

*When Blake undertook the illustration of the 1790 edition of Thomas Gray's Poems for John Flaxman, he did so with characteristic exuberance, providing both illustration and interpretation. Gray represented a contradiction to Blake: while he was a poet of empire aligned with Blake's aesthetic enemy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Gray also wrote the radical indictment of empire, "The Bard." Blake's illustrations testify to this conflict; and in the "Ode," Blake's designs offer an other language, a contradiction, that deconstructs Gray's conscious—and liberates his unconscious discourse. Blake's visual language champions desire's expression, specifically feminine desire, and resists the repression of that desire urged by Gray in his own controlled poetic diction. Blake's images define the visual field at the margin of discourse as the realm of the unconscious. Further, he demonstrates a number of concepts later argued by Jacques Lacan.*

*The Contra-Diction of Design:  
Blake's Illustrations to Gray's "Ode on the  
Death of a Favourite Cat"*

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In 1795, Blake received a commission from Richard Edwards to illustrate Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, and by 1797 he had produced an impressive 537 watercolors and had "engraved forty-three. . . large copper plates" (Grant 304; Keynes 3). However, interest in such projects, like those undertaken by Fuseli and others, to create galleries for English poets (two "Milton Galleries" existed in the last decade of the eighteenth century [Paley 131]), waned with the onset of war against Revolutionary France.

In 1798, the artist John Flaxman, to ease Blake's disappointment as well as to offer his wife a unique gift, commissioned him to produce a volume of watercolor designs to accompany the 1790 edition of Thomas Gray's poetry. In the completed work, Blake renders his aspiration for the volume in a verse and design that concluded his labors. As Richard E. Johnson's recent explication makes clear, "The verses . . . depict in a figurative way the activity that Blake imagined for himself as interpreter of Gray: with his 'divine hands' Blake is to elevate the 'pale little flower' of Gray's poetry to a mountain's brow" (73-74). Blake's designs, from a pietistic point of view, will recover Gray, returning Gray to the peak of poetic prominence, but the last line of the closing verse vibrates with ambiguity, for once placed on the peak, it will be Gray's "fault" if his poetry doesn't "flourish" (1.10).

Does Blake actually seek to elevate Gray's poetry? If one reads the language of the designs, the answer is "no." The language of the designs only recovers Gray, that is, covers the poetry of Gray in Blakean interpretation that overwhelms the meaning of Gray's poems from the margins of the text.

Gray, who died fourteen years before Blake began to publish his own work, represented a contradiction to Blake. Gray, with his privileged social position and politically powerful friends, could be viewed as an artist of empire like the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, yet just as clearly, Blake felt an affinity for the democratic impulses found in a work like

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Gray's "The Bard." However, throughout his designs for Gray, Blake illuminates and interprets as well as illustrates, and the nature of Blake's creative process can be traced in his designs for "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat."

Blake's designs provide another language that operates against Gray's, pushing Gray's words into a sterile center through a literal act of destruction worked on the 1790 edition of Gray's poetry:

Blake's method of working was similar to that which he had used for Young. Taking the 1790 edition of Gray's *Poems*, "[Blake] kept the title page. . . . Trimming off the margins, he inlaid each page in a rectangular window cut off-center from a large sheet of Whatman drawing paper" (Keynes 3).

Blake literally deconstructs Gray's text (Johnson 73), and the result is a staggering imbalance of word and design. The physical destruction of the text allows Blake to relegate Gray's poetic voice to a marginal position relative to his own designs, ironically by placing the words in a sterile colorless center. This contra-diction or other language of design inverts and perversely transforms Gray's "Ode" from a cautionary tale for "vain" women with "ardent wishes" into a psychological drama whose images map the birth of the perceiving self, the drive of desire, projection and the cultural inscription of feminine sexuality in what Lacan terms "the Name of the Father." Alone, Gray's words attempt to consciously restrain desire while Blake's illustrations function as the unconscious in relation to Gray's words as they work to liberate desire.

