

# The Listening Voice

The newsletter of the Equi-Phallic Alliance & Poetry Field Club  
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"Neither Enlightened Nor Half Asleep"



# The Re-enactment of Edward Young

*And why we must do it*

## Edward Young & Night Thoughts

Edward Young was born in the Hampshire village of Upham in 1683. He is best known as the author of *Night Thoughts*, a poem published in nine parts between 1742 and 1745. The full title of the poem is *The Complaint: or Night-Thoughts on Life, Death & Immortality*. It gave rise to a major series of illustrations by William Blake. Young was also the author of *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) which anticipated several ideas of the romantics and was especially popular in Germany.

*Night Thoughts* was translated into many languages including French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish and Russian. In France it became a classic of the romantic school. The poem had a profound influence on the young Edmund Burke, who's philosophic investigations and writings on the Sublime and the Beautiful were a pivotal turn in Eighteenth Century aesthetic theory.

George Eliot, in *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: the Poet Young*, did Young an inadvertent service by referring to his "radical insincerity". He did not so much reject 'authenticity', as not consider it. The absence of autobiographical content in *Night Thoughts* and the abstract universe it summons filled Eliot with aesthetic revulsion. There is no depth in his deeps.

John Buchan (1st Baron Tweedsmuir, imperialist lacky and author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) — in his *History of English Literature* (1928, with an introduction by Sir Henry Newbolt), provides a sense of how Young and his work came to be seen. "Young was a toady and place-hunter of the most

shameless kind, and his relations with the Duke of Wharton show his utter indifference to the moral character of his patrons." Of *Night Thoughts* he says, "Its atmosphere is ... oppressive, its sentiment hollow, its philosophy thoroughly unwholesome."

S.H. Clark, introducing a selection of Young's poetry,<sup>1</sup> reversed the perspective. Where Eliot had attempted to diminish *Night Thoughts*, Clark puts it thus: "...though there may be some grief even in Young's artificiality, the pleasure and power of his text lie not in an authenticity momentarily brought on by pressure of bereavement, but in a linguistic exhibitionism pushed to the point of paradoxical selflessness."

Clark asserts that Young, in *Night Thoughts*, achieves "the lyricism of utter estrangement", he calls it "a supremely undidactic poem." André Breton, in his *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924), declared that "Young's *Night Thoughts* are surrealist from cover to cover."

## Contextualising Night Thoughts: The Augustan Ideal

The Augustan Ideal was the first of the last backward glances of modernity; its proponents sought to establish an equivalence between early-mid eighteenth century England and



Detail from a 1797 illustrated edition of *Night Thoughts* containing 43 engravings by William Blake

Augustan Rome (27 BC — AD 14). The early classical poets had already described the secrets of the natural world; it would therefore be presumptuous of a poet or any other writer to claim to be discovering novelty; the task was instead to express old truths in increasingly beautiful and arresting forms.

The Augustan Ideal obscured contradictions within the State behind a pastoral, but the classicism of the Augustans was underpinned and also undermined by Terror. It was the theme that dared not speak its name. It was the shadow of all that emphatically expressed self-confidence. Terror created divided subjectivities, generating a much more complex interiority than had existed before. This was fuelled by the increasing availability of printed material, newspapers and books. Imagination flourished in the new spaces of the mind.

The growth of early modern Terror also shadows the development of paper money. As money became virtual the world became that much more imaginary. The emphatic timelessness of the great country houses, with their classical gardens — all Euclidean geometry and permanence — screamed Mutability; now they could so easily be unimagined. The ability of gentlemen to get into debt, something at which they excelled, was itself a catalyst of the Romantic aesthetic.

### Pope v. Young: enlightenment & anti-enlightenment currents

Think of Augustan poetry and up pops Alexander Pope. His *Epistle to Augustus* (George II) endorsed if not invented the notion of the Augustan Age. Pope attempted to embody the role of the poet in a style befitting such an idea, his poetry erected displays of ‘wit’ like follies upon a hill. They were best seen from a distance. If you peered around the back there was likely to be nothing there at all. Although Pope is absent from his poetry he achieved only conventional insincerity.

