolution — Blake was historically disillusioned by such turns. More accurately, we can take Edward Larrissy's statement that 'Blake's description of the moment when vision is renewed ascribes it to the intervention of a brother or fraternal spirit' and extend it here.³⁴ Gray's vision is renewed through the intervention of fellow artist Blake and textual vision is renewed through the intervention of a sister image.

Art and text, although capable of intersecting with, translating and emulating each other, are as different, but also as related as Blake's narrator and the Fly that he comes to respect. This sense of simultaneous relativity and individuality, *without* hierarchy, of an unstable and often paradoxical truce between cooperation and conflict is Blake's answer to the sister arts debate and a refutation of those contemporary critics who reduce his illustrations to yet another text in their attempts to 'read' his designs. This weave between word and image echoes Blake's and Gray's connections with and reactions to enlightenment ideas, and also recalls the differences and dependencies that the composite work creates between the two poets: all are, indeed, 'friendly enemies'.

33 – Vaughan, p. 5.

34 – Edward Larrissy, 'Spectral imposition and visionary imposition: printing and repetition in Blake', in *Blake in the Nineties*, eds Steve Clark and David Worrall (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 76