Blake's visual psychodrama can be illuminated by an understanding and application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. For Lacan, the "I" begins in a visual recognition of and identification in a self outside of self, a mirror stage that creates a split in the perceiver at the moment desire receives its "structuration." This "I" is formulated out of the primary language of the unconscious, then reframes this language into representation, which mediates desire's engagement with the world objects. In Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's words, "unconscious language is altogether different from the same language used for conscious discourse"(xvi). In Gray's case, the secondary language of representation is simultaneously a language of repressed desire; and Blake's designs, by addressing the marginal or repressed subject of the poem, liberate

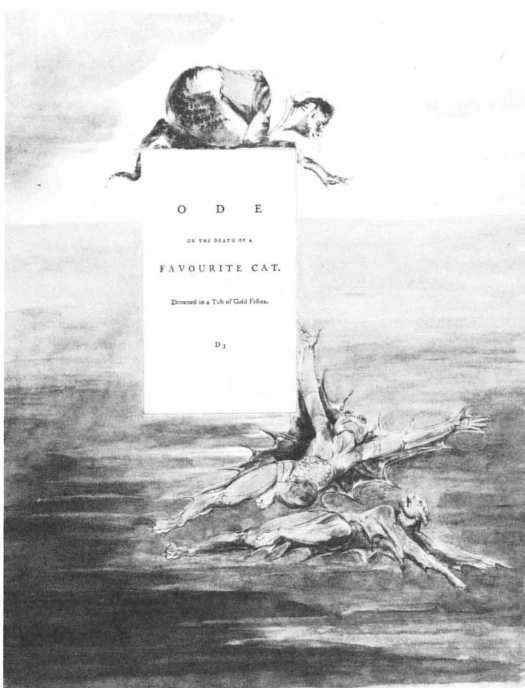
the primary level of Gray's poetic discourse through illustrations that champion desire's expression. Blake's illustrative explosion of color and altered forms functions as counterpoint to Gray's controlled verse. The off-center, rectangular window of the text reserved for Gray is like a tombstone while visionary delight flows around the bound words.<sup>1</sup> The disproportionate space given to illustration, a displacement of Gray's words, testifies to the interpretive nature of Blake's designs, and this interpretive pictorial presence reveals psychological and linguistic processes in conflict within Gray's central metaphor.

"Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat," as Irene Taylor, Richard Johnson, Robert Gleckner and Sir Geoffrey Keynes indicate, links female and feline attributes for amusing effects, with cat as vehicle and woman as tenor. This seemingly trivial poem relates the fall of Selima, Horace Walpole's cat, as she plunges to a watery grave while in pursuit of goldfish. Literally, the poem embodies a fall, a movement Gray reinforces metaphorically. The femme feline's perception of "gold gleam[s]" gives birth to her "ardent wishes" to devour or possess it, for "what female heart can gold despise" (11. 18, 21, 23). The pursuit of such objects of desire leads to the didactic moralizing of the final stanza where "Beauties" should follow "caution," should resist the temptation of "wand'ring eyes and heedless hearts" (11. 37, 39, 40). Why should beauty resist such desire? According to Gray, because all temptations are not "lawful prize" (11. 40-1).

Consciously, Gray's language and central metaphor trope off women's desire for money, a stereotypical projection from within a phallocratic discourse, which unconsciously reveals the masculine drive to translate female desire into a commodity within a masculine economy cast in its own image.<sup>2</sup> Lacan gives voice to such a process, finding that "The father, the Name-of-the-Father, sustains the structure of desire with the structure of law" (Lacan, *FF* 34). Gray's didactic moralizing links repression to moral codes of behavior or the law of society. Blake's interpretive designs empty the money from Gray's poetic materials in an attempt to probe a more universal psychological engagement with materiality itself or what Blake calls vegetative existence. Blake's designs unveil the phallic privileging in Gray's "Ode" to illustrate the drama of feminine desire's drive for satisfaction.