The developing literary market place meant a self divided between the public and the private realms. His public works, his poems, embody his public image; but it is in his private works, his gardens and his letters, that he is revealed. The schematic nympholepsy of his poetry becomes grooming in his letters to young ladies.<sup>2</sup>

The secret places of his gardens — he was an innovator of the picturesque garden — morbid, gloomy and packed with sensation, provided the theatre within which the nymphs of his poetry and the young women he wrote letters to could merge. His gardens represented the machinery of his imagination; they were an interior space, a private world. In his poems Pope kept his anxieties hidden.

Edward Young publicly articulated anxiety in its modern form. His poetry represents the machinery of his imagination. *Night Thoughts* disconnects utterly. When you read it, the world you enter has no dimensions. The reader is dwarfed by and lost within his 10,000 lines on the utter pointlessness of ‘renown’. Ontologically speaking, *Night Thoughts* is not so much a requiem for the dead as for the living.

### Graveyard Poetry & The Sublime

In the 1740s a form of poetry appeared that was radically different from anything Pope advocated, and which came to be called ‘graveyard poetry’. Its emergence was sudden and dramatic and it marked



the end of the conceit of Augustanism: Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* came out between 1742 and 1745; Robert Blair’s *The Grave* in 1743; James Hervey’s major work, *Meditations among the Tombs*, between 1745 and 1747; Thomas Warton’s *On the Pleasures of Melancholy* in 1747; and Gray’s *Elegy in a Country Church-Yard* in 1751. What these works focus on, in sharp contradistinction to Enlightenment empiricism, is the severe limitations of human pretensions to rational understanding of the purposes and workings of the cosmos.

Graveyard poetry was an implicit attack on those who claimed that nature’s purpose is to serve human needs. For the graveyard poet, the nature of destiny and the evolution of the future were far less comprehensible than that. Although written largely about death, these works also served the subtly different purpose of challenging the ideology of progress. With the graveyard poets, an anti-Enlightenment current emerged; the valorisation of reason is replaced by that of feeling, and this leads to a sense of the sublime, in which the mind is overwhelmed by, or swoons before, something greater than itself.

Edmund Burke, in his *Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), created a theory of Terror. “Whatever is fitted in any



sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible subjects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”

Burke’s was an essentially existentialist viewpoint. He — along with Immanuel Kant — provided the theoretical language necessary for the development of Romanticism and all irrationalist enterprises that followed. It was not by accident that Breton praised Young’s *Night Thoughts*. Since then, Terror has gone from strength to strength.

### Philip, Duke of Wharton 1698 - 1731

When commenting on Young’s early life authors such as Buchan refer to his patron, Philip, Duke of Wharton, as if that tells us all we need to know. But Young was not Wharton. You might as well point at the sun in order to explain the moon. *But they are as Sun and Moon in alchemy*. Taken together, their stories read as a Rosicrucian parable or a novel by Hermann Hesse.

Wharton was a generous benefactor, but he accumulated debts. Attempting to clear them, he invested in South Sea Company stock. When the Bubble burst in 1720 he lost £120,000. The patronage ended badly, with Young nursing grievances. Wharton went on to become notorious; Young joined the church and wrote *Night Thoughts*.

Wharton’s rise was extraordinary, his downfall terrible and sublime. In the 1720s he founded the Hell-Fire Club.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in the House of Lords, he led a coalition of “Grumbletonian” Whigs and Tories against the ruling Whig elite. To divert public attention from the South Sea Bubble scandal and to undermine Wharton’s political credibility, Lord Sunderland and Sir Robert Walpole denounced Wharton’s Hell-Fire activities before Parliament, thus alienating his supporters and destroying the coalition.