FIGURE 1

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



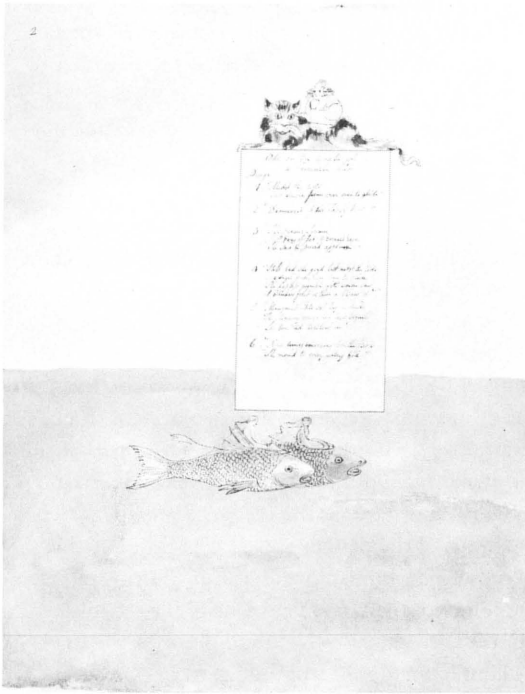
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The first two illustrations have no literal correspondence to Gray's poem as other critics have noted, but they seem to serve at least two distinct functions (figures 1 and 2). The title page universalizes the minute particulars of Gray's verse, and the second design deconstructs Gray's moral allegory. The opening design finds Selima perched atop the rectangular window as she gazes intently down toward the bottom of the page. Selima, a fusion of human and animal qualities, crouches on knees and extends her hand toward the lake below. Unseen by Selima, dark clouds roll onto the design from behind, partially covering the sky and casting shadows over the deep. She wears garments that offer a trace of social attempts to restrict the body's free expression, but the burning eyes, thin smile and reaching hand testify to awakened desire as she seeks objects of satisfaction.

Those objects, Gray's goldfish, also assume figures somewhere between human and the animal as they wear the

FIGURE 2

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



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“amour” alluded to in line sixteen. Here one sees what Nelson Hilton calls Blake’s literal imagination at work; such inspirational counter-trope allows Blake to tap the repressed subject of Gray’s words since “we always mean more than we think and read more than we see. The word has a spirit of its own, more expansive than the individual mind through which it speaks or is read.”<sup>8</sup> Blake plays with the term “armour,” as shall be seen in the third design where armour is linked to “amour”; yet prior to the term’s appearance, Blake images the sexual division of the sexes, with the male stretched protectively over the female. The male offers himself as a shield for the female, “a masculine protector for the female in what may be a parody of the male-dominant ethic that pervades Gray’s poem” (Johnson 88). Although they are innocent in Gray’s poem, Blake re-forms these “angelic forms”(1.14) into a harmonious vision of love between the sexes and then into the figures that enact the law of the father, the repression of female desire.

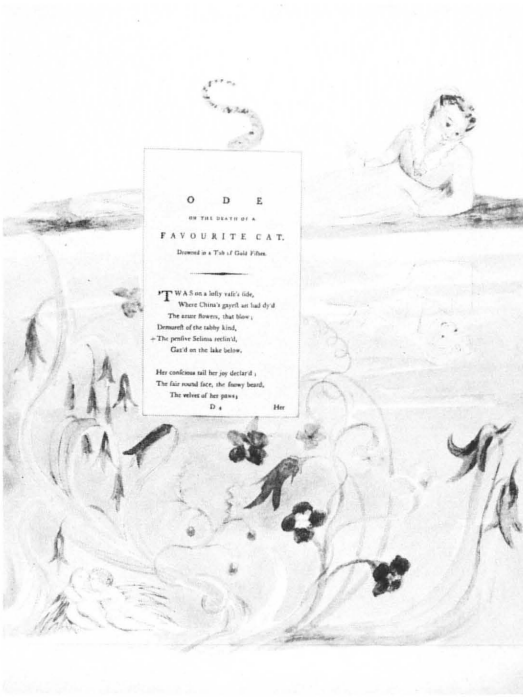
The explosion of color and the altered forms sharply contrast with the colorless window enclosing the poem's title. At the outset, the closed representation of Gray's poem unfolds only through the free play of Blake's imaginative designs. Innocent fish become, first, a pair of lovers and second, figures of guilt and repression. Gray's cat/woman becomes a symbol of female sexuality's clash with what Lacan called "the Name-of-the-Father" as enacted in what Blake called, in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, this "Vegetable Glass of Nature"(555).

The second plate offers an alternate treatment of the same subject as that of the title page. The positions of the poem's participants are virtually unchanged, yet the figures have split, indicating a di-vision at work. This splitting equally traces the deconstruction of Gray's allegorical trope as well as the splitting of the individual psyche discussed by Lacan in relation to the "mirror stage." The first two designs, then, are mirror images of each other, perspectives from either side of a division. Blake again places Selima above the rectangle, where she reclines and stares at the reader. Beneath, two fish swim, unconscious of the danger above. The fish, like the figures above, are split, human qualities riding atop animal qualities. Design two, then, lays bare Gray's allegorical tropes of human and animal, vehicle and tenor, while expanding the conflicting desire and the world of objects, beyond the page and beyond Gray's conscious discourse.