Even more bizarrely, Wharton became Grand Master of English Freemasonry, despite being a Jacobite.<sup>4</sup> He lasted only a year. His exit from the Grand Lodge is obscured behind the dispute that followed it. Masonic minutes merely stating “The late Grand Master went away from the Hall without Ceremony.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1724 a series of provocations, aimed at the Freemasons, were issued by “the truly Antient Noble Order of the Gormogons”. The first of these appeared in the *London Daily Post* on September 3rd:

“Whereas the truly ANTIENT NOBLE ORDER of the Gormogons, instituted by Chin-Qua Ky-Po, the first Emperor of China (according to their account), many thousand years before Adam, and of which the great philosopher Confucious was Oecumenicae Volgee, has lately been brought into England by a Mandarin, and he having admitted several Gentlemen of Honour into the mystery of that most illustrious order, they have determined to hold a Chapter at the Castle Tavern in Fleet Street, at the particular request of several persons of quality. This is to inform the public, that there will be no drawn sword at the Door, nor Ladder in a dark Room, nor will any Mason be reciev’d as a member till he has renounced his Novel Order and been properly degraded.”<sup>6</sup>

Wharton chose exile in 1725, when he became Jacobite ambassador to the Holy Roman Empire in Vienna. Later, in Rome, James gave him the Order of the Garter, which he wore publicly. In Madrid, at the reception for his marriage to Maria Theresa O’Neill, he added *shock to awe* by exposing himself to the wedding party and bride to show her “what she was to have that night in her Guts”<sup>7</sup>.

In 1728, Wharton published the “Persian Letter” in the London periodical, *Mist’s Weekly Journal*. Writing as ‘Amos Drudge’, his letter explained the corruption and loss of liberties in ‘Persia’ after a usurpation. In response, Walpole ordered the arrest of more than twenty people connected with the publication and the destruction of the press. The Persian Letter was described in court as “an infamous, scandalous and treasonable Libel, calculated to poison the Minds of His Majesty’s Subjects with groundless jealousies, to sow Sedition and overturn the Peace of this Kingdom, and in favour of a spurious, abandon’d, and abjured Pretender.”

The final splendour took place during the siege of Gibraltar in 1727. Fighting as a lieutenant colonel in the Spanish army, Wharton led his men in a charge against the British lines. He suffered severe wounds from which he never recovered. Back home, he was charged with High Treason and was outlawed, in his absence, in 1729.

Wharton returned to Madrid where his splendours decomposed. After caning a servant he was briefly imprisoned and then banished. He died in poverty at a Bernadine convent in Catalonia on May 31, 1731. Wharton’s titles were made extinct after his death. Young’s hopes of a political career had by then suffered a similar fate.



*The Mystery of Masonry brought to light by ye Gormagons* — William Hogarth, 1724

Young’s “worldly and infidel”, Lorenzo, to whom *Night Thoughts* is addressed, is clearly Wharton. His downfall, lamented by Young, was enjoyed by Pope, who — nursing a longstanding sexual jealousy<sup>8</sup> — referred to Wharton in his first Moral Essay as “the scorn and wonder of our days, Whose ruling passion was the lust of praise...” (*Epistle to Sir Richard Temple*). In *The Dunciad* he relishes the death of his antithesis thus: “Poor W——, nipp’d in folly’s broadest bloom, Who praises now?”

### Young and Freemasonry

*Night Thoughts* is informed by Masonic symbolism. It and other works were widely distributed throughout Europe by Freemasons and Rosicrucians.<sup>9</sup> Young’s poem, *The Last Day* (1713) — 1,000 lines of heroic couplets on The Last Judgement — was translated into Russian by Prince Mikhail Mikhailovich Shcherbatov.<sup>10</sup> First published anonymously in 1777 — the translation was republished in a second edition ten years later by Nikolai Novikov (1744-1818, writer and Freemason) under the imprint of the Moscow Typographical Company. In 1792, Novikov was arrested and imprisoned. Together with other works of masonic interest, over 1,000 copies of Shcherbatov’s second edition of *The Last Day* were seized and destroyed.