Blake transforms this allegorical trope into an engagement with symbolic and imaginary realms repressed in Gray's poem.<sup>3</sup> The subdued coloration, split figures and handwriting point to Blake's acute understanding of Gray's phallic moralism, and he transforms it with tenors literally riding their vehicles toward metaphorical meaning. In other words, Blake, from a Lacanian perspective, forces the imaginary to precede the symbolic and literal, and these, in turn, precede the appearance of the poem. Blake offers two interpretations of the poem before it is present, a strategy of prefiguring that further marginalizes the poetic center of the text in hand. Further, the establishment of the gaze of the text participates in Lacanian notions of the gaze, which offer the reader the sense, in Lacan's words, of being "looked at" and through which Blake can offer a text that gazes at the reader as the reader gazes at the text in hand. Thus Blake, from a Lacanian point of view, anticipates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights that "we are beings who are looked at, in

FIGURE 3

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



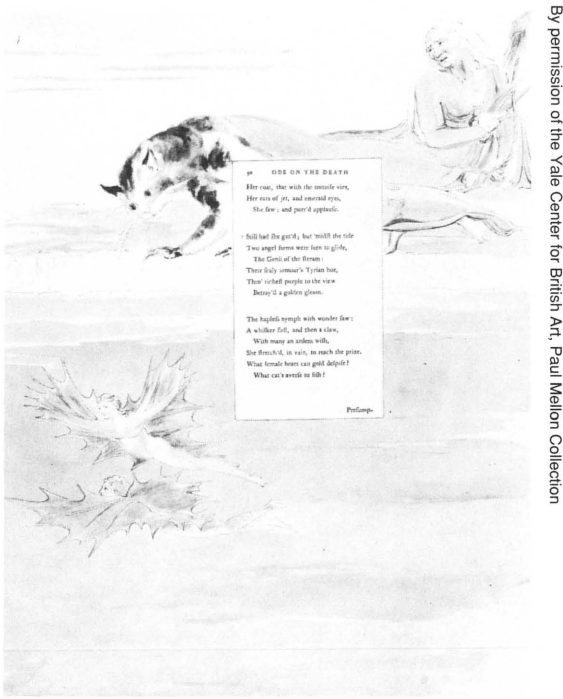
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the spectacle of the world” (Lacan, *FF* 72-5). And it is this understanding of the dynamics of the gaze that allows Blake to craft, what I have called in another essay, transformational texts, that is texts that operate on readers.<sup>4</sup>

Blake’s third design (figure 3), an illustration of lines five, eleven and twelve, is crucial to the development of the psychological processes previously discussed: the birth of desire and of the self, and the self’s (and the reader’s) engagement with the realm of objects. Selima is an attractive human female, with distinct traces of the feline found in whiskers, pointed ears and tail. Against Gray’s description of Selima’s narcissism, Blake depicts “her conscious interest [in] her own image in the water” (Keynes 44). However, the watery mirror, this vegetative glass or mirror of nature, does not yield a true reflection but rather offers an image of Selima emptied of her feline characteristics. The goldfish have become a pair of lovers whose sexual activity, like the uncon-

FIGURE 4

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



scious desire restrained in Gray's poetic language, remains as yet undiscovered by the perceptive Selima.

Blake's illustration demonstrates the first tenet of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, where the birth of desire and the formation of self result from a mirror-stage encounter with an other that is self, a perceptual moment that creates a fissure.<sup>5</sup> From this developmental moment, the split self must exist between the discourses of the conscious and unconscious elements of being (Ragland-Sullivan 19-20 and 29-36). Selima, at plate three unaware of her own sexual urges, finds her own image pleasing, a primary narcissism which precedes her splitting that occurs in the mirror stage. However, beneath this glassy surface await more active expressions of desire.

The fourth design (figure 4) partially recreates the title page design. Selima crawls along the margins of the lake and stalks

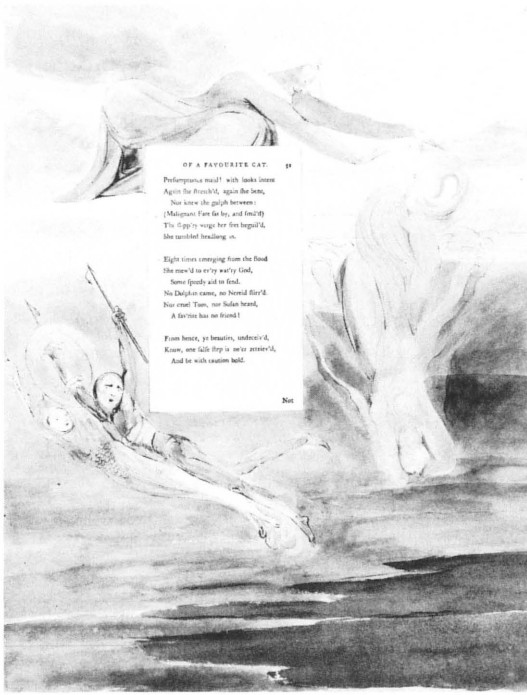
the “angel forms” that glide carefree through the water, having concluded their lovemaking from the previous design. Selima is again a creature of myth, half cat and half woman, but Blake emphasizes the feline. The upper body is a cat whose eyes, in color, mirror the red-gold-yellow of the fish. Gray’s “malignant Fate,” an aged woman, sits behind Selima and splits the threads that restrain Selima’s engagement with the material realm of her desires. Fate supplies an initial impetus and thus structures the sequence of events. For Blake, the birth of desire is a call to action, and to participate in being and becoming is to participate in the fate of life and death.

Here Fate, for Blake, functions as Necessity does for Frederic Jameson: in regard to interpretive activities, “Necessity is not. . . a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events” (102). Necessity is that which stands outside of or what resists encoding; it governs the form that discourses and events take. The fate of life cuts the strands that maintain disengagement from the material. This splitting initiates a vortexual passage through time and space, and Blake reinforces this structure visually: the designs whirl in a vortex around the static linearity of Gray’s verse; they are forms unnamed in the poetic process and operate against the tyranny of Gray’s male-dominated language.

The fifth design completely breaks symbolic alliance with Gray’s “Ode.” Blake supposedly illustrates line twenty-eight, where “Malignant Fate sat by and smil’d” as Selima stretches her grasp to follow the direction of her gaze (figure 5). Just as the split created by the mirror stage stands, for Lacan, “at the heart of human knowledge” (Ragland-Sullivan 25), so too this split, for Blake and Lacan equally, “constitutes the characteristic dimension of analytic discovery and experience” (*FF* 69). For Selima, as for Thel earlier in Blake’s canon, the split “enables [her] to apprehend the real, in its dialectical effects, as originally unwelcome” (*FF* 69). Fate actively participates in Selima’s fall, thus opposing the passivity described as Fate’s role in Gray’s poem. Selima is visually transformed into a young woman, breaking correspondence with the poem by literalizing the extended association of feline/feminine attributes maintained in all prior designs. Selima, in passing through the mirror, assumes the human figure that floated on its surface; she becomes the floating signifier that she beheld.

FIGURE 5

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



OF A FAVOURITE CAT:  
Perfumes a maid! with tasks come  
Again the Fossil'd, again the bone,  
Not know she gaily between;  
(Maugham's Fan for her, and finally)  
The ship to weigh her fine legs'd,  
Her qualified handling on.

Eight times coming from the find  
The maid to cry wail'd God,  
Some speedy aid to find,  
Not Dight to name, no heard dith'd,  
Not great Time, nor shall be said,  
A Justice has no friend!

From hence, ye beauties, understand,  
Know, one fall they in once arriv'd,  
And be with caution held.

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Selima tumbles “headlong” (1.30) into the arena of her desires, “arms clutching her head [as she falls] into the created world” (Johnson 87). The form that her descent takes is common in Blake’s visual vocabulary, appearing on the title page of Blake’s designs for Blair’s *The Grave*, on the title page of *Milton: Part the Second* and in his fully articulated painting *The Fall of Man*. In fact, according to Janet A. Warner, the posture and gesture seem to signify Blake’s concept of “despair” (113). Selima’s despair is twofold: she fails to realize her desires, and she enters materiality only to discover that it leads to death. However, for Blake, the path that leads through the material world also leads to apocalypse, the deliverance of the individual from psychological tyranny that would translate feminine desire into an image of male desire (the subject of design six).