*Night Thoughts* features in a series of lectures by William Hutchinson (1732-1814). Hutchinson — a prominent member of the Royal Society of Antiquaries — was for some years Master of the Masonic Lodge of Concord at Barnard Castle. The series of lectures entitled *The Spirit Of Masonry*, originally

composed and delivered to his Lodge, were published in 1775.

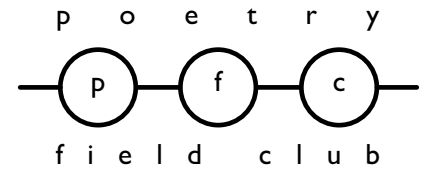
Lecture IV, The Nature of the Lodge, glosses a passage from *Night Thoughts*, utilising the Sublime as a spur to obedience: “When the labors of the day are ended, and man’s mind is abstracted from the cares of life, then it is for our soul’s recreation to walk forth, with contemplative mind, to read the great works of the Almighty in the starry firmament, and in the innumerable worlds which are governed by his will; and thence to meditate on his omnipotence. Our thoughts returning from this glorious scene towards ourselves, we discern the diminutiveness of man, and by a natural inference, confess the benevolence of that God, who regardeth us (such minute atoms) in the midst of his mighty works...”

### Re-enacting Edward Young

At its most absurd, Surrealism was a re-enactment of magic in the modern world: “On returning to Europe after World War II, Breton wanted nothing to do with the Communist Party and tried to make ‘magic’ the focal point of surrealist activity.” Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture*.<sup>11</sup> Home also states that Breton’s “negative influence on the utopian tradition was not dissimilar to the effects of Stalinisation on the workers’ movement.”

With the absorption of ‘the surreal’ into advertising it is hardly surprising that ‘magic’ became fashionable. What the Graveyard Poets started became, amongst other things, neo-Paganism. This, like surrealism before it, uses the morbid pathology of modern

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Wicca or 'Freemasonry Made Simple' gets more than just its terminology from Freemasonry. Detail from the frontispiece of *The Spirit of Masonry, in Moral & Elucidatory Lectures* —William Hutchinson 1775

life to inspire quietism. It creates a fetish out of and for an empty vessel and results in an endless re-enactment of nostalgia.

It is in this context that we are presented with so many examples of Sublime spectacle: the destruction of the World Trade Centre, war and the deaths of 75,000 civilians in Iraq<sup>12</sup>, anti-terror operations, surveillance and the fear of crime — and all this taking place in a world that can no longer avoid the impending catastrophes of global warming.

The postmodern sublime makes of us 'such minute atoms', particles to be directed or merely observed as they are swept away. But postmodern theories of the sublime offer "the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."<sup>13</sup>