By following the flow of action within design five, the reader-viewer’s gaze travels in a circle. Fate, leaning to the

right, pushes Selima into the water, a descent along the right margin. The fish, now warriors clad in the garb of phallic militarism, glide in an upward curve from beneath the squared confinement of Gray's text, to ascend on the left margin. Through my association of the Fate figure with Necessity, in Jameson's sense of the term, the psychological processes under exploration emerge within the horizon of the historical as forces operative within and without the individual. In other words, the process of projection, with its attendant reifications of ideas into ideologies that take on material bodies to perpetuate their own existence, finds the same battles waged in history and within the mind.

In the final design (figure 6), Selima mews "to every watr'y god" (11.31-2). From a Blakean perspective, gods are watery because they are projections onto the "Glass of Nature," as plate eleven of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* makes clear: *The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous sense could perceive. . . . Till a system was formed [that] enslaved the vulgar. . . . Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.* (38)

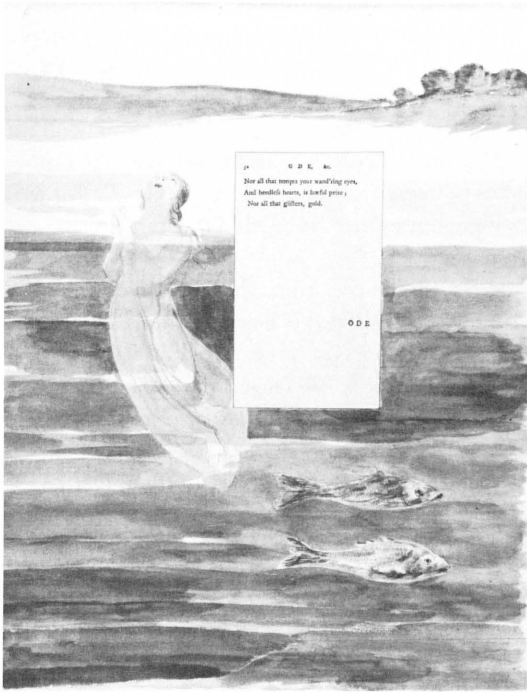
This description of the projective, animating process compares favorably with Lacan's description of a similar process in "God and Jouissance of the Woman," where Lacan attempts to clarify the status of the "other" in his psychoanalytic theories: *The first being of which we are aware is that of our own being, and everything which is for our own good will, by dint of the fact, be jouissance of the supreme Being, that is, of God. In short, in loving God it is ourselves we love, and by first loving ourselves—a convenient charity as they say—we render to God the proper homage.* (FS 142)

As Lacan and Blake's language equally reveal, such projections operate on reflection or mirroring, and Blake continually reinforces the mirrored qualities of his designs for Gray to unveil their projective and prescriptive practices.

Selima's posture mirrors, inversely, her descent from the previous design. She rises, hands clasped in prayer, along the left margin, retaining her fully human form while the fish are reduced to their complete animal state. Selima's mouth is open and her head is raised to heaven as she sings a song to

FIGURE 6

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



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the glory of God. Here we see the completion of a woman's movement from desiring self to a figure inscribed and p(r)aying lip service to the phallogratic, patriarchal discourse that would direct her attention away from material satisfaction. Feminine desire is now inscribed by the masculine, a perversion of desire that directs expectation beyond the material.

My interpretation of Blake's designs for "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat" follows a line of criticism that reads these figures as dramatic visionary forms (Erdman and Grant viii). However, I strongly resist accepted assessments of Blake's intention, where "Gray's conventional moralizing has been transmuted into a barbed allegory of woman's frailty" (Keynes 45). While I agree with Keynes's subject and verb, I believe that the barbed allegory's true object is to demonstrate visually a psychological process that encodes itself within the individual and history, especially as these proc-

esses are enacted upon a figure of female desire. This process leads from the identification of self and the birth of desire through projection and through the perceptual engagement with desire's objects to a new awakening, a dawning realization that desire has been translated into deference for an absent cause. For this reason, I would also resist David Bindman's assessment that "hidden meaning need not be sought in every illustration [because] the illustrations are principally important for their role in Blake's development as a book illustrator"(113-4). Blake's use of visual illustration to liberate unconscious urges repressed by Gray resists the translation of feminine desire into phallocratic discourse by unveiling its operations. Rather, Blake champions desire's expression from the margin as readers pass into a vortex of fluid, flowing signification.