We must explore the processes of dissociation that are an unavoidable result of our historical context. Like Edward Young, we must embrace pointlessness and do something for no earthly reason. We will go to Upham and walk about a bit. In public house or dismal copse, we will attack 'purpose' head on by not being too bothered. Passing a few happy hours, we will celebrate Beauty and Liberty, for where they exist they do so for no reason at all.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Mark Akenside, *James Macpherson & Edward Young, Selected Poetry*, Carcanet Press 1994
- <sup>2</sup> Carole Fabricant offers this example, from a letter to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: "You have no way of making amends [for having gone abroad with your husband], but by continuing an Asiatic when you return to me, whatever English Airs you may put on to other people ... I long for nothing so much as your Oriental Self. You must of necessity be advanced so far Back into true nature & simplicity of manners, by these 3 years residence in the East, that I shall look upon you as so many years younger than you was, so much nearer Innocence ... & Infancy ..." *Defining Self and others: Pope and Eighteenth-century gender ideology*, Carole Fabricant, *Criticism*, Fall, 1997 [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2220/is\\_n4\\_v39/ai\\_20171492](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2220/is_n4_v39/ai_20171492) (Pope produced an "authorized" version of his Letters in 1737. He died at Twickenham on May 30, 1744.)
- <sup>3</sup> Wharton's original rakehell performed 'Satanic' parodies of Christian religious rites in a tavern near St. James's Square. Sir James Dashwood's version (founded in 1746) is now better known — due mainly to the New World Productions movie *The Hellfire Club* (1961): this faux Hammer Horror film includes an orgy sequence in which several scantily clad dollies in harem outfits combine a 'gothick' sensibility with a 'Carry On' style of titillation. It is probable that the cheesy antics portrayed in the film lack the style of the original Hell-Fire Club and its members.
- <sup>4</sup> The United Grand Lodge of England was formed after the Scottish rebellion of 1715, partly to suppress Jacobite Freemasonry. Wharton became Grand Master in 1722.
- <sup>5</sup> This, in such ritualistic company, is a highly symbolic exit.
- <sup>6</sup> Of the origins of the Gormogons, one Masonic historian states that "...nothing is known for fact, but all evidence suggests an attempt by Philip, Duke of Wharton, to establish a Jacobite or Catholic Club." (*Source*: The Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, web page, 6th October 2007: <http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/anti-masonry/gormogons>) Gormogon texts and artifacts surfaced throughout the 18th century, and long after Wharton's death, in England and Scotland. The artefacts include the Gormogon medals shown on page two.
- <sup>7</sup> Maria Theresa O'Neill was the daughter of an Irish colonel in the Spanish service. The quote is cited in Smith, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
- <sup>8</sup> In 1722 Wharton leased The Grove, at the top of Cross Deep (Twickenham), possibly at the suggestion of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu whose father, the Duke of Kingston, had been his guardian. Arriving with a considerable entourage he paid court to her and, so it is said, they conducted a passionate affair. Pope had a longstanding interest in Lady Mary. She was the recipient of many ardent epistles. ("worldly and infidel" is from Margaret Drabble, *Oxford Companion to English Literature*).

- <sup>9</sup> *Ways of Russian Theology* by Georges Florovsky (1937) [www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/florovsky\\_ways\\_chap4.html](http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/florovsky_ways_chap4.html)
- <sup>10</sup> *A Russian Freemason in the Reign of Catherine the Great: Prince M.M. Shcherbatov (1733-1790)* by Bro. Anthony Lentini <http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/aqc/shcherbatov.html>
- <sup>11</sup> AK Press 1991, page 8. The quote that follows is from page 6.
- <sup>12</sup> Sunday 14/10/07: [www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org)
- <sup>13</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Post-modernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant." See also: Emily Lutzker. "The sublime event is the confrontation with our own humanity. The aesthetic rationalization of this experience comes later." *Ethics of the Sublime in Postmodern Culture*, Emily Lutzker. March 18th, 1997 [www.egs.edu/mediaphi/Vol2/Sublime.html](http://www.egs.edu/mediaphi/Vol2/Sublime.html)

## Field Trip

**Saturday 15th December 2007  
at 12.30pm**

### The Alma Inn, Lower Upham (Hants)

We will convene at the Alma Inn and prepare for the work to be done. We will leave the Alma Inn at 1.00pm & proceed to **Upham** where we will walk about a bit. We will then retire to **The Brushmakers Arms** in the centre of Upham, arriving there at about 1.45pm.

We will drink beer and eat lunch before returning to **Lower Upham** by a different route. We will have covered about 4 miles on foot.

## Public Transport

*To Lower Upham*: a No. 69 leaves from Winchester Bus Station at 11.50am and arrives at Lower Upham at 12.26pm. The No. 69 also leaves from Fareham at 15 minutes past the hour, arriving at Lower Upham 46 minutes later.

*To Winchester*: the No. 69 leaves Lower Upham at one minute past the hour until 18.01pm. The last bus is at 18.54pm.

**Stagecoach Traveline**: 0871 200 22 33

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