In this regard, while most commentators recognize Blake's designs as a "mythic treatment of young persons on the threshold of sexual and psychological maturity" (Johnson 86) and an examination of "love in the fallen world" (Taylor 302), they neglect the process by which desire is translated into prayer, choosing to read the drama in pietistic terms. However, Gray's poem, in Lacan's words, reasserts the phallus as "the privileged signifier of that mark where. . . logos is wedded to the advent of desire" (*FS* 82). Blake's designs, in Johnson's words, offer "a reversal of the Freudian formula by which intellection results from repressed and sublimated sexuality" (90); and I see the goal of such a reversal of Freud, prior to Freud's writing, to be precisely Lacanian. I see Blake's re-discovery of Gray as parallel to Lacan's inversion of Freud to emphasize the unconscious (Ragland-Sullivan 6), and his textual operations simultaneously recover and uncover Gray's male-dominated aesthetic.

In summary, Blake's illustrations to the opening stanzas present a drama. The subject, Selima, enacts a mirror stage encounter, and the resulting split, pinpointed by Lacan as one of the products of this encounter, can be read in the difference between the subject's appearance and that of its reflected image. The gaze of the subject, linked by Lacan to the formation of self and the origins of desire (Lacan, *FF* 69-73), fixes first on its own image, then passes beneath this "other" to objects of desire lurking beneath the reflections of the mirror. Fate or Necessity drives the subject to act on desirous impulses as the hand follows the direction of the gaze to obtain satisfaction. Once plunged into the matrix of

matter, subject and objects undergo transformations, finally to be revealed as narcissistic projection onto the glass of nature. Blake offers, therefore, not a moral but a psychological message that is also manifest in history as systems of oppression that generate moral codes. Moreover, Blake equally reveals that poetry can reify those projective oppressions.

Blake's psychological, linguistic and historical insights grow in importance in relation to Gray's moral allegory through the techniques of their presentation. The delegation of Gray's verse to a de-centered engraved rectangle, the placement of two designs prior to the actual beginning of Gray's "Ode," the imbalance achieved between bound verse and bounding illustration, and the deconstructive method of production through which Blake approaches the task as a whole support Blake's contradiction of the unconscious as it operates on the margins of Gray's conscious discourse and unveil the phallic privileging of Gray's association of the feline and feminine, which consciously attempts to control feminine sexuality through inner repression and outer oppression.

#### Endnotes

- 1 The visual affect of the tombstone, in my point of view, is quite close to that described by Thomas A. Vogler in a different context, namely his essay on "Re: Naming MIL/TON," where Vogler approaches Blake's *Milton* through the frame of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In such a conception of the world, to speak or name participates in internal laws of governance that only reifies externality in the name of the father, and to resist this process is to participate in "a rupturing" that allows Blake to intrude "into the Symbolic Order of the patriarchal discourse" (145).
- 2 Such a line of argument follows Luce Irigaray, one of Lacan's students, where she argues that "Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for men." "Women on the Market," *This Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 177.
- 3 This translation from moral allegory, or what Irene Taylor calls fable (following Blake), into a "sublime allegory" is typically Blakean, as Curran and Wittreich indicate in the opening citations for their Blake's *Sublime Allegory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973).
- 4 The essay. "'Vortex' as Philosopher's Stone: Blake's Textual Mirrors and the Transmutation of Audience," *New Orleans Review* 13, 3 [1986]: 40-50, argues that Blake anticipates Lacan's conception of the mirror stage by linking Blake's use of literal and figurative mirroring to bring readers into mirror stage encounters while they read Blakean texts. Through such textual dynamics, Blakean texts create "a situation of exchange. . . where the text transforms the reader as the reader transforms the text" (50).
- 5 Lacan conceives the mirror stage "as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term, namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*"(2). Thus, for the designs at hand, Selima's mirror

stage image of self is emptied of feline characteristics which, within the horizon of the poem, sets identity against identification. Thus, again using Lacan's terms, Blake uses the mirror stage "as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality—or as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*" (E 4).

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